

AN APOLOGETIC OF THE CROSS AS  
A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY APOLOGETICS  
CENTERED ON THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD

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## Abstract

This research examines contemporary Christian apologetics to contextualize current apologetic developments and demonstrate where Lutheran theology departs from popular evangelical approaches to apologetics. It then proposes a Confessional Lutheran approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian apologetics, exploring how the concepts of reason, total depravity, the theology of the cross, the hiddenness of God (i.e., God's masks in nature, Christ's incarnation and crucifixion, and the Christian himself through vocation) interact with evangelism and conversion. This paper proposes an *apologetic of the cross* as an evangelism tool for the Lutheran pastor/apologist. Although strictly speaking only special revelation carries the gospel message, all masks bear witness to the God of Scripture and are at the evangelist/apologist's disposal to bring unbelievers into an encounter with the gospel. This *apologetic of the cross* alters the traditional view of apologetics and its relationship to evangelism. The goal of Lutheran apologetics is not to demonstrate how reasonable our faith is, but rather to point out that the unreasonable did, in fact, take place. When the unreasonable gospel message of forgiveness and the historical event of the incarnation, are brought together, then apologetics has been properly united with the gospel ministry.

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## Introduction

Christian apologetics is growing rapidly as a major branch of theology today in American Evangelicalism, yet Lutheran dogmatics texts devote little if any ink to the subject. Well-established apologetics departments exist in almost every major evangelical Christian university in the United States, yet Confessional Lutheran seminaries virtually never require the study of apologetics. Lutherans are certainly involved in the field, but professional involvement tends to be regulated to Lutherans in other disciplines, such as law, science, and philosophy. The result is that very few Lutheran theologians have systematically analyzed apologetics as it exists in today's Christendom, and very few Lutheran pastors understand how Confessional Lutheran theology interacts and intersects with the field.

The main goal of this thesis will be to propose how Lutheran pastors ought to approach the broad field of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian apologetics, given the nuances of Confessional Lutheran theology. I will propose an *apologetic of the cross*. The Lutheran apologist ought to approach the defense of the faith with the doctrine of the hiddenness of God in the forefront: God's masking himself in nature, his masking himself in Christ's incarnation and crucifixion, and his masking himself in the Christian. This approach will provide Christians with an apologetic that stresses continual reference to God's Word and the goal of evangelism. This approach will also help not only contextualize the Lutheran amid 21<sup>st</sup> century developments (such as scientific, historical, philosophical, and literary apologetics), but also clearly delineate where Lutheran theology departs from popular evangelical apologetic theologies today (such as conceptions of the use of reason in apologetics and conversion).

I begin with an assessment of current Lutheran work in Christian apologetics, followed by a study on why Lutherans may hesitate in becoming familiar with the field. I then define apologetics as the concept is used among 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, before formally exploring the role of reason, faith, and empirical data within the theology of the cross. Once this is established, I examine the masks of God in nature, the incarnation, and the Christian as ways God makes himself known to the world. I offer some final thoughts on how this might alter our current understanding of what apologetics is and its relationship to evangelism.

## Literature Review

This paper examines four areas of theology—contemporary Christian apologetics, Lutheran scholarship in apologetics, the theology of the cross (and divine hiddenness), and the doctrine of vocation—to develop a Lutheran approach to apologetics: an *apologetic of the cross*.

The field of contemporary apologetics is both intricate and diverse. Leading apologists such as William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, Gary Habermas, John Warwick Montgomery, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and Jay Richards have established contemporary fields of study that range from scientific to philosophical inquiries.

While professional literature in apologetics is plentiful, Confessional Lutheran writers within the field are limited. The works of John Warwick Montgomery, Siegbert Becker, Craig Parton, Allen Quist, Gene Edward Veith, and Angus Menuge represent the majority of the field with works that range from evidential apologetics to Christian vocation in academia. Within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), publications on apologetics are rare. A handful of book reviews on apologetic topics, Lyle Lange's 2011 *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* article "Lutheran Apologetics: From Our Classrooms and into the World," as well as a few essays in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) Essay File comprise the near totality of WELS scholastic output on the topic.

Luther's *Bondage of the Will* and *Heidelberg Disputation* first explored the concept of the theology of the cross. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, research has been relatively quiet on this topic until recently when there has been a renewed interest on the theology of the cross and the hiddenness of God as a unique theological doctrine. Theologians Siegbert Becker, Gerhard Forde, Herman Sasse, and John Schaller are examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran writers treating the subject. Non-Lutheran philosophers and theologians such as James Keller, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Robert McKim, Michael Murray, and Robert Oakes explore divine hiddenness not as a theological doctrine but as a philosophical problem.

Interest has also been renewed recently regarding the doctrine of vocation. The subject has been popularly explored through the books of Gene Edward Veith, who examines Christians' vocations both in and out of the home and how they specifically relate to bearing one's cross. The recent essays of Ken Cherney, Mark Paustian, and Jonathan Schroeder examine vocation more specifically in light of the hiddenness/masks of God.

These four broad areas serve as the basis for developing a contemporary Lutheran apologetic. Finding where Lutheran understandings of reason, vocation, and the hiddenness of God fit into contemporary Christian apologetics fills a void in Confessional Lutheran scholarship in general. It is the goal of this essay to fill that void by showing where Lutheran scholarship on the theology of the cross and vocation can help develop a distinctively Lutheran approach to apologetics and alter our current understanding of what apologetics is and its relationship to evangelism.

## 1. The Lack of Studies on Apologetics within Confessional Lutheranism

Within the discipline of theology, apologetics is becoming one of the most popular areas of study for American Evangelicals. Apologetics is already widespread and shows no signs of slowing as a major field in theology. Graduate programs alone in apologetics are springing up at an increasing rate.<sup>1</sup> Many of today's leading itinerant evangelists are recognized apologists, including Josh McDowell of Campus Crusade (the world's largest Christian organization) and Ravi Zacharius. Even within non-Christian universities, apologetics is a major public force with apologetics chapters and organizations existing in the Western world's top academic tiers.<sup>2</sup>

Yet within recent Confessional Lutheran theological studies, apologetics remains peripheral. In neither the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), WELS, nor Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), is apologetics a required course. LCMS offers an elective on the course. WLS offered its first apologetics summer course in 1977,<sup>3</sup> and has since then periodically offered apologetics as a winterim elective to its seminary students. Bethany Lutheran College (BLC) hosted a multi-college faculty development conference on the topic of apologetics in 2010 involving several members of religion departments.<sup>4</sup> This exhausts much of Confessional Lutheranism's involvement in apologetics on the college and seminary level.

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<sup>1</sup> Graduate programs alone in apologetics include: Azusa Pacific University, Biola University (where William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, and Philip Johnson teach), Dallas Theological Seminary, Denver Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Liberty University (where Gary Habermas teaches), Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics (where Alister McGrath and Ravi Zacharias teach), Princeton Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southern Evangelical Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Union University, Westminster Theological Seminary, Wheaton College Graduate School, and Veritas Evangelical Seminary (where Norman Geisler presently teaches). Many of these programs did not exist twenty five years ago.

<sup>2</sup> For one example, the well-established Veritas Forum has chapters in over 60 major universities across the world, including Amherst College, Brown University, Cambridge University, Georgetown University, Harvard University, Northwestern University, London School of Economics, Oxford University, University of California-Berkeley, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, Yale University, as well as chapters in France, Canada, and the Netherlands. The growing apologetics network Ratio Christi has over 30 chapters on different university campuses.

<sup>3</sup> "News and Comments." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 74 (1977): 332-341.

<sup>4</sup> Hosted by Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, MN, the conference was titled, "Professing Total Truth, Expressing Christian Tolerance," August 8-10, 2010. This Lutheran College Conference included religion faculty from Wisconsin Lutheran College and Martin Luther College, as well as faculty members from mathematics, psychology, philosophy and other departments.

This is not to say Confessional Lutherans have not contributed to apologetics, but contributions in recent times come almost entirely from outside seminary walls. (Historically this has not been typical within Confessional Lutheranism.<sup>5</sup>) John Warwick Montgomery, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most influential Christian apologists, with over 50 books written related to the field, practices law. Angus Menuge, author and co-author of several works on apologetics and vocation, is a philosopher. Craig Parton, who delivered several presentations on apologetics within WELS, is a lawyer. Gene Edward Veith, author of *Loving God With all Your Mind*, is an English professor. Allen Quist, ELS member and author of *Many Convincing Proofs*, is involved in politics. But apart from Lutherans in other vocations, there are no major works or systematic analyses of apologetics by theologians. Apart from a handful of dogmaticians touching on the subject (for example, Becker's essay, "Luther's Apologetics," later published in his *Foolishness of God*, and Lyle Lange's recent article "Lutheran Apologetics: From Our Classrooms and into the World"), apologetics remains a mysterious and often avoided area of study, leading theologians in our own circles to state that our understanding of apologetics and our use of apologetics are found wanting.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Reasons for the Lack of Studies on Apologetics

Why have 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Lutherans spent little energy in apologetics? Some would argue this sentiment was modeled by Luther who at times spoke strongly against reason. Becker begins his *The Foolishness of God*, a study on Luther's use of the term *reason*, quoting Luther, "Reason is a big red murderess, the devil's bride, a damned whore, a blind guide, the enemy of faith, the greatest and most invincible enemy of God." It is extremely tempting to stop here and not continue to read the very next sentence, also a quote from Luther, "Reason is God's greatest and most important gift to man, of inestimable beauty and excellence, a glorious light, a most

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<sup>5</sup> In his essay, "Lutheran Theology & Defense of Biblical Faith," Montgomery provides a catalog of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Lutheran dogmaticians and citations of their work on natural theology and the objective defense of Christian truth. Dogmaticians include Chemnitz, Heerbrand, Hunnius, Hafenreffer, Gerhard, J. V. Andreae, Calov, Quenstedt, Baier, and Hollaz. John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics*. (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 147-149.

<sup>6</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, "Luther's Apologetics," 1958, *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, , <http://www.wlsessays.net/node/127> (accessed 22 Oct. 2012). Lyle W. Lange, "Lutheran Apologetics: From Our Classrooms and into the World." *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (December 2011). In an article that draws several comparisons between Lutherans and Evangelicals, David Valleskey states frankly, "Lutherans tend to be quite weak in apologetics." David Valleskey, "Evangelical Lutheranism and Today's Evangelicals and Fundamentalists." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 80 (1983): 181-220.

useful servant in theology, something divine.”<sup>7</sup> If one chooses to read past the first sentence, Luther leaves the reader with an apparent contradiction that takes wisdom and time to unravel. Luther’s tendency to speak in dichotomies and paradoxes (which he means to illustrate the dichotomies found in Scripture) might sometimes give the impression that reason is so dangerous, it’s best to be left alone and not used, implying apologetics, as a specific exercise in reason, is also dangerous.

