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A SURVEY OF LUTHER'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE  
PROPER USE OF RATIO IN THEOLOGY AS FOUND  
IN THE LECTURES ON GALATIANS (1519),  
ON THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL, AND  
THE DISPUTATION CONCERNING MAN

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Systematic Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

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by

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February 1987

Approved by John Johnson  
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## INTRODUCTION

The five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther was celebrated around the world with great fanfare in A.D. 1983, and well it should have been. Luther was a theological giant of a thinker, contributing volumes of writings that are the center of doctrinal studies even to our present day. But he was no mere philosopher of the church, who idled away his time in the contemplation of dogmatic trivia. Not only was Luther a theologian of few peers, but also was he a devout Christian man, who dedicated his work of prolific writing to the greater goal of enabling the people of God to rediscover the comforting Word of the Gospel--and this, that once terrified consciences might be stilled by the voice of the Triune God who offers a new beginning through His Son, to our world's races of people traveling on a collision course with their own self-destruction. And so it is well that the world should have celebrated the birth of a man who fought towering obstacles in his time, so that God's promise of peace to men on whom God's favor rests could be heard as a herald of good news amidst the troubling realities of daily life.

Luther broke into print with his writings only reluctantly.<sup>1</sup> He did so, however, in order that the people of his day would be led to and into Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> It is not without warrant that E. G. Schwiebert notes:

Although Luther's Postils and Catechisms played an important role during the formative years of the emerging Lutheran Church, they pale into insignificance when compared with his translation of the Bible into German. . . . It is impossible to evaluate its role in the furthering of the Reformation, for its assistance in spreading the Gospel to the common man was immeasurable.<sup>3</sup>

Luther would not have wanted to add to the volumes of theological writings, the reading of which served to keep men and women from the task of fervently studying the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Rather, he sought, above all else, to bring the sacred writings into the hearts and minds of all people within his reach. As will be seen in the survey of Luther's understanding of ratio presented in the following pages, his keen interest in turning the human mind away from its introspective mode of thought, and toward an openness to God's revelation of Himself in Scripture, stemmed directly from the most crucial foundation of Luther's theology: a proper view of man in relation to God.

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, D. Martin Luther's Werke (Weimar: H. Boehlau, 1883-), 6:480. Hereafter cited as WA.

<sup>2</sup>WA 10 III, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup>Ernest G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 643.

<sup>4</sup>"The number of books on theology must be reduced and only the best ones published. It is not many books that

Seeing ourselves in a proper relation to God is not an easy task. The inherent pride that we possess causes us not always to see facts as they are, but as we would like them to be; and for us, who live in these days of the Post-Enlightenment, this problem has only become more compounded. Our human reason has stolen the day from the fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom. The ratio of man, which God meant to be a special gift to mankind (distinguishing man from the lower animal kingdom), has become instead a curse for us. In our inner search for the peace which only God can give, our reason stubbornly resists yielding its place of highest honor to any superior source of truth.

Modern theological scholarship bears testimony of our desire to render more credit to reason's capacity for knowing the truth about God and our relation to Him than is due it. Many biblical scholars no longer are willing to define Scriptures as being the word of God; rather, the sacred writings are sifted through the sieve of human reason as an a priori guide to determining truth, with the hope that some grain of truth will pass through the test to lead

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make men learned, nor even reading. But it is a good book frequently read, no matter how small it is, that makes a man learned in the Scriptures and godly. Indeed, the writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time so that through them we may be led into the Scriptures. As it is, however, we only read them these days to avoid going any further and getting into the Bible. . . ." Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), 44:205. Hereafter cited as LW.



us into a deeper relationship with God and one another. Especially those events recorded in Scripture that do not meet the rigors of empirical substantiation, are cast off by reason as being mythological cloakings for an underlying truth which can be determined only through further speculation and evaluation (for some scholars, as was the case for Karl Barth, God reveals His truth through the written word of God, as the latter "gives occasion" for the Word of God to take place).<sup>5</sup>

In seeking a fitting place for ratio in the realm of Christian proclamation, the expected extremes present themselves. Some see any use of ratio in the arena of Christian doctrine to be an encroachment on the integrity of God's revelation to man, and would have us to throw human reason out of the picture altogether, with an invitation into the province of pure mysticism. Others have no use for any system which is in any part irrational or unreasonable (any thought that requires an element of "faith"); hence, they will have nothing to do with a religion that boasts of an outside revelation that is able to approach truths not accessible to human reason via observation and experience.

In establishing a less radical--perhaps mediating--view of the proper place of ratio within the parameters of

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<sup>5</sup>See Samuel H. Nafzger, "Scripture and Word of God," in Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics, ed. John Reumann, in collaboration with Samuel H. Nafzger and Harold H. Ditmanson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 111.

theological pursuits, one must ask some pertinent questions: What is a "responsible" use of human reason in the systematic formulating of dogma within God's Church? What is reason's proper relationship to revelation? What relationship does reason bear to the interpretation of Scripture? To what effect does the employment of reason in making defense of the truth claims of the Christian faith work, both inside and outside the circle of the Christian church? What is reason's competence since the Fall of man, to discern truths which lie beyond the empirical evidence of the world?

Martin Luther must have wrestled with the same kinds of questions in arriving at his own conclusions concerning the proper place of ratio in Biblical theology. The following pages will present the Reformer's understanding on this crucial issue. That investigation will be conducted on the basis of three primary writings: The Lectures on Galatians (1519) [also referred to in this thesis as the "Galatians Commentary (1519)"], On the Bondage of the Will [also called, simply, "Bondage of the Will" in these pages], and The Disputation Concerning Man [also referred to simply as the "Disputation"].

The survey concerning Luther's understanding of the use of reason in theology will be presented in what this writer believes to be a very logical order. Chapter One will present the ideas on the subject, as developed by extremely significant forerunners of Luther, which helped give

shape to the prevalent attitude toward theological method in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Chapter Two will present Luther's own educational background, and a section lending historical information concerning the three primary works under consideration in this thesis, with attention given to their context within Luther's career. Chapter Three will outline Luther's views of man's ratio, especially since the Fall in Eden. In that chapter, special importance will be placed upon the Reformer's concept of reason's competence, and incompetence, to know that which is 'true.' Chapter Four shall survey Luther's ideas concerning the proper place of reason as regards the interpretation of Sacred Scriptures. Chapter Five will then give attention to his position on the employment of ratio within the field of applied theology. The final chapter will offer a brief summary and conclusion, as well as presenting some questions for further investigation.

Through the research and study required for the preparation of the discussion which follows, this writer has come to heed the warnings of those historians and dogmaticians who have turned their immense energy and skill to the field of Luther scholarship. It is dangerous, at best, to present rash hypotheses concerning where one thinks Luther would take his stand today, in the midst of the thoroughgoing debates concerning the proper place of reason in theological studies. The purpose of this thesis is not to speculate regarding

where this writer thinks Luther would stand today in the midst of the battles fought to give ratio its proper place in Christian theology. Instead, this writer finds merit in the practices of the Augustinian scholars of Luther's day, allowing an author's writings to speak for themselves when presenting another's point of view on a given subject.<sup>6</sup>

That shall be the attempt of the following pages: to permit the primary sources themselves the opportunity to speak out on the topic of Luther's concept of the proper use of reason in knowing truths about God, and man's relationship to Him.

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<sup>6</sup>This practice of late medieval Augustinian scholarship is discussed on page 259 of David C. Steinmetz, "Luther and the Late Medieval Augustinians: Another Look," Concordia Theological Monthly, September 1973, pp. 245-260. Note how Carlstadt, Luther and Staupitz relate to Augustine.

## CHAPTER I

### PRELUDE TO LUTHER'S THOUGHT

John Donne (ca. 1571-1631) perceptively wrote, "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; . . ." <sup>1</sup> Curiously, the words of that esteemed author are as appropriately quoted in a thesis discussing the theology of Luther, as in a manuscript detailing the most famous passages in English literature. Whether consciously or unconsciously, theologians are no less affected by their cultural and philosophical environment than are other scholars. While the theologian may have an advantage over others in possessing a timeless norm of objective truth--the sacred Scriptures, <sup>2</sup> which are the very center of concern for the study of theology <sup>3</sup>--he

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<sup>1</sup>John Donne, "Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions: 17. MEDITATION," in The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne, The Modern Library, vol. 12, ed. James H. Dempsey, with an introduction by Charles M. Coffin (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 441.

<sup>2</sup>The difficult problem that confronts the student of theology includes also the understanding that the timeless truths of Scripture are couched in human language that is itself historically conditioned by the distinctive eras in which these writings were penned.

<sup>3</sup>This is the definition for the study of theology, as given by Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:3; however, as

is, nonetheless, conditioned by the setting and persons of his day to think and to inquire in a manner consistent with his distinctive historical time.

If the premise is correct, that each person's thought and mode of inquiry are molded, not only by one's present environment, but also by especially important forerunners who contributed shape and substance to the process of cultural development, then Luther, too, owes a certain amount of credit to his predecessors for the fruition of his own contributions to theological insight.<sup>4</sup> In this light, those who would seek to gain the firmest grasp of Luther's thought become obligated to determine to what extent previous contributors to the field of theology affected his ideas. This is a formidable task. Not only are we presented with the huge problem of determining which forerunners should be credited with being of major significance toward the development of Luther's thought, but also are we confronted with the unsolvable puzzle of trying to determine to what extent those individuals influenced his thinking. Both of those endeavors carry with them the grave dangers of subjec-

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is noted even in this reference, there is no concensus of agreement regarding the centrality of Scriptures in theology, especially concerning the view that Scripture is word of God, and the sole source and standard of truth in this field of study.

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps another premise which is being assumed as a "given," is that one holds a linear view of history, which has a definite beginning and which is progressing toward an imminent end.

tivity's clouding the distinction between fact and speculation.

Throughout this thesis, this writer shall not even attempt to solve the latter problem--that of trying to determine to what extent Luther's predecessors influenced his thinking. That is an impossible task, one which could be resolved only by a personal conversation with Luther himself. Only the former question of ascertaining the most predominant forerunners of Luther's ideology will be confronted, by giving a brief survey of some of the important theologians who preceded him.

Naturally, space here does not permit a thorough review of the history of theology from the time of the New Testament era to the sixteenth century, nor is that the focus of this thesis. Instead, we shall have to be very selective in choosing such pre-eminent individuals who made the greatest impact upon theological studies to the time of Luther. The most distinctive criterion for determining which of Luther's forerunners to include in this survey, is the determination of how pivotal to the study of theology were their views concerning the use of ratio in the pursuit of theological truths; admittedly, even this kind of standard is subjective to a fault. Nevertheless, such selections have here been made on the basis of their pertinence to a survey of Luther's understanding of ratio's relationship to theological inquiry. They are: Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas,

William of Ockham, and Gabriel Biel.

Augustine of Hippo<sup>5</sup>

From Philosophy to Christianity

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) profoundly impacted the theology of the Christian church through his writings and teaching, certainly no less than has Luther. Augustine's early life can best be characterized as a fervent search for truth. His mother, Monica, was a Christian; but it was not until he heard the Bishop of Milan, Saint Ambrose (340-397), proclaiming Christianity from the Scriptures in his preaching, that Augustine was to receive the Christian faith as his own. In illustrating the importance of the influence which Ambrose apparently had on Augustine, Peter Brown cites one account:

'When my mother followed me to Milan', he once told a correspondent, 'she found the church there not fasting on Saturdays. She began to be troubled, and to hesitate as to what she should do: upon which I, though not taking a personal interest in such things, applied on her behalf to Ambrose for his advice. He answered me that "he could only teach me to do what he himself did, for, if he knew of any better rule, he would have observed it." I had thought that he was intending just to tell us to give up fasting on Saturdays merely by an appeal to authority, without giving any reason (and, evidently, Augustine had turned away, feeling snubbed). . . . But he followed after me, and said "When I go to Rome, I also fast on Saturday: when here, I do not. If you go to any church, observe the local custom. . . ." As for me, on fre-

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<sup>5</sup> Significant sources for this section are: Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; also in paperback edition by the same publisher, 1969); and Gordon Leff, Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1959).



quently thinking back on this statement I have always treated it as if it were an oracle from heaven.'<sup>6</sup>

Augustine's conversion to Christianity climaxed his diligent search for truth. That quest had led him to consider the philosophies of Manichaeism, scepticism, and Neoplatonism;<sup>7</sup> and this width of experience could easily have lent contour to his theological contributions. Gordon Leff gives substantiation to this theory, by outlining how Augustine's interaction with those philosophical systems may

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<sup>6</sup>Epistolae 54, ii, 3, quoted in Augustine, p. 87; Brown cites that Augustine's first contact with Ambrose took place in Milan, in 384; see also Augustine, p. 79. The full significance that Ambrose's preaching and argumentation had for Augustine is well expressed by St. Augustine himself in Confessions 5. 14. In that reference to Confessions, Augustine reveals a heightening of his doubting of the philosophy of the Manichees, and his entrance into a time of indecision and scepticism. It is at this time that his mother comes to Milan to help Augustine in his search, in 385. Augustine was baptized by Ambrose in 387.

<sup>7</sup>Manichaeism originated with the philosopher, Mani, in the third century A.D. Its basic tenets were to uphold a dualistic theory of the existence of two ultimate principles, a good principle, that of light, God or Ormuzd, and an evil principle, that of darkness, Ahriman. These principles are both eternal and their strife is eternal, a strife reflected in the world which was produced by the two principles in conflict with each other. Evil was of such strength as to limit God's dominion, and against which God struggled. Manichaeism was characterized by a strict, ascetic code of ethics, which sometimes produced the opposite response--libertinism--among its adherents. Compare Bengt Haegglund, History of Theology, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 115; and Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, vol. 2, part 1: Mediaeval Philosophy: Augustine to Bonaventure (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1959; Image Books, 1962), p. 56.

Neoplatonism proceeded from Plato's idea that there was an ultimate reality of pure unchanging forms or Ideas, and that the world was a pale reflection of these perfect forms. The forms or Ideas existed in their own right and their

well have directed his line of inquiry when seeking to defend and strengthen the Christian faith:

From the Manicheans he had had confirmation of his own inclination to follow evil ways; and sin remained ever one of his deepest preoccupations. As a Christian he subsequently devoted much attention to its nature and cause, for which he was able to reach a solution. Scepticism, whereby he lacked any certitude, remains apparent in his distrust of all sensory and material knowledge and the realization that true faith comes only through inner conviction, independently of all external phenomena. Such a position ultimately buttressed his Christian belief that all truth was spiritual. Neoplatonism, the third stream in St [sic] Augustine's thought, was by far the most influential: it provided him with a cosmology, a pattern of the universe by which he was able to judge the relationship of the spiritual and the eternal to the material and the temporal. It was from Neoplatonism that St Augustine held that the truth was immaterial, residing in forms of Ideas (rationes) which derived from God; that God contained in Himself these immaterial archetypes of all things; that to know the truth is to know God, even though not directly; that only the soul, as a spiritual being, can attain to truth which is itself immaterial; that there is a distinction between such intelligible knowledge, alone the path to truth, and sensible knowledge which is dependent upon mutable things; that the soul can only reach the truth by dissociating itself from the sensible; that all being, as coming from God, is in itself good; that evil is negative, a privation of being; that everything material derives from seminal

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first principle was the Good, the source of all other forms and the means by which they were known. The Neoplatonists translated Plato's ultimate Good into the One, the principle of all existence. From the One's self-knowledge emanated the first Intelligence, the Logos, containing the immaterial Ideas of all beings. The Logos in turn gave rise to a second Intelligence, the World Soul, from which the individual intelligences derived. A hierarchy was developed from intelligence to intelligence, until the moon and sub-lunar world was reached. The human soul was last in the hierarchy of spiritual beings. This very concise explanation of Neoplatonism is found in Gordon Leff, Medieval Thought, pp. 13-15.

Scepticism distrusted any knowledge as certain, especially knowledge derived from the material world, experience, or sensual perception.

forms latent in matter, including those things yet to appear.<sup>8</sup>

### Anthropology and Reason

Though Christianity became the highest truth for Augustine, his conception of man seems to bear resemblance to Neoplatonic thought. Man, says Augustine, is made of three things: (1) a body; (2) the kind of life that makes the body live and grow; and (3) "a head or eye of our soul, as it were, or whatever term can be more aptly applied to our reason and understanding." It is man's reason [ratio] that sets him apart from the animal kingdom, and is man's most noble gift.<sup>9</sup>

Reason, for Augustine, is not merely common sense; rather, reason bears a sharp contrast to it. He contends that reason makes judgments differently than does common sense:

Reason judges by the light of truth so that, by right judgment, it subordinates lesser things to the more important ones. Common sense, on the other hand, inclines toward the habit of convenience, so that it puts a higher value on those things that truth proves to be of lesser value. While reason places celestial bodies far over terrestrial ones, what carnal man would not prefer that the stars be missing from the sky, rather than a single bush from his field, or a cow from his herd?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Medieval Thought, pp. 34-35.

<sup>9</sup>Saint Augustine, On Free Choice of the Will, The Library of Liberal Arts, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff, with an introduction by L. H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1964), 2. 6. 53. pp. 48-49.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 3. 5. 61. p. 100.

In Augustine's thought, reason is the highest and most excellent faculty of created man. A man's body, bodily senses, and the "inner sense" are under reason's judgments. But since even reason is inferior to God, and because of the consequences of sin, reason has been shown to be mutable.<sup>11</sup> Augustine therefore distinguishes between mutant reason and that reason which continues to be man's norm for what is good--a reason which can never be used for evil. This latter kind of reason he calls recta ratio, "right reason." Right reason is the ultimate standard [though always subordinate to God], giving definition to all other virtues of man, for example, wisdom, courage, or temperance.<sup>12</sup>

According to writings of Augustine, reason's role is to keep the vicious elements of man's activities in check, as reason points man instead to do the truly virtuous that has been ordained by God. And yet, because of his corruption in sin, man's soul and reason do not always serve God as God himself has commanded that he should be served; rather, they become used to a person's self-serving interests and produce vices rather than virtues.<sup>13</sup>

#### Predominance of Revelation

It becomes clear through the reading of Augustine, that he held to the idea that an immutable truth exists

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 2. 6. 53-56.      <sup>12</sup>Ibid., 2. 18. 190.

<sup>13</sup>The City of God, 19. 25.

apart from, and outside of, man.<sup>14</sup> This seems a strong foundation for Augustine's tenet that faith precedes understanding; classically, this doctrine has come to be expressed by the formula, "I believe in order that I may understand" (credo ut intelligam).<sup>15</sup> A confidence that God enlightens human reason, and that belief [faith] supersedes the knowledge that can be known through reason alone, is expressed by Augustine, who says to his student, Evodius, in On Free Choice of the Will:

. . . For God will aid us and will make us understand what we believe. This is the course prescribed by the prophet who says, "Unless you believe, you shall not understand," and we are aware that we consider this course good for us.<sup>16</sup>

#### Knowledge Leads to God

The connection of God with understanding is of central importance for Augustine. For him, the only knowledge worth having is that of God and self; all other knowledge has value only as it contributes to the knowledge of God, and all proper

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<sup>14</sup>On Free Choice, 2. 12. 130.

<sup>15</sup>See Etienne Gilson, Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 19, where Gilson cites Augustine, On the Gospel of Saint John, 29. 6.: "Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand." The English translation of this passage is by H. Browne and J. H. Parker, A Library of Fathers, (Oxford, 1848), vol. 1, p. 440. Gilson notes that the actual formula, credo ut intelligam, was coined by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109); see Reason and Revelation, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>On Free Choice, 1. 2. 11., as translated by Anna Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff, p. 5; Cf. Is. 7:9, LXX.

knowledge should lead one closer to an understanding of God.

Saint Augustine's background in philosophical thought surfaces also in the area of apologetics [giving defense of the truth claims of the Christian faith]. Here reason proves a useful tool for demonstrating that Christianity's basic dogma is to some degree palatable to human reason. While perhaps not as elaborate as later Thomistic proofs for the existence of God, Augustine proposes such a proof beginning from an understanding of reason itself. Proceeding from the premise that "this is God to which nothing is granted to be superior," Augustine's proof progresses along a clearly defined line of argumentation: (1) anything superior to reason is its God; (2) reason is the greatest attribute of man; (3) each man has his own reason, and can understand that which another does not; (4) truths and objects exist, which can be experienced by many at the same time, though the objects or truths remain unchanged by the perceivers.<sup>17</sup> Simplistic as this proof may be by scholastic standards, it does show that for Augustine, ratio did own a proper place in theological discussion and the search for truth.

### Thomas Aquinas

#### Assimilation of Aristotle

Saint Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1224/25-1274) was one of the brightest lights to illumine the age of "High Scholas-

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<sup>17</sup>On Free Choice, 2. 7.

ticism."<sup>18</sup> Aquinas became the pupil of the German Dominicans with Saint Albert in Cologne from 1248 to 1252, where the latter was to establish an institution of studies for the Dominican order.<sup>19</sup> The relationship between Albert and Thomas is a significant one; for as David Knowles notes, ". . . in the first half of the thirteenth century, there was a gradual assimilation of Aristotle [into the field of theology] which became complete and programmatic with Albert the Great and his pupil Aquinas . . ."<sup>20</sup> Here is an instance where the student grew to greater stature than his master; although Albert had done much to bring Aristotelian philosophy to bear upon the study of theology, it is Thomas who was crowned prince of the Scholastics through his further inte-

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<sup>18</sup>The term is employed here in the same sense as used by Bengt Haegglund, to describe the apex of the scholastic age in the thirteenth century; see History of Theology, p. 177. That author provides a general definition of scholasticism on p. 163 of that work: ". . . scholasticism refers to the theology which took form in the Western universities beginning in the middle of the 11th century, reached its culmination in the 13th century, deteriorated in the late Middle Ages, and was finally destroyed by humanism and the Reformation." Scholasticism may be defined briefly as the application of reason to revelation.

<sup>19</sup>Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, vol. 2, part 2: Mediaeval Philosophy: Albert the Great to Duns Scotus (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1959, Image Books, 1962), pp. 20-21.

<sup>20</sup>David Knowles, "The Middle Ages 604-1350," in A History of Christian Doctrine, In Succession to the Earlier Work of G. P. Fisher, published in the International Theological Library Series, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, assisted by Benjamin Drewery (Scotland: T. T. Clark, 1978; Fortress Press, 1980), p. 269.

grating the thoughts of Aristotle into the Christian ideology.<sup>21</sup>

#### Limitations of Ratio

Aristotelianism had already made its way into theology by the time Aquinas had turned his attention toward the integration he sought to achieve. Perhaps Thomas has been more unfairly attacked by post-Reformation theologians than he deserves, for the role he played in the wedding of philosophy with theology. Thomas noted the limitations of ratio in

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. David Knowles, "Middle Ages," p. 271; in Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology, 1968 ed., s.v. "Aristotelianism: I. The Philosophy of Aristotle," Max Mueller indicates two great achievements of Aristotle: (1) he transformed the speculative idealism of Plato into a speculative realism, holding, with Plato, that the universal and the spiritual which transcends the particulars of time and space is on a higher plane of being and value than the sensible; but diverging from Plato in submitting that the spiritual has no reality of its own, but is real only when it has entered beings as a principle and is sustained by those beings; and (2) Aristotle provided the transition from the oneness of philosophy to a multiplicity of philosophical disciplines, giving separate treatment to movement in general (physics), vital movement on the human and infra-human level (psychology and philosophy of biological life), pure thought (Organon, logic), art (the Poetica) and social life (politics and ethics).

Aristotle's philosophy came under attack in the 13th century, because of its inconsistency with the Christian faith. Mueller's article in Sacramentum Mundi notes, ". . . Aristotle's philosophy does not allow for a God who is really superior or transcendent to the world; hence there is in it no creator of the world. The world is eternal, and in its perpetual movement tends towards the centre [sic] of its movement which as such is the divine, blessed and self-sufficient life and movement of the spirit." Because of Aristotle's views concerning the spiritual, his system required major adaptations in order to find a place in Christian theology--a place which Thomas sought to determine.



seeking to discover truths about God that can be known only through revelation. Aquinas defined a "twofold truth of divine things," though he did so in a way contradictive to the system of Averroes (1126-1198) before him.<sup>22</sup> Thomas divided revealed truth into two groups: (1) that which is attainable by human reason, such as the truths that God exists, that He is one, and the like; and (2) that which surpasses human

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<sup>22</sup>As Etienne Gilson submits in Reason and Revelation, pp. 39-53, if anyone is to be blamed for bringing Aristotelianism into the fore of theological discussion, to the detriment of the latter system, it ought be the Arabian philosopher, Averroes, rather than Thomas Aquinas. Averroes held that absolute truth was not to be found in any kind of Revelation, but in the writings of Aristotle; and yet, Averroes took great measures not to burn his theological bridges, as he tried to arrive at some meaning of "truth" that would convince the theologians of his day that some sort of agreement between religious faith and philosophical reason was not impossible.

Averroes held to Aristotle's distinction between three main classes of arguments: the rhetorical, the dialectical, and the necessary ones, and proposed that all men be distributed among three corresponding classes: those apt to be persuaded by clever speech only, those more open to dialectical probabilities, and those satisfied only by the necessary demonstrations of the mathematicians and of the metaphysicians. Averroes thought that theologians might reach as high as the second class of people, at best; the third class was made up of the elite--the philosophers--who possessed such a superior kind of truth, that they did best to keep such truth to themselves, lest they risk unnecessary confusion of the more common people.

