Concordia Theological Quarterly

CTQ

Vol. 69 No. 2
April 2005

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

Concordia Theological Quarterly, a continuation of *The Springfielder*, is a theological journal of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, published for its ministerium by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Concordia Theological Quarterly is indexed in *Religion Index One: Periodicals* and abstracted in *Old Testament Abstracts* and *New Testament Abstracts*. *CTQ* is also indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database* (published by the American Theological Library Association, atla@atla.com, www.atla.com) and the *International Bibliography of Periodical Literature on the Humanities and Social Sciences* (www.gbv.de).

Manuscripts should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style* and are subject to peer review and editorial modification. Please accompany manuscripts with a computer disk version, preferably in Microsoft Word. Unsolicited submissions should be original unpublished works and will *not* be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed envelopes and sufficient return postage.

Concordia Theological Quarterly is published in January, April, July, and October. The annual subscription rate is $15.00 within the United States, $20.00 U.S. in Canada, and $35.00 U.S. elsewhere. All changes of address, subscription payments, and other correspondence should be sent to *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 6600 North Clinton Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46825. The *Quarterly* is printed and shipped by Mignone Communications, Inc., Huntington, Indiana. The Web site is at www.ctsfw.edu/ctq/.

 • ISSN 0038-8610

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

Volume 69:2 **April 2005**

Table of Contents

† The Rev. Dr. Melvin Zilz †

April 15, 1932–April 5, 2005

Melvin Zilz was born in Detroit, Michigan where he lived until he was thirteen-years old. He then attended Concordia, River Forest, High School and Teachers College where he received his B.S. degree in Education in 1953.

Upon graduation, he received a divine call to Concordia Lutheran Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois. There he met and later married Carole Brandt on August 17, 1957. Melvin and Carole then moved to Detroit, Michigan after he accepted a divine call to Lutheran High School East, Detroit, Michigan, where he taught Biology until 1965. While living in Detroit, Mel and Carole were blessed with three children: Karen, Kathryn, and Paul.

From 1959 through 1970, Melvin worked toward and received a M.A. degree in Science for Teachers, an M. S. degree in Biology, and a Ph.D. in Biology/Biochemistry. In 1965, Melvin accepted a divine call to Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he held a number of teaching and administrative positions until 1977. In 1976, Melvin accepted a divine call to Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he served as a professor of pastoral ministry and in a variety of administrative positions. In 1978, he was ordained into the office of the public ministry and subsequently served a number of churches as a vacancy pastor from 1983 through 1991. He retired in 2001.

Throughout his life, Melvin held many roles: husband, father, brother, teacher, mentor and friend. He served his Lord with honor and integrity, and possessed a keen wit and sense of humor. His greatest desire was to serve his Lord Jesus Christ and humbly lead by example the people that the Lord put in his life. After a two-year struggle with cancer, he went home to be with his Savior. While we miss him greatly, we rejoice that he is with Jesus, and that we will see him again in heaven, knowing that we are saved solely by God's grace through the faith he gives us in his Son Jesus as our Savior.

Tracking the Trinity in Contemporary Theology

John T. Pless

"The dogma has more than once been thrown to the scrap heap, but has proved to be more lasting than many of the alternatives."[1] Or, at least, so thought Gerhard Sauter regarding the Trinity. Without doubt the doctrine of the Trinity has emerged as a central issue in current theological inquiry. A quick perusal of theological journals published in the last twenty-five years yields dozens of articles on some aspect of trinitarian theology. Since 1982, *Word & World* has devoted two complete issues to the Trinity. This is not atypical when compared to other periodicals. A relatively new journal, *Pro Ecclesia,* founded by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, has become a primary outlet for trinitarian studies utilizing both patristic and ecumenical scholarship. A host of recent books have taken up one aspect or another of the doctrine of the Trinity. In March 2003 the teaching theologians of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod gathered in Dallas for a convocation that had as its theme "Confessing the Trinity Today." Not only systematic theology, but also biblical studies, liturgics, ethics, missiology, and pastoral theology have felt, in one way or another, the influence of contemporary trinitarian studies.

I. Bearings from Barth

Whence comes this resurgence of trinitarian theology, and where is it going? While the Reformation witnessed a rise of anti-trinitarian figures such as Faustus Socinus and Michael Servetus, the major attack on this doctrine would occur with the advent of a historical-critical approach to the New Testament in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the

---

[1] Gerhard Sauter, *Gateways to Dogmatics: Reasoning Theologically for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 39. Two significant books appeared after this paper was completed that should be noted. First, there is Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Grenz does an admirable job of surveying twentieth-century theologians who have worked on the doctrine of the Trinity. Also worthy of note are several essays (especially those by Jenson, Schwöbel, Gregersen, and Saarinen) in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology,* ed. Niels Henrick Gregersen, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

John T. Pless is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

fourth Gospel was reckoned ahistorical (J. G. Herder, D. F. Strauss, and F. C. Baur), fundamental doubts regarding the biblical authenticity of the Trinity likewise began to surface.[2] The dogmatic response to the findings of these exegetes comes in Frederich Schleiermacher's relocation of the doctrine to the appendix of his systematic theology, *The Christian Faith.* Convinced that the doctrine was unnecessary for "Christian self-consciousness," Schleiermacher dismissed the ecclesiastical confession of the Trinity in favor of a God "unconditioned and absolutely simple."

> We have only to do with the God-consciousness given in our self-consciousness along with our consciousness of the world; hence we have no formula for the being of God in the world, and should have to borrow such a formula from speculation, and so prove ourselves disloyal to the character of the discipline with which we are working.[3]

At best, Schleiermacher could see the doctrine of the Trinity only in Sabellian-like terms, which hold the persons of the Godhead as operating in respect to various modes in the world. Schleiermacher's assessment of the doctrine of the Trinity would dominate the nineteenth century as it was congenial to the themes of divine simplicity and human morality.

Karl Barth's (1886–1968) articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity stands in sharp contrast to Schleiermacher's revisionism. Rescuing the Trinity from Schleiermacher's doctrinal attic, Barth sets the doctrine in the prolegomena of his dogmatics. Far from being a theological afterthought, the doctrine of the Trinity, according to Barth, has both a positive and critical function in Christian theology. The root of the Trinity for Barth is in the fact that God reveals himself as Lord. Thus Barth begins his dogmatic treatment of the Trinity by asserting: "God's Word is God Himself in His revelation. For God reveals Himself as the Lord and according to the Scripture this signifies for the concept of revelation that God Himself in unimpaired unity yet also in unimpaired distinction is Revealer,

---

[2] Overviews of the place of the doctrine of the Trinity in nineteenth-century theology can be found in E. J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 250–259; S. M. Powell, *The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104–141; and Claude Welch, *In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 3–41.

[3] Friederich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* tr. D. M. Baillie et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 748.

Revelation, and Revealedness."[4] Positive assertions can be made only because God has revealed himself as the triune Lord. This revelation, for Barth, is God's own interpretation of himself. Critically, the trinitarian doctrine serves to keep all language about God monotheistic. That is to say, the doctrine of the Trinity prevents man from understanding the being of God as a human construction, which is idolatry.

Barth reclaims and employs traditional trinitarian terminology. God's being *ad extra* corresponds to his being *ad intra.* God does not become an economy that is alien to his essence. Dogmatics, argues Barth, must guard against both modalism and subordinationism. To speak of three personalities in God "would be the worst and most pointed expression of tritheism."[5]

Eberhard Jüngel, one of the most perceptive interpreters of Barth, observes: "The *Church Dogmatics* is the ingenious and diligent attempt to think the proposition 'God corresponds to himself' through to the end."[6] Barth seeks to speak of God as he is in himself. Therefore Barth does not begin with an abstract definition of the deity but with God's fundamental revelation of himself in Christ. Consistent with Barth's rejection of any natural theology is his dismissal of all moves to find analogies to the Trinity (*vestigium trinitatis*) in nature, history, or psychology. Simply put, for Barth all speaking about God must be trinitarian if it is to be Christian.

Nevertheless, old habits die slowly. It is not surprising that Barth's reassertion of the Trinity was vigorously repudiated by the older liberalism, which, firmly entrenched in Harnack's opinion, maintained that this doctrine represented the epitome of the Hellenization of the primitive kerygma. Accusing Barth of resurrecting supernatural metaphysics and engaging in unwarranted speculation, Wilhem Pauck impatiently dismissed Barth's trinitarian approach:

> As if it were really a matter of life and death, that as members of the church of the Twentieth Century—we should accept the dogma of the Trinity! Professional theologians may think that it is absolutely necessary for us to be concerned with theological thought-forms of the past, but—God be thanked!—the common Christian layman is no

---

[4] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I:I, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 295.

[5] Welch, *In This Name,* 187.

[6] Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 24.

> professional theologian, and he may be a better Christian for that reason . . . . What (the preacher) needs to know is who God is and how man can be put in right relation with him into the abundant, full, rich, meaningful life.[7]

The old liberalism represented by Pauck and the other heirs of Harnack was fading. Whatever else one may think of Karl Barth, it must be granted that he restored the topic of the Trinity to respectable theological discourse.

In the twentieth century, Karl Rahner (1904–1984) ranks second only to Karl Barth in the development of the new trinitarian theology. This Austrian-born Roman Catholic theologian attempted to connect the classical theology embodied in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas with the worldview created by the Enlightenment. Representative of the climate that was created by Vatican II, Rahner is perhaps best known for his definition of anonymous Christians. It is his trinitarian theology, however, that continues to engage current scholarship. Following in the path of Barth, Rahner also concludes that the word *person* is an unsatisfactory way of speaking of Father, Son, and Spirit as the term is freighted with individualistic definitions. Rahner, similar to Barth, argues that *hypostasis* be defined as "a distinct manner of subsisting."

Rahner observed: "Despite their orthodox confession of the Trinity, Christians are, in practical life, almost mere 'monotheists.' We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."[8] In an effort to bring clarity to the use of the traditional trinitarian categories, Rahner asserted what would come to be known as Rahner's Rule: "*The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity.*"[9] Trinitarian theology for the

---

[7] Wilhelm Pauck, *Karl Barth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931), 189–190.

[8] Karl Rahner, "The Trinity," in *A Map of Twentieth-Century Theology: Readings from Karl Barth to Radical Pluralism*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 190.

[9] Rahner, "The Trinity," 195; emphasis original. On the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity in contemporary theology, see Fred Sanders, "Entangled in the Trinity: Economic and Immanent Trinity in Recent Theology" *Dialog* (Fall 2001): 175–182; Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 20–24; and David Coffey, *Deus Trinitas: The Doctrine of the Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33–65.

remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century is an engagement with or qualification of this axiom.

II. Teutonic Terrain

Barth and Rahner set the stage for what is to follow. The most prolific and perhaps best known theologian in the generation after Barth and Rahner is Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–). While indebted to Barth's articulation of the necessity of revelation for theology, Pannenberg distinguishes himself from Barth in that he locates revelation in God's acts within history. Thus, for Pannenberg, theology begins from below in the arena of history but can only be apprehended eschatologically from its fulfillment in the reign of the resurrected Jesus. It is from this perspective that Pannenberg develops his doctrine of the Trinity.

Asserting that "one can know the intertrinitarian distinctions and relations, the inner life of God, only through the revelation of the God, not through the different spheres of the operation of the one God in the world," Pannenberg grounds his discussion of the Trinity in Jesus' relationship to the Father and the Spirit.[10] Here Pannenberg recognizes his distance from Barth as he observes that Barth does not develop the doctrine of the Trinity from the data of historical revelation of the three persons but "from the formal concept of revelation as self-revelation."[11] Rather, Pannenberg engages the biblical narrative that testifies to Jesus disclosing his relationship to the Father while also distinguishing himself from the Father. More specifically, the Trinity can be known only through the events of the cross and resurrection. Revealing that a Hegelian imprint remains on his trinitarian doctrine, Pannenberg writes:

> Jesus is the Son of the eternal Father only in total to the will of the Father, a resignation which corresponded to the unconditionality of Jesus' historical sending and which, in view of the earthly wreck of that sending, had to become a complete abandonment of his self to the Father. Jesus' absolute practiced unity of will with the Father, as this was confirmed by God's raising him from the dead, is the medium of

---

[10] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 273.

[11] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, 296.

his unity of essence with the Father and the basis for all assertions about Jesus' divine sonship.[12]

Pannenberg speaks of the relationships within the Trinity as reciprocity, acknowledging that the traditional dogmatic language of *perichoresis* and circumincession point to this reality but "had only a limited impact because of the one-sided viewing of the intratrinitarian relations as relations of origin."[13] There is, according to Pannenberg, not only a relationship of origin (e.g., the Father begets the Son and sends the Spirit), but there also exists a relationship of giving within the Trinity (e.g., the Son glorifies the Father and is filled with the Spirit). While there is reciprocity between the persons of the Trinity, the relations between the persons are irreversible. The Father in every respect is God of himself.

> This view seems to rule out genuine mutuality in the relations of the trinitarian persons, since it has the order of origin running irreversibly from the Father to the Son and Spirit. Athanasius, however, argued forcibly against the Arians that the Father would not be the Father without the Son. Does that not mean that in some way the deity of the Father has to be dependent on the relation to the Son, although not in the same way as that of the Son is on the relation to the Father? The Father is not begotten of the Son or sent by him. These relations are irreversible. But in another way the relativity of fatherhood that finds expression in the designation 'Father' might well involve a dependence of the Father on the Son and thus be the basis of true reciprocity in the trinitarian relations.[14]

In contrast to theories of abstract transcendence of God or notions of divine unity that leave no space for plurality, Pannenberg asserts: "Christian trinitarian belief is concerned only with the concrete and intrinsically differentiated life of the divine unity. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact concrete monotheism."[15]

Jürgen Moltmann (1926-), a contemporary of Pannenberg, also had studied at Göttingen under Hans Joachim Iwand, and the two were

---

[12] Quoted in Robert Jenson, "Jesus in the Trinity: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Christology and the Doctrine of the Trinity," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carl Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988). Also see Panneberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, 308-319 and "Problems of a Trinitarian Doctrine of God," *Dialog* 26 (Fall 1987): 250-257.

[13] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, 319.

[14] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, 311-312.

[15] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology – Volume I*, 335.

colleagues for a time (1958–1961 at Wuppertal). Taking up the challenge of Schleiermacher that the doctrine of the Trinity is due for a complete overhaul, Moltmann sets about to achieve just this by finding "the relationship of God to God in the reality of the event of the cross."[16] In this sense, Moltmann and Pannenberg share a similar approach, although Moltmann's conclusions will prove to be far more radical than those of Pannenberg.

The death of Jesus, according to Moltmann, is a "trinitarian event" between God and God.

> In the cross, Father and Son are most deeply separated in forsakenness and at the same time are most inwardly one in their surrender. What proceeds from this event between Father and Son is the Spirit which justifies the godless, fills the forsaken with love and even brings the dead alive, since even the fact that they are dead cannot exclude them from this event of the cross; the death in God also includes them.[17]

Moltmann admits his indebtedness to Hegel at this point.

For Moltmann, the theology of the cross is the hermeneutical key that provides access to the mystery of the Trinity.

> I myself have tried to think through the theology of the cross in trinitarian terms and to understand the doctrine of the Trinity in light of the theology of the cross. In order to grasp the death of the Son in its significance for God himself, I found myself bound to surrender the traditional distinction between the immanent and the economic Trinity, according to which the cross comes to stand only in the economy of salvation, but not within the immanent Trinity.[18]

According to Moltmann, God relates to the world in such a way as to determine its fate, however history also affects God. In this relationship the three persons of the Trinity relate reciprocally, both to each other and to the world. In the Trinity, "the three Persons are equal; they live and are manifested in one another and through one another."[19] God relates to the world as he acts within history, making his love operative in the suffering

---

[16] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, tr. R.A.Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 239.

[17] Moltman, *The Crucified God*, 244.

[18] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, tr. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 160. Cf. John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33–34.

[19] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 176.

of the crucified Christ, an event seen as both temporal and eternal. In the cross, Moltmann argues, God's own being is an open fellowship of love. Thus, the trinitarian communion of the three persons of the Trinity is the source and model for genuine human community characterized by love and freedom, openness and acceptance rather than domination and exclusion.

> The history of salvation is the history of the eternally living, triune God who draws us into and includes us in his eternal triune life with all the fullness of its relationships. It is the love story of the God whose very life is the eternal process of engendering, responding and blissful love. God loves the world with the very same love which he is in himself. If, on the basis of salvation history and the experience of salvation, we have to recognize the unity of the triune God in the perichoretic at-oneness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, then this does not correspond to the solitary human subject in his relationship to himself; nor does it correspond, either, to a human subject in his claim to lordship over the world. It only corresponds to a human fellowship of people without privileges and without subordinances. The perichoretic at-oneness of the triune God corresponds to the experience of the community of Christ, the community which the Spirit unites through respect, affection and love. The more open-mindedly people live with one another, for one another and in one another in the fellowship of the Spirit, the more they will become one with the Son and the Father, and one in the Son and the Father.[20]

1 Corinthians 15:28 ("that God may be all in all") is a key text in Moltmann's discussion of the eschatology of the Trinity. "The cross does not bring an end to the trinitarian history in God between the Father and the Son in the Spirit as eschatological history, but rather opens it up."[21] Thus, for Moltmann, the triune identity is itself moving toward consummation; it is as becoming rather than a static being.[22] The

---

[20] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom,* 157–158. This point is further developed in Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life,* tr. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

[21] Moltmann, *The Crucified God,* 265. Moltmann finally abandons the "conceptual framework" of the immanent and economic Trinity and instead describes the Trinity according to four patterns: monarchical Trinity, historical Trinity, eucharistic Trinity, and the doxological Trinity. See *The Spirit of Life,* 290–306.

[22] John Thompson writes that, in Moltmann's view, the Trinity "is an evolving event between three divine subjects and the world and that the triune God is not complete until the end. Therefore, he can speak of a trinitarian history of God. The difficulty with this view is that it ties God to his relationship to the world and makes the world a

consummation of the Trinity will be a consummation of love as the Son surrenders the kingdom to his Father, that "love may be all in all."[23] Moltmann's trinitarian eschatology is necessarily universalistic as the Trinity is open and inclusive.

Eberhard Jüngel (1933–) of Tübingen has distinguished himself as a foremost interpreter of Barth by recasting Barth's trinitarian theology in the setting of the hermeneutical approach of Ernst Fuchs (1903–). Like Moltmann, Jüngel sees the doctrine of the Trinity as christologically anchored in the event of the cross. The doctrine of the Trinity is inexplicable apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus. But what is revealed in the cross corresponds to the way God is within himself. There is relationality within God. God's involvement in history *ad extra* corresponds to the divine life *ad intra.*

> God's self-relatedness thus springs from the becoming which God's being is. The becoming in which God's being is a becoming out of the word in which God says Yes to himself. But to God's affirmation of himself there corresponds the affirmation of the creature through God. In the affirmation of his creature, as this affirmation becomes event in the incarnation of God, God reiterates his self-relatedness in his relation to the creature, as revealer, as becoming revealed and being revealed. This christological relation to the creature is also a becoming in which God's being is. But in that God in Jesus Christ *became* man, he is as creature exposed to perishing. Is God's being in becoming, here a being unto death?[24]

Jüngel goes on to answer his own question citing the Easter hymn: "Were he not raised/Then the world would have perished; But since he is raised/Then praise we the Father of Jesus Christ/Kyrie eleison!"[25] God remains true to himself as triune in the death of Jesus. In this way God's being for us in Christ expresses and is grounded in God's being for himself. This Jüngel sees, echoing Barth, as revelation—God's own interpretation of himself.[26] Thus he affirms the position of Rahner:

---

contributory factor to the ultimate nature of God. God is therefore not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without this relationship and reciprocity between himself and the world;" *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives,* 51.

[23] Moltmann, *The Crucified God,* 255.

[24] Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming,* 107; emphasis original.

[25] Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming,* 108.

[26] Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming,* 15–25; and *God as the Mystery of the World,* tr. Darrel Guder (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 184–225.

> Karl Rahner's thesis should be given unqualified agreement: *'The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.'* This statement is correct because God himself takes place in Jesus' God-forsakenness and death (Mark 15:34–37). What the passion story narrates is the actual conceptualization of the doctrine of the Trinity.[27]

III. Liberated Trinity: South and North

Leonardo Boff (1938–) and Catherine Mowry LaCugna (1952–1997) stand as examples of contemporary theologians who espouse a social trinitarianism. Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian liberation theologian and author of the 1986 book, *Trinity and Society*. Fueled by Moltmann, Boff attempts to locate in the Trinity the basis for a liberated society. The divine unity that exists between the three persons of the Trinity is reflected in human beings living together in community. As God is a union of three uniques so the human society does not blot out individuality but maintains a unity of egalitarian persons who live in co-relatedness. The communal or social exposition of the Trinity is seen by Boff as a way to move beyond the categories of essence and substance, which he deems to be static. Boff's communal Trinity embraces both masculine and feminine dimensions in Father, Son, and Spirit. Boff anticipates the charge of tritheism and believes that he avoids it by means of his articulation of the *perichoresis* of the three persons.

