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## *Table of Contents*

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<b>A Confessional Response to North American Lutheran-Reformed Ecumenism</b>	
Mark Mattes .....	3
<b>Father, Son, and Spirit Is God: What Is the Point?</b>	
William C. Weinrich.....	27
<b>God as Secondary Fundamental Doctrine in Missouri Synod Theology</b>	
David P. Scaer .....	43
<b>Luther and Calvin on God: Origins of Lutheran and Reformed Differences</b>	
Roland F. Ziegler .....	63
<b>Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin on the Significance of Christ's Death</b>	
John A. Maxfield.....	91
<b>Post-Reformation Lutheran Attitudes Toward the Reformed Doctrine of God</b>	
Benjamin T.G. Mayes .....	111
<b>Luther's Threefold Use of the Law</b>	
Edward A. Engelbrecht .....	135
<b>Gerhard Forde's Doctrine of the Law: A Confessional Lutheran Critique</b>	
Jack Kilcrease .....	151
<b>Theological Observer.....</b>	180
Ash Wednesday	
A Pro-Life Prayer	

## Post-Reformation Lutheran Attitudes Toward the Reformed Doctrine of God

Benjamin T.G. Mayes

Doctrinal dissent has been raging for many years with the Reformed, the spiritual heirs of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin.<sup>1</sup> Lutherans have been falling away from the faith of their fathers and following the dictates of their reason, becoming Calvinists, or worse, Unitarians. Society is more pluralistic than ever before. It is no wonder, then, that pastors and people are confused. They ask: How should we relate to the Calvinists? Can we accept their baptisms? Do they worship a different god? Are they heretics? Thankfully, we have seminary faculties who have answered these questions on the basis of God's word. One of these seminaries is located in Wittenberg. The year is 1619. The question is, "Is Calvinism a damnable sect?" And what is the answer? In this article, I will show that for Johann Gerhard, Philipp Nicolai, and the Lutheran faculty opinions collected by Georg Dedekenn, the "high orthodox" Lutheran opposition to Calvinism centered on the will of God and on Christology, but not on essential attributes of God such as simplicity, immutability, and eternity. Lutheran perceptions of Reformed error in the first few decades after the Formula of Concord show us what the burning issues of those days were, and can provide us with zeal and tools for our tasks today.

When I speak of the age of "orthodoxy" or the time of "high orthodoxy," I mean the time from the Book of Concord of 1580 through the death of Johann Gerhard in 1637. This was a period of scientific flourishing in theology, of a deeper use of Aristotelian scholastic philosophy, of a comprehensive systematization of dogmatics, and of omnifaceted apologetics.<sup>2</sup> In the period of Lutheran orthodoxy, the Lutheran churches defended the Christian message made normative in the Lutheran

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Leube, *Kalvinismus und Luthertum im Zeitalter der Orthodoxie* (Leipzig, 1928; repr., Aalen: Scientia-Verlag, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kolb, "Lutheran Theology in Seventeenth Century Germany," *Lutheran Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2006): 431-433. Other periodizations exist. See Markus Matthias, "Orthodoxie: I. Lutherische Orthodoxie," q.v. in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. G. Krause and G. Müller (Berlin, 1977-) [henceforth TRE]; Wallmann, "Lutherische Konfessionalisierung—Ein Überblick," 49-50; Kenneth G. Appold, *Orthodoxie als Konsensbildung: Das theologische Disputationswesen an der Universität Wittenberg zwischen 1570 und 1710* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 89-90.

Confessions and did so with the use of Aristotelian philosophy, developing a unified churchly doctrine and defending it with sharp polemic against the other confessions.<sup>3</sup>

### I. Johann Gerhard: Theological Commonplaces

Johann Gerhard has been called the "arch-theologian of the Lutheran Church" due to his penetrating insight and voluminous writing.<sup>4</sup> His *Theological Commonplace on the Nature of God* addresses many topics of contemporary interest regarding the doctrine of God, such as social trinitarianism, open theism, language for God, and divine suffering.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is how Hermann Schüssler describes Lutheran theology of this period, though he does not use the term "orthodoxy." Kenneth Appold, however, notes a significant degree of academic freedom among orthodox Lutherans at Wittenberg from 1570 through the end of the seventeenth century. Appold, *Orthodoxie als Konsensbildung*, 11, 317. See also Walter Sparr and Jörg Baur, "Orthodoxie, lutherische," in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon: Internationale theologische Enzyklopädie*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Ulrich Becker, vol. 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 953-959. With the term "orthodox," the churches of the Reformation claimed for themselves the concept of the church found in the ancient Christian confessions. By claiming to be "orthodox," they claimed continuity with the Christendom of the Bible, of the ancient church, and of the first centuries. Matthias, "Orthodoxie: I. Lutherische Orthodoxie," 464-465; Johann Anselm Steiger, "The Development of the Reformation Legacy: Hermeneutics and Interpretation of the Sacred Scripture in the Age of Orthodoxy," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 2, *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 691-757, here at 702. Luther himself used the term "orthodox" to describe his teaching, and thus the term does not belong only to Lutheranism after the Formula of Concord, according to Jörg Baur, "Orthodoxie, Genese und Struktur," q.v. in TRE, here at 25:501-505. Opponents of the term "orthodoxy" in reference to Lutherans after the Formula of Concord include Heiner Kücherer, *Katechismuspredigt: Analysen und Rekonstruktionen ihrer Gestaltwerdung*, *Predigt in Forschung und Lehre* (Waltrop: Spenner, 2005), 154. Ernst Koch does not use the term. *Das Konfessionelle Zeitalter – Katholizismus, Luthertum, Calvinismus (1563-1675)* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000). Unfortunately, the period of Lutheran orthodoxy has suffered from neglect, due especially to a view stemming from radical Pietism, which saw orthodox theology as lifeless, sterile, and focused on doctrine to the exclusion of piety. This same myth continues in the minds of many, though the period is now getting a fair amount of respectful and balanced attention; cf. Steiger, "The Development of the Reformation Legacy," 697-698.

