

# God's Smile

## Worship as Source of Christian Life

CARL AXEL AURELIUS

Translated by Holger Sonntag



FOR LUTHER, THE IMAGE of the Christian life is most clearly seen in the psalms. The mixture of joy and suffering, lamentation and praise found in them characterizes the life and different affects of a Christian. Some of the psalms allow us to look deeply into the most difficult afflictions. We get a picture of the emotions of this situation, for example, in Psalm 6 or Psalm 13. Both are strange psalms, and they are so in a twofold way. On the one hand, it is certainly noteworthy that they are there at all. The afflicted one is apparently in a situation in which he has to ask himself: Does it really pay to pray? Yet he prays in spite of everything. Why? On the other hand, both psalms are noteworthy due to the sudden change in key. In the middle of the psalm there is a change from minor to major. Lament is transformed into a song of praise. What actually happens there? In his second great exposition of the Psalter, *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), Luther states:

For the afflicted ones have to be comforted now and then in order to be able to endure. This is why joyful psalms and psalms of lament are mixed in many ways, so that this mixture of different psalms and this confused order, as it is called, should be an example and image of the Christian life that is practiced under manifold grief from the world and under comfort from God's word. (WA 5: 287.16 ff.)

As was said, both psalms show us the most difficult affliction. They are no longer about the grief the world causes. The afflicted one no longer wrestles with man but with God. More and more he sinks down into despair. On the outside, he or she suffers from something not known to us; yet on the inside, we know exactly how this human being regards his suffering. He thinks, "God has rejected me in his wrath forever." This is the greatest affliction. The afflicted one finds himself in chaotic darkness.

As parallels, Luther points to two passages from Scripture, Genesis 1:2 and Romans 8:26, which follow this train of thought: The darkness surrounding the afflicted one is like the chaotic darkness existing before creation "over the deep." The Spirit who once hovered "over the waters" is the Spirit who now becomes active in the afflicted one and who "intercedes with inexpressible groaning" for him.

In other words, Luther understands this last sign of life not as a result of a final effort of the afflicted one, but as an expression of the Spirit's dwelling in him and praying in him. The Spirit helps him to get through the affliction, helps him to endure. It is thus the work of the Spirit that there is prayer at all and that these prayers are gathered in the psalms.

What is more, the Spirit is active in the intercessions of the saints for the afflicted ones. The Holy Spirit is, for Luther, chiefly intercessor and comforter, just as it is said in Romans 8:26. Regin Prenter calls this specific passage Luther's "center of understanding by which all his thoughts about the Spirit are oriented." Prenter adds: "No infused grace can groan for man with unutterable groanings. No one but God himself is able to do that."<sup>1</sup>

The change in both psalms happens by a word from the outside; the word concerning God's presence and mercy; the Word, Christ. Thus begins the song of praise. On the outside, the situation of the afflicted one has perhaps changed very little. He is still being attacked. Yet by the word concerning God's mercy his interpretation of the situation has totally changed. The word ends fear and its rule. It calls forth hope.

Luther thus says that God has changed for the one praying, and now God steps forth as the merciful Father from whom one expects all good things:

Yet now that you have become my Lord and God, turn to me, not only to hear me but also to answer me, and to do nothing else than to save and preserve me, so that I might have a gracious God instead of an angry Judge. (WA 5: 388.19 ff.)

Overcoming affliction is an act of creation that happens, like that first one, in characteristic darkness: out of nothing and by the word. The double exposure of creation and redemption is clearly emphasized and is quite frequent in Scripture. God's redemption means to begin at the beginning, therefore redemption is new creation.

Overcoming affliction is likewise a Trinitarian event. The angry God is replaced by the merciful Father who embraces the

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1. Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. J. M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 18–19.

afflicted one by the inexpressible groaning of his Spirit and the lost love of his Son.

A catechetical text from the same time as the commentary on the psalms narrates how the Spirit opens the way to the Father “through Christ and in Christ.” The wording is highly reminiscent of the explanation of the Third Article in the Small Catechism:

I do not only believe that the Holy Spirit is a true God with the Father and the Son, but also that no one can come in and to the Father through Christ and his life, suffering, death, and everything that is said about him, or gain any of these, without the work of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Father and the Son moves, awakens, calls, draws me and all who are his; by whom he also makes us alive, holy, and spiritual through and in Christ. This is how he brings us to the Father; for he is the one by whom the Father through Christ and in Christ does everything and makes alive. (WA 7: 218.25 ff.)