The conclusions derived purely from philosophical reasoning are bound to be at variance with truths about God, known to man only through Revelation. Therefore, the followers of Averroes devised a scheme of "twofold truth," asserting that philosophical conclusions which differed from the teaching of Revelation should be held as necessary results of philosophical speculation, but, as Christians, they should believe that what Revelation says on such matters is true. In this way, they supposed, no contradictions would ever arise between philosophy and theology, or between Revelation and reason [see Gilson, Reason and Revelation, p. 57]. Aquinas

reason, as does the truth that God is triune.<sup>23</sup>

### Faith and Reason

Because of human reason's lack of ability to know things about God that have not been revealed to it, Aquinas came to assert that it is faith, not reason, that must be the guiding principle of theological inquiry. Thomas asserts that the investigation of the human reason for the most part has falsity present within it, due partly to the weakness of our intellect in judgment, and partly to the admixture of images.<sup>24</sup> It is the Fall into sin that has impaired reason's ability to know the truth. Says Thomas:

. . . there was a time when original justice enabled reason to have complete control over the powers of the soul, and when reason itself was subject to God and made perfect by him. But original justice was lost through the sin of our first parent . . . .<sup>25</sup>

Because human reason has thus been devalued through the Fall, it stands inferior to divine truth in the order of certitude. Therefore, faith must be a more reliable guide

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discredited this view of "twofold" truth. Gilson summarizes Aquinas's critique of that view thus: ". . . To say that the conclusions of Averroes were rationally necessary, but not necessarily true, was to empty the word 'truth' of all meaning" [Gilson, p. 80].

<sup>23</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, I. 3. [This work will hereafter be abbreviated "SCG".]; cf. SCG, I. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., I. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I-2ae, q. 85, a. 3. [This work will hereafter be abbreviated "ST".]

toward true knowledge than is man's intellect, since faith relies upon divine truth for what it ascertains, whereas intellectual powers rely on human reason. To be sure, Aquinas realized that truths perceived through senses and observation do appear, on one level at least, to be more certain than those attained through faith; however, he maintained that the certainty of a given truth is weighed more carefully on the basis of the source of the truth, and it was apparent to Thomas that truth derived from the word of God, on which faith relies, is far more trustworthy than are axioms based on the natural light of reason.<sup>26</sup>

#### Philosophy and Theology

In a vein similar to that of Augustine, Aquinas posited that all true knowledge will lead ultimately to God, inasmuch as it is God who moves the intellect to act.<sup>27</sup> Philosophy, then, invariably plays a role subordinate to theology, as the primary source of truth in the latter is derived from God himself. Gilson seems correct in assessing the Thomistic view concerning the proper balance of faith and reason thus:

To any sincere believer who is at the same time a true philosopher, the slightest opposition between his faith

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<sup>26</sup>ST, II-2ae, q.4, a.8.

<sup>27</sup>ST, I-2ae, q.109, a.1.

and his reason is a sure sign that something is the matter with his philosophy.<sup>28</sup>

In matters that could be more clearly illumined and defined through the use of reason, Thomas became the philosopher par excellence; but the truths of faith, as revealed by the word of God, which were found to be in apparent contradiction with the assertions of philosophy, were to retain their paramount place of distinction as the ruling norm for what is held to be true. This is the careful balance between faith and reason that Aquinas sought to contribute to the pursuit of the study of theology in his generation, and into the present century.

#### William of Ockham

##### Toward a Proper Use of Aristotle

The union between Aristotelian philosophy and theology that Thomas tried to consummate was not to meet with immediate acceptance; during his own lifetime, and in the period that followed, the jury was still out as to whether he had been successful in his endeavor.<sup>29</sup> Still today, many wonder

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<sup>28</sup>Gilson, Reason and Revelation, p. 83.

<sup>29</sup>See Knowles, "Middle Ages," pp. 280-281; Later in the same essay (p. 286), Knowles cites two primary reasons for the decline of medieval thought, which were not aimed at Aquinas's views per se, but against the general rise of Aristotelianism within the study of theology. The first reason for such reaction was the ascent of a new technique of criticism, which was based on logic: the disputation. The second was a growing attitude of dissatisfaction with the pursuit toward abstract truth that characterized Aristotelian logic and epistemology. Medieval argumentation had developed

if Aquinas had really synthesized the philosophy of Aristotle completely enough, so that it might truly find an appropriate place in theological discourse.

It should not surprise us, then, that notable opposition to the use of Aristotelian presuppositions in theological inquiry should arise in the thirteenth century itself. This antithesis to Thomas's proposed solution to the "philosophical truth" versus "theological truth" debate was given further expression in the fourteenth century by William of Ockham (ca. 1285-ca. 1349).

The approach of Thomistic scholasticism to the relationship between theology and philosophy, has been given the designation "via antiqua". Ockham cannot properly be listed among the proponents of the via antiqua; rather, he exemplifies the argumentation of those who helped give rise to the via moderna, the movement that was to give new definition to the relationship between philosophy and theology. But the term "via moderna" may be something of a misnomer. It was not the claim of Ockham and his followers [who came to be known as "Ockhamists," or "nominalists"] that they had invented a new way of knowing truths about man's existence; rather, it is more proper to say that the proponents of what

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into long chains of syllogisms that could be negated by the smallest infractions in one of the propositions. The trend had moved toward losing touch with the real world and its people, and with the living Christ of the gospel. The fourteenth century theologians sought to correct this situation, initiating the decline of scholasticism.

is called the via moderna believed they had rediscovered a more correct understanding of Aristotle than had been true of their Thomistic predecessors.<sup>30</sup>

It is Moody's contention that Ockham's goal was to go back to a more pure Aristotelianism, away from the distortions brought into it by the Augustinian tradition and from the Arab commentators. This stance often pitted Ockham against even the moderni, such as Duns Scotus (ca. 1265-ca. 1308); in fact, he criticized Scotus more directly than Aquinas, who, in philosophy, was less affected by Augustinian presuppositions.<sup>31</sup>

#### Idealism Versus Realism

If the proposition is true, that a key feature of Aristotle's philosophy was the transformation of Plato's speculative idealism into a speculative realism, then Moody's assessment of Ockham's approach to epistemology and ontology is indeed correct.<sup>32</sup> Ockham represents a change of emphasis in philosophical inquiry in medieval thought, that moves away from speculation of the abstract and toward careful definition of realities that can be known to exist through the cognitive powers of man's reason, as guided by empiricism.

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<sup>30</sup> Ernest A. Moody, The Logic of William of Ockham (New York: Russell Russell, 1965), p. 17; cf. Haegglund, p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. page 19, n. 21, above.

This is evidenced by the respective weight that Ockham gives to the certitude of conclusions derived from "intuitive cognition" and "abstractive cognition." Intuitive cognition here means that which can be known through man's sense experience in such a way that the intellect immediately judges that the thing exists and evidently knows that it exists; this kind of knowledge is of real entities, not of abstractive or universal ideas. But it cannot be said of Ockham that he posited the extreme thesis of those who would later be designated as "Ockhamists" or "nominalists," who emphatically declared that universals, which could not be empirically perceived, simply did not exist. Ockham maintained that things which can be known may be known either intuitively or abstractively; abstractive cognition, in contrast to intuitive cognition, deals with things that probably exist, but which cannot be known through empirical evidence.<sup>33</sup>

#### Restrictions on Reason in Theology

Because of the clear distinction which he makes between intuitive and abstractive knowledge, Ockham sharpens the delimitation between truths derived through philosophy and theology. A limit is placed on what can be known via man's reason. Man can know with certitude only those things which he can observe and describe through his experience

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<sup>33</sup>Ockham, Philosophical Writings, a selection edited and translated by Philotheus Boehner (New York: Thomas Nelson Sons, 1962), pp. 23-24.

[This criterion for determining certain truth was to earn the designation as "Ockham's razor."]; any knowledge of God and His nature is contingent on the divine will, and is not philosophically demonstrable.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Ockham restricted reason's role in theology to elucidating the meaning and the implications of revealed truth, while contending that theological truths were, at most, probable.<sup>35</sup> Gordon Leff's description of the contrast between fourteenth century theological methodology with that of previous scholastic methodology can aptly be applied to Ockham:

Where before many theological propositions, held on faith, had been treated as conclusions to be reached by reason, in the fourteenth century they tended increasingly to become premises, held only on faith, from which further conclusions could be drawn. Thus, reason could not display the certainty or often even the probability of revelation, merely the implications which could be shown to follow from its articles.<sup>36</sup>

#### Reasoning That Involves Language

In the arena of theological discourse, Ockham's concern is with logic, rather than with speculation; and Copleston's assertion seems correct, that the logic of the

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<sup>34</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 103; also Frederick Copleston, A History of Medieval Philosophy, (New York: Harper Row, Publishers, 1972; Harper Torchbook, 1974), p. 238.

<sup>35</sup>This view of Ockham's view of reason in theology is upheld in Gordon Leff, The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook: An Essay on Intellectual and Spiritual Change in the Fourteenth Century (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 16.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 17.



fourteenth century was "reasoning that involves language," whereby all terms in a proposition must be carefully defined. With the greater emphasis placed on logic, paradoxes became more prominent in the theology of the fourteenth century, as did apparently insoluble statements, such as the declaration "What I am saying is false," if that phrase is the only utterance offered.<sup>37</sup> On this basis, it does not seem tenable to suggest that Ockham abandoned altogether the use of ratio in theological discussion. It would be more appropriate to say that Ockham distrusted ratio's ability to determine the 'trueness' of divine revelations of faith, inasmuch as he contended that the only 'necessary' being is God; and He is such that by His 'absolute' power He can do anything which does not involve a contradiction to His essence, even if it does involve a contradiction to man's logic.<sup>38</sup> Insofar as man's ratio is involved in the process of "reasoning that involves language" that was the discipline of fourteenth century logic, human reason does find an important place in Ockham's theology.

#### 'Right Reason' and Ethics

A further use of reason is significant for Ockham, namely, the employment of 'right reason' in the realm of a

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<sup>37</sup>See Copleston, History of Medieval Philosophy, pp. 234-235.

<sup>38</sup>See *Ibid.*, p. 253.

'rational ethic.' This position is well presented by Copleston, who states Ockham's position that since God has created man in such a way that certain acts are harmful to human nature and to human society, man can engage the dictates of his God-given 'right reason' to determine proper behavior and directives for human conduct.<sup>39</sup> This view of 'right reason' appears strikingly similar to that of Saint Augustine [see pages 14-15 above].

Gilson renders an apt summation of Ockham's place of importance in the pursuit of theological truth throughout subsequent generations of scholars:

The influence of Ockham is everywhere present in the fourteenth century; it progressively invaded Oxford, Paris, and practically all the European universities. Some would profess it, others would refute it, but nobody was allowed to ignore it. The late Middle Ages were then called upon to witness the total wreck of both scholastic philosophy and scholastic theology as the necessary upshot of the final divorce of reason and Revelation.<sup>40</sup>

Gabriel Biel<sup>41</sup>

The Age of Eclecticism

Gilson [as quoted above] appears not to have overstated the impact that Ockham's nominalism was to have on the theological studies of successive generations. But to this writer it seems that he rather exaggerates the extent of the cleavage between reason and Revelation that would take

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 253-255.      <sup>40</sup>Gilson, pp. 87-88.

<sup>41</sup>The significant source for this discussion of Biel is Heiko Augustinus Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology:

place in the late Middle Ages. Rather than to suggest that a "final divorce" between reason and Revelation actually took place, one might more correctly propose that merely a trial separation was pursued--and this not advocated by all scholars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The opinion that especially the fifteenth century can be characterized by eclecticism seems correct, if one makes this judgment on the basis of a survey of important theologians of that age. An essay by Gordon Rupp suggests that Nominalists and Realists were at that time being affected by cross-currents of Augustinianism, Platonic thought or by mystical religion. Rupp bestows upon this age the designation of 'Unklarheit'--absence of definition.<sup>42</sup>

The theology of Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420-1495) may well show the markings of eclecticism. While succeeding, through his important association with the University of Tuebingen, in bringing the via moderna to a place of pre-eminence,<sup>43</sup>

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Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism (Durham, North Carolina: Labyrinth Press, 1983). This resource was helpful not only in its relating Oberman's astute presentation of Biel's theology, but also in its extensive inclusion of quotations from Biel's own writings, found throughout Oberman's work.

<sup>42</sup>E. Gordon Rupp, "Christian Doctrine from 1350 to the Eve of the Reformation," in A History of Christian Doctrine, In Succession to the Earlier Work of G. P. Fisher, published in the International Theological Library Series, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, assisted by Benjamin Drewery (Scotland: T. T. Clark, 1978; Fortress Press, 1980), p. 300.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Oberman, Harvest of Medieval Theology, p. 17.

Biel appears not to have followed consistently the methodology of the Nominalistic school that he came to represent. Whereas he follows the principle (held, on the whole, by nominalists of his day) that Scripture is the sole authority and only reliable guide in matters of faith, Biel remained strongly papalistic.<sup>44</sup> His position on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception exemplifies this inconsistency; for Biel takes as his foundation (in contrast to the principle of Scripture as sole authority in matters of faith) the formulation established by the tradition and decision of the Church.<sup>45</sup>

De Potentia Absoluta and Ordinata

Heiko Oberman argues the case persuasively, that in seeking to understand the theology of Biel, one must recognize the significance of the distinction between de potentia absoluta and de potentia ordinata; for, according to Oberman, these terms appear at all the decisive junctures of Biel's theology.<sup>46</sup> Truths that can be known with certainty through human reason are those which can be demonstrated or per-

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<sup>44</sup>Cf. Haegglund, History of Theology, p. 199; Ernest G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 156; also Rupp, "Christian Doctrine from 1350," p. 301. As Schwiebert points out, however, this inconsistency is to be found in many of the nominalistic theologians of that era. Therefore, it cannot be said that Biel demonstrates an inconsistency that is peculiar only to him.

<sup>45</sup>Biel, III Sent. d 3, q 1, art. 2 G, as quoted by Oberman, Harvest of Medieval Theology, p. 295.

<sup>46</sup>Oberman, Harvest of Medieval Theology, p. 53.

ceived by experience and observation. This is knowledge according to de potentia ordinata. In this realm, man perceives things as they are ordinarily found in nature. But this kind of knowledge cannot comprehend truths that lie beyond the realm of experience and observation; and such truths as transcend the empirical do exist, as the Creator is able to act also according to de potentia absoluta. God is limited in His work only by what is consistent with His own nature. As an example, the miracles can be explained as potentia absoluta; God's acts are not contingent on any powers higher than His own will, and for this reason He can act in ways which the human reason could not have predicted.<sup>47</sup>

#### Agreement With Ockham

Biel's distinction between potentia absoluta and ordinata seems remarkably congruent with that proposed by William of Ockham [see page 28 above]. In point of fact, Biel's thought follows rather consistently the salient features of Ockham's assessment of the relationship between theology and philosophy, and of the role that human reason properly may occupy within the parameters which he established for that relationship. Biel holds, with Ockham, a confidence in the undisturbed connection between objects and thought, thought and reality; a rejection of the concept that universals coincide with individual things or with common na-

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 38-39; cf. Ibid. p. 61.

ture; the assertion that faith is a much more reliable form of knowledge than so-called scientific knowledge can be, by virtue of its having God as its object, who is more infallible than any human object or inquiry can be; the position that human reason is of no avail in the realm of faith, but that in matters of this world, human reason should be employed to its fullest extent; the idea that once within the circle of faith, it is possible for at least part of the articles of faith to present certain probabilities by deductive reasoning; that unassisted reason can know of such things as God's existence, but nothing of His nature and essence; and that man's intellect knows by nature the difference between good and bad, and that good deeds have to be performed out of an innate love for virtue.<sup>48</sup>

#### Reassessment of Philosophy and Theology

The last point in the above listing of similarities in the thought of Gabriel Biel with that of William of Ockham has an undeniable resemblance to expressions found in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics; and a question associated with this discovery is "What place, if any, did Biel hold for the employment of philosophy within the structure of his theology?" Oberman provides the answer to this question in the context of showing that, in Biel's case, one can speak

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<sup>48</sup>Cf. Ibid., pp. 61, 71, 81, 40, 48; also Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, p. 136.

of a ratio fidei--that faith is not irrational or contrary to natural reason, but rather is ungraspable by natural reason. He maintains that it is in the area of faith, and not in that of secular knowledge, that the authority of Aristotle's metaphysics is seriously questioned by Biel.<sup>49</sup> And thus, like Ockham before him, Biel underscores the limitation of the use of ratio in the pursuit of theological truth: reason is always subordinate to revelation in any matters of faith.

It does not follow from these observations, however, that Biel advocated the total divorce of reason from the field of theological inquiry. Rather, Biel's efforts sought to delimit clearly the parameters within which ratio could still operate in the field of theology; and the results of these labors was again to return Biel to the sharp distinction between philosophy and theology that had been outlined by William of Ockham.

### Three Levels of Apologetics

The place which Biel reserves for ratio within the theological discipline may best be discovered in the three levels of apologetics which he maintains exist. The first level is founded on the assertion that natural philosophical and moral elements can be found in the Bible, which make it possible even for non-Christians who do not believe in the

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<sup>49</sup>Oberman, Harvest of Medieval Theology, pp. 41-42.

infallibility of the Bible to understand and to accept them as truth. The second level of apologetics recognizes that the Bible yields certain results not found in other fields of research, and that these allow the doctors of Scripture to defend articles of faith to which they refer. However, the arguments made on this level are not viewed as being compelling; instead, they are sufficient to refute the accusation of the absurdity of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. The top level is formed by pure credibilia, the inner core of faith. Here even the faithful are unable to acquire evident knowledge. To explain articles of faith held on this level, one must fall back on other articles of faith.<sup>50</sup>

Within the first and second levels of Biel's apologetics, deductive reasoning plays an important role; but not without the involvement of faith. He presents no rational structure which can enable the systematic theologian to jump from one locus, accepted by faith, to another locus, by way of sheer logical demonstration, without the employment of faith. Yet Oberman contends that even in view of the premium Biel places on faith within theology's realm, it cannot be said that he expresses anything so extreme as the divorce of faith and reason.<sup>51</sup> Oberman argues:

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 75 and 88.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 74 and 81.



. . . Biel is a rationalist insofar as he holds that the distance between creator and creature as expressed in the distinction of the potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata can at least be partly bridged by reason.<sup>52</sup>

Biel's expression of the relationship between faith and reason thus presented, the task may now be undertaken to determine some of the implications these views may have had for Luther's own approach to this problem. The next chapter will survey Luther's life, with special reference given to the background and setting of the primary works of Luther with which this thesis will concern itself in showing Luther's understanding of the role ratio is to play in the realm of theology.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

## CHAPTER II

### LUTHER'S YEARNING FOR TRUTH

#### Educational Development

##### Early Education

Luther's education began at the small school in Mansfeld, the village in which he resided with his family for the first fourteen years of his life. It is reasonable to speculate that Luther began school at the age of seven, and that the curriculum was that of a so-called "trivial" school, a Latin school which taught principally three subjects (trivium): grammar, logic, and rhetoric. These, along with music, would comprise the fundamental education of young Luther. All classes were conducted in the Latin language, the foremost among the subjects taught being grammar.<sup>1</sup>

For reasons not fully known, Luther was sent by his parents to attend the school at Magdeburg in his fourteenth year, 1497. Magdeburg was a city of approximately 12,000 at that time, and it is not certain which of its schools he

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Brecht, Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521, trans. James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 12. Brecht notes also that the date on which Luther probably entered the school at Mansfeld was 12 March 1491, St. Gregory's Day, on which the new school year began.

attended. However, Luther himself hints that it was at this time in his learning that he first became introduced to the Brethren of the Common Life--an order which emphasized Bible reading and the return to simple, pious life for both the clergy and laity--the same order, interestingly enough, with which Gabriel Biel had associated himself in 1468, when he became Provost of the house of the Brethren of the Common Life at Butzbach.<sup>2</sup>

Luther stayed at Magdeburg but one year; but during that year he made an important discovery. Ernest Schwiebert contends that in all likelihood, it was at Magdeburg, rather than at Erfurt, that Luther made his discovery of the Bible; and it would not have been unusual for Luther not to have seen a Bible before this, since at Mansfeld most of his instruction had been by the blackboard and wax tablets, and the students handled few books.<sup>3</sup>

Again for reasons unknown, Luther's parents decided to send their son to Eisenach following the one year of study at Magdeburg. Here, he would complete three years at the

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Ernest G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 117-119 and n. 55; also Martin Brecht, Road to Reformation, pp. 15-16; also E. Gordon Rupp, "Christian Doctrine from 1350 to the Eve of the Reformation," in A History of Christian Doctrine, in succession to the earlier work of G. P. Fisher, published in the International Theological Library Series, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, assisted by Benjamin Drewery (Scotland: T. T. Clark, 1978; Fortress Press, 1980), p. 301.

<sup>3</sup>Luther and His Times, p. 119.

parish school of St. George. Apparently, Luther praised his teacher, Wigand Gueldenapf, as one who taught grammar in a fashion superior to any other.<sup>4</sup> Such praise may have been reciprocal, as Luther emerged through all his studies as a most intelligent student.

#### University of Erfurt

Luther entered the University of Erfurt in the summer semester of 1501. The city of Erfurt was a populous one of some 20,000 inhabitants; and the university, though waning a bit from its lofty reputation as leader among German universities that it held in the middle of the fifteenth century, was still a prestigious one in the sixteenth century. Luther later comments that for him, all other universities appeared to be elementary schools in comparison with Erfurt.<sup>5</sup>

Erfurt became a spawning ground for the rising tension between humanism (understood not in the modern, but in the sixteenth century sense of the term) and scholasticism. Its teachers would include some who studied with the Tuebingen scholastic Gabriel Biel, and the influence of William of Ockham was becoming more noticeable at Erfurt since the second half of the fifteenth century. The university was divided into four faculties: the liberal arts, or

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<sup>4</sup>Brecht, Road to Reformation, pp. 19-20.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther, D. Martin Luther's Werke (Weimar: H. Boehlau, 1883-), TR 2, no. 2788 (hereafter cited as WA); cf. Brecht, Road to Reformation, p. 29.

philosophical (which held a place of special distinction at this time), theology, jurisprudence, and medicine. All students began their studies in the faculty of liberal arts. Only upon successful completion of the liberal arts was a student qualified to enter one of the three higher faculties.<sup>6</sup>

Although Biel and Ockham are names associated with the university at Erfurt, following the prescribed course of studies would not have led Luther immediately to become aware of their profound influence on the field of theology. Rather, the young scholar had first to contend with traditional Logic, then with the so-called Physics, and Ethics in his career as university student. In point of fact, it appears that only in connection with the continuation of his studies in the monastery does Luther occupy himself with Ockham and Biel.<sup>7</sup>

Koestlin marvels that the forces of humanism seemed to have so little affect upon Luther at this stage of his education; but that writer is careful to note that humanism, as taught at this juncture of Erfurt's history, contained "no manifestation whatever of a tendency . . . hostile to the

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<sup>6</sup>See Brecht, Road to Reformation, pp. 28-29.

<sup>7</sup>Julius Koestlin, The Theology of Luther in its Historical Development and Inner Harmony, trans. Charles E. Hay, from the second German edition, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 1:37; nonetheless, Bengt Haeggglund, History of Theology, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 197 indicates that Biel's theology was basic for the instruction in Erfurt.

Church or even to Scholasticism."<sup>8</sup> Koestlin's astonishment seems based upon the premise that since the Erfurt faculty showed definite tendencies toward humanism, and since some of Luther's close associates took their studies from such men, Luther therefore must certainly have had a close circle of friends who must have been classed as "humanists." But Ernest Schwiebert takes exception to such presuppositions as these, finding no evidence that Luther traveled in the humanistic circles, and holding doubt that the humanistic tendencies of his professors would have found their way into the dialectic approach that he was being taught in the regular courses.<sup>9</sup>

If the forces of Erfurt humanism made little impression on Luther, then may it be concluded that nothing of the faculty's positions left their marks upon that future Reformer? Schwiebert answers a resounding "No!" According to that Luther-scholar, at least two of the Erfurt professors whom Luther admired may have helped give shape to the young

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43; see also Koestlin's discussion concerning Luther's associations with his colleagues on pp. 38-40 of that work. Chief among Koestlin's listing of the professors who gave rise to humanism at Erfurt are Maternus Pistoris, Nicholas Marschalk (who moved away in 1502), noted for promoting the study of Greek, and Mutianus Rufus (Conrad Muth), who resided at nearby Gotha and had apparent influence on the young students of the University. It is especially to this theory that those living in Gotha had profound influence on the University of Erfurt during Luther's undergraduate days that Schwiebert takes exception (see n. 9 below).

