



Luther on Reason: A Reappraisal

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In spite of frequent caricatures of Luther as a radical opponent of human reason, the weight of his writings and their center of gravity suggest a more balanced appraisal. Luther is primarily a religious thinker, and his thoughts about human reason emerge from a religious context. Unless this is acknowledged, great misunderstanding of Luther can result. The negative things he sometimes says about reason must be recognized as implications of his religious fervor. His maddening oscillation between praising reason and calling reason nasty names is a product of his singular obsession with the gospel. It is this same religious preoccupation that makes the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and the obedience and rebirth of the disciple so important in his overall evaluation of reason. In this essay, I want to suggest that it is just that kerygmatic substance in Luther's thinking that feeds, focuses, and directs his evaluation of reason.

I.

Reading Romans, Luther discovered the kerygmatic pulse of the whole Bible, redemption through an eternal righteousness not one's own but from God. Salvation is not in frenzied self-justification but in waiting for "the naked mercy of God who will reckon us righteous and wise."¹ In order to make central the things that are central, that is, the kerygma, grace, and faith, Luther had to attack the edifice of works-righteousness. The only way he could do this and survive spiritually was to replace it with an equal or better righteousness. This he discovered in the gospel message of justification through Christ.

¹*Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress, St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76) 25.3-9, 135-170; hereafter *LW*.

The kerygmatic juices of New Testament Christianity infiltrated, lubricated, and animated all that Luther did. For Luther, the gospel was the living water that truly satisfies, the wine that makes the soul glad, the bread of life that abides forever. Without it Luther could see only a wasteland of human ambition and pride. Without it the human race was doomed to spiritual death. Luther thirsted for righteousness, the righteousness that comes from God alone. Supping again and again before the fountain of grace, he received the spiritual sustenance that became his only strength. In the grace of God, the pure unconditional love of the Father for his children, Luther lived and moved and had his being.

Although the center of Luther's life was filled with the luminous glow of the gospel, his theology did not entail an indifference to how believers behave. He was concerned, however, with just *where* pious behavior was located in the relation of redemption to discipleship. The

medieval church had placed good works as a condition prior to justification. Luther insisted that only God's mercy justifies, and good works follow as a seal upon conversion.

Once the matter of priority is corrected, Luther is lavish in his praise of good works. Indeed, Luther believed one of the positive things about justification by grace, beside freeing the tormented conscience, is that it produces genuine good deeds. In order to be saved from original sin, an "alien righteousness" is required; to be saved from actual sin a "proper righteousness" is called for. At the same time, while good works are not needed to set us right before God, they do place the justified believer before the neighbor.

The complex dynamics between God's justification and human effort come into play in Luther's discussion of the life of the Christian as an echo of the cross of Christ. Anders Nygren has noted that there were three ladders to heaven in the medieval church: moralistic piety, rational theology, and ecstatic religiosity.² Luther, however, rejected all ladders by which human beings ascend to heaven for the cross of Christ by which the Almighty God descends to earth. Luther preached only the wisdom of the cross, a message for those who claim no righteousness in themselves. Douglas Hall describes Luther's theology of the cross in this way: "The gospel of the cross condemns every pretension to possession. It divests man of all he has attempted to use to cover up his essential nakedness. It reduces him to the status of a beggar, robbed, beaten, and naked at the side of the road."³

Luther was aware that if one possible error is to bear the cross as an act of self-justification, the other is to hear the word of justification without bearing a cross. The way of the Christian is a way of the word and the cross. It includes both gospel and discipleship. This will involve the believer in an active ministry of self-giving service in the world. It also means crucifying the old Adam.⁴ Christian

²Philip Watson, *Let God be God: An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947) 94-95.

³Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 117.