Luther calls affliction and overcoming the affliction a “play of God.” In this sense it is possible to regard and experience the event as Jacob did at the ford of the Jabbok in Genesis 32. According to Luther’s exposition in the early sermons from the 1520s, as well as in the great Genesis commentary, this account is about the most difficult affliction, just as Psalm 6:13. Perhaps his interpretation of Jacob’s prayer and struggle can deepen our understanding of overcoming affliction and the turn from lament to praise we encountered in the psalms.

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### ***Luther understands Jacob’s struggle as a story of an answered prayer.***

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Luther understands Jacob’s struggle as a story of an answered prayer. Jacob called on God to be delivered from the hand of Esau, his brother. In his prayer Jacob reminded God of His promise made to him in Bethel. Yet God’s answer, at least at the beginning, looks like its opposite: God wants to kill him. This is why God’s actions are impossible to grasp with reason — faith, however, grasps it.

Jacob is caught between a rock and a hard place. His chief desire is to avoid an encounter with Esau and so this is his request of the Lord. In answer, he encounters God instead of Esau. Jacob’s opponent is for Luther not only an angel but God himself. During the struggle, Jacob holds on to God’s promise, and in this consists his strength by which he prevails.

How can Jacob overcome God who is almighty? To struggle with God and prevail means for Luther to overcome the angry God, the God who has eternally rejected and forsaken me. Just like in the psalms mentioned above, this is about the follow-

ing: How does a human being understand his suffering while he finds himself in deepest affliction? How does he regard God and all that exists? This is not a question concerning God “by himself,” but one concerning God “in me”:

Thus, this is what overcoming God means: not to overcome his power, but to overcome that which he is, and as what he is felt, in our conscience, just as Scripture says that God is changed when we are changed. He is changeless in himself. (WA 24: 568.28 ff.)

Therefore we see that God is always the same; yet God changes for me when the affliction is overcome.

For this change to happen, it is of critical importance to hear and hold on to God’s word and promise, even if, and especially if, this word becomes doubtful in the darkness of affliction:

When I overcome him in this way in me, then I have overcome God by grasping and holding the word concerning his mercy and by driving away what wants to make him angry. Thus, one does not overcome his majesty, but his work that he does in us. (WA 24: 579.7 ff.)

Luther here speaks of the alien work of God. God kills to make alive; he destroys to create anew out of nothing. This is how God preserves man in faith and in humility. “This is how God acts when he wants to make those who are his completely strong” (WA 24: 578.22).

The Trinitarian movement, which was already noticeable in the exposition of the psalms, is found here as well.

Jacob’s opponent is “God Himself, or God’s Son, who was to become incarnate” (AE 6: 130). Christ is the opponent! Luther compares Jacob’s struggle to the struggle the Canaanite woman had to go through in Matthew 15. Jesus rejects her with harsh words, but she did not give up. She continued to ask him for help. And finally Christ puts down his mask. He begins to speak to her in a comforting way that refreshed her heart: “O woman, your faith is great!”

In such a struggle it is impossible to endure without the presence of the Holy Spirit in our weakness. He intercedes for us in the best way possible with inexpressible groaning. As usual, Luther points to the passage concerning the Spirit in Romans 8:26.

Overcoming affliction is described in almost the same words as in the psalms. God, who, in the eyes of the ones affected, was an angry Judge, now steps forth as the loving Father. (AE 6: 141)

The Trinitarian movement is the same: *With the Spirit — through the Son — to the Father.*

### ***The worship service as place of justification***

The work of the Holy Spirit consists in leading men to the Father in and through Christ. The Spirit mediates the real presence of Christ. Where does this take place? To be sure, the re-

formers thought that God can let this take place whenever and however he wished. Yet they were also convinced that God indicates the time and place. With Regin Prenter I therefore want to speak, in Reformation perspective, about the worship service as the place of justification:

The place . . . where Jesus Christ, God and man, with his vicarious satisfaction is given to faith as the only righteousness of the sinners is the worship service with its word and sacrament.

For if we are to be made righteous before God only on account of Christ's vicarious satisfaction, then this satisfaction has to be distributed by God himself. This happens precisely in the mass, by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the Lord's Supper. The mass is, so to speak, justification by faith in action.<sup>2</sup>

If this is indeed so, as Regin Prenter says, that the divine service is the place of justification, then justification has found its artistic expression in St. Mary's Church at Wittenberg. I am thinking here of the altarpiece by Lucas Cranach, which actually consists of four pictures.