<sup>9</sup> Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, pp. 134-135.

student's later rejection of Scholasticism in the Wittenberg curriculum, namely, Trutvetter and Usingen. Trutvetter tried to simplify the dialectics of Ockham and Biel for use in teaching, while Usingen distinguished, in theology, between Aristotle and the Bible as sources of information. Describing the teaching of Usingen, Schwiebert notes:

In matters of faith he accepted the Scriptures as an unerring guide to truth, while his conception of the Church Fathers and later tradition as evaluated in relation to the revealed Word doubtless influenced Luther in his later discovery of Sola Scriptura, or the principle of relying on the Bible alone in determining Biblical doctrines. . . . Usingen was progressive, up-to-date, and quite receptive to new ideas.<sup>10</sup>

#### The Order of Augustinian Hermits

Luther became a Bachelor of Arts at Erfurt in 1502, completing his studies in the minimum amount of time, and a Master in 1505. Yet because of a crisis experience in his life, Luther would not maintain his goal of studying law. Instead, on July 17, 1505, he quite unexpectedly applied for admission to the "Black Cloister" in Erfurt, the chapter

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 135; cf. Brecht, Road to Reformation, pp. 34-36, where that writer notes also the importance of Jodokus Trutfetter (ca. 1460-1519) and Bartholomaeus Arnoldi von Usingen (1462-1532) for Luther's education at Erfurt; also noted in Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 6: ". . . we may safely say that the young Luther was influenced by the nominalist philosophy of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and that this influence is evident throughout his life."

house of the Augustinian Hermits.<sup>11</sup>

The events that led to Luther's becoming a monk, the near miss of a thunderbolt near Stotternheim and his near bleeding to death following an accidental slashing of the cephalic vein on another occasion, are well known and documented.<sup>12</sup> It must be noted, however, that the events in themselves are not sufficient cause for Luther's engagement to the strictest monastic order in Erfurt; rather, they were final blows to a man terrified by his sense of guilt before his God, and driven to despair concerning whether he could ever know if he had done enough in life to appease God for his wrongdoing.<sup>13</sup>

Luther would search diligently for such appeasement during his career as a monk; but he would find it neither in the completeness with which he carried out his monastic vows, nor in his ordination to the priesthood in 1507. Nevertheless, the Augustinian monk was exact in his studies. It is here, in the Black Cloister, that Martin came into close contact with the writings of Gabriel Biel; for a standard text

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<sup>11</sup>See Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, pp. 136-138 for the defense of this date as the authentic time of Luther's entry into the monastery.

<sup>12</sup>For careful documentation of the Stotternheim incident, see Brecht, Road to Reformation, p. 48, n. 14; Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, p. 143, n. 121 lends documentation of the second event.

<sup>13</sup>The word most often used to describe Luther's fears of Satan's assaults and of trials sent by God is Anfechtung.



of that day in preparation for the priesthood was Biel's lengthy Sacri cononis missae expositio (Canon of the Mass), in which Biel discusses in eighty-nine lessons the entire mass liturgy. Where necessary, Biel's writing also gave thorough consideration to theological problems, such as indulgences, veneration of the saints, the presence of Christ in the sacrament, or the Lord's Prayer, or to practical questions concerning the ceremony of the mass.<sup>14</sup> Schwiebert notes that in his Tischreden, Luther evaluated Biel's work at the time as having been "the best book," even the Bible not being able to compare with its authority. Asserts Schwiebert: "This book made a fervent disciple of papalism out of the young monk, for, says Luther in the same conversation: 'When I read therein, my heart bled.'"<sup>15</sup>

During the years 1505-1509, Luther studied also Biel's Collectorium and Peter d'Ailly's (1350-1420) and Ockham's commentaries on Peter Lombard's Sententiarum libri quatuor (long used as a doctrinal textbook in Medieval theological studies).<sup>16</sup> Melanchthon also indicates that Augustine's On The Letter and the Spirit deeply influenced Luther; and, as

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<sup>14</sup>See Brecht, Road to Reformation, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup>Luther and His Times, p. 148; the quotation is from WA, TR 3, no. 3722, rendered in English in Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols. gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), 54:264 (hereafter cited as LW).

<sup>16</sup>Haeggglund, History of Theology, p. 212.

Schwiebert notes, ". . . even though Luther remembered Biel and d'Ailly almost word for word, he remembered Augustine best of all."<sup>17</sup> That well may be true; but it appears that Luther's ultimate discovery, while in the monastery, was his new relationship with the Bible. To quote the Tischreden:

At that time [in the monastery] no other study pleased me so much as sacred literature. With great loathing I read physics, and my heart was aglow when the time came to return to the Bible. . . . I read the Bible diligently. Sometimes one important statement occupied all my thoughts for a whole day. Such statements appeared especially in the weightier prophets, and (although I could not grasp their meaning) they have stuck in my memory to this day.<sup>18</sup>

#### Teacher of Theology

Luther's studies continued with the Augustinian order, and by 1508 he found himself both a student and a lecturer in philosophy. He was transferred to Wittenberg in the fall of 1508, where he would continue as student and teacher, delivering lectures on Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics. On 9 March 1509, Luther earned his first theological degree, bachelor of the Bible, and shortly thereafter became a bachelor of the sentences. Before he could begin his duties of giving cursory lectures on Lombard's Sentences, Luther was called back to Erfurt; and by this time in his career, according to Schwiebert, "he had progressed to the

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, p. 157 and n. 36.

<sup>18</sup>English translation of WA, TR 1, no. 116, as found in LW 54, p. 14.

point of criticizing all of the Schoolmen on the basis of the Latin Vulgate, but he had not gone far enough to realize that in time this principle would destroy his whole Catholic plan of salvation."<sup>19</sup>

Following his journey to Rome (1510-1511) on business in behalf of the Erfurt order to which he belonged, Luther returned to the university at Wittenberg, where he would soon begin preparations toward becoming a Doctor of Theology. The degree was awarded to him on 19 October 1512, and Dr. Luther was officially received into the Theological Faculty at Wittenberg on the twenty-second of that same month. As far as can be known, Luther began his teaching activity during the winter semester of 1513/14.<sup>20</sup>

Selected Writings in the Context  
of Luther's Career

Luther's Early Lectures and the  
Galatians Commentary of 1519

The first lectures given by Luther (at least the first ones to have been preserved), are those on the Psalms (1513-15). During this period of his Biblical studies,

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<sup>19</sup>Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, p. 173.

<sup>20</sup>As Brecht points out in Road to Reformation, p. 127, the reason for the year's delay in Luther's teaching career is unknown. That author speculates that such a period of time could have been required by the young teacher as a preparation interval before his lectures could begin; Schwiebert maintains, in Luther and His Times, p. 282, that Luther may have lectured on Genesis in 1512-13, though no positive evidence exists.

Luther appears to have employed a positive aspect of Biblical Humanism,<sup>21</sup> by endeavoring to pay close attention to the classical languages of Scripture, notably, Greek. It seems possible that this diligent study of the text of Scripture, in preparation for his lectures on the Psalms, could well have led to Luther's famous Tower Discovery, at which time he finally discovered the Gospel and the full impact of the ultimate dynamic of the Christian faith: the forgiveness of sins.<sup>22</sup>

In his early lectures on the Scriptures, Luther used methodology similar to the other Wittenberg professors. The text was presented in a fourfold meaning: the literal, the allegorical, the tropological, and anagogical. Luther used

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<sup>21</sup>Schwiebert makes an important point regarding the role "Humanism" played in the German Reformation, revealing that scholars have discovered that there were no less than a half dozen different kinds of Humanism, the common denominator being a Heimweh, or homesickness, for something in ages past; see Luther and His Times, p. 275.

<sup>22</sup>Much discussion has taken place regarding the exact date of Luther's "Tower Discovery." Ernst Bizer and Uuras Saarnivaara, ascribe to the experience of Luther's discovery of the Gospel a late date at the end of 1518 (in this case, Luther would not have made his discovery until one year after his posting of the 95 theses in Wittenberg); but others, like Schwiebert, Gordon Rupp, and Heino Kadai, hold to the early date of 1513/14. See Heino O. Kadai, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," in Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, ed. Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 268, n. 50; Saarnivaara cites, in support of the later dating, Luther's Preface from the year 1545, as well as excerpts from other lectures and writings of Luther; cf. Uuras Saarnivaara, Luther Discovers the Gospel: New Light upon Luther's Way from Medieval Catholicism to Evangelical Faith (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), pp.

contemporary illustrations and anecdotes to liven the subject.<sup>23</sup> But a marked change in Luther's approach to the Biblical texts arises by the time of his next series of lectures, those given in 1515/16 on Romans. From this time onward, he largely abandons the fourfold interpretation of the Scriptures in the classroom, rendering instead what one scholar calls "a historical-Christological"<sup>24</sup> interpretation--an approach rising from the grammatical historical method--that focuses especially on one's spiritual relationship with Christ. This method of interpretation can be called solus Christus, as it seeks to persuade every Bible student to find Jesus Christ in every passage.<sup>24</sup>

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103-105, and 122. Indeed, this seems to be powerful ammunition in support of the later dating of the Tower Discovery; Brecht, Road to Reformation, p. 225, concurs, both with the evidence presented by Saarnivaara, and with the later dating of the experience itself.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Ernest Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, p. 283; A. Berkeley Mickelson, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), pp. 35-36, outlines the method of "fourfold interpretation" that was common for exegetes of the Middle Ages, rendering a rough paraphrase, in English, of some Latin poetry of the sixteenth century: "The letter shows us what God and our fathers did; The allegory shows us where our faith is hid; The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life; The anagogy shows us where we end our strife." Hence, Mickelson shows that the literal is the plain, evident meaning; the moral (tropological) sense tells men what to do; the allegorical sets forth what they are to believe; the anagogical centers in what Christians are to hope.

<sup>24</sup>Hilton C. Oswald, Luther's Works, vol. 25: Lectures On Romans: Glosses and Scholia, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), p. xi; also Herbert T. Mayer, Interpreting the Holy Scriptures: Principles for the Proper Study of the Bible (St. Louis: Concordia Publish-

Luther's lectures were delivered from notes comprised of Glossae and Scholia. The Glossae (glosses) were copies of the Vulgate text with generous space between the lines, and wide margins, for the inclusion of Luther's interlinear and marginal notes in Latin; the Scholia were notes of extended commentary on various selected passages, written out in detail as a separate preparation for the lectures. Especially the Glossae were intended to be dictated almost verbatim in the classroom; but Schwiebert makes mention of the fact that when one compares Luther's own Glossae and Scholia of his lectures to the student notes that have been preserved on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, it must be concluded that Luther did not always closely follow his manuscripts when delivering his lectures.<sup>25</sup>

Coinciding with Luther's lecturing on Romans, the humanist scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam (ca. 1469-1536), had published his annotated edition of the Greek New Testament (February 1515). Apparently, Luther was making use of this new edition by the spring of 1516, a fact not insignificant for the lectures he would give on Galatians, which took place from 27 October 1516 until 13 March 1517.<sup>26</sup> He was critical

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ing House, 1967), p. 39.

<sup>25</sup>Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, p. 283; also see Hilton Oswald, Lectures on Romans, LW 25, pp. ix-x.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Brecht, Road to Reformation, p. 129 and n. 3; Saarnivaara, Luther Discovers the Gospel, pp. 74-75 and n. 171, which refers the reader to a letter Luther wrote to

of Erasmus's "annotations" on Paul, because they spoke only of the Christian's freedom from the Cermonial Law, and not the whole Law. Saarnivaara notes that Luther thus must have known at that time that man cannot be justified without faith, simply by fulfilling the Moral Law [see note 26]. Clearly, this also is the central theme, not only of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, but of Luther's lectures on this part of Scripture, as well--a fact that further complicates trying to ascribe the proper date to Luther's Tower Discovery (Turm-erlebnis) [see page 47, note 22, above]. Whether the Galatians lectures occurred before, or after, that event remains an unsolved puzzle.

The earliest of Luther's lectures on Galatians are preserved in a student notebook on the classes given in 1516-1517, first published in the twentieth century by Hans von Schubert and then revised for the Weimar edition by Karl Meissinger (WA, 57). Luther used those notes as a basis for the printed version of his exposition of 1519 (WA 2, 445-618; Saint Louis, 8, 1352-1661; LW 27, 151-410), but significantly revised and expanded some of his earlier judgments. Four years later (1523), he published a revised and abbreviated version of the commentary.<sup>27</sup> The writer of this paper

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Spalatin on 19 October 1516, in which he relates his criticism of Erasmus' annotations.

<sup>27</sup>See Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther's Works, vol. 27: Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 5-6 and Lectures on Galatians 1519, Chapters 1-6, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, associate

has chosen to give attention to the published version of 1519, rather than to the lengthier commentary on Galatians of 1535 (based on Luther's lectures from 1531), because of the earlier work's importance for understanding Luther's approach to theology, and of the proper role of ratio within that field of study, at the relative beginning of his career. [Luther's later ideas concerning man's ratio will be represented in this paper by his 1536 Disputation Concerning Man.]

The extent to which the lectures on Galatians may have given rise to the events of October 1517 is open only to speculation. Certainly, Luther's study for his lectures on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews (1517/18) could not have damaged his spiritual growth; yet the Luther-scholars place far more weight on the controversy over indulgences as the cause for the 31 October 1517 declarations, than on the early lectures themselves. And well they should; for the Ninety-five Theses deal primarily with the abuses of the indulgences sold to individuals as satisfaction for their sins--a widespread practice as a result of Pope Leo X's (1475-1521; Pope 1513-21) revival of the jubilee indulgence of 1510 under Julius II (1443-1513; Pope 1503-13). But this writer finds wisdom in the words of Brecht, who states that between 1513 and 1516 a definite change certainly took place in Luther's image of God, a change apparently aided by his

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ed. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. ix.



wrestling with the texts for his early lectures. Brecht asserts:

No longer did he find himself in continual confrontation with the judging God. He knew that God did not reckon sins to the believer who confessed them, and to this extent he experienced forgiveness. But the emphasis on the continuing reality of human sinfulness remained constant, and it was even conceived of more and more sharply, and along with it the inability of man to produce his own righteousness. . . . This was still the phase when Luther despised the word "righteousness," and would gladly have dispensed with it. . . . Luther's theology of 1516 unmistakably shows important reformatory elements, chiefly in its emphasis upon the salvation which is given from without. But in its stubborn orientation toward the attitude of humility it is still obscure. The reason, therefore, why Luther research still disputes whether or not the Luther of the lectures on Romans was already a reformer lies in the ambiguity of the subject itself. He was, and yet he was not yet. But in the following lectures on Galatians Luther's way of speaking is already much freer. There he is no longer oriented so much toward one's own righteousness. On the basis of the epistle text, humility takes a back seat to freedom.<sup>28</sup>

Luther and Erasmus: On the Bondage  
of the Will

Reaction to Luther's posting of the Ninety-five  
Theses in Wittenberg was both swift and severe. Not only had Luther fired a resounding volley into the midst of one of Rome's most precious fund-raising projects, the sale of indulgences for the further construction of the cathedral in Rome; but also had the shot been aimed directly (and delib-

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<sup>28</sup>Brecht, Road to Reformation, pp. 136-137; see also Kurt Aland, Four Reformers: Luther-Melanchthon-Calvin-Zwingli, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), p. 11, where that writer notes that Luther's early lectures were decisively important in lending shape to the Reformer's theology.

erately) at the Pope himself. The Theses were but an overture to Luther's endeavor to end the blatant tyranny by which the papacy had oppressed the souls of the faithful people of Christ's Church; for Luther had come to see that the forgiveness of sins rested on no human authority, but solely on the merits and grace of Christ Himself.

Following the evening of 31 October 1517, Luther received a startling education as to just how widespread his thoughts would come to be. He had apparently circulated copies of the Theses only to a small circle of close friends and colleagues; but to the astonishment of all, they spread to all of Germany within two weeks!<sup>29</sup> This fact marks an extremely important point, one which J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston do not miss in their thorough, yet concise, historical and theological introduction to their English translation of On the Bondage of the Will, that the Lutheran Reformation was the first historical movement to have nationwide printed publicity. Luther would use this gift of history to his advantage, although he was not entirely pleased that the Theses themselves had been given such wide publication--for this was not his immediate intent.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Luther became a prolific writer during these early

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<sup>29</sup>See Luther's comments in LW 41, p. 234.

<sup>30</sup>Martin Luther, On the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of "De Servo Arbitrio" (1525), Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam, trans. and ed. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (United States: Fleming H. Revell Co.,

years of the Reformation; and strong reaction to his efforts was not slow in coming from the Roman Church.

The times were indeed changing. The spirit of the Renaissance of secular culture now seemed to be penetrating the bastion of the Church, or so it must have seemed to Rome. The calls for reform in the Church, that seemed only a whisper with John Wycliffe (1320-84) and John Hus (ca. 1370-1415), became a battle cry for those who followed Luther's lead. Many must have wondered when the other great mind of the Reformation era, Desiderius Erasmus, might join forces with the German reformer.

Gordon Rupp bestows upon Erasmus the distinction of being "the greatest figure in the northern Renaissance . . . an indispensable link between the overlapping themes of humanism and reformation . . . ." <sup>31</sup> Erasmus had studied with the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer (1475-84). He later became a monk, and was ordained a priest in 1492. His service to the bishop of Cambrai brought him out of the secluded life, and after a time he studied philosophy and theology at the College de Montaigu in Paris (1495-96). On the first of three visits to England (1499-1500), he came into the circle of Christian humanism through John Colet (ca. 1467-1519), who allegedly persuaded him to turn his

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1957), p. 38; and Brecht, Road to Reformation, p. 205.

<sup>31</sup>"Christian Doctrine from 1350," p. 302, though elsewhere he calls Erasmus the "flitting Dutchman."

humanistic interests in the direction of Biblical studies. During his studies, Erasmus acquired a distaste for Scholasticism--and for theology, in general; therefore, Packer and Johnston aptly declare, "Erasmus was no theologian."<sup>32</sup> But a man of incomparable learning he was, and no one could stand the same ground with Erasmus in his field of the reading and writing of classical languages.

Erasmus took his position against the complexities of the scholastics, seeking a return to the simpler Christianity of the New Testament era. Here shines forth a thought held in common with Colet (and certainly the return to a simpler, more pious, Christian living was a major motif found in the Brethren of the Common Life, though one can only speculate as to how much influence this order had on a boy, who was at most eighteen--and probably fifteen--years of age when he left that school). On this count, Erasmus holds something in common with Luther; but there is more.

With his humanistic approach to the classical languages, Erasmus paved the way for the deep Biblical scholarship of Luther. That Luther made extensive use of Erasmus's magnum opus, his publication of the Greek New Testament, has already been noted [see page 49, above]. And it should be noted again (as pointed out previously on page two of the introduction to this thesis), that Luther's own magnum opus

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<sup>32</sup>On the Bondage of the Will, p. 19.

was not to be found in his volumes of commentaries, and the like; rather, his most towering achievement for the expansion of the Reformation was the translation of the Bible into the German language, the New Testament having been translated and published by September of 1522, from Erasmus's revised text of 1519 [the Old Testament would be translated from an equally fine edition of the Hebrew, as rendered by Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522)].<sup>33</sup>

Erasmus approved of Luther's assault on abuses; yet he opposed innovations in doctrine and church life.<sup>34</sup> Also, Erasmus was always careful to protect his close relationship with the Pope, and with Henry VIII (1491-1547), in shrewdly

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<sup>33</sup> Schwiebert, Luther and His Times, p. 528 gives evidence that Luther had begun translating parts of the Psalms as early as 1517, while at Wittenberg. However, not until his stay at the Wartburg in 1521 did his work toward the translation of the entire Bible begin in earnest. The first complete translation of the Old and New Testaments did not appear until 1534; but this edition did not satisfy Luther's high standards. Two additional complete revisions were published, with the aid of Luther's fellow professors; the last did not appear in print until after Luther's death in 1546. Cf. Schwiebert, pp. 643-644; see also Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther in Mid-Career: 1521-1530, edited and with a Foreword by Karin Bornkamm, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 46, for reference to older, out-dated German translations of the Bible extant at the time of Luther. These versions noted, Luther's was the first written in the idiom of the German people, equivalent to the Greek Koine, which made the Bible easily accessible to a nation hungry to discover the Gospel.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., Lutheran Cyclopedia, 1975 ed., s.v. "Erasmus, Desiderius." See also the extremely fine summation of the relationship between Luther and Erasmus in Brian Albert Gerrish, Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 156-167.

keeping his doors open to new opportunities. Therefore, his relationship to Luther, although he had many thoughts in common with the German theologian, was kept always at some distance, even though his friendship with other keys of the Reformation, Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560), for example, (who also demonstrated a desire for a more cautious progress toward reform than was Luther's manner) would continue even after Luther's death.

Finally, Erasmus's luxury of being allowed to remain in an intermediary position between Luther and the Roman Church was revoked. Henry VIII, himself looking for papal favors, began pressuring Erasmus to go into print, in providing the Church with a definitive refutation to Luther's new challenge. The Dutchman gave in to the insistence of his friends and enemies, and on 1 September 1524, his Diatribes seu collatio de libero arbitrio (Discussion, or Collation, concerning Free-Will) appeared.

The Diatribes of Erasmus did cut to the heart of the Reformation, giving Luther the opportunity to elucidate in his response, De servo arbitrio (On the Bondage of the Will), [WA 18:600-787; LW 33:(xi), (5-13), 15-295] the meaning of the pure Gospel proclamation. Luther says to Erasmus on his choice of topics with which to launch his public attack:

Moreover, I give you hearty praise and commendation on this further account--that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indul-

gences and such like--trifles, rather than issues--in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood (though without success); you, and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot.<sup>35</sup>

Published in December of 1525, the answer to Erasmus's Diatribes stands as one of the most important writings to come from Luther's hand; certainly, it is that, also, for a paper which seeks to discover Luther's concept of the use of ratio within the framework of theological discussion. It is in this writing that Luther meets Erasmus on the same humanistic ground, pushing his own intellect and reason to high limits, in making defense of the Biblical basis for the Reformation. Here, perhaps as nowhere else, does Luther demonstrate what he considers to be the proper role of man's reason in the pursuit of theological truths.

#### The Later Disputations of Luther

Luther's most prolific period of writing had been the decade of the 1520s. Fully two-thirds of his original works had appeared between the years 1516 and 1530. Throughout his career as a reformer, Luther's health had not been good; but the years 1531-1546 would bring him more frequent and more serious illness.<sup>36</sup> It is not surprising, then,

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<sup>35</sup> On the Bondage of the Will (Packer and Johnston), p. 319; cf. WA, 18, 786, 26-31; LW 54, 294.

<sup>36</sup> Mark U. Edwards, Jr., Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 9-10.

that those years would see a corresponding decline of productivity from Luther's pen.

In seeking to find, in the Reformer's later period in life, a work that demonstrates that theologian's mature views concerning the proper role of ratio in the course of theology, the Disputation Concerning Man (1536) was selected by this writer for inclusion in this paper's discussion. In that disputation, Luther pays tribute to man's gift of reason, while at the same time carefully delimiting the scope in which reason is competent to search out truth. Unfortunately, only a fragment of the entire disputation has been preserved.<sup>37</sup>

As part of the academic exercises of the Medieval world, "disputations" were also a part of Luther's life and career, especially from the time he became a Doctor of Theology in 1512. The statutes of the University of Wittenberg in the year 1508 noted three types of disputations in the faculty of theology: the disputation for receiving a degree, the festive and public quarterly disputations, and the weekly circular disputations, which professors conducted for the benefit of the students. In part due to the influence of humanist concepts of education, the three types of disputa-

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<sup>37</sup>This writer used the English translation of Lewis W. Spitz in LW 34, pages (135), and 137-144. That version is based upon WA 39 I, (174) 175-180; see Lewis W. Spitz, ed, Luther's Works, vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 135.



tions fell into disuse at Wittenberg from 1525-1533. In 1533, however, their use was revived; and Luther favored their use greatly.<sup>38</sup>

Care must be used, however, in seeking to use the disputations of Luther to prove his position on a particular area of theology. Many were not penned by him personally, and even those that were contained articles for discussion purposes alone, not intended to be final formulations of ideas.<sup>39</sup> For this reason, this writer shall carefully weigh the concepts, as related in the Disputation, with the contents of the two other primary documents with which this thesis will be concerned.

#### Epilogue to Chapter II

Literally volume upon volume has been written about the life, times, and teachings of Martin Luther. This chapter has not begun even to consider all of the highest moments in his illustrious career; rather, it has been written especially with the intent of providing background information for the three primary Luther sources being considered in the subsequent chapters of this thesis, as well as rendering pertinent facts concerning his education and career that have significant bearing on the development of the Reformer's understanding of the use of ratio within the context of

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. xiii.

<sup>39</sup>Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 14.

theological inquiry and presentation.

Upon his death in 1546, Luther had provided the world with a reawakening to the light of the Gospel proclamation. Through the enormous library of work produced by that scholar, the realm of theology would feel such impact so that the world would give thanks for his birth five hundred years later.

Luther's scholarship was profoundly important for the development of approaches to theology throughout the centuries that would follow his lifespan. It is the thesis of this writer, that at no point is Luther's contribution to theology more decisive than at the juncture where the Reformer determined faith must divorce reason. The following pages seek to underscore where Luther made that demarcation in his own pursuit of truth.

## CHAPTER III

### RATIO BEFORE AND SINCE THE FALL: LUTHER'S VIEW OF MAN BEFORE GOD

#### Definitions

Before any clear discussion of Luther's understanding of the way ratio may be employed in theology can take place, the term itself must be given adequate definition. The task of delimiting the scope of the word 'ratio' becomes all the more important, when its wide variety of nuances is taken into consideration. Just as the English noun, 'reason,' carries more than one meaning, so does its Latin equivalent. 'Ratio' may denote not only the faculty of mind which calculates or plans (the usage of the term which is employed throughout this paper), but also can it refer to the following: (1) the motive, or ground, for an action; (2) a plan, scheme, or system; (3) a theory, doctrine, science; (4) consideration taken, or account rendered, and (5) any transaction, affair, or business.<sup>1</sup>

A complete word-study of the occurrences of the vocable 'ratio' in The Bondage of the Will, the Galatians Commentary (1519), and the Disputation Concerning Man, would

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<sup>1</sup>Cassell's Latin Dictionary, 1968 ed., s.v. "ratio."

reveal that Luther used the word in especially the sense of "man's faculty of mind," and "the motive, or ground, for an action." The occasional usages of ratio in the latter sense are not of importance to this paper; rather, it is the meaning of that word in the first connotation that is of interest here. That aspect of 'ratio' is expressed most fully by the German, 'Vernunft'. The German vocable expresses only the nuance of man's "reason, intellect, intelligence, understanding," and so forth;<sup>2</sup> hence, it is, in that respect, a more useful rendering than its Latin counterpart, in lending contour to the topic being considered in these pages.

