

# Reason as Instrument

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John Wesley read Luther's commentary on Galatians and was surprised and repelled by Luther's attacks on human reason.<sup>1</sup> Luther's denunciations of reason are often sharp and bitter, and many since Wesley's day have read Luther with the same feeling, for it would certainly seem that if reason is to be rejected lock, stock, and barrel, as Luther's words often seem to imply, then there is no point in books like the commentary on Galatians, or any book for that matter. "What is reason," asked Wesley, "but the power of apprehending, judging, and discussing?"<sup>2</sup> It has been pointed out repeatedly that the critics of reason employ the very instrument which they depreciate and that without reason they would not be able to meditate on or discourse about the problem that they are attempting to solve.

## Reason a Great Gift of God

When this criticism is directed against Luther, it flows either out of ignorance of what he said or out of a failure to understand Luther's thought. In fact, it is so difficult to misunderstand Luther's position that one can only conclude that those who find fault with Luther on this score have not really read him extensively.

It must always be kept in mind that scholastic theology had exalted reason almost to divine status and had sought to employ it as a means for searching out the secrets of God. When Luther criticized reason it was often the speculative thought of scholasticism and the critically rationalistic approach to Scripture that he had in mind.

But as the instrument which man uses to examine his environment, to interpret his experience, and to discourse about it, Luther valued reason highly. The course that his thinking on this matter will take ought to be clear to anyone who knows that in the explanation of the first article in the Small Catechism he lists reason and all our faculties as gifts of the Creator for which we ought to be grateful.

Luther often spoke of reason as a gift of the Lord which man ought not to depreciate. Toward the end of 1543 he lectured at Wittenberg on the ninth chapter of Isaiah. In the course of these lectures he said,

Reason is a very great gift of God whose value cannot be measured, and those things which it wisely ordains and discovers in human affairs are not to be despised (WA 40,3,612).<sup>3</sup>

Earlier in the same lecture he had compared the light of reason to that of the sun, and he says,

Who would not recognize that these lights are splendid? Who would despise them?...As, however, the light of the sun is splendid and admirable, so also is the light of reason, and indeed reason is a far more splendid light than that of the sun...What the sun cannot do, reason can do (WA 40,3,611).

"Reason is a glorious light," he wrote at another time (WA 47,813). An "*egregium lumen*," he called it, and "glorious" is almost too weak a translation for "*egregium*." To say that it is "a splendid, magnificent light" might be more in keeping with what he wrote. But at the same time it should not be forgotten that immediately afterward he wrote, "So is a wax candle, but what if the sun should rise?" (*ibid.*). In a debate at Wittenberg in 1536 he said that reason even after the fall (*post peccatum*) is still a very beautiful and a very excellent thing (WA 39,1,176). In a lecture he called it "a most outstanding gift" (WA 42,408).

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<sup>1</sup> P. Watson, *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> References to Luther are indicated in the body of this article. The Weimar edition of Luther's works is cited as WA.

In 1536 Luther wrote a series of theses for a disputation on the nature of man, which was to be held at the University of Wittenberg. The fourth thesis reads, “It is certainly true that reason is the best thing of all, the chief thing, the best thing above all other things of this life, and something divine (*et divinum quiddam*) (WA 39,1,175). He describes reason there as the inventor and the governor of all arts, of medicine, and law, and whatever of wisdom and power and virtue and glory is possessed by men in this life. It is the chief part of man, and it constitutes the essential difference between men and animals (*ibid.*). Significantly, in the course of the debate, Luther said, “And this majesty God did not take away from reason after the fall of Adam, but rather He confirmed it” (*ibid.*). Not only did Luther insist that the fall had not destroyed the capacity of reason to examine and to interpret the data of experience furnished by the senses, but he held also that in conversion this aspect of our rational nature remains essentially unchanged. Luther specifically excluded reason, as such, from his definition of the image of God. He argued that the devil, who certainly does not have the image of God, has a better reason than men (WA 10,1,1,528). He pointed out that Jethro, whom he calls a heathen, taught Moses, a man who was completely filled with the Holy Ghost, how to rule (WA 16,354). It was in this connection that Luther wrote, “The heathen have demonstrated far greater wisdom than Christians” (*ibid.*). It would appear, then, that at least in this area, Luther gives more credit and honor to human reason than those who criticize Luther for what they call his “irrationalism” and then proceed to include reason in the image of God that has been obscured by the fall.