<sup>4</sup> Erdmann Rudolph Fischer, *The Life of John Gerhard* (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2001), 295-296. See also C.F.W. Walther, "Lutherisch-theologische Pfarrers-Bibliothek," *Lehre und Wehre* 1 (1855): 300-301; Wilhelm Löhe, "Why Do I Declare Myself for the Lutheran Church?" trans. Holger Sonntag, *Logia* 17, no. 3 (2008): 28.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, ed. Benjamin T.G. Mayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007). See the chapters on the unity of the divine essence, on divine omniscience, eternity, justice, and immutability.

Gerhard marks a turning point in the Lutheran presentation of the doctrine of God. Before Gerhard, all the Lutheran dogmaticians started their presentation of the doctrine of God by discussing the Trinity, and they omitted any discussion of the divine attributes. Gerhard, on the other hand, began with the divine names before moving to the attributes, and only after that dealt with the Trinity. Later dogmaticians generally followed Gerhard in discussing the divine essence and attributes before the eternal relations of the divine persons in the Trinity. Robert Preus regretted this move of Gerhard's, but said that it was a necessary development, since it had not been discussed previously. Preus's wish was that Gerhard and the later orthodox Lutherans had begun with the Trinity and moved to the divine attributes after that.<sup>6</sup> Despite his displeasure with the ordering, Preus defended the Lutheran orthodox doctrine of God overall:

the old Lutheran theologians, although discussing a number of philosophical questions and using a good deal of philosophical vocabulary, do not see God as some sort of neuter First Cause, but as the Lord of history who is also Creator of all. Theirs is a Biblical rather than a philosophical notion of God.<sup>7</sup>

A closer look at Gerhard's commonplace *On the Nature of God* shows, however, that some of Preus's concerns have a simple explanation. First, regarding the ordering of the systematic presentation—whether essence and attributes or Trinity should be taught first—an examination of Gerhard's presentation shows that he speaks of God as Trinity and that he confesses Christ the God-Man throughout his commonplace *On God*. Gerhard is not starting with a blank slate nor pretending not to know that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He takes the divine revelation as a whole and lets its wholeness shine through, even when he is discussing one part of that revelation in particular, such as the essence and attributes of God.<sup>8</sup> Gerhard never loses sight of the fact that the one true God is none other than the Holy Trinity.

Second, a reason for Gerhard's method of dealing with the attributes in such detail is the contemporary threat of Socinian unitarianism. At Gerhard's time, Socinianism had a home in Raków, Poland (Latin:

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<sup>6</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol. 2, *God and His Creation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 16, 53–54.

<sup>7</sup> Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2:51.

<sup>8</sup> See how the Trinity and Christology are embedded in Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 5, 11–15, 57, 63, 90–95, 97–98, 102–105, 116, 137, 160–162, 170, 176, 190–191, 204 (*De natura Dei*, §§ 2, 12, 14–15, 58, 64, 82–87, 93, 95, 98, 105, 134, 166–167, 176, 182, 195, 213).

"Racovia"). Here, the unitarian theology of Fausto Sozzini and the Germans Valentin Schmalz (1572-1622) and Christoph Ostorodt (d. 1611) thrived by means of a secondary school (1603-1638), a seminary, and a publishing house, which produced over 250 unitarian titles between 1600 and 1638. One of their most popular books was the "Racovian Catechism," first published in 1605 in Polish and then translated into German in 1608 and Latin in 1609. The "Racovian Catechism" was an important piece of propaganda for the unitarianism promoted by Fausto Sozzini,<sup>9</sup> which Johann Gerhard called "Photinianism," after the early church heretic Photinus. In Gerhard's commonplace *On the Nature of God*, he constantly defends the dogmas of the Trinity and of the person of Christ against these "Photinian" objections. The Photinians were taking certain positions on the essence and attributes of God in order to undermine the doctrine of the Trinity. Faced with a serious threat, Gerhard first had to respond to this threat before he could proceed to the doctrine of the Trinity. For example, without first discussing God's eternity, the doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son lacks a context. In many places it is clear that Gerhard discusses the essence and attributes of God with a view to defending the Nicene dogma of the Trinity against the Photinians. There is more work to be done here, but it would make sense if the incursion of Photinianism into Germany by means of the "Racovian Catechism" explained much of why Gerhard was the first Lutheran to bring in a detailed discussion of the divine attributes.<sup>10</sup>

Most of Gerhard's commonplace *On the Nature of God* deals with the divine attributes. Gerhard makes clear that the divine attributes are one with the divine essence and that they are distinguished only because of our conceptual weakness. He bases this claim upon the utter "simplicity of the divine essence, which excludes every composition of essence and of accidents without exception."<sup>11</sup> That is, God is utterly one. He is not made up of parts. So when we are talking about God's eternity, for example, this is nothing other than speaking of the one divine essence, yet as we conceive of it as being infinite with respect to time. This is an important

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<sup>9</sup> John C. Godbey, "Socinianism," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Muller likewise notes the impact of the Socinians in provoking detailed discussions of the divine essence and attributes among the Reformed; see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed., vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 91-92.

