

Mercy from the Heart

By Oswald Bayer
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1. Trinitarian

“A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”¹

These well-known lines from Luther have led Neo-Protestantism to think and speak starting from point of the believing individual and moving outward from there; they have shaped the whole character of dogmatics, now understood as a doctrine of believing (*Glaubenslehre*). But in all this, something gets obscured, namely, the fact that faith has an antecedent—that something precedes faith. This antecedent entity, often relegated to the shadows, cannot, however, be understood as something implied or set forth by the immediate religious self-consciousness. This something is God’s promise, which comes to me — and all creatures — from outside of me. We encounter this promise in the principal pledge by which God introduces Himself, that is, in His name: “I am the Lord, your God” (Ex. 20:2). In Luther’s case, this unsearchable name — this promise of a dependability that accompanies its recipient in free, unindebted presence (Ex. 3:14) — interprets itself as follows: “I, yes, I will give you enough and help you out of every need.”² According to this explanation, God’s name manifests the divine attributes of goodness and mercy; God’s name — His being and His essence — is unfounded, unprovoked goodness and mercy. In His goodness, the Creator gives and grants all good things to His creatures. In His mercy, He delivers them out of all danger and helps them in every need.³ Luther’s pointed explanation is scriptural. With Scripture, he takes seriously the weight of God’s self-predication as is expressed, for example, in Ex. 34:5–6 (cf. 33:19): “Then the Lord descended in the cloud and came up to him,” to Moses, “and he called out the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed before him and called out, ‘The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious and patient, and abounding in grace and faithfulness!’”⁴

Luther is just as pointed in his explanation of the article on creation in the Small Catechism as he is with his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. “I believe that God has made me and all creatures ... and

¹ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386 [hereafter, *BoC*].

² *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 581 [hereafter, *Triglotta*].

³ *BoC*, 386–92.

⁴ Cf. Hermann Spieckermann, “Barmherzig und gnädig ist der Herr,” *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102 (1990): 1–18. In regard to the following cf. Bayer, *Zugesagte Gegenwart*, 191ff.

all this out of pure fatherly, divine goodness and mercy.”⁵ So also Ps. 145:9: “The Lord is good to all and He has mercy on all His works” (cf. mercy and goodness in Ps. 25:6–7 and 2 Chron. 5:13). In that God affords existence, He is good and benevolent; in that He defends against nothingness, He is merciful. As far as Luther is concerned, these are the two key points when it comes to believing in God the Creator: His goodness, which gives, and His mercy, which rescues from all evil and from the power of death. Redemption is not the first work of the trinitarian God’s mercy, but rather that He created in the first place.

If the mercy of the trinitarian God in His creation is external to that from which and out of which it saves, so His mercy in His work of redemption carries in itself that from which and out of which it saves. In His very own heart, God opposes His own wrath against man, who contradicts God’s creating word of promise and is thus sinner and the object of God’s wrath. According to Hosea 11:7–11 (cf. Jer. 31:20), something happens with God that is unthinkable for ancient metaphysics and that would be rejected for proper mythology — an “overturning,” a change in God Himself. God is not He who is identical with Himself, who is consistent with Himself. On the contrary, God contradicts Himself insofar as He bears out a contradiction in Himself — the contradiction between wrath and mercy: “My heart has changed within Me; My remorse breaks out with might. I cannot execute my burning anger, cannot ruin Ephraim again, for I am God, and not man” (Hos. 11:8–9).

It is this God, the God of mercy, to whom Luther intently listened. He experienced, preached, pondered and sang this overturning that takes place in God Himself. We find his most concentrated presentation in his hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,”⁶ which sings of rescue from sin, death, hell, separation from God and separation from God’s hatred. This rescue happens in a dramatic conversation that takes place within God, an exchange of words between the Father and the Son (st. 5), an internal exchange of words that manifests itself to me from outside of me and that gets spoken in God’s external word of promise, His *promissio*. In this word of promise, the substitution that has taken place (“All this I suffer for your good ... And you are blest forever.” [st. 8]) comes to me: “I am yours” (st. 7).

This hymn, a song of the Church’s praise (st. 1), speaks of God’s giving Himself in His Son as an answer that anticipates the lamentation of lost man (st. 2), an answer that took place “before the world’s foundation” (st. 4). And as it sings of God’s self-giving, it simultaneously tells of the rescue of man, sinking as he is into the very depths of hell; from the very beginning, man is incorporated into God’s internal conversation as one who receives. His lamentation, not yet even voiced to God, is heard in eternity. Indeed, it is heard in such a way that the hearing and the rescuing take place in history

⁵ Triglotta, 543.

