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Martin Luther: Master of Paradoxes

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MARTIN LUTHER: MASTER OF PARADOXES

Introduction:

Martin Luther is considered one of the most original and provocative theological thinkers that ever lived.¹ One of the major qualities that characterized his writings was his use of paradoxical statements to express his most significant theological ideas.² “More than any other Protestant reformer, Luther was given to thinking in terms of paradoxical propositions and binary dialectical oppositions that depended on each other for meaning, despite their apparent contradictions, such as faith and works, law and gospel, flesh and spirit.”³ Here are some examples of Luther most quoted paradoxical statements: “Christian is perfectly free, lord of all subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all.”⁴ “A Christian is simultaneously a saint and a sinner.”⁵ “Although the works of humans always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.”⁶ “We cannot go to heaven, unless we

¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2013), 53-54; Heiko Oberman and Eileen W. Schwarzabart *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). For more on Luther’s originality see Robert Kolb *Genius of Luther’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

² Markus Wriedt, “Luther’s Theology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 2003), 86-88, 103-04.

³ Carlos Eire *A Brief History of Eternity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2010) 129

⁴ Luther, “*The Freedom of the Christian*,” in *LW* 31:343.

⁵ Luther, “*Commentary on Galatians*,” in *LW* 26:232.

⁶ Luther, “*The Heidelberg Disputation*,” thesis 3, in *LW* 31:39.

first go to hell” and the most shocking one is: “God cannot be God unless he first becomes a devil.”⁷

Paradoxical⁸ theological statements are not original to Luther. In the gospels, Jesus expressed many of his most powerful truths in paradoxes. Examples of these are: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt 16:25 KJV). Jesus also stated that “the last shall be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:13). The apostle Paul also expressed some of his most profound theological ideas in paradoxes: “exaltation through humiliation” (Philippians 2: 8 9), “strength through weakness” (2 Cor. 12:10); “freedom through servitude” (Romans 6:18) etc.⁹

The great German and Protestant reformer sees himself as following this biblical tradition of speaking in paradoxes. This paradoxical quality about Luther’s theological ideas evades easy explanation or simplistic interpretation. Some consider that Luther’s theological genius enabled him to view both sides of an issue.¹⁰ Others stumble over his paradoxical and apparently conflicting statements. The purpose of this paper is to analyze and critically evaluate some of Luther’s usage of paradoxes in his writings.

⁷ Luther, “The Exposition of the 117th Psalm” (1530), in *LW* 14:31.

⁸ Merriam Webster defines a paradox as a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.

⁹ Some have argued in favor of paradox being one of the major literary techniques of the New Testament, especially for Jesus and Paul. See Stephen D. Cox, *The New Testament and Literature: A Guide to Literary Patterns* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2006), 21-30, 74-91, 113-126, 140-144.

¹⁰ In explaining the statement in which he calls God the devil, Luther explains through his exposition of two kinds of works of God: God’s alien work (*Opus Alienum Dei*) and God’s proper work (*Opus Proprium Dei*). The former involves killing, taking away hope, and even leading to desperation. The latter speaks of forgiveness, love encouragement. In other words, God makes bad results, which we do not understand, and even uses Satan in order to bring us to repentance. Luther proclaims that we must first understand our lost condition before we can be saved and thus “we cannot go to heaven, unless we first go to hell” and hence to us “God cannot be God unless he first becomes a devil” (Luther, “The Exposition of the 117th Psalm” [1530] in *LW* 14:31).

Heidelberg Disputations

One of the earliest examples of Luther's use of paradoxes was the Heidelberg Disputation at the chapter meeting of the Augustinian order in April 1518, where Luther was asked to explain some of his new ideas that seemed to be at variance with traditional Catholic views. At the behest of Johannes Van Staupitz, Luther, for this occasion, wrote a series of theological and philosophical theses that outlined many of his theological ideas that he would later develop. Many of these ideas were expressed in paradoxes. Theses 1-12 deals with the problem of good works, while theses 13-18 deals with the will.¹¹ True to his paradoxical style, right from the onset of the disputation, Luther asserted that the "good works" that appear beautiful and attractive are nothing less than "mortal sins"! On the contrary, Luther continued, God's works, which to many appear ugly and evil, are really beautiful for they are the sole source of salvation.¹²

In order to understand this particular paradox, we must understand the major crux of Luther's theology, which was focused on the impossibility of humans to earn salvation through their good works and deeds. A frequently quoted passage by Luther was: "By the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight" (Romans 3:20).¹³ The passages in Galatians also complement this idea: "a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ (Gal 2:16). For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse" (Gal 3:10). Any attempt towards righteousness by works is for Luther a delusion and it leads straight to hell. All human attempts to achieve righteousness through the keeping of the law, take away from the

¹¹ Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation" (May 1518) *in LW* 31:39-70

¹² Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," thesis 3 *in LW* 31: 43.