<sup>11</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 114-115 (*De natura Dei*, §§ 104-105). See also Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2:55-59; cf. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:289.

aspect of the standard Lutheran teaching on the divine attributes, an aspect that we will see already in Philipp Nicolai, and that has great importance for Lutheran views on the Reformed doctrine of God.<sup>12</sup>

How, then, did Gerhard, the writer of so many warm devotional writings,<sup>13</sup> approach the differences between Lutherans and the Reformed in general? In his theological commonplace *On the Church*, Gerhard argues against the Roman Catholics on behalf of "Protestants," not just Lutherans. He appeals to Geneva's burning of the antitrinitarian Michael Servetus in 1553 as proof that "we" do not agree with Servetus's heresy.<sup>14</sup> Gerhard also defends English Calvinists against the false accusations and slander of the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621).<sup>15</sup> But in his commonplace *On the Church*, Gerhard is also careful to distance himself from Calvin, and he agrees with Bellarmine that Calvin corrupts passages of the Old Testament that prove the Trinity and the divinity of the Son of God.<sup>16</sup> When discussing whether the leaders of the Reformed confession died a happy or a calamitous death, Gerhard writes, "We do not care very much how Oecolampadius, Zwingli, Carlstadt, and Calvin ended their lives."<sup>17</sup> At various times in his *Theological Commonplaces*, Gerhard uses the writings of Reformed authors such as John Calvin as witnesses to the truth; yet we

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<sup>12</sup> Gerhard's treatment in the *Commonplaces* is not the exhaustive presentation of his views on the divine essence and attributes. Within the *Commonplaces*, Gerhard refers to another work of his as being a fuller treatment of this topic. He refers his readers at many points to his series of disputations *De gloria Dei*; Johann Gerhard, *Disputationum Theologicarum, In Quibus Gloria Dei Per Corruptelas Pontificias, Calvinianas & Photinianas labefactari ostenditur* (Jena: Tobias Steinmann, 1618) = Johann Gerhard, *Disputationum Theologicarum. A Johanne Gerardo D. In Academia Jenensi conscriptarum & publice habitarum Pars Prima* (Jena: Steinmann, 1625), 1–544. The translated title of this series of disputations is "Theological disputations in which the glory of God is shown to be undermined by the corruptions of the Papists, Calvinists, and Photinians."

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Johann Gerhard, *Meditationes sacrae* (1606/7): lateinisch-deutsch, ed. Johann Anselm Steiger (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2000); Johann Gerhard, *Sacred Meditations*, trans. C.W. Heisler (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1896; repr., Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici cum pro adstruenda veritate tum pro destruenda quorumvis contradicentium falsitate per theses nervose solide et copiose explicati*, ed. Edward Preuss, vol. 5 (Berolini: Gust. Schlawitz, 1867), locus *De ecclesia*, § 213. (Preuss ed. 5:464). This commonplace has now appeared in English as *Theological Commonplaces: On the Church*, ed. Benjamin T.G. Mayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010). See also Helmut Feld, "Servet, Michael," in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* (Verlag Traugott Bautz), <http://www.bautz.de/bbkl>, accessed January 16, 2010 [henceforth BBKL].

<sup>15</sup> Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, locus *De ecclesia*, § 210, 224 (Preuss ed. 5:462–463, 473).

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, locus *De ecclesia*, § 214, 216 (Preuss ed. 5:464, 466).

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, locus *De ecclesia*, § 297 (Preuss ed. 5:590).

must also realize that when he does this he is simply using the testimonies of his adversaries against themselves, a tactic he uses against all of his theological opponents, whether Reformed, Roman Catholic, or Unitarian (which he calls "Photinian").<sup>18</sup> Are they heretics? When the Reformed speak about Christology and deny the real communication of divine properties to the humanity of Christ while trying to use the same vocabulary as the Lutherans, Gerhard calls this "the mark of heretics."<sup>19</sup>

When Gerhard turns his attention to the doctrine of God, he often notes and refutes Calvinist errors. These errors occur throughout the 1625 *Exegesis* commonplace *On the Nature of God*,<sup>20</sup> but they can be reduced to three main problems: (1) errors stemming from the Reformed view of the divine decrees (e.g., predestination), (2) errors stemming from Christology, and (3) errors stemming from the misuse of reason.

The errors stemming from the divine decrees occur in several places. In Gerhard's view, the Calvinist teaching of absolute double predestination conflicts with divine simplicity—that is, the fact that God is not composed of parts, but is utterly one. According to Theodore Beza (1519–1605) and Jerome Zanchi (1516–1590), God reveals in his word that he wants to save all human beings; but in his secret counsel he has willed that some people be saved and others be damned, regardless of Christ's atonement or their persistence in sin and unbelief. These are contrary wills of God. So Gerhard explains the conflict with divine simplicity: "Those who attribute contrary wills to God undermine the simplicity of the divine essence, for wherever there are contradictions of will, there is no room for the supreme and most perfect simplicity."<sup>21</sup> Thus, this Calvinist error on the doctrine of God's simplicity does not stem from what they say about simplicity itself, but from what they say about predestination. Similar errors arising from the Calvinist doctrine of absolute double predestination arise in the chapter

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<sup>18</sup> Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 89 (*De natura Dei*, § 86).

<sup>19</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Christ*, ed. Benjamin T.G. Mayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 176 (*De persona et officio Christi*, § 183).

