

Luther's Apologetics

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The renewed interest in the construction of a Christian apologetic which is stirring in Protestantism ought also to stimulate Lutherans to take a fresh look at the possibilities of defending the Christian faith before an unbelieving world. As Protestantism shortens its lines in an attempt to strengthen its position, it behooves a Lutheran theologian to come to a clear understanding of the nature and the place of apologetics in the Christian witness.

Luther's position in the field of apologetics is completely consistent with his views on natural theology. Rejecting Thomism completely, Luther did not believe that natural theology could ever bring the unbeliever one step closer to the Christian faith. His apologetic is consistent also with his denial of every right of reason to sit in judgment on the statements of God in Scripture.

This does not mean that Luther believed that the study of philosophy has no place in the theological curriculum. He was perfectly willing to teach philosophy to the youth of the church, not in order that they might approve of it but that they might, as slaves in barbarous Egypt, be able to speak with the tyrants that rule over them until they are freed. (WA 6, 188)

THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE WAYS OF GOD

One end of apologetics is to "justify the ways of God to men." Luther condemned all such efforts as arrogant and presumptuous blasphemy. He says that the mouth that asks God why He did a certain thing belongs on the gallows (33, 121 f.). He characterized this as an impious effort to search out the hidden secrets of God. A man, he says, would not tolerate it if another man were to pry into his secrets in this way, and the Lord will surely not permit it. He is Lord and has authority to do what He wills. He has His own reasons for doing whatever He does. If He had to answer all the questions that men put to Him, He would be the "poorest God." (TR 2, 584 f.)

Moreover, the question why God deals as He does with men springs from a failure to understand and to recognize His sovereign lordship. If God will have it so, it must be so, and it is right that it should be so. Beyond this we are not to go. God is limited by nothing; there are no laws which He must obey, no rules to which He must conform (WA 16, 140). Reason always voices this "Why?" but this is profitless grubbing and accursed prying (WA 16, 142). When we are tempted to ask this question, we should remember that the works of God are past all accounting. (WA 18, 709)

We are zealously to guard against all attempts to explain the way of God. If the Lord has not Himself revealed it to us in His Word, we must take off our hat and stand in awe of His majestic excellence. And if men murmur, let them murmur. God will not be changed to suit their ideas. If many are offended and leave, the elect, at least, will remain. If men ask us, for example, why God created Adam in such a way that He could sin, we can only reply that He is God and His will has no rules and regulations according to which it must act (WA 18, 712). The writings of Luther abound in warnings against this why, this effort to find a rational explanation for the ways of God, which are past understanding (WA 16, 143f.; 43, 76f.; 47, 540). He even invented a name for those who ask this question. He called them "Whyers" and "Whatforers" (WA 43, 77: *Curistas et Quaristas*). God's acts or words do not require explanation or justification. They are right and good simply because they are the words and acts of God. To demand that God should conform to human patterns of thought and earthly standards of conduct is to shut God up in a glass where I can observe Him (WA 16, 141). Before such arrogance, Luther recoiled in horror.

THE WAY OF ANALOGY

It is therefore not unexpected that we should find Luther rejecting every attempt to justify God's counsels by the use of analogy. Luther did not discountenance the use of analogy. He delighted in comparing

his relation to his son Hans to that which exists between believers and the heavenly Father. He pointed to the blooming flowers of spring and spoke of them as a testimony to the resurrection, but he also said that these testimonies make little impression on men (WA 43, 374). Philip Watson says that Luther warns against the view that analogies from human experience are valueless, (*Let God be God* [Philadelphia, 1949] p. 84) and this is true. Yet we ought not to overlook the fact that in the same connection Luther says, “These arguments are the weakest of all” (WA 40, 1, 459f.). It seems clear that Luther regarded them as valid illustrations but not as logical proof. (WA 40, 1, 459 f.)