The *vestigia trinitatis* so vehemently rejected by Barth comes back in full force in Boff:

> As there are traces of the Trinity in the whole cosmic order, so there are in human lives. Every human being is undoubtedly a mystery, with unfathomable depths not communicated to oneself or to others; this is the presence of the Father as deep, inner mystery in every human person. All men and women possess a dimension of truth, self-knowledge and self-revelation, the light and wisdom of their own mystery; this expresses the presence of the Son (Word and Wisdom) acting in them, developing the communication of their mystery. All human beings feel an urge to commune with others and be united in love; the Holy Spirit is present in this desire and in the joys of its

---

[27] Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World*, 369–370; emphasis original. Also see Jüngel's discussion of justification by faith as an "event in the being of the triune God" in *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, tr. Jefferey F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 82–85.

fulfillment in this life. Mystery, truth and communion live together in each individual; they are interwoven realities that together make up the unity of life. They provide a reflection of trinitarian communion and are the ultimate foundation for humanity being the image and likeness of the Trinity.[28]

As Moltmann sought to bring history into the Trinity, so Boff seeks to bring creation into the life of the Trinity.

> [Creation] prolongs and reflects the outpouring of life and love that eternally constitute the being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To use anthropomorphic language: the Trinity does not wish to live alone in its splendid trinitarian communion; the three divine Persons do not love just one another, but seek companions in communion and love. Creation arose from this wish of the three divine Persons to meet others (created by them) so as to include them in their eternal communion. Creation is external to the Trinity only so as to be brought within it.[29]

Finally, Boff retreats to the language of mystery.

> What is manifested in our history is indeed God as God is, trinitarian. But the Trinity as absolute and sacramental mystery is much more than what is manifested . . . . What the Trinity is in itself is beyond our reach, hidden in unfathomable mystery, mystery that will be partially revealed to us in the bliss of eternal life, but will always escape us in full, since the Trinity is a mystery in itself and not only for human beings. So we have to say: the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, but not the whole immanent Trinity.[30]

A second exponent of social trinitarianism is Catherine LaCugna, who was teaching at Notre Dame at the time of her death from cancer in 1997. She is the author of *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* published in 1991. In this book, LaCugna seeks to show the practicality of the doctrine of the Trinity with its consequences for the Christian life. Like Boff, but with greater precision and more engagement of both classical and contemporary sources, LaCugna sees the Trinity in communal or relational categories. "Trinitarian theology could be described as par excellence a theology of relationship, which explores the mysteries of love, relationship,

---

[28] Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, tr. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 223–224.

[29] Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 221–222.

[30] Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 215.

personhood and community within the framework of God's self-revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit."[31]

The central thesis of LaCugna's book is that "soteriology and theology belong together because there is an essential unity between *oikonomia* and *theologia.*"[32] Reviewing the history of the trinitarian doctrine, LaCugna concludes that, from the late fourth century on, theologians in both the East and West deviated from the earlier pattern of approaching the Godhead through the economy and instead explored questions of intratriniarian life such as the equality of the persons. This, she argues, led to "the defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity."[33] Thus she confirms Rahner's conviction that most Christians are, in practice, mere monotheists. LaCugna maintains further that insofar as contemporary theologians continue to focus on the immanent Trinity they reinforce the impression that the doctrine of the Trinity has limited soteriological significance as it is limited to God's internal life and has no connection with the Christian life in the world.

LaCugna devotes the remainder of her book developing the claim that "The doctrine of the Trinity is not ultimately a teaching about 'God' but a teaching about *God's life with us and our life with each other.* It is the life of communion and indwelling, God in us, we in God, all of us in each other. This is the *'perichoresis,'* the mutual interdependence that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel of John."[34]

Drawing on the work of John Zizioulas, a contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologian, LaCugna seeks to develop a definition of person as relation in keeping with the Cappadocian pattern of speaking of the "unique hypostatic identity and distinction 'within' God without postulating a difference in substance between the divine persons."[35] Being constitutes personhood. "Being, existence, is thus the event of persons in

---

[31] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 1; emphasis original. Also see Catherine Mowry LaCugna and Kilian McDonnell, "Returning from the Far Country: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988): 191–215. For a positive assessment of LaCugna's work by a feminist theologian, see Mary Catherine Hilkert, "The Mystery of Persons in Communion: The Trinitarian Theology of Catherine Mowry LaCugna," *Word & World* (Summer 1998): 237–243.

[32] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 13.

[33] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 210.

[34] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 228.

[35] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 243.

communion."[36] LaCugna then goes on to describe *perichoresis* as a "divine dance."[37]

Ultimately the questions of trinitarian theology are not, for LaCugna, speculative but practical. Trinitarian salvation is *theosis* according to LaCugna. Thus the basic, practical question of trinitarian theology is: "How are we to live and relate to others so as to be most Godlike?"[38]

LaCugna holds that relational trinitarianism has great promise for feminist theology because it lifts up mutuality rather than patriarchy. "As a revised doctrine of the Trinity makes plain, subordinationism is not natural but decidedly unnatural because it violates *both* the nature of God *and* the nature of persons created in the image of God."[39] LaCugna argues that authentic trinitarian existence will always be liberationist in character as the economy of Jesus Christ has established a new household unbounded by patriarchal distinctions. She admits that the church lost this vision quite early as the household codes of the post-Pauline and pastoral letters of the New Testament represent an accommodation to non-trinitarian patterns.[40]

---

[36] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 249.

[37] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 271. Here LaCugna draws on the work of Patricia Wilson-Kastner who argues that *perichoresis* is the glue that holds the three persons of the Trinity together in such a way as to establish an ethic that upholds three central values: inclusiveness, community, and freedom; see *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 131–133. For further research, also see David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Cunningham proposes that the titles Source, Wellspring, and Living Water be substituted for the traditional Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For a critique of feminist interpretations of the Trinity see Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate Over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1985) and especially Alvin F. Kimel Jr., ed., *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992). This volume contains essays by Colin Gunton, Robert Jenson, Gerhard Forde, Thomas Torrance, Thomas Hopko and others who make an incisive critique of feminist proposals on the basis of orthodox trinitarian theology.

[38] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 249.

[39] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 398, emphasis original.

[40] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 392. LaCugna's argument that the household code in Ephesians represents a loss of trinitarian vision is curious in light of the fact that she begins her book by citing Ephesians 1:3–14 as testimony to the trinitarian shape of salvation history.

IV. Blazing New Trails: East and West

There are certainly others who ought to be mentioned to round out any survey of contemporary theologians who have engaged the doctrine of the Trinity. We have already noted the significance of John Zizioulas (1931–) in the work of Catherine LaCugna. Although suspect in some Orthodox circles, his work, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church,* probes the connection between ontology and the communion that transpires between the persons of the Trinity.[41] In conversation with the Cappadocian discourse on the Trinity, Zizioulas maintains that "Being is simultaneously relational and hypostatic."[42] His work has also been a source of influence for Miroslav Volf (1956–), a student of Moltmann, especially in his efforts to develop a trinitarian ecclesiology in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity.*[43] The legacy of Karl Barth continues to find a lively voice in the work of Thomas Torrance (1913–).[44] Robert Jenson has emerged as perhaps the leading North American representative of contemporary trinitarian theology with his provocative assertion that the triune God is "one event with three identities" as an attempt to free the doctrine from a Hellenized abstraction.[45] In the tradition of George Lindbeck, Bruce Marshall (1955–) examines epistemic dimensions of the doctrine of the Trinity in *Trinity and Truth* published in 2000. [46] Colin Gunton (1941–2003) has produced several impressive contributions including *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (1991) and *The*

---

[41] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

[42] John D. Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution," in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act,* ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 50.

[43] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

[44] See especially Thomas Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).

[45] Like Pannenberg, Jenson studied with the liturgical scholar Peter Brunner and the Lutheran Barthian, Edmund Schlink, at Heidelberg. Jenson's major works on trinitarian theology include *Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); *Systematic Theology – Volume I: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and "Locus II: The Triune God" in *Christian Dogmatics – Volume I,* eds. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 79–191. For a variety of engagements with Jenson's contributions, see *Trinity, Time, and the Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson,* ed. Colin Gunton (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

[46] Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study (1998).[47] Shortly before his untimely death last year, his final work, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes* was published.[48] In this book, Gunton engages in a critique of the separation of God's being from his actions in theologies that approach the attributes of God apart from his trinitarian being. Two recent books approach the doctrine of the Trinity through the practices of the church. Reinhard Hütter's *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* sees the work of the Trinity in the core practices or marks of the church, making the case that there can be no division between trinitarian dogma and the concrete practices that define and order the identity and character of the church.[49] Hütter, along with several other theologians, make this case explicit in a collection of essays edited by James Buckley and David Yeago entitled, *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church.*[50] Using Luther's hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice," Oswald Bayer (1939–) teases out what he describes as a "poetological" doctrine of the Trinity asserting that this doctrine "considers nothing other than the *gospel*." [51]

V. Where Is This Highway Going?

It is difficult to summarize the vast and varied work in contemporary trinitarian theology. It would be even more difficult to attempt a meaningful assessment that avoids generalizations. Nevertheless, I will single out a few themes that deserve some reflection and critique.

Mark Twain once remarked that in the beginning God created man in his own image and ever since man has returned the compliment. It seems that this is what we see in the social trinitarians—Moltmann, Boff, and LaCugna. Moltmann's early work, *The Theology of Hope,* was his own attempt to provide a theological parallel to the Jewish Marxist Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope,* and Moltmann continues to work out the

---

[47] Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990); and *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998).

[48] Colin Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

[49] Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

[50] James Buckley and David Yeago eds., *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

[51] Oswald Bayer, "Poetological Doctrine of the Trinity" *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (Spring 2001): 43–58; emphasis original. For further discussion, see also "The Triune God" in *Living By Faith:: Justification and Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 52–57.

eschatological implications of this theme in his later works on the Trinity. Boff sees the Trinity as a model of liberation for the poor and the oppressed. LaCugna finds in social trinitarianism a resource for an egalitarian, non-patriarchal God and church. The Trinity is abstracted from creation and history, which is ironically the very error Moltmann claims to avoid.

Here we might inquire as to what this means for ethics. Paul Jersild, a recently retired professor from the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, published a book in 2000 entitled *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life.* In this volume, Jerslid seeks to ground Christian ethics in the work of the Holy Spirit. While he does not cite Moltmann or LaCugna, his argument runs parallel to theirs in significant ways.

After a critique of the presumed authoritarianism of antiquated notions of reading the Scriptures, Jersild opts for a view of biblical authority that is open-ended. Thus a Spirit ethic, while recognizing the inspiration of the Scriptures, will nevertheless be an ethic of openness to the future. A broadened concept of inspiration will enable the church to engage the Bible in a meaningful conversation. This dialogical method of listening to Scripture encourages the "fruitful engagement of moral imagination" in an impossible way seeing Scripture as a source of moral absolutes.[52] "The notion of a deposit of eternal truths 'once for all delivered to the saints' is entirely inappropriate in regard to our moral tradition, for in this realm we are dealing with our response to the Gospel, not the Gospel itself."[53]

Rather than attempting to extract specific and concrete moral teachings from the New Testament, the church, Jersild opines, ought to concentrate on a cluster of images—love, freedom, and responsibility—that are at the heart of the New Testament's ethical vision. According to Jersild, a Spirit ethic will bear the marks of God's presence and display his empowering love. A Spirit ethic will listen to the Scriptures and "the contemporary experience of the church as it grapples with difficult moral issues."[54]

---

[52] Paul Jersild, *Spirit Ethics: Scripture and the Moral Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 21.

[53] Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 134.

[54] Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 135.

Having established the basis for his ethics, Jersild then turns to the current debate surrounding homosexuality. Worried that many Christians, under the influence of natural law thinking have adopted an "excessively physicalist approach to homosexuality," Jersild instead urges the church to revise its traditional stance on homosexuality in a way that exhibits acceptance and responsible freedom.[55]

Jersild has effectively collapsed the Trinity into the Spirit. His concern over an "excessively physicalist approach to homosexuality" evidences his lack of a trinitarian doctrine of creation. Christoph Schwöbel observed: "The search for relevance, so it appears, comes into conflict with fundamental dogmatic tenets of a Christian theology of creation. What seems to be needed is not an ethics of creation, but an *ethic of createdness* which is informed by a *theology of creation.*"[56]

The ethic that Schwöbel calls for cannot be sustained by the trinitarian theology of LaCugna. LaCugna pits personhood against nature in such a way as to dismiss the significance of the createdness of male and female. She endorses the conclusion of Margaret Farley:

> If the ultimate normative model for relationship between persons is the very life of the Trinitarian God, then a strong eschatological ethic suggests itself as a context for Christian justice. That is to say, interpersonal communion characterized by equality, mutuality, and reciprocity may serve not only as a norm against which every pattern of relationship may be measured but as a goal to which every pattern of relationship is ordered.[57]

Here we must ask if equality, mutuality, and reciprocity are derived from the biblical doctrine of the Trinity or from our postmodern culture that is characterized by its drive toward autonomy. Creational distinctions are lost as the self-differentiation within the Trinity, which is exchanged for a communal theology that is but a murky reflection of our culture's gnostic spirituality.

---

[55] Jersild, *Spirit Ethics*, 139.

[56] Christoph Schwöbel, "God, Creation and the Christian Community: The Dogmatic Basis of a Christian Ethic of Createdness" in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 150; emphasis original. Also see Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Orders," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1998): 125–160.

[57] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 282.

Any sexual activity that reflects equality, mutuality, and reciprocity is deemed to be iconic of the Creator.

> Sexuality can be a sacred means of becoming divinized by the Spirit of God instead of a tool to exercise control over others, or an aspect of ourselves that is to be feared and avoided. Alienated or alienating expressions of sexuality, practices that are truly 'unnatural' in the sense of being contrary to personhood, contravene the very life of God. In contrast, fruitful, healthy, creative, integrated sexuality enables persons to live from and for others. Sexual practices and customs can be iconic of divine life, true images of the very nature of the triune God.[58]

What is unnatural in LaCugna's estimation is not that which is contrary to our being creatures of the triune God but rather contrary to our personhood. As defined by the categories of autonomy and capacity, personhood becomes ambiguous as we witness in Justice Harry Blackmun's declaration that "the word person as used in the 14th Amendment does not include the unborn."[59] The initial promise of LaCugna's book to offer a soteriological theology of the Trinity that has as its corollary in the life of the Christian in and with God is lost.

VI. Conclusion

There are many issues that this brief overview of contemporary trinitarian theology has addressed only minimally or not at all. The debate

---

[58] LaCugna, *God For Us*, 407. David Cunningham follows LaCugna in drawing out the implications for the acceptance of homosexual unions: "I have already suggested that the doctrine of the Trinity can help us to understand and evaluate the nature of the relationships among bodies, including relationships that involve sexual desire. The question which remains, is whether it necessarily limits those forms to opposite-sex relationships. And as far as I can see, there is nothing in trinitarian doctrine that has a word to say, in any *prima facie* sense, against monogamous gay or lesbian relationships. In such relationships, mutual participation is clearly possible, just as in opposite-sex relationships. The same-sex partner is still an 'other,' and fully capable of embodying the trinitarian view of particularity. The doctrine of the Trinity does not seem to address anatomical features of the desired body; God manifests yearning, desire, and love for the *otherness* of the other, but this otherness is not limited to—nor does it necessarily even involve—questions of sexual differentiation." *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 300. Only a hermeneutic completely detached from the trinitarian narrative of the Scriptures could arrive at such a conclusion. Barth rightly points to the "structural differentiation" of man's duality as male and female; see *Church Dogmatics III:II*, 286.

[59] John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodox Christianity and Bioethics* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 146–147.

over the *filioque* will continue. The avoidance or the complete exclusion of the name of the Trinity in liturgical forms and hymns will be a most obvious feature distinguishing orthodoxy from the new unitarianism already evident in the mainline churches. On both scholarly and popular fronts, the likes of Marcus Borg offer up another Christ *sans* Trinity who is confessed not as the only-begotten Son of the Father but as a mistaken mystic.[60] In today's world, we are confronted anew with questions relative to the triune God versus the gods of the nations. The significance of these topics cannot be fully apprehended apart from a critical engagement of the theologians we have examined. This survey has attempted to identify some of the leading players in contemporary theological discussion of the Trinity and map out at least a few key features of their thinking. We have noted the twists and the turns, both the rediscovery of the church's confession of the triune God and not a few detours from the path of biblical orthodoxy. Thus, Uwe Siemon-Netto, a Lutheran lay theologian, offers this timely challenge:

> . . . postmodernity's profusion of bogus and ever-changing 'truths' and 'values' can only be overcome by a renewal of trinitarian theology—not in the watered-down version of liberal theology: No cheap anthropocentric metaphors are in order here. Rather theologians must learn to speak about the triune God in a new language that resonates with the post-post-modern people who are attempting to come out of the spiritual bankruptcy into which the quest for autonomy has led them. This may well be one of the most important tasks for theologians in the almost 2000 years of church history. It is an urgent task. There is no time to lose.[61]

---

[60] Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006).

[61] Uwe Siemon-Netto, *One Incarnate Truth: Christianity' s Answer to Spiritual Chaos* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 157.

Potestas in Ecclesia, Potestas Episcoporum: *Confessio Augustana* XXVIII and the Life of the Church

Anssi Simojoki

There was in Finland in the 1960s lively discussion concerning the voice of the church. There was an expectation that a great number of social and ethical issues would be addressed with official ecclesiastical authority. The voice of the church should be clearly heard in a modern society. There was, however, no consensus as to where in the church this voice was to be sought and heard: whether with the Archbishop or the Bishops' Conference, whether with or without legitimization from the synodical plenum of the church. Neither was there any consensus as to what exactly the voice of the church was supposed to pronounce regarding various contemporary issues. There were various proposals of an ecumenical and democratic nature for locating this much-expected authoritative ecclesiastical voice. It was also the time when I, as a student of theology, in the full blossom of my youth, had no reservations, nor modesty, when I declared in an article, with vigor and simplicity: "If the church, so far, has no voice, we must get such a voice at once." After years of moderate liberal studies of theology, little did I know or understand the teachings that so plainly and clearly stand in our chief Lutheran confession, the Augsburg Confession, and its Apology, concerning the life of the church and life in the church. In retrospect, my sole, meagre consolation was the fact that I was by no means alone in this, even with such a statement of appalling ignorance.

The 1993 Lutheran-Anglican Porvoo Agreement, moreover, further exacerbates this issue and begs these questions: What is the episcopal office in the church? Is the office of the ministry in its constitution tripartite, as taught in Anglicanism, or not? Is the apostolic succession indispensable (*conditio sine qua non*) for the episcopal office? In which areas and to what extent is the life of the church dependent on the office of the bishops, and relatedly, is ordination administered by a rank and file pastor as valid as an episcopal ordination, or is it only the bishops who can ordain pastors in the church by divine right, *iure divino*? What constitutes

---

Anssi Simojoki is the Vice President to Africa for the Lutheran Heritage Foundation, Nairobi, Kenya.

a valid ministry of the word and the sacraments in the church, the call of a congregation or the hands of a bishop?[1]

Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession (*CA*), however, treats the power and authority of the church, perhaps even giving us an answer. It teaches us: how to live in the church, what the voice of the church is, and finally, what the relationship of all of this is to normal worldly life and worldly authorities.

I. The Distinction Between the Regiments

First of all, the Augsburg Confession clearly defines the sphere of ecclesiastical authority, which is definitely distinguished and separated from all worldly authorities (*CA* XXVIII,12–19). The church as the church has no legitimate civil authority. The long history of ecclesiastical misuses of authority by Roman pontiffs and bishops in the civil realm necessitated the Lutheran reformers to formulate this issue in an unambiguous manner. The earthly political life is under the mandate of legitimate rulers, politicians, magistrates, and soldiers. The church has other important things to do.