Bengt Haeggund, in showing the antithesis between faith and reason in Luther's theology, further maintains that 'Vernunft' does not merely denote the human ability to comprehend; rather it stands for the "entire attitude of natural man, which gives to him his natural knowledge and aspiration".<sup>3</sup> The qualification of Vernunft as applying to the 'natural man' seems apt, especially in light of the discussion below, which will contend that in Luther's theology, ratio can properly be categorized with the things of the flesh, in contrast with things of the Spirit.

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<sup>2</sup>The New Cassell's German Dictionary, 1971 ed., s.v. "Vernunft."

<sup>3</sup>Theologie und Philosophie bei Luther und in der Occamistischen Tradition: Luthers Stellung zur Theorie von der Doppelten Wahrheit (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1955), p. 84.

In the same vein, Gerhard Ebeling suggests that the term 'ratio' be distinguished from 'intellectus.' He holds that, for Luther, intellectus is not a mere human faculty, nor knowledge of an arbitrary object; rather, the term refers to something biblical--especially the wisdom of the cross. In contrast, human intellect is mere sensualitas; and this includes the human ratio, since it is likewise incapable of understanding spiritual things (spiritualia).<sup>4</sup>

While it is not the purpose of this paper to present a word-study of Luther's use of the term 'ratio'--in contrast with its synonyms--the point made by Ebeling is a good one. If Luther's concept of ratio is to be rendered rightly, care must be given to distinguish the knowledge of things spiritual which belong to a believer, from that knowledge (or lack thereof) possessed by the unregenerate. As will be made clear below, Luther's quarrel with ratio stems only from its incapability to know, and to accept without argument, the gospel (things of the Spirit). Luther condemns human reason because it stands in opposition to man's salvation in Christ. Hence, as will be shown in the pages that follow, ratio stands--in Luther's theology--for that human faculty which enables man to think, calculate, or plan; but which, as belonging to man in his fallen state, is incapable of comprehending the mysteries and will of God. Let this, then, be

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<sup>4</sup>Luther: An Introduction to His Thought, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 87.

the working definition of ratio in the discussion below. In order that this understanding might be properly conveyed in an English equivalent, this writer will employ the term 'human reason,' when referring to ratio (Vernunft), thus defined.

### "Ratio" Before the Fall

The difficulty in substantiating the claim that one individual was influenced by the ideas of any other person or school, without the former's specifically stating such a dependence upon his forerunners, is well known; and certainly this also is the case with Luther research. One may only surmise that Luther's educational background--that would have made him familiar with the ideas of Augustine, Aquinas, Ockham, and Biel--must have given some shape to his developing theological insights; and for this reason, what information has been related in the previous chapters of this paper bears significance to a survey of Luther's understanding of ratio.

A further problem in the composition of a survey of Luther's understanding of ratio arises from the fact--and here this writer must beg the indulgence of the reader in being "trite"--that Luther was not a systematician.<sup>5</sup> Too often stated, or not, that Luther did not write a treatise on the subject of the human reason remains an obstacle with

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<sup>5</sup>See Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 14.

which the modern scholar must contend. This is unfortunate; for the want of such a work by Luther necessitates that gaps in the present examination be left open. In addition, the selectivity of writings with which this paper is concerned will cause still further gaps to appear, as the intent of the present project is to supplement the extant works of other scholars, who have given attention to the topic of this thesis.

The first, and perhaps most noticeable, of the gaps in Luther's view of ratio, is discovered when seeking to outline his concept of the competence of human reason before the Fall of man took place. Little difficulty is encountered in relating what the Reformer considered ratio to be at the dawn of creation; but his ideas concerning the limits to which human reason could be employed in that era remain unspoken.

#### Man's Highest Attribute

In correlation with writings as far back as St. Augustine, Luther maintains in the Disputation Concerning Man that man's ratio "is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine."<sup>6</sup> It renders humans the ability to invent and maintain the arts, medicine,

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<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), 34:137, a.4 (hereafter cited as LW); cf. Martin Luther, D.

law, and whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory man possesses in this life.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, those are high accolades which Luther bestows upon man's reason, and they are not unexpected. In the Reformer's view, reason, as a gift from God to man, is the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things.<sup>8</sup> It became man's possession at the creation, and this fact alone is sufficient to establish ratio as a prize to be cherished; for God saw that His work before the Fall was very good (Gen. 1:31).<sup>9</sup> Luther asserts that Holy Scripture has established man's reason as lord over the earth, birds, fish and cattle, saying, "Have dominion" (Gen. 1:28); that reason is a sun and "a kind of god" appointed to administer these things in life.<sup>10</sup>

#### Limitations

These propositions suggest that Luther held human reason in high regard. Nevertheless, he also noted well the limitations of that special gift from God. Were these limits applicable to ratio even before the Fall of man? Luther does

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Martin Luther's Werke (Weimar: H. Boehlau, 1883-), 39 I:175 (hereafter cited as WA).

<sup>7</sup>LW 34, 137, a.4; WA 39 I, 175      <sup>8</sup>Ibid., a.6.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Martin Luther, On the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of "De Servo Arbitrio" (1525), Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam, trans. and ed. by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (United States: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), p. 203 (hereafter cited as BOW); WA 18, 708-709.

<sup>10</sup>LW 34, 137, a.7 and a.8; WA 39 I, 175.



not tell us. This silence may prove annoying to those who demand a philosophical answer to the question of ratio's competence before the Fall; but Luther's tacit approach to the query is consistent with his theological methodology. Where Scripture is silent, he is silent. The Bible does not delve into the issue of the extent of man's knowledge before the Fall, and neither does Luther.

Luther's approach to theology will be given a more detailed review in chapter five, below. For the present, suffice it to say that his method appears to have close connection with man's relation to God. Man is ever the creation; God is the Creator--and never the twain shall converge [the incarnation of Christ notwithstanding]. God remains God, and man, man. God is always above the scope of man's comprehension. The Divine acts exceed man's grasp.<sup>11</sup> God remains free above all things. He has not bound Himself totally by His word of revelation to man. Wherever God hides Himself, and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no concern. "What is above us does not concern us."<sup>12</sup>

Moot questions abound in the structure of Luther's thought. Why did God let Adam fall, and why did He create all men with his [Adam's] same sin?<sup>13</sup> Why does God not alter

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<sup>11</sup>BOW, p. 93; WA 18, 627, 19.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 170; WA 18, 685, 7: "Quae supra nos, nihil ad nos."

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 209; WA 18, 712, 29.

the evil wills of His creation?<sup>14</sup> How is it that God would do that which is absurd to human reason, by requiring impossibilities of man's 'free-will' [to will that which is 'good' and to avoid evil]? Luther's answer to all remains the same: let God be God. Reason may insist that God acts inconsistently, but this is simply because the things of God lie beyond its grasp. Reason wants to shut out all articles of faith, and to judge the real by what she [Luther often refers to 'Reason' in the feminine gender, and the German noun, Ver-nunft, also is feminine] is able to see, feel, and understand.<sup>15</sup>

A correlation seems to exist between Luther's connotation of human reason's sphere of competence, and Ockham's description of "intuitive cognition" [see page 26, above]. But Brian Gerrish signals a key difference between Luther and Ockham: for the former, Ockham's epistemological problem ('How do we know God?') becomes subordinate to the soteriological problem ('What must I do to be saved?').<sup>16</sup> Luther's "razor" for distinguishing the true from the untrue (in the more important realm of the spiritual life of man) would not be, What is demonstrable by use of empirical evidence? but, Does the assertion agree, or disagree, with the Gospel?

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 208; WA 18, 712, 24.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 201-202; WA 18, 707-708.

<sup>16</sup>Brian Albert Gerrish, Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 55-56.

The Reformer is critical of Erasmus's Diatribes precisely because it fails to acknowledge the necessity of reason's submission to faith in matters that pertain to man's relationship to God. Ratio cannot fathom faith's response to the question, Why are some saved, while others are not? Luther contends that reason can make no other response to that question than to surmise that God is one of Chance--that God merely sits by in idleness, not using His own wisdom, will and presence to elect, separate and inspire, but entrusts to man the business of curbing God's wrath.<sup>17</sup> Human reason will not allow God to be God. The basis for this fact lies in the Fall of man.

#### "Ratio" Since the Fall

##### The Totality of Sin's Effect on Man

It has been observed that if we fail to grasp Luther's literally staggering idea of sin, we shall never do justice to the genius of Luther or fathom his profundities.<sup>18</sup> Surely this applies to the realm of rightly understanding the Reformer's concept of reason's limited scope within the parameters of things spiritual. And Luther's understanding of the totality of sin's binding effects upon man lies at the very center of his argumentation against Erasmus in The Bondage

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<sup>17</sup>BOW, pp. 199-200; WA 18, 706, 13.

<sup>18</sup>Heinz Bluhm, "Luther's View of Man in His Early German Writings," Concordia Theological Monthly 34 (October 1963):586.

of the Will.

Erasmus condemned Luther's view of the severity of the effect which Adam's sin had upon all subsequent generations of mankind:

[Luther] exaggerates the importance of original sin by teaching that it has corrupted even the noblest faculties of man to such a degree that man cannot know God, that he hates him, and that even the believer who is justified by faith remains a sinner.<sup>19</sup>

By editing Erasmus's words, substituting the vocable "underscores" for "exaggerates," one is given a fair summation of Luther's view of the condition of man after the Fall. Luther held fast to the words of Romans 5, that by the single offense of the one man, Adam, all men lie under sin and condemnation.<sup>20</sup> By virtue of that condition, man becomes hostile toward God, and refuses the aid of faith in Christ for his salvation. Man is a sinner; and his sin is seated, not in the skin or in the hair [or any of the lesser parts of man's being], but in the highest attributes of natural man: in the reason and the will [ratione et voluntate].<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>On Free Will, IV, 13, as quoted in Hermann Sasse, "Luther and the Word of God," in Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, ed. Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 65.

<sup>20</sup>BOW, p. 297; WA 18, 773, 7.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 311; WA 18, 782, 14; cf. BOW, p. 280 [WA 18 761, 32]: "And doubtless that ignorance and contempt are not seated in the flesh, in the sense of the lower and grosser affections, but in the highest and most excellent powers of man . . . that is, in reason and will . . . ."

That Erasmus would so vehemently attack Luther for suggesting that original sin has corrupted human reason along with all other attributes of man, probably did not surprise the Reformer. Rather, Erasmus's insistent endeavor to preserve the integrity of ratio even after the Fall would merely prove that he was human. Luther cited Romans 1:21 in defense of his position, showing that, since the Fall, men became fools in their reasoning, and their heart was darkened--they became vain in their own reasonings [dialogismois].<sup>22</sup> So blinded has man become in his vanity, that he would rather protect his reason and be damned, than to admit reason's corruptness.<sup>23</sup> Luther criticizes the Diatribes for supposing that man is sound and whole after the Fall:

. . . Scripture describes man as corrupted and led captive, and, furthermore, as proudly disdain[ing] to notice, and failing to recognise [sic], his own corruption and captivity; . . .<sup>24</sup>

Luther's concept of ratio after the Fall, then, takes notice that that gift has been profoundly impaired by the devastating effects of original sin. To what extent has man's reason been limited by his sin? That question is to be considered now.

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<sup>22</sup>BOW, p. 277; WA 18, 759, 29.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 309; [WA 18, 780-781]: ". . . And as long as my will and my reason are blessed, I shall be glad for my filthy animal flesh to be taken away and damned; so far am I from wanting Christ to be its Redeemer!"

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 153; WA 18, 674, 9.

Ratio Impaired--Not Destroyed--by Sin

In spite of the magnitude of Adam's sin for the human race, Luther did not defend the position that man's ratio was utterly destroyed in the Garden. It has been noted above [pages 65 and 66] that Luther held, with high regard, reason's God-given abilities to have dominion over the rest of the created order, and to administer things in this life. And we note further, that he believed that God did not revoke this privilege from man after the Fall of Adam.<sup>25</sup> But lost is reason's aptitude to know and to judge rightly, in accordance with God's perfect will. Though reason has not been destroyed by the Fall, it is, nonetheless, made to serve the sinful self-awareness and self-glorification of fallen man.<sup>26</sup>

The nature of reason's impairment lies chiefly in the arena of man's knowledge of God. Pelikan assesses the extent to which Luther maintained ratio's ability to know God thus:

Luther was perfectly willing to grant that the unaided human mind can know that there is a God, 'quod est Deus.' But it cannot know what God is, 'quid est Deus.'<sup>27</sup>

In The Bondage of the Will, Luther holds that the knowledge of God in reason, carried to its logical conclusion, is

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<sup>25</sup>LW 34, p. 137, a.9; WA 39 I, 175.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 66.

<sup>27</sup>Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 22.

nothing but atheism; for reason cannot resist the assault of the power and the paradox of evil in the world.

Behold! God governs the external affairs of the world in such a way that, if you regard and follow the judgment of human reason, you are forced to say, either that there is no God, or that God is unjust; as the poet said: 'I am often tempted to think there are no gods.'<sup>28</sup>

In view of Luther's personal struggles with the concept of the "righteousness of God" earlier in his career, these words might be self-descriptive of his own wrestling with the issue of man's natural knowledge of God.

Luther's description of man's natural knowledge of God takes form in his contention that all men find the following in their hearts [as shall be shown in the next section, man's "heart" can be synonymous with "reason," and other attributes, in Luther's language usage], even if they have no Scripture: (1) that God is omnipotent, not only in power but also in action, and (2) that He knows and foreknows all things, and can neither err nor be deceived. Taken together, these assertions form a sort of 'proof for the existence of God' for Luther. By them he seeks to show, from "irrefutable logic," that man must admit that he does not act by his own 'free-will,' but by necessity--that there must exist a God who, by virtue of His foreknowledge and His infallible and immutable counsel and power, is able to order the direction of the paths man walks in life. This same God

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<sup>28</sup>BOW, p. 315; WA 18, 784, 36; cf. Ebeling, Luther: An Introduction, p. 230.

writes every other law into the hearts of man.<sup>29</sup>

The Scholastic axiom--that man can know from his natural reason that God exists, but that he can never know who that God is by the use of his unaided reason--is never more true than for Luther's theological understanding of man's condition since the Fall. What natural knowledge man has of God is, furthermore, of a legalistic order. When the 'grace' of God is sought by unaided reason, a distorted picture is rendered. In his exposition of Galatians 5:14 ("For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF'"--NASB.), Luther notes that nature may try to emulate grace, but especially when it gets to the "cross," it meets opposition to its own understanding of 'grace,' and rebels mightily.<sup>30</sup>

That ratio since the Fall cannot comprehend things of a spiritual nature, is a characteristic description of Luther's view of fallen man. Unaided reason is blind to the knowledge of godliness.<sup>31</sup> Reason, impaired by the Fall, now sees things of God as 'absurd.' For example, in discussing the complex issue of God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, Luther notes:

. . . It is human reason that is offended; which, though

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<sup>29</sup>BOW, p. 218 [WA 18, 719, 33]: "In the same way, every other law is written in our hearts (we have Paul's word for this [cf. Rom. 2:15]). . . ."

<sup>30</sup>LW 27, p. 353; WA 2, 578-579.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. BOW, pp. 280-281; WA 18, 761-762.



it is blind, deaf, senseless, godless, and sacrilegious, in its dealing with all God's words and works, is at this point brought in as judge of God's words and works!<sup>32</sup>

The Reformer continues:

On these same grounds you [Erasmus] will deny all the articles of faith, for it is the highest absurdity by far--foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling-block to the Jews, as Paul says [1 Corinthians 1:23]--that God should be man, a virgin's son, crucified, sitting at the Father's right hand. It is, I repeat, absurd [emphasis theirs] to believe such things!<sup>33</sup>

And elsewhere in the same work:

How could reason conceive that faith in Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man was necessary, when even at this day it can neither grasp nor believe, though the whole creation should cry aloud, that there is a person who is both God and man! Indeed, it rather finds offence [sic] in such a statement, as Paul tells us in [1 Corinthians 1]--so impossible is it that it should be either willing or able to believe it!<sup>34</sup>

#### Ratio in Relation to Man's Will

##### Flesh and spirit

At one's first impression, it may seem rather odd that Luther would write a major book on "the bondage of the will," and then proceed to discuss at length, not only the topic of the human will, but also the state of man's reason. But when Luther's usage of language is considered more carefully, the apparent confusion of terms no longer looks peculiar.

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<sup>32</sup>BOW, p. 201; WA 18, 707, 22; cf. p. 150 below.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.; WA 18, 707, 24.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 187; WA 18, 698, 5.

Luther sees an extremely close connection between man's will and his reason. In fact, it is man's ratio that assists his will in lending directives to act. Returning to Luther's defining of ratio's condition before the Fall, as found in the Disputation, it appears significant that the purpose for God's bestowal of reason upon man at creation was not, primarily, that man might think, but that he might act in ways consistent with God's own will.<sup>35</sup> Luther apparently finds a defense in Scripture for drawing an unbroken relationship between human reason and man's will. To which aspect of the man is the Law spoken? To his will, as an imperative which causes a man to act upon God's directives? No. Rather, the Law is spoken to illuminate the blindness of reason, "so that it may see that its own light is nothing, and the power of the will is nothing." And further, "'By the law is knowledge [emphasis by this writer] of sin,' says Paul [Romans 3:20]. He does not say: abolition, or avoidance, of sin [emphasis theirs]."<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, Luther finds an ally in Paul for treating nearly any aspect of man, that is hostile to God since the Fall, as synonymous. Paul lists among the "works of the flesh" heresy, idolatry, contentions, divisions, and so forth, which are in turn attitudes that reside in man's most exalted

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<sup>35</sup>LW 34, p. 137, a.7 and 8; WA 39 I, 175.

<sup>36</sup>BOW, p. 158; WA 18, 677, 7.

faculties, namely, reason and the will.<sup>37</sup> In Luther, as for Paul, all actions and attitudes of man can be classified in but two categories: "flesh" and "spirit." In addition, so complete is man's corruption since the Fall, that anything that is classed as "flesh" is, by its nature, against the spirit.<sup>38</sup>

For this reason, Paul Althaus can rightly declare that when Luther says in one of his hymns, "My free will hated God's judgment," any one of these other concepts could take the place of "free will": "flesh," "flesh and blood," "nature" of man, "natural reason," "sense," "entire world," and so forth.<sup>39</sup>

Because the flesh stands in opposition to the spirit, man's will and reason are always to be subordinated to the revelations of God. Luther's words:

For if human words or examples, no matter how saintly, have begun to be boasted of in opposition to those that

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 313; WA 18, 783, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 242; WA 18, 735, 31; cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21.

<sup>39</sup> Theology of Luther, pp. 66-67; Heinrich Emil Brunner seems not to know of Luther's way of treating such concepts as synonymous, for he asserts in Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge (Westminster Press, 1946), p. 301, n. 1: "The personification of reason by Luther in the controversial sense ('die Hure Vernunft,' et cetera) is not derived from the Bible but is to be understood in the light of the Scholastic use of the rational principle. In the Bible it is not so much the reason that is sinful as the heart, and that means the person."

are divine, it is time for us confidently to regard whatever is not divine as flesh and blood, yes, as nothing.<sup>40</sup>

This is the kind of statement that Erasmus could not bear; and Luther laments the former's inability to understand the relationship of man's sin, with human reason and the will. According to Luther, it is fallen reason's misguiding that has caused so many men of outstanding ability to be offended at the truths of God's Word through the ages.<sup>41</sup> Luther's lamentations are not spoken for "men of outstanding ability" alone. The bell tolls for all. He asserts that it is to be lamented whenever it happens that we human beings are praised as possessing reason, because of our free will, and because of our works, since Paul declares that it is impossible for one who pleases himself, or men, to be a servant of Christ and of the truth.<sup>42</sup>

"Simul justus et peccator": the paradox of regenerate man

Thus far, a description has been given of the condition of ratio in unregenerated man. Is the ratio possessed by a regenerated Christian man exactly the same as that found in his unbelieving counterpart? Luther's response to that question speaks the unreasonable; for he seeks to answer both Yes and No. By no rule of logic is this possible, and Luther

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<sup>40</sup>LW 27, p. 192; WA 2, 471, 21.

<sup>41</sup>BOW, p. 232; WA 18, 729, 13.

<sup>42</sup>LW 27, p. 181; WA 2, 464, 28; on Galatians 1:10.

would quickly admit such. Here, as in all articles of faith, reason and God's truth are rent asunder.

'Paradox' abounds in Luther's thought, and perhaps the supreme example is the doctrine rendered as simul justus et peccator (simultaneously justified and sinner).<sup>43</sup> Luther sees in the regenerated man a distinction not of 'either/or', in contrast with the unregenerated, but of 'both/and'. The believer in Christ is, on the one hand, enlightened by the Spirit to see God's truths, and on the other, darkened by his remaining sin. Luther saw this idea as wholly Biblical. Coupling 1 John 1:8 with 1 John 3:9, he shows that God's Word says, at one and the same time, that the believer is not able to sin, yet if he says he has no sin, he is lying.<sup>44</sup>

#### Man in two kingdoms

According to the Reformer, regenerated man, while still on this earth, finds himself in the realm of two overlapping kingdoms. In regard to the lesser kingdom of the creation [actually of Satan], man is able--even after the Fall--to be led by his own free will with regard to those

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<sup>43</sup>The exact phrase 'simul justus et peccator' is found in the Galatians Commentary (1519), WA 2, 497, 13, where the phrase is employed to describe the Biblical personage of Job. Another clear reference to this concept is found in WA 2, 489, 11-14.

<sup>44</sup>LW 27, p. 230; WA 2, 496-497; the Biblical passages as rendered in LW 27: "He who is born of God does not sin" (1 John 3:9); and "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

things that are below him; in the other kingdom [the kingdom of God], he is not left in the hand of his own counsel, but is directed and led by the will and counsel of God.<sup>45</sup> This places regenerated man in the precarious position of being caught between two kingdoms that are at war with each other; hence his life on earth will be one of great confusion and of paradox.<sup>46</sup>

### "Ratio Coram Deo"

#### The "magisterium" and "ministerium" of man's use of reason

If Luther's distinction of the two kingdoms is noted, attention must be given to the condition of ratio, as possessed by the regenerate man, and as it seeks to function within each of those distinct spheres. The first of the kingdoms to be treated here will be the kingdom of God. As noted in the previous discussion [pages 78-79], the will of God reigns supremely in this realm. Sin has darkened man's knowledge of God; and as man stands before God (coram deo), he is not able even to know what is right and wrong.<sup>47</sup>

Classic surveys of Christian dogmatics delineate ratio's proper use before God, by carefully distinguishing

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<sup>45</sup>BOW, pp. 150-151 [WA 18, 672-673]: "For there is no middle kingdom between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, which are at war with each other."

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Ibid., p. 253; WA 18, 743, 32.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Gerrish, Grace and Reason, p. 14.

the so-called 'usus rationis ministerialis' from the 'usus rationis magisterialis'. In this distinction, the ministerium of reason is its proper sphere of competence, when as a maid it gives way to higher authority; the magisterium of reason speaks of ratio's arrogating to itself judgment in things about which it knows nothing, and which exceed its grasp of understanding.<sup>48</sup> These categories fit well into Luther's view of ratio coram deo. According to the Reformer, reason is quite stupid and absurd when applied to holy things.<sup>49</sup> Reason's relationship before God is a ministerial one.

#### "Theologia crucis"

At no crossroad is ratio's incompetence to understand articles of a spiritual nature more amplified, as when it encounters the cross of Christ. Much has been written concerning the central importance of the 'theology of the cross' (theologia crucis) for Luther's thought.<sup>50</sup> The 'theology of the cross' stands in contrast to the 'theology of glory' (theologia gloriae). While the 'theology of glory' seeks to

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<sup>48</sup>See Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:199.

<sup>49</sup>BOW, p. 152; WA 18, 674.

<sup>50</sup>The most excellent treatment of this subject, known to this writer, is Walther von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976). See also Althaus, Theology of Luther, pp. 25-34.

know God through His works, the 'theology of the cross' recognizes, through faith, that a true knowledge of God is to be found only in the suffering Christ on Calvary.<sup>51</sup>

"Deus absconditus" and "revelatus"

The cross of Christ is the greatest stumbling-block to the reason of man [see page 76 above]. Human reason is totally baffled that God should reveal Himself to man in this way. This is the point at which another important distinction in Luther's understanding of man's ability to know things concerning God must be noted: the distinction between God, as He chooses to remain hidden from the reason of man (Deus absconditus), and God, as He has chosen to reveal Himself to man (Deus revelatus).