Analogies are to be used when the matter at issue has been established dialectically. Such analogies are related to allegories, which also proceed from human to divine matters. Luther’s changing attitude toward the allegorical method in Biblical interpretation is related to this rejection of apologetics by analogy. Of allegories Luther said: “They prove nothing.... We ought not to be quick to use them unless our cause has first been established by very sound arguments.” (TR 1, 606)

But not only are analogies weak arguments even when they are used correctly, but they can become downright vicious unless great care is exercised in their use (WA 40, 1, 460). The Turks say, for example, that in one house there should be no more than one master or one host, and from this analogy they conclude that in heaven there must be only one God, and from this they are led to reject the doctrine of the Trinity. (WA 47, 328)

In another place he writes that human reason can conclude from human government only that God must punish the wicked and reward the good, for this is the basic principle according to which human governments act (WA 21, 512). This analogy serves to strengthen men in their legalistic opinions of justification by works. In the justification of the sinner before God the very opposite happens. The innocent One is punished, and the guilty go free (WA 25, 329). Therefore when men take counsel of reason and seek to find a way in which they can bring about an agreement between the judgment of reason and the articles of faith, it will finally come to this, that they will believe nothing at all. (WA 28, 92)

“PROOFS” FOR FAITH

We are not to look for proof of the truth of the Christian faith. When men seek for such proof, it is already too late. When we begin to doubt and dispute about an article of faith, we have already lost it (WA 40, 2, 592). This does not mean that we are not to search the Scriptures to ascertain what the Word of God says about any given question. But this is all that we should do, and whenever and wherever the Word of God has spoken, then and there we are not to ask for additional proof or to demand a rational explanation.

This attitude toward apologetics follows naturally from Luther’s view regarding the nature of the Christian faith and is perfectly consistent with the distinctive Lutheran doctrine of the bondage of the will. In the theology of Martin Luther faith is never, and in no way, an achievement of man. It is always, in its totality, a gift of God’s grace (WA 10, I, 1, 611). The conviction and the confidence which is the essence of the Christian faith is not an intellectual and emotional position which a man chooses for himself and by his own power. We believe, rather, according to the working of the almighty power of God. Nor is faith the final stage to which a man comes after a long-drawn-out process of reasoning, in which he is finally persuaded that now at last he can rest his heart in the sufficiency of the evidence. It is much rather a stepping out into the darkness, where there is no “proof” in the ordinary sense of the term, but only a word of the Lord which is infinitely better and more certain than all the rational proofs in the world. Faith is something done to us rather than by us. (WA 42, 42)

Luther warns against the faith which is the work of man. He calls it a “manufactured faith” and an “imagined faith” (WA 10, 3, 357). True faith is complete trust of the heart in Christ and is kindled alone by Christ. Such faith does not come out of our own preparation, but when the Word of God is preached openly and clearly, it begins to grow by itself. (Ibid.)

Luther believed that man is totally impotent in conversion and that faith is worked in man by an act of God’s gracious but resistible omnipotence, without any cooperation on the part of man. He is sure that if we wish to discuss the question of faith at all, we must first learn that it is a gift of God and a divine power and that we cannot believe by our own strength (WA 33, 284). And from his day to ours he has taught every Lutheran

child to recite in the explanation of the Third Article of the Creed: “I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.” He warns against the presumptuous attitude that looks upon faith as something that we can do easily. Both the Word and faith in the Word are gifts of God and not our work. Faith comes to us without any effort or power on our part, through the grace of God alone. (WA 33, 284-287)

If men could come to faith by the use of their rational faculties, then there would be no need of the Holy Ghost (WA 36, 492). Unbelief is not due to the weakness of the intellectual capacities of the unbeliever. Indeed, nothing is more fit to understand the words of God than a weak intellect. Christ was sent to imbeciles and for imbeciles. The real cause of unbelief is the devil, who sits in our imbecility and rules there. If it were not so, the whole world would be converted with one sermon, and it would not need to be a long sermon. Without God’s power working in us we can see nothing, understand nothing, and do nothing in the realm of faith (WA 18, 659). And if we did not want to be saved until we had grasped God’s promises with our reason, we would be a long, long time at this business (WA 47, 330). If all the reason in the world were concentrated in one spot, it could not understand or tolerate the Word and the holier and sharper, the higher and more intelligent, reason is, the less it understands. If the words are to be understood and enter the heart, we must come into a different world and give reason a furlough. “If a man wants to hear the Word of Christ, he must leave the donkey at home” (WA 33, 264 ff.). Human reason can teach the hand and foot what to do, but only God can teach the heart to believe (TR 1, 544).

