

Symposium—Continued

Response to the Symposium

on

*God's Most Earnest Purpose*¹

Dennis Ngien

I am grateful to the gentleness and generosity extended to the author by respondents Jonathan Sorum, Drew Christiansen, and Erik Hermann. My reflections may be summed up as follows:

Antinomy between Curse and Blessing: Resolved by the Triune God

“God’s most earnest purpose” is, Jonathan Sorum recognizes, “that God should finally succeed in being our God” (124). Which God? The monotheistic deity or the Trinity? Sorum captures Luther’s thought: it takes the Triune God to *succeed* in being our God. The doctrine of justification is to be framed within the paradoxical distinction between law and gospel. The law serves as an agent exposing sin, curse, and wrath, the opposites of justification, in order to prepare us to be the recipients of the gospel—righteousness, blessing, and mercy. To appreciate the gravity of *how* God succeeds in winning us, one must recognize in Luther’s theology the antinomy between the curse of God’s distance from us and the blessing of God’s reconciliation with us; the former is set opposite the latter. The conquering of the antinomy comes purely from God, not us; salvation rests on the “who,” namely that God in Christ enters the opposites of justification—sin, curse, and wrath—to suffer the contraries and conquer them to constitute a people under his righteousness, blessing, and mercy. The epistemic cognition of the triumph that blessing has over curse, of mercy over wrath, gets attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit. No mortal souls could succeed in resolving the impasse between God’s love and His wrath except God, that is the Triune God. In this context, Sorum rightly notes that “a recovery of the church’s confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is at the heart of Luther’s reformation” (Sorum 124).

1. This symposium appeared previously in *Promissio*, volume 1, number 2 (2026), and can be accessed at <https://promissio.ilt.edu/index.php/pj/article/view/97>.

The Trinity as “a Differentiated Unity”: Pannenberg and Luther

Chapter I of my book locates Luther within the early church tradition in which the doctrine of the Trinity got upheld. Andrew Christiansen states: “In particular, Luther’s extensive corpus offers rich resources for sustained reflection on God as Trinity in ways that can be meaningfully engaged” (128). All three respondents recognized the trinitarian grammar of faith in Luther’s theological enterprise. Luther interprets the Creed in trinitarian terms, portraying the threefold self-giving of God: The Father gives Himself by creating, the Son by redeeming, and the Spirit by sanctifying. Each work is distinctive to the person rather than exclusive of that person. Where one person of the Trinity gets mentioned, the other two are included. As such, one could say the Trinity is the subject of salvation. In the tradition of Augustine, Luther affirms the unity and distinction between the immanent Trinity—God as He is in Himself—and the economic Trinity—God as He is for us. Nevertheless, there exists one God, the Triune God. However, the starting point of Luther’s theological task begins with the economic Trinity, from which the immanent Trinity gets deduced. The chief exercise of *God’s Most Earnest Purpose*, Christiansen rightly points out, “is to articulate how God relates to us—us as members of God’s creation and as sinners whom God redeems. This relation is constituted by God’s activity: God acts upon and toward us through the persons of the Trinity. The grammar of this trinitarian activity ... is given in the words of the Creed, and the logic of this trinitarian grammar ... undergirds Luther’s theology as a whole” (128). The author underscores Luther’s understanding of God’s way of being God “for us” in such a manner that draws us into the perichoretic unity of the Trinity. Through God’s trinitarian activity we are enabled to fear, trust, and love God above all else. Faith restores the responsivity to God lost in Adam’s fall, an instrumental grasping of God’s fatherly action in Christ through the efficacy of the Spirit. The gracious descent of God—from the Father through the Son in the Spirit—is the abiding presupposition of the effectual ascent to God, by the Holy Spirit through the Son to the Father. Both movements, descending and ascending, are of God’s grace.

The usage of Pannenberg’s phrase—“a differentiated unity”—as a predicate of the Trinity helps shed lights on each person’s action, yet that action does not exclude the other two. For instance, when we say the Son is the redeemer, this includes the other persons, thus making the Trinity the subject of redemption. The patristic doctrine of appropriation sits in view: that which is appropriate or distinctive to each individual person is not exclusive to that person. The word “differentiation” accentuates the distinctiveness of each person while the word “unity” accentuates the oneness of being or essence. A worthy project may deal with the reception of Luther’s trinitarian grammar of faith in Pannenberg’s trinitarian ontology, featuring how Luther’s catechetical materials may be read “*through* a Pannenbergian framework, especially in his treatment of the three articles of the Creed” (134). The authentic knowledge of God springs not from ourselves or from some external authority but solely from

God as He is towards us. Our understanding of God, shaped by our experience of the economic Trinity (Creed), must be grounded in the eternal nature of God (the immanent Trinity) to reflect His true being. The knowledge of God's external relationship with humanity corresponds to our knowledge of God's internal relationship with Himself. Luther's articulation of the Trinity proves basically economic and soteriological, thereby focusing on how the three persons of the Godhead work together *ad extra* as one God to achieve God's reconciliation with us, which we apprehend by faith.