In The Bondage of the Will, Luther again takes the offensive against Erasmus for the latter's failure to make the distinction between God hidden and revealed. The Reformer notes that "Wherever God hides Himself, and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no concern. Here that senti-

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<sup>51</sup>An interesting passage in Althaus, Theology of Luther, pp. 26-27, further establishes that Luther deepens the meaning of these concepts by showing that, in the 'theology of glory,' man seeks to know God not only through His works, but also through man's works; in the same way, in the 'theology of the cross,' God is found not only in the suffering of Christ, but also in man's suffering. Hence, in Althaus's words, "natural theology and speculative metaphysics which seek to learn to know God from the works of creation are in the same category as the work righteousness of the moralist. Both are ways in which man exalts himself to the level of God."



ment: 'what is above us does not concern us', [sic] really holds good."<sup>52</sup> Against a philosophical approach toward seeking to know God, Luther forcefully ascertains that God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone. The magisterial use of human reason is to be shunned. Says Luther, "We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which He presents Himself to us."<sup>53</sup>

Thus even regenerated man must know God only as He has chosen to reveal Himself to him. Man must be guided by God's word, not by His inscrutable will which we cannot comprehend.<sup>54</sup> If reason tries to know God by observing His works, then it will be confounded all the more; for God frequently acts in paradoxical ways. For example, Luther states that when God quickens, He does so by killing [as occurs to this writer, the supreme instance was at Calvary!]; when He justifies, He does so by pronouncing guilty; when He carries up to heaven, He does so by bringing down to hell. "Thus God conceals His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>BOW, p. 170; WA 18, 685, 6.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.; WA 18, 685, 16.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., pp. 170-171; WA 18, 685.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 101; WA 18, 633, 9. Luther's 'proof texts' are 1 Kings 2, "The Lord killeth and maketh alive"; and 1 Samuel 2:6, "he bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up" (as rendered in the Packer-Johnston text).

Revelation at God's initiative

Therefore, the essential need of man--in order that he might come to know God--is for God's revelation of Himself. Accordingly, in giving his exposition on Galatians 4:9, Luther agrees with Augustine regarding the fact that, properly speaking, man does not come to know God at all; rather, God must come to know us first.<sup>56</sup> God, not man, must take the initiative of this effort. As the Reformer makes mention of the fact, 'sons of God' [regenerate men] became such only by being born of God, not by human volition.<sup>57</sup> And, as Luther shows from 1 Corinthians 2, unless the Spirit [God] revealed the principal articles of faith concerning salvation itself, no man's heart would know anything about the matter of life everlasting.<sup>58</sup> Luther: ". . . the whole world, human reason, yes, 'free-will', [sic] are forced to confess that they had not known nor heard of Christ before the gospel [God's revelation through the word] entered the world."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>LW 27, p. 294; WA 2, 539, 10.

<sup>57</sup>BOW, p. 303; WA 18, 776, 30; cf. John 1:12-13.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 139; WA 18, 663.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 306; WA 18, 778, 34. As can be seen from these points, Gerrish's distinction between Luther and Ockham grows more significant as to its correctness [see page 69 above]. Indeed, Luther's paramount concern in his concept of ratio is not of an epistemological, but of a soteriological, nature.

Without the aid of revelation from God, human reason cannot grasp Him. In the Galatians Commentary (1519), Luther states that Christ alone, not man's reason, is the Light and Life of all men.<sup>60</sup> Indeed! Then what can be made of the ratio of unregenerated man? Has it not been shown above [pages 73-76] that man's reason--even in the realm of the unregenerate--was not destroyed, but merely impaired, by the Fall? Again Luther's position must be restated, that unaided reason is able to perceive that a God exists, but that it is utterly incapable of knowing who or what kind of God He truly is, namely, a God of grace.

#### Three lights of illumination

Luther distinguishes between three separate "lights," which illumine man's path to the truth: the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory.<sup>61</sup> Judging by Luther's usage of these terms in their context, the 'light of nature' refers to the God-given gift of ratio, as it is possessed even by the unregenerate, and is able to make deductions and calculations in this life; the 'light of grace'

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<sup>60</sup>LW 27, p. 293; WA 2, 538, 15: "Solus Christus est lux et vita omnium hominum, non ratio nostra."

<sup>61</sup>BOW, p. 317. Could these 'three lights' be a reworking of the system of three classes of arguments that had been outlined by Averroes [see page 20, n. 22 above]? This writer does not pretend to have the answer; but what is interesting is the observation that Luther's 'three lights' offer a complete reversal of the order of possessed truth that had been given by Averroes. In the latter's system, it is the natural philosopher who holds the most certain truth;

describes the enlightened reason of the regenerate man, who is able to perceive such things as the Gospel and other articles of faith (against which the 'light of nature' is hostile because of their supposed unreasonableness); and the 'light of glory' takes into account the eschatological aspect of man's knowledge of God, noting that our understanding of God and His will is imperfect, at best, while man remains in this world--that the regenerate will possess a more complete picture of God when they are taken to be with Him in heaven.

Enemy of the gospel;  
friend to the law

Much mention is made in writings about Luther's theology that the Reformer spoke in condemning fashion concerning ratio. The "White Devil," "the Devil's whore," "Frau Hulda," "Madam Reason," [Domina Ratio] are but a few of the not so complimentary names which Luther employs when referring to human reason.<sup>62</sup> But one must recall Luther's understanding that man's reason has not been totally destroyed, only impaired, by the Fall [see pages 73-76 above]. Reason is not always a tool of the devil. The context in which Luther

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in Luther's view, it is the regenerated man [in heaven], who holds that highest level of knowledge, while philosophy holds the lowest form of knowledge.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. BOW, p. 154 [WA 18, 674, 13], p. 232 [WA 18, 729, 7], and passim. These names do not appear, as such, in the Galatians Commentary (1519), nor in the Disputation, though in the latter, reason is described as being under the devil's influence, as the discussion on pages 93-95 (below) will indicate.

speaks of "Mistress Reason" in his writings bears important evidence, which shows that he viewed ratio in this dark light only as it is used in a 'magisterial' way [compare pages 81-82].

Luther's criticism of reason stems from its inability to accept the gospel as true; put in stronger terms, he sees that misused reason has the ability to weaken--even destroy--the gospel's saving impact upon fallen man. In The Bondage of the Will, "Mistress Reason" finds no friend in Luther: "Reason is . . . so entrapped in the inferences and words of her own wisdom, that she does not know what she is saying or talking about."<sup>63</sup> The focus of Luther's argument, in this instance, is that reason will not allow natural man to acknowledge his total inability to do anything toward working out his own salvation with God--or, for that matter, anything that is at all God-pleasing. Erasmus has sought to preserve something in man's 'free-will' since the Fall, that will enable one to at least co-operate with God's will. Yet Luther has shown, to the contrary, that man has been totally corrupted by his sin, and is held in captivity apart from God as a consequence.<sup>64</sup> The Reformer's point of contention, throughout his treatise On the Bondage of the Will, is that if man can be shown to retain something of his 'free-will'

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<sup>63</sup>BOW, p. 154; WA 18, 674, 22.

<sup>64</sup>Cf. Ibid., p. 153; WA 18, 674, 9.

after the Fall, which enables man to co-operate with God's will in any way in working toward his salvation, then the sacrifice of Christ is diminished; for in that case, Christ would only have died to save the lesser attributes of man, and not his reason and will (his highest attributes).

Unaided reason, as portrayed in Luther's writings, is no friend of the Gospel. This is because man's natural reason, since the Fall, is legalistic in character. Ratio wants to make works of the Law the criteria for determining who will be saved, and who will be lost, at the last judgment of God. For this reason, Luther is highly critical of any, who would seek to use the wisdom of men as authoritative over the Gospel, in formulating any theology which depicts man as being able to contribute works of merit toward his own salvation:

We learn these godless kinds of righteousness from the decrees of men and from the monstrous theology which has Aristotle as its head and Christ as its feet, since these decrees and these kinds of righteousness alone hold sway. For this is how they vaunt their petty works of satisfaction; and it is amazing what value they place on these with their traffic in indulgences, as if it were not enough to believe in Christ, in whom our righteousness, redemption, satisfaction, life and glory are by faith alone [1 Corinthians 1:30: "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" NASB].<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>LW 27, p. 328 [WA 2, 562, 1], on Galatians 5:2; cf. a similar statement in that same work, p. 219 [WA 2, 489, 24]: "This is the kind of righteousness Aristotle and other philosophers describe--the kind produced by laws of the state and of the church in ceremonies, the kind produced at the behest of reason and by prudence."

Reason as judge over God

Allowing God alone to be the judge, over who is to be saved and who is to be damned, is contrary to the impulse of human reason, as described by Luther. This is the height of the magisterial use of ratio. Luther observes that the greatest possible offense confronts human reason, when it is noted that God, Who is proclaimed full of mercy and goodness, should of His own mere will abandon, harden, and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. Says the Reformer, "And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man."<sup>66</sup>

In this arena of man's contemplation, fallen reason will not allow God to be God. Satan's influence is felt by the ratio of man.<sup>67</sup> Reason praises God as God only when He acts as One who serves its own convenience. Ratio praises God when He saves the unworthy from their destruction, but finds fault with Him when He damns those who are also undeserving of His mercy.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>BOW, p. 217; WA 18, 719, 9.

<sup>67</sup>In BOW, p. 134 [WA 18, 659, 32], Luther surmises that if Satan were not at work in this world, "the whole world could be converted by a single word of God, heard once: there would be no need of more."

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 234; WA 18, 733.

Invincible ignorance

In light of reason's incompetence before God, man could easily adopt an entirely fatalistic outlook toward the question, Why are some saved, while others are not? Luther demonstrates, in the Galatians Commentary (1519), that teachers of that era were doing just that. Some were hypothesizing three classes of ignorance: invincible ignorance, gross ignorance, and affected ignorance [ignorantiam aliam invincibilem, aliam crassam et affectatum].<sup>69</sup>

Luther describes the three classes of ignorance in reference to Galatians 4:8 ["However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods" NASB.]. Ignorance that is affected [by the Holy Spirit] accuses man in his sin all the more; he can no longer plead innocence before God as Judge, claiming that he simply did not know any better than to act as he did in life. Gross ignorance of God's will is an intermediate category, between "affected" and "invincible" ignorance, which partially excuses one from his sin, but not entirely. Invincible ignorance, so it was said by those who composed the theory, was able to absolve a man from all sin.

Luther indicted those who espoused the notion of an invincible ignorance with doing injury to God's grace, and inflating man's supposed 'free-will.'<sup>70</sup> God is able to sur-

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<sup>69</sup>LW 27, pp. 292-293; WA 2, 537-538.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.



mount any obstacle; hence, an "invincible" ignorance cannot exist. It might also be added, that what has been shown above, namely, the idea that God has written His law into the heart of man as part of his very nature [see pages 74-75], shatters the mistaken concept of a so-called 'invincible ignorance' on the part of man.

#### "Ratio Coram Humanitate"

Attention must now be given to the second of the two kingdoms in which regenerated man finds himself living while in this world, that is, the kingdom of Satan [also, "the world," and "the flesh"]. It has been established above, that Luther envisioned as being improper, any so-called 'magisterial' use of reason before God (coram deo), which does not allow God to be God, and which usurps to itself the authority to declare what is righteous and unrighteous, just and unjust. But the preceding discussion also acknowledged a 'ministerial' use of reason, which described an appropriate sphere of action and thinking, where ratio is free to work within properly defined parameters. This 'ministerium' of reason speaks of man's living with his fellowman in the world: hence the phrase, 'ratio coram humanitate'.

#### Reason's majesty

In describing man's gift of ratio before the Fall, Luther heaped praise upon it as man's highest attribute [see pages 66-67]. Because of the lofty importance which reason

holds for the proper maintenance of God's creation, and for the improvement of man's life on earth, Luther also speaks of ratio as possessing a certain "majesty."<sup>71</sup> But this majesty belongs to reason not for its own sake, but because it is a gift of God at creation; it is God who both bestowed, and confirmed, the majestic honor upon man's reason.

Even for the unregenerate man, reason is an essential tool for service. With it, man can "have dominion" over the other living things on the earth; that is, he can properly administer the things of this life.<sup>72</sup> A high gift, reason owns the distinction of being the inventor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and so forth.<sup>73</sup> Thus, it can be noted that Luther valued man's reason highly.

#### Influence of the devil

Since the world can also be called the kingdom of Satan, can it be inferred that every action of man, while he is in this domain, is controlled by the devil; and further, is every earthly act of man necessarily evil? As shown in the section concerning ratio coram deo above, distinction must be made between unregenerate, and regenerate man. If consideration is given only to man apart from faith, then articles 24 and 25 of the Disputation lend a certain answer:

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<sup>71</sup>LW 34, p. 137, a.9 and 10; WA 39 I, 175.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., a.7 and 8; WA 39 I, 175.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., a.5; WA 39 I, 175.

even though reason remains man's highest attribute after the Fall, it still lies under the devil's power, and it must be concluded that the whole man and every man--regardless of one's station in life--is and remains guilty of sin and death under the power of Satan.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, unregenerated man is totally unable to choose between what is 'good' and that which is 'evil,' neither is he able to merit the grace of God and life; moreover, the light of God's countenance is no longer in the unregenerate since the Fall.<sup>75</sup>

If the regenerated man is taken into consideration, the picture of man under the devil's power changes somewhat. Yet here the caveat must again be sounded, that the fragmentary articles for debate, which follow the Disputation proper, may not necessarily represent Luther's final formulations on the topics in question. This warning in mind, the tentative response to the question of Satan's level of dominance over regenerate man might be rendered as follows:

(1) an apparent implication in the argument against thesis 24 in the Disputation, is that man is utterly incapable of doing anything that is 'good' (before God) apart from his being regenerated by God; (2) against the reactionary comment outlined in that same section--that is, "if reason is of the devil, no one does good; but we ought to do good; therefore,

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<sup>74</sup>LW 34, pp. 138-139; WA 39 I, 176.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 139, a.30, 27, and 29; WA 39 I, 176.

all reason is not under the power of the devil"--Luther makes defense by noting that "we are not debating about the pious man"; (3) Luther's further comment in that section states "all good things which are over and above the divine gift are subject to the devil"; (4) ergo, regenerate man does, indeed, live within two kingdoms (the kingdom of God and of Satan), and whatever part of that individual as lies outside God's active influence, such is as remains under the domination of the devil. However, insofar as God is actively at work to enlighten the reason of regenerate man, the latter is able to know the 'good' that remains a mystery to the man without faith.<sup>76</sup> Hence, in the case of the regenerate man, not all reason lies necessarily under the devil's control. One may speak of an enlightened reason, or (as in Luther's terms), of a "theological man."<sup>77</sup>

#### Right reason

Paul Althaus lends interesting insight into the theology of Luther. In summarizing Luther's view of reason, as it is employed in earthly affairs, Althaus notes that theology has no other task than to allow reason its place, to

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 142; WA 39 I, 179.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 139, a.28; WA 39 I, 176; "theological man" is a term which Luther uses to distinguish man, as he is portrayed in Scripture, in contrast to a philosophical, Aristotelian, idea of man. The term refers especially to regenerate man: "Theological man is outside the realm of the devil. Civic man has virtues to be sure, but he is not free from the devil" (LW 34, p. 144; WA 39 I, 180, 30).

recognize it, and to testify that it is God's creation. Still further, in the matters of "earthly government," reason alone is the final authority, containing within itself the basis for judging and deciding about the proper regulation and administration of earthly matters such as economics and politics. Says Althaus, "In these matters the Bible, Christian preaching, and theology have nothing to say. Holy Scripture and the gospel do not teach us how to make right laws or administer the affairs of state."<sup>78</sup>

The selected writings of Luther with which this paper is concerned do not allow as complete a construction of Luther's view of reason's scope in earthly affairs, as Althaus is able to render. However, hints do appear in a fragmentary way within the Disputation, that reason is meant to play a significant role in the task of administering the affairs of this world, even for the unregenerate.

The Disputation fragment speaks of a "right reason" [recta ratio], which is the principal part of man that distinguishes man from beasts.<sup>79</sup> Since the early articles of the Disputation had determined that man's "reason" was his highest gift at creation, and that which differentiated man from animal, it seems logical to deduce that the terms 'ratio' and 'recta ratio' denote one and the same concept,

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<sup>78</sup>Theology of Luther, p. 65.

<sup>79</sup>LW 34, p. 144; WA 39 I, 180, 16.

insofar as they are used to describe that faculty of man that is able to properly administer the affairs of this world, act as the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and so forth.<sup>80</sup> Thus, "right reason" is presented as that attribute of man which is able to act as a guide in matters concerning this life, regardless of whether a man be regenerate or unregenerate.

As stated before, the primary works under consideration in this paper do not lend sufficient information to construct a thorough presentation of Luther's concept of "right reason." To go further than what is presented here, however, would be an interesting project, especially in seeking to discover the similarities (and dissimilarities) of Luther's defining of this term, as contrasted with Augustine and other prominent theologians who lived before the sixteenth century. The focus of the current project will concentrate on matters more fully discussed in the primary writings under present review, beginning with Luther's understanding of the relationship of ratio to the study of Scripture.

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 137, a.4, 5, and 6; WA 39 I, 175.

## CHAPTER IV

### LUTHER'S UNDERSTANDING OF RATIO AS APPLIED TO SCRIPTURE

#### Scripture as Word of God

The previous chapter established Luther's views concerning the severe limitations incurred by human reason since the Fall of man. Before attention may be given to the topic of how the Reformer viewed ratio's acceptable employment in theological concerns, the importance of ratio's relationship to his study of Scripture must be considered. Clearly, Luther's concept of Scripture is central to his theology; for the teachings of Holy Writ form the very basis for the doctrines which he upheld in the many open debates of the Reformation.

The relationship between ratio and the word of God, as drawn by Luther, is paramount toward understanding the significance of what one writer has called the "Schriftprinzip" of the Reformation--Sola Scriptura.<sup>1</sup> Establishing that correlation demands, first, that attention be given to Luther's conception of the meaning of 'word of God'.

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<sup>1</sup>A. Skevington Wood, "Luther's Concept of Revelation," Evangelical Quarterly 35 (July-September 1963):150.

"Word of God" Defined

In the Galatians Commentary (1519), Luther notes that the word of God (verbum Dei) is the church's first and greatest benefit; and, on the other hand, there is no greater harm by which the church is destroyed than the word of man and the traditions of this world. "God alone is true, and every man a liar [Psalm 116:11]."<sup>2</sup> From this passage, it is exceedingly clear that the word of God held the place of highest authority in Luther's theology, and that the words of man pale in comparison as vehicles of proclaiming truth. But what, exactly, is meant by the phrase "word of God" in the Reformer's thinking?

The context of the many references to "word of God" in the writings of Luther indicates, most often, that he means the written words of Scripture as God's revelation of Himself to man. Yet the phrase does not signify only that to Luther. One notices, for example, such passages as the following:

I am conscious of being a debtor to the Word [verbi], no matter how unworthy I am. It has never been possible to discuss the Word of God [verbum dei] without incurring danger of bloodshed; but just as the Word died for us, so it requires, in turn, that we die for it when we confess it. The servant is not greater than his master.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), 27:165 (hereafter cited as LW); Martin Luther, D. Martin Luther's Werke (Weimar: H. Boehlau, 1883-), 2:453, 33 (hereafter cited as WA).

<sup>3</sup>LW 27, p. 159; WA 2, 449, 11.



The interchange in this excerpt between the vocable "Word," and the phrase "Word of God," is striking. And if the usage of each is noted within the context of the cited passage, one must concede that--by both the vocable and the phrase--Luther refers not to the words of Scripture, but to Christ Jesus Himself: the Word made flesh. Certainly, in view of the Reformer's acknowledgment that the written word is the church's greatest benefit, it may be given that Luther may have--in some sense--felt indebted to it; but this kind of nuance does not fit the occurrence of the vocable in the sentences quoted above. Further, the third occasion of the use of "Word" in the quotation [line 4] does not occur in the Weimar edition, as it does in the American translation; instead, it is implied by the grammar, so that the sentence could read, "It has never been possible to discuss the Word of God . . .; but just as it [the Word of God] died . . . ." Surely Luther cannot mean to say that the written pages of Scripture died! Rather, the rendering makes more sense if "the Word of God" is understood as "Christ Jesus," who died for us. Ergo, "word of God" must be understood always within the context of Luther's writings; for only then may one determine whether by the phrase is meant either God's written word, or the Word made flesh--Jesus Christ.

A further connotation of Luther's concept of the word can be found in the continuation of the passage cited above: ". . . 'If they persecuted Me,' says Christ (John 15:20),

'they will also persecute you; if they have kept My Word [sermonem], they will also keep yours.'"<sup>4</sup> The Latin vocable "sermonem" bears the import of a word that is spoken, or proclaimed. Therefore, Paul Althaus is not out of line in suggesting that the idea of the "spoken" word is also of great moment in Luther's understanding of "word of God."<sup>5</sup> For Luther, the word of God is not something static, or lifeless. Rather, it is a vibrant, living word; it is Christ made manifest for man through the verbal proclamation of God through the apostles.

#### Scripture as Revelation of God's Word

##### Vehicle of the Spirit

In Luther's concept, the word of God--whether spoken or written--does not possess power to save by its own right, but only insofar as it is a vehicle for conveying the Holy Spirit to man. This point is established most lucidly in the Galatians Commentary (1519), by the Reformer's discussion concerning whether or not infants (or the deaf) can believe in Christ if they have not heard the preached word. Luther finds agreement with Jerome,<sup>6</sup> who concluded that, to the word

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<sup>4</sup>LW 27, p. 159; WA 2, 449, 13.

<sup>5</sup>The Theology of Luther, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 72.

<sup>6</sup>Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus, born probably in the 340s, died 419 or 420. In addition to Augustine, Luther cites this church father often in the Galatians Commentary--this in accordance with the expected method of Luther's time, that a

of God, nothing is deaf, and that it speaks to those ears of which it is said: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear"

[Matthew 11:15]. Says Luther:

I like this answer very much, because the Word of God [verbum dei] is not heard even among adults and those who hear unless the Spirit promotes growth inwardly. Accordingly, it is a Word of power and grace when it infuses the Spirit at the same time that it strikes the ears. But if it does not infuse the Spirit, then he who hears does not differ at all from one who is deaf.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for Luther the word of God receives its power by virtue of the working of the Holy Spirit. As vehicle of the Spirit, the word has the force to create new life in its hearers. Apart from the Spirit's work, the word remains empty. But the Reformer goes one step further: he indicates not only that the word is null without the Spirit, but also that the Spirit does not work faith into the hearts of men apart from the word. To quote from The Bondage of the Will at length:

If Reason should here wrinkle up her nose and say: 'Why does God will that these things be done by His words, when nothing is achieved by such words, and the will cannot turn itself in either direction? Why does He not do what He does without speaking a word, when He can do all things without a word? For a will that has heard His Word can do and does no more than before, if the inner moving of the Spirit is wanting; nor could it avail or do any less without the Word being spoken, if the Spirit was with it; for all depends on the power and operation of the Spirit' to this I shall say: It has pleased God

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lecturer on Biblical exegesis was required to present to his students the thoughts of approved expositors; cf. Uuras Saarnivaara, Luther Discovers the Gospel: New Light upon Luther's Way from Medieval Catholicism to Evangelical Faith (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>LW 27, p. 249; WA 2, 509, 1.

not to give the Spirit without the Word, but through the Word; that He might have us as workers together with Him, we sounding forth without what He alone breathes within wheresoever He will. This He could do without the Word; but He will not. And who are we to inquire into the cause of the Divine will? It is enough for us to know that God so wills, and it becomes us to worship, love and adore His will, bridling the presumption of reason.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear from this excerpt that there is no difference between the "early Luther" and the "mature Luther" on the matter of the word's being the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Because of this close correlation between the word and the Spirit, the written word, too, becomes authoritative and all-important for the formulation of Luther's affirmations of the Reformation.

#### Means of grace

In addition to being the sole vehicle of the Holy Spirit's interaction with man, the word (in Luther's theology) is also the only means whereby God bestows His grace upon man. Luther could not be more clear on this point: "If you want to obtain grace, then see to it that you hear the Word of God attentively or meditate on it diligently." And again: "The Word, I say, and only the Word, is the vehicle of God's grace."<sup>9</sup> It is obvious from this passage that by stating that only the word is God's means of grace, Luther

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, On the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of "De Servo Arbitrio" (1525), Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam, trans. and ed. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (United States: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), p. 184 (hereafter cited as BOW); WA 18, 695, 22.

<sup>9</sup> LW 27, p. 249; WA 2, 509, 13.

is referring to both the spoken and written word of God; because of the reference to "hearing" and "meditating," the word of God may not be taken as denoting Christ in this particular excerpt, though because of His atoning sacrifice, Jesus Christ might also be considered a "means of God's grace" to man.<sup>10</sup>

### "Sola Scriptura"

As noted above [page 98], the Scriptprinzip of the Reformation came to be known by the phrase "sola Scriptura." But it must be kept in mind that the concept that Scripture was the sole authority for any article of faith, was not an invention of Martin Luther, nor of the Reformation era. The assertion of Scripture's primacy had been held at least since the time of Augustine.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, one can maintain the position of Luther's having further developed the idea of the absolute supremacy of the Scriptures in defense of true doctrine. Yet, interestingly enough, when seeking to lend

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<sup>10</sup>The discussion in this portion of the present paper is not meant to be taken as exhaustive of Luther's enumeration of the "Means of Grace"; for surely one must consider also the sacraments in Luther's theology, if the listing is to be complete. For a more comprehensive overview of the Means of Grace in Luther's theology, see Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Theology of the Means of Grace," in Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, ed. Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), pp. 124-147.