We have enough to do in listening to the Word (WA 42, 453) and praying for help to understand it. (TR 1, 576) When the Word of God is preached, he says, it does not require a rational decision and assent but a supranational faith (WA 10, I, 1, 218). The less there is of reason, say the *Tischreden*, the greater is the capacity for faith (TR 3, 62). It would be easier to teach a donkey to read than to set reason right, and while a poorly gifted man needs one teacher a highly gifted one needs ten (WA 1, 696). Indeed, reason fights against this faith, and faith cannot exist unless reason is blinded and made foolish. The Gospel is to lead obstinate and blind reason away from its own light into faith, by which it comes into the true light (WA 10, I, 1, 218). Faith is therefore not the result of a rational decision on the part of man, but it is the Spirit alone who enlightens the minds of men through the Word (WA 42, 486). And since we ourselves have not become believers as a result of rational argument, we ought not to expect to persuade other men by lengthy and learned disputations. In that way little can be accomplished. (TR 6, 181)

MAKING THE GOSPEL “REASONABLE”

As is to be expected from a man who took such a position Luther resisted all attempts at making the Gospel reasonable. Nor only did he consider such efforts a waste of time, but he looked upon them as dangerous and actually destructive of the Christian faith. This sort of rationalizing has found great favor in some areas of Christendom. Books on the reasonableness of Christianity have enjoyed great popularity, but entirely aside from the sinful pride inherent in such an approach Luther would have considered the title *The Reasonableness of Christianity* a contradiction in terms. Luther simply did not believe that the Gospel was reasonable or that it could be made reasonable. Speaking of the doctrine of the person of Christ, he says that Nestorius, Arius, and the Jews all have reason on their side (WA 40, 3, 704) . At another time he said that if we judge according to reason and our understanding, we shall thoroughly corrupt the Gospel and lose it. (WA 36, 492)

The Gospel cannot be made reasonable to natural man because natural reason opposes the Gospel. To unconverted reason the Gospel is sheer nonsense, and reason is the greatest impediment to faith (TR 3, 62). In the Galatians commentary he writes: “It is the very nature of all articles of faith that all reason shrinks back from them” (WA 40, 2, 589). In another place he says, “Reason is diametrically opposed to faith” (WA 47, 328). The Gospel is an offense to our reason (WA 40, 2, 587). Reason and the wisdom of our flesh damn the wisdom of the Word of God (WA 40, 2, 374).

Luther held that if reason could understand the truths of the Gospel, faith would be unnecessary. What can be established by rational proof and empirical evidence need not be believed (WA 40, 2, 593). Faith has to do with things not seen. Luther asks, “What sort of faith is this, to which even reason is able to attain?” (WA

40, 2, 589). If the doctrine of the person of Christ could be understood by reason, no faith would be involved in its acceptance (WA 10, I, 1, 152). In the Sacrament we see bread and wine, but we believe that Christ is present, too, with His body and blood even while He sits at the right hand of God. If this does not seem to agree, we must remember that if our Lord God would give us articles which our understanding can grasp, none of us would be saved. Whatever we begin and understand with our reason will not help us or save us, for all the clever people on earth working in concert could not build a ladder to heaven. (WA 33, 120)

It is the nature of reason to judge on the basis of the evidence of the senses. But faith deals with matters about which the senses can tell us nothing (WA 40, 2, 589). If there is therefore to be a place for faith at all, God and divine truth must be hidden. And it is hidden just in this way that it is contrary to what we feel and experience. When we think, for example, of the many people whom God damns, He does not appear to us to be kind and merciful but rather cruel and arbitrary. It is precisely this that gives us an opportunity to exercise our faith. God always hides His grace and mercy under His wrath, and He conceals His righteousness under sin. When He wants to make us alive, He does this by putting us to death. When He wants to take us to heaven, He does it by leading us into hell. In these things lie the province and the need of faith (WA 18, 633). We believe that God is just especially when He appears to be unjust. (WA 18, 784)