Closely related to this is Luther’s statement, “The less there is of reason... the greater is the capacity for faith.”<sup>8</sup> One might interpret this as suggesting God goes out of his way to provide as little evidence as possible for Christianity (which we will find directly contradicts both the gospel writers’ approach to testimony as well as minimizes God’s use of masks to provide the Christian with ample ways of exploring God in the world).

We might also speak of Lutheranism’s tendency to react against Evangelicalism’s seeming obsession with apologetics. And this reaction is good, unless one reacts so strongly we end in the opposite ditch of fideism and scorn against God’s gift of reason. There is a middle way here, too, as there are Lutheran middle ways throughout the rest of doctrine.

Finally, the ministerial use of reason may lead some to think that one ought to distance oneself as far as possible from Western philosophy, literary criticism and an appreciation of the liberal arts in general. After all, Luther himself states, "Indeed, one does not become a theologian unless he first frees himself from Aristotle."<sup>9</sup> But note that Luther also writes that the scholastics, those that had become intellectually married to Aristotelian metaphysics, “did not understand even one line of Aristotle.”<sup>10</sup> Luther’s deepest issue with Aristotle was the scholastics’ misuse of Aristotle. In another place he writes, "See how well Aristotle can serve theology with his philosophy, if he is understood and applied not as he wished but in a better way."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther*. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Becker, “Luther’s Apologetics,” 3.

<sup>9</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

When it comes to liberal arts proper, Luther sings praises. In his *Letter to the German Nobility*, he suggested Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *De Anima* and *Ethics* be dropped from the curriculum, but Aristotle's *Logic*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetry* remain.<sup>12</sup> Luther later said philosophy was useful for the youth "as slaves in barbarous Egypt," so that they might, "be able to speak with the tyrants who rule over them until they are freed."<sup>13</sup> After Luther, the dogmaticians of the Age of Orthodoxy saw subjects in the liberal arts, particularly logic and rhetoric, as necessary for the proper study of dogmatics. Chemnitz promoted the study of Cicero,<sup>14</sup> Chytraeus listed dialectics (logic) and rhetoric in his ten rules for the study of theology,<sup>15</sup> and Gerhard built the outline of his dogmatics according to classical forms.<sup>16</sup> Andreas Hyperius, whose *De theologo, seu de ratione studii theologici, libri IIII* was extremely influential on Lutheran dogmatics, wrote:

For what is the purpose of words? Experience shows that in these matters that commonly come up for discussion among writers the basic principles of the subject matter, the progression, the conclusions, the accompanying circumstances, and whatever other important factors enter in are all considered with much more acuteness by those who are steeped in the fine arts than by those who have never tasted them. Similarly will one who is directed to theological study, as long as he lives and whenever he has occasion, turn the force of his natural talents to the liberal arts, and he will enter on those studies with the best efforts of a diligent disciple. By listening, by repeating, by reading, by composing he will occupy himself in a very justifiable manner, and by persistent work he will try to conquer all difficulties.<sup>17</sup>

These studies gave the Reformation church fathers and their students confidence in their ability to defend the faith, as well as aided in their understanding of Scripture.<sup>18</sup> And even if one

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<sup>12</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 76-77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 141.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*. Translated by Jacob A. O. Preus. (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1989), 53.

<sup>15</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1970) 105-6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 114-125.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>18</sup> Veith catalogs the different disciplines and areas of study useful in the interpretation of Scripture: Besides knowledge of the ancient languages, linguistics, and history, "geography, archaeology, and anthropology are all involved in a full understanding of the events of Scripture. The Bible also proclaims theological truths, which involve the vocabulary of philosophy and abstract discourse. The point is, even if a person desires to know only the Bible, that knowledge would have to involve a multitude of sophisticated academic disciplines." Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Loving God with All Your Mind: Thinking as a Christian in the Postmodern World*. (Crossway, 2003), 21-22.

disagrees with how fruitful the application of logical and rhetorical discourse was for Lutheran theology in the age after Luther, it still remains that our intellectual heritage requires a firm grounding in logic and rhetoric for understanding and conversing with our dogmatic fathers. To leave behind these subjects is to leave behind the ability to understand and address their subject matter, as well as the proper training of God's gift of reason for its ministerial role in the life of the theologian.

As we define apologetics, and as we identify the proper role of reason in apologetics, as well as a Lutheran approach to how to understand and share the Hidden God, we will find an appreciation for reason rightly used, as well as the discipline of using reason, logic. We will also find that God beckons Christians to find him in all of life and to share what they find with the world, using the pursuits of reason as a wonderful expression of faith.

### **3. Defining Apologetics**

The term *apologetics* comes from the Greek ἀπολογία, which means simply *a defense*. Paul, in defense of his character as a good Jewish man, shouted out in Jerusalem, “Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense (ἀπολογία)” (Acts 22:1). Festus, in describing the circumstances in which he found Paul in his custody, uses the term to refer to legal charges: “I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over any man before he has faced his accusers and has had an opportunity to defend himself against their charges (ἀπολογία)” (Acts 25:16). Paul uses the term to speak of his defense of his theological practices: “This is my defense (ἀπολογία) to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have the right to food and drink?” (1 Corinthians 9:3-4).

But of most importance to us, we find the term employed particularly in the defense of the gospel message. Paul writes to the Philippians, “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending (ἀπολογία) and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me” (Philippians 1:7). And more narrowly, we use the term to designate the formal preparation of the defense of the gospel, as Peter writes. “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer (ἀπολογία) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter

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The point, of course, is not that without these disciplines Scripture is unclear, but no Lutheran historically would question the value of these intellectual pursuits for exegesis.

3:15). Note here that Peter adds, “But do this with gentleness and respect.” The word as used by Scripture never refers to a formal discipline of study or as a formal defensive polemic. Instead, when in the context of the gospel, we find more the general idea of a lawyer preparing a response that has an appropriate form of delivery: Christian love. This is because the aim of the Christian is always the saving of souls, not a propositional defense; the delivery of a message of hope, not the delivery of a message of being right; the building up of the family of Christ, not a verbal defense that antagonizes.

Today, the term has lost much of this evangelical emphasis. John Shook provides an adequate definition of today’s general use of the term: “As a religion reliant on traditional narratives in scripture, Christianity first developed a theology of apologetics, attempting to formulate a consistent and reasonable way of explaining what the Bible says and what it does not say.”<sup>19</sup> As a formal system of study, apologetics generally focuses on two main teachings of the Bible: (a) God exists, and (b) Scripture records real events dealing with the salvation of humankind. Gary Habermas in a recent Evangelical Philosophical Society conference labels the former *general* apologetics and the latter *specific* apologetics, offering several areas in each where current apologetic scholarship has been flourishing.<sup>20</sup>

Within general apologetics, Habermas identifies four areas where current scholarship is developing arguments in ways very unique to Christian history. (1) New cosmology: Recent research and discovery in physics has given apologists such as William Lane Craig an extraordinary amount of data to work with to expand the classic argument of this universe beginning from a single cause. Craig and others find in the current theory of a Big Bang a point at which this universe came into existence, demonstrating that this universe had a beginning, and therefore ample room for a cause from outside the universe.<sup>21</sup> (2) Intelligent design: A growing number of scientists have begun work with philosophers in labeling certain features of the

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<sup>19</sup> Shook, John R. *The God Debates: A 21st Century Guide for Atheists and Believers*. 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 35.

<sup>20</sup> Gary Habermas. “Beyond Standard Apologetics Categories: A New Typology of Empirical Evidences,” Paper presented at the meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Milwaukee, WI, November 14-16, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: MacMillan, 1979) was William Lane Craig’s first major work on the topic of Big Bang cosmology and the existence of God. For a more recent treatment, see *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration*, with Paul Copan (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Bookhouse, 2004).

natural universe as evidence of an intelligent designer. Biologist Michael Behe's theory of irreducible complexity argues certain biological features could not have evolved because they depend on other features for functionality. Philosopher William Dembski's theory of specified complexity argues one can measure the complexity and specified patterns of certain features in nature (such as DNA or other data patterns) and arise at the conclusion that this is intelligent information from an intelligent being. (3) Fine tuning arguments: Astronomer Guillermo Gonzalez and philosopher Jay Richards published in 2004 *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos is Designed for Discovery*, arguing that the mere existence of earth as well as earth's conditions to be a place suitable for scientific creatures, is a mathematical impossibility given the numbers of factors required. This has been dubbed *fine-tuning*, suggesting life on this planet requires an intelligent fine-tuner.<sup>22</sup> As one proponent states, "Almost everything about the basic structure of the universe—for example, the fundamental laws and parameters of physics and the initial distribution of matter and energy—is balanced on a razor's edge for life to occur."<sup>23</sup> (4) Near Death Experiences: Scientific journals in recent years have been able to document for the first time in an empirical, scientific manner the phenomenon of near death experiences. This area of apologetics is very new as a formal argument. Habermas himself is the most widely published apologist focusing on near death experiences.

To these four we might add a fifth. (5) Contemporary philosophical apologetics has matured considerably; major Christian philosophers serve in several top philosophy departments in the world, publishing nuanced Christian defenses that non-Christian philosophers take very seriously. Alvin Plantinga lead the way in the most important developments dealing with the philosophical problem of evil.<sup>24</sup> Plantinga has persuasively demonstrated to the philosophical community that this is not a logical problem. God and evil can logically coexist. Rather, it

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<sup>22</sup>Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards. *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery*. (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Robin Collins, "A Recent Fine-Tuning Design Argument," from Khalidoun A. Sweis and Chad V. Meister, eds. *Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 106.