⁶ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 556 [hereafter, *LSB*].

through the incarnation and the death of God, which again is conveyed and communicated historically in the tangible word of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The conversation between Father and Son, Son and Father, is not some speculative notion of trinitarian theology; rather, this conversation narrates itself from the very beginning as an event pertaining to the sinner, as "mercy" (st. 4). The whole of God's being is understood as a giving of Himself in the word of promise, which the Son gives to the person lost in death: "Stay close to Me ... Your ransom I myself will be"⁷ (sts. 7–10)!

The triune God's entire being is merciful. God — as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Creator, Re-creator and Consummator of the world — is a merciful *deus humilis* (humble God). By virtue of His omnipotence, His humility is proud; He who looks mercifully on the lowly is exalted (Is. 57:15; Ps. 102:19–20, 113; 138:6; Luke 1:46–55). However, He does not reign from on high as some monarch turned in on himself, who only thinks on himself, caring nothing for the misery of the world, as one would expect according to Aristotle's metaphysics. Rather He opens Himself to that which is below Him and shares Himself in His mercy. He offers himself. In His merciful humility, His condescension, God proves "how He has given Himself completely to us, withholding nothing."⁸ God's merciful humility, His heartbeat, characterizes not only His incarnation and His death on the cross, but also His actions as Creator and Holy Spirit:

How God the Father humbled Himself, that He not only formed a lump of dirt, but also gave it a soul with His breath. How God the Son humbled Himself — He became man, became the least of all men, and took on the form of a servant; He became the most miserable of all men; He was made sin for us; in God's eyes He was *the* sinner of the whole people. How low God the Holy Spirit stoops, that He became a historian of the smallest, most contemptible, most meaningless incident in the world, so that He revealed the counsels, mysteries and ways of the Godhead to man in his own language, in his own history, in his own ways.⁹

⁷ Literally, the German of st. 7 reads, "Hold on to me . . . I give myself entirely for you."

⁸ *BoC*, 434.

⁹ Johann Georg Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, ed. Oswald Bayer and Bernd Weiffenborn (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1993), 151, 37–152, 8.

2. Temporal

Mercy is not self-evident.¹⁰ It cannot become an existential or epistemological principle. On the contrary, mercy is actually something that is won and something that — emerging — happens unpredictably. And as this justifying God is not simply and in principle merciful, so also is sinful man not simply and in principle on the receiving end of God’s mercy. Otherwise he would not have to cry, “Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam!” (Ps. 51:3; English 51:1). “If he did not feel God’s wrath, he would not say, ‘Have mercy!’; thus he names himself [a man] under wrath that he has earned, and indeed he struggles to turn from the gaze of wrath and to lay hold of the gaze of mercy.”¹¹

For this turning from wrath and turning to mercy, time is needed, time in which the turning from and the turning to get carried out, time to pray a psalm like Psalm 51. It is noteworthy, for example, that in Psalm 22 the lament comes out in no less than three cycles (vv. 1–5, 6–11, 12–21). The psalm makes room for the lament, room for repetition and escalation; apparently lament is not something that gets mopped up in the wink of eye. As is the case with suffering itself, so also suffering’s lament evidently takes patience. And yet at the same time — paradoxically it would seem — the lament happens in the impatient anticipation of the promised, saving mercy. This means living in waiting and in haste (2 Peter 3:12), so that the way one speaks and the way one lives are shaped by the patience of the Holy Spirit as well as by impatient lamenting and pleading, which are also worked by the same Spirit. In a particularly clear and impressive statement, Luther expressed this very point as he cited Rom. 8:26 (“The Spirit himself intercedes for us with inexpressible groaning.”) in a sermon on 1 Cor. 15:23 on Oct. 20, 1532: “‘Oh, how I wish I were saved! Deliver me from death!’ That is the sort of crying out that no speech and no person in his body [knows], and [this crying out wants] nothing other than to be rescued from death. Thus let every Christian learn that such groaning and lamenting gets heard in heaven and causes quite a commotion there, so that the Lord comes and helps.”¹²

Lamenting and pleading amount to nothing less than the call, “Maranatha! Come, O Lord!” (1 Cor. 16:22) coming to a head in the plea, “Mach End, o

¹⁰ For more on the theology of lament presented in this section, see Oswald Bayer, “Toward a Theology of Lament” in *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, ed. David M. Whitford, trans. Matthias Gockel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 211–20.

¹¹ Peccator, “Qui sentit iram dei, sol er so fortem distinctionem machen inter peccatorem et propicium deum. Das ist non theologia rationis, sed supernaturalis, quod peccator nihil videt quam misericordiam, et tamen ibi sentit iram dei, quia si non sentiret, Non diceret: ‘Miserere’; ergo significat se sub ira et dignum ira, et tamen sic pugnat, ut abigat spectaculum irae et misericordiae apprehendat. Das ist Theologia.” Martin Luther, *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.), 40 II:342, 6–11 [hereafter, WA] in regard to Ps. 51:1.