Just because this is the nature of faith, it cannot be achieved nor maintained by rational argument or empirical evidence. All the articles of our faith are so difficult and so high that no man can hold fast to them without the grace of the Holy Spirit (WA 32, 57). Take any article of faith and hold fast to it with reason, and you will retain nothing of it (*ibid.*). The Holy Ghost must be Master and Teacher, or nothing will come of it. (WA 37, 43)

For this reason, too, Luther was opposed to the use of all force to compel men to believe or to accept the Christian religion (TR 4, 576). When Balthasar Hubmaier, the Anabaptist, was burned in 1528, Luther wrote that one ought to oppose false teachers with the Scriptures and that little would be accomplished here with fire. (WA 26, 145-146)

With the conviction that only the Holy Ghost is able to create and preserve faith Luther armed himself against unbelief. If someone said of any article of faith, "That makes no sense," he made no effort to demonstrate how this could be made to agree with reason. This conflict between reason and faith did not disturb him. He was happy that it was there, because he was sure that if reason once agreed with the message of the church, it would be evidence that the church no longer held the Christian faith. And therefore, when the unbeliever said, "This makes no sense," Luther answered, "Indeed it makes no sense in your head, but it must make sense in faith, and it is in accord with God's Word." (WA 37, 43)

It is only man's damnable pride that keeps him from seeing that the way out of this conflict is not to be sought in a modification of Scripture but in a change in reason. Since Scripture cannot be broken, it is reason that must break. It is not difficult for men to change the truths of Scripture to make them reasonable. It takes no great skill to philosophize about these things (WA 41, 274). Paul of Samosata did it with the doctrine of the Trinity, and when he finished, he offered men something easy to believe. His doctrine was one that a godless heathen or a boy of ten could understand, but it was not the Christian faith (WA 40, 2, S88). When God has spoken, we are no longer to ask how this can be true. We are to be content with His Word alone, though it may not agree with reason. It is a gift of God's grace when a man has no desire to argue about these matters. (WA 41, 274)

All men ought to refrain from tampering with the Scriptures. It is a godless business to abuse the Word of God in order to make it conform to the imaginations of reason (WA 40, 2, 589). Even if it sounds foolish, what do we care? (WA 41, 273 f.). If a man does not want to believe what the Bible says, he ought at least to have the decency to leave it untouched. No harm is done if we do not comprehend it. And if someone calls us foolish for believing such things, that also will do us no damage. We Christians are not such fools that we do not know what we believe. We will nevertheless believe God and give Him the glory against all sense and reason (WA 47, 51). No matter how it sounds, we still know that it is true. If others do not want to believe it,

that is their privilege, but one thing they ought not to do, and this is to change it (ibid). It is therefore not Christianity that needs to be made reasonable. It is reason that needs to be made Christian.

So convinced was Luther of the irreconcilability of Scripture and natural reason that he held that any attempt to bring about such a reconciliation must inevitably lead to a loss of faith. If we should insist on comprehending the articles of faith with our reason, we would very quickly lose Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Word, grace, original sin, and all other articles, for not one of them is understood by reason (WA 40, 2, 593). Regarding the position of Zwingli and his followers on the Lord's Supper Luther said that they want to measure and master this whole matter with their sophistic reason, and he correctly predicted that eventually it would come to this that they would also deny that Christ is God, for the same arguments that overthrow the Real Presence also cast doubt on the person of Christ. (WA 18, 186 f.)

For the same reason Luther had little sympathy with the attacks of Erasmus on the Roman Church. Erasmus had used ridicule against the abuses and malpractices of Rome. Luther was afraid that such an attack would boomerang and also strike the Scriptures. There are things in the Bible which from the viewpoint of human reason are just as foolish as any of the ceremonies of the Roman Church. And Luther asks, "What if these foolish things, which you ridicule, are pleasing to God?" (TR 1, 185). Luther simply believed that human reason was not competent to judge and distinguish clearly between wisdom and folly.