¹³ Unless otherwise specified all Bible references in this work are from the KJV.

merits and grace of Christ, and as such, constitute the worse of all mortal sins. The so-called “good works” of men are hence for Luther mortal sins, since they give men the illusion of being saved while leading one to hell. Righteousness and salvation comes only from Christ; he alone is our righteousness. He alone can give us righteousness.¹⁴

How about the second part of this paradoxical statement, where Luther asserts that the works of God seem unattractive and evil, although they are really eternal merits. Luther argues that God’s works to many appear evil, lowly, unimpressive and even repulsive. God often chooses weak, sinful humans to speak his word of forgiveness grace and judgment. God’s greatest work happened on a despised and lowly wooden cross where His son hanged as a condemned criminal. Yet, through Christ’s death, the solemn work of atonement is made for humanity. God transformed an instrument of capital punishment into a symbol of grace and salvation. God has indeed chosen “foolish things of the world to confound the wise” (1 Cor. 1:27).¹⁵ It is in the apparent ugliness and evil of the cross that God’s greatest act of grace is accomplished.

Paradox of the Cross

Luther’s use of paradox to express his understanding of the gospel should come as no surprise since for Luther the cross is the hinge on which all theology swings and it is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls.¹⁶ For Luther, the cross of Christ is the great paradox of the

¹⁴ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1966), 118-130.

¹⁵ Christine Helmer, *The Global Luther* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2009), 230.

¹⁶ See Alistair E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 149-50.

Bible. Where humans perceived weakness, shame, humiliation and suffering, is precisely where God is to be found, hidden beneath it all, where only the eye of faith can perceive His power, glory and love. Exactly where God seems absent is where God is revealed most fully.¹⁷

Luther carries the paradox of the cross further by saying that Christians must follow Christ in taking up their cross. Only through our personal cross we can experience God's glory.¹⁸ This is also a paradox. Luther wrote, "You God exalt us when you humble us. You make us righteous when you make us sinners, you grant victory when you cause us to be defeated, you give us life when you permit us to be killed."¹⁹ Luther believed that is only through the denial of self, that we can truly receive life. This profoundly paradoxical, yet historically fundamental Christian doctrine greatly shaped Luther's theological thinking. Richard Hughes argues that, "Luther prized the theme of paradox, not because the notion of paradox was philosophically intriguing, but rather because he found the notion of paradox at the very heart of the Christian Gospel. Because his "theology of the cross" stands at the very center of Luther's thought, so does the notion of paradox."²⁰ God is found not only in the suffering but also in the midst of doubt, fear, tribulation, temptation and finally despair. This is what Luther calls God's alien work, God's work of wrath. Beneath is to be found God's work of mercy. Only when human beings abandon themselves can they begin to trust in God's mercy alone. Luther never got tired of saying, "only experience makes a theologian. Not understanding, reading, or speculation, but

¹⁷ On detailed analysis of Luther's view of hidden/revealed God see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 198-213; See also Luther, "Lectures on Jonah" (1526) in *LW* 19:72 etc.

¹⁸ Luther, "Commentary on Psalm 118" in *LW*, 14: 95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Richard Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 88.

living—nay, dying and being damned—make a theologian.”²¹ For Luther, the experience of the cross can alone bring one to true theology. In order for us to see God at work through our sufferings we need a revelation of the Holy Spirit: “no one can correctly understand God or [H]is word, unless he receives such understanding from the Holy Spirit. But no one can receive it from the Holy Spirit without experiencing, proving, and feeling it.”²²

Paradox of the Hidden and Revealed God

Another important feature of Luther’s theology is the proclamation of a God who is both hidden and revealed. Luther argues that before revealing himself, God first hides himself. God is hidden in two ways, argues Luther. First He is hidden *outside* of revelation, unknown, and as unrevealed, unknowable. Secondly, God also hides himself *within* his revelation, undisclosed in the very act of disclosure.²³ God’s hiddenness outside of revelation is far easier to grasp because a person cannot be known and understood until he reveals something of himself. It is Luther’s second concept of God’s hiddenness within his revelation that is problematic for many; it is here that we encounter one of Luther’s most profound paradoxes.²⁴