<sup>24</sup> The Problem of evil might be summarized: If God exists (being completely good and all-powerful), evil cannot exist. Evil clearly exists. Therefore God does not exist. Of possible interest to the reader, the hiddenness of God has been proposed as a variation of the problem of evil. Consider J.L. Schellenberg's form, summarized by Taylor: "(A) If there were a perfectly loving God, he would make sure that each person capable of a personal relationship with him reasonably believes that he exists... (B) But there are capable, culpable nonbelievers. (C) Therefore, there is no perfectly loving God." James E. Taylor, *Introducing Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 159.

ought to be considered a probable problem: How probable is it that God exists given evil existing? David O'Connor summarizes this development:

We saw J. L. Mackie's argument to prove that God and evil are logically inconsistent with one another fail. Moreover, we saw it proved by Alvin Plantinga that the existence of God remains a logical possibility, even though evil exists. The answer to the first of the 'squaring' questions, then, is that God and evil do square with one another, in the sense of being logically consistent. But... logical consistency means only the absence of a strict contradiction. In itself, the absence of a contradiction is no reason to suppose that the non-contradictory thing in question is true or probably true.<sup>25</sup>

Plantinga's work paved the way for more nuanced approaches to both philosophical negative apologetics (atheism itself is either illogical or improbable)<sup>26</sup> as well as philosophical positive apologetics (Christianity is more probable than rival worldviews).<sup>27</sup>

Within specific apologetics, Habermas identified four areas where current scholarship is developing a defense of propositions specific to Christianity in ways unique in Christian history. (1) Jesus' miracles: Critical scholars now allow the possibility of miracles (or something like miracles) within the discipline of history. This is due to adopting historical analysis to the gospel (e.g. allowing testimony to function within the gospel accounts as it does in other areas of historical study). (6) Present day miracles: Many top biblical scholars, such as Craig Keener, are bringing their approach to analyzing past ancient events to more current events, such as medically documented anomalies attributed to miraculous intervention. (7) Prayer effect:

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<sup>25</sup> David O'Connor, *God, Evil and Design: An Introduction to the Philosophical Issues*. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 210-211.

<sup>26</sup> "If life is random, then the inescapable consequence, first and foremost, is that there can be no ultimate meaning and purpose to existence. This consequence is the existential Achilles' heel of atheistic belief. As individuals and collectively as cultures, we humans long for meaning. But if life is random, we have climbed the evolutionary ladder only to find nothing at the top." Zacharias, Ravi. *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 39. Zacharius demonstrates a main thrust in apologetics today, the demonstration of the irrationality of an atheist worldview, especially the atheist's worldview's inability to keep elements of a worldview we are particularly attached to: meaning, moral absolutes, etc.

<sup>27</sup> "I shall discuss only arguments in which the premises report what are (in some very general sense) features of human experience—for example, evident general truths about the world or features of private human experience. Such arguments I shall term a posteriori arguments. They claim that something that humans experience is grounds for believing that there is a God or that there is no God. I shall not discuss a priori arguments—these are arguments in which the premisses are logically necessary truths—namely, propositions that would be true whether or not there was a world of physical or spiritual beings." Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8. Swinburne's approach is unique in that he sets out to demonstrate the existence of God based on only a posteriori premises, that is, premises expressing "evident general truths about the world or features of private human experience." This opens his approach to examining miracles, as well as more general experiences evident to most people.

Closely related to miracles, Christian apologists also have more empirical data than ever before to work with in the area of whether or not prayer effects or intervenes states of affairs. (8) The resurrection of Jesus: More than any other area in specific apologetics, the resurrection of Jesus has been scrutinized like never before, Habermas argues, and has never had more superior evidence. For one example, apologists begin conversations dealing with eyewitness accounts and early resource attestation with Paul rather than the gospels (as had been the more traditional approach), because Paul's creedal texts are widely held to go back to even the early 30s AD. Even the most liberal historians, such as Bart Ehrmann, concede this point.

This is all to demonstrate that the field of Christian apologetics is deep and complex. We cannot speak of "scientific" apologetics or "historical" apologetics or even "philosophical" apologetics, because one is hard-pressed to find even one area within apologetics today that is not approached by several major disciplines. The resurrection of Jesus, for example, seems to be a straightforward historical topic, but we find philosophers of the highest caliber like Richard Swinburne and Gary Habermas dedicating their lives to working with historians. Astronomers and philosophers work together on fine-tuning. Doctors, psychologists, philosophers, and biblical critics work together on the apologetic role of miracles today. The field is intricate, multi-faceted, and thus daunting to one unfamiliar with the field, let alone one whose theology is not represented compared to the theological positions of the scholars within the field.

And note this is a far more specialized use of the term *apology* than what we find in Scripture. Apologetics today is by and large an analysis of the data in the world pertaining to Christianity. The Lutheran theologian, though, as we will note, is not primarily interested in data (although this is of enormous importance, just not primary), but rather what might be the proper use in employing that data. Where does the data of general and specific apologetics fit into the witnessing life of a Christian? How is that data used by one witnessing his faith? I will argue that Lutheran theology's unique contribution is in this area: the proper relationship between data and conversion, and how that data pertaining to God's existence and God's role in human history is given to the world. The theology of the cross offers the proper model for both understanding evidence's role in Christianity as well as *how* God has provided that evidence (and how Christians can take that evidence along in their witness).

#### 4. An Apologetic of the Cross

Johann Gerhard once made the distinction between the *theologia beatorum*, the direct knowing of God that only exists for angels and those in heaven, and the *theologia viatorum*, the type of knowing that humans this side of heaven have of God. Clearly we do not know God as the angels do.<sup>28</sup> We do not know our Savior as the saints triumphant do. We cannot look upon Christ's face as I look upon my neighbor's. Instead, I must, as Moses, glance only at God's backside (Exodus 33:23). God hides himself. God faces away from us. He shows himself to us indirectly, as it were, never straight on. This fundamental truth, that God is surely one who hides himself (Isaiah 45:15), is the foundational thought for a Lutheran approach to apologetics.

Outside of Lutheranism, the hiddenness of God is one of the main philosophical problems of belief in God's existence and a serious argument against theism.

Many philosophers have contended that (traditional) theism or supernaturalism suffers from what can properly be called the *Problem of Divine Hiddenness*... Specifically, at the heart of this ostensible difficulty for theism is that Divine "Hiddenness," like pain or suffering—or at least pain and suffering in the amount that the world contains—is precisely the opposite of what one would *expect* if there existed a (maximally great) supernatural person.<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting, though, that the hiddenness of God was not popularized by non-Christian philosophers attempting to refute theism, but rather it was first formally brought to light by

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<sup>28</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 113.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Oakes. "Life, Death, and the Hiddenness of God." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64, no. 3 (December 1, 2008): 155. An extended dialogue takes place among Oakes and the following papers: James A. Keller, "The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37, no. 1 (February 1, 1995): 13–24. Robert McKim, "The Hiddenness of God," *Religious Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 1, 1990): 141–161. Robert Mesle, "Does God Hide from Us?: John Hick and Process Theology on Faith, Freedom and Theodicy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 24, no. 1/2 (July 1, 1988): 93–111. Michael J. Murray, "Coercion and the Hiddenness of God," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 1993): 27–38. J. L. Schellenberg, "The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I)," *Religious Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 1, 2005): 201–215. See also Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). In its widest sense, the hiddenness of God has been understood within the philosophical and Christian apologetic community to refer to the God of the philosophers that leaves evidence of himself in his creation, yet leaves himself hidden, problematically not providing direct evidence of his existence. In contrast to this, one may define the term more specially to refer to the limited amount of knowledge man may comprehend about the Christian God. Despite his special revelation in Scripture, much of God and his will remains a mystery to his people. This is often how the term is understood in strictly theological circles. Contrast the above essays with John Schaller, "The Hidden God," *Our Great Heritage Volume 1*, Lyle Lange ed., (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1973, 1984), pg. 438-460; Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), 85-103.

Martin Luther in his reply to Erasmus in his *Heidelberg Disputation* and the *Bondage of the Will*. He writes concerning Erasmus' work, "The Diatribe makes itself ridiculous by its ignorance in making no distinction between God as preached and God as hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God himself."<sup>30</sup> The distinction Luther is making is between knowing God directly and knowing God through special limited means. Since God hides his full nature and identity from us, we are limited in what we know about God by what God has told or shown to us. This notion of God showing himself in limited ways we might call *the masks of God*, the places God has chosen to "hide" behind and let himself be known *through*, the chief place being the cross. This is the foundation for what has been called Luther's *theology of the cross*, and I will suggest it ought to also be the foundation of a Lutheran apologetic approach, what we might term *an apologetic of the cross*, an apologetic approach that begins with the presupposition that God hides himself (the chief mask he hides behind being the cross of Christ).

An apologetic of the cross takes seriously God's hiddenness, but instead of viewing it as a problem to be solved, it is where the discussion begins. And the question, given a Christian anthropology and the role of reason in the life of a human, is not whether one *can* find God, but instead what are the modes in which God finds *us*? To answer this, we must first look at in quite some detail the role of reason in Christian anthropology. This will allow us to see that the use of reason for the Lutheran apologist is not to *convince* as the world understands the word *convince*, but rather to bring about a psychological encounter in which the Holy Spirit does the supernatural work of bringing the dead to life.

#### **4.a The Role of Reason**

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties." (*Book of Concord*, Small Cat., Creed, Art. 1, par. 2)

I hold and believe that I am God's creature, that is, that he has given me and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all my senses, my reason and understanding, and the like." (*Book of Concord*, Large Cat., Creed, Art. 1, par. 13)

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<sup>30</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 14.

Luther was fully convinced that reason was a gift of God, created by God and constantly sustained by God. Luther addresses reason in both catechisms when summarizing the first article of the Apostle's Creed. He knew that reason was a special attribute of humankind, being trained in Aristotelian metaphysics where reason was the specific difference that separates humankind physically from all other creatures of creation. And so we again consider Luther's appraisal of reason as "God's greatest and most important gift to man, of inestimable beauty and excellence, a glorious light, a most useful servant in theology, something divine."<sup>31</sup>

But although a gift of God, man's relationship with reason was effected by the Fall and is now used as a tool against God. Man in his sinfulness rejects God's plan and the very idea of the gospel, and man uses his reason to convince himself all the more that he does not need God. And so we find Paul writing, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:18,23). Man finds himself spiritually dead in his ability to love God and yet at the same time actively warring against God (Ephesians 2:1,2). Being spiritually dead, man cannot do anything good to reconcile himself with God. Being spiritually at war with God, man is constantly driving himself further from God. And throughout all this, man employs reason to solidify and justify his fallen state. And so salvation can come only from God and only based on his mercy (Romans 9:16; 11:32). The means by which he has chosen to bring about that reconciliation is through the proclamation of gospel carried through word and sacrament (2 Corinthians 5:18-21; 1 Corinthians 1:21).