And, as we have already noted, even after conversion reason remains essentially unchanged. It is given a new spirit and a new direction in conversion, but its discursive and apprehending powers remain substantially unaltered. In the *Kirchenpostille*, which Luther considered to be one of his best publications, he is quoted as saying in a sermon,

For although the Gospel is a higher gift and wisdom than human reason, yet it does not alter or tear to pieces the understanding which God has implanted in human reason (WA 22,108).

### **The Sphere of Reason**

It must be said at this point that Luther sharply limits the sphere of reason when he speaks of it in this way, and yet here again we must be careful not to draw these lines of demarcation tighter than Luther himself draws them. At this point we wish simply to call attention to what Luther says about the limitations of reason in order to make clear that we have not forgotten this aspect of Luther’s thought, because at first glance it may sometimes seem that Luther excludes reason completely from the realm of theology, which, as we shall see presently, he does not really do.

Luther says, for example, “Reason, although it is beautiful and glorious, belongs only into the kingdom of this world. There it has its authority and its sphere (*Gebiete*)” (WA 16,261). Reason has a place in governing this present world (WA 22,42). The things which belong to this temporal life and to the government of the world are subject to reason (WA 46,56). But the management of households and the ordering of the affairs of the commonwealth are the limits beyond which reason is not to go (WA 25,393). Reason and experience teach us how to rule wife and children, how to drive cows out to pasture and how to bring them in again (WA 16,353). It tells us that a pig must be handled differently than a cow, and that wine should not be made in a beer keg but in a wine barrel (WA 16,354).

In outward and worldly things one ought to permit reason to exercise her judgment, for there you are able to figure out things and to understand that a cow is larger than a calf, likewise, that three yards are longer than one yard, that a dollar is more than a penny, that a hundred dollars are more than ten dollars, and that the roof is better situated on top of the house than under the house. Stay with those things. Such things are in your power. With it you can well determine how to train a horse. Such things reason teaches you. There exercise your mastery, for God has also given reason for this purpose that we should milk cows and train horses (WA 33,127).

These words appear to be sarcasm, and when viewed from the standpoint of scholastic theology, they were very likely intended to be just that. But when we remember the high value that Luther placed on the affairs of this life, so that he held that a farmer who plows his field in fulfillment of his calling is doing a greater work than a monk who spends all his time in prayer without a call from God, we shall not surrender to the temptation to interpret those words as an indication that Luther placed a low value on reason, or that he considered it useless for theological pursuits.

One other thing should not be forgotten. If we review all these statements we must realize that in all of them not the exercise of reason in apprehending or discussing truth is under discussion, but rather the ability of reason to decide what is good and proper and beautiful and true. The common idea which runs through all of these statements is contained in words like “authority,” “management,” “government,” “ordering,” “rule,” “handling,” and “breaking,” “training,” and “mastery.”

This evaluation of Luther’s thought is further substantiated by the fact that in the area of economics and government Luther admired the accomplishments of the heathen, something of which we have already taken note in another context. He published an edition of Aesop’s fables for the schools of Germany because he considered them to be of great value for the education of the young. He delighted in the proverbs of the heathen. He spoke of “the excellent proverbs and teachings of the heathen authors” (WA 16,260). He said that the heathen have made great contributions to the betterment of discipline and to the government of this world. To this history itself bears witness, he says (WA 16,260).

Not to use reason in the sphere where God intended that it should be used is to tempt God (WA 43,107). There is no need to jump out of a window if there is a ladder available, nor does it make sense to walk through the Elbe when there is a bridge across the river (WA 44,77). He writes,

Nevertheless, God must not be tempted, that is, the means must not be neglected, but we must use those which we are able to use, inasmuch as God has not given reason and the counsel and aid of reason that you should despise them (*ibid.*).

Thus it was perfectly proper for Abraham to go to Egypt during the famine even though he had no specific command of God to do this, “for in bodily perils reason has its place, so that it is able to see something and to give advice” (WA 42,469). In regard to the efforts of Jacob to appease his brother Esau, Luther comments that in times of danger we must do what reason indicates (WA 44,48) and in a similar vein he says that it was right for Noah to take food into the ark, for

It is true that it is the will of God that all our works should be done in faith, but nevertheless it is not His will that we should neglect what lies at hand and He has previously given (WA 24,180).