⁴Regin Preter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 4, 6-7, 13-15; Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 114-143.

life is a discipleship of suffering which repeats in the life of the faithful the pains and torments that Jesus endured.⁵ According to Luther, "Christ's passion must be met not with words or forms, but with life and truth."⁶

The crucifixion of the self takes place first of all by mortification. Luther writes, "It is necessary that we be destroyed and rendered formless in order that Christ may be formed and be alone in us."⁷ Baptism is the sum of the whole Christian life, namely a constant dying and rising with Christ.⁸

Being crucified with Christ also means the Christian must necessarily incur the enmity of the world. As sheep for the slaughter, Christians encounter hostility and strife because of the message they bring.⁹

Three especially important marks of crucifixion with Christ are humility, trial, and prayer. Humility is the negation of all human claims, the renunciation of all human qualities, the surrender of all virtuousness. Trial can arise when questions are asked about the meaning of

suffering, or the seemingly self-contradictory nature of God. It is a severe trial to Christian consciousness to feel forsaken and rejected by God. Prayer uncovers human sin and God's wrath, and may leave the believer with only emptiness and silence.¹⁰

II.

Luther's singular passion for the gospel, or kerygmatic message of salvation through Christ, and his companion insistence on discipleship under the cross, shaped his views on the place of reason and faith in the Christian life. The point where Luther's religious fervor and his interest in the subject of reason meet is his discussion of a theology of the cross. The meaning of Christianity as a way of the cross receives special emphasis from Luther in his thoughts about how theology works. Luther's theology of the cross is a window on the whole of Christian life, but especially the life of the mind.¹¹ It is a way of talking about the spirit and method of theological reflection so as to bring theology under the shadow of the cross. It is a means to show how life under the cross impacts on our thoughts about God, God's way of redemption, and the human role in that redemption. It is a rubric that enables Luther to speak about both justification and imitation at the very center of Christian life, namely, the knowledge of God.

The writing in which Luther's passion for the all-sufficient grace of God revealed on the cross and his attitude toward reason first converge is the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. In this document Luther introduces the two slogans, *theologia*

⁵Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 118.

⁶*LW*, 42.14.

⁷*LW*, 27.308.

⁸*LW*, 36.69.

⁹*LW*, 44.49f.

¹⁰Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 123; *LW*, 42.183f.; 4.92-93; 6.131-132f.; 25.364-370.

¹¹Robert H. Fischer, "A Reasonable Luther," in *Reformation Studies: Essays in Honor of Roland H. Bainton*, ed. Franklin H. Littell (Richmond: John Knox, 1962) 34-35; Watson, *Let God be God*, 78, 95, 102; Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness*, 222-224.

crucis and *theologia gloriae*, with which he will characterize the life of faith. Of particular interest are Theses 19 and 20 where Luther describes the true theologian as one who perceives God in the weakness of the cross rather than the majesty of any mighty works. In Thesis 21 Luther further develops his distinction between good and bad theology: "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." Those who seek God in works have a theology of glory; those who seek God in suffering exhibit a theology of the cross.¹²

In this compact writing we see the heart of Luther's attitude toward the relationship between reason and faith. Because of Luther's intolerance of anything that might weaken the absolute sufficiency of the cross, he rejected all natural theology as a form of self-justifying works-righteousness. Included in this judgment was a censure against any and all reason that participated in constructing a theology of glory. Reason is to be resisted and dismissed insofar as it creates a structure for knowing God that is distinct from the revelation of God in the cross. At all costs, the adequacy of the cross must be preserved. Luther's whole approach to the question of reason and faith is located within this evangelical concern. His evaluation of the rational capacity

proceeds from this religious conviction. Because of that, Luther's views on reason and faith are complex and sharply skewed to an audience sympathetic to a religious perspective.

Scholars find Luther either painfully clear or hopelessly muddled on the subject of reason and faith. Votes in favor of viewing him as a consistent thinker can be garnered by noting that Luther always looked at reason in its relationship to God rather than any other consideration. That steady tracking led Luther to distinguish three conditions of reason: natural, arrogant, and regenerated.¹³ When these distinctions are recognized, Luther's widely different assessments of reason begin to make some sense.

Luther gives high marks to natural reason:

And it is certainly true that reason is the most important and highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and sometimes divine. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possesses in this life. By virtue of this fact it ought to be named the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things....Nor did God after the fall of Adam take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it.¹⁴

Luther supported the use of logic in debate, and the use of common sense and wisdom in creating an orderly, caring, just, and ennobling society.¹⁵ In his *Address*

¹²*LW*, 31.52-53.