This means sinful man, regardless of how powerful his faculty of reason, cannot on his own come to know God rightly or do good. Reason is completely useless as a means of salvation, just as every other tool a human has, if we are speaking about man's own efforts to reconcile himself with God.<sup>32</sup> But this does not mean reason does not have a role to play in the

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<sup>31</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Compare this to how an Arminian view of the will effects the role of reason in conversion. "God must take some action to which sinners can freely respond... Therefore, the kind of rational reflection involved in understanding and accepting revelation must be possible in order for belief or faith in the truth of that revelation to be possible." Taylor, *Introducing Apologetics*, 43. Compare also Norman Geisler, one of the most influential Christian apologists of our time: "One must have some evidence that he is taking the right path and embracing the true object of his love before he makes the existential commitment. Likewise, before one makes a leap of faith in God he must have some reason to believe that it is the true God to which he is committed." Norman Geisler,

reconciliation of man to God. Man on his own cannot use reason to his benefit, but God does use man's reason to his benefit *through the means of grace*. The Word of God works both *supernaturally* on the heart of man as well as *psychologically* on the mind of man.

Gerhard writes:

As in any other writing done by an intelligent and rationale agent, so also in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures two things should be borne in mind: first, the letters, syllables, and words that are written and are outer symbols indicating and expressing the ideas of the mind; and second, the thoughts themselves, which are the things signified, expressed with the symbols of letters, syllables, and words. Accordingly, in the term *Scripture* we include both of these, but especially the latter.<sup>33</sup>

The human mind, then, apprehends *meaning* when Scripture is read, apprehending the thoughts conveyed by the language of Scripture. When we speak of God's Word, Gerhard notes, we are especially talking about the meaning (*forma*) expressed by the sounds and syllables (*materia*). Although the Spirit works supernaturally through God's Word, he works through what appears to be the rather ordinary working of rational minds: the comprehension of meaning expressed through language. Make no mistake, something supernatural is happening when faith is strengthened through the reading of God's Word. But let us not forget how this is being

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*Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 62. Softer approaches exist, but often still without totally eliminating the role of the will. Moreland writes in his work on the role of reason and scholarship in the Christian life: "The will is fallen and depraved too, but God still commands people to make a choice to believe. The doctrine of total depravity does not mean that the image of God is effaced, that sinners are as evil as they could possibly be, or that the intellect, emotions, and will are gone or completely useless. Rather, total depravity means that the entire person, including the intellect, has been adversely affected by the Fall and is separate from God. The sinner alone cannot extricate himself from this condition and cannot merit God's favor or commend himself to God on the basis of his own righteousness. Further, the entire personality is corrupt but not inoperative, and every aspect of our personality has a natural inclination to run in ways contrary to God's ways." J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 59-60.

<sup>33</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, I, 14, cited in *Dogmatics Notes* (Mequon WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary), <http://www.wls.wels.net/resources/dogmatics-notes> (accessed 10 Jan. 2013).

accomplished: through the use of reason.<sup>34</sup> This is part of what we mean when we speak of the Holy Spirit enlightening us with his gifts.<sup>35</sup>

This leaves us in a very precise position in regards to the relationship between apologetics and rational creatures. Christianity is only rational to the Christian. When the Holy Spirit works faith supernaturally through the psychological methods of apprehending truth, the human mind is being brought to life, and that which was at first irrational and a stumbling block is now understood as truth by the enlightened mind. If we consider Craig's definition of apologetics, "Apologetics, to repeat, is a theoretical discipline that tries to answer the question, What rational warrant can be given for the Christian faith,"<sup>36</sup> we see that technically speaking, no rational warrant can be given for the Christian faith to an unbeliever. Yet, through methods that make use of rationality, the Holy Spirit convinces hostile minds against their will.<sup>37</sup>

#### **4.b The Ministerial and Magisterial Roles of Reason**

Lutheran theologians distinguish between the ministerial and magisterial roles of reason.<sup>38</sup> Luther's strong reaction to reason is best understood in the context of the medieval rationalism and scholasticism of his time where classical philosophical concepts were being used

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<sup>34</sup> Consider Huelsemann, "The Word of God has this in common with ordinary human words that just as a man's word is a representation or an indication of what is in his mind, by means of which he indicates to another man the ideas of his mind, either to seek those things which he desires or to share those things which he has, so the Word of God is an indication of God's will, by which God makes known to us what he wants us to believe and to do." From *De auxiliis gratiae*, disp. III, IV, 178, quoted in Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. James Langebartels and Heinrich Vogel, Vol. 4 (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 14.

<sup>35</sup> "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith." (*Book of Concord*, Small Catechism, Creed, Art. 3, par. 6.)

<sup>36</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 15.

<sup>37</sup> One interesting area worth considering is whether the gospel remains foolish after conversion. In a sense, yes, but when I find myself seeing it as foolish, I feel my old man trying to control and enslave reason to his will. But in a sense, no, I *don't* see the gospel as foolish, and this is my new man using my reason for what it was designed. My reason can make no sense of how justice and mercy kiss at the cross, but my reason says, "An omnipotent God would be able to make them kiss: I therefore make the rational move and bow to Scripture." Luther considered this as well and spoke of reason using concepts like omnipotence in useful ways. (See Becker's *Luther's Apologetics*.) The gospel is foolish to my sinful nature. Is it also foolish to my new man? Perhaps not entirely so.

<sup>38</sup> Evangelical apologists are not ignorant of the distinction, being championed as foundational for a correct understanding of apologetics. Consider Craig: "I think Martin Luther correctly distinguished between what he called the magisterial and ministerial uses of reason. The magisterial use of reason occurs when reason stands over and above the gospel like a magistrate and judges it on the basis of argument and evidence. The ministerial use of reason occurs when reason submits to and serves the gospel." Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 47.

to dictate how to interpret Scripture. Luther saw the relationship between reason and Scripture in a very different way, one in which Scripture dictates to reason her boundaries and functions. He writes concerning theologians bringing their reason along with them to do exegesis, “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.”<sup>39</sup> Here we see the ministerial use of reason at its best, where all our faculties can be directed to proper exegesis. Based on these foundational principles of interpretation, know the grammar and know the context, reason can be truly untethered and run in the freedom for which it was meant. To drift from this, to allow one's own dreams and desires to pollute exegesis, enslaves reason. This is what the magisterial use of reason actually is. Reason is held captive by sin and raised as a puppet government above Scripture. We look at the puppet politician and say, "what an abominable ruler," when in fact her strings are being pulled from the shadows by the *opinio legis*.

And so I oppose rationalism (or scholasticism or any manmade method that puts reason over Scripture as her master), but I do not oppose reason, just as I oppose gluttony (putting one's appetite over all things as master), but I do not oppose food. There is something fundamentally wrong with opposing reason altogether because of the reality of those who abuse it, just as there is something fundamentally wrong with opposing food altogether because of the reality of those who abuse it. Reason is a gift from God, given to aid the theologian in understanding Scripture, as well as given for the Holy Spirit through which to work conversion, as noted in the previous section. Reason is a gift, and it has its role in God's world.

Related to this, Luther states, "Faith is in the intellect. Hope is in the will."<sup>40</sup> That is, faith is a new thinking, a new reasoning. What our minds rejected (and by rejecting created an illusory and false understanding of the world), is now accepted by the mind and gives the intellect a truer way of seeing and understanding the world. The sinful mind rejects God as creator, and so the unbelieving scientist cannot arrive at the truth of the world's origins. The new creation knows God as creator, and so the believer has a correct view of looking at the world and understanding origins. But, of course, it goes far beyond that. The new creation knows true love,

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<sup>39</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 88.

true hope, true solutions to the problems of this world, and the new creation looks upon the world with these corrected lenses. And so we can say with Becker, “It is therefore not Christianity that needs to be made reasonable. It is reason that needs to be made Christian.”<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.c The Role of Evidence in Faith

The typical approach to apologetics today is what might be called a veil of ignorance approach, summarized well by O’Connor:

To facilitate impartiality in our philosophical investigations here, we borrowed John Rawls’s tactic of imagining ourselves behind a veil of ignorance. Tailoring this approach to our two questions, we imagined ourselves cut off, first, from knowledge of our own religious preference, and then from knowledge of the entire subjects of religion and philosophy.<sup>42</sup>

This is an excellent summary of what one often is trying to accomplish within philosophical apologetics (as well as other types). By beginning from as neutral a position as possible, which direction will the evidence take us? Our meditation on reason thus far brings up several comments at this point. The problem with the veil of ignorance approach is that it’s entirely impractical. The heart of the unbeliever is set against evidence in favor of God (to the extent that unbelief persists in the face of the strongest evidences, e.g. Luke 16:29), and a believer may have faith *despite* evidence to the contrary.

This may draw us to the conclusion, as noted already, that all evidence will be *against* Christianity. As Becker writes, “It is *necessary* that appearances should be against God’s Word. Only under those conditions is there room for faith, and only in such a situation can we learn to trust in the Word alone.”<sup>43</sup> And Becker has a point we ought not to forget, that the gospel is hidden behind facts our fallen reason rebels against, as Paul points out (1 Corinthians 1). But we should be careful that this is not pushed too far that we believe the concept of evidence itself has no home in the faith life of a Christian. What of Thomas, the witnesses of Christ’s miracles, the witnesses of the Exodus, and the witnesses of the resurrection? Following this reasoning to its end, Jesus ought to have never showed us his resurrected body so that faith might increase all the more.

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<sup>41</sup> Becker, “Luther’s Apologetics,” 5.

<sup>42</sup> O’Connor, *God, Evil and Design*, 209.

<sup>43</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 99.