The tremendously influential theologian of the twentieth century, the Swiss centenary theologian Karl Barth, has caused plenty of confusion in this area. There is a Barthian legacy of which we should rid ourselves and all theological discussion. Barth, under the influence of Ernst Troeltsch, introduced a completely misleading term into theology, *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*,

---

[1] In Finland at least, the development is currently towards Anglicanism. The life of the church is becoming more and more dependent on the bishops. On the other hand, their true power and authority is very limited, and even more so in the Anglican Church. Politically, the media seems to favor this kind of episcopal development in the church, probably for the simple reason that the present bishops are 100 percent politically correct and always sing in unison: be it an ecclesiastical issue, a moral problem, a political triviality such as lamenting over the free economy called capitalism, or criticising the United States of America upon which they are pronouncing. Thus, the block of liberal and politically-correct bishops in the church enjoys unshaken media protection. We are witnessing the rise of a sort of liberal-high church and societal church controlled by the media. This secondarily established church is unconditionally fundamentalist in terms of administration, since it respects no divine word, no article of faith and no confession. Therefore, human statutes and bureaucratic processes have become authorities never to be disobeyed. This kind of neo-Erastian, secondarily established church with its episcopacy has also passed its heyday and is in the process of disintegration. Similarly, a century ago, the European nobility was rapidly leaving the stage's political influence and, instead, reappeared as fancy dress figures on operetta stages.

which has dominated theological and political discussion concerning Lutheranism and Lutheran social ethics. This misleading term revolves around his discussion of the two kingdoms in Lutheran theology. According to Barth and his successors, the doctrine of the two kingdoms, namely the confession that distinguishes between the worldly and the spiritual kingdoms, was the main reason that Lutherans failed to react against the Nazi regime in Germany from 1933 to 1945. This term, *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre,* which Barth introduced at a fairly early stage in 1922, grossly misses the point, however. The Lutheran Confessions nowhere speak about the kingdoms (*Reiche*) in this connection. Rather the term employed in respective connections is always *power* (*potestas, Gewalt*).[2]

All power belongs to the omnipotent God, whose power and authority is given to Christ, Pantocrator (Matt 28:18). Thus, all kinds of autonomy, *Eigengezetlichkeit,* in exercising power in this world, is excluded at the outset because all power belongs to God. Consequently, all the potentates of this world are fully answerable to him.[3]

God employs two different instruments in exercising his omnipotence: the worldly authorities and the church. The former is the rule of his left hand, the latter of his right hand. The church has no short-cut authority to cross the boundary of these two ways by which God rules and to interfere with worldly power. There is one area, though, where these two realms touch each other. This is the function of God's law in society. It is the calling of the church to teach the Ten Commandments in their three functions. Society and its authorities must be taught the first, outward use of the Ten Commandments, otherwise God's good institutions—marriage, family and temporal rule—may be corrupted creating ethical chaos in society. Ironically, and sadly, it was the church that had in the past caused such corruption and chaos in both church and society by establishing human traditions and decrees as if they were divinely instituted and,

---

[2] Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995), 172, 334–335.

[3] Ahti Hakamies, *"Eigengesetzlichkeit" der natürlichen Ordnungen als Grundproblem der neueren Lutherdeutung: Studien zur Geschichten und Problematik der Zwei-Reiche-Lehre Luthers,* Untersuchungen zur Kirchengeschichte (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1971); and Martin Honecker, *Eigengesetzlichkeit,* Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (RGG) 4 Band 2 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), 1131–1133. It is a liberal tradition from Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, later adapted by Karl Holl and Helmut Thielicke against Karl Barth's christocracy. Negatively, autonomy separates God and his revelation from history; positively it takes into account the differentiation of spheres in society.

consequently, necessary for man's salvation. The reader of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession cannot miss Philipp Melanchthon's vigorous tenor in condemning, article by article, the erroneous teachings of the past concerning justification and ecclesiastical authority. It was the sheer misuse of ecclesiastical authority that had caused all the abominations in God's temple and in society—misuses that the Lutheran Reformation was vigorously opposing, condemning and correcting. As I mentioned above, the law must be taught in society according to its first, outward use, not solely by its second, spiritual use. Good temporal rule is always in harmony with the outward use of the Ten Commandments. The spiritual use of the law takes place in the realm of the church. Just as the Reformation rehabilitated marriage and family life after a millennium of Babylonian Captivity, it likewise reinstated to worldly authorities and normal civil life their God-given glory. For this reason, the Augsburg Confession included article 16 into its first part on faith and doctrine.[4]

Even with these simple and very basic facts of the Lutheran Confessions, we still find ourselves amid a hair-raising theological mess. First, Karl Barth taught his contemporaries to read the Bible and newspapers in order to find out God's will. Barth's situational ethics, which stemmed from his actualistic theology, acknowledged no continuity in time and history at the point of contact between God's word (*senkrecht von oben)* and the world. For this reason, the kind of teaching that would present God's eternal will as being the same always and everywhere was excluded at the outset. In new situations, therefore, God's word can mean different things. Thus, men's own political instincts, put together with some biblical principles, became virtually man's compass in social ethics. Barth's monistic and truly Reformed thinking against the Lutheran distinction between the law and the gospel made the distinction between the two modes of divine rule quite incomprehensible to him.[5]

Second, the history of twentieth-century theology is basically the story of a deteriorating Bible crisis. Any authoritative biblical passage can be made suspicious in regard to its authenticity and present-day relevance. How can one expect bishops and theologians to teach the Ten Commandments clearly before the society, when they themselves have all too often been

---

[4] Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, tr. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 101–131, and Lohse, *Luthers Theologie* , 336–340.

[5] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part One, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 111–120: The Bible becomes God's word *in actu*. See also Michael Beintker, *Barth Karl*, RGG 4, Band 1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1998), 1138–1141.

agents of the biblical crisis? Further, the strong legacy of the Lundensian School of Theology has made the use of the Ten Commandments in Scandinavia suspicious, to say the least. The only accepted role of the law is the spiritual use in disclosing and judging one's sins. Otherwise, there is no fixed, perpetual divine code to be taught and followed. The only logical conclusion from this is a flexible situation ethics advocated by the Lundensian School.[6]

Liberation theology and all similar kinds of political theology are basically monistic theologies. Therefore, they cannot acknowledge the distinction between the law and the gospel, nor any distinction between the realms of the church and society. They, therefore, ultimately succumb to the same pitfalls as Islam only in a different direction.

If the church follows the various paths of theological monism, it cannot be content with its particular calling to preach the gospel as well as administer the keys of heaven and the holy sacraments. They are too immaterial compared with the self-chosen role of being some sort of supreme arbiter in society and in the world. Yet, the pope of Rome or the archbishop of Canterbury, for example, have no particular illumination in judging matters of war and peace that raise their opinions above the considerations of political and military professionals.[7]

However, where the Ten Commandments are being trampled down by worldly authorities in society, thus provoking ethical chaos, it is the calling of the church to challenge the authorities and to give its testimony to the truth, even at the price of persecution and suffering. This kind of bold witness took place here and there in Hitler's Third Reich, even amid the most merciless state terror. Communist regimes were far more successful in silencing the churches. Theological confrontation by appealing to God's law is, however, absolutely alien to the modern, politically-correct church leadership. To demonstrate this, we need only to remind ourselves of the

---

[6] Gustaf Wingren, *Luther On Vocation*, tr. C. C. Rasmussen (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1999), 199–212. Instead of the Decalogue, which has no positive function, Wingren operates with the undefined term, *God's Command*. Lauri Haikola, *Usus Legis*, 2nd Impression (Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston monistuspalvelu, 1981). Haikola follows the legacy of Wingren. Herbert Olsson, *Schöpfung, Vernunft und Gesetz in Luthers Theologie*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Doctrinae Christianae Upsaliensia, 10 (Uppsala: 1971), 80. See also Barth's and Wingren's sharp criticism by Karl-Manfred Olsson, *Kristendom Demokrati Arbete* (Borås: LT, 1965), 51–74. Barth and Wingren fail to answer epistemological questions; therefore, their ethics bear the marks of arbitrariness.

[7] Olsson, *Kristendom Demokrati Arbete*, 86–89.

flood of divorces, abortions, the teaching of adultery to entire generations in public schools and, of late, the vigorous promotion of homosexuality by European governments and legislators, compared with extremely cautious or non-existent reactions from various episcopal sees, not to mention open advocacy and promotion in the church of morals and values that are openly contrary to the word of God.

The strong emphasis in the Augsburg Confession, and likewise in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, on the distinction between the secular and ecclesiastical spheres of authority was not the result of any kind of social or ethical escapism in the ranks of the Reformers. On the contrary, the past confusion of these authorities had placed tremendous burdens on Christian consciences. The time had come to free Christians from the yoke of assumed ecclesiastical authority. Christians could, at last, live in this world with a good conscience and, simultaneously, live by God's gifts of eternal salvation through the gospel. The right distinction between the worldly and ecclesiastical authorities is the best protection for the freedom of a Christian.

II. The Office of Ministry in the Life of the Church

Ecclesiastical power or authority has several connotations in the Augsburg Confession. According to the Latin text, Article 28 treats "The Power of the Church" (*De Potestas Ecclesiastica*). This power, that is, this authority is, in particular, the administration of the keys—confession and absolution. The German text of the Augsburg Confession, however, speaks of "The Power of Bishops" (*Von der Bischöfe Gewalt*). This ecclesiastical or episcopal authority in the church is the authority to preach the word of God and to administer the holy sacraments and the keys (*CA* XXVIII,5-6). Thus, episcopal power in the church is directly connected to the doctrine of justification: "So that we may obtain this [justifying] faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted" (*CA* V). It is no wonder at all that the German text explicitly uses the titles of bishops and pastors synonymously ("bishops or pastors" *CA* XXVIII,53). The same is stated in the Latin text: " . . . bishops (that is, to those to whom the ministry of the Word and sacraments has been committed)" (*CA* XXVIII,21). Later in 1537, Melanchthon's Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope carried on the discussion of ecclesiastical power. Here, unambiguous biblical arguments and authoritative patristic testimonies confirm that there is no substantial difference between bishops, presbyters or pastors by divine right (*iure divino*). Even Jerome

taught that the distinctions of degree between bishop and presbyter or pastor are established by human authority (*iure humano*; Tr 60–82).

Anyone who reads the Bible can observe how St. Paul freely employs various ecclesiastical titles for the same group of ordained men from Ephesus in his farewell address at Miletus: they are in the very same passage called bishops, presbyters and leaders chosen and installed in the church by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:17–38).

How very far, then, from the teachings of the Augsburg Confession are Thomas Cranmer's words in the Anglican Ordinal: "It is evident unto all men who diligently reading Holy Scriptures and ancient Authors that from the Apostles' times there have been these orders of Ministers in Christ's Church: Bishops, Priests and Deacons . . . ."[8]

Historical rather than doctrinal modes of episcopacy dominate even Nordic discussions, not only those concerning the Porvoo Agreement but also those preoccupied with emergency ordinations, which have indeed become and are becoming more and more necessary in order to preserve the Lutheran Church and pure Lutheran doctrine in the Northern Europe. In fact, every pastor in charge of a congregation is the true bishop of that flock of Christ. His authority by divine right (*iure divino*) is by no means less than that of one bearing the title bishop: to preach the word of God, to administer the keys and the holy sacraments. In emergency cases, part of this episcopal power is given even to a layperson who, when proclaiming the emergency absolution, becomes the minister or pastor to another (Tr 67). The arrangements concerning ordination of new pastors are matters of human right among the ordained clergy (*iure humano*). The mode of ordination is a matter of good order, not some kind of divine statute that is solely the concern of a certain higher class of the ordained clergy. The Anglican concept of *episcope*, the supposed necessity of having a ministry of oversight among the clergy as a biblical, divine ordinance, conquered Scandinavian Lutheranism already in certain quarters of the high church movement and recently via Porvoo. Therefore, it is important to understand and acknowledge that all ordinations in the Lutheran Church by ordained pastors, on behalf of the church, are legitimate episcopal ordinations. In post-Porvoo and post-Joint Declaration Lutheranism it is important—indeed, it is a matter of *status confessionis*—to maintain the unity of the ordained ministry by divine right (*iure divino*).

---

[8] Church of England, *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1910), 292.

What the Lutheran Confessions focus on are the gifts of God in Christ given to his church according to the testimony of St. Paul in Ephesians 4:8, 11, 12 and the freedom of the church and of Christians to receive these gifts without any human interference, hurdles, or complications. This is why also the Augsburg Confession (*CA* VIII), after defining the church as the assembly of saints and those who truly believe, even though mixed with hypocrites and evil people, strongly defends the validity of the sacraments even when administered by evil men: "Both the sacraments and the Word are efficacious because of the ordinance and command of Christ, even when offered by evil men" (*CA* VIII,2). The focus is here on ordinary Christians who must be in the position to receive God's life-giving gifts, even though the church is unable to safeguard the integrity of its clergy. As long as the command of Christ is formally valid, Christians can with a good conscience behold the divine gift administered to them even by an evil and corrupt ministry.

The situation in traditional Lutheran churches has, in this respect, dramatically changed in recent years and decades as the ordination of women has been cultivated by human authority in open contradiction to the biblical witnesses. For the sake of the church's life, the life-giving ministry of the word, the keys, and the sacraments must be freely available to all Christians. It should never be an object of political play and interference.[9] Where human impediments are constructed against scripturally legitimate calls in the church, the church—which is so according to *CA* VIII—has the right (*iure divino*) to provide its members with ordained pastors.

III. What is Necessary and Sufficient?

The acceptance of the Porvoo Agreement in 1993 changes the doctrine of the ministry in those churches that have signed it. A considerable aspect of Christian freedom has been sacrificed and unnecessary human traditions established in order to satisfy all participants. Even neutral or good human traditions per se are changed for the worse when they begin to rule in the church without the mandate of the Holy Scriptures. Such rulers have the tendency, sooner or later, to become tyrants, oppressing the biblical faith and the Christian's evangelical freedom.

---

[9] Such was the case during the Reformation in Bohemia and Saxony and even today in many traditional Lutheran churches in Germany and Scandinavia with historical state-church backgrounds.

The question of the so-called apostolic succession, namely the historical chain of the laying on of hands in episcopal ordinations, is one such tradition. First of all, there is no evident necessity, no clear condition in the Holy Scriptures to establish and maintain such a tradition. The attempts to prove the necessity of this kind of tradition must follow a very tortuous way and yet end up nowhere. When such a tradition, however, is made into a condition for the fullness of the office of the ministry in the church, the integrity of the divine ordinance and command is in grave jeopardy. It belongs to the same category as church art, bells, incense, paraments, the number of candles on various Sundays, shoe polish, and all such vestry props, which are needed neither in the pulpit when the gospel is preached nor at the altar when the body and blood of our Lord is distributed.[10]

The Augsburg Confession deals a blow to the exquisite concept of the apostolic succession by its complete silence on the matter, on the one hand, and by speaking of the proper call to the ministry in *CA* XIV, on the other. *Rite vocatus* in *CA* XIV does not pertain to a specific rite such as the laying on of hands. It refers, instead, to a regular call by a proper public authority in the church. Thus, it is the call that is the constituent act in the ordination to the office of the ministry. The role of a bishop and the episcopal laying on of hands is merely to confirm (*comprobatio*) the proper call.

> These words (of Peter: "You are a royal priesthood") apply to the true church, which, since it alone possesses the priesthood, certainly has the right of choosing and ordaining ministers. The most common practice of the church also testifies to this, for in times past the people chose pastors and bishops. Then the bishop of either that church or a neighbouring one came and confirmed the candidate by the laying on of hands. Ordination was nothing other than such a confirmation. Later, new ceremonies were added. (Tr 69–71)

---

[10] It may be of some interest to know that it is this very question of the apostolic succession that has become divisive in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Bishops ordained within the apostolic succession are not permitted to lay their hands on a bishop to be ordained and installed in a diocese that does not approve the tradition. Thus, for example, the presiding bishop may lead the ceremony but he must abstain from laying his hands on the new bishop who will serve his diocese opposed to the apostolic succession. Sometimes, though, a visiting bishop who possesses the apostolic succession spoils this purity by laying his hands on even those who oppose this tradition. Such offenses to their understanding are usually met only with silence.

It is true that even Melanchthon was prepared to call ordination with laying on of hands a sacrament in the Apology, provided that no misunderstanding would arise concerning the nature of the rite.

> But if ordination is understood with reference to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament. For the ministry of the Word has the command of God and has magnificent promises . . . . If ordination is understood in this way, we will not object to calling the laying on of hands a sacrament. For the church has the mandate to appoint ministers, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it. Indeed, it is worthwhile to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise against fanatics who imagine that the Holy Spirit is not given through the Word but is given on account of certain preparations of their own. (Ap XIII,11-13)

While the laying on of hands is at the center of this passage from the Apology concerning the number and use of sacraments; this does not, in any respect, necessarily contradict the preponderance of the call.

Whereas, contemporary Lutheranism is witnessing a recession of the pure doctrine; traditions, on the other hand, are amassing in profusion. For this reason, the question of what is necessary and sufficient in the church is of extreme importance. The Old Adam is prone to traditions. The Antichrist dwells on pomp and circumstance. Bells and whistles, so to speak, can be used with joy and happiness when the doctrine of justification is clear and the advocates of a robust ceremony clearly teach and believe that all these reverent and sometimes amusing vestry props belong only in the category of adiaphora. If any doubt is cast on Christian freedom, we find ourselves *in statu confessionis* to witness to the biblical evangelical truth, which alone can set us free.

IV. The Mandate and the Limit: The Word of God

In recent church controversies concerning either the office of the ministry or various moral issues, bishops like to stress the importance of unity. A Protestant version of Roman curialism is also increasing, a tendency I have earlier called administrative fundamentalism: human statutes and bureaucratic processes have become authorities never to be disobeyed. We may go back to the book of Jeremiah in which the religious leadership and false prophets chanted their favorite slogan: "This the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" (Jer 7:4.) The prophet, for his part, had the word of God, the word alone.

The word of God is, in the first instance, the Bible; there is no question about this in the Lutheran Confessions.[11] Wherever the Bible speaks, other authorities must give way in silence. Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession is an excellent example of this. The adversaries who wrote the Confutation of the Augsburg Confession claimed and boasted that the church has authority to change even the Decalogue by abandoning the Sabbath and choosing Sunday as the Christian holy day (*CA* XXVIII,33). The confession states clearly: "Scripture, not the church abrogated the Sabbath" (*CA* XXVIII,59).

The word of God is the sole source of authority and ecclesiastical power in the church. The word is the true mandate of the church, of its ministers and of all Christians. At the same time, this mandate is also the clear boundary and limit in the church.

> However, when they teach or establish anything contrary to the gospel, churches have a command from God that prohibits obedience. Matthew 7[:15]: "Beware of false prophets." Galatians 1[:8]: "If . . . an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" 2 Corinthians 13[:8, 10]: "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth," and, "Using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down." . . . Augustine also says in the letter against Petilian that one should not agree with catholic bishops if they perchance should err and hold anything contrary to the canonical Scriptures of God. (*CA* XXVIII,23–28)

The mandate of all ecclesiastical power is therefore the word of God, and this same word also serves as its boundary and limit.[12]

---

[11] As opposed to Barth's notion of the Bible continually becoming God's Word *in actu*; see footnote 4.

[12] It has for a long time been fashionable to call faithfulness to the biblical word by derogatory names and adjectives. Personally, I remember the theological objection of the archbishop emeritus of Finland, John Vikström in the 1980s. He compared faith in the word of God to the trinitarian heresies of the early church: We poor confessional Lutherans may be guilty of having elevated the Bible to a position of faith and adoration equal to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. What else is this but a trinitarian heresy? One might imagine how difficult it was to react politely to such an appalling *theologoumenon*! What is the correct, diplomatic answer to a man of acclaim who claims that he, finally, has invented a *perpetuum mobile?* Recently, the current archbishop, the Most Reverend Jukka Paarma, claimed in an interview that the reactionaries in the church, believing in the Bible, claim to be omniscient like God (Magazine "Apu" August

We can rightly grasp the centrality of the word by bearing in mind that this very word of the Holy Scriptures is christological and trinitarian, as well. According to the promise of Jesus in John 14, this word brings the Holy Spirit to us, and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, brings Christ himself to us, and Christ, the Son, brings the Father. Thus, by the power of the word, the Holy Trinity dwells with us and in us. The church can, therefore, exist by the power of the word and it is Jesus Christ who himself is this word of God. According to St. Paul in Ephesians 2, he is the cornerstone, on which the prophetic and apostolic foundations of the church are laid. The mystery of the church is that she is both the body of Christ and his bride. According to his own promise, Christ is truly present in his church (Matt 18:20; 28:20). In the sacraments, he even enters into a bodily union with his people. Therefore, his word is not a distant echo from past times. It is rather the living voice of the Lord who is truly present. For this reason, the idea that the church is in need of a visible head to be Christ's vicar on earth is in every respect an anomaly. A vicar is required to stand in the place of someone who is currently absent. This is Martin Luther's strong christological argument against the claims of the Roman pontiff in the Smalcald Articles (SA II,4). The church never requires a visible head because its real head, Jesus Christ, is truly present in his church. This head speaks his word through the ordained ministry. Therefore, the ministers are not his vicars but his representatives according to his own word: "Whoever listens to you listens to me" (Luke 10:16).