¹³B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason; A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 26; Marilyn J. Harran, "Luther and Freedom of Thought," in *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind: Freedom, Conscience, Toleration, Rights*, ed. Manfred Hoffman (N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1985) 195; Siegbert Becker, *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982) 122-23.

¹⁴*LW*, 34.137; Harran, "Luther and Freedom of Thought," 194.

¹⁵Fischer, "A Reasonable Luther," 32.

to the German Nobility in 1520, he asked that Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *De Anima* be dropped from the university curriculum, but not his *Logic*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetry*. As well as recognizing the importance of logic, Luther praised the work of science, even while insisting on its limitations.¹⁶

In the explanation to the first article in the *Small Catechism*, Luther lists "reason and all our faculties" as gifts from God for which we ought to be thankful. In a lecture on the ninth chapter of Isaiah, he writes that reason is a "very great gift" whose light is far more splendid than the sun.¹⁷ The fundamental interpretive powers of reason are not harmed by the fall, and therefore are not changed with conversion. The gospel does not tear out human reason.¹⁸ Indeed, Luther argues it is wrong if we do not use our reason in worldly things.¹⁹

Luther did not rule out the utility of reason in the religious realm. Siegbert Becker argues: "[Luther] did not believe that the processes of thinking must be left behind when one passes through the portals of the Christian church."²⁰ Indeed, in his famous defense at Worms, Luther placed reason along with Scripture as the two authorities he followed. His legendary words were, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason...my conscience is captive to the Word of

God.”²¹ Luther believed that reason could know that God exists, is creator, powerful, superior, merciful, and benevolent. Although unbelievers have only a limited knowledge, Luther stated that God is known to the heathen through a light and understanding in the heart. Natural reason can discover what God is not and what it is wrong to do.²²

Luther employed reason in the formation of his own religious understanding. His commentaries on the Bible include logical arguments to establish theological points. Luther also believed that in the matter of interpreting the Scripture, the Holy Spirit ought not wholly replace understanding. The Bible is not written in a code that requires special enlightenment, but only ordinary knowledge of the language in which it is written. Therefore it is important to have a faculty of reason in order to think about the text. As well, Luther thought reason was vital for pointing out logical weaknesses in destructive reasoning. He tried to show that reason can be very unreasonable in criticizing important religious truths. Luther was quick to point out inconsistencies in his contemporary adversaries, in medieval theology, and even in St. Paul. In his defense of crucial doctrines such as the real presence of Christ in the sacraments, Luther could be quite persuasive through the use of rational arguments.²³

¹⁶Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 61,78.

¹⁷Ibid., 72.

¹⁸Ibid., 74.

¹⁹Ibid., 76.

²⁰Ibid., 87.

²¹Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (N.Y.: Abingdon, 1940) 185.

²²N. Arne Bendtz, “Faith and Knowledge in Luther’s Theology,” in Littell, *Reformation Studies*, 22-23; Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 29; Harran, “Luther and Freedom of Thought,” 196.

²³Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 81-82, 85-87, 174-183; Fischer, “A Reasonable Luther,” 44-45.

III.

On the other hand, Luther did have some harsh judgments against reason. Reason is the “Devil’s Whore,” a “beast,” and “enemy of God.” Reason is “carnal” and “stupid,” a “source of mischief.” Aristotle, whose name Luther associated with reason, was “a destroyer of pious doctrine,” a “mere sophist and quibbler.” He is “the stinking philosopher,” a “trickster,” “rascal,” “liar and knave.”²⁴ In view of all his praiseworthy acclamations, how can Luther also say these nasty things about reason? It is important at this point to recall his division of reason into natural, arrogant, and regenerate categories. Luther levels his criticisms against arrogant reason. While logic, wisdom, and science, and perhaps even some forms of speculation, can be useful to life in the world, they can be positively harmful if they trespass onto the territory of religion. It is when reason oversteps its secular boundary and moves into the realm of the sacred, in a spiritually harmful way, that Luther rises up in protest.