<sup>11</sup>For an excellent treatment of this subject, see Hermann Sasse, "The Rise of the Dogma of Holy Scripture in the Middle Ages," The Reformed Theological Review 18 (June 1959):45-54.

force to his argument for the primacy of Holy Writ, even in the eyes of Rome, Luther cites the early Fathers as support:

St. Augustine teaches that no one should be believed, no matter how greatly he may excel in sanctity and learning (even the highest degree of sanctity, I believe), unless he convinces you by Holy Writ or acceptable reasoning [here Luther must mean the 'usus rationis ministerialis'], lest we be tricked if we play some other game.<sup>12</sup>

While many of Luther's predecessors had espoused the supremacy of Scripture in establishing theological truths, few went quite so far as the Reformer in subordinating even the authority of the Church to the Bible.<sup>13</sup> The fundamental reasons for Luther's extreme position of the primacy of Scripture are clear. Man's ratio has been seriously impaired by the Fall, thereby making him totally dependent upon God's revelation of Himself in order that anything certain about His nature and will can be known. God's self-disclosure is given by the power of the Holy Spirit; and the relationship of the Spirit to the word, as vehicle of His power to reveal and to convert, has already been determined [see pages 101-103 above]; in the larger excerpt, Luther argues from the strength of Matthew 4:4 ["But He answered and said, 'It is written, "MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD"' " NASB].

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<sup>12</sup>LW 27, p. 156; WA 2, 447, 15.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., "Luther's Sola Scriptura," Concordia Theological Monthly 31 (December 1960):740-745; see also BOW, p. 69 [WA 18, 604].

Because of Luther's view of the necessity for the presence and working of the Holy Spirit in order for the Scriptures to be effective, a careful definition of 'sola Scriptura' must be rendered, lest one be misled into thinking that the Bible has supremacy even over the Spirit. On this point, Bernhard Lohse has sounded the appropriate caveat:

Luther is known for his principle 'Sola Scriptura' [sic]. But Luther never forgot that man needs the enlightening by the Holy Spirit, though the Holy Spirit never works apart from the means of teaching and preaching. The revelation of which the Scripture is a witness and the revelation of the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from each other. Luther makes the objection to the enthusiasts of his time that they try to do this. The result of such an attempt always is that one is led not by the Holy Spirit, but by one's own spirit. The revelation of the Scripture and the revelation of the Holy Spirit are in the same way one, as the works of the different persons of the Trinity are one. One must distinguish but may not separate them.<sup>14</sup>

#### The Content of Scripture

Even though Luther may not be credited as the originator of the tendency toward the sola Scriptura principle of formulating doctrine in the church, his findings were distinctive nonetheless. In an essay entitled "Luther and the Word of God," Hermann Sasse presents the following summation:

If this tendency [sola Scriptura] is obviously in the background of the Reformation and one of the reasons for its success, it does not explain Luther's new understanding of the authority of Holy Scripture. For this was linked up from the beginning with a completely new discovery that was as important to him as it was new to

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<sup>14</sup>"Reason and Revelation in Luther," Scottish Journal of Theology 13 (December 1960):337-365, p. 346.

the Christian world of that time: the distinction between Law and Gospel in the Word of God.<sup>15</sup>

The discovery of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel was significant; for as Sasse notes elsewhere in the same essay, the Gospel for all medieval men to that time had been the lex Christi: 'Do this and you will live.'<sup>16</sup> The lex Christi was found especially in Matthew 19, in Jesus' response to the young rich man; and when the young man heard this statement, "he went away grieved" [Matthew 19:22, NASB]. This 'gospel' is no Gospel at all to Luther. Quite in contrast to the response of the young rich man, Luther rejoices at having found in Scripture the true Gospel proclamation. The clear Gospel, then, is yet another way to understand the phrase "word of God" in Luther's writings, as can be seen in the following excerpt from the Galatians Commentary (1519):

To put it clearly, . . . as often as the Word of God is preached, it renders consciences joyful, expansive, and untroubled toward God, because it is a Word of grace and forgiveness, a kind and sweet Word.<sup>17</sup>

And in comparison with this sweet word of God is the word of man: "As often as the word of man is preached, it renders the conscience sad, cramped, and full of fear in itself, because it is a word of the Law, of wrath and sin; it shows what a

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<sup>15</sup> See Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, ed. Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), pp. 47-97, especially p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 61-62.

<sup>17</sup> LW 27, p. 164; WA 2, 453, 2.



person has failed to do and how deeply he is in debt."<sup>18</sup>

Because of the importance in understanding Luther's distinction between Law and Gospel in Scripture, it is again necessary to quote the Reformer at length:

The Gospel and the Law, taken in their proper sense, differ in this way: The Law proclaims what must be done and left undone; or better, it proclaims what deeds have already been committed and omitted, and also that possible things are done and left undone (hence the only thing it provides is the knowledge of sin); the Gospel, however, proclaims that sins have been remitted and that all things have been fulfilled and done. For the Law says: "Pay what you owe"; but the Gospel says: "Your sins or [sic] forgiven you." Thus in [Romans 3:20] we read: "Through the Law comes knowledge of sin"; and in the fourth chapter Paul says [verse 15]: "The Law works wrath; for where there is no Law, there is no transgression." But concerning the Gospel Luke [24:46-47] says: "Thus it was necessary that Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached to all nations in His name." . . . Therefore he who has been justified through grace flees from the Law to the Gospel and says [Matthew 6:12]: "Forgive us our debts."<sup>19</sup>

Thus the content of Scripture, for Luther, can be properly divided between the two major categories of Law and Gospel. Yet again let the reader beware; just as the vocable "word" can be found in an equivocal manner throughout the writings of Luther, so can the word "Gospel" have more than the nuance just noted. "Gospel" may also denote the entirety of God's revelation to man, whether this be Law or Gospel in the narrow sense of these words. The context must determine for the reader which connotation Luther intends for each

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.; WA 2, 453, 4.

<sup>19</sup> LW 27, 183-184; WA 2, 466, 3.

occurrence of this term.

The Competence of "Ratio" in  
Understanding Scripture

Luther's approach to Scripture demonstrates a keen awareness of the Bible's being a divine collection of writings, intended for the purpose of making men wise unto salvation in Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> But alongside of the assertion that the Scriptures are God's own revelation to man must be placed the contrasting view of the incompetence of ratio, since the Fall, to comprehend things of a spiritual nature [as demonstrated from Luther's theology in Chapter Three above]. How are these two ideas reconciled one to another? Is man's reason at all capable of understanding the content of sacred Scripture since the Fall? The following survey of Luther's words will seek to unveil the Reformer's answers to these questions.

The Nature of Scripture's Language

Scripture is no dark book

Erasmus had been critical of Luther for the latter's reliance upon Holy Scripture without realizing that Scripture needs interpretation and does not interpret itself. The former writer maintained that Scripture is in most of its

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<sup>20</sup>Sasse offers a word of clarification as to the definition of "Scriptures" at the time of Luther, that is worth noting: one must keep in mind that in Luther's era no one in Christendom had a clear conception of what the Holy Scriptures really were; for it was not until the decision of the Council of Trent [held in three sessions--1545-1547; 1551-

passages dark either on account of the language it uses, or because it even contradicts itself for the superficial reader; and for these reasons, Erasmus held that one is compelled to deviate somehow from its literal meaning and must reach a more moderate understanding of Scripture by way of interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

But Luther was not willing to concede to Erasmus the validity of the medieval viewpoint that Scripture was a dark book which needed the interpretation of the church. To be sure, the Reformer asserted the need for the Holy Spirit's involvement, if any part of Scripture was truly to be understood by man. Nevertheless, he contended against Erasmus that in its external perspicuity, the words of Scripture are not at all obscure or ambiguous, but all that is in the Scripture is through the word brought forth into the clearest light and proclaimed to the whole world.<sup>22</sup>

Luther is adamant in his defense of the clarity of Scripture. The reason for his firmness may lie in the inherent danger which Luther finds lurking within the presuppos-

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1552; and 1562-1563] that the antilegomena of the New Testament and the Apocrypha of the Old Testament were made canonical for the Christians under the pope. See "Luther and the Word of God," pp. 85-86.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Desiderius Erasmus, On the Freedom of the Will: A Diatribe or Discourse, trans. and ed. E. Gordon Rupp, in collaboration with A. N. Marlow, in Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 97; also, Sasse, "Luther and the Word of God," p. 66.

<sup>22</sup>BOW, p. 74; WA 18, 609, 12.

ition of those who would take an elitist, philosophical approach to the study of Scripture. Says Luther:

. . . the notion that in Scripture some things are recondite and all is not plain was spread by the godless Sophists . . . who have never yet cited a single item to prove their crazy view; nor can they. And Satan has used these unsubstantial spectres to scare men off reading the sacred text, and to destroy all sense of its value, so as to ensure that his own brand of poisonous philosophy reigns supreme in the church.<sup>23</sup>

On the accessibility of clear words of Scripture to the human mind, Luther fights against two fronts. Against the notion of the Roman Church, that only its interpretation of Holy Writ holds validity, the Reformer's piercing arrows are aimed to protect the church against the philosophical errors of the ungodly. However, Luther must defend his flank from another, equally devastating, assault from the "enthusiasts," who were wont to interpret Scripture in totally free fashion, according to any misguided notions.

Addressing the need to establish right doctrines only by the authority of Scripture, Luther writes:

It is true that we shall not detect the spirits by appeals to learning, life, abilities, majorities, distinction, or to ignorance and lack of education, or numbers, or standing. However, I do not applaud those who take refuge in bragging about the Spirit. I fought last year, and am still fighting, a pretty fierce campaign against those fanatics who subject the Scriptures to the interpretation of their own spirit. On the same account I have thus far hounded the Pope, in whose kingdom nothing is more commonly said or more widely accepted than this dictum: 'the Scriptures are obscure and equivocal; we must seek the interpreting Spirit from the apostolic see of Rome!' No more disastrous words could be spoken; for by this means ungodly men have exalted themselves

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 71; WA 18, 606, 16.

above the Scriptures and done what they like, till the Scriptures were completely trodden down and we could believe and teach nothing but maniacs' dreams.<sup>24</sup>

In both of the extreme positions mentioned above lies a common pitfall: they subject the Scriptures to a human authority, not fully taking into account man's incompetence, since the Fall, to know truth about God's nature and will. For Luther, who recognized the totality of the effect of sin upon man's reason and will [see pages 70-72 above], the subordination of God's revelation of Himself to the "so-called" authority of human reason--whether the interpretation of Scripture be of ancient or modern origin--was a theological error of the most heinous kind.<sup>25</sup> For the Reformer, the problem of understanding Scripture lay not in the written record of God's proclamation to man, but within fallen man himself. Man's reason is no friend of the Gospel [see above, pages 87-89].

#### Problems of language

While Luther sustained his position concerning the natural clarity of the words of Scripture against the view that Scripture was in most passages a "dark" book, he was not unaware of the problems that arise when seeking to determine the meaning of select portions of the Bible which, by their composition, are undeniably "obscure" and difficult to

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 124; WA 18, 652, 35.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. BOW, p. 260; WA 18, 748, 29.

understand. "I certainly grant that many passages [emphasis theirs] in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate," writes Luther, "but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent our knowing all the contents [emphasis theirs] of Scripture."<sup>26</sup>

For the Reformer, the content of Scripture is Christ. "Take Christ from the Scriptures--and what more will you find in them?"<sup>27</sup> The proclamation of the written word about Christ is presented in wondrous clarity; and yet, Luther agrees that some passages remain dark to human understanding. Nevertheless, he contends that to declare the bulk of Scripture "obscure" on the basis of passages which contain words that remain unknown, is not tenable. Assistance in regaining the import of difficult passages is lent by Scripture itself.

If words are obscure in one place, they are clear in another. What God has so plainly declared to the world is in some parts of Scripture stated in plain words, while in other parts it still lies hidden under obscure words. But when something stands in broad daylight, and a mass of evidence for it is in broad daylight also, it does not matter whether there is any evidence for it in the dark. Who will maintain that the town fountain does not stand in the light because the people down some alley cannot see it, while everyone in the square can see it?<sup>28</sup>

The nature of the obscurity of the words of Scripture which Luther identifies cannot fully be perceived unless one

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<sup>26</sup>BOW, p. 71; WA 18, 606, 22.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.; WA 18, 606, 29.

<sup>28</sup>BOW, pp. 71-72; WA 18, 606, 34.

takes into account that the Bible was originally given in ancient languages. The positive influence of the humanism of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries [see pages 40-42 above] seemed to surface in Luther's approach toward the establishment of the most reliable text of Scripture that was possible. The Galatians Commentary (1519) and The Bondage of the Will bear ample testimony of Luther's endeavor to know the text of Scripture on the basis of the Greek and Hebrew languages in which the New and the Old Testaments, respectively, were given.<sup>29</sup>

The mere determination of the actual meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew vocables in Scripture was not the only malady which Luther encountered in seeking a proper interpretation of the texts of the Bible. Grammatical problems also begged conquest. To compound this difficulty, one must also take into account the perplexing connotations being forced into the passages of Scripture by the procedure, common to medieval exegetical practice, of establishing a "fourfold meaning" for the contents of the Bible [see page 48, note 23, above].

These obstacles to the clarity of Scripture do not stem directly from the deficiencies of ratio; rather they are inherent within the texts themselves, by virtue of the task of translating the ideas of one idiom of language into

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<sup>29</sup> An extended example of Luther's disputation with Jerome's commentary on Isaiah 40, on the basis of the Hebrew text, is found in BOW, pp. 243-246; WA 18, 736-738.

another language of another culture--and another era. However, the inadequacy of ratio becomes apparent in yet another aspect of Biblical interpretation: in the understanding of articles which require acceptance by faith.

#### Difficult articles

Luther does not imply that man is able to understand every article of Scripture, in the sense of being capable of grasping each article by logic. Scripture is plain on such doctrines as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and so forth, insofar as they are rendered as statements of fact; but Holy Writ does not need to explain how these things are what they are. Again we are reminded of the Reformer's plea to let God be God. Some things will remain obscure to us because God has chosen not to reveal them in Scripture.<sup>30</sup> Man's comprehension may not exceed God's revelation. In this arena of seeking to know the truth about God's person and works, ratio feels the brunt of its struggle with the blindness of the sinful will, as shall be shown through Luther's distinguishing between the "letter" and the "spirit" of Scripture.

#### The Letter and the Spirit of Scripture

It was shown above [pages 109-111] that, according to the 'external' perspicuity of Scripture, Luther contended that the written word was no dark book, but instead is easily

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<sup>30</sup>Cf. BOW, p. 73; WA 18, 608, 5.



understood by all who read it. This idea must now be contrasted with Luther's concept of the 'internal' perspicuity of the word of God; and, as one might suspect, the 'external' and the 'internal' perspicuity of Scripture are presented by the Reformer as polar opposites. Luther outlines the essential difference:

In a word: The perspicuity [claritas] of Scripture is twofold, just as there is a double lack of light. The first is external, and relates to the ministry of the Word; the second concerns the knowledge of the heart. If you speak of internal [emphasis theirs] perspicuity, the truth is that nobody who has not the Spirit of God sees a jot of what is in the Scriptures. All men have their hearts darkened, so that, even when they can discuss and quote all that is in Scripture, they do not understand or really know any of it. . . .<sup>31</sup>

The critical distinction between the 'external' and the 'internal' clarity of Scripture rests with the working of the Holy Spirit [compare pages 101-103 above]. If the Spirit is impeded in His pursuit to "infuse" faith into the hearts of those giving audience to Scripture, then the words will remain empty. Still better, the words will no longer act in their life-giving mode; for Luther's contrasting of the 'internal' and the 'external' perspicuity of the word, is analogous to the difference between a 'living' and a 'lifeless' word. These comparative analogies are apt, since Luther's primary contention is that, for those who receive the Spirit through the proper vehicle of the word, new life is added. Those who have received enlightenment from the

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.; WA 18, 609, 4.

Holy Spirit are able to see the "spirit" of the word of God, not merely the "letter."

One might, at first, be tempted to press the issue further, by attempting to show an exact correspondence between Luther's contrast of the "letter" and the "spirit" of Scripture, on the one hand, and the distinction of the will's motivation by the "flesh" and the "spirit," on the other. To be sure, a correlation can indeed be found among these concepts, as in both instances the "spirit" connotes God's activity of winning men back from their fallen state--through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit--so that those redeemed might again comprehend God's perfect will, and emulate Him in their own righteous living with one another. But the concepts of "flesh" and "letter" are not so parallel. "Flesh" referred to all aspects of man that are hostile toward the Spirit, and therefore under the condemnation of the Law. However, the "letter" of Scripture may refer not only to things of the law, but to things of the gospel as well. One who reads Scripture may well understand the outward meaning of Christ's death and resurrection (and all other related facts of the gospel), but without the Spirit the words remain only empty symbols to those who live outside of the grace of God. Even worse, those without the Spirit's guidance are unable to discern the true Gospel--that God's grace is given apart from the works of the letter of the Law. For this reason, Luther warns that the "letter" can kill

[compare 2 Corinthians 3:6], since those without the Spirit are deluded into thinking that God's grace is given through works of the Law.<sup>32</sup>

"Ratio" and Method in Biblical Interpretation

The foregoing discussion of Luther's standpoint of Scripture as being the word of God--God's own revelation of Himself through the Gospel--and of the deficiency of ratio in knowing God and His will apart from this revelation, brings focus to the Reformer's intense concern for the proper interpretation of the Bible for any matter of the Christian faith and life. In view of fallen reason's inability to comprehend things of a spiritual nature, Luther consigns to that faculty of man a position of profound subordination to Holy Writ in all aspects of Biblical interpretation.

For Luther, human reason is an extremely poor standard for discerning the truths of Scripture, "for reason, by her inferences and syllogisms, explains and pulls the Scriptures of God whichever way she likes."<sup>33</sup> Not even the authority of the Fathers is to be trusted on the same level as Scripture, since their reason, too, is susceptible to error.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>See LW 27, pp. 312-313; WA 2, 551-552.

<sup>33</sup>BOW, p. 152; WA 18, 673, 8.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. pages 104-106 above; also BOW, p. 97 [WA 18, 630, 14].

Yet, to classify Luther as an "irrationalist"<sup>35</sup> in his approach to Biblical doctrine is unjustifiable. The pages which follow will seek to determine to what extent ratio found employment within Luther's method of Biblical interpretation.

#### Distinction of Law and Gospel

Because Luther saw reason's greatest defect to lie in its utter failure to distinguish properly between the Law and the Gospel [see pages 87-89 above], it is not surprising to find the same theme at the very center of his methodology of Biblical exegesis. Hermann Sasse has found this to be one of the most distinctive features of Luther's new approach to the study of Scriptures in his time [see quotation, page 106-107 above].

The proper distinction between Law and Gospel comprises a main criterion by which Luther judges the validity of any interpretation of Scripture; for, in the first place, those who operate with the "rule of reason" (dictante ratione) as a guide seek, by nature, to use the works of the Law as a means to become justified by God. Such persons are accused by Luther as taking away from men the fear of God and teaching them to be smug, as they foolishly proclaim that their moral works done in accordance with the rule of

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<sup>35</sup>The term "irrationalist" is used here in the sense of one who opposes the use of reason in any aspect of epistemology (how one comes to know).

reason are not sins.<sup>36</sup> This diminishes man's ability to recognize his extreme need of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

This gives occasion for a second point, that in his review of methods of Biblical interpretation, Luther is extremely critical of any opinion which holds that man can be justified by God apart from faith in Christ (that is, the Gospel). In his exposition of Galatians 3:12 ("But the Law does not rest on faith. For he who does them shall live by them."), Luther dismisses the opinions of Jerome, on the basis of the latter's failure to recognize the works of the Law correctly. Whereas Jerome had asserted in his commentary that some virtues existed without faith, Luther contends that this is an impossibility. The Reformer holds that no one is righteous before faith--that even Moses and the prophets lived before God justified and sanctified, even before the Law and the works of the Law were enjoined.<sup>37</sup>

As was noted in the third chapter of the present work [pages 87-88], Luther unleashed his most scathing critique of the competence of ratio for those instances when human reason was allowed to guide theological pursuits at

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<sup>36</sup>LW 27, p. 189; WA 2, 469, 21.

<sup>37</sup>LW 27, p. 259; WA 2, 515. Luther's accusations against Jerome include the charge that Jerome brought his ideas of virtues existing apart from faith into Scripture from an outside source. It seems, to this writer, that the source might have been Aristotle's influential Nichomachean Ethics, which sought to demonstrate that man's innate 'goodness' caused him to strive toward the attainment of the goal of emulating the perfect virtues.

the expense of the Gospel. That the clarity of the Gospel be preserved from all dilution through any method of Biblical exegesis, appears to be the foundation of Luther's modus operandi of interpreting every Bible passage from the viewpoint of solus Christus [see page 48 above]. The Reformer's razor sharp focus on the Gospel is also at the heart of another of his criteria for the correctness of the interpretation of Scripture: the "analogy of faith."

#### The Analogy of Faith

In his reading of the Scriptures in the light of the distinction of Law and Gospel, or any other essential doctrine of the Christian faith, Luther was establishing a basic rule of interpretation that subjected ratio to a more subservient role to the word of God. This rule of Biblical exegesis came to be known as the "analogy of faith" (analogia fidei).<sup>38</sup>

The principle of the "analogy of faith" states in lucid terms that no interpretation of Scripture may be allowed to stand, if it in any way contradicts an article of faith that is clearly established in the word of God. Even more, all valid Biblical exegesis must revolve especially around the chief article of faith: the Gospel proclamation

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<sup>38</sup>Otto Hof contends that Luther himself formulated the term 'analogia fidei' to represent this principle of exegesis, and finds the phrase used repeatedly in Luther's writings; cf. "Luther's Exegetical Principle of the Analogy of Faith," Concordia Theological Monthly 38 (April 1967): 242-257.

that man is justified before God solely through the work and sacrifice of Christ Jesus. If any rendering of a Biblical text contradicts the true message of the Gospel, or any of its related articles, such an interpretation must be totally disregarded as being false.<sup>39</sup>

The 'analogia fidei' was, for Luther, a safeguard against the overly speculative and creative interpretations of Scripture in his day. One must remember that the common method of exegesis in Luther's time was to establish a 'fourfold' interpretation of each text in Scripture: literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical.<sup>40</sup> This procedure often introduced many strange ideas--even heresy--via the liberal use of 'figures' and 'implications' that were drawn from the text. Against Erasmus's habitual finding of such nuances in Scripture, Luther proposed that each passage be interpreted in the most straightforward manner possible. Luther wrote:

Rather let this be our conviction: that no 'implication' or 'figure' may be allowed to exist in any passage of Scripture unless such be required by some obvious feature

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<sup>39</sup>Cf. Ibid.; Hof elucidates this principle further, by noting that the analogy of faith does not, for Luther, set up the church's dogma as the supreme norm over the understanding of Scripture; nor is the analogy of faith subordinate to the tradition of the church, as is still the case today in the Roman Catholic church. Rather, the articles of faith to be used as the guiding norm of Biblical interpretation must themselves be derived from the Scriptures alone. See pp. 247-248 of Hof's article.

<sup>40</sup>The explanation of each of these interpretive categories is given on pages 47-48 above, especially page 48, note 23.

of the words and the absurdity of their plain sense, as offending against an article of faith. Everywhere we should stick to just the simple, natural meaning of the words, as yielded by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech that God has created among men; for if anyone may devise 'implications' and 'figures' in Scripture at his own pleasure, what will all Scripture be but a reed shaken with the wind, and a sort of chameleon? <sup>41</sup>

Luther recognizes that all heresies and errors in handling the Scriptures have come from not regarding the simplicity of the words of the text, and from the creating of figures and implications that come out of men's own heads. This practice had given rise to such heresy as the Arians' making Christ less than God, and the denial of some of Luther's contemporaries that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper.<sup>42</sup> Those kinds of false doctrine Luther sought to repudiate through the use of the analogy of faith as a guiding principle in Biblical exegetical practice, as also he established, by that means, a method of protecting the true articles of faith against the "enthusiasts" of his day [see page 111 above], who played havoc with the dogma of the Christian church through their free lance method of the interpretation of Scripture.

#### Scripture Interprets Scripture

Closely related with the principle of the analogy of faith for the proper interpretation of the Bible is Luther's

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<sup>41</sup>BOW, pp. 191-192; WA 18, 700, 31.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. BOW, p. 192; WA 18, 701, 8; an excellent exposition of Luther's polemic against especially the latter heresy is Hermann Sasse, This is My Body: Luther's Contention



contention that Scripture interprets itself. The Reformer's concern is that the word of God be understood in the clearest explanations possible, rather than to allow the exegete free license to impose upon the Bible any preconceived notions of "doctrine."

Allusion to Luther's proposition of the self-interpreting Scripture has been given on pages 112-114 of the present paper. In those pages, The Bondage of the Will was cited, bearing testimony of the Reformer's thesis that obscure words in one place in Holy Writ are plainly explained in another part of the Bible [compare the quotation rendered on page 113]. However, the principle of Scripture's interpreting itself is broader than merely clearing up obscurities of language. The maxim seeks also to underscore the need for considering the subject-matter and the speaker's intention before postulating a meaning for passages of God's word.<sup>43</sup> Further, seeing the words of Scripture in their context is of primary importance to the proper understanding of any passage. The significance of context refers not only to the text in its immediate setting, but also to the wider scope

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for the Sacrament of the Altar, revised edition (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977). That work also renders an extremely useful analysis of Luther's concept of the use of ratio in theology, based upon writings not under consideration in the present work.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. BOW, pp. 264-265; WA 18, 751, 33; here, Luther takes Erasmus to task for not considering these aspects of the text prior to his giving interpretation to 2 Corinthians 3:6-9.

of the Old and New Testaments; for all must be interpreted in the light of the Gospel proclamation [compare pages 119-121 above].<sup>44</sup>

In his response to the fourfold method of interpreting the word of God, Luther was not seeking to forbid altogether the use of such linguistic devices as allegory to discover the true meaning of the text. Yet neither did he espouse the unlimited employment of such figures in exegetical practice. That the Reformer was aware of many dangers inherent in these procedures has already been mentioned [pages 122-123 above]. Therefore, Luther's approach to let Scripture determine what is allegory, and so forth, was a protection against the abuse of such devices.