Struggling with the idea of predestination, Luther argues that this difficult teaching belongs to “the hiddenness of God.”²⁵ Luther urges believers to turn their eyes away from the

²¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 61. Luther repeated this idea several times. See “Luther, “Table Talk 46, 1531” in *LW* 54:7 See also Luther, in *WA TR* 1:146 and *WA* 5: 163.

²² Luther, “Exposition on the *Magnificat*,” *LW* 21: 299

²³ Alister McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 164-169 argues that God hidden in His revelation is actually a “revealed God.”

²⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 198-202.

²⁵ Luther, *De Servo Arbitro* (1525) in *WA* 18:685

Deus Absconditus, the hidden God, who elects and demands and rather to focus on the *Deus Revelatus*, the revealed God, who has shown a merciful face in Jesus Christ.²⁶ “The hidden God hardens the heart of Pharaoh, rejects Esau before he is born and wills the death of sinners, the will of the God is inscrutable, incomprehensible to mortals. It not merely undisclosed, it is concealed.” It is not a subject of human investigation. It is beyond human understanding and we should not speculate on such matters. On the contrary we should focus our attention on the revelation specifically as it is in Jesus Christ.

“Begin your search with Christ and stay with him and cleave to him, and if your own thoughts and reason, or another man’s would lead you elsewhere, shut your eyes and say; I should and will know of no other God than Christ, my Lord.... But if you abandon this clear prospect and climb up to God’s majesty on high, you must stumble, fear and fall because you have withdrawn yourself from God’s grace and have dare to stare at the majesty unveiled, which is too high and overpowering for you. For apart from Christ, Nature can neither perceive not attain the grace and love of God, and apart from Him is nothing but wrath and condemnation”²⁷

At the same time, for Luther, God is also a *Deus Revelatus*. He revealed Himself in the person of Jesus, dying for humanity at the cross. Paradoxically, the revealed God is the God who is simultaneously hidden (*absconditus*) in the cross. Jesus was truly God but was hidden in the garb of humanity. His dying for us on the cross was a revelation of God’s character. At the same time, people crucified him because they could not see God in plain sight. Furthermore, God the Father, by hiding himself in the darkness during Christ’ crucifixion and abandoning His son,

²⁶ Luther, “The Bondage of the Will” in *LW* 33:292.

²⁷ Luther, “Sermons on John 1-20,” in *WA* 28: 101-102, transl. in Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 27.

revealed His love for humanity. Thus, in hiding, God reveals himself and in revealing Himself, God is hidden. What a paradox! God's reality is revealed in its hiddenness, under the form of its opposite (*absconditus sub contrariis*) as revealed in Luther's own words "man hides what is his own in order to conceal it, but God conceals what is his in order to reveal it."²⁸

Paradox of Faith

Another paradox Luther frequently explored is the paradox of faith. In the paradox of faith, faith in God involves faith even when the natural circumstances contradict God's love towards us, "Faith is holding fast to the deep and hidden **yes** under and above the **no** firmly trusting God's word."²⁹

Luther's view of the hiddenness of God is intimately connected to his view of faith. To trust and believe in God even when God seems hidden, this is true faith. This faith goes beyond reason and it defies mere human reasoning. Unbelief is the fundamental predicament of the human condition. Fallen humanity instead of putting their trust in God puts their trust in themselves and the material reality they can touch and see. Pride blinds us and can only be broken down by the hidden revelation of God. Faith, by its very nature, exists outside the realm of material physical world for "it" has at its object hidden things, the so-called reason opponents, "things that do not appear." Hiddenness belongs to the very nature of revelation." The hidden things and the revealed things of God are not antithetical to each other. "The revealed God remains hidden, not only outside his revelation, but also in it. Indeed hiddenness particularly

²⁸ Luther, "Sermon on St. Matthew's Day, Matt. 11:25-30" (February 24, 1517) in *LW* 51:26

²⁹ Luther, "Lectures on Isaiah 40-66" (1527) in *LW* 17: 203.

hiddenness under the forms of contrary appearance is the form of God—self-revelation. This is beautifully illustrated in Luther’s sermon on Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Her Luther contrasts the entry of Christ, “the poor beggar king “ into Jerusalem with the customary entry of “other kings” into their capital cities.