In the area of logic this territorial infraction can occur when the premises in the argument are not supplied by faith or do not capture the fulness of the Christian gospel. Most often the fault with logic is not its form, although this can go wrong as Luther was well aware, but its content. A valid argument can be mistaken because its premises come from outside the faith. A valid syllogism can also be untrue because it omits a term known only to faith.²⁵

Logic as such is not the villain in the household of faith. The villain is the source of the premises. Reason is out of line when it operates in the realm of religion with premises

uninformed by faith. When in Rome, you must do as the Romans do. Just so when reason enters the land of faith, it must derive its first principles from Scripture and tradition.²⁶ A logical argument, no matter how valid, is still wrong if it ends with a conclusion contrary to those authorities.

The issue with reason is allegiance and purpose.²⁷ Although fallen reason is still functional in the secular realm, and to a certain degree in the sacred, it is misdirected by fleshly ambitions, interests, and goals. Reason in religion goes astray when the devil gets hold of it instead of the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Then all manner of pride and works-righteousness rear their ugly heads. Those who think they are wise wallow in their self-generated thoughts with “hearty pleasure in their own ideas.”²⁹ Instead of trusting God’s grace and power they concentrate on their own strength and ability. They make *ratio* into a merit and turn their works into a reasonable religion. Reason becomes both the path to salvation and the goal of all their effort.

This arrogant reason, which operates as a means of self-justification, earns

²⁴Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 2-3.

²⁵Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 89.

²⁶Perhaps for this reason, Luther thought it was a waste of time to debate with those who deny the first principles of faith. See Becker, *ibid.*, 174.

²⁷Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 66-67. ²⁸*LW*, 54.71.

²⁹Harran “Luther and the Freedom of Thought,” 199.

Luther’s most scathing attack. Reason that presumes to misplace the sufficiency of Christ with the allurements of worldly wisdom is the devil’s whore.³⁰ It is Satan deceiving us with promises of salvation through our own resources. Reason is the devil luring us away from our faith in Christ to the couches and comforts of self-indulgent egocentrism. It is the arch-demon filling us with lust for the glitter and beauty and excesses of rational pleasures. “Madame *Reason*,” “Frau Hilda,” blinds us to the saving gospel of God’s majesty and mercy while it leads us ever deeper into the flaming dens of self-defeating legalism. Unregenerate reason is an all-consuming beast who spreads only destruction in the temple of God’s grace.

Luther’s vociferous attack on reason must not be misunderstood as a blanket condemnation of human ratiocination. It is not reason as such that is blasted by Luther, but only reason that has been turned to anti-Christian purposes. It is not reason as a “method of making inferences, definitions and the like,” that Luther runs out of town, but reason as a “positive attitude,” “a certain *thought*,” namely, reason that trespasses on spiritual matters in the form of a “concrete material attitude of the unregenerate man.”³¹ Luther’s quarrel is not with thinking as such, or even freedom of thought, but with particular, specific thoughts.³² It is not the reasoning capacity per se, but the particular conclusions of reason that trouble Luther.³³ When the rational functions of human beings become captive to an unregenerate, arrogant mind-set, then Luther leaps to the offensive. It is this engagement that produces some of Luther’s most violent writing against reason.

Luther can’t hurl enough stinging verbal volleys against reason that arrogantly trespasses on holy ground. His language is the most severe when counterattacking this thief who tries to steal the grace of God from believing hearts. When Luther joins this attack on criminal reason with his theme of imitating the cross-bearing life of Jesus, the result is a passionate apologetic for

the violent destruction of reason. Looking at the situation from the position of the believer, Luther sees reason as the great enemy of faith. If reason were to triumph, then all the things of faith would have to be destroyed. Instead, Luther holds onto faith and destroys the power of reason. It is a battle in which Luther unloads every weapon against reason that he can muster.

Reason wants to get rid of the things of faith because they make no sense. Reason makes the teachings of Scripture seem like impossible lies, foolish, weak absurdities, abominations, heresies, and works of the devil. When reason looks at the stories and doctrines of religion it sees assertions that are one of three things: (1) contrary to experience, (2) in violation of logic, or (3) absurd. For example, surely it is contrary to experience to believe the message of Psalm 23 with its picture of triumph over suffering, or to believe that ordinary bread becomes flesh, and ordinary water becomes a water of eternal life. That God can be a trinity and each

³⁰Ibid., 195-196; Althaus, *Theology*, 70; Fischer, "A Reasonable Luther," 32-34.