¹² WA 36:560, 9–12.

Herr, mach Ende / mit aller unser Not.”¹³ Finally, at the definitive point of being heard, as the world is brought to its completion, praise will echo with grand voice, just as the overarching architecture of the five-part Psalter is characterized by a movement from lament to praise (for praise, see especially Psalm 145–150).¹⁴ The closing of many hymns in the *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* and in *Gotteslob*¹⁵ parallel this layout of the Psalter;¹⁶ see, for example, Erasmus Alber’s hymn, “Ihr lieben Christen, freut euch nun,” especially the last verse, “Ach, lieber Herr, eil zum Gericht! /Laß sehn dein herrlich Angesicht,/das Wesen der Dreifaltigkeit./Das helf uns Gott in Ewigkeit!”¹⁷

The vision of God is to partake of His righteousness.¹⁸ “[T]he light of glory ... will show us hereafter that the God whose judgment here is one of incomprehensible righteousness is a God of most perfect and manifest righteousness.”¹⁹ The light of glory will shed light on the incomprehensible

¹³ “Bring to an end, oh Lord, bring to an end, all our need.” This line comes from the last verse of Paul Gerhard’s hymn “Befiehl du deine Wege” (*Evangelisches Gesangbuch*, 361, st. 12); compare “Entrust Your Days and Burdens” (*LSB* 754:6). Grasped in christological specificity, the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come,” in which we find nothing other than God’s first promise (“I am the Lord, your God”) along with the First Commandment, finds expression in the words, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

¹⁴ Cf. Bernd Janowski, “Die ‘Kleine Biblia’: Zur Bedeutung der Psalmen für eine Theologie des Alten Testaments” (1998), in *Die rettende Gerechtigkeit: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999), 125–64, esp. 146. See Janowski, “Der barmherzige Richter: Zur Einheit von Gerechtigkeit und Barmherzigkeit im Gottesbild des Alten Orients und des Alten Testaments,” in *Das Drama der Barmherzigkeit Gottes: Studien zur biblischen Gottesrede und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte in Judentum und Christentum*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 183, ed. Ruth Scoralick (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), 33–91, esp. 76. See further, Janowski, “Die Antwort Israels,” *Bibel und Kirche* 56 (2001): 2–7, and also Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, “Von der Klage zum Lob—die Dynamik des Gebets in den Psalmen,” *Bibel und Kirche* 56 (2001): 16–20.

¹⁵ The *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* (hereafter, *EG*) is the hymnal of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKiD), and *Gotteslob* is the normal prayer book and hymnal of the German-speaking Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁶ If systematic theology would take this scope or flow of the Psalter seriously, the consequences for the layout and structure of a Christian dogmatic would be immense, especially in regard to setting the place and the function of the doctrine of the Trinity. See Bayer, *Zugesagte Gegenwart*, 171–79.

¹⁷ Translated, this line from “Dear Christians, Now Rejoice” reads, “O dear Lord, hasten to (your) judgment! / Let your glorious countenance appear, (which is) the essence of the Trinity. May God so help us in eternity!” (*EG* 6:5).

¹⁸ See Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), 181–84 (part of “Staunen, Seufzen, Schauen: Affekte der Wahrnehmung des Schöpfers,” 169–84). See also Bayer, “Die Zukunft Jesu Christi zum Letzten Gericht,” in *Gott als Autor: Zu einer poetologischen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 161–86, esp. 172ff., as well as the theses 10ff. (183–85).

¹⁹ *Luther’s Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, Press, 1955–86), 33:292 [hereafter, *LW*]; cf. *WA* 18:785,35–37: “Lumen gloriae aliud dictat, et Deum, cuius modo est iudicium incomprehensibilis iustitiae, tunc ostendit esse iustissimae et manifestissimae iustitiae.” In my judgment, Luther’s closing from *The Bondage of the Will*, in the larger context of *WA* 18:783, 17–785, 38 (*LW* 33:288–92), along with his preface to the book of Job (*WA* DB 10 1:4; *LW* 35:251–53), strikes precisely at the heart of eschatology. In this regard, his closing is cited in the last chapter of my short outline of dogmatics (“Faith within the

hiddenness of God, a hiddenness extant not only in the light of nature, but first and foremost in the light of grace. The light of glory, which is the same thing as the final judgment, brings the case argued with God over His own righteousness to a close and thereby dissolves the question of theodicy: “on that day you will ask me nothing” (John 16:23).²⁰