<sup>20</sup> In 1625, after Gerhard had finished his *Theological Commonplaces*, he published another volume, addressing Holy Scripture, the nature of God, the Trinity, and the person and work of Christ under the title *Exegesis, or a More Copious Explanation of Certain Articles of the Christian Religion*. They were often published with the earlier *Theological Commonplaces* and were not meant to be a replacement for the original commonplaces on these topics, but a supplement: Johann Gerhard, *Exegesis Sive Uerior Explicatio Articulorum De Scriptura Sacra, De Deo Et De Persona Christi in Tomo primo Locorum Theologicorum concisius pertractatorum* (Jena: Steinmannus, 1625).

<sup>21</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 136 (*De natura Dei*, § 131).

on divine immutability, or "unchangeableness."<sup>22</sup> The Calvinist doctrine of immutability *per se* is not the problem. Gerhard does not oppose it, for example, as he opposes the doctrine of Conrad Vorstius on this point.<sup>23</sup>

The Calvinist teaching on the divine decrees especially runs against the divine attributes of goodness, mercy, justice, and perfection. On divine goodness, various Calvinist doctrines undermine this, though Gerhard only mentions them briefly. They are all related to the divine decrees. The doctrines are:

- (1) The absolute decree of reprobation without any consideration of unbelief. (2) The absolute decree of election through which the good and beneficial will of God, which is serious in seeking the salvation of humans, is restricted to a few. (3) The absolute decree of Adam's fall. (4) The absolute and fated necessity of all things and actions. (5) The cause of sin being referred to God.<sup>24</sup>

The Calvinist errors on divine mercy are the same as on divine goodness: absolute reprobation, God as the cause of Adam's fall, and limited grace. All of these undermine God's mercy. Likewise, the Calvinists err when they say that God's mercy itself is absolute, that is, not based or founded on anything, not even on something like the merit of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

On the attribute of divine justice, we find an interesting Lutheran teaching on the relation of God's will to the moral law. Here, Gerhard stresses that God's justice has no higher norm than itself and that God's justice does not act "contrary to the norm of equity set forth to us in the divine Law." "You see," Gerhard says, "though God may not receive a law from a superior, nevertheless He is the law to Himself and does not act contrary to His natural justice, the expression of which is set forth in the Law." As a result, Gerhard "condemns gravely" a statement in which Ulrich Zwingli says that God is outside the law and that he both can and does do all sins that he forbids to us.<sup>26</sup> So Gerhard is rejecting a view which would see the moral law as an arbitrary code imposed by a divine

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<sup>22</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 151 (*De natura Dei*, § 152). See also 151-152 (§ 153).

<sup>23</sup> Vorstius (1569-1622), a Reformed theologian, was ordained by Theodore Beza but was soon suspected of Socinianism. His views were condemned by the Reformed at the Synod of Dort in 1619: "Vorstius, Conrad," *BBKL*.

<sup>24</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 202 (*De natura Dei*, § 209).

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 210, 213 (*De natura Dei*, §§ 221, 225). Their errors on divine justice and perfection are nearly identical to what was said about goodness and mercy: absolute reprobation and God as the cause of sin are again problematic: Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 218, 255 (*De natura Dei*, §§ 232, 294).

<sup>26</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 220-221 (*De natura Dei*, § 236).



despot. Gerhard insists on seeing the moral law as a reflection of God's justice itself. This is a teaching which we will see anticipated and repeated in other writers, such as Philipp Nicolai.

I have said that all of these issues stem from the Reformed view of the divine decrees. Of course, the divine decrees are a function of God's will. It makes perfect sense, therefore, that in the chapter on God's will, Gerhard would have much to say against the Reformed doctrine of God. Gerhard opposes the Calvinist way of distinguishing "the will of the sign" from "the will of good pleasure."<sup>27</sup> The basic problem is that they say that these two ways of considering God's one will can be contrary to one another. For example, God says in his word that he seriously desires to save all human beings. This is what is called "the will of the sign." But in his secret counsel he decrees absolutely, without consideration of human sin and unbelief, the reprobation of the majority of mankind. This is "the will of good pleasure." According to Gerhard, this Calvinist explanation not only twists old, helpful scholastic distinctions and terminology, but it actually results in two contradictory wills in God. This conflicts with divine simplicity and immutability and makes God a liar.

Gerhard feels quite strongly about the Calvinist error regarding the hidden and revealed will of God:

The Calvinists use this distinction also in the worst way, for they oppose the hidden and revealed wills to each other and assert wickedly that in the work of salvation God inwardly wills the contrary of what He outwardly revealed in His Word that He wills. . . . In those things that concern the work of salvation, we deny with all our might that one should establish a hidden will not only diverse from the one revealed in the Word but even opposed to it. In fact, we declare that this is wicked and blasphemous.<sup>28</sup>

As appears from Gerhard, the will of God is really a central issue among the Calvinist errors on the doctrine of God. Gerhard takes the Calvinists to task on the distinction between God's absolute and conditional will, the antecedent and consequent will, the effectual and ineffectual will, and the effecting and permitting will. He does not reject the distinctions and the terminology for all of these, but he objects to the way in which the Calvinists abuse them.<sup>29</sup> In general, Gerhard writes,

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<sup>27</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 240 (*De natura Dei*, § 268).

<sup>28</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 240–241 (*De natura Dei*, § 269).

<sup>29</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 241–243 (*De natura Dei*, §§ 270–272, 275).