#### 4.d The Empirical and Non-empirical in Christianity

We will do well, thus, to distinguish between the empirical facts of the Bible and the non-empirical doctrines of the gospel message. Luther once commented that reason simply cannot comprehend that an infinite God would be found in a manger trough.<sup>44</sup> Here we may differentiate between two things: the event in time and space in which Mary bore a child and laid him in a manger; and the truth that no human eye could see, that God came to earth as man as that child in the manger. Witnesses verified the event: the shepherds, Joseph, Mary, and others. The Spirit uses a real event that is taken in physically and psychologically by those witnesses and through the event works something supernatural in their hearts, something that was there but not able to be empirically verified: God now choosing to take on flesh in time and space. Similarly you and I do not have the event to experience, but we have the testimony of witnesses. In Scripture we read Luke's words, and as our minds psychologically take in the meaning of the event, the Spirit works something supernaturally into us, strengthening our faith in something hidden, something the witnesses cannot verify. Luther writes, "Faith has to do with things not seen. In order therefore that there might be a place for faith it is necessary that all things which are believed should be hidden."<sup>45</sup> Everything miraculous taking place at the incarnation could not be seen, only believed. What our faith takes hold of cannot be seen, only believed. Yet God works through real time and space in events that are empirically witnessed and verified to build faith in what cannot be seen.

This is an important distinction, because Scripture stresses two seemingly contradictory truths: first, that God provides ample evidence, confirmation, and interaction with the world of his existence and care within the world. We will explore this issue at length in the next section, but to touch on it here, we might speak of the plethora of masks behind which God chooses to interact in very real ways with the world. Through natural revelation, God has provided powerful evidence for his existence. Through the incarnation and Scripture, God has entered

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 109.

<sup>45</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 120. This is also how we ought to understand Luther's words, "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." Becker, "Luther's Apologetics," 9. This is how Soren Kierkegaard meant his leap of faith originally to be taken, not that belief hinges on an Arminian decision to leap. Rather he was commenting on the absurdity of the content of faith.

into this world in a special way for the express purpose of giving evidence of his love and redemptive plan, and the crucifixion was a real event in history with both believers and nonbelievers in witness. Through the Christian, he hides behind his chosen agents of the gospel that do his works and spread his message. The Christian God is a God that comes into his creation in direct ways. The Christian God is a God that is part of our history. As such, our religion is a religion of empirical facts.

But this first truth stands in direct opposition to faith: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). The naked eye does not see God, despite the infinite evidence found in his creation. For all the gospels’ evidence, one cannot *see* sins being paid for on that cross. And one cannot tell a believer from an unbeliever; the soul and its beliefs remain hidden and immaterial. As such our religion is a religion of non-empirical truths that cannot be tested or verified.

#### **4.e Summary**

There are two parts of an analysis of Lutheran apologetics. The first is on the state of the person being witnessed to, the state of humankind. The second is what truths are conveyed by God and through what means. In regards to the first, we note that man is both dead in sin and hostile to God. Yet God has chosen to bring the dead to life and break through the hostility by working supernaturally through psychological processes. Reason’s role, then, is first a tool used by hostile man to discredit the truth. The Holy Spirit then uses the unbeliever’s faculty of reason to comprehend God’s truth and bring the dead to life. After conversion reason is a tool used ministerially as a servant to the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit continually uses psychological means (e.g., the reading and apprehension of God’s Word to strengthen faith) to work on the heart of the believer.

The second part is what God is conveying to humans by God. Here we made a distinction between the empirical and unempirical. The truths regarding God come in two modes, the first being the empirical facts through history that were empirically witnessed and recorded by Scripture: a birth in a manger, a crucifixion, an empty tomb. The second is the unempirical reality behind the facts: the incarnation of God, the atonement of the world’s sins, the resurrection of the Son of God. Between the empirical and unempirical is the territory of

signs and wonders performed specifically as evidence that the unempirical stands behind the empirical.<sup>46</sup>

What follows is an analysis of this second part, that is, the different ways in which God empirically comes in contact with humanity. He does this by hiding. We call these modes the masks of God.

### **5. The Masks of God: The Non-empirical Hides Behind the Empirical**

Although God is hidden, he is not absent. God is very present, and he is constantly making his presence known through different means, means Lutheran theologians have often called God's masks. When we speak of God hiding, we are not describing God as conniving or deceptive. Rather, we are simply describing the ways God has made himself known to humankind since he does not, nor cannot, reveal himself in all his glory. But make no mistake, we are teaching that God is really here, really present, really hiding behind the masks we will discuss.

Note also that to present a mask of God will always be to present a contradiction. Luther writes:

Hence in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden. It cannot, however, be more deeply hidden than under an object, perception, or experience which is contrary to it. Thus when God makes alive he does it by killing, when he justifies he does it by making men guilty, when he exalts to heaven he does it by bringing down to hell, as Scripture says: "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up" (I Sam. 2[:6]).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> A word concerning miracles: Consider John's record of miracles as signs. "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name" (John 2:23). "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). "Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe" (John 4:48). "This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee" (John 4:54). "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). John uses the word *miraculous sign* eighteen times in his gospel. The signs demonstrate as evidence that Jesus is who he claims he is and that when the empirical event of his death will occur, the unempirical saving of sins will be taking place. The person apprehends these signs psychologically, and through that psychological act the Holy Spirit supernaturally works faith into Jesus' disciples.

<sup>47</sup> "The Bondage of the Will," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 33. American Edition. (55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), 62. Note the context of Luther's often quoted words, "in order that there may be room for faith, it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden." These were his words at the Heidelberg Disputation, where the theology of the cross was first explored. The context is speaking against a theology of glory, *not* against natural theology or apologetics or in regards to the role of reason.

There is wide application of this principle of God hiding himself in contradictions, but for our purposes we note that every mask he hides behind mentioned below includes contradiction. Although God's power and goodness are found in nature, so too is evidence of sin, suffering, and death. Although God's grace and mercy are found on the cross, it is found behind an event that suggests anything but mercy and grace, where the King of kings appears as the lowliest of criminals. Although God's care and concern are clearly evident in the life of a Christian, so too is the Christian life one of pain, hardship, and toil.

### **5.a Mask 1: God Masks Himself in Nature**

The heavens declare the glory of God... There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19:1,3)

We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7; 1072b)

Luther saw the natural world also as one of the masks of God. Just as God hides himself in the means of grace, so he hides his invisible attributes in the whole of nature. All the works of God are such masks behind which we see God at once hidden and revealed.<sup>48</sup>

The universe is its Creator's mask.<sup>49</sup>

One way in which God makes himself known by hiding is through his revelation of nature. This is unique, in that this mode of revelation is accessible to all people throughout all time. And so we find peoples from every time and culture finding God behind this mask. Luther writes, "Such light and understanding is in the heart of all men and is not easily smothered or extinguished."<sup>50</sup> All people are forced on some level to struggle with what and who they find operating in the natural world in which they find themselves. And we find ample evidence of this outside of Scripture. But what do we make of those that claim, when they examine nature,

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<sup>48</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "Theological Axioms I," trans. Christopher S. Doerr, *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/WaltherTheologicalAxiomsI.pdf> (accessed 24 Oct. 2012), 21.

<sup>50</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 28.

they find no God? “There have indeed been some, such as the Epicureans, Pliny, and the like, who deny it with the mouth. But they do it with force and want to smother the light in their hearts. They act as those who forcibly plug up their ears and hold their eyes shut so that they neither see nor hear. But it does no good; their conscience tells them otherwise.”<sup>51</sup> Those that look at nature and conclude there is no God are in fact working *against* the evidence. They are forcibly misinterpreting the data.<sup>52</sup> They act as if their reason is king (the magisterial use), and the king says there is no God, but at the heart of the matter they enslave reason to interpret the data that fits their own purposes.

And this is not speculation. This is what Scripture tells us takes place in the hearts of those that say there is no God. Luther continues:

For Paul does not lie when he says that God has revealed it to them, so that they know something about God. For these people believe that God is a Being who can help in all time of need. Out of that it follows that natural reason must confess that all good comes from God... The natural light of reason goes this far: it considers God to be good, gracious, merciful, and kind. That is a great light.<sup>53</sup>

Note what Luther is saying here about reason: she is a *light*, and those who come to the conclusion that God does not exist based on the evidence of nature are snuffing out that light. Reason provides a way to touch at a great distance the reality of God, that he is good, gracious, merciful, and kind. Christianity is not required to reach this conclusion, as Aristotle did. Elsewhere Luther writes, “We are *forced* to ascribe to God omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness.”<sup>54</sup>

Because of this, the natural knowledge of God and reason as a tool has a special place in the theology of Luther. Becker writes:

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

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>52</sup> Note we are speaking *theologically* here. The actual experience of some unbelievers may be quite different. They may honestly feel as though the evidence points against God’s existence, and this must be received by the Christian evangelist with tact, patience, and love. Like those tied down in Plato’s cave, those imprisoned in unbelief may often *feel most certain* about being free. The Christian, though, has escaped and knows the actual state of affairs.

<sup>53</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 28-9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

attributes of God, for example, he was willing that we should be as subtle and as sharp in debate as we possibly can be.<sup>55</sup>

Within apologetics, several arguments are put forth by Christians that attempt to take advantage of this natural knowledge. Note that Scripture never says *how* nature declares the glory of God, only that man is without excuse because of his seeing this mask. Two ways in which Christians have traditionally argued that God's presence cannot be denied are through cosmological and teleological arguments on the one hand, and moral arguments on the other hand.<sup>56</sup>

Cosmological and teleological arguments are based on the evidence of certain features in the observable world that demand an intelligent, powerful entity behind them. From our earlier summaries categorized by Habermas, we would list the work in cosmology (particularly popularized by Craig), intelligent design (popularized by Behe and Dembski), and fine-tuning arguments (popularized by Richards and Gonzalez). Each of these approaches believes certain empirical features in the universe give evidence to Aristotle's *first cause*, an entity behind the veil. Although an analysis of the employment of such arguments is needed, the Lutheran fathers did see value in the pursuit of arguments for God's existence based on the natural knowledge.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Before we continue it ought to be noted that these arguments are human constructions meant to best put into practice biblical teaching. As such, these arguments may and will fail to demonstrate to an unbeliever that God exists for a number of reasons: (1) The believer, hindered by his own sinfulness, has botched up the argument. (2) The believer, hindered by his own sinfulness, did not speak the truth in love. (3) The believer, hindered by his own sinfulness, is using an argument that is fallacious (albeit the propositions he attempts to demonstrate he knows from Scripture are true). (4) The unbeliever simply finds the argument *not* intellectually satisfying. Most unlikely is that the unbeliever is intellectually foolish. When Scripture states "The fool says in his heart there is no God," this is a reference to moral and spiritual foolishness, *not* intellectual foolishness. As explored earlier, the *heart* of the unbeliever is set *against* the truth, and so the mind follows the will of the heart. We ought to be very careful that we do not take issue with the *intelligence* of those with whom we seek to share the gospel. The issue is always the heart.