### **The Place of Reason in Communicating Religious Truth**

But while the sphere of reason is this earthly life and this present world, yet Luther has a place for reason even in theology. It is true that he drastically limits its functions in this field. He was not willing to let reason be in any way the source of any of the truths revealed in the gospel. Luther could never have subscribed to those views of revelation which reduce it to a process of discovery through the diligent use of reason on the basis of human experience. And he warned repeatedly also against ever letting reason become the judge of Scripture. But he definitely held that reason has a place in theology as the instrument by which the truths of divine revelation are apprehended and understood.

There can be no doubt that at least in some respects Luther must be classified as an antimetaphysical theologian. He definitely felt that philosophy had no positive contribution to make to theology. J.V.L. Casserly has pointed out that those who take an antirational stance in theology always run the risk of destroying the

foundations on which the whole structure of language and all human communication is built.<sup>4</sup> The necessary corollary would seem to be that we shall be forced to the conclusion that divine revelation cannot come to men through the medium of human speech or at least that the revelation must always become obscured and partially corrupted by being reduced to verbal propositional form.

We have seen, in our time, this very thing happen in neo-orthodoxy, where words have, in many instances, lost all concrete meaning, and theology has become what might almost be described as a form of impressionistic art.

Luther stood firm against this temptation. He would never have agreed with the man who said, “The study of logic is a curse to candidates for the ministry.”<sup>5</sup> When he called for the reform of the German universities in his *Address to the German Nobility* in 1520, he asked that Aristotle’s *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *De Anima*, and his *Ethics* be dropped from the curriculum. But it is of the utmost significance for our thesis that, even though he calls Aristotle “that damned, proud, rascally heathen” (WA 6,457), he nevertheless wanted to retain three of his works as textbooks for university study. They were Aristotle’s *Logic*, his *Rhetoric*, and his *Poetry* (WA 6,458).

Significant also in this connection is the stress that Luther laid on the study of the languages, especially Greek and Hebrew. In addition to the three works of Aristotle mentioned above, the core of the curriculum was to include mathematics, history, Latin, Hebrew, and Greek (WA 6,458). In 1524 Luther wrote his *Open Letter* to the members of the councils of all the German cities in which he called for the establishment of Christian schools, both on the elementary and the secondary level and for both boys and girls. In this letter he emphasizes the need of training the youth of the nation in all the skills necessary for the welfare of the community. The greater emphasis, however, he lays on the study of language. He wrote,

As dearly as we love the Gospel, so diligently let us hold to the study of the languages. (*so hart last uns uber den sprachen halten*) (The preceding context makes it clear that he had in mind especially Hebrew and Greek)... And let us recognize the fact that we will not be able to preserve the gospel well without the languages. The languages are the scabbard in which this sword of the Spirit is sheathed. They are the jewel box in which we carry this treasure. They are the cask in which this beverage is contained. They are the pantry in which this food is kept. And as the gospel itself shows, they are the baskets in which these loaves and fishes and fragments are preserved (WA 15,37f.).

He says further that if the study of Hebrew and Greek is neglected, the next step will be that interest in the languages in general will wane, and the time will come when men will be able to speak neither German nor Latin properly. He points to the example of the German universities and the monastic schools, where not only has the gospel been lost, but where men had become such rude beasts that they could neither speak nor write the common languages correctly. They have, he says, almost lost even natural reason (WA 15,38). For a man who was ready to curse the universities because they had exalted reason, this last remark would seem to indicate most clearly that Luther understood the relation between communication and reason, and that he was therefore aware of the danger pointed out by Casserly. The whole letter is of the utmost importance for a clear evaluation of Luther’s thought in this area, and we shall have occasion to allude to it once more before we finish this essay.

Philosophers and psychologists have at times attempted to draw a sharp line of demarcation between the function of the mind by which we “understand” and that by which we “reason.”<sup>6</sup> It is to be questioned, however, whether such a line can be drawn. Language is more than a complicated system of conditioned reflexes. Especially ought this to be clear in theology, where it is necessary so often to deal with abstractions. Unless we

<sup>4</sup> *The Christian in Philosophy* (New York: Scribner’s, 1951), pp. 150,170–172.