*The Calvinists . . . set the freedom to act, or God's free will, against the rest of the divine attributes. That is, because of His freedom to act, they attribute to God the sort of things that conflict with His goodness, righteousness, and wisdom. They say, for example, that "God drives people to sin," that "God has made an absolute decree of reprobation," etc. But if we say that this conflicts with the righteousness and holiness of God, they flee for refuge to the idea that "God is an utterly free agent and is subject to no laws." Yet God acts freely in such a way that He still does not act contrary to His own natural righteousness and goodness.*<sup>30</sup>

So as we have seen, the Reformed doctrine of God's will and the divine decrees is a major issue in the doctrine of God. In polemicizing against his Reformed opponents, Gerhard spends perhaps most of his time on this issue within his 1625 commonplace *On the Nature of God*.

Second, several errors in the doctrine of God surface in the Calvinist approach to Christology. This was a major problem that surfaced over and over in Gerhard's commonplace *On the Nature of God*. Specifically, the Calvinists deny a real communication of divine properties to Christ's human nature. Thus, in the chapter on the divine attributes in general, this question arises: "*We teach that the [divine] attributes were communicated to Christ according to His human nature. Is it then right to infer that we are separating the essential properties from the [divine] essence and from each other?*" Polanus . . . makes us out to be guilty of this crime."<sup>31</sup> The Polanus that Gerhard mentions here is Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf (1561–1610), a Reformed professor of the Old Testament in Basel, who was prolific in systematic theology.<sup>32</sup> Gerhard responds with various arguments, but finally appeals to the union of the two natures in Christ:

If we prefer, however, to indulge our own reasoning rather than to stay in the footsteps of Scripture, let Polanus explain to us how the hypostasis of the Word itself is communicated to the flesh yet the hypostatic property [i.e., being eternally begotten] is not communicated to it. The first he cannot deny, unless he should go on to deny the union itself. The latter he cannot affirm, unless he would like to assert that Christ's human nature has been eternally begotten from the Father. Therefore as the infinite wisdom and power of God could find a manner and means by which the hypostasis of the Word was

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<sup>30</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 246 (*De natura Dei*, § 278) (italics original). See also 251 (§ 287).

<sup>31</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 119 (*De natura Dei*, § 111) (italics original).

<sup>32</sup> Erich Wenneker, "Polanus von Polansdorf, Amandus," *BBKL*.

communicated to the flesh through the union (but not communicated immediately, that is, by a hypostatic property), so also He could find a means whereby eternity, infinity, etc., were not communicated immediately while omnipotence, omniscience, and the other attributes pertaining to the fulfillment of Christ's office were communicated [immediately].<sup>33</sup>

This is a very technical argument. Yet from it we see that the battle is on the field of Christology, though this extends by necessity at some points into the doctrine of God.

Against the Calvinists, especially Polanus, Gerhard defends the communication of divine properties to the human nature of Christ in his chapters on divine wisdom, glory, omnipotence, and omnipresence.<sup>34</sup> Regarding omnipresence, a Calvinist slur used in referring to a Lutheran was "ubiquitarian," from the Latin word *ubique*, "everywhere," because of the Lutheran teaching that "Christ, according to both natures, is present in heaven and earth and governs all things."<sup>35</sup> In response to Calvinist claims that would undermine the Lutheran position, Gerhard lists fourteen arguments for the omnipresence of Christ according to both natures.<sup>36</sup> Actually, the amount of space that Gerhard devotes to refuting the Reformed christological errors is relatively short in the commonplace *On the Nature of God*. The bulk of his arguments on Christology are reserved for the next commonplace, *On Christ*.<sup>37</sup>

The third main center of Calvinist errors, according to Gerhard's commonplace *On the Nature of God*, is the misuse of reason. At the beginning of the volume, Gerhard opposes Zwingli on the issue of natural theology, that is, how much our reason can know about God apart from revelation. Ulrich Zwingli, Rudolf Gualther (1519–1586), and others said that "from the book of nature one can have the sort of knowledge of God that is sufficient for salvation, something we energetically deny."<sup>38</sup> While this view was perhaps not the dominant Reformed view, Gerhard includes evidence that Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), shared

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<sup>33</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 120 (*De natura Dei*, § 111).

<sup>34</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 198, 236, 258–259 (*De natura Dei*, §§ 202, 263, 304).

<sup>35</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 176–177 (*De natura Dei*, § 182).

<sup>36</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 176–178 (*De natura Dei*, § 182). See also 136, 181 (§§ 131, 187). A related issue is divine omnipresence, regardless of the issue of the omnipresence of Christ's humanity. Here, Gerhard notes several errors on the part of the Reformed; Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 173–174 (*De natura Dei*, § 179).

<sup>37</sup> Gerhard, *On the Person and Office of Christ*, §§ 66, 92, 110, 119, 121, 123, 141, 152, 158, 178, 195, 205, 243, 246, 288, 314–315, 327.

<sup>38</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 62 (*De natura Dei*, § 64).