“Yea, of a truth He will be king, but a poor beggarly king, who has in no way the appearance of a king, if He is judged and esteemed by outward might and splendor, in which kings and princes like to array themselves. He leaves to other kings such things as pomp, castles palaces, gold, and wealth; and he lets them eat and drink, dress and build more daintily than other folks; but the craft which Christ the poor beggar king knows, they do not know. He helps against not one sin only. But against all my sin; not against my sin only, but against the whole world’s sin.... He rides there so beggarly, but hearken to what is said and preached about this poor king. His wretchedness and poverty are manifest, for he comes riding on an ass like a beggar having neither saddle nor spurs. But he will take from us sin, strangle death, endow us with eternal holiness, eternal bliss, and eternal life, this cannot be seen, wherefore thou must hear and believe.”³⁰

From all outward appearances , riding on a donkey, Jesus does not appear as a king. This is in stark contrast to the traditional power figures that ride on a powerful horse surrounded by his own trusted warriors, followed by a throng host of captives or treasure obtained in his latest conquest. “Nevertheless, even though the royal power of Christ is hidden under his beggarly appearance, Christ is in fact a king. A king whose power over life and death puts the merely political power of kings to shame. The danger is that the onlookers will judge the event by what

³⁰ Luther, “Sermon on the First Sunday of the Advent” (November 30, 1533), in WA 37: 201-202.

they see and not by what the prophet Zechariah says. The word of the prophet is the clue to the meaning of the event against what the eye can see, against what reason pronounce, common sense dictates, the onlookers must deny the evidence of their senses and grasp the word of the prophet by faith. He must close his eyes and open his ears. The revelation of God is hidden under a contrary appearance, in his self-disclosure, God remains concealed.³¹

Faith alone enables the eyes of the believer to see the true God hidden in suffering. Luther proclaims that the theologians of glory expect God to be manifested in power majesty and strength, but the theologians of the cross know through the eyes of faith that God is in fact manifest in suffering and death. God's true nature is always and only revealed under God's opposite, Luther contends.³²

Sometimes God's works in us by forgiving us and encouraging us but sometimes he works in us by putting us down, by taking away our hope and by leading us into desperation.³³ God exalts us when he humbles us, you make us righteous when you make us sinners- - - you grant us victory when you cause us to do be defeated. You give us life when you permit us to be killed.³⁴

For Luther faith operates outside the realm of the senses. "Empirical evidence cannot be trusted, particularly when it is assessed by fallen human reason. I am brought in touch with my real situation by listening to the word of God, which contradicts my own assessment, and ty

³¹ Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* ,28

³² Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," thesis 5, (May 1518) *in LW* 31:55.

³³ Luther, "The Exposition on the 118th Psalm" (1530) *in LW* 14:95.

³⁴ Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," thesis 3, (May 1518) *in LW* 31:45.

trusting it. Faith means letting God be God, and accepting the scandal of his hiddenness and trusting him in spite of reason, experience and common sense”³⁵.

Paradox of the Gospel and Law

The gospel as you would expect from Luther is a gospel of paradox. In the words of Steinmetz (p.30) “Just as the revealed God is hidden in his revelation under the form of the contrary appearance, as the yes of this revealed God in the Gospel is hidden under the no spoken to guilty sinners in the law. If I say yes to God’s no, if I embrace God’s no as the final reality, then God himself keep me from God. Against God’s opposition to me in the law, I must break through to God’s mercy in the gospel. I must grasp underneath God’s “no” the deeply hidden “yes.” I must borrow from Christ “no” to the law which is not rightly mine. I must with the promise of God in the Gospel outwit the denunciations of me by the law. Behind the strange work of God’s wrath, I must believe in the proper work of his mercy. Not only is God hidden under the form of a contrary appearance, so too in a certain way is the gospel.”³⁶

Luther further states that God never proclaims his great yes without at the same time proclaiming his terrifying no. Luther puts it another way, God’s assuring yes is hidden in his severe no. Luther describes the word of God coming to us in two forms, Law and Gospel. God first speaks his word of law (his alien work) which kills the sinner. Then he speaks his word of gospel (his proper work) which recreates the sinner through the forgiveness of sin.³⁷

³⁵ Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 29.