<sup>5</sup> *The China Fundamentalist*, quoted by O. Petty, *The Laymen’s Foreign Mission Inquiry, China*, Supplementary Series, New York, 1933, V,ii, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> cp. Ad. Haentzschl, *The Great Quest* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), pp. 49–50,59.

are willing to adopt the position of logical positivism and rule these abstractions out of court, which some theologians have done, we shall have to recognize the cogency of this argument.

The same thing ought to be clear in the field of Bible interpretation, when it is often necessary to exercise the capacities of the mind for what might be called linguistic judgment. Since a single word may have a half dozen possible meanings, we shall have to grant that the interpretation of Scripture often involves a procedure which could definitely be classified as “problem solving” in every sense of the term. Luther seems to indicate that he understands the difference between what is called simple, “primitive” understanding, such as men often assumed is found also in animals, and the activity of the mind which is involved in hearing the Word when he writes,

One would have to preach to a donkey, an ox, or a cow for a hundred thousand years before they would accept the law, although they have ears and eyes and a heart, just as a man. They can hear it, too, but it does not strike the heart. Why? What is lacking? The soul is not so formed and created that such things can strike it (WA 16,447).

Also on this score, therefore, Luther should not be called “irrationalistic,” and the modern participants in what has been called “the revolt against reason” can not claim him as their own.

Luther believed that it was possible for an unconverted man to understand the meaning of the Scriptures by the use of the natural powers of his reason. This simply means that Luther expected no one to read the Scriptures in a cabalistic way. For him the Scriptures are not written in code. The revelation of God and the meaning that God wishes to convey to us through the words of Scripture are not hidden behind the words of the Bible. God may be hidden and He always remains hidden, indeed, but the Word through which the hidden God reveals Himself is open to all. The revelation is there for all men, not only for those who somehow are initiated into the secret, or who have somehow become partakers of the “special” grace which modern followers of Calvinistic thought have renamed “personal encounter.” No special enlightenment is necessary to know what the words of Scripture mean. The man who knows the languages in which the word is written will know what the words intend to say to him. To understand it, to grasp its meaning, to think about it, is not the same as to believe it.

In the letter to the city councils Luther says that the fathers often erred in their teaching because they did not understand Hebrew or Greek. And even when they taught correctly they often, on account of their ignorance of the languages, used proof texts which made them ridiculous in the eyes of the world, for the educated unbeliever could know that the text did not say what the fathers claimed to find in the text (WA 15, 38f.). The clear implication of such a statement is that an intelligent unbeliever understands the meaning of the Bible better than an ignorant but pious believer.

Luther said also that the contention of the scholastic theologians that the Bible is an unclear book is due to their ignorance of the languages (WA 15,38). The significance of this statement will perhaps be clearer if we contrast it with the explanation that is often given, namely, that the Scriptures are unclear to the unconverted because they have not been enlightened by the Holy Ghost. The “enlightenment” of the Holy Ghost, for Luther, did not have to do with the understanding of the meaning of the words of Scripture but rather with the acceptance of those words in faith. The enlightened person in Luther’s vocabulary was the believer in Jesus Christ. The believer, in approaching the Scriptures, uses his reason to “think about” the gospel. Luther says, “Reason serves faith in this way that it thinks about things” (WA, TR, 1,191).

### **The Interpretation of Scripture**

The place of logical processes in Luther’s theological thought is brought into sharp focus when we examine the basic principles which underlie his whole approach to the interpretation of Scripture. It is well-known that when Luther began his exegetical lectures at Wittenberg, he quickly turned away from the allegorical method, by which he said that Origen and Jerome had made fools of themselves (WA 18,180), and

finally abandoned the method almost entirely. And, in view of the disguised revival of the allegorical method in the modern tendency to reduce the Scriptural account to the level and status of mythology, it will be well for those who seek to claim Luther for neo-orthodoxy to keep in mind that he insisted on what he called the “historical and literal meaning which is consistent with the text” (WA 42,138).