³¹Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 169-170.

³²Harran, "Luther and Freedom of Thought," 199.

³³Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 169.

of the three persons be complete God, and that Jesus can have two natures that are not separate make the head spin in confusion and incomprehension. Faith claims that God is merciful, yet God condemns many people. It believes that God is just, yet God appears to be unjust.³⁴

Luther's response to the charges of reason against faith is to turn the tables and attack reason. Reason wants to teach God what will fit into good sense and what needs to be thrown out. Luther stands up to reason with what fits into good faith and declares what there is about reason that must be thrown out, namely, its pride, arrogance, and gross violation of the "no trespassing" rule. In view of the pest that reason is for faith, we should send it on vacation where it can do no harm. Or it would not be too extreme to ask it to keep silence in the church. This reason that "kicks out the doctrines of faith" should itself be booted out from the midst of the faithful.³⁵

In his typical flare for the bold and shocking word, Luther goes so far as to say the believer ought to "slay" reason. Just as Abraham butchered the enemy reason, so the pious should put reason to death saying, "Reason you are a fool. You do not know the things of God. So do not get in my way, but be quiet. Do not judge, but hear the Word of God and believe."³⁶ Lest it interfere with faith, reason must be murdered. This is part of the meaning of daily baptism in which, in a recovery of childlike faith, "a man must die to reason and become a fool."³⁷ To sacrifice reason in this way is the highest level of discipleship. It is the proper worship of the believer. In the dismissal of reason, the Christian makes his or her morning sacrifice which is also the evening sacrifice of giving glory to God.³⁸ Through all these images, Luther gives expression to his one underlying strategy in the war of faith against reason. The way to victory in that arena is through conquest over the autonomy of reason: "Therefore...we must simply insist that when we hear God say anything we will believe it and not argue, but rather *take our intellect captive* in obedience to Christ."³⁹

IV.

While Luther was clear in dismissing arrogant reason as an enemy of faith, that was not

his last word on the relationship of faith to reason. It is therefore an error to label Luther an irrationalist with no use for reason or to criticize him as a fideist whose only interest is to destroy reason. Luther was much more complex. There is another strong beat in the rhythm of his dance with reason. True to his vision of the whole gospel, Luther affirmed the renewal of reason through its transformed life in Christ. The reason taken captive to Christ is liberated to experi-

³⁴Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 105-106, 113-15, 123, 126, 134, 162f.; Bendtz, "Faith and Knowledge," 25, 28.

³⁵Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 88, 117, 157, 164-67.

³⁶Ibid., 116; Harran, "Luther and Freedom of Thought," 200.

³⁷Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 158.

³⁸Ibid., 117.

³⁹Ibid., 108; italics added.

ence the true freedom of the Christian. Luther put it succinctly, "Enlightened reason, taken captive by faith receives life from faith, for it is slain and given life again."⁴⁰ The reason that loses its life in the world finds its life in the Holy Spirit. It is this resurrected reason that Luther praises as regenerate reason.

Luther's position is well summarized by John Dillenberger who notes that the challenge of revelation does not impact on reason but the whole person. It is the total person who is set in opposition to God and must be turned around. Reason is not singled out such that "revelation means the shattering of man as a structural and thinking animal."⁴¹ The effect of conversion is not to leave the human being in a shambles that is somehow replaced by a totally new person. Rather, "Revelation may mean that in the very midst of being man, including the possession of reason, man's entire life is transformed." This is, however, the transformation, not the destruction, of human beings as human beings.⁴²

Luther expresses this theme of transformation in the traditional language of death and resurrection:

Reason receives life from faith. It is put to death by it and *made alive again*. Just as our body will rise in a glorified state, so also our reason is different after conversion from what it was before. The same thing must be said about our memory, our will, and our tongue. All things are changed, just as glowing iron is changed into something different from that which is not glowing. This is the regeneration through the Word, which, although the members and the person *remain the same, yet changes* the members and makes another person from that which was conceived and born from Adam.⁴³

Luther portrays the transformation of reason in conversion as similar to the resurrection of the body to eternal life. Therefore, the fate of reason is just like that of the body: it is changed, yet it remains the same. That is, resurrected reason retains enough continuity with its natural state to be considered human reason, but it is transformed sufficiently to be called regenerate reason.