<sup>57</sup> Luther: "Human reason and wisdom by itself can come this far, that it concludes, although weakly, that there must be a single, eternal divine Being, which has created, preserves, and governs all things. When reason considers such beautiful, exquisite creatures both in heaven and earth, governed in such a wonderful, orderly and sure way, it must deny the possibility that the origin and preservation of these things are accidental or spontaneous. There must be a Creator and Lord from whom all things came and by whom all are governed. And so reason must know God by his creatures, as St. Paul says in Romans 1." as cited by Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 33.

Chemnitz: "The evidences mentioned above are correctly called demonstrations, for Paul speaks of "the truth of God," Rom. 1:18. And these demonstrations are of two kinds: 1. From the natural knowledge which is grafted into the minds of all men, Rom. 1:19, "which has been made manifest to them," that is, has been placed in their minds. And he adds "for God has shown it to them," that is, through their natural knowledge, Rom. 1:19. And in Acts 17:27, "He is not far from each of us," that is, He wills that the evidences of the deity be closely examined by each of us. 2. The second kind of evidence is from the effects which demonstrate the existence of a Creator. Rom. 1:20 says, "They are seen from the creation of the world," and he goes on to add, "by the things that were

Whereas cosmological and teleological arguments look to the evidence *outside of* man, moral arguments are based on the evidence of certain features found *within* man. These deal with features God has placed within all men, mainly the conscience and the law, features that cry out for the existence of a lawgiver. Luther writes:

The knowledge of the law is known to reason, and reason has almost touched and smelled God. For they saw out of the law what was right and wrong, and the law is written in our hearts, as St. Paul testifies to the Romans. Although it is more clearly revealed through Moses, it is nevertheless also true that by nature all rational men can come this far that they know that to disobey father and mother or the government is wrong--likewise murder, adultery, theft, cursing, and blasphemy... So far reason can go in knowing God that it has a law knowledge. It knows God's command and what is right and wrong. The philosophers also had this knowledge of God."<sup>58</sup>

C.S. Lewis was particularly interested in this topic when he wrote his opus *The Abolition of Man*. Natural Law ethicists such as J. Budziszewski also spend considerable time on the importance of the conscience in philosophical inquiry and Christian apologetics. This approach as a Christian apologetic, though, is used with difficulty for a number of reasons, the chief reason being that the objectivity of morality is in question. It may be used to posit no morality existing at all. And then one loses not only the existence of God, but the first use of the law as well.<sup>59</sup>

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made," that is, from the governance, preservation, or administration of the creation. Acts 14:17, God "did not leave Himself without witness," that is by blessing us from heaven. In Acts 17:27 Paul says that God can almost be contacted through these evidences. In the *Loci*, folio 68, nine proofs are listed: (1) the very order of nature itself, (2) the nature of the human mind, (3) the difference between the honorable and the shameful, (4) the truthfulness of natural knowledge, (5) the terrors of conscience, (6) the structure of human society, (7) the orderly process of cause and effect, (8) the signs of future events, (9) the ultimate purpose of things." as cited by Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 52.

Chemnitz: "Since all men by nature acknowledge that there is a God and that He is to be glorified as God, and at the same time they are compelled to confess that they do not know how He is to be worshiped, God has ingrafted into them this knowledge, so that they may seek the proclamation of divine revelation in the church. And in order to give this proclamation great visibility, He has made this teaching so conspicuous throughout the whole world that all nations can clearly see the light of the heavenly teaching, not hidden under a bushel but placed high on a candlestick. But the same thing has happened to mankind as befalls bats who are blinded by the brilliant splendor of the sun. These people have become so darkened in their mind and their understanding that they become more blinded to the clear light of the divine Word. To this the Holy Scriptures bear witness concerning even the wisest of the heathen, such as Galen, Plato, and others." as cited by Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 53.

<sup>58</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 35.

<sup>59</sup> At times arguments from conscience may also lead to a bifurcation between the law and lawgiver. Kant famously attempts to demonstrate that meditation on conscience leads to an acknowledge of God: "Morality thus leads ineluctably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral Lawgiver, outside of mankind, for Whose will that is the final end (of creation) which at the same time can and ought to be man's final end." Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (La Salle, IL: Open Court Pub. Co., 1960), first preface. Yet many contemporary Kantians find in Kant a

Although God wears nature as a mask, and although we are able to comprehend by examining this mask alone that there is indeed a God that is all powerful as well as morally perfect, and although we may look at the evidence *inside* us for evidence of a law-giving God, there are severe limits to what reason can apprehend. Regarding anthropological truths, nature tells us very little about the human condition. As Becker writes, “Man can never know himself adequately until he knows his fount, or origin, which is God.”<sup>60</sup> Although we would tend to look at our accomplishments in the sciences today and praise our ingeniousness and far-sightedness, science is entirely near-sighted and dim when it comes to discovering the truths that most affect our eternal destiny, truths only revealed in Scripture. The great questions of philosophy remain untouched or only grazed by the sciences: Who am I? Where am I from? What kind of creature am I? What do I need? What is the source of true happiness for humanity? The greatest questions of theology are not even asked, as they are not even within the scope of scientific inquiry: Are there any other manifestations of God? Has God ever entered the world? Am I only partly evil, or entirely evil? And if I am entirely evil, what awaits me after I die? And most importantly, is there a Savior? The natural knowledge of God knows nothing of Jesus, nothing of divine revelation, nothing of the gospel.<sup>61</sup> No philosopher or scientist of nature alone was or ever will be saved.

The examination of nature within the sphere of contemporary scientific methods also offers challenges to those looking upon God’s mask of nature. As Becker writes:

In reality [modern science] can find only material and formal, or instrumental, causes, but in its ignorance it imagines that it has found efficient and final causes. It is this attitude which is behind the "scientific" assertion that diseases cannot be caused by devils because they are caused by germs, or that God cannot answer

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demonstration that morality may be explained a priori without need or reference to a lawgiver—the internal rationality of morality makes God superfluous.

<sup>60</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 62.

<sup>61</sup> The examination of nature also yields considerably limited knowledge of God as well. Consider Sproul: “We have seen that much of contemporary evangelical apologetics retains the traditional theistic proofs but in a reserved and qualified way. They are accepted as reasonable but not compelling, as persuasive but not demonstrative, as valuable but not conclusive, as evidence but not proof. Norman Geisler, for example, has so weakened the teleological argument that for all practical purposes he has virtually given it up. Though he considers himself a mild proponent of it, he ends where Kant and Jung end. He appreciates its suggestive power and even modestly claims its probability, but does not address Kant’s contention that even if it were cogent it would prove merely a great architect. If the argument proves only a great architect, it does not prove God who is not merely a great architect but is the infinite source of all things. Though Geisler and others appreciate the argument, they, like Kant, reject it as a proof or demonstration of the existence of a purposive, divine being.” R.C. Sproul, and John Gerstner, Arthur Linsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 125.

prayers for rain because rain is the result of the interacting of complicated meteorological factors. Man, with his reason, can only deal with phenomena, and he ought to be conscious of the limitations which this places on all his investigations.<sup>62</sup>

In one scene from C.S. Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the children meet a star, and the star introduces herself and her name. The children reply that in their world stars do not have names but are balls of gas. The star replies that is what she is made of, but that is not who she is. Lewis notes the severe limitations our modern scientific methodology places on being able to apprehend purpose as well as first causes. The apologist John Lennox once described the dilemma in a lecture: The Ford automobile has two explanations: (1) the laws of engineering, and (2) the laws of Henry Ford—that is, we might explain the Ford automobile by referring to internal combustion, etc., or we might explain the Ford automobile by referring to the person and work of Henry Ford who put internal combustion to use. If I asked you to please choose one as the right explanation, you would say that would be ridiculous. Both instrumental and efficient causes lend to a more complete explanation. Explanation comes in different kinds, yet modern scientism limits the explanations worthy of the title knowledge to instrumental causes alone.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, nature's revelation is by God's design a vehicle of conflicting messages. Nature does not only give evidence of an all-powerful and all-good creator, but she also gives evidence of a fallen, sinful world. God has placed arrows in nature that point to the problem of sin (Genesis 3:17-19).<sup>64</sup> And in addition to these, human evil flourishes in our world. If one is to argue that nature provides evidence of a good creator, one must deal with all the evidence to the contrary. And so the traditional Problem of Evil finds its home here, recognized by every major

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<sup>62</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 64-5.

<sup>63</sup> One can find Luther speaking something close to the idea that only Christians can be truly good scientists, that through the process of sanctification, a correct view of nature is being restored. "We are beginning to regain a knowledge of the creation, a knowledge we had forfeited by the fall of Adam. Now we have a correct view of created reality, more so, I suppose, than they have in the papacy. Erasmus does not concern himself with this; it interests him little how the fetus is made, formed, and developed in the womb. Thus he also fails to prize the excellency of the state of marriage. But by God's mercy we can begin to recognize his wonderful works and wonders also in the flowers when we ponder His might and goodness. Therefore we laud, magnify, and thank him. In his creation we recognize the power of his Word." Martin Luther, quoted by J.W. Montgomery, *In Defense of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1970), 93.

<sup>64</sup> "The beasts harass, harm, kill, and eat their former lord; in the air he breaks his neck; the water drowns him; the earth becomes his tomb, etc. Such considerations, says Luther, serve a useful purpose. They teach us what an abomination before God sin must be, since it has so thoroughly deranged the relationship between man and the rest of creatures." Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia College, 2003), 522.

philosopher on the topic. “At face value, there is friction between the facts of destruction and suffering, on the one hand, and the belief in a good creator God, on the other.”<sup>65</sup>

The Lutheran apologist may point others to God hiding behind nature, both the nature of the empirical world around us, as well as to the nature we find inside us, the conscience and law of God. To point others to God’s handiwork is to point others to God himself hiding in plain sight. This is severely limited, but nevertheless God expects us to find him there and share him there and take pleasure in his handiwork there (although not to stop there, as we will explore). And we have no reason to shy away from discussing the inherent contradiction between evidence of God’s handiwork and evidence of sin and evil. Based on Scripture’s presuppositions, this is what we ought to expect. As such, the hiddenness of God in nature is not a problem, as contemporary Evangelical apologists cast it, but instead it is for the Lutheran a *presupposition* latent with explanatory power that takes seriously the evil people encounter in themselves and in the world.<sup>66</sup>

But this is only the beginning. As Walther states, “Reason knows there is one God, but doesn’t know he is my God.”<sup>67</sup> The goal reason reaches when it contemplates nature cannot arrive at the gospel. But there is hope. God wears more masks than this.