SCRIPTURE THE DEFENSE OF SCRIPTURE

Luther knew of only one true way to defend the truths of Scripture. The principle of *sola Scriptura* Luther applied also to the field of apologetics. When faced with the need of defending any article of faith, whether it be the resurrection of the body, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, the personal union, or the Trinity, he usually reminds his hearers that God has said these things and God is almighty. If God said it, we are not to doubt. There stands His clear word, which cannot lie. The only hindrance here is that either men do not believe that God really said this or they do not believe that He is almighty. (WA 49, 412)

If we could convince a Turk of these two premises, namely, that God said it and that God is almighty, he would surely also believe all the other articles of faith (WA 49, 413). But of this only the Holy Ghost can convince men. We, on our part, have enough to do if we will set out to repeat only what the Scriptures have said (WA 41, 271). To fail with God's Word is far better than to succeed without it. (WA 36, 204)

We shall therefore be well equipped to defend the articles of faith against the devil if we are well grounded in God's Word and cling firmly to it when the devil seeks to overthrow our faith with the clever arguments of reason (WA 22, 40; cp. TR 2, 243). Faith, after all, is the evidence of things not seen. It clings only to the Word of God, and lets itself be guided by that Word, even when it appears that what the Word says is vain and useless (WA 10, I, 1, 613 f.). And just that which reason calls folly faith considers to be the right way, and in this way it comes to Christ and finds Him. (ibid.)

Over against the "conclusions of faith" the arguments of reason and experience are always "lesser arguments" (WA 42, 482). And if men will not accept the doctrines of faith on the authority of the Bible, we ought nor even to desire their assent on other grounds (WA 36, 526). If they accept them on the basis of reason, they may not expect us to thank them for this (ibid). Against Erasmus he wrote that the principles of the Reformation can be defended by clear Scripture, and he goes on to say that whatever cannot be so defended has no place in the Christian religion (WA 18, 659). It is the very nature of the Christian faith to have nothing on which it can rest except the bare Word of the Bible. (WA 36, 492)

We must not even attempt to undergird the faith with arguments from reason. To do so can have the most disastrous results. If we want to remain firmly grounded in the faith, we must be on our guard against what reason and human thoughts teach (WA 28, 91). The only way to retain the truths of Christianity is to hold fast to the clear and definite statements of the Bible. We should cling only to the words of Scripture and say, "This is what Christ said, and it must be true." (ibid.)

The Christian faith, then, can be maintained and defended only by an appeal to Scripture. Luther's approach to this question is thoroughly dogmatic and authoritarian. He held that there was not one article of the true religion that could be firmly held in any other way (WA 32, 57). He told his congregation in Wittenberg

that they should learn “to prove and to defend the doctrines of the faith only with Scripture” (WA 32, 60). And in the scholastic, Thomistic atmosphere of his time this was sensational. And it is difficult to understand how, in the light of all this, neo-orthodoxy can on this point claim Luther for its own.

Luther insists that if the believer wants to be well prepared to defend his faith, he should know the texts of Holy Scripture on which the articles of faith are based and from which they are drawn (WA 40, 2, 592). In divine things we are not to dispute but only to listen (TR 2, 23). Nor are we to engage in subtle disputation in an attempt to prove the possibility of what God has said. If it is His Word, we are to trust it without question, even if we do not understand it (WA 41, 274). This is a basic principle that underlies Luther’s approach to all the doctrines of the Bible, and in it can be found an explanation for much of the distinctiveness of Lutheran theology. Of the doctrine of the Trinity he says that we ought to be satisfied with the fact that God testifies and speaks thus of Himself in the Word (*ibid.*). The same attitude is manifested also in his defense of the sacraments. (WA 47, 329)

If men want to argue with us about the truth of our faith, we are to do nothing more than this, that we throw the texts before them. We are not to enter into any prolonged dialectics, and we are simply to say, “I do not want to hear your scoffing words and speculations” (WA 40, 2, 592). The primary concern of a theologian must be that he knows the texts well, and his first principle must be that in holy things one must not dispute nor philosophize. In theology one must simply listen and believe and firmly hold this in the heart: “God is true, however absurd the things which God says in His Word may appear to reason.” (WA 40, 2, 593)

Any attempt to defend the articles of the Christian faith with reason is the greatest folly. To undertake to establish and to defend God’s Word with reason is equivalent to an attempt to illumine the bright sun with an unlit lantern and to found a rock upon a reed (WA 6, 291). If a man will not believe the Word, then whatever else you may say to him will be only so much wasted breath (WA 36, 528). If a man does not want to believe the words of God, then he may demand nothing more from me. If I have shown that it is not contrary to God’s Word but in accord with the Bible, I have done my duty (WA 23, 131). The devil must be conquered with the Word and not with reason (WA 20, 770; cp. 22,44) To defend God’s Word with reason is to defend one’s armor and sword with the bare hand and the bare head. (WA 6, 291 f.)