> We do not want to hear what they command or forbid in the name of the church, because, God be praised, a seven-year old child knows what the church is: holy believers and "the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd." This is why children pray in this way, "I believe in one holy Christian church." This holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, long alb, or other ceremonies of theirs that they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures. Its holiness exists in the Word of God and true faith. (SA III,12)

Through his word preached, taught, and confessed, the present Christ uses his power (*potestas ecclesiastica*) to create, maintain, and protect his own life in the church. This is his scepter prophesied in Psalm 110:2: "The Lord

---

2003)! Indeed, we know what God causes us to know in his word, not more, not less! But we are not omniscient, quite the contrary. Since I know nothing by my own reason and understanding, I am fully dependent on the word of the living God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who has also given me my body, my soul, my senses, and my reason.

will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies."

V. Conclusion

I began by relating the call of a young theology student of yesteryear, myself, for the voice of the church in society. Yet the church does not need to make a voice for itself. Rather, it needs simply to remember the voice of her Lord, which never changes: "Thus says the Lord." The almighty God spoke through the prophets and the apostles, and so he speaks in the Scriptures. This is the testimony of all Scripture and of all true confession. "Holy Father, sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

Natural Knowledge of God and the Trinity

Roland Ziegler

Throughout the greater part of the history of Christianity, the natural knowledge of God—a knowledge of God derived from nature, history, and man outside and beyond the biblical story of God's interaction with the world—cohabitated peacefully with the revealed knowledge of God in the minds of Christians and theological textbooks.

This peaceful coexistence between the natural and revealed knowledges of God, however, was shattered in modernity. The first attack came from the side of the natural knowledge of God. This alone was seen by the English Deists and their followers as the true knowledge of God, whereas the Christian concept of the triune God was viewed as a departure from the true, simple, and natural knowledge of God. The interaction with different religions, especially the impression left by ethically high-standing religions, shattered the conviction of the singularity and superiority of Christianity. All religions seemed to contain elements of truth, and these were identical with the natural knowledge of God: There is a God; he cares, and he is an ethical being to which man is responsible. As Alexander Pope put it in "The Universal Prayer":

> Father of all! In every age
> In every clime adored,
> By saint, by savage, and by sage,
> Jehovah, Jove, or Lord!
>
> Thou great First Cause, least understood,
> Who all my sense confined,
> To know but this, that Thou art good,
> And that myself am blind;
>
> Yet gave me, in this dark estate,
> To see the good from ill;
> And, binding nature fast in fate,
> Left free the human will.[1]

[1] Alexander Pope, *Collected Poems* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1924), 216.

Roland Ziegler is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Another attack on the unity of the natural knowledge of God with the Trinity came with the rise of modern science, which rejected theological thinking by adopting instead a methodical atheism.[2] The existence of God, known by nature, rapidly lost plausibility. The massive atheism that started to spread in the nineteenth century and continued to spread in Europe in the twentieth century seemed to disprove any concept that man can evidentially know God.[3]

The peaceful coexistence between the natural and revealed knowledges of God also came under attack from a theological point of view. Karl Barth saw an enemy and a deadly disease of Christian theology in any concept of a natural theology, manifesting its poisonous fruits in the collaboration of the so-called German Christians with the National Socialists in Germany in the 1930s.

In exploring these questions, we will first investigate a classical statement of the natural knowledge of God and the Trinity by Thomas Aquinas and then look at the debate between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth. We will then try to articulate a Lutheran position by first referring to the Scriptures and then listening to the Confessions and the Lutheran fathers. Finally, we will draw some conclusions for the challenges we face today.

I. Natural Knowledge and the Trinity: A Classical Position

According to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), God is known by natural reason and by revelation: "There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that He is one, and the like."[4]

---

[2] For further evidence see Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). For the general intellectual history that led to the modern crisis of Christianity see Paul Hazard, *The European Mind 1680–1715* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1963).

[3] See James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith. Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book One: God (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1955), 63 [*Summa contra gentiles*, I,3,2.]. For the Latin edition, see Summa contra gentiles seu de veritate catholicae fidei. Impressio XVIII stereotypa (Taurini: Marietta, 1927), 2–3: "*Est autem in his, quae de Deo confitemur, duplex veritatis modus. Quaedam namque vera sunt de Deo, quae omnem facultatem humanae rationis*

In his *Summa Theologiae* Part 1, question 2, Aquinas discusses the question of Gods existence and then further differentiates this question into three points: "1. is it self-evident that there is a God? 2. can it be made evident? 3. is there a God?"[5]

The first question asks if there is an innate idea of God, such that human beings simply have to start to think and will find in themselves the concept of God. Three arguments are adduced in favor of such a position. The first Aquinas founds upon the argument of John of Damascus, that "the awareness that God exists is implanted by nature in everybody."[6] The second argument is the ontological argument: Whoever thinks the word "God" (defined as "that than which nothing greater can be meant") must also think that God exists—and that not only in thought, but also in fact. The third argument is the existence of truth: Since there is truth, and any rejection is self-contradictory, there must be ultimate truth.

Aquinas, however, rejects this a priori argumentation for the existence of God. Against John of Damascus, he states that in man there is not implanted an idea of God but only a desire for happiness, which finds its fulfillment in God but remains so vague that human beings can mistake it and search for happiness, for example, in money. Against Anselm he maintains that the definition of God as "something than which nothing greater can be thought" is not a common definition of God, and that the transition from the fact that we have to think that God exists to the fact that God actually exists is not logically conclusive. Aquinas also rejects the idea that the existence of truth implies the existence of a first truth.

Aquinas then comes to the opposite position: God's existence cannot be made evident—the fideistic position. Again, three arguments in favor of this position are listed: first, a proof for the existence of God is impossible because God's existence is an article of faith; second, to demonstrate the existence of God would presuppose that we can define the essence of God, which is patently impossible; and third, a proof for the existence of God could only come as a conclusion from the works of God to the creator, that

---

excedunt, ut Deum esse trinum et unum. Quaedam vero sunt, ad quae ratio naturalis peritingere potest, sicut est Deum esse, Deum esse unum, et alia hujusmodi."

[5] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. 2 (Blackfriars, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 5; [*Summa theologiae* I,2].

[6] John of Damascus, *De fide Orthodoxa*, 1,1. PG 94,789; In English see, John of Damascus, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899).

is, from effects to their cause. Since God and his effects are not on the same plane, but rather creator and creation are of an infinite ontological difference, such a concluding back to God seems impossible.[7]

These objections are first answered by a recourse to Scripture: The witness of Paul in Romans seems to contradict such a fideist position. Philosophically the foundation is laid by affirming that any effect presupposes a cause, and the least we can say—but we can say it—is that there exists a cause, even if we could say no more. The first objection is countered by a recourse to Romans 1:19-20: since Paul says that certain things can be known about God by the power of reasoning, the existence of God is not strictly speaking an article of faith; it rather presupposes faith. "For faith presupposes natural knowledge, just as grace does nature and all perfections that which they perfect."[8]

Against the argument that a proof demands a definition of the essence, Aquinas contends that this mistakes the way we think. In the words of a commentator: "first, we know *y* to exist; secondly, we use the word 'x' to mean *cause of y*; thirdly, we demonstrate that x exists (cf. note *b)*; fourthly, we define *x* (that is present how the word 'x' is used as a declaration of what *x* is); fifthly, we then demonstrate why certain other truths hold of *x* (cf note *a*).[9]

Having thereby rejected both positions—that no proof for the existence of God is necessary because there exists an a priori knowledge of God, and that no proof for the existence of God is possible—Aquinas continues by demonstrating the existence of God a posteriori, that is from the effects of God. He does this with five arguments: the famous five ways. The basis of these proofs is the relationship of cause and effect. There is, as stated, a certain relation between cause and effect, a certain proportion or analogy that enables us to conclude from the created order to its source, the creator.

What do these five ways then look like?[10] The first way is based on change. Everything that is changed or moved is changed by another thing and not by itself, there is no true *automobile*. Since there is no infinite regress possible, there must be a first cause of change which is not changed by itself, and this is "what everybody understands by God."

---

[7] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 9 [*Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 2, art. 2].

[8] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 11 [*Summa Theologiae* I, qu. 2, art. 2, ad 2]: *Sic enim fides praesupponit cognitionem naturalem sicut gratia naturam et ut perfectio perfectibile.*

[9] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 11; emphasis original.

[10] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2, 12–19 [*Summa Theologiae* I, qu.2, art. 3].

The second way is based on causation. Everything is caused by something else, and since there is no break in this line, there must be a first cause, and this cause is God.

The third way argues from necessity. There are beings that exist contingently; that is, they can exist but do not have to exist: "we find them springing up and dying away, thus sometimes not." Now, there must exist more than contingent beings: "if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing." There must be one thing that exists necessarily, which is the cause of the contingent beings.

The fourth way is based on gradation. In things we find differences—some are more good, more true, more noble, some are less. Since there is this hierarchy, there must be something which is "the truest and best and most noble of things, and hence the most fully in being". "There is something therefore which causes in all other things their being, their goodness, and whatever perfection they have. And this we call 'God'."

The fifth way is the argument from the order in nature. Since the created things obey natural laws, and their behavior "will practically always turn out well," there must be an intelligence behind it.

But reason can establish more than just the existence of God. It can also say something about the properties of God. Though man cannot have any direct knowledge of the divine essence but relies on what his senses perceive, one can come to a concept of a being that actually is beyond sensory experience. Through the threefold way—the negative way, the positive way, and the way of eminence—reason can make a true statement about what God is like.[11]

---

[11] "The knowledge that is natural to us has its source in the senses and extends just so far as it can be led by sensible things; from these, however, our understanding cannot reach to the divine essence. Sensible creatures are effects of God which are less than typical of the power of their cause, so knowing them does not lead us to understand the whole power of God and thus we do not see his essence. They are nevertheless effects depending from a cause, and so we can at least be led from them to know of God that he exists and that he has whatever must belong to the first cause of all things which is beyond all that is caused. Thus we know about his relation to creatures - that he is the cause of them all; about the difference between him and them - that nothing created is in him and that his lack of such things is nto a deficiency in him but due to his transcendence." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, 41 [S Th I,12,12 resp.].

The first method is the method of negation.[12]

> For, by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing *what it is*. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing *what it is not*. Furthermore, we approach nearer to a knowledge of God according as through our intellect we are able to remove more and more things from Him.[13]

Through this method, Aquinas shows that God is eternal (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I,15), that there is not passive potency in God (I,16), that there is no matter in God (I,17), that there is no composition in God, which is otherwise positively called the simplicity of God (I,18), that there is nothing violent or unnatural in God (I,19), and that God is not a body (I,20). God is infinite and perfect and so on. The way of affirmation, or causality, however, sees God as the efficient cause of everything. Since the efficient cause contains in itself every perfection that is in the effect, God possesses all perfections that are in the creatures. The way of eminence finally deduces from the finite perfections of creation by way of an analogy that God possesses infinite perfections.

It is not our task now to engage in a detailed discussion about the value of these proofs or the three ways. Important for our purpose is only that Aquinas understands Romans 1 in such a way that everybody can come to the knowledge of the existence of God. This knowledge consists in the knowledge of God as the first mover, the first cause, the highest and noblest thing, and the law-giver of nature. Therefore anybody can have a concept of the true God. How is this then related to the Trinity? As quoted before from Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles,* Christianity presupposes this knowledge. It is a better and more complete knowledge of God, but it includes the natural knowledge.[14] Here we truly have a two-tier model of the knowledge of God.

---

[12] Thomas follows here a tradition that started with Pseudo-Dionysios the Areopagite [*De divinis nominibus*, VII, 3; PG 3,869]; see Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 108–109.

[13] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 96f. [*Summa contra gentiles*, I,14,2]; emphasis original.

[14] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 3, 41; [S. Th. I,12,13, resp.]. "By grace we have a more perfect knowledge of God that we have by natural reason. The latter depends on two things: images derived from the sensible world and the natural intellectual light by which we make abstract intelligible concepts form these images. In both these respects

II. The Brunner-Barth Dialogue

The history of Protestant theology in the twentieth century was decisively shaped by the new beginning Karl Barth inaugurated with the publication of his *Commentary on Romans* in 1919. Barth started a theological program that tried to avoid the errors of liberal Protestantism, which, according to Barth, had made Christianity a prisoner of culture and, therefore, impotent to voice the distinctive doctrines of Christianity. He rejected a predominance of epistemological questions, the quest to harmonize Christianity and culture, and the strong interest in how Christianity can be communicated as an anthropocentric approach to theology. Barth accused the current Protestant theology of taking up the question: "How can this be made understandable?" instead of simply saying what Christianity had to say. Such a question sought to mediate, which thereby arrogated the work of God to man. This attitude, moreover, destroyed the possibility to say what God actually said. The beginning of Barth's theology was therefore viewed by the Protestant theological establishment as the assault of a new form of anti-intellectualistic barbarism that simply brushed aside important questions instead of facing them.

Barth was not alone in this new beginning, which soon came to be called *dialectical theology*. While Barth was pastor in Safenwil, he was in continuous exchange with Eduard Thurneysen. In Germany, Friedrich Gogarten and Rudolf Bultmann were part of this loose movement. The most influential dogmatician, besides Barth, was Emil Brunner. He had published a monograph on Schleiermacher in which he sharply critiqued this ninetheenth-century church father, demanding a new beginning that started with revelation instead of man.

Dialectical theology was not at all homogenous, and in 1934 a controversy arose between Barth and Brunner that caused an insurmountable split. This division occurred on the question of natural theology, one of the classic controversies of Protestant theology in the twentieth century.[15]

---

human knowledge is helped by the revelation of grace. The light of grace strengthens the intellectual light and at the same time prophetic visions provide us with God-given images which are better suited to express divine things than those we receive naturally from the sensible world."

[15] For the historical background, see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 248–253. The theological

Brunner published a booklet entitled *Nature and Grace: A Contribution to the Discussion with Karl Barth*. In this booklet, Brunner, after giving a short account of the position of Barth, summarizes his own position in six theses.[16] First, the image of God has been lost through the fall as far as the material image is concerned, that is original will and therefore free will. The formal image of God (i.e., that which makes man human), however, is retained. This formal image includes the superiority of man in creation, his subjectivity—namely that he is a rational creature having a capacity for words—and his responsibility. Brunner, therefore, essentially rejects the idea of a remnant of the image of God: man is a sinner through and through, but man remains a person.

Second, since the world is God's creation, it has the imprint of his maker. "Therefore the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation, a self-communication of God."[17] Sin did not destroy but only adversely affects the ability of man to perceive this revelation. This is also true regarding the "consciousness of responsibility." "Only because men somehow know the will of God are they able to sin."[18] There are two sources of revelation, Brunner does not question this. What is in question, however, is the relation between these two: universal revelation and revelation in Christ. Universal revelation is obviously not a salvific revelation.

> According to St. Paul the revelation of God in his creation would be sufficient for every one to know therein the Creator according to his majesty and wisdom. But sin dulls man's sight so much that instead of God he 'knows' or 'fancies' gods. We may correctly characterize the objective and subjective factors thus: man misrepresents the revelation of God in creation and turns it into idols.[19]

---

background is extensively treated in Christoph Gestrich, *Neuzeitliches Denken und die Spaltung der dialektischen Theologie. Zur Frage der natürlichen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977). Brunner's and Barth's pamphlets have been reprinted in Walther Fürst, ed., *"Dialektische Theologie" in Scheidung und Bewährung 1933–1936. Aufsätze, Gutachen und Erklärungen* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966), 169–258. They were published in an English translation as *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth* (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946).

[16] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 175ff; *Natural Theology*, 22ff.

[17] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 177; *Natural Theology*, 25.

[18] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 177; *Natural Theology*, 25.

[19] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 179; *Natural Theology*, 26.

The Christian nevertheless can see God in creation and therefore is informed by a double revelation. "Only the Christian, *i.e.* the man who stands within the revelation of Christ, has the true natural knowledge of God."[20]

Third, there exists a general or preserving grace operative in the world through which God preserves his fallen creation; and fourth, to this preserving grace, moreover, belong those ordinances which are a constant factor of human life. This includes the orders of creation, especially matrimony and the state. They are only correctly understood in faith, but they are created and maintained by instinct and reason. Natural man, although not able to understand them truly in their relation to God, still can know that they are "necessary and somehow holy and are by him respected as such."[21]

Fifth, Brunner develops his famous doctrine of the *Anknüpfungspunkt,* the point of contact. "No one who agrees that only human subjects but not stocks and stones can receive the Word of God and the Holy Spirit can deny that there is such a thing as a point of contact for the divine grace of redemption."[22] This point of contact is the formal image of God, that is as a person who has a capacity for words and is responsible. Responsibility, in particular, namely that man is a moral being who knows good from evil, is absolutely necessary to be able to hear the call to repentance. But the natural knowledge of the law, the will of God, is dialectical. "Natural man knows them and yet does not know them. If he did not know them, he would not be human; if he really knew them, he would not be a sinner . . . . *Without* knowledge of God there can be no sin: sin is always 'in the sight of God.' *In* sin there can be no knowledge of God, for the true knowledge of God is the abolition of sin."[23] But the point of contact is not only the formal image of man.

> What the natural man knows of God, of the law and of his own dependence upon God, may be very confused and distorted. But even so it is the necessary, indispensable point of contact for divine grace. This is also proved by the fact that on the whole the New Testament did

---

[20] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 180; *Natural Theology*, 27.
[21] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 183; *Natural Theology*, 31.
[22] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 183; *Natural Theology*, 31.
[23] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 184; *Natural Theology*, 31f; emphasis original.

> not create new words, but uses those that were created by the religious consciousness of the pagans.[24]

Finally, therefore, what Scripture has to say about the death of the old man always refers to the material side of human nature, not to the formal. The formal personality continues in the regeneration, the revivification.

In the final chapter, Brunner discusses the significance of natural theology for theology and the church. Since theological ethics is determined by the concept of the orders of creation and Christian love, natural theology has implications for approaching this topic. A rejection of the orders of creation leads to "invincible individualism."[25] Natural theology is important for dogmatics because it enables us to speak about God through analogy.[26] Brunner defends here the *analogia entis*, which Barth rejected as an "invention of the Anti-Christ." Finally, the practical importance of natural theology ultimately lies in the fact that the church's proclamation rests on the remnant of the image of God, which makes this message comprehensible. The fact that man is a responsible being is also important for Christians' interaction with unbelievers.[27]

Karl Barth's reply, tersly titled *No!*, was not favorable toward Brunner's theological interest and argumentation. After his first chapter, "Angry introduction," where he rejects Brunner's conciliatory rhetoric to soften the theological difference between them, Barth defines natural theology as "every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, that is to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture."[28] He sees his position as so fundamentally opposed to natural theology that he even rejects any treatment of it as an independent topic. Though Brunner wants to maintain *sola scriptura* and a free and sovereign grace, Barth thinks that Brunner, by developing a natural theology, actually gives up both. He gives up *sola scriptura* because knowledge of God is now available outside of Scripture.

---

[24] Fürst, "*Dialektische Theologie*", 185; *Natural Theology*, 32f.
[25] Fürst, "*Dialektische Theologie*", 201; *Natural Theology*, 52.
[26] Fürst, "*Dialektische Theologie*", 202–204; *Natural Theology*, 53–55.
[27] Fürst, "*Dialektische Theologie*", 204–207; *Natural Theology*, 56–60.
[28] Fürst, "*Dialektische Theologie*", 214; *Natural Theology*, 74f; emphasis original.