To demonstrate Luther's exegetical methodology would take many more pages than are available here. However, one lengthy example in the Galatians Commentary (1519) serves to point out his procedure of looking to the text for clues as to how best to interpret the words of Scripture.<sup>45</sup> In the exposition of Galatians 4:24-31, Luther employs an allegorical method of interpretation. But he does so on the strength of Paul's own words, which proclaim at the beginning of that section of his letter that what he writes is to be taken as an allegory. Luther lets the text dictate how it is to be read: if literal, then literally; if allegory, then

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<sup>44</sup>Cf. BOW, p. 180; WA 18, 692, 17.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. LW 27, pp. 310-324; WA 2, 549-559.

allegorically. This way is the only completely trustworthy way of Biblical interpretation for Luther. To be sure, he mentions that fourfold interpretations lend added ornamentation to the text--and Luther does not forbid their usage in toto; nevertheless, the Reformer contends that no doctrine of faith should be established by them. The fourfold method is not well enough supported by the authority of Scripture.<sup>46</sup>

A word of caution is also given by Luther against the pellmell linking of Biblical passages in order to formulate doctrines. Says the Reformer, "There is, as I have often shown, no easier or commoner failing in dealing with the Scriptures than to bring together diverse passages as if they were alike."<sup>47</sup> The intent of each passage must be studied carefully in order to determine a proper comparison between like thoughts.

Obviously, such methods of Biblical interpretation as are promoted by Luther demand a great deal of the use of human reason. Not only is reason required to comprehend the general sense of language, but also is it a veritable necessity for the analytical comparison of one passage of Scripture with another. The formulation of dogma depends as well on the sanctified use of reason, recognizing from the preceding discussions of this paper that without the activity of the Holy Spirit, such ratio of man is utterly incapable

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<sup>46</sup>LW 27, p. 311; WA 2, 550, 29-35.

<sup>47</sup>BOW, pp. 230-231; WA 18, 728, 6.

of making the determination of right doctrine from Scripture.

One more important aspect of the employment of ratio in Luther's Biblical interpretation must now be considered. That is the topic of the use of logical argument to discern the meaning of Scripture.

#### Logical Reasoning

A serious problem confronts any who would seek to demonstrate an undeniable influence of a particular school of thought upon any other person, regardless of period. The making of such assertions, apart from irrefutable testimony of the subject being studied, is mere speculation. The question presented now straddles the fence line between probable truth, and speculation: Was Luther at all influenced by the methodology of the via moderna in his exegetical process?

Without doubt, the ways of dialectics and rhetoric were of monumental significance to all areas of scholarship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. That dialectics, with its syllogistic procedure from premise to conclusion, and rhetoric, with its emphasis upon persuasive speech and organized thought, were central to the educational institutions of the medieval period, is a fact that no scholar (to this writer's knowledge) would dispute. Similarly, it would appear that no one who has done any extended reading of Luther's works could refute the assertion that the Reformer frequently displays his skills of dialectics, logic, and rhetoric in his discussions of theology--even when that dis-

cussion takes place in the field of Biblical interpretation.

To be sure, all of Luther's warnings against the magisterial use of reason must be kept firmly in place when suggesting that Luther employs logical reasoning in his exegetical method. Scripture is always the supreme authority for any matter of faith and life in the Reformer's exposition of the word of God. Nevertheless, Luther often speaks as a formidable opponent--even to Erasmus's Diatribes--when refuting what he sees to be erroneous conjectures on the part of other commentators on the Bible.

The instances of Luther's use of logic and rhetoric to elucidate the arguments of Scripture are far too numerous to list, even though the current work gains this insight from but three of his writings. Those skills seem too far ingrained in the Reformer's thought, even in the manner of presenting the ideas of God's word in commentary form, for one to read even a few pages without the notice of at least one rhetorical device or logical argument. For the sake of example, however, the selection of Luther's exposition of Galatians 2:11-13 seems apt.<sup>48</sup> The text is rendered in the American edition of Luther's Works thus:

[11] But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. [12] For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. [13] And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>LW 27, pp. 211-216; WA 2, 483-487.      <sup>49</sup>LW 27, 211.

Jerome had taken the position that Paul was being hypocritical against Peter in this instance, since the former had insisted that he circumcise Timothy on account of the Jews who were in those regions [Acts 16:3]. Augustine had established a contrary view of the text, citing Galatians 1:20 ["In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie" --rendering of the American edition of Luther's Works] as proof that Paul could not be acting in a hypocritical manner in this instance, or else Paul would at least be telling an obliging lie; and if this were allowed to stand, the authority of all Scripture would crumble--if in a single passage one thing is said and another thing is meant [a forceful argument indeed!].

Luther finds Augustine's argument the more satisfactory of the two presented, though he sees therein a weakness in Augustine's rendering as "blameworthy" the Greek word for "stood condemned" [kategnosmenos] in verse 11--a minor matter to Luther. The Reformer then sets forth his logical argumentation for the preference of Augustine's position, over that of Jerome: (1) Paul did not reprove Peter for having lived in the manner of the Gentiles, as Jerome thinks (for then he would really have been directing the same reproof against himself, and Jerome's opinion would stand on a solid footing) [Luther here states his antithesis to Jerome's thesis, and establishes the ground on which the argument will take place]; (2) Jerome must have brought to the text a

preconceived notion that deeds done according to the Law are not permissible after Christ's Passion, to have arrived at such a conclusion [Luther analyzes Jerome's conclusion, and states a most likely premise upon which Jerome must have based his opinion]; (3) on the strength of the text, Paul is seen to reprove Peter only for his hypocritical behavior, censuring him for withdrawing and segregating himself from the foods of the Gentiles when the Jews came, and causing the Jews to believe that the ways of the Gentiles were forbidden [Luther states his major premise, that the evidence of the text establishes that Paul censured Peter only for the latter's hypocritical behavior in this instance]; (4) Peter must certainly have been aware of his hypocrisy, as the text goes to lengths to establish that he knew that the things of the Gentiles were unrestricted, by his prior action of eating with them [Luther renders support for the position of his major premise, on the basis of the text, while establishing his minor premise, that surely the text shows that Peter was living in a hypocritical manner]; (5) ergo, Paul's complaint is not that the Jews concurred with respect to food--whether Gentile or Jewish--but that they concurred in Peter's hypocrisy in forcing Gentiles and Jews into Judaism as something that was necessary [Luther draws his conclusion from the first two premises, which he has established from the text, thus declaring his reasoning for disagreeing with the commentary of Jerome on this issue]. The following pages of

Luther's commentary on these passages then continue to give further support of his syllogism, on the basis of the textual language, and of supporting passages, from other portions of Scripture, which are shown to favor Luther's linguistic analyses of the present text.

Does this kind of argumentation demonstrate Luther to be a product of his age? Certainly he shows keen ability in presenting his insights into Scripture with logical precision and great skill. That this method of rhetoric was espoused by proponents of the via moderna in setting forth argument and thought is also undeniable. But these correlations do not prove anything of Luther's dependency upon any particular school of thought for his aptitude for interpreting the Bible. Regardless of where the Reformer learned his skill for logical reasoning, he finds precedent for his reasonable approach to Scripture in the very texts themselves.<sup>50</sup> Yet let the reader take note: Luther's defense throughout the lengthy analysis above was based solely upon the words of the text. Great care seems to have been taken not to fall into the trap of Jerome--that of bringing any preconceived notions into the argument of the passage itself. Luther seeks to prove only what the words of the Scriptures

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, LW 27, p. 264 [WA 2, 518-519], where Luther gives analysis of Galatians 3:13-15 ["Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written: Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree--that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the



seek to prove. This kind of approach to the text of Holy Writ appears uniform throughout the works consulted for the current project. Logical reasoning is employed by Luther only to benefit the process of establishing the answer to the question: What does the text say?

#### Conclusion Concerning Luther's Method of Interpretation

Of Luther's concept of the proper use of ratio within the interpretation of Scripture, then, it can be said that the Reformer found human reason a most cherished gift, indeed, as a God-given tool for understanding and proclaiming God's revelation of Himself to man. However, ratio was held by the Reformer to be always subordinate to the Word of God [here, that term may refer to any of the definitions given on pages 99-101 above]. Luther did not appear to care for the use of speculation when seeking to determine the truths

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Spirit through faith. To give a human example, brethren: no one annuls even a man's will, or adds to it, once it has been ratified--as rendered in that text]: "Let us, therefore, set before our eyes both things: the analogy and the fact itself. Then we shall see with how strong an argument Paul again breaks down the righteousness of the Law. Now the conclusion he wants to draw is this: If righteousness can be acquired of ourselves through the Law and its works, the promise of a blessing made to Abraham is useless, because then we are able to become righteous without it through the Law; or it itself is surely not sufficient to justify if the righteousness of the Law has to be added to it; and thus the testament and promise of God is either superfluous, or it is deficient and requires the addition of something else. Both notions, however, are utterly detestable. Therefore the opposite is true, namely, that the righteousness of the Law is neither necessary nor sufficient. Take note! A very strong argument indeed!"

of Scripture. A rule of thumb for his approach toward the determination of right doctrine, as derived from the careful exegesis of the Bible, might be presented in the same manner in which Luther proposes his method of debate against Erasmus in The Bondage of the Will:

Let it suffice for now . . . that the Scriptures are perfectly clear in their teaching, and that by their help such a defence [sic] of our position may be made that our adversaries cannot resist; and that what cannot be thus defended is not our business, and is of no concern to Christians.<sup>51</sup>

Luther's concept of the ministerial use of reason in the study of Scripture, as suggested by that passage, serves to anticipate the topic for consideration in the next chapter of the present work: Luther's view of the proper place of ratio within the framework of theological discussion, and the responsible formulation of doctrine.

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<sup>51</sup>BOW, p. 133; WA 18, 659, 18.

## CHAPTER V

### LUTHER'S POSITION CONCERNING THE USE OF RATIO IN APPLIED THEOLOGY

#### Luther's Critique of Philosophy as Contrasted with Theology

Noted Luther-scholars have suggested that an important aspect of Luther's theology is his delimiting of the extent to which philosophy might be employed in conversation concerning man's relationship to God.<sup>1</sup> The significance of that task grows all the more, when one considers the extent to which philosophy had come to influence theology between the apostolic age and the time of the Reformation. Chapter One of the current work demonstrated how Augustine, Aquinas, Ockham and Biel had all employed a philosophical methodology in their theological endeavors, especially as they wrestled with the question as to how man might come to know things about God. Jaroslav Pelikan summarizes the extent to which

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<sup>1</sup>This point is shared by so many such scholars, that a full listing of references is not practical. However, an apt quotation on this subject is given in Gerhard Ebeling, Luther: An Introduction to His Thought, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 92: "The task posed by Luther's theology is that of giving a fuller exposition of the relationship between theology and philosophy in the light of his extremely contradictory assertions concerning reason."

philosophy had become a part of applied theology in the sixteenth century, suggesting that as a man in that era, Luther inherited a tradition in which Christianity and philosophy were much more closely intertwined than they are today.

Says Pelikan, ". . . the many Summae of the medieval thinkers bear witness to the fact that there was no eminent theologian in the Middle Ages who was not also at least something of a philosopher, and vice versa."<sup>2</sup> The present chapter will seek to give expression to Luther's distinguishing between the proper--and improper--usage of philosophy (as the exercise of ratio to discover that which is true) within the sphere of theological discussion, and the formulation of right doctrine.

### The Proper Realm of Philosophy

#### Philosophy's area of competency

The passages which uncover Luther's view of philosophy's area of competency (as found in the primary sources under consideration by the current work) are few in number. But a synthesis of those excerpts reveals the fact that the Reformer held for a very limited scope in which philosophy, as a discipline engaging ratio in the pursuit of truth, was free to operate. The most significant of those references can be found in thesis nineteen of the Disputation Concern-

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<sup>2</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 3.

ing Man: "But as this life is, such is the definition and knowledge [cognitio] of man, that is, fragmentary, fleeting, and exceedingly material."<sup>3</sup> This passage appears to intimate that man's certain knowledge (referring to unregenerate man) is limited to the realm of the empirical. Any meaningful knowledge which can be possessed through human contemplation must find its basis only in what can be perceived by the outward senses.<sup>4</sup> If that premise is true, then that which could be said of Luther's concept of the limitations of ratio in knowing truth [compare pages 67-70 above] applies also to his view of the competency of philosophy. Especially things which concern God are always beyond the scope of man's grasp, and if anything is to be known about God's nature and will, it must be given via outside revelation.

Thesis nineteen of the Disputation seems to indicate Luther's acceptance of a Nominalistic critique of that which can be known through philosophy. The Reformer's limiting of certitude to the observable and the experiential, seems to establish a correlation between Luther's understanding of a 'valid' philosophy, and the epistemology of the tradition ala

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<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols., gen. eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), 34:138 (hereafter cited as LW); Martin Luther, D. Martin Luther's Werke (Weimar: H. Boehlau, 1883-), 39 I:176 (hereafter cited as WA).

<sup>4</sup>This writer finds justification, in the passage cited, for Paul Althaus's holding for the same contention; cf. The Theology of Martin Luther, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 62.

Ockham and Biel, in which Luther was educated. Abstract cognition was not thought to bear any large degree of certitude among the followers of Ockham [see the discussion on pages 26-27 above]. Abstractive ideas dealt only with things that probably exist, and were not trustworthy to the same degree which could be said of those things that were demonstrable via empirical evidence.

Luther's limitations on that which can be known through philosophical inquiry established a clear boundary between reason and revelation as sources of truth. Applied reason could comprehend only the mundane things concerning man's own existence, whereas, the revelation which comes to man from without knows truths of a broader scope. If one is permitted to deduce from statements in the Disputation fragment (against theses thirteen and fourteen), it becomes evident that Luther believed that the Gentiles [in this context, "Gentiles" apparently means "unenlightened men," before such have come to receive faith through God's revelation] are able to discern that God exists, but that they are not capable of knowing anything of substance about Him.<sup>5</sup> This delimitation of the competence of philosophy is entirely consistent with

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<sup>5</sup>LW 34, p. 140 [WA 39 I, 177]: "Those who know God also know their own efficient cause. But the Gentiles have known God. Therefore, the Gentiles have also known their own efficient cause. By logical consequence, therefore, it is mistakenly asserted in the thirteenth and fourteenth argument that human reason and philosophy do not know the efficient cause of man. I prove the minor premise: The Gentiles knew God, but they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him [Romans 1:21]. Objection: They have indeed known God, but

Luther's concept of ratio since the Fall of man [compare above, especially pages 73-75, 85-86, 105]. In fact, the Reformer's primary criterion for setting limits on the use of philosophy in theological discussion is, apparently, the recognition that philosophy does not take into account the fallen state of mankind.

### Improper anthropology

According to Luther, philosophy fails in its task to determine truths about God, and man's relationship to Him, because it knows nothing of "theological man" (Theologico homine).<sup>6</sup> The scope of philosophy is limited to that which can be deduced through reflection about things that are perceivable in this world; and since human wisdom does not take into account man in his fallen condition, it renders an inaccurate picture of the creation and of the creator.<sup>7</sup> Hence, philosophy's improper anthropology is wont to render falsehood instead of truth. Says Luther:

Therefore let those people who have learned from the tree of Porphyry and from the teachings of Aristotle and other philosophers how to praise, boast of, and love rational

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not as creator. Explanation: Yes, to know God is indeed something else than to know that he is the creator of all things. For the most excellent knowledge of God is to know that he has created all things.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. LW 34, p. 139, a. 28 [WA 39 I, 176]: "So also, of those who introduce Aristotle (who knows nothing of theological man) to witness that reason aspires to the best things;"

<sup>7</sup>Cf. LW 34, p. 138, a. 13 and 14; WA 39 I, 175; these articles are fully quoted in note 11, page 140, below.

man and then to trust in their own precepts and to justify their own counsels--let them see how well their wisdom savors of the truth of God, which allots everything human to falsehood, vanity, and destruction.<sup>8</sup>

Luther's writings also indicate that the difference in opinion concerning the anthropology of philosophy and of theology is not, simply, that philosophy tends to see man in a more positive light than does theology. Descriptions of some philosophers, instead of acknowledging man and his attributes as a gift from God, portray man in far lesser terms. Luther notes the terminology of various men, who have ascribed to "man" the distinctions "chaos" (Plato), "vacuum" (Leucippus), and "infinite" (Aristotle).<sup>9</sup> Not seeing man as theological man, philosophy often misses the point as to the real meaning and worth of man as the crown of God's creation.<sup>10</sup>

A further flaw in philosophy's view of man rests in its limited concept of life itself. Natural philosophy is not capable of seeing beyond the present world; hence, it has

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<sup>8</sup>LW 27, p. 181; WA 2, 464, 24-31.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Luther, On the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of "De Servo Arbitrio" (1525), Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam, trans. and ed. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (United States: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1957), p. 266 (hereafter cited as BOW); WA 18, 752, 25.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. LW 34, p. 138, a. 20 and 21 [WA 39 I, 176]: "[20] Theology to be sure from the fulness of its wisdom defines man as whole and perfect: [21] Namely, that man is a creature of God consisting of body and a living soul, made in the beginning after the image of God, without sin, so that he should procreate and rule over the created things, and never die, . . ."



a terminal vision of things as they are, and does not grasp the immortality that God bestows upon man--nor, most significantly, does philosophy know anything of the gift of eternal life that is given only through the Son of God, Jesus Christ, to all who believe in Him.<sup>11</sup> In The Bondage of the Will, Luther points to experience as lending validity to that assertion:

Look at experience; see what the most distinguished minds among the nations have thought of the future life and the resurrection. Is it not a fact that the more distinguished their minds were, the more ridiculous the resurrection and eternal life was to them? Or were not those philosophers and Greeks at Athens, who called Paul a 'babbler' and a 'setter forth of strange gods' when he taught these things (Acts 17.18), men of mind? Porcius Festus in Acts 24 (26.24) cried out that Paul was mad because of his preaching of eternal life. What of Pliny's yapping about these matters in his seventh book? What of Lucian, that great wit? Were these stupid men? To this day, it is true of most men that the greater their wit and learning, the more they deride this article, and that openly, thinking it a fable. For no man on earth, unless imbued with the Holy Ghost, ever in his heart knows of, or believes in, or longs for, eternal salvation, even if he harps upon it by tongue and pen.<sup>12</sup>

From this excerpt, one can also determine the distinctive feature of Luther's understanding of the proper sphere of theology: the radical difference in its source of knowledge, as distinct from philosophy.

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<sup>11</sup>LW 34, p. 138, a. 13 and 14 [WA 39 I, 175]: "[13] For philosophy does not know the efficient cause for certain, nor likewise the final cause, [14] Because it posits no other final cause than the peace of this life, and does not know that the efficient cause is God the creator." Cf. LW 34, p. 138, a. 23 [WA 39 I, 176]: "[Man] can be freed and given eternal life only through the Son of God, Jesus Christ (if he believes in him)."

<sup>12</sup>BOW, pp. 139-140; WA 18, 663, 27.

## The Proper Sphere of Theology

Epistemology

The epistemology [the process of how one comes to know] of philosophy had as its source of truth (according to Luther) man's capability to make deductions based upon things which he was able to observe with his senses. Beyond these demonstrative truths, little else could be known via philosophical speculation; and what additional theories man derived from such speculation was, at best, only probable "truth" [see pages 136-137 above]. Therefore, theological articles of faith lay outside the scope of philosophy's competency.

If anything more is to be known of things which transcend the observable and the demonstrative--and, certainly, this is the focus of concern for theology, which seeks to know all that can be known about God--such truth must come to man from without [see pages 73-76 above]. And Luther's assertion that God has deliberately chosen, in some things, to remain hidden from man's reason [compare pages 83-84 above], makes the need for a reliable source of outside truth all the more essential to the task of theology.

Luther finds that outside source of truth in God's own revelation of Himself to man. The Word of God [Christ and the Scriptures] acts as that vehicle of the Holy Spirit which enlightens man's thinking to include truths not available to it via the observable creation. As Chapter Four of

the current work has established, Luther contended for the primacy of Scripture as the supreme source of God's revealed knowledge. But although this view is consistently present throughout all three of the primary sources under consideration in these pages, Luther's educational background lends evidence that such was not always the case for him. The study of Biel, while in the Erfurt monastery, would have put Luther in contact with the inconsistency in theological authority so prevalent in those days of eclecticism [see pages 29-31 above]. As in the case of Biel, it was not rare for a theologian to hold for Scripture's being the sole source of truth for articles of faith, while at the same time allowing the dogma of the church to enjoy an equal honor--especially in the instance of papal decrees. [The "tradition" of the Roman church was not officially declared to be on equal footing with Scripture as authoritative for doctrine and practice, until the Council of Trent, session IV.] This disagreement in the view of epistemology, it would appear, was at the center of any doctrinal controversy within the Christian church; and key to one's method of determining theological truth is the understanding of the limitations (if any) that should be placed on human reason within that exercise. For this reason, the noting of Luther's point of view in delimiting the competency of ratio to know things that are true is critically important, if one is to understand the basis of his many criticisms of false doctrine within the

church of the sixteenth century.

As in philosophy, which has always been a field in which not one, but several views concerning the proper source of truth have contended for supremacy, so also is the case in theology. Luther was well aware that not all theologians shared his position that Scripture alone was to be the norm for all true doctrine and right practice in the Christian church. Moreover, the Reformer demonstrates in the Bondage of the Will that he realized that this struggle had been raging since the time of Christ . . . and beyond.<sup>13</sup> Also, the Reformer acknowledged the fact that the differences in epistemology for theology--as distinct from philosophy--tended to place theology on a more suspect foundation than systems based on human reason were willing to allow. For this reason, Luther notes in the Galatians Commentary (1519) that even Paul preferred to call faith a persuasion, "because it is something that cannot be demonstrated unless you believe

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<sup>13</sup>BOW, pp. 129-131 [WA 18, 656-657]; in this excerpt, Luther shows how people through the ages have shut off their common sense, when confronted with the clarity of Scripture, so as to defend, stubbornly, their own presuppositions. Among the examples given are: Christ silencing the Sadducees [Matthew 22] by proving the resurrection of the dead with a Scripture quotation from Exodus, while they continued to oppose Him; Stephen spoke on Luke's testimony [Acts 6], but his audience continued to resist him; John Hus preached against the Pope from Matthew 16, demonstrating that the Pope and his men are not the church of which Christ speaks, but the authorities burnt him instead of abandoning their views; and Luther himself refutes the notions concerning 'free-will' by the clear teachings of Scripture, yet his opponents vigorously reject his statements.

the one who is persuading you; for faith does not tolerate the quarrels of the sophists."<sup>14</sup>

A critical distinction:  
Law and Gospel

The most critical point of disagreement between theology and philosophy that is found throughout Luther's writings, is the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. As was shown in the general discussion concerning Luther's condemnatory allegations against the use of ratio in matters having to do with man's relationship with God [see pages 87-89 above], so is Luther's main contention against the knowledge of philosophy that it is unable to comprehend the grace of God and the Gospel proclamation.<sup>15</sup>

For defense of his assertion that, above all, the purity of the Gospel must be preserved at all cost to reasonability and rational argument, Luther needed look only to Paul's letter to the Galatians:

Therefore let us say confidently with Paul: "Damned and accursed be every doctrine from heaven, from earth, or from whatever source it is brought--every doctrine that teaches us to trust in works, righteousness, and merits other than those that belong to Jesus Christ." And by saying this we are not being insolent toward the popes

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<sup>14</sup>LW 27, p. 339; WA 2, 569, 17-19.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Pelikan, Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 4, where that writer asserts that Luther repudiated the systems of the medieval thinkers because of what they had done to free grace, and not principally because of what they had done with Aristotle. On page 11 of that same work, Pelikan posits that what Luther most passionately feared was a repetition of the medieval error by which Aristotelian philosophy had been permitted to obscure the Gospel.

and the successors of the apostles; we are being dutiful and truthful toward Christ. For one must prefer Him to them; and if they should refuse to allow this, we must shun them altogether as being anathema.<sup>16</sup>

Philosophy, like fallen reason itself, was seen by Luther as being legalistic in nature. The Reformer cataloged the kind of righteousness espoused by Aristotle and other philosophers, as being a righteousness that came only through works of the Law, and by habit.<sup>17</sup> But true theology finds man's righteousness only in the merits of Christ, bestowed upon man through the faith given by the Holy Spirit. That these two approaches to reconciliation with God stand contrary to one another is self evident. The way of philosophy is based upon the conclusions of human reason, whereas the way of true theology is founded in faith.

The proper sphere of theology (in contrast to philosophy), then, is centered especially in the pursuit of the pure Gospel; for only as man receives this Gospel through the Holy Spirit's activity in Word and sacrament, is he enabled to see the truth about his relationship with God. The source of this truth lies outside of man's own intellect and ratio; hence, theology contributes to his knowledge of that which is true, by expounding the content of God's revelation of Himself to mankind.