## **5.b Mask 2: God Masks Himself in the Incarnation**

Another way in which God makes himself known by hiding is through his revelation of Christ. Here we focus on the events of the incarnation and the way in which these events are treated by Scripture. The incarnation *is* a historical event, which means it has an empirical dimension and is treated by Scripture as an empirical event that can be studied and defended.

Allen Quist, one of the few confessional Lutherans to publish on the topic of apologetics, focuses particularly on how the gospel writers viewed the events of Jesus as historical evidence for the Christian faith. He writes:

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<sup>65</sup> O’Connor, *God, Evil and Design*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> “It is not disgraceful for a believing theologian to have to confess that he does not have a solution to a thousand ‘problems’ which human reason finds in Scripture. Orthodox Lutheran theology looks upon this attitude of faith as being the one basic principle of knowledge.” Schaller, “The Hidden God,” 455. In this sense, we might note that God’s hiddenness of nature can be used as a preaching of the law, since the Lutheran explanation of nature includes not only evidence of a God, but evidence of evil that must be dealt with.

<sup>67</sup> Walther, “Theological Axioms I,” 19.

While describing the activities of these evangelists, Luke managed to include nine of their missionary sermons... When we evaluate these sermons, we find that there are four lines of verification which are common to them generally. These four lines of argument and evidence are: (1) Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. (2) The many eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus confirm the fact of the resurrection. (3) Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. (4) Jesus' many miracles, and those done by the apostles in his name, demonstrate that he is the Messiah.<sup>68</sup>

Since the gospels are testimony regarding the events of the incarnation, we might note that this is only one form of testimony (albeit certainly the best, and the only sure, testimony the Christian knows). Luke speaks of other witnesses and accounts, and we find extra-biblical evidence of Jesus' ministry. But from the historian's point of view, the New Testament documents remain the best, earliest, and most widespread evidence. And so much of Christian apologetics today focuses on either 1) examining the uniqueness of the New Testament documents as historical testimony,<sup>69</sup> or 2) examining a limited number of reported events in the New Testament documents and what conclusions historians must come to.<sup>70</sup> Note that at this

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<sup>68</sup> Allen Quist, *Many Convincing Proofs A Biblical Approach to Christian Apologetics*, Paul Wold ed. 2008th ed. (Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2008), 6. Former Bethany Lutheran College professor Allen Quist's work is an exceptional treatment on analyzing the apologetic nature of Scripture, demonstrating how the gospel writers understood their writings as the conveying of historical facts proving the incarnation, as well as demonstrating how the epistles' authors understood their writings as developing a gospel theology built on those historical facts.

<sup>69</sup> John W. Montgomery pioneered this approach that was widely popular among evangelical apologists in the second half of the twentieth century. Often designated as *evidential* apologists, these scholars rested heavily on the works of evangelical textual scholars. Consider Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). As a summary of this position, Craig Parton, a student of Montgomery and proponent of evidential apologetics, writes, "In short, from a lawyer's viewpoint these documents are in solid shape and would surely, as Simon Greenleaf argued, be admissible under the so-called 'ancient documents' exception to the hearsay rule. They give no evidence of tampering, are well-attested as coming from a strong tradition of manuscript evidence, arise almost on top of the events they record, and have no peer among all works of antiquity based on the sheer number of excellent and early manuscript copies. The documents are reliable historically, applying the commonly accepted canons of historical scholarship used to determine if any work that predates the printing press has reached us in substantially the same shape in which it was authored." Craig A. Parton, *The Defense Never Rests: A Lawyer's Quest for the Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 77.

<sup>70</sup> Evidential apologetics is at times contrasted with *minimal facts* apologetics, pioneered by the work of Gary Habermas. In Habermas and Licona's *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, written as a popular guide to their apologetic approach, they describe this apologetic in action: "Using this approach, we may start off by saying, 'I believe there's some pretty good evidence for Jesus' resurrection.' When asked to provide that evidence, we respond by saying, 'Because not everyone believes the Bible in its entirety, how about if I use only facts that are so strongly evidenced historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject, even the rather skeptical ones?' This usually solicits the skeptical friend's attention. We can then follow up by providing something like the following argument: [a] The disciples sincerely believed that Jesus rose from the dead and had appeared to them. [b] A number of outside evidences support the truth of their beliefs in his resurrection. [c] Since no opposing theories can adequately account for all the historical evidence, therefore, Jesus' resurrection is the only

point we are referring to the empirical dimension of the incarnation events: a birth in a manger, a death on a cross, an empty tomb, the words spoken by a teacher at a certain point and time in history.

But the incarnation at the same time is the focal expression of God's hiddenness, really a double hiddenness, as Sasse explains:

The God who is hidden, who is the invisible, eternal God, becomes for us the God revealed in Jesus Christ. But this revelation, this unveiling of God, is at the same time a veiling, a hiding. So Luther's twofold use of the expression 'God hidden' is to be understood. Luther can speak of the hidden God in the sense of God who has revealed himself by hiding himself in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Incarnation, then, is at one and the same time both an unveiling of God as well as a veiling or hiding of God in human nature.<sup>71</sup>

So we may speak of a physical hiding, where God reveals himself to the world in the incarnate Jesus while at the same time hiding himself behind his humanity.<sup>72</sup>

There is also an intellectual hiding taking place, especially when we speak of the crucifixion. Here we find our Christ the King texts of the pericope, which are really meditations on the theology of the cross, meditations on how everything that took place on Good Friday gave the impression that Jesus was anything *but* a king. John records how Pilate asks Jesus whether he is a king, and Jesus asks him whether that was Pilate's own idea, knowing that Pilate thought Jesus was anything but a king, anything but a political threat to him and Rome (John 18:33-37). Matthew recounts Jesus' abuse by the soldiers in the Praetorium (Matthew 27:27-31). Luke presents us with two men hanging on crosses as condemned criminals, the scum of the earth, and we find one turning to the other and saying, "Today you will be with me in paradise," a

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plausible explanation." Gary R. Habermas, and Michael Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004) 207. See also Habermas, Gary R. *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). For an example of a current development, Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

<sup>71</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," trans. Arnold J. Koelpin, *Briefe an lutherische Pastoren*, nr. 18, (October, 1951), *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, [www.wlsessays.net/files/Luther's%20Theology%20of%20the%20Cross.pdf](http://www.wlsessays.net/files/Luther's%20Theology%20of%20the%20Cross.pdf) (accessed 20 December 2012).

<sup>72</sup> Luther sees this as a continuation of God's hiding himself in the Old Testament. In his Heidelberg Disputation he comments on God's hiding all but his backside from Moses. Gerhard Forde sees Luther bridging the account of Moses being hidden from God's glory with God being hidden in Jesus: "God, that is, actually prevents Moses from seeing his glory. To be sure, that is on the one hand a gracious act since no one can look on God's face and live. But for a theologian of glory it is on the other hand a supreme put-down. God won't let even Moses see what every theologian of glory so desperately wants to see. God allows Moses to see only his back when he has passed by. In Luther's mind here it is the suffering, despised, and crucified Jesus that takes the place of God's backside." Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 78.

statement that must have sounded ludicrous to the onlookers (Luke 23:35-43). And yet Daniel and Ezekiel tell us Jesus indeed is King and Savior, the greatest there ever was, is, or will be (Daniel 7:13-14; Ezekiel 34). All evidence on that Good Friday shouted out the contrary, “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Here God’s Word and his Word alone is the only source of truth regarding those events.<sup>73</sup> The historical event itself is useless to understand how the gospel unfolds. The fact that the event is historical and empirical is enormously important: Your and my faith is built on a historical event in history, and just as any other historical event, no one has the ability to go back in time and change this event, and so no one has the ability to undo the fact that the price for our sins has already been paid. But the event is still the last thing we would expect as the highest and most epic moment in the history of the world, the moment of the salvation of all humankind and the supreme act of God in the world. God’s Word is needed to explain what was taking place so that faith might lay hold of God’s promises.

We may speak even of a spiritual hiding. Luther wrote, “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.”<sup>74</sup> Here we find life hidden behind death. One must die before living. We will explore this issue more at length with our next mask.

### **5.c Mask 3: God Masks Himself in the Christian.**

The final way we will discuss in which God makes himself known by hiding is through his Christians. We might speak of God’s activity of sustaining and caring for people today through his providential control and guidance over all people. As such, God continues to heal, feed, and protect humankind through doctors, government workers, and even dairy farmers regardless of whether or not the doctors, government workers, and dairy farmers are Christians.

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<sup>73</sup> And we should reiterate that this is, in fact, *truth*. The unempirical truth found in the gospel is as much truth as the empirical dimension of the events. “The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls things what they are.” Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation”, in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 31. American Edition. (55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), 40.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* Luther in his commentary on thesis 18 quotes also Romans 2 and 3:9.

As Mark Paustian writes, “God milks the cows behind the mask of the milkmaid.”<sup>75</sup> Luther states the truth:

[All these activities] are our Lord God’s masks (Larven); beneath these He chooses to be hidden and to do everything. Had Gideon not co-operated and taken the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been defeated. Yet God was able to smite them without Gideon. No doubt He could create children without man and woman, but He does not intend to do so. Rather He joins man and woman to make it look as if man and woman do the procreating. Yet He, hidden under this mask, is the one who does it. They say: (*Dat Deus omne bonum, sed non per cornua taurum*). God bestows every good thing; but you must “pitch in” and “take the bull by the horns,” that is, you must work and supply God with a reason and a covering.<sup>76</sup>

And even beyond this, there is a special way in which God comes to the world today: through Christians. Christians are used by God not only through their explicit proclamation of the gospel (Romans 10:14), but also through what we might call their implicit proclamation of the gospel, their vocations.

“Christian vocation is our calling to be the Masks of God.”<sup>77</sup> Through our vocations, the circumstances and events that we find ourselves in, the unique place God has decided to place us, God puts us on as masks and through us reaches out into the world. “Through my vocation, I take my place between God and my neighbor and become a conduit through which divine blessings reach others. In Luther’s terminology, I become ‘the mask’ God wears or ‘the hands’ God uses as he does he work in the world.”<sup>78</sup>

The Christian first collides with the unchristian world (as well as with other Christians) through vocation. Although three spheres have often been identified (home, society, church), these are not firmly separated spheres, but rather spheres that overlap into each other. A father is also a son as well as a laborer and citizen. A mother is a daughter as well as a laborer and

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<sup>75</sup> Mark A. Paustian, “Unleashing Our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations,” Symposium on Vocation; Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary; September 18-19, 2006, *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/PaustianVocation.pdf> (accessed 23 Oct. 2012), 3.