The words of Peter which call upon us to be ready to give “a reason of the hope” that is in us have often been quoted in support of a rational apologetic. Luther says that the scholastics have twisted this text to make it say that one must overcome heretics with reason. Yet our faith is above all reason and is worked by the power of God. If men do not want to believe, you should be silent, for you are under no obligation to compel them to look upon Scripture as God’s Word. It is enough if you have shown that your point of view is founded on the Bible. If you have given them proof out of Scripture, you are to give them nothing more. If men are afraid that such a course of action will cause the Scriptures to be ridiculed, that in this process the Word of God will suffer shame, they should remember that this is God’s business (WA 12, 362; cp. 36, 526). In other words, it is blasphemous to imagine that our reason can provide an adequate defense for God’s Word. The Gospel stands in need of proclamation only, not of defense.

Luther understands very well the dialectical implications of such an approach, and he himself points out the weakness of this position from the rationalistic point of view. In a sermon on Paul’s defense of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 he says that Paul’s argument seems to be dialectically weak, for the apostle commits, from the scholastic point of view, a twofold error in logic. In the first place, he says that the heathen and the unbelievers will accuse Paul of seeking *probare negatum per negatum*, for the resurrection of Christ means as little to the unbeliever as the resurrection of all men. Thus Paul is guilty, from the viewpoint of the unbeliever, of begging the question. In these comments Luther exhibits a clear understanding of the logical processes involved in theological debate. He illustrates Paul’s method by saying: “If someone were to accuse a man before a court and say, ‘You are a rascal, etc.,’ and when he is called upon to prove it, simply keeps on repeating the same thing and says, ‘It is true, you are a rascal. You have always been a rascal from conception and birth,’ one could not call that proof but vain, useless chatter.”

The second logical weakness which Luther points out in Paul's argument is the fallacy of arguing from the particular to the universal. Even if Christ is risen, this would not be logical justification for the assertion that all men shall rise, for from the fact that one judge is a rascal, it does not follow that all judges are rascals. But in spite of the dialectical weakness of Paul's argument, Luther insists that Paul's way of defending this doctrine of the resurrection is the correct method of guarding every article of the faith. (WA 36, 525-526)

THE PLACE OF REASON IN APOLOGETICS

After having heard Luther's scornful denunciation of the use of reason in the defense of Scripture, it is a little surprising to hear him insist, as he did at Worms, that he would bow to the dictates of sound reason, and it is still more remarkable to find that he repeatedly castigates his opponents as irrational and senseless fools. It would seem at first glance that we are here faced with an inconsistency in the thought of the great Reformer.

However, it will become evident, upon more mature and careful evaluation of Luther's method, that he is entirely consistent. In regard to the natural proofs for the existence of God he said that there is no argument based on reason that cannot again be overthrown by reason (TR 1, 530). While Luther believed that it was ridiculous and downright blasphemous to presume to defend Scripture with rational argumentation, yet he also believed that it was perfectly proper to point out the logical weakness in the attacks made on Scripture, whenever the opportunity to do so presented itself. In his controversies with his adversaries we find him saying, "This reason itself is forced to admit" (WA 18, 786). It is evident from what has been said before that Luther did not place much confidence in such a procedure, but there was scarcely an opponent against whom he did not use this sword.

He uses it repeatedly in his *De servo arbitrio*. He is willing, for example, to give Erasmus a rational explanation of the manner in which it can be said that God works evil. While we are to be content with God's Word, yet in deference to human reason, that is, to human foolishness, it is permitted to be foolish and silly and to try to offer some solution to the problem (WA 18, 709). Even reason, he says, agrees that God works all in all. So God works also in evil men and concurs in all their acts in the same way that a good rider rides a three-legged horse. Such a horse is ridden badly, but through no fault of the rider, and when we say that God works evil in us, we must never understand this to mean that God is the cause of evil or that He works a new evil in us. (WA 1, 709-711)