As the death and resurrection of the body does not destroy but transforms the material self in some way that we do not understand, so the resurrection of the mind (ultimately and penultimately) does not destroy reason but changes its working. Luther uses the imagery of an

iron that is heated to a glowing red, and a snake that sheds its skin, as metaphors of conversion.⁴⁴ The iron remains iron, but assumes a new quality. The snake remains a snake, but leaves its old skin behind. Even when Luther talks about water that is warmed as “entirely different water,” he says it “remains water.”⁴⁵ All these images reflect the complexity and mystery that surround the death and resurrection of the body. They do not explain *how* human reason can be changed yet be identical with natural reason, but only *that* such a transformation occurs.

⁴⁰Harran, “Luther and Freedom of Thought,” 201.

⁴¹John Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1953) 182.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 182-83.

⁴³Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 93-94; italics added.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 91-92.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 91.

Paul Althaus points out that for Luther it is only the distorted reason that is killed in the human rather than the essence created by God:

Indeed, we must not only distinguish the two but also keep them separate from each other. Natural man is admittedly not able to do this. It can be done only when a man has first been enlightened through the Holy Spirit and made free, that is, when he believes the word. Then he rejects the distortion. *The distorted reason of unredeemed man must die.* But at the same time reason’s God-given essence is brought to life and *regenerated* through the word. In this process it *remains one and the same reason—even as I remain one and the same man—and still it becomes something entirely new*, just as my tongue, for example, after my regeneration is not destroyed but converted, not done away with, but enlightened.⁴⁶

When Luther says we should slay reason, therefore, we should not forget the sequel in that drama. The reason that goes down to death with Christ also rises to new life with the resurrected Lord both in this life and in eternal life. Perhaps this is one way to think of the thorny issue of what to do with logical thinking in religion. It is not the formal structure of logic that is wrong or needs to be transformed, but the premises constituting the syllogism. Regeneration puts the proper premises into the formal structure. Reason thinks the same formally after regeneration, but entertains new thoughts. Luther writes, “Reason purified takes all its thoughts from the word. The substance remains but the vanity departs when reason is purified (*illustratur*) by the Spirit.”⁴⁷

The final word in Luther’s formula for reason and faith is not defeated and destroyed reason, but regenerate and resurrected reason. No more than a believer is absolutely destroyed at death is reason eliminated at conversion. Rather, reason gets a new focus and direction. Luther likens the change that conversion brings to reason to the effect marriage can have on the sexual urge: it corrects and legitimizes it.⁴⁸ Luther clearly did not want to do away with sex! But this image is provocative also in suggesting that the regenerate reason is *more* productive rather than less. At least that is consistent with Luther’s praise of regenerate reason as a friend of faith that is useful in support of the religious life.⁴⁹

Regenerate reason is very much like the tough faith that is an indispensable mark of the believer's life. The outstanding quality of regenerate reason is servanthood, not spectacular works: "[For Luther] regenerate reason is not supernatural insight received through mystical visions but it is reason taken captive by grace, so that it realizes that its place is to serve faith not to challenge or displace it."⁵⁰ Perhaps this is what Luther meant when he wrote that when a person becomes a believer, "another reason is born which is the reasoning of faith." Siegbert Becker seems correct in translating, "another way of thinking is born which is faith," and in adding, "[Luther] specifically says that in substance reason

⁴⁶Althaus, *Theology*, 70; italics added.

⁴⁷Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 93.

⁴⁸Ibid., 94-95.

⁴⁹Harran, "Luther and Freedom of Thought," 202, 205-206.

⁵⁰Ibid., 201.

remains what it was before conversion."⁵¹ While in formal essence reason remains the same, in allegiance, direction, and purpose it becomes servant to the projects of religion.