> No, when he speaks of the God who can be and is 'somehow' known through creation, Brunner does unfortunately mean the one true God, the triune creator of heaven and earth, who justifies us through Christ and sanctifies us through the Holy Spirit. It is he who is *de facto* known by all men without Christ, without the Holy Spirit, though knowledge of him is distorted and dimmed and darkened by sin, though he is 'misrepresented' and 'turned into idols.'[29]

Regarding the relationship between these two types of revelation and the status of non-Christian religions, Barth asks: "Is it his opinion that idolatry is but a somewhat imperfect preparatory stage of the service of the true God? Is the function of the revelation of God merely that of leading us from one step to the next within the all-embracing reality of divine revelation?" And regarding *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia*: "And if we really do know the true God from his creation without Christ and without the Holy Spirit—if this is so, how can it be said that the *imago* is materially 'entirely lost,' that in matters of the proclamation of the Church Scripture is the only norm and that man can do nothing towards his salvation?"[30]

Regarding Brunner's concept of preserving grace and the ordinances or orders of creation, Barth asks: How is natural man able to come to a true understanding, for example, of marriage, when following instinct and reason? Barth furthermore thinks that Brunner gives up the doctrine of free, sovereign grace when he develops his concept of a point of contact because now grace is again in some way dependent on man; there is some kind of preparation on the side of man. Otherwise, argues Barth, all of Brunner's reflections about the formal image of man, about man as a moral being, and his capability for words (which, by the way, Barth consistently misquotes as "capability for revelation") would be pointless.[31] Against Brunner's reflection about the possibility and presuppositions of man becoming a Christian, Barth posits the simple proclamation of the Christian message. God himself will create the presupposition so that his message will be understood.[32] Brunner has left the new start and become one with the mediating theologians of the nineteenth century, who, instead

---

[29] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 220; *Natural Theology*, 81f.
[30] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 220; *Natural Theology*, 82.
[31] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 220f; *Natural Theology*, 82f.
[32] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 249; *Natural Theology*, 117.

of simply listening to God, listened to man and God, which ultimately means only to man.[33]

In summary, Barth rejects any natural theology because it is against *sola scriptura*, because it is against the *sola gratia*, and because it ignores that God is revealed solely in Christ. The God of natural theology, for Barth, is an idol, not the true God.

Barth's rejection of any and every form of natural revelation proved to be very influential for Protestant theology in the twentieth century not only due to the systematic consistency of his position that claimed to know Christ and only Christ in an effort to end all ambiguous "ands" between theology and whatever, or because he was determined to do theology in a thoroughly trinitarian way, but also because of the historical context in which this rejection and condemnation of natural theology was situated. The theme of natural theology stood at the center of the controversy between the so-called German Christians—the church political party that sought to form the Protestant churches in Germany in the image of National Socialism—and their opponents. Very briefly, the German Christians claimed that the rise of Hitler was a providential occasion that, through the revolution of national socialism, God speaks to the German people. They claimed that the ordinances of nation and race are instituted by God and that the church has to respect them—for example, by separating converted Jews and Aryans in the Christian church. Barth was a leading opponent of the German Christians and saw in natural theology the root of the catastrophic development of Protestant Christianity in Germany. His denunciation of any form of natural theology as serving the cause of the German Christians discredited this theological topic for a long time. Only when the shadow of this history waned was a new discussion, at least in Germany, possible.

III. An Attempt to a Solution— Scripture and Confession

The Teaching of Scripture

Even though Thomas Aquinas, Emil Brunner, and Karl Barth were not Lutheran, their respective positions can also be found in the Lutheran Church.[34] It is not simply a look into a distant or closer past, or even a look

---

[33] Fürst, *"Dialektische Theologie"*, 252; *Natural Theology*, 121.

[34] For a critical view of the Thomistic approach to natural theology in Lutheranism, see Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, Band I (München: C.H. Beck'sche

beyond fences, rather these men (and of course also other theologians) still form and inform discussions on natural theology among Lutherans. How do we come to an evaluation then? All these radically different positions read and claimed the same Bible as the foundation of their theology. Thus, it is necessary to give a short exposition of some of the classical passages that are quoted in the discussion on natural theology.[35]

Romans 1: The Natural Knowledge of God as Creator

This passage introduces the first main part of Romans (Rom 1:18–3:20); the purpose of which is to show that Jews and Gentiles are sinners, lacking righteousness before God. In Romans 1:18 and following, Paul wants to show that the Gentiles are without excuses (ἀναπολόγητοι). They cannot claim ignorance as grounds for lenience. The wrath of God has rightfully come upon them. God has revealed himself to the Gentiles. Any interpretation that denies natural revelation does not, in my opinion, do justice to the text. Thus we must strictly see it as revelation, that is, God's action and not some property inherent in nature. An alternative view would be to interpret Paul along Stoic lines. There is a similarity in vocabulary but a difference in theology. The Stoic school of philosophy taught that man can know god because man shares in the Logos. Since they are of one kind, man can know god. While this view is in harmony with the overall pantheistic concept of god in Stoicism, Paul, on the contrary, is maintaining that any knowledge about God is revealed, that is coming from God and not the result of a merely human enterprise.

The content of this revelation is revealed from the beginning of the world through the works of God. Most often, ποιήματα is translated with "what is made," and is understood as a knowledge derived from creation along the same line as the cosmological or teleological argument for the existence of God.[36]

What, then, is actually revealed? Paul summarizes them as God's invisible attributes (ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ). By stressing God's invisibility in verse

---

Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931), 44–52; in English, see *The Structure of Lutheranism,* Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 49–58.

[35] On Romans 1 and 2, see especially Richard Bell, *No one seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18–3.20,* WUNT 106 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998). On Acts 17, see Bertil Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation,* ASNU 21 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1955).

[36] Gärtner argues for a wider understanding that also includes the works of God in history; *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation,* 138.

20, Paul develops a not-so-invisible anti-pagan polemic. Since God is invisible, pagan worship of statues or any visible material object is therefore idolatrous. Yet, even though he is as such outside of human perception, he graciously enables man to perceive his eternal power (ἀΐδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις), and his deity (θειότη). Man can thus perceive in the works of God that there is God, a God who is eternal and categorically different from the works man encounters.

But this revelation is rejected by man. God's revelation is universal and man's rejection of it is universal. Men suppress the truth in unrighteousness (1:19), they do not honor God nor give him thanks (1:21), they did not retain the knowledge of God. Rather, they exchanged the truth of God for idols of their own making. Idolatry is therefore not fate but guilt.

Paul indeed is here talking about a revelation that exceeds the boundaries of God's history with Israel. And he is also talking about a revelation that is at least not explicitly Christological because this general revelation does not reveal the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ).[37] But Paul is not following here the natural theology of Hellenistic philosophy. He maintains rather that all knowledge of God is derived from revelation. Another difference is that this knowledge is not simply there in natural man, so that it can be used as a welcome point of contact for the proclamation of the gospel. The pagans have twisted and distorted this knowledge so that natural revelation of God is turned into the worship of idols.

Romans 2: The Natural Knowledge of the Law

Here Paul argues against the attitude of the Jews, which thinks that they are superior to the Gentiles because Israel is given the law. Paul says that there is no advantage given to Israel, since there are Gentiles (ἔθνη) who are a law unto themselves in whose heart the works of the law are written. The evidence for this is the fact that in their conscience are either accusing or excusing thoughts.

The first question that arises is, who are the ἔθνη? There are three different options: 1) Gentiles who fulfill the law and are saved apart from explicit faith in Christ; 2) Gentiles who do some part of the law but who are not saved; 3) Gentile Christians who fulfill the law by virtue of their

[37] Bell, on the other hand, thinks that Christ is included in this natural theology because for Paul there can be no revelation without Christ; *No one seeks for God*, 91.

relationship to Christ.[38] It seems to me that Douglas Moo in his commentary on Romans is right in choosing option two.[39] Paul talks again about a universal phenomenon that is the basis for a moral consciousness. Obviously this can not mean that all Gentiles have a perfect knowledge of the law and do the works of the law. That would hardly be in harmony with what Paul had said just before about the Gentile world that is sunk into idolatry and, consequently, moral depravity and his conclusion afterwards in Romans 3:10-18. What Paul is talking about is a certain knowledge of the will of God, analogous to the knowledge that Israel has from the Torah, and a behavior that mirrors this knowledge. How far this knowledge extends, Paul does not discuss here. Exegetes have proposed an identity of these works that are written in the heart of the Gentiles with the Ten Commandments. The problem here is whether or not Paul really meant that the Gentiles not only know but also do what is required by the First Commandment. So one may have to follow Käsemann in his commentary and leave it rather undermined, stressing that the point Paul is here making is that the Gentiles are also confronted with the will of God and know about their guilt.[40]

Acts 17: The Unknown God

Acts 17 has the closest connection to philosophical natural theology, not only, but also most obviously, through the quote from Aratus in verse 28. Nevertheless, Paul does not simply give a slightly Christianized Stoic diatribe; he is not making an appeal to reason in an effort to prove the existence of God. On the contrary, it is proclamation, as καταγγέλλω and ἀπαγγέλλω at the beginning and ending of the speech denote. Idolatry, not atheism, is the problem of the Athenians for, as the account of Paul's stay in Athens begins, "his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was full of idols" (17:16).

---

[38] Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 148-153.

[39] Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 149.

[40] "Here, however, it is matter of Gentiles experiencing God's will, not from the Torah as such, but in outline, as it were, from what is written in their hearts. If the text is not left imprecise [German: *schwebend*, RZ] but worked out metaphysically, fear of Pelagianism might lead us to make Augustine's mistake of referring e[qnh to Gentile Christians." Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 65; this is an English translation of *An die Römer*, 4. durchgesehene Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1980), 60.

At the beginning of his speech, Paul compliments the Athenians for their religiosity (a *captatio benevolentiae)* using the altar of the unknown God as his starting point. This compliment, however, is not without a sting: The Athenians, a people who sacrifice in the temples and philosophers who engage in metaphysical speculation, revere what they do not know! That is, no real knowledge of God is to be found in Athens. Therefore, Paul continues with a critique of the actual religion he encounters. Verses 24–25 employ the God-as-creator topos to critique pagan concepts of God: God is neither dwelling in a temple nor is he worshipped with hands.[41] He does not receive but gives (διδοὺς), for he needs nothing. Moreover, what he has made is made not arbitrarily but for a purpose. Paul thus argues in verse 26 that God made (ἐποίησεν) from one nation (ἑνὸς) all the nations of men for two distinct purposes. The two infinitives that depend on ἐποίησεν—κατοικεῖν (to dwell) and ζητεῖν (to search)—denote the purpose of God's creation of man: to dwell on earth in the land that God has given him and to seek him. This seeking God is here not philosophical speculation: the personal construction speaks against such an understanding. Rather, if we understand this language as an inheritance from the Septuagint, where ζητεῖν θεόν and ζητεῖν κύριον mean "to turn to God, cleave to Him, inquire about Him,"[42] we come to the understanding that Paul is emphasizing here that man is created towards God.[43] "Thus, when the speech alleges that man was created in order to seek God, it is not advancing the philosophical argument based on man's share in the Divine *Logos*, but is following the Old Testament-Jewish tradition as to the seeking of God . . . . Man must be heedful of the revelation, and from the knowledge of God gained thereby will then spring a rightful worship of God."[44]

Verse 27 continues: "that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him and find him" (Authorized Version). This subordinate clause is an indirect question that uses the optative. It expresses a potentiality. This is not a simple indicative, stating a fact. "The result of seeking will

---

[41] Incidentally, this line of argumentation is also found in the Old Testament.; cf. Is 66:1.

[42] Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 156

[43] Gärtner refers to 1 Cor 8:6 as a parallel to this passage: "The Creation of men towards God is a principle that cannot be expounded better than by saying that they shall seek God, live for His glory, obey and serve and worship him;" *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 155.

[44] Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 158.

therefore be uncertain—indeed, any positive outcome is very much doubted. This optative construction expresses a doubt on the speaker's part as to whether men can, on their own, attain to God."[45] The word ψηλαφήσειαν, translated as "haply feel," means to touch concretely as it is used elsewhere in the New Testament. This meaning, however, can be excluded here. The Septuagint uses it in the sense of to grope or to fumble, as a description of the way a blind person seeks to find his way. Against an understanding that sees Paul here stating the universal ability of man to know God, he pictures man as groping for God in the dark. This interpretation goes against the Stoic view of natural theology, since the kinship between God and man guarantees that man will find God. This imagery should make us cautious to be too optimistic about the actual attaining of the knowledge of God through natural revelation, even as the summary of man's situation as "the times of ignorance" attests (v. 30). If Paul's speech at the Areopagus is used to support the thesis that the Gentiles already know the true God, though incompletely or however it is hedged, then this "times of ignorance" is de facto turned into "times of knowledge." This does not qualify as sound exegesis in my opinion.

What about the unknown God though? Does this not prove that the pagans have a valid knowledge of God? Such an assumption would contradict Romans 1, which states that the Greeks did not retain the knowledge of God but fell into idolatry. Paul can make this statement because of the paradoxical inscription: The unknown God. The true God cannot be identified with any of the gods of the Greek pantheon—that is explicitly denied in Acts 17:29. The true God is unknown to his audience. Paul can use the term *God*, but he has to redefine it. It then is neither identical with the sense as used by the popular culture, which is polytheistic, nor is it identical with the Stoic concept of a pantheistic deity nor with the remote gods of the Epicureans nor with the unmoved mover of Aristotle.

The Lutheran Confessions

The Confessions teach a natural revelation of God. The content of this revelation is twofold: the knowledge that there is a God and also a certain

---

[45] Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, 159. See also Rudolf Pesch, "Die dem Menschen aufgegebene Suche Gottes führt nicht—wie die Stringenz philosophischer Erkenntnis meinen könnte—ohne weiteres zum Ziel," in *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Vol. 2 (Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 138.

knowledge of his will. The passages about the natural knowledge are few in the Book of Concord and are mostly in connection with the natural knowledge of the law. The divine law is written in the mind of all men, and therefore, man understands in some way the law (Ap IV,7). The Ten Commandments are written in man's heart (LC II,67). "Natural law includes actual though obscure knowledge of the fact that God is, but only Christ provides us with true knowledge of Him."[46] Romans 1 is quoted in the Solid Declaration, article II regarding free will: "For, first, although man's reason or natural intellect indeed has still a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law, Rom 1 . . ." it cannot understand the gospel (SD II,9).

Luther refers to non-Christian religions in his Large Catechism in the exposition of the First Commandment and in the explanation of the Creed. He first states the universality of the phenomenon of having a god, that is trusting in something. "For no people have ever been so reprobate as not to institute and observe some divine worship; every one has set up as his special god whatever he looked to for blessings, help, and comfort" (LC I,17). But this worship, exemplified by the religion of ancient Greece and Rome, is idolatrous:

> Therefore, the heathen really make their self-invented notions and dreams of God an idol, and put their trust in that which is altogether nothing. Thus it is with all idolatry; for it consists not merely in erecting an image and worshiping it, but rather in the heart, which stands gaping at something else, and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils, and neither cares for God, nor looks to Him for so much good as to believe that He is willing to help, neither believes that whatever good it experiences comes from God. (LC I,21)

The other passage in the Large Catechesim (LC II,66) focuses on the difference between Christians and other religions:

> These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe in and worship only the one, true, God—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they

---

[46] Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529–1537* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 66.

> remain in eternal wrath and condemnation. For they do not have the Lord Christ, and besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.[47]

Lately, this passage has come under discussion. One interpretation suggested that Luther actually teaches here that all traditions of faith believe and worship the same god, who is the one, true God—thus bringing together Luther and Alexander Pope.[48] Two arguments, however, speak against such an understanding: 1) an argument of contradiction, and 2) an argument of translation. First, if Luther said here that all religions worship the true God, he would be in flagrant contradiction with his statement made earlier (cf., LC I,21). Second, the English translation is not entirely correct. There are two points where the English translation departs from the German: 1) it adds the definite article before "one, true God," and 2) it translates the construction "*glauben einen wahrhaftigen Gott*" with "believe *in the* one true God." But there is a difference in the German at Luther's time between "*glauben an*" (believe in) and "*glauben* plus accusative object" (believe that).[49] The Latin translation captured that difference.[50] A more adequate translation would therefore be:

> All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe that there is only one, true, God and worship him—nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them.

Neither Luther nor the Confessions identify the gods of non-Christian religions with the true God. The natural knowledge of God is a "dim spark," which essentially acknowledges that there is a God, and as such, it explains the universality of religion. Since natural law is part of natural revelation, fallen man has also an innate knowledge of the divine law, and thus, that God further requires morally good behavior. But the religious practice of fallen man is idolatrous.

> The Confessions emphasize the *defectiveness* of the natural knowledge of God; it provides a false picture of God and therefore promotes work-

---

[47] Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 440.

[48] See Pope, "The Universal Prayer," fn 1.

[49] See Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, IV, I, 4 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1949), col. 7836–7837, s.v. "glauben," III, B 1.

[50] See John G. Nordling, "Large Catechism III, 66, Latin Version," *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003): 235–239

> righteousness. They do not so much stress the lack of natural knowledge about God as they do its falseness. The natural knowledge of God sets forth a distorted picture of Him. It is incapable of showing us the God who justifies and saves from sin.[51]

The confessions have no interest beyond that. That can be explained with the fact that natural theology was not at the heart of the Reformation controversy, or the lack of the atheistic challenge in the sixteenth century.[52] One reason might be that the Reformers had a certain distance to traditional approaches to natural theology, as we have encountered them in Thomas Aquinas, because they saw it as too philosophical and speculative—an approach that tries to deal with the absolute God instead of the God incarnate.[53]

IV. Luther's View

From Romans 1 and 2, Luther followed that there is a natural revelation of God through nature and through the innate knowledge of the law. This

---

[51] Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529–1537*, 67, emphasis original.

[52] For the debate on atheism in the seventeenth century, see Hans-Martin Barth, *Atheismus und Orthodoxie. Analysen und Modelle christlicher Apologetik im 17. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

[53] Thus Luther writes: "The people of Israel did not have a God who was viewed 'absolutely,' to use the expression, the way the inexperienced monks rise into heaven with their speculations and think about God as He is in Himself. From this absolute God everyone should flee who does not want to perish, because human nature and the absolute God—for the sake of teaching we use this familiar term—are the bitterest of enemies. Human weakness cannot help being crushed by such majesty, as Scripture reminds us over and over. Let no one, therefore, interpret David as speaking with the absolute God. He is speaking with God as He is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises, so that from the name 'God' we cannot exclude Christ, whom God promised to Adam and the other patriarchs. We must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise certain despair will crush us. This distinction must always be made between the Prophets who speak with God, and the Gentiles. The Gentiles speak with God outside His Word and promises, according to the thoughts of their own hearts; but the Prophets speak with God as He is clothed and revealed in His promises and Word. This God, clothed in such a kind appearance and, so to speak, in such a pleasant mask, that is to say, dressed in His promises—this God we can grasp and look at with joy and trust. The absolute God, on the other hand, is like an iron wall, against which we cannot bump without destroying ourselves" (AE 12, 312). Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 12: Selected Psalms I*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 312.

understanding shall be expounded on the basis of his exposition of Jonah 1:5: "Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god."[54]

Luther sees in the very fact that the mariners cry to their gods as a proof for general revelation as Paul describes it in Romans 1: "For if they had been ignorant of the existence of God or of a godhead, how could they have called upon him and cried to him?"[55] Although there are atheists (Luther brings examples from classical antiquity such as the Epicureans and Pliny), this is a secondary step, a reaction against the natural knowledge of God. The content of this natural revelation that can be known through nature and reason is the existence of the Godhead as a being superior to all other things. As such a God, he is the source of all good things and able to deliver. "That is as far as the natural light of reason sheds its rays—it regards God as kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And that is indeed a bright light."[56] However, there are grave deficiencies. First, although reason knows that God can help, it does not know if God is willing to help man. Second, though reason can say that there is a god, it is unable to identify who this God is. But man does not stay in this aporia, rather he calls god what is not God and does not recognize the true God.

> Thus reason also plays blindman's buff with God; it consistently gropes in the dark and misses the mark. It calls that God which is not God and fails to call Him God who really is God. Reason would do neither the one nor the other if it were not conscious of the existence of God or if it really knew who and what God is. Therefore it rushes in clumsily and assigns the name God and ascribes divine honor to its own idea of God. Thus reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil.[57]

This is not only true of the pagan sailors of the time of Jonah. In the Roman Catholic Church, Luther finds also the same thing happening, that is, man fashions an idol in his likeness and puts it in God's stead. Here the idol is a god that is "moved and satisfied" by good works. The result is idolatry.

---

[54] The 1526 German exposition of Jonah is quoted according to the translation in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 19: Lectures on the Minor Prophets II—Jonah and Habakkuk*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 53–57.

[55] Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 53.

[56] Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 54.

[57] Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 55.