Erasmus quoted Ecclesiasticus, "If you will keep the commandments, they will keep you," and he argued that to speak thus to a man is to assume that he has a free will. Luther answers that this is an argument from reason, which is accustomed to inventing such wise sayings, for reason twists Scripture according to its pleasure. And in doing so reason says nothing but foolish and absurd things (WA 18, 672). This is a rather remarkable statement, since it is apparent that what Luther is saying is that reason is often unreasonable by its own standards. He continues the argument against Erasmus in a purely logical vein and says that if we ask him how one can prove from such words as "if you will," "if you do," "if you hear," that the will is free, we are told that the nature of words and the accepted manner of speaking demand this. But this, says Luther, is the fallacy of metabasis, and he adds that analogies prove nothing. Therefore all that reason has proved, if it has proved anything at all, is that reason is foolish. Moreover, so Luther argues, it is by no means universal usage among men to speak in this way. A doctor may ask a patient to do something which he cannot do in order to show the patient that he cannot do it. Luther continues: "I mention this only in order to show reason, in regard to its conclusions, how foolishly it adds them to Scripture and how blind it is not to see that they do not hold good even in human matters and words" (WA 18, 673). Luther accused Erasmus also of making universals out of particulars, and he says that when reason sees something happen a few times, it immediately assumes that things always follow the same course (WA 18, 672 f.). It is evident that Luther saw the inherent weakness in all inductive reasoning. And it also is significant that Luther was willing to use against the position of his opponents an argument which he was not willing to use, or permit to be used, against Scripture.

When Erasmus used the argument that God would not command men to do what they were unable to do and that therefore men must have the ability to do what God commands and consequently have a free will, he did not intend to recede from the Semi-Pelagian position of the medieval church. But Luther insists that if

Erasmus is right and the commands of God prove that man has the ability to do what God commands, then Erasmus is wrong in his basic position and the Pelagians are right. So, Luther says, “the *Diatribes* has her throat cut with her own sword.” (WA 18, 65)

In his controversies with the Anabaptists he used the same method and often pointed out logical weaknesses in their argumentation. They are not only without reason but completely mad and foolish (WA 47, 327). He is willing to meet them on their own ground and fight against them with their own cleverness (WA 17, 2, 8287). He says that their argument that Cornelius was baptized upon profession of faith and therefore only adults should be baptized is the fallacy of proceeding from the particular to the universal (TR 3, 62). In the treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets* he spends a great deal of time showing that the views of Carlstadt are not even logically sound and he heaps ridicule upon his arguments. (WA 18, 186)

But it must be noted that Luther in all these cases is not seeking to establish the truth by reason, but what he attempts to do is to show that the arguments of the opponents are weak and that if they are followed to their logical conclusion, they end in nonsense. Luther insists that the most irrational procedure of all is to refuse to let the words of Scripture stand as they read.

It may be argued that these controversies of Luther with Carlstadt and the Anabaptists and Erasmus belong in the field of polemics and not of apologetics. But Luther himself would have made no such distinction. To him there was no great difference between the unbelief of the Jew and the Mohammedan which denied the Trinity and the unbelief of those who denied the Real Presence and the efficacy of Baptism. To Luther both are manifestations of man’s natural rebellion against the truth of God.

The papists he attacked in the same way. He says: “The senselessness, asinine pope has dealt so crudely that it would be possible to lay hold of him with the judgment of reason, even if we did not have Scripture” (TR 2, 60). Of the faculty of Louvain he said that the learned doctors argue like a bunch of old women, and he complained that they use neither reason nor Scripture against him but only their own opinions (WA 6, 176). He accused them of begging the question (WA 6, 184). And having pointed out the fallacy in the university’s chain of reasoning, he added the crowning insult that this “is forbidden even by Aristotle” (WA 6, 195). He complained that Alveld had used neither Scripture nor reason to show that the Lutheran doctrine was wrong (WA 6, 290). In his reply to Catharinus, Luther set up a series of syllogisms in the scholastic manner to disprove the contention that the pope is the successor of Peter, and having done so, he said: “You see, my most excellent Thomist, that the beast is a dialectician?” [WA 7, 712 (or should it be, “Dialectics is also a beast”?)] He challenged Catharinus to point out an error in his argumentation. (WA 7, 711 f.)