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<sup>16</sup>LW 27, p. 179; WA 2, 462, 29-34.

<sup>17</sup>LW 27, p. 219; WA 2, 489; this reference is fully rendered in English on page 89, note 65, above.

## Against Joining Philosophy with Theology

Gerhard Ebeling has taken the position that Luther represents not merely an antithesis between philosophy and theology in general, but of good and bad theology--of true theology and pseudo-theology.<sup>18</sup> On the basis of the previous discussion above, this writer finds Ebeling's statement an agreeable one. Understood as defined by Luther's writings, philosophy, as such, was not guilty of spreading only false statements; to entertain this kind of idea about man's ability to deduce truths about his life and environment via empirical evidence would be ludicrous. "Good" theology takes into consideration reason's capability to discern truth based upon experience and the observable. "Bad" theology (pseudo-theology), on the other hand, fails to grasp the inherent limitations of human reason to know of truths which lie beyond the perceivable world and life.

Luther had seen that the church had lost sight of Christ and the pure Gospel, because some were preoccupied with Aristotle's philosophy--a system which did not clearly distinguish between the demonstrably provable and that which can be known only through the outside revelation of God.<sup>19</sup> According to the Reformer, not a few theologians and jurists sometimes followed monstrous opinions (monstra sententiarum)

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<sup>18</sup>Luther: An Introduction to His Thought, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Brian Albert Gerrish, Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 33.

instead of the familiar doctrine of the church (domestica ecclesiae doctrina).<sup>20</sup> Erasmus himself, it is charged by Luther, was guilty of treating Christian doctrines as no better than the views of human philosophers, choosing to argue that it was stupid to wrangle and fight and assert concerning such doctrines, because doing so only resulted in bad feelings and in a disruption of outward peace.<sup>21</sup>

Where any philosophical point is in conflict with the word of God, Luther would contend that true theology is under obligation to dispute against the joining of philosophy with theology to the extreme. To do such was not merely for the sake of winning an argument; rather, at stake was the Gospel itself . . . and that destructive result was, for the Reformer, not only a possibility, but a foregone reality within the church. In the Galatians Commentary (1519), it is noted that Paul's theology of salvation by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith had vanished entirely in some circles, and could not be understood by those who declared falsely that Aristotle's ethics were entirely in accord with the doctrine of Christ and of Paul. On this point, Luther says:

For our righteousness looks down from heaven and descends to us. But those godless men have presumed to ascend

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<sup>20</sup>LW 27, p. 248; WA 2, 508, 29-31; here, one must read the "familiar doctrine of the church" as doctrine that has rightly been deduced from Scripture (and not such as is contrary to the word of God), since Luther has no qualifying, nor condemnatory, remarks concerning those teachings in the passage noted.

<sup>21</sup>BOW, pp. 69-70; WA 18, 605, 15.



into heaven by means of their righteousness and from there to bring the truth which has arisen among us from the earth.<sup>22</sup>

Luther's position concerning the joining of philosophy with theology, then, is that a clear distinction must be made between the kind of knowledge that is appropriate to each sphere of inquiry. The speculations of philosophy must not in any way interfere with the articles of faith that are regarded as truth in theology. For example, Luther's words concerning the right understanding of the righteousness that can come to man only through faith:

For those men should be kept far away from Holy Writ who, with distinctions drawn from their own brains [cerebro], bring into theology various kinds of righteousness and say that one is ethical, that another is the righteousness of faith, and speak of I know not what other kinds. By all means let the state have its own righteousness, the philosophers their own, and everyone his own. But here [Galatians 2:21] one must take righteousness in the Scriptural sense; and the apostle says plainly that this righteousness does not exist except through faith in Jesus Christ . . . .<sup>23</sup>

For Luther, the key question which calls for a strict cleavage between philosophy and theology is of a soteriological nature.<sup>24</sup> His concern for the use of philosophy with theology is, above all, that men might be saved through the proclamation of right theology. Luther aptly paraphrases the words of Psalm 51:13 ["Then I will teach transgressors

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<sup>22</sup>LW 27, p. 225; WA 2, 493, 8-14.

<sup>23</sup>LW 27, p. 240; WA 2, 503, 23-28.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Gerrish, Grace and Reason, pp. 55-56; this reference also cited on page 69 above.

Thy ways, And sinners will be converted to Thee"--NASB]:

[That passage] is as if [the psalmist] were saying: "Let me not, I pray, teach the ways of men and the doctrines of our own righteousness, since thereby they will not be converted to Thee but will be turned farther away from Thee. . . ." <sup>25</sup>

Those words truly sound forth Luther's focus of the entire realm of the theological pursuit of truth.

The Employment of "Ratio" in  
Theological Discussion

Defense by Reason

If the statement is true, that Luther would contend that true theology is under obligation to dispute against any point which is in conflict with the word of God (that might imperil the Gospel) [see page 147 above], then the question arises as to what extent ratio is to be employed in such defense of doctrine (polemics and apologetics).<sup>26</sup> On this subject, two passages from The Bondage of the Will (which is perhaps Luther's most significant "apologetic" work) are especially noteworthy. On the one hand, Luther says:

So one of the main reasons why the words of Moses and Paul are not taken in their plain sense [by the Diatribel] is their 'absurdity'. But against what article of faith does that 'absurdity' transgress? And who is offended

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<sup>25</sup>LW 27, p. 185; WA 2, 466, 34-37.

<sup>26</sup>This writer defines 'polemics' as that aspect of applied theology which is concerned with the defense of right doctrine within the realm of the Christian church, and 'apologetics' in the narrow sense of the term--that of making a so-called "scientific" defense of the basic tenets of the Christian faith to those who stand outside of the Christian faith.

by it? It is human reason that is offended; which, though it is blind, deaf, senseless, godless, and sacrilegious, in its dealing with all God's words and works, is at this point brought in as judge of God's words and works! On these same grounds you will deny all the articles of faith, for it is the highest absurdity by far--foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling-block to the Jews, as Paul says [compare 1 Corinthians 1:23]--that God should be man, a virgin's son, crucified, sitting at the Father's right hand. It is, I repeat, absurd [emphasis theirs] to believe such things! So let us invent some figures with the Manichaeans, and say that he is not truly man, but a phantom who passed through the virgin like a ray of light through glass, and then fell, and so was crucified! This would be a fine way for us to handle the Scriptures! 27

In this quotation, Luther contends against the use of reason in theological debate, since that human faculty is unable to comprehend articles of faith which are based upon Scripture as the supreme authority for determining truth. As the Reformer notes, human reason finds such articles absurd, and is wont to rewrite them according to its own standpoint. To engage in such practice is, for Luther, an abominable way to "do" theology. Faith must always take precedence over reason in theological endeavors.

In light of the excerpt given above, justification can be found for conclusions which find Luther critical of the validity of 'Christian apologetics.'<sup>28</sup> Faith cannot be proved, in the same sense that philosophical methodology seeks to "prove" its arguments on the basis of experience

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<sup>27</sup>BOW, p. 201 [WA 18, 707, 19]; cf. pp. 69 and 76 of the present work.

<sup>28</sup>See Siegbert W. Becker, "Luther's Apologetics," Concordia Theological Monthly 29 (October 1958):742-759.

and observable evidence. But to push such a condemnation of apologetics to the extreme, suggesting that Luther had absolutely no place in his theology for making defense of the truth claims of Christianity, is without warrant. Indeed, the entire writing on The Bondage of the Will shows demonstrably that Luther had precious much to say in defense of the doctrine of Scripture. Specifically, Luther writes:

To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all. (Now, lest we be misled by words, let me say here that by 'assertion' I mean staunchly holding your ground, stating your position, confessing it, defending it and preserving it unvanquished. . . .) <sup>29</sup>

In this second passage, Luther makes a strong a case for the validity of a Christian apologetic, even within his own view against the improper joining of philosophy with theology.

In the final analysis, then, is Luther for, or against, a reasonable defense of the Christian faith? This writer finds the proper answer in the synthesis of Luther's ideas, as rendered by Paul Althaus. As that writer surveys Luther's arguments against Erasmus in The Bondage of the Will he notes that Luther uses philosophy and natural reason to provide secondary proof for theological theses. However, that remains a secondary and peripheral addition to his method.<sup>30</sup> Therein lies the key to Luther's view of the proper

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<sup>29</sup> BOW, p. 66; WA 18, 603, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Theology of Luther, p. 4.

employment of reason in applied theology: as long as reason remains subordinate to Scripture in all aspects of theological practice, it may be used to its fullest extent as a gift of God.

### Speculation

Within the presentation of Chapter Three of the current work [pages 68-69], mention was made of Luther's aversion to speculation, when approaching matters of theology. There the apt quotation "What is above us does not concern us" was shown to be a basic rule for the Reformer's procedure of relating truths concerning God.<sup>31</sup> Speculation about things which God has not revealed to man (beyond the empirical) does not yield any certain truths.

Yet, Jaroslav Pelikan comments: "In general [Luther] regarded philosophy as dangerous; and yet, when the occasion seemed to demand it, he was not at all averse to philosophical speculation."<sup>32</sup> What situations might occasion Luther to employ philosophical speculation within the framework of his applied theology? The Reformer's writings give indication that, when involved in controversy, Luther's general way was to meet his opponents on their own ground; if they were to attack with the weapon of philosophical argument, he would parry by showing--via logic and philosophical specula-

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<sup>31</sup>See above, page 68; cf. BOW, p. 170; WA 18, 685, 7.

<sup>32</sup>Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 10.

tion--the weaknesses in the statements of his adversaries.<sup>33</sup>  
 A clear example of this method is found in Luther's debate with Erasmus concerning the problem of evil.

Against Erasmus's Diatribes Luther takes up the query as regards by what means God is said to work evil in man. A word of introduction concerning such speculative inquiry seems appropriate to the Reformer:

We should in any case be content with the words of God, and simply believe what they say; for the works of God are wholly indescribable. However, to humour reason (that is, human folly), I do not mind aping its stupidity and foolishness and seeing if I can make any impression on it by my own broken words on this subject.<sup>34</sup>

Luther then proceeds to his argumentation, by establishing basic premises which even reason and the Diatribes had to accept: namely, that God works all in all, and that without Him nothing is effected nor effective--by definition of His omnipotence. Once these foundations are in place, the Reformer's argumentation follows a brilliant line of thought: (1) Satan and man, being fallen and abandoned by God, cannot will good; (2) but their will's turning away from God cannot have turned itself into nothing, since they ever remain part of God's creation; (3) as part of God's creation, man's will remains subject to God's omnipotence and action [by virtue of the agreed definition of God's actions, at the outset of the

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. James I. Packer, "Luther Against Erasmus," Concordia Theological Monthly 37 (April 1966):207-221.

<sup>34</sup>BOW, p. 203; WA 18, 709, 6.

argument]; (4) therefore, God must move and work of necessity even in Satan and the ungodly; but since they are evil and corrupt, God must work through them such as they are; (5) ergo, although God is not the cause of evil (since it is against His nature to act evilly Himself), he can be said to work evil insofar as He works through evil instruments!<sup>35</sup>

#### Devices of Logic

That Luther was no mere novice in his use of logic within his theological method has been shown [Chapter Four, pages 127-132 above]. In fact, in those writings with which the present work is concerned, the Reformer demonstrates adeptness in formulating highly persuasive argument. Listing instances of Luther's usage of logical devices is a task that would be tedious for both reader and writer alike. But in the interest of demonstrably proving the assertion that the Reformer makes use of such argument, a few examples shall be given [the following examples are excerpted from The Bondage of the Will]: (1) Luther finds a most essential fault in Erasmus's argument for 'free-will,' in that the latter has failed to adequately define the term--the definition fails to cover the thing defined;<sup>36</sup> (2) Luther places Erasmus on

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<sup>35</sup>BOW, pp. 203-204 [WA 18, 709-710]; it is in this reference that Luther makes a well-known analogy concerning a man who rides a horse with only three, or two, good feet--his riding corresponds with what the horse is, which means that the horse goes badly, but this is not the rider's fault.

<sup>36</sup>BOW, p. 137; WA 18, 662, 12.

the horns of a dilemma, forcing a decision between the assertion that the great scholars and martyrs of the church (who held that the Scriptures were clear) were to be admired for their skill in the sacred writings, or the statement that the Scriptures are not clear;<sup>37</sup> (3) Luther reduces Erasmus's argument--that because God promises a reward to those who keep His commandments, therefore man must have the 'free-will' to accomplish them--to the absurd statement "The prize is set before all in the race; therefore, all can run and obtain it," and so forth;<sup>38</sup> (4) Luther associates Erasmus's position with that of the Pelagians, who were noted for the heresy that man's will was not at all corrupted by the Fall of man;<sup>39</sup> (5) Luther employs a rule of logic that a conditional statement asserts nothing indicatively, as "if the devil be God, he is deservedly worshipped"; or, "if an ass flies, an ass has wings"; or, "if there be 'free-will', [sic] grace is nothing".<sup>40</sup>

In each of these examples, Luther employs various devices of logic and rhetoric, in order to gain advantage over his opponent in the debate at hand. The devices appear not to be meant to prove the meaning of the texts of Scrip-

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<sup>37</sup>BOW, pp. 134-135; WA 18, 661.

<sup>38</sup>BOW, p. 181; WA 18, 693, 19.

<sup>39</sup>BOW, pp. 140-141; WA 18, 664, 14.

<sup>40</sup>BOW, p. 151; WA 18, 672, 33.



ture, which are his most important line of defense; but in their usage, Luther seeks to weaken the argumentation of his adversary, to make way for the acceptance of his exposition of the meaning of those Biblical passages that support his theological standpoint.

#### Philosophical Language

The writings of Luther that are under survey in the present work, indicate his frequent usage of terminology and categories from the realm of philosophy. However, in recognition of his adamant position of defending the purity of the Gospel against the perversion of philosophical method, it hardly seems likely that the Reformer was intent on employing the distinctions of philosophy as proof for theological assertions. If the present writer might be allowed to speculate on this matter, it would appear that evaluating Luther's applied theology in light of his historical context is of importance; for one must remember that the predominant way of theological method in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, was one which had not divorced theology from philosophy. In order for Luther to make the most of his argumentation within that setting, therefore, it seems likely that by the use of such terminology he was again meeting the opposition on its own ground, clearing the way for his exposition of Scripture.

Such seems the case in the instance of Luther's mention of the philosophical controversy over the validity of

"universals" within the Galatians Commentary (1519).<sup>41</sup>

In that reference, he shows his familiarity with the ongoing debates of his time, while at the same time demonstrating that all the uproar concerning the validity of "universals" was not of significance for the proper understanding of the text of Scripture. In so doing, Luther seems also to employ another device of logic, in undermining any argument against his exposition of the text through anticipating objections that his opponents might raise, thus stealing away the force of their assertions to the contrary.

Therefore, Luther's employment of philosophical language in applied theology appears to have a twofold purpose: first, that he might demonstrate his cognizance of the position of other theologians and philosophers on the matters being discussed, and secondly, that by mentioning such ideas, he might show their irrelevancy toward trying to disprove the clear import of Scripture toward the development of true doctrine. To this twofold purpose, Pelikan might also add a third, stating, ". . . it is significant that when the opinions of ancient philosophers, dramists, or poets seemed to coincide with his own, Luther was perfectly willing to cite

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<sup>41</sup>LW 27, p. 390 [WA 2, 604, 9-11]: ". . . And would that the Thomists, the Scotists, and the moderns would thus settle their question whether universals are real things or are terms predicated indifferently of real things! Man is man. Flesh is flesh. Flesh has never done anything that similar flesh would not do wherever God did not make a distinction."

such opinions as evidence."<sup>42</sup>

#### Limitations

This chapter of the present work has established that Luther was not altogether intolerant in the use of ratio in applied theology, even as ratio might be used in a manner in some ways consistent with philosophy. Human reason was seen to remain a gift from God, which enables man to infer truths based upon what can be observed and experienced. It has also been shown in the preceding pages, that reason was held to be incompetent in matters of faith: that such truths as lay outside the realm of the empirical were dependent upon the revelation from God, if man was to know articles of faith with any certitude.

As Luther considers the propriety of coupling philosophical method with theological defense and investigation, he establishes clear limitations as being essential before any such co-operative endeavor can take place. Above all do the mottos "Let God be God" [pages 67-70 above] and "Sola Scriptura" [pages 104-106 above] hold places of prominence in Luther-an theology. A shining example of these guidelines in action is found in the Galatians Commentary (1519), where the Reformer expostulates the meaning of Paul's words of Galatians 3:5-7.<sup>43</sup> In that place, Luther asserts that Paul

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<sup>42</sup>Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup>LW 27, pp. 251-253; WA 2, 510-511; the Biblical

does not follow the rules of logical argumentation in making the point, that the righteous are made such apart from any similarity of action (or ancestry) with Abraham--that only the Spirit's action brings the grace of God to men. The Reformer surmises that the formulation "Abraham believed; therefore those who are of faith are the children of Abraham" simply does not stand up to logical analysis.

Luther's point appears to be this: that truths given to man via God's revelation must not be expected to square with human reason or logic. Some things exceed man's grasp, and are better left for faith to take hold, rather than for ratio to gain the upper hand. Above all, reason must yield to the incomprehensible nature of the Gospel. Especially at this point, Luther is apt to quote Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elements of the world, and not according to Christ."<sup>44</sup> Here again we see that Luther's primary concern is, above all else, of a soteriological nature. That concern is reflected in his stern words against Erasmus:

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passage is rendered in that location: "[5] Does He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the Law or by hearing with faith? [6] Just as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. [7] So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham."

<sup>44</sup>LW 27, p. 285; WA 2, 533. 12-13.

Your craft and cunning may gain forbearance in secular matters, but in a theological discussion, where plain straightforward truth is required, for the salvation of souls, it is supremely objectionable and intolerable.<sup>45</sup>

Here, this writer allows Luther to have that last word on the matter of his own theological guidelines for the use of reason and philosophy in matters that concern man's relationship with God.

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<sup>45</sup>BOW, p. 221; WA 18, 721, 31.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Martin Luther lived in a time when the Copernican revolution in the field of astronomy still lay in the future; and yet, as Brian Gerrish suggests, Luther gave rise to a 'Copernican Revolution' of his own--in the field of theology. According to Gerrish, Luther's great achievement was, above all else, his substitution of a God-centered Christianity for the man-centered religion of the Schoolmen of the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> That summation of Luther's approach to Biblical theology is apt, especially when considering the topic of the present work. The preceding pages have offered a survey of the Reformer's understanding of the proper use of ratio within the realm of theological method and discourse; and what has been shown as the focal point throughout that discussion was Luther's keen awareness of man's relationship to God since the Fall. Those who had seen no apparent contradiction between the truth claims of philosophy and theology had not (in Luther's view) taken seriously enough the magnitude of sin's effect upon mankind; and because of that major error

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<sup>1</sup>Brian Albert Gerrish, Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 2.

in judgment, the theologians of the Middle Ages had developed a system of thought which had placed reasonable speculation on the same plain of authority with God's revelation.

Luther's primary concern over the marriage of philosophy with theology was of a soteriological nature. The theologians of his era had brought the man-centered presuppositions of philosophical speculation to bear upon the very word of God: and all to the detriment of the saving proclamation of the Gospel. Allowing fallen ratio the privilege of guiding man's thoughts about God, was bound to bring about the total removal of the Gospel [salvation by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith alone] from its pivotal position as the very heart of the Christian proclamation. Although human reason remains, even since the Fall in Eden, as a gift from God--and man's highest attribute, distinguishing him from the animal kingdom of the creation--it, too, has suffered the dire consequences of man's sin. Corrupted by the self-centered essence of sin, reason distorts the image it has of God, and of man's relationship to Him. Thinking his situation before God not to be as serious as the Scriptures proclaim, unregenerate man stands as an enemy of the Gospel, desiring to rely upon works of the Law to make his relationship with God right again. That God should have to take up the task of reconciling man to Himself solely by His efforts (especially by way of a cross) is the ultimate absurdity to fallen reason. This Luther seemed to know more than anyone

else at his time.

Of course, even in Luther-an theology, reason has its place. Those who would accuse Luther of irrationalism do not take into consideration the profound use of reason that is prevalent throughout the works under consideration in the current thesis. In Chapter Five, Luther's widespread use of reasonable argumentation as a secondary proof for the doctrine of Scripture was outlined. However, in that section careful distinctions were drawn between the "epistemology" of philosophy and theology. It appears that Luther held a "nominalistic" evaluation of that which can be known through philosophy: that man is able to know with certitude only that which is empirical, that is, gathered through observation and experience. For theology, God's revelation of Himself to man must remain the ultimate standard of truth; for God is able to reveal more to man than the latter is capable of determining through introspection and observation.

In the same vein, Chapter Four surveyed Luther's critique of reason's competence in the realm of Biblical interpretation. Even in this sphere of theological inquiry, ratio serves a useful purpose; for God has made revelation of Himself in such a way as intelligible to human reason, through the use of human language that in its basic proclamation is clearly understood by the human mind. Yet, there are certain articles of faith that remain incomprehensible to ratio, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the Real Presence



in the Lord's Supper, and (especially) the Gospel itself. Luther did not attempt to explain such articles of faith; nor did he find much use for speculation about things which God has not directly revealed to man through His word. "What is above us does not concern us" [see page 68]. The Divine exceeds man's grasp. God has chosen to remain hidden in some ways from man.

The later Lutheran systematians condensed quite well the Reformer's view of the use of reason in theology in their formulations which distinguish the so-called 'usus rationis ministerialis' from the 'usus rationis magisterialis' [pages 81-82]. The former term refers to reason's proper sphere of competency in theological questions, as it acts as a servant to God's revelation, and does not attempt to usurp authority to itself in determining what is true about God and His relationship to man. In this realm, man not only is able to interpret the language of Scripture, but even unregenerate man is able to judge over civil affairs, and to otherwise exercise his God-given dominion over the creation in which he lives.

The 'magisterial' use of reason is the converse position of the 'ministerial': that is, when ratio oversteps its bounds of competency and becomes supreme judge over what is 'true,' even at the expense of Scriptural statements to the contrary. It is reason acting in this capacity that draws Luther's adamant attacks, and upon which the Reformer bestows

the names "White Devil," "the Devil's whore," "Frau Hulda," "Madam Reason," and so forth [pages 87-89]. When ratio is given license to determine 'right' doctrine on a plain equal to the revelation of God, the Gospel itself is at stake. Being no friend of the Gospel (it is utter foolishness to unenlightened reason), fallen reason--in its magisterial use --is no friend to Luther.

One scholar points to what he calls the "two-fold advice" that Luther has for all who come to search for truth in theology: (1) leave alone all speculation and inquiry into God's hidden purposes, and confine all attention to what He has revealed and affirmed in His word; and (2) remember that theology is ultimately a matter of eschatology.<sup>2</sup> The central concern of theology is man's relationship with God, that will climax in the believer's being received into heaven by Christ at the last. And whatever is unknown to man in this present world, will be at last revealed to him in glory! This writer feels certain that Martin Luther understands this all the more . . . now.

#### Some Remaining Questions

The focus of this thesis was to give a presentation of Luther's view as to the proper place of the use of ratio in theology, as can be determined by the Galatians Commentary (1519), On the Bondage of the Will, and the Disputation Con-

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<sup>2</sup>James I. Packer, "Luther Against Erasmus," Concordia Theological Monthly 37 (April 1966):207-221.

cerning Man. Thus, the subject of the current project was necessarily narrowed for the sake of manageability. But any such limiting of the topic and source material comes at a price. In the case of the present survey of Luther's understanding of the use of reason in theology, that cost is reflected in several significant questions which will have to remain unanswered until a future endeavor is able to treat them adequately.

One of the most intriguing of these questions, for this writer, has to do with the development of Lutheran theology after the Reformer's death: recognizing that Philip Melanchthon was an integral part of the systematizing of Lutheran theology, it would be important to discover the parallels and dissimilarities of Melanchthon's views concerning the place of reason in theology, as contrasted with Luther's. The present thesis has shown, to no small extent, that Luther's view of reason is not a dogmatic statement in isolation from other questions, but is instead integral to his entire theological structure and method. If the same is true for Melanchthon, then perhaps this is an important factor for his taking mediating positions with theologians at variance with Luther's theology after the latter's death.

Other questions are perhaps of more pertinence to our present day, such as What relationship does Luther's view of ratio have to current "Lutheran" theological method and doctrine? Are there any true "Luther-ans" in present-day

theology? To what extent has Luther's view of reason helped to give shape to theological practice in the various circles of Lutheranism today? What changes, if any, would need to be effected in current Lutheran theology, if that system were to be brought back into line with Luther's concept of reason?

Another class of questions has to do with Luther himself: specifically, Since no perceivable difference in understanding of the use of ratio in theology is present in the writings surveyed in the current thesis, is it true that during Luther's entire career after the posting of the Ninety-five Theses he maintained a uniform view of human reason? Would a comparison of the present work with Luther's earlier lectures--those before the year 1517--yield any differences in insight?

And, finally, there are the queries of speculation, which though they can never be answered with certitude, are interesting, nonetheless. To what extent was Luther influenced by his predecessors in giving shape to his theological method and insight? Where would Luther have stood in the later controversies within the Lutheran church? Would Luther have joined in the later questioning of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scriptures, or would he have continued to equate them with the word of God? Interesting questions, all.

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