An approach to Scripture which insists on this ought not to be called irrational. And this was Luther’s consistent exegetical method. He insisted that, in the interpretation of Scripture

the natural speech is the Kaiser’s wife, and it is to be preferred to all subtle, sharp, and sophistic interpretations. One must not depart from it unless one is compelled to do this by a clear article of faith, or else not one letter of Scripture can be maintained against the spiritual jugglers (WA 18,180).

In the introduction to the Genesis lectures he indicates clearly what his method in this commentary will be. This world, of which Moses speaks here, Luther holds, is no allegorical world. It is a real world and these are real creatures. And one might say that Luther anticipates Darwin by three hundred years when he says that the days of Genesis one are real days (WA 42,3ff.).

Of the creation of Eve, in this same commentary, he says that we should forget all the foolish glosses of the scholastic commentators and he announces his resolution to treat the account as true history (WA 42,97). Again he makes special mention of the fact that he believes that the rib was a real rib (*ibid.*). Scholastic theology had always allegorized the story of the fall, at least in its theological significance, out of history, just as neo-orthodoxy mythologizes it away, but Luther urged his students to believe that the serpent was a real serpent, that the woman was a real woman, and that the man was a real man. He says, “According to this interpretation the serpent remains a serpent, but possessed by Satan, the woman remains a woman, and Adam remains Adam” (WA 42,139).

In his answer to the *Diatribes* of Erasmus, he wrote,

No conclusion (*sequelam*) or figure of speech is to be permitted in any Scripture passage, unless the context clearly compels it and the absurdity of the matter manifestly conflicts with an article of faith, but everywhere we must cling to the simple, pure, and natural meaning of the words, which is dictated by grammar and common usage, which God has created in men (WA 18,700).

In these words to Erasmus we have an allusion to the second great principle which Luther adopted in his exegesis, and this, too, has significance for our thesis. The principle is that in the interpretation of the Bible, proper consideration should be given to grammatical rules and to the context. In the *Tischreden* Luther speaks of the rules that he gave to those who had helped him in the work of translating the Bible. The third rule that he lists there is “that one must pay attention to the grammar” (WA, TR, 587). Luther criticized Erasmus, who was recognized as the most distinguished linguist of the day, because he did not know that there is a real difference between the indicative and the imperative mood, since he argued that from a command of God it was possible to conclude that the command could also be fulfilled (WA 18,677).

As the rules of grammar must be given proper consideration, so the context must also be given due weight. In the Galatians commentary he wrote that men ought not to carry their own thoughts into Scripture,

since they ought to come empty and take all their thoughts out of the sacred letters, then diligently consider the words, and compare what precedes with what follows, and pay attention to this that they grasp the whole sense of the passage, and do not construct their own dreams out of isolated words torn out of context (WA 40,2,36f.).

In January of 1539 a disputation was held at Wittenberg on the question whether the words, “The Word was made flesh,” could be defended philosophically. In the course of this debate one of the participants argued

that dialectics, the capacity for logical thinking, is a divinely given instrument which is rightfully employed in the search for truth, and therefore it is to be used also in theology. Luther did not disagree with this point of view, but he said that while it was to be used, it should not be employed as mistress, but only as a helper and slave and a most beautiful servant, which teaches us how to define and distinguish, but that beyond that point its service must come to an end (WA 39,2,24).

### **Syllogistic Argumentation in Doctrinal Theology**

While Luther insisted that all our premises in theology must be taken from the Bible, he was not at all averse to the use of logical processes in setting forth and proving the doctrines of the Christian faith. Here it would be possible to heap up examples without number, but we shall restrict ourselves to only a few illustrations of Luther's dogmatical method in this regard.

Commenting on the statement of Hebrews 1, that God made the world through His Son, he writes

If all is made through Him, He Himself must be uncreated. From this it follows clearly that He must be true God, for everything that is not made and yet is something must be God...If He is a Son, He cannot be alone, He must have a Father, and if God made the world through Him, then this God who made the world through Him cannot be He through whom He made it. Thus it follows that there must be two persons, the Father and the Son distinct from each other, and yet, since the divine nature is one and there can be no more than one God, it follows that Christ is one God with the Father, in one divine essence, one Creator and Maker of the world (WA 10,1,1,51).