Zwingli's error, as did many other German Reformed theologians.<sup>39</sup> Against them, Gerhard is able to quote Calvin, using his common tactic of quoting his adversaries against themselves.<sup>40</sup>

The other place where the Calvinist misuse of reason plays a role is in the chapter on divine omnipotence. Here, Gerhard sets forth a "Luther" quote that Luther probably did not say: "It is a chief basis of Calvinist doctrine that most of his defenders think that God cannot do what He promises in His Word." The Calvinist doctrines of the Lord's Supper and the presence of Christ in the church make it clear that they indeed do this, says Gerhard. In addition, the Calvinists say "that God cannot do those things that involve a contradiction in the judgment of our reason." And "they deny that God is able to accomplish what is beyond nature and reason." Gerhard explains the problem with this: "In so doing, they make the measure into something measured, for the power of God is the measure that measures and is the efficient cause of nature, human reason, and all created things."<sup>41</sup> Later, again quoting his adversaries against themselves, Gerhard quotes Calvin and Polanus against this limitation of God's omnipotence. Polanus said, "God can do many things that man's reason cannot comprehend. The incarnation of the Word and the other mysteries of faith are examples of this." Gerhard then asks,

Why, then, do they declare (wickedly) from the leadership and comprehension of reason so daringly that God cannot cause one body to be in many places? Yet from these words, it readily appears what great impudence it is for the Photinians, who walk in the footsteps of the Calvinists, to say: "It implies a contradiction and is simply impossible for God to be one in essence and three in persons, for God to beget a Son from eternity of His own essence, for the divine and human natures in Christ to be personally united," etc.<sup>42</sup>

Gerhard's point is that the Calvinists and Photinians, that is, the unitarian Socinians, use human reason to determine what God cannot do, and thereby they undermine divine omnipotence.<sup>43</sup>

All in all, Gerhard spends the most time in this commonplace opposing not the views of the Calvinists, but the views of the Photinians

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<sup>39</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 83–84 (*De natura Dei*, § 81).

<sup>40</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 89 (*De natura Dei*, § 86).

<sup>41</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 189–190 (*De natura Dei*, § 194).

<sup>42</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 195 (*De natura Dei*, § 199). The same issue also occurs in the chapter on divine wisdom, 235 (§ 261).

<sup>43</sup> Gerhard deals with a few other Calvinist errors regarding the misuse of reason: *On the Nature of God*, 195–196, 239 (*De natura Dei*, § 200, 267).

and the semi-Photinian Conrad Vorstius, whose views were by no means typical among the Reformed. After them, however, Gerhard seems to spend more time polemicizing against the Reformed than against the Roman Catholics. This tendency to polemicize against the Reformed is even stronger in the Commonplace *On the Person and Office of Christ*, yet it does not hold true in every commonplace. In the commonplace *On the Church*, for example, Gerhard spends nearly all of his time debating the views of the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine.

Aside from the errors of individual Reformed writers, which are not necessarily representative of Reformed Christians as a whole, Gerhard sees three main areas of disagreement between Lutherans and the Reformed: (1) divine decrees, which have to do with God's will, predestination, atonement, and the cause of sin; (2) Christology, especially the communication of divine properties to the human nature of Christ, which has implications for the doctrine of the Lord's Supper; and (3) the use of reason in theology, which plays itself out especially in the chapter on divine omnipotence. In the midst of all this disagreement, however, Gerhard does not state that the Reformed have a different god, or that they are not Christians. The Calvinist errors on God stem, for the most part, from errors in other articles of faith and make their way to the doctrine of God if they are being consistent. As Gerhard criticizes the Reformed doctrine of God, he never implies that they are trying to teach a completely different God. Also, his argument is never so general as, "They teach divine simplicity, but we do not," or, "They teach divine immutability, but we do not." Instead, his argument is that they claim to teach simplicity, immutability, etc., just as we do, but their doctrine of decrees and their view of Christology conflict with this. It is also significant that in his next commonplace, *On the Trinity*, Gerhard finds no problems with the Calvinist teaching, except for isolated places where Calvin and a few other Reformed theologians do not see the Trinity in certain passages of the Old Testament.<sup>44</sup> Yet in the commonplace *On the Nature of God*, the errors of the Calvinists seem very serious indeed.

Some questions arise from this. Does every error concerning God's works immediately imply an error in the doctrine of God? Also, because God's will is nothing other than his utterly simple essence as it works toward creation, is each and every error with regard to God's will and work immediately a case of idolatry? Gerhard does not answer those sorts of questions. But a generation earlier, Philipp Nicolai did.

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<sup>44</sup> Gerhard, *On the Person and Office of Christ* (*De persona et officio Christi*, §§ 65, 145, 154, 155).

## II. Philipp Nicolai: On the Calvinists' God and Their Religion

We have heard from the arch-theologian Johann Gerhard. Now let us hear from the writer of the king and queen of Lutheran chorales,<sup>45</sup> Philipp Nicolai. Nicolai is significant to our examination of the Lutheran opposition to the Reformed doctrine of God, due not to his hymn-writing, nor to his emphasis on missions, nor to his meditations on eternal life, nor to his doctrine of the ministry,<sup>46</sup> but due to his treatise from 1597, *On the Calvinists' God and Their Religion*.<sup>47</sup> In this heavily polemical book, which is but a sample of his polemic against the Reformed, Nicolai essentially denies that the Reformed are Christian. This work was produced in a polemical context, where accusations were flying on both sides. Nicolai was responding to a book entitled *Pseudochristus*, "False Christ," by Eberhard Blyttershagen, who apparently was accusing the Lutherans of christological heresy, stating that our Christ is a different Christ than the one revealed in the Scriptures.<sup>48</sup> Nicolai's intention was to return the favor, trying to demonstrate that the Calvinists have a heretical doctrine of God and thus worship a different god.<sup>49</sup> The first part of Nicolai's book is on the Calvinists' god. The second is on their religion. As we proceed, we will see that the heart of Nicolai's objections is his firm faith that God is love.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" (O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright) and "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme" (Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying), included in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 395, 516; see also Fred L. Precht, *Lutheran Worship: Hymnal Companion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 82–84, 194–196.