³⁶ Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 30.

³⁷ Ibid.

Paradox of Spirituality

It was Luther's search for true spirituality that led him to his monumental rediscovery of the gospel. From his youth until his induction into the Augustinian order he was confronted by a legalistic spirituality that demanded everything from him. He chanted the liturgy of the hymns in choir. He spent long hours in private prayer and spiritual reading. He went to confession, celebrated mass, participated in Eucharistic devotions, went on pilgrimages, fasted, prayed the rosary, did everything a good monk should do. He even tried mysticism, reading deeply in mysticism, that other path to find the divine but to no avail. He remained fearful of a vengeful God, he found no spiritual fulfillment, and emptiness of soul, loneliness of Spirit still haunted him. His search for some spiritual nirvana proved illusory. Then he discovered the beautiful truth of the gospel. With exhilaration and ecstasy, he disclosed his discovery.

His discovery of true spirituality was not to be found in any of the writings of the theologians or mystics in even in his own vain striving to be holy before God. Luther found that according to the word of God, it is not about our human achievements and what we can do but it is all about God who comes to us with all of his love and grace. It was about Jesus, God's son who humbled himself to save us on a cross. Luther had discovered the theology of the cross, - a great paradox - which became the foundation of his entire theological system.

Like his favored theological idea — Luther's spirituality was highly paradoxical. For Luther the life of the Christian is characterized by the process of a series of contrasting realities. His spirituality was built on these polarities and paradoxes that could be resolved only through the eyes of faith.

The tension existing in Luther's theology actually makes it eschatological to the core .
"To live in paradox is to live in a state of crisis that cries not for resolution, a resolution that for

Luther only God can affect. The work of the living in the time before the end is to manage the polarities and pray fervently for the coming of the Lord.” This is another topic, maybe too much on the plate for this article.

Luther’s spirituality was a spirituality of paradox. He lived in tension between law and gospel. Between the law that condemns us when we fall and the promise of Christ’ atonement from sin when we repent. Doubts may arise, anxieties cause us to fear, we may feel frustrated by all our attempts to live a life of piety and devotion, but we cling to the Word and to the promise of God’s grace and love.

Luther’s most engaging model of how a Christian tries to live out his spirituality is his doctrine of the “two kingdoms,” the “kingdom of the world,” and “the kingdom of God.” These are two different realms of authority that coexist and overlap. The Christian must live in both and experiences the tension of trying to live in one kingdom, yet trying to obey the authority of another. There are times when there are conflicting authorities and the Christian finds himself in a conundrum, which kingdom will receive his supreme allegiance?

Responses to Luther’s paradox

Luther’s contemporaries were often troubled by Luther’s paradoxes. Humanist reformer Erasmus commented on Luther’s use of paradoxes: “[He] proposes some riddles that are absurd on the face of them I don’t see that it does any good to dispute the way Luther wishes the

things to be understood I think I have taught almost everything that Luther teaches, only I have not done it so fiercely and have abstained from certain riddles and paradoxes.”³⁸

Erasmus shared many of the evangelical views of Luther but he was very critical of Luther’s paradoxical model and argued that the idea of a paradoxical God jeopardizes the rational basis of Christian theodicy. Concerning one of Luther’s earliest paradoxes, the Bondage of the Human Will, Erasmus wrote, “what could be more useless than to publish this paradox to the world. The Apostles healed the sick and raised the dead, they did not teach paradoxes”. Concerning the propriety of paradoxes and popular theological discussion Erasmus wrote, “where axioms are put forward in the disputing of truths, I do not consider paradoxes of this kind should be used, for they are almost riddles and . . .these matters it is moderation that pleases me.”³⁹

Erasmus agrees with Luther that the Christian experience can be paradoxical but insisted that the Christian doctrine “cannot accommodate the absurdity of a hidden God who elects and reprobates arbitrarily and thus is neither reasonable nor good. Using parables, Erasmus compares Luther’s God to a master who is cruel unjust, and insane. . . Although he accepts the Pauline theology of justification by faith and grace alone, Erasmus is concerned to prevent calumnies attributing cruelty and injustice to God.”⁴⁰ Erasmus somehow believes that Luther is

³⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, “Letters to Zwingli,” *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, trans. and ed. Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacob, II (Philadelphia, PA: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1918), 196-198. Erasmus intimated that some have been martyred by the authorities due to misunderstanding of Luther’s paradoxes. “It is rumored here that the third Augustinian also was burned. . .the other two were burned the day before Certainly they died with the greatest and most unheard of constancy, not because of Luther’s doctrines but because of his paradoxes, for which I would not die, because I do not understand them.” Erasmus, “Letters to Zwingli,”196.