> They miss the true God, and nothing remains but their own false notion. That is their god. To him they assign the name and honor of God. Of course, no one but the devil can be behind this delusion, for he inspires and governs these thoughts. Thus their delusion is their idol; it is the image of the devil they hold in their hearts.[58]

Luther holds together the universal revelation that is the basis of all revelations with a strong rejection of every non-Christian belief as idolatry:

> Thus you also note that the people in the ship all know of God, but they have no definite God. For Jonah relates that each one calls on his own god, that is, his concept of God, whatever he conceives of God in his mind. And in that way they all fail to encounter the one true God and have nothing but idols whom they call God and honor as God. Therefore their faith, too, was false; it was superstition and idolatry and of no avail.[59]

This attitude towards other religions and their gods did not change. Luther was unequivocal that these gods were not identical with the true God, but figments of man's imagination. About a fortnight before his death, Luther preached in Eisleben on this very topic. He clearly articulated his belief in this matter which he had held throughout his life:

> Therefore, even though Turks, Jews, and all heathen know to say that much of God as reason can know from his works, i.e. that he is a creator of all things, and that one should be obedient to him etc. And they always cry and slander that we worship many gods, but they do that to us unjustly and wrong. We know, however, that they don't yet have the true God, because they do not want to hear his word, which he has revealed about himself from the beginning of the world to the holy fathers and prophets, and at last through Christ himself and his apostles, neither do they know him in this way. But they slander and rave against that, picture him as a God who has no Son neither Holy Ghost in his deity, and therefore take nothing but a mere dream to be God and worship [him]; indeed, they boast of lies and blasphemies as knowledge of God, because they dare to know God without divine revelation, that is: without the Holy Ghost, and to come to God without a mediator (which must be God's only Son). And therefore strictly speaking they are without God, because there is truly no other God

---

[58] Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 55.
[59] Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 19, 56–57.

> than this one, who is the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who both reveal themselves through the Holy Ghost to his church and act and rule in the hearts of the believers. As 2 John [9] says: "Who does not believe and stay in Christ's doctrine, has no God." And Christ John 5[:23]: "Who does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father either." Also John 14[:6] Nobody comes to the Father but through me."[60]

Unlike classical natural theology, Luther did not believe that calm reasoning from nature would lead fallen man to an essentially true albeit imperfect picture of God. It can also drive into atheism, for example the problem of evil:

> Tell me, is it not in everyone's judgment most unjust that the wicked should prosper and the good suffer? But that is the way of the world. Here even the greatest minds have stumbled and fallen, denying the existence of God and imagining that all things are moved at random by blind Chance or Fortune. So, for example, did the Epicureans and Pliny; while Aristotle, in order to preserve that Supreme Being of his from unhappiness, never lets him look at anything but himself, because he thinks it would be most unpleasant for him to see so much suffering and so may injustices.[61]

The solution of this argument —the existence of God or the existence of a God who governs his creation—is again for Luther not a rational argument along the lines of classical natural theology but the proclamation of Scripture:

> Yet all this, which looks so very like injustice in God, and which has been represented as such with arguments that no human reason or light of nature can resist, is very easily dealt with in the light of the gospel and the knowledge of grace, by which we are taught that although the ungody flourish in their bodies, they lose their souls.[62]

This again shows that the use of natural theology is more limited in Luther than in large parts of the theological tradition.

---

[60] Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 51, (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 151,16–36; my translation from *Sermon at the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Eisleben, 31 January 1546.*

[61] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 33: Career of the Reformer III*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 291.

[62] Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 33, 291.

Ultimately the difference between Luther and Aquinas is not so much in certain details of what is comprised in the natural knowledge of God. It seems rather that the main difference is in Luther's leading question: In what do you trust? So the question to everybody is: Whom do you worship, in whom do you believe? Thus non-Christian religions (and even some forms of Christendom) must be regarded as idolatry, and not an entry-level form of Christianity. To put it differently: reason can make a negative contribution—it can say that atheism is not a reasonable explanation of the world; however, it cannot say what kind of theism or what religion is true.

V. Conclusion

Although Barth's position has an impressive consistency, his rejection of any revelation of God in nature because of his overarching principle that all revelation must be christological is not tenable. It simply does not agree with Romans 1. God does reveal himself to all people through his works. So the term *natural revelation* should not be banished from Christian theology.

On the other hand, the theological edifices that were erected on Romans 1 and 2 and Acts 17 and other passages to develop a metaphysical concept of God that was then the first step in knowing the true God, miss the intention of these passages and their evaluation of the situation of man after the fall. Man's universal religiosity is a reflection of or rather on natural revelation. So the old argument for the existence of God *e consensu gentium* actually has merit. There is a supernatural reason for man's religion. Yet man's religion reflects natural revelation in such a distorted way that it is not possible by simple observation of the religious phenomena to distill out of these diverse and contradicting images of god(s) the image of the true God. Coming from revelation, we recognize that certain pronouncements about what God is are true if you extricate them from the sea of errors. Man has not effectively known God through this revelation, not because of the deficiencies of the revelation, but because of his sinful, warped nature. In the hands of man, the natural revelation of the true God is turned into an idolatrous concept of god and gods. The problem of man is therefore not simply an intellectual one, but it is sin. The remedy for this is not a return to a purer, better natural theology but the proclamation of Christ.

The concepts of god in the religions and philosophies of this world are therefore not only deficient but positively wrong. They do not have at their

core a purely maintained true knowledge of God. Zeus, Brahma or Odin are not identical with the triune God or with the Father of Jesus Christ (not to mention Hera, Kali, or Freya). They are also not a preliminary stage of faith in the true God. Of course one can say that at least the adherents of these religions believe in one or several divine beings and are therefore not atheists. But their concept of deity needs a thorough-going conversion, as they themselves need conversion—the death of the old man and the birth of the new man.[63] They will define God differently after they have embraced the triune God, confessing their former position as the worship of idols. That is also true for faiths that are post-biblical like modern Judaism or Islam. It would be a caricature of the biblical doctrine of natural revelation and truly anti-trinitarian to identify any god of a non-Christian religion with the Father simply because this god is called and recognized as the creator of the world.

Classical natural theology suffers from the fate that it constructs a metaphysical concept of God that is essentially non-trinitarian. Then the problem arises that either the Trinity is an afterthought and has to be fit into a finished concept of God, or the Trinity becomes superfluous, as for the Deists in the eighteenth century. This approach suffers such problems because it tries to form a closed concept where there should be an openness. The traditional definition of God, according to natural knowledge, does not include any reference that it is deficient. So, instead of building systems, it would be more appropriate to speak in aphorisms and fragments about the natural revelation of God.

The effect of natural revelation for fallen man lies in the fact that he makes idols and that he has a sense of guilt or responsibility to a norm higher than himself. He finds himself entangled in a web of conflicting values, which results in a guilt he cannot cut through. If one seeks a point of contact, this is it, even though here, too, it is not a simple relation of human question and divine answer. That is not much, but more than nothing. Apologetically, that means that it can be shown that man is a creature of faith in the sense of Luther's explanation of the First Commandment. Even atheism is just another form of natural man forming

---

[63] Compare Elert's critique from a slightly different angle: "It [sc. later Lutheran dogmatics] lost sight of the inner connection between the natural knowledge of God and the necessity for penitence. It forgot that 'natural' man's knowledge of God leads to doubt about God, thus to unbelief, and therefore makes penitence necessary, and that in all circumstances faith presupposes a break with the natural knowledge." Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 50–51.

idols, another example of man who believes—but not in the true God. Nevertheless, it can be shown that the question of guilt is something man has to deal with.

The field of natural theology as it has existed in philosophy and influenced the treatment of natural revelation in theology is not useless to theology. It is not simply identical with the natural knowledge of God. Theology can use it to show that theism is at the very least not a superstitious relic of an unscientific age. Theology can use it to preach the law, that is to convict people. This use nothwithstanding, the faith into which one can be reasoned is nonetheless not faith in the triune God.

Such a skeptical evaluation of much of what was and is passed as natural revelation should not be misunderstood as an exclusion of the presence of God in nature and history. The way to recognize him there goes through his revelation in the word—the eternal Word that was made flesh and the written and oral word that was given by the Spirit. Through this revelation, the world becomes once again transparent reflecting God's goodness because God as the one who sustains and governs his creation every moment and who loves and sent us his Son are not always congruent to our perception. The question of evil and suffering is not intellectually solved in this life.

The way out of idolatry to the knowledge of the true God is to know God as the Father of the Son through the Spirit. The way to this knowledge is through the babe in the manger, through a man hanging on the cross, through the proclamation of Christ crucified. That might appear cruder than an approach through "pure thinking," but it follows the wisdom of God instead of the wisdom of man. "For, since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21).

Man is a Microcosmos:
Adam and Eve in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545)

Theo M.M.A.C. Bell

"Until now there has not been anyone in the church who has explained everything in the chapter with adequate skill," so Martin Luther (1483–1546) boldly states in the beginning of the first chapter of his explanation of Genesis.[1] The commentators from the past with their countless questions had confused everything in this chapter: that God has reserved his exalted wisdom and the correct understanding of this chapter for himself alone. He has left us these two things to know: "this general knowledge that the world had a beginning and that it was created by God out of nothing." For Luther, it is clear that the perfect knowledge, which Adam and Eve once possessed in Paradise, has been gone for good. This will make his undertaking not an easy one. Trying to read Scripture in its literal meaning, Luther embarks on this journey on his own and without a guide. "We shall, therefore, leave others to their opinion and explain what seems right to us."[2]

More than the pursuit of knowledge, Luther is concerned with God's wisdom, which can be found in Scripture. He has some meaningful things to say about it in his Introduction to Genesis. According to Gregory, Scripture is a river, in which a lamb wades and an elephant floats. It is God's wisdom, which makes the wise men of this world fools; and it is the prince of this world who makes children eloquent and eloquent people like children. Not he is the best, who understands everything or even who has no shortcomings, but he who loves the most, like Psalm 1:2 says: "Happy is the man, who loves and meditates on the Law of the Lord." It would be more than sufficient, if this wisdom would please us, if this meditated wisdom would be loved and held day and night.[3] These thoughts about love for wisdom, which can only be gained from meditating Scripture day and night, make us think of Luther's story of his so-called tower

---

[1] WA 42:3,22–23; from Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesammtausgabe, Schriften*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993).

[2] WA 42:6,10.

[3] WA 42:2,5–13.

Theo M.M.A.C. Bell is a professor of theology at Catholic Theological University, Utrecht, The Netherlands.

experience,[4] but even more it discloses his monastic theological background—exposition of the Scriptures and meditation are intertwined for him.[5]

Luther dedicated an extensive series of lectures to what he called "my beloved Genesis." Apart from the Psalms, there is no other book in the Old Testament that is treated by him in such a profound and extensive way.[6] Leaving aside some series of sermons (*Declamationes*) from his younger days, we also have these academic lectures which remained unfinished in spite of a period covering ten years. His Lectures on Genesis (*Enarrationes in Genesin*)[7] comprise no fewer than three strong volumes of the Weimar edition of Luther's works and count some 2200 pages.[8] However, Luther research has not paid the necessary attention that this commentary deserves. While it is true that we must be very cautious in making use of these lectures on Genesis—primarily due to the fact that they are considered a reworking by editors who were influenced by Melanchthon[9]—we join Martin Brecht's opinion: "Nevertheless, the bulk of this commentary, with its amazing richness of features and allusions, undoubtedly does come from Luther, and his spirit is evident in it. Despite

---

[4] WA 54:185,12–186,20.

[5] Martin Nicol, *Meditation bei Luther*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 171. Meditation should not be considered as a private activity but rather as a practice in the Word aiming at teaching and preaching the doctrine therein.

[6] Oskar Ziegner, *Luther und die Erzväter: Auszüge aus Luthers Auslegungen zum ersten Buch Moses mit einer theologischen Einleitung* (Stuttgart: J. F. Steinkopf, 1936), 9.

[7] "The Weimar Edition speaks of 'Commentary'. Actually this is not the right word, but *enarratio*, which means: 'to speak, tell, or set forth in detail.' A public context is connoted. Therefore, it means to speak in public in detail." See Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his 'Commentaries' on Galatians 1519–1538* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993), 49–66, quote p. 50.

[8] WA 42–44. Only the first volume of the Commentary on Genesis is published during Luther's life in 1544 and has a foreword by him. Further, several editors have worked on the edition. It is not possible to deal here with the complicated *Redaktionsgeschichte*. For this, see E. Seeberg, *Studien zu Luthers Genesisvorlesung: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem alten Luther*, Beiträge zur Förderung christliche Theologie (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1932) and especially Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber* (Stuttgart: J. F. Steinkopf, 1936). See also footnote 10.

[9] These editors may be responsible for the repetitions that the lectures contain—a result of their using different students' notes. They likely also added some things. Above all, their own theology crept into the work so that one cannot always be sure of reading the genuine Luther.

the subsequent alterations, this monumental work may still be regarded as primarily his work and thus as a useful source."[10]

Why do we choose these lectures? If we are looking for a most ample and detailed description of Adam and Eve by Luther, we can find it here. Furthermore, in the years around 1535 theological-anthropological issues clearly are at the center of his thought.[11] Moreover, the Lectures on Genesis are dated from the last stage of his life, when Luther lived the life of a married man himself, and where his own experiences seemed to have enhanced his own appreciation of marriage and family life.[12] Did his marriage influence his exposition of the creation account somehow?

Premodern exegetes used to read Scripture in a different way than many modern exegetes do. To them Scripture was one holy book that fascinated as a whole as well as in its numerous details. It was written by God to put mankind on the way back to Him. That is the reason why reading Scripture is not reading literature in the first place, but reading about the history of salvation and doom, in which one finds oneself: "Like [it happened] to Adam, so to all men. Like [it happened] to Eve, so to all women."[13] This marks very clearly the central position of the first human beings, and at the same time, it expresses the self-identification of the exegetes with both ancestors; what is said of them, can be applied to all humans. So the story of the first human beings interprets the present interpreter as well.

For Luther the story of the creation and fall still remained a historical reality. In this way, though it had happened some six thousand years ago, one must take the text literally.[14] This was an important argument against philosophers like Aristotle who tended to teach the eternity of the world. But it is also an argument against church fathers like Augustine and Hilary who did not want to read Scripture literally and held that the world was created instantaneously and not successively in the course of six days. The

---

[10] Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Volume 3 – The Preservation of the Church, 1532–1546* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), 136.

[11] Bengt Hägglund, "Luthers Anthropologie," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag*, vol. I, ed. Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 68. In this connection reference is made to Luther's *Disputatio de homine* (1536).

[12] Marc Lienhard, "Luthers Menschen- und Weltbild im Genesiskommentar (1535–1545)," in *Luther-Bulletin* 3 (January 1994): 35.

[13] WA 24:91,1.

[14] WA 42:3,20.

Bible was for Luther the book of the world and the history of humanity from its very beginning. His exegetical method was aimed at finding the proper historical sense of the text. With this he distinguished himself from many of his predecessors who tended toward an allegorical interpretation.[15]

The story of the creation of man gave the exegete an opportunity to describe the relations between both sexes more precisely. It is clear that Luther as an exegete of the Bible was influenced by the thinking of his time concerning the relationship between man and woman. Therefore, his views may appear sometimes dated to us. However, it is essential for us not to seclude ourselves from this strange Luther but to hear him out first.

Like Augustine and many others, Luther could perceive a human ideal of living together in an harmonious way in the original community of Adam and Eve in paradise. First we will deal with man created after the image of God. After that we will look at the relationship of Adam and Eve and their position before and after the fall. A few particular verses from the first chapters of Genesis will have our special attention: Genesis 1:26–27 on the creation of man in the image of God, Genesis 2:16–23, in which the woman is created, and Genesis 3:15, the so-called proto-gospel, in which for Luther the history of creation and fall seems to culminate.

I. Adam and Eve as the Image of God

Man created according to the image of God is a topic that draws the most attention within the first chapter, and no theologian in the present or in the past can avoid determining the nature of this image. It is characteristic of Luther that he never deals with man on his own. He is not interested in a philosophical anthropology, which first treats man as man and after that covers the theological meaning. "What advantage is there in knowing how beautiful a creature man is if you are unaware of his purpose, namely, that he was created to worship God and to live with Him eternally?"[16] The human being can only be defined through his relationship to God and the destination which is intended by him. The most important goal, which Scripture reveals, is to live with God in eternity and to preach God here on earth, to thank him and patiently obey

---

[15] WA 42:176,21: " . . . *quod relictis Allegoriis historiam et propriam sententiam secuti sumus*." Sticking to the literal sense (*historia*) is also the reason why Luther estimated the exegete Nicolas of Lyra so highly: "*Ego Lyram ideo amo et inter optimos pono, quod ubique diligenter retinet et persequitur historiam . . .* " (WA 42:71,17–18).

[16] WA 42:98,11–13.

his word. Philosophers know nothing about this and the world with its highest wisdom is most ignorant when it does not take advantage of Holy Scripture or of theology.

Among all others man is a very special creature. He is created according to the image of God (*ad imaginem Dei*). This has to be mentioned first as this makes him a unique work of God.[17] For Luther this image-character is not identical with certain natural qualities, which are owned by all human beings. The theology of that time, following Augustine, defined the image in terms of the rational powers of the soul and perceived in them the fundamental difference between man and animal. According to the Vulgate translation, image (*imago*) and similitude (*similitudo*) were distinguished. The image of God would consist in memory, the intellect, and will.[18] These three comprise the image of God, which is in all of us. Moreover, the theologians stated that the similitude lies in the gifts of grace. Just as a similitude is a certain perfection of an image, so our nature is perfected through grace. Thus, the similitude of God consists in this: that the memory is provided with hope, the intellect with faith, and the will with love. Sometimes other divisions are made; namely, that the memory is the power of God, the mind of his wisdom, and the will of his justice. In this manner Augustine and others after him have exerted themselves to think out various trinities in man. Luther calls this "not unattractive speculations," which point conclusively to keen and leisurely minds, but they contribute very little toward the correct explanation of the image of God.

Luther rejected these kinds of interpretations.[19] Naturally, man did possess these three powers of the soul (memory, will, and mind) in a most perfect way, and they have been the foundation for a perfect knowledge of God and for a perfect love of God and fellow creatures.[20] Yet the image of God is not an active human power in the first place but rather the right relationship of a person to God.[21] Thus, if the *imago Dei* exists in this

---

[17] WA 42:46,11: "*opus Dei singulare.*" *Singulare* also points to being distinguished from the other creatures.

[18] WA 42:45,3–7: "*Doctores autem reliqui fere Augustinum sequuntur, qui Aristotelis divisionem retinet, quod imago Dei sint potentiae animae, memoria, mens vel intellectus, et voluntas; in his tribus dicunt consistere imaginem Dei, quae in omnibus hominibus est.*" Augustine, *De Trinitate*, chapt. IX-XI.

[19] WA 42:45,11–17; 247,39–248,8.

[20] WA 42:47,23–35.

[21] WA 42:86,3–16. See also Leinhard, "Luthers Menschen- und Weltbild im Genesiskommentar (1535–1545)," 24–25, and Hägglund, "Luthers Anthropologie," 24.

relationship, then it means that "Adam in his being not only knew God and believed in His kindness, but also lived in a life that was wholly godly, that is: he was without the fear of death or of any other danger and he was content with God's favor."[22] According to Luther, God meant to say with this: "This is my image, by which you are living, just as God lives. But if you sin, you will lose this image and you will die." Being created in the image of God means to live this fundamental vital relationship with the creator. In the fall, man does not lose only the similitude but the image too because this relationship with God is annihilated.

According to Luther's view, the similitude with God is not to be understood as an additional gift of grace but belongs to the natural being of Adam and Eve in their original condition. Their perfection consisted in being equipped with qualities in the spiritual as well as the physical realm. In this way, human beings possessed original righteousness by virtue of their being created.[23] At the same time, however, one should not lose sight of the physical dimension for the personal partnership with God and the certainty of God, which found expression in the physical condition of the first human beings. They possessed a perfect knowledge of the nature of animals, plants, fruits and other creatures. Their interior as well as their exterior senses were perfectly pure.[24]

Luther's view that man as the image of God concerns the whole person and is not restricted to the spirit only would definitively break through in modern Bible studies. Moreover, what draws siginficant attention is that Luther attributes the image of God equally to man and woman. This is an obvious correction of the tradition which saw the image of God only in the male and considered the woman only as an image because of Adam.[25] Finally, another remarkable point is this: Luther no longer explained the

---

[22] WA 42:47,9-11.

[23] David Löfgren seems to put the original righteousness of man on the same level with justification by faith. *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 62. However there is a remarkable difference that does not seem to be noted by him sufficiently; the original justification in Paradise is not attributed to man but is created inside within his human being and is therefore his possession. See e.g., WA 42:47,8: "*Quod Adam eam in sua substantia habuerit . . .*"

[24] WA 42:46,23-26; 47,35-38.

[25] See e.g., William of Auxerre, *Summa aurea* (Paris 1500), Fol. 58v: ". . . *quia vir immediate factus est ad imaginem et similitudinem Dei, mulier vero mediante vir,*" quoted by Elisabeth Gössmann, "Glanz und Last der Tradition. Ein theologiegeschichtlicher Durchblick," in *Mann und Frau – Grundproblem theologischer Anthropologie*, ed. Theodor Schneider (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 37.

image of God in a directly christological sense as he did in his earlier sermons.[26] The original purity of human nature is stressed much clearer now.