At the center is the picture of the institution of the Lord's Supper. One of the participants is Martin Luther, the man with the beard who receives the chalice. This is how Luther looked when he — safe from his opponents — lived in Wartburg Castle as *Junker Georg*. It is no accident that it is he who receives the chalice. After all, Luther, like Jan Huss a century earlier, had given the people not only the bread but also the chalice.

On the left-hand side, we see how Melanchthon baptizes a child, with Cranach himself as a sponsor. It is remarkable that Melanchthon baptizes, because he was not ordained. On the right-hand side, Johannes Bugenhagen, the congregation's pastor, uses the keys of the kingdom of heaven. On the one side is a penitent man who kneels; on the other side is an impenitent man who turns away from him in anger.

Bearing the altarpiece, in the predella, we see Luther preaching to his congregation to which belong, among others, Luther's wife, Catharine; his daughter, Magdalena; and his son, Hans. The content of the sermon is Christ crucified.

The interpretation of pictures is a difficult task that is to be done in two steps: the intuitive encounter with the picture that leaves room for contemplation, and then the methodical interpretation. In the second step, one can distinguish four aspects: the material, the verbal, the graphic, and the iconographic aspects. The last is most interesting to us, but something must also be said about the verbal and graphic meaning.

One speaks of verbal meaning when a picture contains written messages or signs. This does not apply to the actual pictures but to the framework. At the top there is a biblical text and underneath it there are two numbers referencing two years. The biblical word crowning the altar is found in 1 Corinthians 3:11:

"For no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." It is possible that the biblical verse was added later, but without a doubt it fits very nicely with the picture of the crucified One on the predella. The T-shaped cross gives the impression that everything is borne by the arms of the crucified One.

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### *The altarpiece stands as a piece of theology in a time of need.*

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The year 1547 is noteworthy when one considers that the picture is to represent what is central to the Reformation. In the year 1547 everything seemed to be over. Luther had died in the previous year. The elector had been imprisoned after he was defeated in the Battle of Mühlberg. Cranach himself had to give up his office as mayor of Wittenberg and follow his elector into imprisonment. Melanchthon had left the city. The Protestant Maurice of Saxony had made common cause with the party of the emperor and received the office of the elector as a reward. The city was besieged by the armies of the emperor and capitulated on 19 May 1547. The emperor himself stood next to Luther's tomb in the Castle Church.

To be sure, Bugenhagen was still in town, but his position was weakened. His gratitude over the sparing of the city and the university, and his participation in the signing of the various Interim treaties were interpreted as complaisance and a lack of dedication to the cause of the Reformation. The altarpiece stands as a piece of theology in a time of need. It is focused on the one thing needful in a time when the foundations seemed shaken.

The graphic meaning is about the perspective and the play of forms and colors. Here we can state that the altarpiece is a single whole of very homogenous shape. Everything takes place in the same space.

The arches and the window on the right picture have their mirror image on the left side. The middle picture is square and contains the circular table for the Supper. Square and circle are the most perfect geometrical forms. The circular form is found, as a whole or in part, in the baptismal font, in the pulpit, and even in the scene depicting Bugenhagen's pastoral care. A straight line connects the binding key to the loosening key, down to the furry collar of the repentant, kneeling man and up to the sword of the impenitent.

The picture gives a homogenous impression that is nonetheless not closed. The Upper Room is open toward the world. We get the sense of a landscape that art historians consider typical for Renaissance painting. The field, the river, the hamlet, and the castle give depth to the picture. As theologians, we perhaps want to add that life out there in family and society — the

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2. Regin Prenter, "Das Augsbürgische Bekenntnis und die römische Messopferlehre," *Kerygma und Dogma* 1 (1955): 45.

world's landscape—is the gospel's horizon of understanding. Now we have reached the iconographic meaning.