Regenerate reason is reason under the passion of faith, an unreserved trust and commitment to the gospel. It is reason that has a kerygmatic center from which it draws substance, energy, and ambition. Regenerate reason is the intellect illumined by faith, thinking that is grounded in Scripture.⁵² At its highest spiritual reaches, regenerate reason is hardly distinguishable from faith. Reason, when regenerate, is virtually absorbed into faith, becoming faith's cognitive and intellectual aspects.⁵³ Far from losing its grip on the life of the believer, therefore, reason, at least in its regenerative form, becomes an integral part of that life.

V.

It is reported that the last words of Luther on his deathbed were, "We are beggars. This is true."⁵⁴ Those words might well serve as an epitaph to his life-long struggle to relate Christian faith and natural reason. The bottom line of that struggle was a sense that we cannot understand fully the most central and crucial things of Christianity. The regenerate reason is a reason that has yielded its natural rights in obedience to God. Luther said that if God commanded him to believe that $2+5=8$ he would do it. He would not understand it, but he would defer to faith.⁵⁵ Luther had a gutsy willingness to suspend his natural rational capacities for the "reasoning of faith." Even as his reason was raised into life with Christ, it left unsolved a multitude of problems.

Luther apparently thought of himself as a beggar in understanding as well as in all other claims before God. With extraordinary courage he walked into the arena of theology with nothing to cling to but his faith in the sufficiency of God's grace to save him. He confronted all the rational perplexities caused by the claims of Christianity and took them upon himself in obedience to Christ. Admitting that his reason was bankrupt, he continued to believe, nevertheless. On the doctrine of the Lord's supper, he wrote:

There I will not first ask reason about it, but I will hear what the Lord Christ says about it and close my eyes....I will only hear what the Lord says, namely, that I should eat his flesh and drink his blood. More I do not have. By this I will stay. I

have heard these words. I will believe them and stick with them. *I do not see it. I cannot figure it out. Let it fit itself into my head as it may.*⁵⁶

At many places Luther confessed he just did not know what was going on. Why all people are not saved, for example, is hidden from our understanding. Luther simply shoulders his cross at such times and begs off on grounds of

⁵¹Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 90.

⁵²Ibid., 91.

⁵³Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 26.

⁵⁴Eric Gritsch, *Martin: God's Court Jester* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 86-87.

⁵⁵Fischer, "A Reasonable Luther." 35.

⁵⁶Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 112; italics added.

ignorance. Siegbert Becker understands Luther as saying we should not ask for answers. Rather, we should realize God wants both truths (God's will to save all people, and human free will) to stand.⁵⁷ The implication is that both truths will reside in the intellect of the believer whatever turmoil that juxtapositioning may cause the understanding.

Luther's willingness to let contradictory propositions fit into his head is his decision to carry the cross even into his mind. It is his choice for a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory. Luther is not so much an irrationalist as he is a rationalist who has crucified his reason for the sake of faith. Luther does not renounce reason as such, but embraces it within his religious consciousness. Had Luther had no sympathies for reason, had he had no respect for learning, had he simply dismissed logic as foolishness, then it would have been very easy for him to deal with the complexities of doctrine. But Luther had a high respect for reason, and, therefore, had to reconcile it with faith. His solution was to incorporate it into the whole death/resurrection drama of Christianity where it found a location and meaning consonant with the kerygma. Believers carry the contradictions of the Christian message in their minds upon the cross of the intellect where they are at most beggars in understanding.

It has been said of Luther that he was not only a doctor of theology but also its patient. Surely, Luther was afflicted in many ways by his faith, none the least in his understanding. To hold onto the faith and to keep his sense, Luther perceived discipleship as a constant cross-bearing. He simply bracketed all his rational possessions, became a beggar in his thoughts, in order to possess the treasures of the kingdom. This was not an irrationalism born of some dislike of reason, but a realism that grew out of his profound faith. Luther recognized that there are many perplexities in religion. He also believed reason is one of the finest capacities of human nature. The only way to be faithful to both was to accept the fact that there is much about God's ways with human beings that we cannot know. This does not mean we have to choose either a frenetic rationalism or a despairing fideism. It means, rather, we must brace up to the demand of bearing a cross even in our reason, while hoping for a faith able to survive the rigors of this vocation.

⁵⁷Ibid., 138.