All these examples show that Luther was not averse to the use of reason in apologetics. Its value was limited indeed, but Luther is fond of saying that he can think as logically as his adversaries and that he understands Aristotle as well as they do (TR 1, 57). He ridicules the supposed intelligence of his opponents. Any fool can invent such syllogisms as theirs. The Jews and the Mohammedans consider us to be fools because we say that God has a Son or that God died. How will we poor mad geese and ducks, we poor Christians, ever be able to stand up against such high super-intelligence? What if they ever ask us where God will find a nurse for His Son and where He will find a baby sitter? Luther closes the argument by dismissing them as madmen (WA 54, 89). It is clear that Luther did not believe that the Christian Church has a monopoly on folly and irrationalism, and he was sure that the unbelievers could be just as foolish in their way as Christians. While he would never have written a book on the reasonableness of Christianity, it is conceivable that he might have authored one on the irrationalism of unbelief.

And there was an area of theology where Luther was willing to debate with the adversaries. He warns against the use of reason in the doctrine of justification, in matters of conscience and in regard to satisfaction, remission, reconciliation, and salvation, but outside these areas, in regard to the wisdom, power, and other attributes of God, for example, he was willing that we should be as subtle and as sharp in debate as we possibly can be (40, 1, 78). Such disputes with Jews, Turks, and sectarians are possible because many things are clear in the light of natural reason. (WA 18, 785)

Thus while it is possible to find the most vehement rejection of reason in Luther, yet he did not deny all common ground between the believer and the unbeliever. Both share the light of nature, and it is clear that while Luther was sure that the truth of Christianity could not be proved by rational argument, yet he was also certain that the premises of unbelief were subject to the same weakness. Reason always leaves men in darkness and uncertainty. Luther's position might well be described as a philosophical agnosticism coupled with theological certainty.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF LUTHER'S APOLOGETICS

In debate with his opponents Luther, as we have already noted, appealed to the omnipotence of God, a doctrine which even his bitterest opponents took for granted (WA 49, 400-404). He did not believe that the omnipotence of God was capable of rational demonstration. He insists, however, that once a man has accepted the premise of the omnipotence of God, he should not longer deny any of the plain statements of the Bible on the ground that they seem impossible to human reason. (Ibid.)

Luther lays little stress on Christian evidences. But again this does not mean that he rejects such an approach completely. He says, for example, that the Bible is proved to be the Word of God by its survival in the face of the attacks of so many enemies (TR 1, 381). One of the strongest proofs for the truth of the Gospel Luther sees in the very opposition which it engenders. The mark of true and divine promises is this, that they disagree with reason and that reason does not want to accept them (WA 42, 452). There is no more certain sign that something is of God than that it is against and above our way of thinking (WA 10, I, 1, 242). When the fury of the tyrants and the heretics and the scandal of the cross come to an end, this is a certain sign that the pure doctrine of the word has been lost (WA 40, 2, 53f.; cp. 52, 29). If our Gospel were received peacefully, it would not be the true Gospel (WA 38, 510). In saying these things Luther was simply applying the Biblical statement that the things of the Spirit of God are foolishness to the natural man.

One more word should be said. When Luther speaks of faith as a stepping out into the darkness, he does not mean that it closes its eyes and steps off a cliff into nothingness. When he speaks of closing one's eyes, he defines those eyes as the eyes of reason, and it should be noted that he says that when we close our eyes, we should open our ears (WA 33, 267). The eyes of reason must be put out indeed. But faith has better eyes than reason and can see in the dark. What Luther meant by stepping out into the darkness is just this, that we should be willing to trust the Word even though we have no rational or empirical proof for its truth. He writes: "Grace cheerfully steps out into the darkness, follows the bare Word and Scripture, whether it appears to be so or not. Whether nature considers it to be true or false, still it holds fast to the Word" (WA 10, I, 1, 611). And after all is said, the whole of Luther's apologetics can still be summed up in a sentence that he wrote into the margin of his copy of the works of Peter Lombard: "Arguments based on reason determine nothing, but because the Holy Spirit says that it is true, it is true." (WA 9, 35)