Even if the full, unbroken praise of God’s goodness, with which we praise God in the absence of trial and temptation, will first take place at the end, in a certain way the praise of God is implied in every lament. If God could in no way be praised — even with tears — then man could not lament. Lament is always tied to past and future praise. This fact manifests itself, for example, in Is. 51:9–11. Here the impetuous plea, a plea that wells up from the lament (cf. Is. 40:27), that God would finally take mighty action and prove Himself the merciful Comforter and Deliverer — this plea holds up God’s previous mighty acts of creation and deliverance from Egypt before God (vv. 9–10) and extends itself simultaneously to the certain hope that the miserable tables will be turned and that there will be an new exodus, this time from Babylon to Jerusalem (v. 11). And this exodus is then the reason for “everlasting joy” (v. 11) and everlasting praise. Thus the current hardship is not treated as a matter of indifference nor is it glossed over. Rather, it is taken seriously, but taken seriously in such a way that the hardship and misery do not become the final reality, leading to resignation and cynicism.

As we have just seen, even though praise is implied in every lament, it cannot be made into some sort of principle and into the quasi-“normal” sentiment of the Christian, as happened in the Schleiermachiian tradition. Then lamenting and pleading would, as a matter of principle, have no place in the Christian congregation and its worship. “Kyrie eleison!” would then have to be understood as the call of one standing outside the congregation.²¹

3. Ethical

In its effort to provide uplifting comfort, Christian ethics appeal to the mercy of God as the foundation for its merciful action (Rom. 12:1; cf. 11:32). It is God who stoops to the depths and turns toward the lowly, promising and creating communion that holds in death and beyond. When it comes

Lawsuit about God—Before God” in *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003], 69–80). Thomas Reinhuber offers an impressive and comprehensive interpretation of WA 18:783, 17–785, 38 in *Kämpfender Glaube: Studien zu Luthers Bekenntnis am Ende von De servo arbitrio* (Berlin/New York: W. de Gruyter, 2000).

²⁰ For the relationship between God’s judgment and mercy, see Bernd Janowski’s summary under the article on “Gericht Gottes (II. Altes Testament)” in *Religion in Geschichte in Gegenwart* [RGG], 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 3:733ff.

²¹ Ernst Christian Achelis, “Kyrie eleison: Eine ligurgische Abhandlung,” *Monatsschrift für Gottesdienst und kirchliche Kunst* 4 (1899): 161–72 and 211–16, esp. 215.

to overcoming the power of death, mercy and comfort are the same thing (2 Corinthians 1).

Over against the depths of this divine mercy, today's merciful sort of interpersonal solidarity is becoming increasingly suspect, with doubts looming that such interpersonal solidarity goes about its business in a rather haphazard spontaneity, not really reaching deep enough when it comes to shaping social structures. Legal guarantees of aid have a way of freeing people from the fear of not being able to find any help, switching chance, for the most part, off. However, this guaranteed aid comes at the price of being handled by a cold system. The warmth of emotional concern and care, along with its freedom and spontaneity, cannot be organized. Not only in the holes and on the edges of a welfare state governed under the rule of law but also within institutional structures, we run into the question about a kind of freedom that, despite adhering to the letter of the law, does not let itself be forced into providing help and aid. This freedom is the freedom granted by God's mercy, a freedom that allows people to go beyond themselves, to step into the next man's shoes, to sense his hardship and privation, to discern his need, to help him and to be there for him. Being there for the next man certainly has institutional consequences, but being there for the neighbor in need does not need to justify itself in institutional structures.

Mercy (*Barmherzigkeit*) means having a soft heart and is the opposite of hard-heartedness (*Hartherzigkeit*); hard-heartedness means closing myself off to the hardships and needs of next person, thereby forgetting my own needs and my own privation. Four features constitute mercy's gentle movement, showing clearly its anti-Stoic bearing: Mercy is affective; mercy stoops down; mercy lives outside itself; mercy seeks solidarity with the next person. Mercy is a matter of the innermost being, a matter of the heart, now turned entirely outward. It cannot be equated with moral resolution, but rather underlies such resolution and is in this sense "pre-moral." Mercy applies to the poor and the distressed; grace and will fix themselves on what is below. It is no self-satisfying disposition or mindset; in mercy, borne along by love and pathos, we slip outside ourselves to be with one lowlier. And yet inequality, in which the one helped and the helper come into contact, is surrounded and pervaded by a yet greater commonality and equality. This greater commonality and equality consists of being creatures or creations of God and in the communion of need that was given with the loss the image of God, a loss to be distinguished from being a creature (being a creature and being one who has lost the image of God are not the same thing). As universal as this twofold communion is, mercy cannot simply be assumed after the loss of the image of God. If mercy were simply self-evident, Jesus would never have had to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. If mercy went without saying, we would have no need of this parable continually being told us anew. The evidence of this narrated mercy is continually mediated by the Mediator of creation, Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, who sees to His presence in the present. Human mercy (Luke 10:33) is founded in God's mercy (Luke 15:20).

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