Regularly, in dealing with the deity of Christ, Luther makes use of syllogistic argument. He sees the deity of Jesus in many passages of Scripture that do not mention it specifically. In Matthew 23 the Lord Jesus says that He has sent the prophets. But prophets are sent by God, and Luther says, "Therefore He is God!" (WA 47,540). The angels of Bethlehem call Him Lord, but if angels call Him Lord, He must be higher than they. The only one higher than angels is God. Therefore He is God (WA 37,44).

In 1530 Luther published an exposition of the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel. Commenting on the third verse, "This is life eternal that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent," Luther says,

There stand the clear, bare words, which every man can understand and grasp; Christ gives to all who believe eternal life. But since no one can give eternal life but God, therefore it follows incontrovertibly from this that Christ is true, natural God. Likewise, since he bases eternal life on this that one knows Him and the Father, so that no one may attain to eternal life without a knowledge of Him, so that it is one knowledge by which He and the Father are known, therefore He must be of one essence and nature with the Father, that is, the same true God, but a distinct person from the Father. This is so clearly and powerfully taught in this text, that even reason cannot contradict it (WA 28,92f.).

He employs the same sort of syllogistic reasoning in assuring the Christian of his salvation. On the basis of the words, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world," he says in a sermon,

Now you cannot deny that you are also a part of the world, for you were born of man and woman. You are not a cow or a pig, and therefore your sins must also be included...Everything which is called sin, world, and the world's sin...all lies alone on the Lamb of God, and since you are also a part of the world and remain in the world, therefore you must also share in the blessing of which in this place the text speaks (WA 46,683).

In discussing the doctrine of the resurrection of the body he uses an argument *a maiore ad minus* and says that if we believe that God created all things out of nothing, we ought to find no difficulty in believing that He is able to raise our bodies. For it is a lesser thing to make a body out of the dust and ashes to which it has turned than it is to make the dust out of nothing in the first place (WA 49,412). In the same connection he says that the possibility of a resurrection is a foregone conclusion if we once grant that God is almighty (WA 49,400).

It is evident, then, that Luther did not disparage the processes of reason as such. A man who could say, "In philosophy a slight error in the beginning is very great at the end. So in theology a slight error overthrows the whole body of doctrine" (WA 40,2,46), certainly did not believe that the processes of thinking must be left behind when one passes through the portals of the Christian Church.

On the other hand, it must be recognized clearly that Luther was not willing to allow syllogistic argument full and free sway. There were very definite limitations to be observed in the use of logical process. In the debate of January 11, 1539, to which reference has already been made, one of the participants argued that if we take away the reasoning process, we open the door to a completely uncontrolled interpretation of Scripture, and thus with every one free to interpret as he pleases, we will have given men the occasion to become heretics. To this Luther answered,

Indeed, greater heretics are those who commit the sin of rushing in with the syllogistic form and who permit men to harmonize and settle everything by reason against Scripture. For, trusting in this form and in reason they have brought many harmful and vicious conclusions into Scripture, even though a clear text may cry out against it. So we say, "Let the woman (Reason is feminine both in German and in Latin.) keep silence in the church." Bring forth something out of Scripture, for it is said, "Hear ye Him," or something which will please all your hearers, but only so long as it does not stand and contradict Scripture (WA 39,2,26).

It is clear from these words that Scripture sets the limits beyond which reason is not to go. In this way Luther applied his own axiom, "Theology shall be empress. Philosophy and other good arts shall be her servants. They are not to rule or govern" (WA 22,255).

In 1517, long before Luther had come to a clear and full understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith, and very likely even before the posting of the ninety-five theses, a disputation was held at Wittenberg on the theology of the scholastics. Luther drew up the theses for this debate. In the forty-seventh of these theses, he wrote, "No syllogistic form holds within the boundaries of the Godhead" but in the very next thesis he laid down the principle, "However, it does not therefore follow that the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity contradicts the syllogistic forms" (WA 1,226).

And this same position he held toward the close of his life. Twenty-two years later, in the disputation on the sentence, "The Word was made flesh," Luther gave voice to an identical thought in different words. He sets up a series of syllogisms and he holds that from a philosophical standpoint they are correct as to form, but that theologically they are wrong. This state of affairs, he says, is brought about

Not indeed by any fault of the syllogistic form, but because of the excellence of the majesty of the material, which cannot be comprehended in the narrow ways of reason or syllogisms (WA 39,2,4).