When Luther talks of the image of God, he emphasizes again and again the difference between the original state in paradise and the one after the fall. When we talk about it now, we deal with something that has become completely unknown to us. "Not only because we don't have any experience of it anymore, but also because we constantly experience the contrary and hear nothing except bare words."[27] After the fall, we are not able to imagine what a life in God's image is all about. Death creeps into all our perceptive powers like leprosy so that we cannot even understand that image with our intellect. We are not sure of God any longer but are teased by fear and dismay.[28] However, not everything is lost. Where the gospel is at work, a beginning of the restoration of the *imago Dei* is made. Man is born by faith to eternal life, or rather, to the hope of eternal life and is called to his eternal destination. This new life will realize itself here only fragmentarily. Here on earth man lives between expectation and fulfillment.

Is "image of God" the term with which man as a creature in relation to God is defined? In the next paragraph we will view what being created as a man or as a woman actually means. For that meaning, a distinction has to be made between the situation before and after the fall.

II. Adam and Eve in Paradise

The exegesis of the creation story provided Luther with the opportunity to describe the relationship of the sexes more precisely. In his sermons on Genesis in the years 1523–1524, Luther's understanding of Adam and Eve is still strongly determined by theological tradition; whereas in his lectures, his view gained distinct features. This can be explained from the question: Was the woman already in paradise subordinated to the man, or was her subordination only a consequence of the fall? Still completely in line with his predecessors, the young Luther in his sermons on Genesis thought that the woman in paradise was already subordinated to man.[29]

---

[26] See e.g., WA 42:66,20–28. The reference to Christ as the image of God is called here an allegory or anagogy by Moses.

[27] WA 42:47,31–33.

[28] WA 42:46,28–29.

[29] WA 24:639,6. "*Ibi ante lapsum iniunctum est Adamo et Evae, ut operarentur, ut Adam praeesset, regeret excoleretque paradisum.*"

But how did he think about it in his Lectures on Genesis? Eve appears for the first time in Genesis 1:26. After Luther has stated the remarkable difference between humanity and all other creatures by referring to the words *imago* and *similitudo*, he discussed God's mandate to both Adam and Eve to rule "the earth, the sea and the air."[30] He stresses that both have heard this mandate with their very own ears. It was not given as advice but as a command: *Dominamini* ("You shall rule")—given in the plural. If ruling over other creatures is at stake, Eve is completely equal to her husband and a "partner in ruling."[31] This ruling over everything is, according to Luther, "part, as it were, of the divine nature," it happens without force or effort and is coupled with a perfect knowledge of all things and an immediate intellectual comprehension of the good.[32] "If, then, we are looking for an outstanding philosopher, let us not overlook our first parents while they were still free from sin."[33]

The verse "male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27) offers the Reformer the first opportunity to draw attention to the woman as a creature.[34] Not wanting to exclude her from the future life, Moses, who was generally considered as the author of Genesis, has mentioned both sexes explicitly. Luther defines the woman as a physical being that is somewhat different (*quoddam diversum*) from man. The word *animal* here clearly points to the physical aspect. This means that although Eve was a very excellent creature, equal to Adam concerning her being an image of God, she still was physically different. Luther tried to explain this with a comparison of two celestial bodies, the sun and the moon. The sun is more excellent than the moon, though the moon as a celestial body is very excellent.[35] The same applies to the woman. Though she is an excellent work of God, she is not equal to the male's glory and dignity. In the first instance, this looks like inequality, but things are not so simple. In the perspective of creation, Luther can put both on the same level. As Moses, the author of Genesis, explicitly states, God created man and woman. She participates in the divine image and similtitude. In this way, the woman still remains a partner of the future life and an heiress of the same grace (1

---

[30] WA 42:49,30: "*rectores terrae, maris et aëris*".

[31] WA 42:151,35: "*socia gubernationis*".

[32] WA 42:47,42: " . . . *sicut Adam et Heva Deum agnoverunt Dominum, ita postea ipsi reliquis creaturis in aëre, aqua, terra dominati sunt.*" Luther seems to connect the knowledge of God here with the knowledge of nature and the ruling over the creation.

[33] WA 42:49,39f.

[34] WA 42:51,35ff.

[35] WA 42:51,39f. The same image is used again in WA 42:52,18.

Pet 3:7). According to Luther, all this is written with the intention to exclude no sex from the full honor of human nature, even if the female sex would be lower than the male. In spite of that, Luther rejects Aristotle's view, which was commonly supported by scholastic theologians, that a woman was a "maimed" man (*vir occasionatus*) or even a monster. He lashes out fiercely against these theologians whom he calls monsters themselves by mocking a creature of God that is created by a special decree of God.[36] Again he calls the creation of woman a very excellent work of God. With that he radically rejects the medieval opinion that a woman is an imperfect being by nature.

In the explanation of Genesis 2:18 ("It is not good that man is alone"), one would expect Luther to start with the creation of woman, but surprisingly he starts by mentioning the three estates: church, household (in a wider sense including government), and the institution of the household (in the narrow sense, *oeconomia*).[37] This may look somewhat remarkable, but discussing this estate first is important to Luther in order to understand the position of the concrete human being in the world. These are the life connections in which humans are placed in this world. Though the *ecclesia* is the most important estate, after that comes the household, which is set up as a regulation of family life. After exploring this estate Luther turns to the creation of woman. One could also state that with the creation of the woman the household or human community was founded. Like Adam, so also Eve was created according to a well-considered decree. After man was formed from the earth, woman was made from the side of man. God did not do this like a surgeon with a knife but through his word.[38] Whereas, in all of nature, offspring are created by males and females and born of the female, in the case of her creation, it is

---

[36] WA 42:53,22f. See e.g., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, art. 99,2 ad 1 and 2; Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* I, chapt. 20. About the woman as a "maimed man" according to Thomas, see e.g., Otto Hermann Pesch, *Thomas von Aquin: Grenze und Grösse mittelalterlicher Theologie: Eine Einführung* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1988), 208–227. Isnard W. Frank, 'Femina est mas occasionatus: Deutung und Folgeringen bei Thomas von Aquin', in *Der Hexenhammer. Entstehung und Umfeld des Malleus maleficiarum von 1487*, ed. Peter Segl (Köln: Böhlau, 1988), 71–102. Regarding the much more negative approach to the female by Aquinas due to the influence of Aristotle's biology as compared to Augustine's, see Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

[37] WA 42:87,10–90,9.

[38] WA 42:97,7–12.

the other way around: woman is formed from man, which is a miraculous work, just like Adam's creation from clay. Both are miraculous works, which a philosopher like Aristotle understood nothing. If it were not written in Scripture, it would be difficult for us to comprehend. Like Adam, so is Eve called to life by a unique decree (*singulari consilio*) of God. This means that this creature too is the companion (*socia*) of eternal life, which is superior to the life of other animals. The destination of the human kind is different from the beginning. Man is a unique creature and is suited to be a partner of the divinity and in immortality. At the same time, Adam and Eve become "*pater et mater generationis*" for the increase and preservation of the human race.[39]

With the creation of man before woman, however, a certain order is set. This becomes clearer when Luther deals with the idea that the woman is a helper "fit to him" (Gen 2:18).[40] In Hebrew it is stated: "Because she should be in the presence of him" (כְּנֶגְדּוֹ; *Quod coram eo sit*). With this the woman is distinguished from other female beings (i.e., female animals) that do not always remain in the presence of their male companion. However, the woman is created in such a way that she should always and everywhere be around her husband. Luther does not state the same for the male. This is noteworthy and said of the situation in paradise when both were supposed to be equal.

He continues with a remarkable sentence: "If the woman had not been deceived by the serpent and had not sinned, she would have been the equal of Adam in all respects."[41] And he adds: "Eve was not like the woman of today." Her state was much better and more excellent and in no respect subordinated to Adam, whether you count the qualities of the body or those of the mind. This concrete statement has tempted some authors to suppose that Luther changed his view on Eve in paradise. This would distinguish Luther not only from the exegetes before him but also from his own previous position in his sermons on Genesis. John Thompson talks here about a "created equality" of Adam and Eve.[42] Mickey Mattox, too, seems to join this view, though he adds some marginal notes. He is of

---

[39] WA 42:89,16: "*Adae itaque adiutorium fuit mulier, solus enim non potuit generare, sicut nec mulier sola generare potest.*"

[40] WA 42:88,23–40.

[41] WA 42:87,23-25.

[42] John Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Rules in the Exegesis of Calvin, His Predecessors, and his Contemporaries* (Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 1992), 136–144.

the opinion that the elder Luther leaves no room for domination in paradise.[43] However, we would like to qualify this interpretation. Compared to the situation after the fall, the woman has an equal position; but that does not mean equality in every respect. Mattox is aware that Luther's view on the woman's position is somewhat ambivalent. Equality always means equality only to a certain extent. Besides that, there is also some talk of inequality, even in paradise, which we have to investigate now.

First, equality exists above all in being created in the image of God. Both sexes are called to communicate with God and to live with him in eternity. Therefore, both are equipped to know God in an equal way. The woman possessed these mental powers in the same degree as the man. Her nature was pure and full of the knowledge of God so that she could understand and perceive the word of God on her own.[44] Can there be any inequality or difference in position? We think there is some and in order to see it, Adam and Eve have to be considered in the two different estates. In the *oeconomia*, that is, the domestic regiment and the ruling over creation, full equality can be assessed. Eve in paradise was the most free partner in ruling, which now is totally of the male's concern.[45] There was a spontaneous harmony of will between them, which was not affected by sin and egoism. Government (*politia*) for the purpose of protecting the community from evil and, if necessary, the use of force did not exist yet because nature was still "pure and without sin."[46] Once in a while, Luther mentions *politia*

---

[43] Mickey Mattox, *Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs: Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesin 1535–1545* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 101. Mattox writes: "For the young Luther, as for the Christian exegetical tradition generally, there is an order and rule of the male over the female within the unfallen human family. For the elder Luther, this is not so. . . . The spontaneous mutuality of their relationship meant that neither had dominion over the other within the sphere of the home."

[44] WA 42:50,10–11.

[45] WA 42:151,23: "*Viri subiecta est, quae antea liberrima et nulla in parte Viro inferior erat, socia omnium donorum Dei.*"

[46] Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 344. Luther views the existence of the state and the government as a consequence of the fall and he underlines their provisional character by calling them *regnum peccati*; they will be there as long as there is sin.

along with *oeconomia* in paradise, but then he points to the original human ruling over creatures and not to the ruling of humans over each other.[47]

Concerning the situation in the *ecclesia,* things are somewhat different. For Luther it is clear that preaching is the highest task followed by producing offspring.[48] Concerning preaching, Adam in paradise is given priority from the beginning. As the first human being, he is privileged to hear the word of God and with it comes the mandate to preach. This mandate is given to Adam personally on the sixth day. For Luther, this implies that Eve, who did not exist yet, did not hear the words directly from God, but had to hear them from her husband who informed her later.[49] The *mandatum Dei* concentrates on public worship (*cultus externus*). Adam was required to worship on every Sabbath and to preach the divine word, which God had spoken to him.

Why was the Sabbath made? First of all, Luther says, God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it for himself. This has the special purpose of making us understand that the seventh day in particular should be devoted to divine worship. Holy is that which has been set apart for God and has been removed from all secular use. God gave his word and command to Adam who is to occupy himself with this word for the sanctification of the Sabbath and for the worship of God. To man all this clearly proves that there remains a life after this life, and that man was created not for this physical life only, like the other animals, but for eternal life.[50]

The church is set up as the first estate by God's short sermon: "Eat from every tree in paradise, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil do not eat" (Gen 2:16–17). This little sermon contained all wisdom. "This sermon would have been like a Bible for him and for all of us."[51] The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was Adam's temple, church, altar, and

---

[47] WA 42:72,13–15. For *politia* as a postlapsarian institution in behalf of *remedium peccati,* see WA 42:79,7-9; 72,13–15.

[48] WA 42:89,6–7: "*Revera enim nullum opus fuit praestantius et admirabilius in tota natura quam generatio.*"

[49] WA 42:80, 11: "*Hanc concionem si, ut textus ostendit, Adam solus audivit, sexta die habita est, ac Adam eam postea cum Heva communicavit.*" Compare to WA 42:50,10–11. There is a certain tension between Luther's view that the word of God had to be preached to Eve by Adam, and Eve's faculty to perceive the word on her own.

[50] For the Sabbath, see Luther's explanation of Gen 2:3, especially WA 42:60,1–61,32.

[51] WA 42:80,3f.

pulpit.[52] It was established first (before the household), because God wants to make clear by this sign that man was created for another purpose, different than the rest of the living beings. Since the church was established by the word of God, it is certain that man was created for immortal and spiritual life. And this church without walls or without any pomp would have stayed the same, if man had remained innocent. That means the church was completely different in paradise. Adam and his descendants would have gathered there on the Sabbath day. After refreshing themselves from the tree of life he would have praised God together with all creatures on earth. He would have extolled the greatest gift, namely, that he, together with his descendants, were created in the image of God. He would also have admonished them to live a holy life and to work faithfully in the garden. Was there a law? Not in the sense we know it now. Adam was righteous; law was not envisaged as a postlapsarian device to him. In paradise, it only was some sort of exhortation; ultimately the meaning of the law for Luther is worship in its fullest sense.[53] If law is understood that way, we can say that Luther understands the original purpose of the law was to provide Adam with a means of giving concrete form to his love through his responsive obedience to God's explicit command.[54]

God had given the word to Adam alone on the sixth day before Eve was created. He informed her later, and she had to subject herself to the word of God (not to Adam!), which was received by him and preached with authority. For Luther it was still not an issue that a woman should also preach, even though, with the thought of the common priesthood of all believers, he had expressed the task of all Christians to preach.[55]

---

[52] WA 42:72,20.

[53] WA 42:80,9–14.

[54] Bernd Wannenwetsch, "Luther's moral theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. D. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 120–135. "Surprisingly, the law is not envisaged as a postlapsarian device, a makeshift repair provoked by the fall, but rather as belonging to Adam's original righteousness, and as such, it could not be opposed to his spontaneous love of God" (Wannenwetsch, "Luthers moral theology," 125).

[55] "Therefore order, discipline, and respect demand that women keep silent when men speak; but if no man were to preach, then it would be necessary for the women to preach." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 36: Word and Sacrament II*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oslwald, Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 152; WA 8:498,12–14. Elsewhere (Sermon on 1 Pet 2:5; 1523) Luther asserts that the common priesthood does not mean that women should preach (WA 12:308,29–309,10), referring to the submission of the woman to the man. But as Luther states, there

Nevertheless, Eve took part of the priestly task of Adam by teaching the gospel to her children at home.[56] Both parents fulfill their priestly task by teaching their children, as Luther had already argued in *Vom ehelichen Leben* (1522). So Eve at home shares the task of preaching with her husband.[57]

Luther goes further into the creation of the woman in connection with Genesis 2:23 ("This at last is bone from my bones").[58] Eve is led to the man by God and is introduced to him. He accepts her "with the greatest pleasure and reverence." In fact, this is for Luther the divine institution of marriage.[59] Adam immediately perceives that the woman is a building that is made from him. That is why he calls her "bone from my bones," which, according to Luther, are the words of a person who is righteous, wise, and full of the Holy Spirit. God is the *causa efficiens* of the woman and the marriage with the intention of (*causa finalis*) making the woman a "mundane dwelling" (*politicum habitaculum*) or "household building" (*oeconomicum aedificium*) for the man.[60] These metaphors need some explanation. Luther adapts the last figure of speech from Genesis 2:22 in the Vulgate text: "*Et aedificavit Dominus Deus costam . . . in mulierem.*" Here a rib of Adam is made into a woman.[61] According to Luther, many interpreters were anxious to know why Moses talks here about building instead of modeling or creating, and they all tried to explain this allegorically in many ways. Thus Eve's body as a "building" would have referred to the church, which is a body with limbs too. Though Luther thinks this traditional allegory is beautiful, he prefers the historical and proper sense of the text. In Holy Scripture, a married woman is called a building (*aedificium*) because she generates and raises offspring (Gen 30:3;

---

may be situations, in which the woman has to preach, even though she is physically less capable.

[56] Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia, Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545)*, Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 323. WA 10,II:301,23–25: "*Denn gewißlich ist vater und mutter der kinder Apostel, Bisschoff, pfarrer, ynn dem sie das Euangelion yhn kundt machen.*"

[57] Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia*, 323. WA 10,II:301,23–25: "*Denn gewißlich ist vater und mutter der kinder Apostel, Bisschoff, pfarrer, ynn dem sie das Euangelion yhn kundt machen.*"

[58] WA 42:101,34ff.

[59] WA 42:100,22–26: "*Quod addit Moses: 'Et [Deus] adduxit eam ad Adam, est descriptio quaedam sponsalium imprimis digna observatione . . . . Est enim legitima coniunctio masculi et foeminae ordinatio et institutio divina.'*"

[60] *Politicum habitaculum* (this is the only place in Luther's works, where it can be found): WA 42:102,22; *oeconomicum aedificium*: WA 42:99,13.

[61] For this subject, see WA 42:98,30–99,36.

Exod 1:21; 2 Sam 7:11). She serves as a permanent shelter, which means that the man finds a dwelling in her for generating and raising his progeny. Luther likes to compare this with a bird's nest. The word *oeconomicum* specifies the figure of the building; as a household building it offers structure and order to living together as a family and society. Also the cultivation of the field, the care for home, cattle, and domestic animals belong to it. To put it in another way: with the creation of the woman, the human species settles as a social and economical being in this world.

Luther relates the notion *politicum habitaculum* to cohabitation, which literally means that a married couple live together, keep house together, and raise a family. So the meaning is very much related to the woman as a building. *Habitaculum* has the sense more of a dwelling place than a mansion. So Bernard of Clairvaux speaks of "the little dwelling place of our body," which is more like the tent of a soldier or the resting place of a pilgrim than a mansion of a citizen.[62] The word *politicum* includes a broader meaning as in the original state a more comprising dominion might ring through. In this way the woman as the center of life not only offers a housing to her man and family, but in the original condition she also offers order and structure in ruling everything. For Luther the woman as a building and a housing is implied in Genesis 2:22; however, which form this habitation in paradise exactly had, we cannot imagine anymore; it was lost by sin.[63]

No word in Scripture has been written without reason. That Luther places value on every single word becomes clear when he pays attention to the Hebrew word *happa'am* (הַפַּעַם), which means now, at last, or this time. "This little word indicates an overwhelmingly passionate love."[64] It expresses most beautifully the affection of a husband for his wife, who feels his need for her company and for living together in both love and holiness. Though this purity and innocence have disappeared today, the joy of the groom and the affection for his bride still remain.

Eve is called wo-man (*vira*) because she is taken from man (*vir*).[65] Vir-vira is a Latin play on the Hebrew words *'yš* (אִישׁ) and *'iššâ* (אִשָּׁה). Eve is she-man indeed, denoted in the Vulgate as a *virago*, a heroic woman

---

[62] Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermones in Cantica 26,1", in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 1 (Rome: 1957), 170, 9–14.

[63] WA 42:99,13–14.

[64] WA 42:102,25–37. Quote 102,31f.

[65] WA 42:103,12.

(*mulier heroica*) who performs manly matters. With these manly matters, Luther points to a complete equality in the ruling of domestic and public affairs.[66] They share children, food, bed, and house; and they are of one will.[67] Even after the fall, when the woman is subjected to man, there still are remains of this shared ruling. The woman can still be called a *virago* because she lives in joint property with her man.

We already noted some difference in assignment of duties between the sexes, but what about the matter with regard to sexual determination? ". . . the husband differs from the wife in no other respect than in sex; otherwise the woman is altogether a man."[68] According to Luther, sex is the only real difference between the sexes. What does this mean? In another context, he states that Eve as a creature differs somewhat from man insofar as far as she has different members and that she has a much weaker nature (*ingenium*).[69] The first word clearly refers to the sexual characteristics; the last word can be understood in two ways. It can be applied to her natural condition, or to her rational gifts; but possibly it refers to both. In short: though Eve was a most excellent creature, nevertheless she was a woman. So, was there a real difference? Mickey Mattox tried to solve this problem by distinguishing between "qualitative equality" and "quantitative inequality."[70] With this, he wants to designate equality in a qualitative sense if Eve's physical, mental, and spiritual gifts are at stake; and a quantitative inequality, if a comparison of power and size with the man is at stake. But this difference does not really hold; for the physical aspect cannot be equal and unequal simultaneously. In my opinion it is Luther himself, whose speaking of the relationship between man and woman in paradise is not always consistent, who causes the problem. Sometimes he

---

[66] WA 42:103,36: "*gubernatio aequalis*".