<sup>76</sup> Martin Luther, Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says*, Vol. III, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1494-1495.

<sup>77</sup> Jonathan E Schroeder. “Our Calling: Christian Vocation and The Ministry of the Gospel,” 60th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Assembled at Michigan Lutheran Seminary; July 27-31 2009, 6.

<sup>78</sup> Ken Cherney, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Luther’s Doctrine of Vocation.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 98 (2001): 282.

citizen. But the Christian is no mere father or mother, no mere laborer, no mere citizen. God has chosen the father to be father and the mother to be mother, has called them into a holy position to witness through that position that they are redeemed sinners who love and serve their neighbors out of love for what Christ has done. Jonathan Schroeder puts it elegantly:

...husband, father, parent, rulers, pastors, children, servants. These roles Luther called "Holy Orders," the very words people used in the Middle Ages for the monastic life. The new Holy Orders of Christian life were pastors and princes, husbands and wives, employees and employers, children and widows. In these Holy Orders God called man and woman to live lives of active righteousness out of love for their neighbor. Here in the Table of Duties, not in the monastery, one could find the righteousness that God wants us to display in the world. Here, one found our calling in the world.<sup>79</sup>

As such, the Christian becomes evidence of God, evidence of his gospel, albeit imperfect and often bad evidence. God's grace shown to sinners on the cross is shown as a microcosm in the selfless acts of love of the Christian. Through works of service, the Christian hopes to point to Christ's ultimate work.

The goal is always that this implicit witness of Christ will lead to an explicit presentation of law and gospel, that one would have their neighbor look upon the mask of vocation only to eventually be turned to the mask of the incarnation. But throughout even this, the Christian not only is presenting objective justification, but also the experience of subjective justification in his own life. Preus summarizes Chytraeus:

The general experience of all pious people is "a weighty and important criterion" of certainty. Here the author is speaking of the experience of being delivered from the wrath of God, the experience of forgiveness and a peaceful conscience, experiences common to children of God. Just as experience verifies and certifies in philosophy, it offers certainty in theology.<sup>80</sup>

Here we find the Christian life as one of God's masks.<sup>81</sup> The peace of conscience in the Christian's life is a powerful witness. The joy in the midst of hardships in this life is a powerful arrow to our hope in an eternal joy in the next.

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<sup>79</sup> Schroeder, "Our Calling: Christian Vocation and the Ministry of the Gospel," 8.

<sup>80</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 101.

<sup>81</sup> Chytraeus oversteps when he speaks of the certainty that comes through one's *experience* of being saved. After all, I am forgiven even when I do not feel forgiven; certainty can only be based on the promises of God hinging on the reality of events of the Bible (Romans 4:16; John 10:28,29; Romans 8:15,16,38,39; Ephesians 3:12). Yet Scripture does speak of the certainty that comes with faith (Hebrews 11:1).

But here we find, just as with the other masks, contradictory evidence. Not only is this the most imperfect mask of all (called by Paul *clay jars*, 2 Corinthians 4:7), because we often are hateful, spiteful, mean-spirited, conniving, treacherous, slanderous, wicked, and weak. But even if we were none of these things and instead exhibited constant virtuous behavior, the Christian still does not look like what he claims to be. The Christian claims to be a redeemed child of an omnipotent and all-loving God. The Christian claims to be in the palm of God's hand, under his constant care and protection. But instead the Christian life is filled with just as much pain and hardship as any other, and much of that pain and suffering comes at the expense of being a Christian.

This suffering at the expense of the gospel is our final dimension of the theology of the cross, and the final dimension of an apologist of the cross.<sup>82</sup> We mentioned that the theology of the cross hinges around God's hiddenness: God hides himself in nature, God hides himself behind Christ, and now we see God hides himself behind Christians. And just as God's salvation of the world was hidden behind the cross of Christ on Calvary, so we see that God's plan of salvation is shared behind the cross of suffering that Christians bear in this world. But this life of suffering is not viewed by the Christian as a problem, as the world sees it, but rather, in a certain sense, as a badge. Luther writes:

A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God) teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself has consecrated and blessed... Indeed fortunate and blessed is he who is considered by God to be so worthy that these treasures of Christ should be given to him.<sup>83</sup>

What this means practically speaking is that to an outsider looking in, the Christian is fundamentally undistinguishable from an unbeliever. Often the Christian acts like an unbeliever and the unbeliever acts like a Christian, and often the Christian's life is just as hard as the believer's. Beyond this, the one thing that would surely set the two apart is entirely invisible.

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<sup>82</sup> I have found Veith's most well-known work on vocation useful for explicit connection between vocation and cross bearing. Jr, Gene Edward Veith. *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011). Veith's most current work on vocation, focusing on the vocation of the home, includes a chapter for every vocation summarizing that particular vocation's cross: the crosses of marriage, parenthood, and childhood. Jr, Gene Edward Veith, and Mary J. Moerbe. *Family Vocation: God's Calling in Marriage, Parenting, and Childhood*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

<sup>83</sup> Martin Luther, "Explanation of the Disputation Concerning the Value of Indulgences," in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31. American Edition. (55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), 225f.

Faith itself is unempirical: one cannot view or examine faith. It's not that kind of thing. And so there is no certain way of telling a Christian apart from an unbeliever. Just as the Christian God is hidden, in many ways one can speak of the Christian hidden as well. Walter von Loewenwich writes:

Why is the life of the Christian a hidden one? Very simply because it is a life of faith... The Christian life can never be fully identified with the empirical life that we lead. The Christian life is an object of faith and, as such, it is hidden. What we see is never the real thing; only God and faith see this innermost core.<sup>84</sup>

Yet, the Christian carries with him something that becomes very evident to the world through his vocational work in this world: the message of forgiveness. This message becomes very evident not only through the explicit proclamation of Christ's forgiveness for the sins of the world, but also through the lifestyle of mercy that flows from the Christian. "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). "Forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2 Corinthians 2:7). This mercy and culture of forgiveness stretches beyond our relationships with fellow Christians. Our lives with those outside the faith are marked with the same attitude of mercy. "Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear" (Jude 22-23; See also Micah 6). While at the same time taking seriously the implications of unbelief, Christians allow Christ's mercy to shine through.

And so we find that God hides behind the Christian. At times, the world will not notice that God is hiding there, as the Christian carries his cross throughout his vocations. But he is there. His Spirit lives within the Christian, and his Spirit speaks through the Christian through both his words of proclamation and his life shaped by and expressing the mercy of God. A fundamental part of apologetics, then, is the simple fact that before the unbeliever stands evidence of God: a redeemed sinner that now lives to share that message of redemption.

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<sup>84</sup> Walter von Loewenwich. *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976) 114.

## 6. Conclusion and Notes on a Lutheran Apologetic

The goal of Lutheran apologetics is never to show how reasonable our faith is, but rather to point out that the unreasonable did, in fact, take place. There is nothing reasonable about Jesus dying and rising for my sins, but that does not change the fact that it happened and was documented for my benefit.

When these two aspects, (1) the unreasonable gospel message of forgiveness and (2) the historical event of the incarnation, are brought together, then apologetics has been properly united with the gospel ministry. If the goal of the evangelist is to use every tool at his disposal to connect his hearer to the Jesus of history and the forgiveness he offers, the gospel is being proclaimed.

Apologetics, then, for the Lutheran, is simply that part of evangelism that stresses and examines that the gospel did, in fact, take place in real history through real empirical events. Mary carried the child in her arms. The disciples touched the risen Savior. Luke performed an investigation to establish the circumstances of historical events, dealt with eyewitnesses, and produced a document of recorded evidence. This is but one of the masks of God, his incarnation in history, with which the Christian has at his disposal. The Christian can point to nature as well, as Paul did on many occasions, as well as to his own experiences as a forgiven child of God living out his vocation.

It is my opinion that we ought to reject, practically speaking, the designation between apologetics being *negative*<sup>85</sup> and suitable only for pre-evangelism and evangelism proper that has no place for certain masks of God. Rarely does one come to faith first struggling with whether or not God exists before moving on to which God. In the trenches, the Christian finds himself playing out both roles of evangelist and apologist. The Christian ought to approach sharing Jesus with *all* God's masks, knowing that God has given us all his masks to use to present all the types of evidence of the Christian God. Only the gospel converts, but this does not happen in a

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<sup>85</sup> That is, is meant only for taking apart the arguments of the unbeliever. For the use of the term *apologetics* in this sense, see Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. James Langebartels and Heinrich Vogel (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 270-271; Richard Balge, "Preaching Repentance and Remission of Sins—With Application to Personal Witnessing." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 75 (1978): 106.

supernatural vacuum. Conversion takes place in the midst of the psychological struggles of normal discussion and dialogue, as God has designed it.<sup>86</sup>

The apologist of the cross seeks to bring about the psychological encounter of the unbeliever with the masks of God: God in the world, God revealed in the incarnation and crucifixion reported in his Word, and the Christian life under that cross. Through that psychological encounter, the Holy Spirit does the unimaginable: he brings the dead to life and turns the hostile heart. The Lutheran apologist uses reason ministerially to bring about this encounter, realizing that, although it appears that his meaningful discussion and persuasive presentation of the Christian narrative is what persuades, it is in fact the Holy Spirit at work doing all the work. And so in the end we find the work of the Holy Spirit hidden as well, underneath the work of the apologist and evangelist. Forde summarizes for us well how the Lutheran apologist, as well as the Lutheran under any circumstances, strives to operate and live:

As theologians of the cross we operate on the premise that faith in the crucified and risen one is all we have going for us... By faith we become a human being, a person of this world, a truly historical being, because there is nothing to do now but wait, hope, pray, and trust in the promise of him who nevertheless conquers, the crucified and risen Jesus.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Consider the lengths Paul goes to in Romans, exploring the full dimensions of faith in an almost dialogue fashion, asking question after question and responding both with the testimony of Scripture and with logically analyzing the implications of questions. See Romans 6:1-11; 6:15-19; 7:7-12.

<sup>87</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 80.

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