<sup>46</sup> Philipp Nicolai, *Commentariorum De Regno Christi, Vaticiniis Prophetis Et Apostolicis Accommodatorum Libri Duo*, 2 vols. (Francofurti Ad Moenum: Spies, 1607); Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Philipp Nicolai (1556–1608): Theologian, Mystic, Hymn Writer, Polemicist, and Missiologist: A Bibliographical Survey," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 39 (1968): 432–461, esp. 453–454; Philipp Nicolai, *FrewdenSpiegel deß ewigen Lebens, Das ist: Gründtliche Beschreibung deß herrlichen Wesens im ewigen Leben* (Franckfurt am Mayn: Spieß, 1599; repr., Elberfeld: Verlag des Lutherischen Büchervereins, 1909); Jörg Baur, "Das kirchliche Amt im Protestantismus: Skizzen und Reflexionen," in *Das Amt im ökumenischen Kontext*, ed. Jörg Baur (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1980), 122–126.

<sup>47</sup> Philipp Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion, in etliche Frage unnd Antwort . . . verfasst und zusammen getragen. Sampt angehengter Kurtzer Form, wie ein christlicher eynfältiger Haußvatter sein Kindt und Haußgesind, für demselbigen unseligen Calvinismo trewlich warnen, und davon abhalten soll* (Franckfurt am Mayn: Johann Spieß, 1597). Translations from this work are my own.

<sup>48</sup> Eberhard Blyttershagen, *Pseudo-Christus: Grundt und eigentliche beschreibung, auch gegeneinander haltung deß einigen und waren Christi . . . Und dargegen des falschen errichten Christi* (Hanau: Antonius, 1596).

<sup>49</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, fol. Aiii r.

<sup>50</sup> See Anne M. Steinmeier, "Nicolai, Philipp," q.v. in *BBKL*.

The first problem with the Calvinist view of God, according to Nicolai, is their doctrine of absolute reprobation. In catechetical question-and-answer format, he sets forth the question: "What kind of a god do the Calvinists have?" He answers:

They invoke a god who, without any grace or mercy, ordains and reprobates many hundreds of thousands of human beings—even the majority of all of Adam's children—to eternal death, the abyss of hell, and eternal hellfire without any fault or merit of theirs, and even though they had not given him any reason for this false, horrible, and cruel reprobation, nor had they ever provoked him to do this with their sinful works.<sup>51</sup>

Nicolai objects to a Reformed doctrine of a reprobation that is not in view of sin and unbelief, which makes God the primary cause of damnation.

Nicolai is talking about predestination. There was a change among Lutherans on the doctrine of predestination shortly after the Formula of Concord. FC XI teaches that God's election from eternity is the cause of faith and is not based on foreseen faith. Nevertheless, within two decades after the Formula of Concord, most Lutherans were teaching that God's election from eternity is based on foreseen faith, or at least on a foreseen non-rejection of grace, and his reprobation from eternity is based on foreseen sin and disbelief.<sup>52</sup> Philipp Nicolai seems to echo these sentiments.

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<sup>51</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Gottfried Adam, *Der Streit um die Prädestination im ausgehenden 16. Jahrhundert: Eine Untersuchung zu den Entwürfen von Samuel Huber und Aegidius Hunnius* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970); Robert D. Preus, "The Influence of the Formula of Concord on the Later Lutheran Orthodoxy," in Lewis W. Spitz and Wenzel Lohff, eds., *Discord, Dialogue, and Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); Robert D. Preus, "Article XI. Predestination and Election," in Wilbert Rosin and Robert D. Preus, eds., *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978); Robert D. Preus, "The Doctrine of Election as Taught by the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians," *Quartalschrift* 55 (1958): 229–261; Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 3rd ed., vol. 4/2 (Erlangen: A. Deicherische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1920), 548; C.F.W. Walther, "Dogmengeschichtliches über die Lehre vom Verhältniß des Glaubens zur Gnadenwahl," *Lehre und Wehre* 26 (1880): 42–57, 65–73, 97–110, 129–137, 161–170. For an example of how FC XI was understood in the seventeenth century, see Johannes Huelsemann, "Praelectiones academicae in librum concordiae," in *Vindiciae s. scripturae per loca classica Systematis Theologici: Praelectiones academicae in librum concordiae: Patrologia succincta, vice Appendicis Loci de Ecclesiâ Representativâ: Annotationes ad Breviarium Theologicum, Accessere denuo Animadversiones in Bellarminum de Verbo DEI et Dissertatio de Necessitate Conjunctionis Evangelicorum cum Romano Papatu* (Leipzig: Michael Russworm, 1679), 691–743.

In each part of this catechetically fashioned attack on Reformed doctrine, Nicolai proposes a simple, if loaded, question, answers it, and then proceeds to cite his Reformed opponents at length, lest he seem to be setting up a straw-man to knock down with such force. Often, Nicolai will follow up by citing passages of Scripture which say the exact opposite of the Reformed citations he had produced.

Nicolai opposes not only the Reformed doctrines of Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Christ, and Predestination, but also their doctrine of God, tracing their error regarding God's work to an error regarding his nature:

What kind of an essence does this god have? Answer: As is the work, so is its essence. Therefore, if he cruelly and unmercifully determines, assigns, dedicates, and ordains the poor, miserable children of Adam to hellfire and eternal torment without their fault and without any cause being given, out of mere whim, then you must believe that this cruel and terrible condemnation is one and the same with the nature and essence of this lord god.<sup>53</sup>

According to Nicolai, therefore, the Calvinist error about absolute reprobation has to do with God's will, which is one with the divine essence. That is a necessary result of the doctrine of divine simplicity, which both the Lutherans and the Reformed confessed.<sup>54</sup> It is also a way of thinking that allows one to take any error from anywhere in theology and immediately make it an error in the doctrine of God.