The Christian Life:

Paradoxical Tension between Old Self and New Self

The doctrine of *ex nihilo* is the doctrine of "incongruous grace" (John Barclay's phrase). Grace does not annihilate humanity but animates it. The author appreciates Hermann's comparative but perceptive remark: "Ngien helps us observe and perhaps pine for a theology that moves from 'faith to faith'—from belief in the *truth* of divine things to the 'living, busy, active' faith that lives *truthfully*. Perhaps God creating *ex nihilo* is precisely what we need in our day of 'normal nihilism'" (139). Before God, we are not nihil; as Christiansen quotes Ngien, "We are endowed with an orientation toward God. This *Godward-ness* is constitutive of our created nature; it is not ours by merits or rewards but is God's gift of grace" (132). Out of sheer mercy, God endows his creatures with the power of turning to God, fearing, trusting, and loving God. God-wardness ontologically constitutes our creaturely status. In the innocent state, the innate life of communion and belonging to God remains a God-given reality until sin enters. God's most earnest purpose is that God may be ours and that we may be God's. God belongs to us even as we belong to Him. That belongingness, however, got severed by Adam's sin but reinstated by Christ's righteousness. This brings into sharp focus Luther's *theologia crucis*, which is a theology of "radical reversal" (Forde's phrase): Adam's fall as the movement from life to death is set opposite Christ's redemption as the movement from death to life. The language of dying and rising in Christ underscores salvation as "a discontinuity" (Daphne Hampson's phrase) with the old creature to whom we die in exchange for "the recreation" (Steven Chester's phrase) or "reconstitution" (John Barclay's phrase) of the new creature who now lives to God. The identity of true humanity is not a byproduct of human actions but Christ's redemptive action on the cross. Christ lives in us, imparting his power to us by the Spirit so that the power of nothingness—the world and all its vices—loses its grip on us. Both creation and redemption occur *ex nihilo*, purely by divine agency, not out of human agency.

The Christ whom faith grasps makes our existence anew; we are no longer enslaved by the sinful flesh but are instead enlivened by the life of God. The gospel is hidden in the paradoxical tension between the two poles: negatively, the passing away of the old self, and positively, the coming to life of the new self. Neither can the old "I" (self) predispose itself to the kingdom of God nor prepare itself for a reception of God's grace unless he is united to Christ through baptism and renewed

into Christ's life in which he now lives. The old self gets annihilated, as does the world. Both are crucified through the cross so that Christ alone remains Lord of all. We are most truly ourselves when we have Christ as Lord, and we falsify our identity when we have the world or ourselves as the lord instead. To live out of the old "I" is death while to live out of the new "I" is life. The Christian life is one of paradox: we must die by the annihilating power of the law in order to live by the animating power of the gospel. We are most crucified when our old Adam is most crucified; conversely, our old Adam is most dead when we are most edified. The cruciform life shapes the identity of the justified self where the old Adam undergoes death, and is not permitted to have free rein, and the new person undergoes resurrection and lives again in holiness and righteousness. Self-obsession or self-incurvature means we are dead to God; conversely, by dying to it, we are alive to God. The "I" of the justified self is identical to the "I" of the pristine self. Apart from human actions or merits, Christ's justifying action effects a return of the renewed "I" to Eden to partake of the eternal bliss of communion with God, the very purpose for which humanity had originally been created.

Erik Hermann rightly observes that *God's Most Earnest Purpose* favors forensic justification; however, an engagement with the monastic and mystical elements, as stressed in the works of Bernd Hamm and Volker Leppin (139), might be a way forward for the next project, as I deal with the theme of passive affectivity of an effective faith in Luther.

To sum up, in embracing that God's most earnest purpose is to be our God means to cling to God alone, declaring that He is the source of our being, the sustenance of our well-being, the quickening of our willing, the dynamic of our performance, and the power of our epistemic perception of God, thereby nurturing a piety focused not on self-fulfillment but on fearing, trusting, and loving God above all else. In all this, God remains the causative factor, the active agent of all activities. We are the passive recipients of these actions that benefit us. My book aims not only at being instructive but evocative, meant to stir up in readers a simple yet relatively doxological response, as recognized and elaborated upon in the elegant conclusion by Hermann:

In the end, *God's Most Earnest Purpose* gives us a robust experience of Luther's thought. With a second naiveté, I found myself saying, "So this is what it can look like when we believe that the God who saves me is triune, when redemption from sin and death is grace from beginning to end, and when life with God is a pouring out of the creator's love in Christ and a gathering back into communion with God and one another" (139).

Promissio

A Journal of Confessing Theology



A Call for Papers

Promissio seeks submissions for the upcoming issues:

Volume 1, No. 4 (Autumn 2026):

How do creeds and confessions provide
the grammar of the scriptural language of faith?

Volume 2, No. 1 (Winter 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Fatherhood of God

Volume 2, No. 2 (Spring 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the divine Sonship of the man Jesus

Volume 2, No. 3 (Summer 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the personhood of the Holy Spirit

Volume 2, No. 4 (Autumn 2027):

The doctrine and proclamation of the Holy Trinity

All submissions should be emailed to the General Editor

All accepted authors will need an account at promissio.ilt.edu

Please see the Submissions Guidelines there for important information!

All questions can be directed to:

Paul R. Hinlicky, General Editor

phinlicky@ilt.edu