If we try, he says, to comprehend the truth of the theology, in syllogistic forms, we will pour new wine into old bottles and lose them both, as the Sorbonne has done (WA 39,2,5). Evidently, then, Luther was not willing to lose either, and it is to be noted that he guards against giving the impression that he is making an attack upon the syllogism as such. In its place it is a divinely given instrument. But he insists rather that we are here dealing with matters which do not fit into our syllogisms. In regard to the argument,



Every man is a creature;  
 Christ is a man;  
 Therefore Christ is a creature,

he says that we really have four terms and therefore no true syllogism. “Man” in the major premise, and “man” in the minor premise are not the same thing. In the first it means an ordinary man. In the second it means the incarnate God (WA 39,2,11). This fact, however, is known only to faith, and

we shall therefore act more correctly, if we leave dialectics or philosophy in its own sphere and learn to speak with new tongues in the realm of faith outside of every sphere (WA 39,2,5).

### Faith as a Rational Process

Luther would have rejected vehemently and categorically any point of view which held that men come to faith by rational conclusion or decision, or that faith is the end product of a rational process. But this does not in any way mean that reason is not involved in the believing process. When Luther defined faith as “right thinking of the heart about God (*rectam cogitationem cordis de Deo*)” he most certainly looked upon faith as having a very direct relation to the activities of reason in the human soul. In the Galatians commentary he wrote, “This right thinking about God is plainly nothing else than faith” (WA 40,1,376).

There are actually places where he seems to define faith as “right reason.” He often uses the Latin word, *ratio*, which is usually translated as “reason,” to denote a way of proceeding, a way of acting, a way of thinking. Very likely it must be so understood when he says that when a man becomes a believer, “Another reason is born which is faith” (WA 40,1,412). As we shall see in a moment, Luther did not believe that in conversion any alteration in essence took place in reason. He specifically says that in substance reason remains what it was before conversion. If we would then translate the previous quotation as “another way of thinking is born, which is faith,” this would be in perfect harmony with his definition of faith as “right thinking of the heart about God.” This would also help us to understand why Luther practically identifies faith with “right reason,” when he says, “In theology we have no right reason and good will except faith (*In theologia nullam rectam rationem et bonam voluntatem habemus nisi fidem*)” (*ibid.*).

But even if this is granted, it is still possible to demonstrate that for Luther faith was no mere mystical or vague feeling, as though the “thinking of the heart” was somehow different from the thinking of the mind. He looked upon faith as an intellectual exercise. In the Galatians commentary he discusses the difference between faith and hope at some length, and he writes, “Faith is in the intellect, hope is in the will” (WA 40,2,26). It is in this same connection that he says, “First of all, a pious man ought to have a right opinion and intellect informed by faith” (p.28). And just a few lines later he writes, “Faith therefore is the dialectic which conceives an idea of all that is believed” (*ibid.*).

Luther regularly treats faith as the receiving instrument by which the merits of Christ are appropriated by the individual believer. In the commentary on Galatians there is a paragraph in which he speaks of the “apprehension of Christ through faith” (WA 40,1,447), but what is of the utmost significance for our thesis is that the previous sentence reads, “However, Christ is apprehended not by the law, not by works, but by reason or the intellect, illumined by faith” (*ibid.*).

This conception of a reason which is “informed” or “illumined” by faith is a commonplace in Luther. He was willing to listen to reason whenever it was “grounded” in Scripture (WA 6,291). In the commentary on Genesis, he describes what happens to a man in conversion in the following words,

They do not know that faith is a change and renewal of the whole nature, so that ears, eyes, and the heart itself hear, see, and feel entirely differently than all men. For faith is living and powerful. It is not idle thinking. It does not swim on top of the heart, as a goose on water, but just as water, warmed by fire, although it remains water, nevertheless is no longer cold, but warm

and entirely different water, so faith, the work of the Holy Spirit, constructs another mind and feeling, and makes an entirely new man (WA 42,452).