The altarpiece is not only a whole from a graphic point of view; the same can be said in iconographic perspective. All of the pictures express one and the same thing: the distribution of the gospel to the people. The following words from the Smalcald Articles come to mind:

Now we want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in His grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matthew 18[:20]: "Where two or three are gathered . . ." (SA III, 4; Kolb-Wengert, 319)

The worship service is the place of justification, just as Regin Prenter says. Everything happens in the context of the worship service, in which man encounters the living God and where God places his coat of justification over man freezing in his sin. Luther's distinctions between the fact of Christ's suffering and its application expresses the relation between what is past and what is present:

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won; second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But He has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the Supper or Sacrament. There He has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. (AE 49: 213–214)

Luther sees the distribution that takes place now in line with the humiliation that already characterized the incarnation, where honor is hidden under dishonor and injury, and power under powerlessness. He speaks of the "labor of the Lord's Supper":

But the glory of our God is precisely that for our sakes He comes down to the very depths, into human flesh, into the bread, into our mouth, our heart, our bosom; moreover, for our sakes He allows himself to be treated ingloriously both on the cross and on the altar. (AE 37: 42)

In a description of the altarpiece I purchased in Wittenberg one can read that the four pictures reflect the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession by Melanchthon. However, the altarpiece is hardly an illustration of a dogmatic train of thought. Rather, Melanchthon formulates dogmatically what Cranach designs artistically, namely, the use of the gospel and the communion at the table of the Lord.

The articles of the confession explain the use of the gospel and defend it against every abuse. Nathan Söderblom, the Swedish archbishop who lived a century ago, encouraged the study of the Confessions for the following reason: "The grandiose spiritual work contained therein has as an essential purpose to keep the joy that God gives in Christ from being that the joy God gives in Christ is diminished."<sup>3</sup>

The worship service, with word and sacrament, is our joy—the place where Jesus Christ, God and man, is given to faith with his vicarious satisfaction as the only righteousness of the sinner. The confessions explain and defend this joy.

### *In the Beginning Was Worship*

In 2 Corinthians 4:15 is found a brief description of the basic structure in every service: "For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."

The Greek word for grace is *charis*; the word for thankfulness and thanksgiving is *eucharistia*. This furnishes the two movements of the worship service. God calls and men answer, with the distribution of the grace among people and their thanksgiving to the glory of God. On 5 October 1544, Luther highlighted this basic pattern of the worship service in his sermon for the dedication of the castle church at Torgau. He said, by way of introduction:

My dear friends, we are now to bless and consecrate this new house to our Lord Jesus Christ. This devolves not only upon me; you, too, should take hold of the aspergillum and the censer, in order that the purpose of this new house may be such that nothing else may ever happen in it except that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through His holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise. (AE 51: 333)

When talking about the distribution of grace, Luther does not only mean the gifts God gives. He also speaks of the three-fold self-giving of God. According to the 1528 *Confession of the Supper of Christ*, Luther declares that God gives himself to us fully, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:

These are the three Persons and one God, who has given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall. Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all His works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and His gifts.

3. Nathan Söderblom, *Herdabref till prästerskapet och församlingarna i Uppsala ärkestift* (Uppsala: F. C. Askerberg, 1914), 26.

But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it. He does this both inwardly and outwardly — inwardly by means of faith and other spiritual gifts, outwardly through the gospel, baptism, and the Sacrament of the altar, through which as through three means or methods he comes to us and inculcates the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of our salvation. (AE 37: 366)

In looking at the second movement in the worship service, namely, our receiving the grace and our thanksgiving, we take as a point of departure the same text as earlier: Luther's later commentary on Genesis. In the 1534 edition of the *Luther Bible*, there is a picture that shows God the Father as Creator of heaven and earth. Underneath is seen the earth with Paradise, surrounded by water, with Adam and Eve, trees and rivers, and the sky with the birds, sun, moon, and stars. Everything was finished. God rested on the seventh day, and God blessed and sanctified this day (Gn 2:3). This is how God from the beginning dedicated the seventh day for worship (AE 1: 80).

If mankind had remained in the state of innocence, he would himself have sanctified the seventh day with the order for worship being passed down through the generations. We are therefore created to praise and recognize God.

This is exactly the meaning of the Sabbath: God speaks to us through his word, and we in turn speak to him in prayer and faith (AE 1: 81). Man is created not only for the physical life, but also for the eternal life, the rest in God, into which Adam would have transitioned without dying.

Luther calls the worship connected with the Sabbath an inner and spiritual service consisting of faith and love. Yet God also wants man to practice his worship of God externally and physically (AE 1: 94). This is why God mandated not only a time but also a place where worship was to take place. This is how Luther saw the meaning of one of the two trees that stood in the midst of Paradise: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, whose fruits men were not permitted to eat (Gn 2:9, 16–17). This tree was “Adam's church, pulpit, and altar.”<sup>4</sup>

Here the church is established. *Ecclesia* thus comes before *oeconomia* and *politia*. This sequence means, according to Luther, that man is created for a different purpose than the other creatures. He was created for immortal, eternal life. Here on earth Adam and his offspring are to offer their due obedience to God, come to know his word and will, thank God for all gifts, and call on him against temptation. There in heaven they are to gather after eating from the fruits of the tree of life, to thank and praise the Lord.