³⁹ John Schwindt, “Luther’s Paradoxes and Shakespeare’s God: The Emergence of the Absurd in Sixteenth-century Literature,” *Modern Language Studies*, vol.15, no 4 (Autumn, 1985): 4-12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

misrepresenting God by portraying him as arbitrary, unjust and insane. Such a view of God would not induce sinners to come to Him and so Erasmus feels that he must defend God from Luther's misrepresentation. Bainton sums up the debate between Luther and Erasmus by noting that whereas Luther said, "Let God be God", Erasmus said "let God be good"⁴¹ Erasmus was concerned about maintaining free will for humans as this was reflection on the goodness of God. Luther as more concerned about maintaining God's sovereignty and power free from the influences of human choices.

Luther did not take kindly to the assault of Erasmus on his use of paradoxes. Luther responded to Erasmus in his typical acerbic manner, "They are not my paradoxes, they are God's paradoxes! ... it should be simply to say that God has willed their publication... This answer will satisfy those who fear God". The efforts of Erasmus to make God more reasonable and just by attributing reprobation to foreknowledge of sin, called forth this response from Luther. "Do not remove the absurdity or if they do, only at the cost of introducing greater absurdities, by assigning all things to free will."⁴²

But why, Luther asks, is Erasmus offended by the absurd? Against what article of faith does that absurdity transgress? And who is offended by it? It is human reason that is offended.... On these same ground you will deny all the articles of faith, for it is the highest absurdity by far—foolishness to the Gentiles and stumbling block to the Jews as Paul says (1 Cor 1:23) – that God should be a man, a virgin's son, crucified, sitting at the Father's hand. It is, I repeat *absurd* to believe such things"

⁴¹ Roland Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1969), 190.

⁴² Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 257.

To accommodate the absurdity of the articles of Christian faith and Christian experience and human destiny under the arbitrary and capricious God, Luther recommends the abandonment of human reason and an awakening of faith: “ all the devout believers enter with Abraham into the darkness of death, saying “Tu ratio stulta es”. . Faith speaks as follows: I believe thee God, when thou dost speak what does God say? Things that are impossible, untrue, foolishness, weak, absurd, abominable, heretical and diabolical—if you consult reason.”⁴³ Reason says Luther stumbles over the Trinity, the Creation, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection.⁴⁴ For Luther, human reason is unable to truly comprehend divine revelation. No wonder, we are confronted with divine paradoxes that stretches our imagination, stupefies our reason, perplexes our thinking. All of this is designed to humble us and leaves with no reason to boast. That’s why our most appropriate response in the face of such paradoxes is faith.

Conclusion

Luther was not a systematic theologian like John Calvin who sought to put the theology of the bible in neat, digestible categories. Luther did not endeavor to create nicely organized schemes and classifications. He was first and foremost a biblical exegete who saw his calling as proclaiming the word of God. For Luther, the revelation of God and the theology of the bible are paradoxical at its very core. He made no attempt to simplify this paradoxical quality. On the contrary, he reveled in it. David Whitford was right when he said that Luther, “was comfortable with paradox and that is why he is so perplexing, but if one allows one’s self to sit inside his

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

theology and become comfortable with his use of paradox and dichotomy, then one can begin to see the genius of his work⁴⁵

Luther viewed theology from the inside out, from the outside in, from the top down, from the bottom up, from different sides and various angles. When we come to see Luther as entirely at ease with paradoxes, we will become less bewildered by his apparent contradictions because what may appear as contradictions are simply portraits of theological paradoxes. For Luther God's revelations is so mysterious and profound that it transcends the simple formulations of human reason, that any attempt to grasp them without the use of paradoxes lead to theological errors. How does one explain God becoming flesh, or a holy God dying for sinful man, or the meaning of cross, that symbol of a curse, shame and disgrace becoming a symbol of salvation, hope and life? Paradoxes are necessary and intrinsic to the nature of divine revelation and Luther trumpets that view in his writings.

⁴⁵ David Whitford, *Luther: A guide for the Perplexed*, (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2011), 80.