Our judgment, our reason, and our intellect are defiled and corrupted through original sin (WA,TR, 1,592; 42,608). Thus the “light” of reason is turned into darkness. And because reason is darkened, all the powers of man are used improperly, for “where reason leads, the will follows” (WA 10,1,1,233). These words of Luther express a thought which is almost identical with that to which Jonathan Edwards gives voice when he says, “The will always follows the last dictates of the understanding.”<sup>7</sup>

But in conversion reason is renewed. Luther compares the procedure by which a man comes to faith to that by which a snake sheds its skin, and he says of man,

So he sheds the old skin, leaves behind his light, his thinking, his willing, his loving, his desiring, his speaking, his acting, and so he becomes an entirely new man, who sees all things differently than before, judges differently, decides differently, thinks differently, wills differently, speaks differently, loves differently, desires differently, acts and conducts himself differently than before (WA 10,1,1,233).

Thus the reason of man is purified by faith (WA, TR, 2,372) and enlightened by faith (WA 40,1,418). When Luther was asked whether the light of reason was of any use or advantage to a theologian, he answered that we must distinguish between reason possessed by the devil and reason illumined by the Spirit. He says that it is with reason as with all the members of the body. The tongue of the unbeliever utters blasphemies, but the tongue of a believer is used to praise God. Insofar as its substance is concerned it is a tongue before conversion and after conversion. There is no change in its essence.

And the tongue, so far as it is a tongue, does not help faith, and still it serves faith, when the heart is purified (or enlightened: *illustratum est*). So also reason serves faith in thinking about a thing, when it is purified (*illustrata*). But without faith reason profits nothing and can do nothing, just as the tongue without faith speaks nothing but blasphemies, as we see in Duke George. But reason purified takes all its thoughts from the Word. The substance remains, but the vanity departs when reason is purified (*illustratur*) by the Spirit (WA, TR, 1,191).

The grace of God in conversion does not change the nature of man, however, so far as its temperament or its gifts and talents are concerned. It uses nature as it finds it. If a man is mild-mannered before conversion, he becomes a mild-mannered Christian. If he has a fiery nature, he becomes a fiery preacher. And where grace finds a sharp, versatile man, gifted with reason, as Philip Melancthon, there it uses such a man for the salvation of others (WA, TR, 1,78).

Reason indeed does not help a man come to faith, but once the power of the Holy Ghost has kindled faith in the heart, faith uses reason as an excellent servant.

Reason acts and serves in matters of faith not before but after conversion, just as the tongue and all human powers and members of the body. Reason, after it is enlightened by the Holy Spirit, serves faith. But without faith it blasphemes God together with all powers and members of the body, both outward and inward (WA, TR, 6,158).

Thus in the believer reason becomes what Luther calls the “best instrument of piety” (WA, TR, 3,102).

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<sup>7</sup> J. Edwards, “The Freedom of the Will,” in Muelder and Sears, *The Development of American Philosophy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1940), p. 39.

Reason receives life from faith. It is put to death by it, and again made alive. Just as our body will rise in a glorified state, so also our reason is different after conversion from what it was before. The same thing must be said about our memory, our will, and our tongue. All things are changed, just as glowing iron is changed from that which is not glowing. And this is the regeneration through the Word, which, although the members and the person remain the same, yet changes the members and makes another person from that which was conceived and born from Adam (*ibid.*).

It is clear from all this that the antirationalism of Luther is never properly called “irrationalism” as is done by Bainton.<sup>8</sup> When God works in an eloquent man, He makes use of his eloquence. When He works in an energetic man, He works in and through his energy. When He works in a rational man, He operates through and with his rationality. Although a man contributes absolutely nothing either to his conversion to the Christian faith nor to his preservation in that faith, and all things in this realm are done by God, yet God works in us in such a way that we work with Him (WA 18,754).

Man is a rational creature and he remains a rational creature also after his conversion to the Christian faith. His rationality acquires a new attitude and a new direction indeed, but essentially it is no different from what it has always been. The rules of logic are the same for the believer as for the unbeliever, wherever they apply. But by acquiring this new outlook reason becomes an excellent instrument for apprehending the truth of Scripture, for understanding its words, for determining its meaning, for communicating the message to others. “A fluent tongue promotes faith,” says Luther, “reason makes the sermon clear, and all things help faith” (WA, TR, 3,104). But, so said Luther at the Heidelberg debate in May of 1518, just as the sex urge is not used properly unless a person is married, so “no one philosophizes well except a fool, that is, a Christian” (WA 1,355).

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<sup>8</sup> R. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York; Abingdon, 1950), p. 125.