Luther finds examples for the concrete forms of such songs of praise and laud in Psalms 148 and 149, where every creature, sun, moon, lightning and hail, heights and mountains, trees and animals, and so forth, is called to praise the Lord. This is worship in its “barest, purest, and simplest” form (AE 1: 106). Nothing else is prescribed, only this one thing: to praise and thank God, to rejoice in the Lord, and to obey him by not eating from the forbidden tree. Christ reestablished this worship for us in part; but it will be perfected first in heaven.

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### *We are therefore created to praise and recognize God.*

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Describing pure worship the way Luther does here, it is interesting to see how he handles the question of sacrifice. He emphasizes that the sacrifices are an expression of faith and thanksgiving to God. The thought is developed in a Trinitarian fashion. Adam and Eve are not only the parents of Cain and Abel, but also have priestly tasks. This is why they, filled with the Holy Spirit and knowing about the coming Christ, are able to kindle in their children the hope of a future liberation as well as gratitude for God's great mercy,<sup>5</sup> which resulted in their offering of sacrifices as described in Genesis 4.

The sacrifice, additionally, is to be understood as the external sign that God always adds to his word to remind mankind of his mercy and to make their faith easier. This is also true for the other signs of the old covenant, as, for example, the rainbow or circumcision. All these were signs of God's grace, just as baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs of the new covenant. The sacrifice after the promise made to Adam had the same function as the sacraments do for us. The old as well as the new signs bear witness to God's ceaseless care for mankind, even after the fall into sin.

These visible signs of God's grace answer the question of where the church is. They are marks: “Where the Eucharist, Baptism, and the Word are, there are Christ, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life” (AE 1: 249). These words are reminiscent of Luther's train of thought on the marks of the church in his 1539 tract *On Councils and the Church*. It is about how a poor, lost sinner is to find a holy Christian people. The means that constitute the church are also its surest marks.

There are additional verses in the opening chapters of Genesis that make Luther talk about worship. Thus the concluding short note in chapter 4 that “men at this time began to call on the name of the Lord” (Gn 4:26). Luther calls this passage the “most beautiful description of what it means to celebrate a right

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4. AE 1: 95: “Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the Word and will of God, give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation.”

5. AE 1: 247: “It is evident that the sacrifices which were handed down had no other purpose.”

worship service,” namely, to call upon the name of the Lord. The “name of the Lord” points to Christ, the promised Seed, who will crush the head of the serpent.

Such a worship service Luther can also call a right service according to the commandments of the First Table. This usage of words we also recognize in *On Councils and the Church*, where Luther speaks of marks of the First and Second Tables. For to call upon the name of the Lord means to preach the word, to believe in the heart, and to confess with the mouth.

All these belong together and follow one after another, just as Paul states it in Romans 10:13–14. Calling upon the name of the Lord comes from faith in the heart, which in turn comes from the preaching of the one sent to proclaim. All this corresponds to what God commands in the First Table. The First Commandment commands to believe that God rushes to our salvation. The Second Commandment demands confession and prayer, that we might call on the Lord in the hour of need and that we might thank God. The Third Commandment demands that we preach the truth and preserve and defend the right doctrine.

The Second Table also is connected to worship, but not as immediately, because what is said there deals with man’s behavior to his fellow men. However, when the demands of the First Table are fulfilled, the other works of the Second Table follow spontaneously as well. They are to be considered as liturgical acts according to the Second Table, borne out of the fulfillment of the commandments of the First Table.<sup>6</sup> They are thus secondary. This means that the works of the Second Table are less reliable as marks, but they exist because a good tree always bears good fruit. This is how Luther regards the entire life of the Christian, the life according to the First and the Second Tables, as worship. It is a life of faith in God and love of the neighbor. **LOGIA**

6. AE 1: 329 (emphasis added): “He demands the First Table, that you hear, meditate on, and teach the Word; that you pray, and that you fear God. Whenever this is done, there will follow spontaneously, as it were, the *forms of worship* or the works of the *Second Table*. It is impossible for him who *worships in accordance with the First Table* not to keep the Second Table also.”

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