[67] WA 42:103,16: "*Quicquid enim maritus habet, hoc totum habet et possidet coniunx. Sunt communes non solum opes, sed liberi, cibus, lectus, domicilium; voluntates pares sunt.*"

[68] WA 42:103,18: "*Ita ut maritus ab uxore secundum nullam aliam rem differat, quam secundum sexum, alias mulier plane est vir.*"

[69] WA 42:51,35: ". . . *videtur enim mulier quoddam diversum esse animal a viro, quod et membra habet dissimilia et ingenium longe infirmius.*" The translation of *ingenium* as nature is too narrow.

[70] Mattox, *Defender*, 82. Clearly the author is still saddled with an unsolved problem. "Perhaps he means that Eve was equal in dignity (i.e., worth before God) and in her possession of the virtues with which God had adorned humankind, but not in her social position or status. If that is the case, then Luther is frustratingly obscure about it, for he seems already to have denied even the possibility of differences of social status in an unfallen world" (81).

underlines their equality; other times their inequality. There are passages which refer to a complete equality. Referring to Genesis 2:18 ("I will make him a helper fit for him"), Luther writes that God makes out of Adam, being alone, a husband by adding the woman to him, who was needed for increasing the human race. Originally she was not like the woman today, but her condition was far much better and more excellent, "because she was in no respect (*in nulla re*) inferior to Adam, whether you count the qualities of the body or those of the mind."[71] But in other places Luther states that "though she was a most beautiful work of God, she nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige."[72]

Referring to Genesis 3:14, where Luther explicitly rejects the allegorical explication of Augustine and Gregory, he puts a similar opinion forward. According to these church fathers a difference should be made between a higher and a lower part of the human reason, in which Adam stood for the higher part, which is engaged in the contemplation of God, and Eve for the lower part, which is engaged in ruling over the house and state. This division between higher and lower is rejected by Luther because Eve was in no part (*in nulla parte*), neither in the body nor in the soul, inferior to Adam. Here the full equality of man and woman is used as an argument against a traditional anthropological division between a higher and lower part in humanity. Luther thinks these absurd allegories have caused much mischief and have misled theology into philosophic and scholastic twaddles. Therefore he wants to stick to the simply historical and literal meaning (*simpliciter historicam et literalem sententiam*) of the text itself.[73] According to this meaning, the serpent remains a serpent, the woman a woman, and the man a man. For, so he states not without any irony, not the lower but the higher reason have generated Cain and Abel, but Adam and Eve.

Another question is this: How does Luther deal with the two creation stories? It is clear that he wants to read them as a whole. Contrary to his sermons on Genesis, here he wants to stick to a literal reading of the text: a creation in six days.[74] In fact, in Genesis 2, Moses returns to God's work on

---

[71] WA 42:87,27–29.

[72] WA 42:52,10f.

[73] WA 42:138,40–139,5.

[74] WA 42:91,22: "*Pertinet autem hoc eo, ut firmiter teneamus hanc sententiam, vere sex dies fuisse, quibus Dominus creavit omnia, contra Augustini et Hilarii sententiam, qui uno momento putant omnia esse condita.*" Cf., WA 24:62,1 (*Sermons on Genesis* 1523–1524), where Luther still held to Augustine's view.

the sixth day with the intention of describing more closely the creation of mankind.[75] For Luther it is clear that the man was created first. Eve was created next, towards the end of the sixth day, while Adam slept. On the seventh day God spoke to Adam, mandated and instituted public worship, and forbade him to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.[76] It is rather peculiar that God speaks here to Adam exclusively. Where was Eve? Elsewhere Luther speaks, albeit inconsistently, about the fact that Adam had received the law on the sixth day, before Eve was created.[77] Apparently it is important for Luther here in Genesis 2:3 (the blessing and hallowing of the seventh day) to underline the preaching and hearing of God's Word as a characteristic task for the seventh day, whereas at the creation of the church as the first estate (Gen 2:16), it is the sixth day, which comes to the fore. However, this inconsistency does not seem to have bothered Luther at all.

III. Adam and Eve after the Fall

Though Scripture does not offer any proof, Luther still thought it most likely that the seventh day was also the day of the fall. This means that Adam and Eve had hardly spent one full day in the Garden of Eden before their temptation and fall.[78] Satan attacks the humans in the weakest area, namely in the person of the woman.[79] For although both of them were created equally righteous, still the man surpasses the woman, just like in the whole of nature, the male power surpasses the female. In this way, the male surpasses the female even in the original condition, as Luther asserts here. Satan had understood this very well; and whereas he noticed that the man was more excellent, he did not dare to beset him. Luther is even of the opinion that if Satan had tried to tempt the man, Adam would have been the victor for sure. That is the reason why Satan put Eve's valor to the test, for he saw that she depended so much on her husband that she thought she could not sin.[80] The mistake that Eve made was that she was not

---

[75] WA 42:63,15: "*Hic redit Moses ad opus sexti diei, et ostendit, unde cultor terrae venerit.*"

[76] WA 42:61,36–39.

[77] WA 42:77,18-19: "*antequam Heva esset condita, Adae data lex sit.*" Note: here Luther calls it a law, elsewhere he calls it an exhortation (WA 42,80,9–14).

[78] WA 42:61,33–36.

[79] WA 42:114,1–11.

[80] WA 42:114,10–11: "[Satan] *videt enim eam sic confidere viro, ut non putet se posse peccare.*" In the American edition of Luther's Works, this passage is translated too suggestively: "[Satan] puts her valor to the test, for he sees that she is so dependent on her husband that she thinks she cannot sin." Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 1:*

satisfied with the wisdom she possessed. She was not satisfied with the word of God and wanted to climb higher and to know God in another way than he had shown himself in his word. "So this is the Fall, that Eve after giving up the true wisdom, threw herself into the deepest blindness."[81]

However, this does not clear the man from blame. Both of them were equally righteous before the fall; both of them are equally guilty now. Luther does not agree with almost everybody who asserts that Adam would not have been seduced but had only sinned knowingly (*sciens*).[82] He would not have wanted to disappoint his beloved and had put the love for his wife above the one for God. Luther is not willing to accept this whitewashing. Adam is seduced as well as not seduced. It is true that this happened not by the serpent, but by his wife and himself, since he had convinced himself that no punishment would follow; this was announced by God (i.e., that they would die). Both human beings fall from faith into unbelief; their sin was that they did not believe in the word of God. Here we notice a remarkable difference with the theological tradition that was shaped by Augustine. To Luther the first humans did not sin out of lust but out of disbelief, which is the refusal to listen to God and his mandate. Luther treats lust more as a consequence than as a cause of the fall.

With the fall, being an image of God and the promise of immortality was lost, just like the immediate knowledge which Adam and Eve had of God.[83] The original purity and immediacy stand in sharp contrast to the situation of fallen humanity. According to Luther both sexes are dependent upon each other for procreation, but since the fall the mutual relations are totally changed. Now there is inequality between the sexes and the man is now the head of the woman. The woman is submitted to the man and is no longer able to carry the burden of the ruling, though she

---

Lectures on Genesis, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Olswold, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 151.

[81] WA 42:121,17–18.

[82] WA 42:136,3–5. This view was based on 1 Tim 2:13–14, which Luther reads somewhat differently than nearly all who assume that Adam was not seduced but would have sinned willingly and knowingly. Concerning *sciens*, see further Peter Lombard, *Sententiarum Liber* II, dist. 41 (PL 192,751) with a reference to Augustine, *Retractiones*, lib. 1, c. 15.

[83] That does not mean that the knowledge of God, which Adam and Eve originally possessed, was completely immediate. In that situation too, there is some talk of the word of God as a medium of communication, which had to be preached by the man.

is grumbling about her unequal situation.[84] Still she has an important task; she does not serve only as a partner in the procreation and preservation of the human race, but she is also needed for the community of life and the protection of it. An additional element after the fall is the defence of life in threatening situations. So the *oeconomia* needs the *ministerium* of women.[85]

Also the place of sexuality and marriage is different from now on. In paradise Adam met Eve still without any passion of lust or sense of shame. If Eve had not sinned, she would not only have given birth without pains, but also her union with her husband would have been just as honorable (*honesta*).[86] Adam would have known her with full confidence and an obedient will to God without any evil thought. Nowadays the woman is needed as medicine against sin referring to 1 Corinthians 7:2. Luther also refers to a statement of Peter Lombard, that marriage in paradise was established as a duty (*officium*), but now, above all things, it serves as an antidote (*remedium*).[87] Therefore men are compelled to make use of intercourse with their wives in order to avoid sin. According to Luther there are very few who marry solely as a matter of duty. For most people marriage is of all things a remedy to restrain lust. The role of sexuality has been changed drastically. After the fall, lust rages in man, who is infected by the poison of the devil. Death has crept into all our perceptive powers like leprosy, and nobody knows yet how much passion rules in the flesh.[88]

In paradise the order of the society was not deduced from the ruling of one person over another. By excluding the civil government from the prelapsarian institution of the estates, Luther rejects the notion that the original human society would have known a social order that was based on a difference in dignity. *Politia* as the exercise of power of men over men belongs to the situation after the fall. However, the state as an institution can be deduced from the will of God, who wants to preserve his world,

---

[84] WA 42:151,37. The submission after the fall does not seem to come very easily to all women. There is a reference here to her murmuring (*murmur*) and impatience (*impatientia*).

[85] WA 42:88, 4–6.

[86] WA 42:151,12.

[87] WA 42:88,10–14; 89,34–37. Peter Lombard, *Sententiarum Liber* IV, dist. 2 (PL 192,842): "*Fuit autem Conjugium ante peccatum institutum; non utique propter remedium, sed ad sacramentum et ad officium; post peccatum vero fuit ad remedium contra carnalis concupiscentiae corruptelam . . . .*". In other contexts different from sin and fall, Luther can underline marriage and sexuality as good gifts of creation. See e.g., *Von ehelichem Leben* (1522).

[88] WA 42:46,28–47,2.

which is threatened by selfish desires of human beings. Herewith belongs the law with coercive power, which is needed to protect life from destructive powers. The ruling of all three estates is entirely the concern of males after the fall.[89] Women cannot perform the functions of men any longer like teaching and ruling. Their functions become fully situated now in the domestic domain (*oeconomia*). In procreation, feeding, and nurturing their offspring, they are the masters.

Because the woman sinned first, she also is the first one to hear her penalty. Therefore, she also received the heavier penalty. Nevertheless Luther ventures to call this penalty "gladsome and merry" (*laeta et hilaris*),[90] for she receives as the first to sin the promise of hope; she is promised personally that her offspring will crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). The punishment of childbearing in pain will remain as a heavy burden on her body, but in spite of the penalty she gets the honor of motherhood, keeps her sex, and remains a woman.[91] She notices that she is not separated from her husband so that she does not have to live in isolation. With this Luther wants to express the creaturliness and dignity of Eve as a woman.

The penalty of the man consists in the increase of lust in his body and the aggravation of his tasks, such as supporting his family, ruling, and teaching. Henceforth, all this will involve the highest efforts. The field, once fertile, can now be plowed in sweat and tears only. Also, the man can maintain only with pains the obedience imposed to the woman. This applies even more strongly to the ruling over humans, for was it not Xenophon who had said that it was easier to rule wild animals than human beings?[92] Also man's relationship to wild animals has been changed radically; he has been alienated from those that do not want to be subjected to him any longer. Only the care for domestic animals remains to him.

Thus the ruling over creation is badly disturbed. With the penalty of sin, also the creation itself is coming into an ambivalent position. It is true that the earth is innocent and that it has not sinned. However, it is forced to endure the curse. On the one side, nature remains the reality created by

---

[89] WA 42:151,25: "*Regnum itaque manet penes maritum, cui uxor mandato Dei parere cogitur.*"

[90] WA 42:148,4 and 23.

[91] WA 42:148,27: "*Videt se retinere sexum suum et esse mulierem.*"

[92] Xenophon, *Cyropaed.* 1,1,3. Quoted in Greek in WA 42:152,18.

God; on the other side, it becomes a hostile reality and a tool of God's anger in regard of human sin. After the fall, man is called to acknowledge how wonderful the world, nature, and life are. The earth remains a kind, gentle, and forbearing mother; likewise, she is the perpetual servant of the need of mortals,[93] but at the same time, the earth feels the curse about which St. Paul had written in Romans 8:21. In the first place, it does not bring forth the good things it would have produced if man had not fallen. In the second place, it produces many harmful plants now. With the increase of sins, not only weeds, nettles, thorns, and thistles will multiply, but also nature will turn against man by cold, lightning, poisonous plants, floods, and earthquakes. According to Luther, the number of contagious and fatal diseases increases visibly too.[94] Though all this is not described in the Bible, Luther explains this as a consequence of the increase of sin in the world and with that the increase of its penalties.[95]

IV. The Promise that Remains

In spite of the extensive elaborations on penalties, the center of Genesis 3 for Luther is the proto-gospel (3:15). In this Luther finds the promise of a savior and of eternal life. This message seems to pervade the whole history of the first people. God is no tyrant, but a merciful God, who, in spite of the penalties, shows man the way to eternal salvation and worldly prosperity and happiness "because He has given a wife, home and children and preserves and increases this all by blessing it."[96]

However important the arrangement of this worldly life as a defense from chaos and protection against evil may be, the most important is nevertheless the beginning of the history of eternal salvation. It is true that people now are still subject to death as a penalty for sin, but one day they will be resurrected to immortality. This promise is seen by Luther as a reality yet. God transfers the death, which humans deserved, to another and insignificant part of them, namely the flesh, whereas the spirit lives in righteousness because of faith. According to the flesh they deserve death, but according to the hope, they are already liberated from death now. They are already justified by that faith in this world, and the expectation of

---

[93] WA 42:152,29. This is a quotation from Plinius the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, 1,63.

[94] WA 42:154,35–155,10. Luther mentions here the rise of the "French disease" or syphilis, which in his youth still was unknown, and the "English sweat disease," which spread in Germany (1529) and notably in Wittenberg too.

[95] WA 42:153,37–154,7.

[96] WA 42:149,12–17.

eternal life tempers the weight of the inflicted penalties. In this way, faith is put in a central position in Luther's Commentary on Genesis. Adam and Eve trusted God's promise. By doing so, they became the archetypes of justification by virtue of the promise, which effects what it announces. "It is the Word," according to Luther, "which has made Adam and Eve alive and has awakened them from death to life."[97] As life in paradise was, life now stays surrounded by God's mercy and kindness. The last day will be no return to a paradise lost, but a much more exalted state will be given to human kind. This promise is actually fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. He removed sin, swallowed up death, and restored obedience to God. That is the reason he remains a pledge for us. "These treasures we possess in Christ, but in hope. In this way like Adam, like Eve, all who believe until the Last Day live and conquer by that hope."[98]

V. Conclusion

In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther deals extensively with the story of creation and fall and the special position of the first human beings in it. It is possible to consider in other creatures, as it were, God's footprints, but it is in the human being with his and her original wisdom, righteousness, and knowledge of all things that God may truly be recognized, and for that reason, original man is described by Luther as a "microcosmos." [99] This image had its philosophical background in antiquity and was developed and incorporated in medieval Christianity (e.g., Isidore of Sevilla and Hildegard of Bingen). There is an analogy between the cosmos and man, and the arrangement of the macrocosmos can be traced back within man. This world *en miniature*, the summit of God's creation, contains an understanding of heaven, earth, and the entire creation. Originally, in human beings the knowledge of God, man, and creation were present in full harmony. According to Luther, through the fall this perfect knowledge of all things was lost for good, which means that man as a microcosmos is disturbed. Man's view of himself and the world is troubled like in a broken mirror. In this view, Luther distinguished himself from Renaissance thinkers like Leonardo da Vinci, who considered "man as the measure of

---

[97] WA 42:146,18–20. Here a line can be discerned with Luther's commentary on the Letter to the Romans (1515–1516), in which he deals with man as "*peccator re vera, sed iustus ex reputatione et promissione Dei certa.*" (WA 56:272,3–19).

[98] WA 42:147,5–7. The identification with Adam and Eve here is one with their hope instead of their sin, cf., footnote 9.

[99] WA 42:51,22–26. It is remarkable that Luther applies this image on Adam especially (*praesertim*)!

all things."[100] The divine-human shape represents the lasting harmony between the macro- and the microcosmos.

In his Lectures on Genesis, Luther stresses that man and woman are permanently dependent upon each other, and that, in this, the foundation of marriage is found. Human beings contribute, according to God's mandate, to the planning of life in view of the preservation of humanity and creation. Definitely, the elder Luther had an eye for the original equality of man and woman in paradise, but this does not necessarily imply another view of the situation after the fall. Certainly there is some talk of created equality (in the image of God), but this equality does not extend itself to the concrete life in the three estates in the present time. On the one side, in his description of the relations between man and woman, he still was a tributary in many ways to the views of his time; on the other side, he emphasizes their partnership and common responsibility for the preservation of creation. Undeniably, Luther has provided marriage with a higher social respect by appreciating it as a created institution and, thus, as the highest human estate of life.[101] This is an explicit correction of an overemphasis of celibacy by the Church of Rome. According to Luther's opinion, the papacy had tarnished marriage and had exalted celibacy to the highest estate.[102] Contrary to this self-chosen status of life, which does not comply with the original mandate to preserve the human race, the Reformer emphasizes marriage as a divine institution. [103] At the same time, the Reformation movement of the sixteenth century has profiled marriage more strongly as a mutual contract based on freedom and mutual respect. For the legal status of women, it certainly meant some progress; forced marriages were disproved as well as forced entries into cloisters.[104] Nuns

---

[100] Actually a classic idea, developed by Protagoras of Abdera (c. 480–410 BC).

[101] See e.g., L. Roper, "Gender and the Reformation," in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 92 (2001): 290–302; Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[102] WA 42:100,36–101,34. Here Luther mentions his own negative memories from his youth concerning marriage as a sinful state of life by definition (101,13–15). See Gerta Scharffenorth, "Im Geist Freunde werden. Die Beziehung von Mann und Frau bei Luther im Rahmen seines Kirchenverständnisses," in *Den Glauben ins Leben ziehen . . . Studien zu Luthers Theologie* (München, 1982), 128–131.

[103] See e.g., WA 42:101,3–33; 101,27–28: " . . . *praeterquam quod coelibatus sine verbo Dei institutus est, Imo, sicut praesens historia testatur, contra verbum Dei.*"

[104] See further Steven E. Ozment, "Luther on Family Life," in *Protestants, The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), chapt. 7, 151–168. "Among the leaders of the Reformation, it was widely believed that in most cases women had been placed in cloisters against their will and without full understanding of the consequences" (154).

were even encouraged to leave them behind. From a sixteenth-century point of view, cloisters could only be seen as women-unfriendly because women were kept away from their real tasks and responsibilities in society.

In spite of the fact that the Reformation movement acquired a stronger appreciation for marriage as an earthly institution of God, it did not immediately mean an improvement of the concrete position of women. Now, that an independent development within the cloister was denied, there remained for them only the traditional tasks within marriage and family life. It is obvious that Luther was no proto-feminist. We would do well to bear in mind that proposals for the praxis of marriage and family do not come from general, doctrinal statements, but that they are dependent in a much higher degree from social structures, models of acting, and the horizon of thinking in a certain time.[105] Definitely, the elder Luther caught more sight of the original equality of man and woman in paradise, but it did not necessarily mean another view on the situation after the fall. On the one side, describing the relations between man and woman, he was still supportive of the views of his time, on the other hand he underlined their partnership and common responsibilty.

How had the situation in paradise been? Even when some authors underline created equality in Luther's Lectures on Genesis, it does not mean equality in every respect. There remains a certain ambiguity in Luther's statements. Sometimes he stresses equality, especially when there is talk of man and woman created in the image of God. Other times, however, he can also stress a certain inequality from the beginning of creation. The inequality deals then with a difference of sex and a different position in the church. Man and woman are equal before God as creatures, but at the same time they are different from the very beginning and not only after the fall. However, emphasizing the equality of the woman as a full-fledged creature of God already means a remarkable departure from the medieval scholastic theology, in which the woman by nature was considered an imperfect being. Luther was able to bring back the discussion from a philosophy of nature, which was strongly determined by Aristotle, to proper theology; from scriptural insights, he reinterpreted the creation of man and woman theologically. The creation of both sexes are equally miraculous, and therefore, both are destined to eternal life with God. Besides that, man and woman in their being ordered to each other

---

[105] Scharffenorth, "Im Geist Freunde werden," 142.

have their own functions and responsibilities for the preservation of creation and for the protection against chaos. Although subject to change through time, these are fundamental insights upon which every theology of creation should always be prepared to reflect for its own time, again and again.