After quoting Reformed authors who stress that an error regarding God's will is indeed an error regarding God's essence, Nicolai declares:

Now, from this we see, and it becomes sufficiently obvious, that no devil in hell can be so damned, base, depraved, and evil as the Calvinists' lord god depicts himself: he not only burns with calamitous hate and unmerited reprobation of the human race, but also, according to his nature and according to his essence, is the hostile condemnation itself.<sup>55</sup>

When this doctrine of absolute reprobation is combined with the Reformed emphasis on the glory of God and his sovereignty, an interesting question and answer result:

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<sup>53</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> AC I confesses that God is *impartibilis, ohn Stuck*. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 50 [henceforth BSLK]; Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 114 (*De natura Dei*, § 104); Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:271–298.

<sup>55</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 9.



To what end does the Calvinists' god bring about this reprobation and destruction of the poor people? Answer: Just as the cattle and animals were ordained by God to be slaughtered for the food and nourishment of people, so also the Calvinists' god has ordained many thousands of human beings to eternal death, without any cause being given except that he has his glory and pleasure in such bloodthirst.<sup>56</sup>

Just as Johann Gerhard would do twenty-eight years later in his *Theological Commonplaces*,<sup>57</sup> here Nicolai notes that one of the fundamental differences between his Reformed opponents and the Lutherans has to do with God's relation to the moral law. Nicolai rejects the view that God's law is not descriptive of him, and therefore that God can be pure and holy, even though by nature he is the cause of sin and damnation. He rejects the opinion that "no law is given to God the highest master; therefore he does not sin even though he does and works the same thing in man that to man is sin, but to him it is not sin."<sup>58</sup> A generation later, Gerhard identified the same error regarding the relation of the law to God's character. For the Calvinists that Gerhard and Nicolai opposed, God's will is sovereign above the law. For the Lutherans, God's will *is* the law.<sup>59</sup> As a result of seeing God as sovereign above and contrary to the moral law, the Calvinists had no trouble making God the cause of sin, according to Nicolai. The Calvinists' "lord god" was a cause of David's adultery, he causes murder and the murderer's execution, and he causes the sin and vice of all evil people; he decreed and caused Judas's betrayal of Christ, and he causes the godless to despise the gospel.<sup>60</sup>

Nicolai asks, "What do you think, now, about the Calvinists' lord god?"

Answer: From these testimonies of the adversaries it is sufficiently obvious that their god must be a profane, lecherous, unchaste, devious, evil, deceptive, and bloodthirsty Moloch. No murderer, no thief, no villain, no traitor could begin his condemned vice, murder, theft, whoring, incest, treason, or any similar, horrible vice—much less carry it out and fall into eternal hellfire—if he were not moved and driven to it by the Calvinistic lord god with the secret cord of his inner will.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, 220–221 (*De Natura Dei*, § 236).

<sup>58</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 10–11.

<sup>59</sup> See FC SD VI, 15; V, 17 (BSLK 966, 957).

<sup>60</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 10–18, 24–26.

<sup>61</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 26.

Nicolai continues: "Do you really think, then, that the Calvinists honor and invoke the devil himself, instead of the true, living God? Answer: I confess it from the bottom of my heart, and I say it as a certain truth." As proof, he also mentions that Zwingli taught that the virtuous pagans would be saved and would dwell in heaven.<sup>62</sup> Of course, as we saw from Gerhard, this was not the position of John Calvin. So Nicolai may not always have sought out representative Reformed writers as his dialogue partners.

In the second part of the book, Nicolai proceeds to show on the basis of the five chief parts of the catechism how the Calvinist religion is the abomination of desolation.<sup>63</sup> Nicolai says again that the Calvinist errors deal not just with God's works, but also with his nature. The Bible teaches that God is love, and that we are to be formed into the image of God, which is love. God never acts against love. But the Calvinists say that the law of love, the Decalog, does not apply to God. Therefore he can reprobate people arbitrarily and without respect to their foreseen sin.<sup>64</sup> The Calvinists make a double will of God. With one he commands the moral law, with the other he reprobates and causes sin.<sup>65</sup> "The devil and his Calvinists" deny that God's mercy extends to the whole world and that he desires the salvation of all human beings from his heart, and that God's will was for Christ to die for all human beings. Instead, God the Father never so loved the reprobate sinners that he gave his only-begotten Son.<sup>66</sup>

Other errors mentioned by Nicolai include the Calvinists' view of God's omnipotence, the issue of Christ's omnipresence according to his humanity, limited atonement, the communication of divine properties to the humanity of Christ, the inamissibility of faith and the Holy Spirit, Baptism as a mere sign, and their opinion about the spiritual eating of

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<sup>62</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 27, 30.

<sup>63</sup> Nicolai does not count confession as one of the chief parts of the catechism, though he does consider the *Apology of the Book of Concord* to be a Lutheran confessional statement on the same level as the Book of Concord itself. Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 32-33, 106-107; Timotheus Kirchner, Nicolaus Selnecker, and Martin Chemnitz, *Apologia, Oder Verantwortung deß Christlichen Concordien Buchs: In welcher die ware Christliche Lehre . . . vertheydiget: Die Verkerung aber und Calumnien, so von vnruhigen Leuten wider gedachtes Christlich Buch im Druck ausgesprenget, widerlegt werden; Desgleichen ein warhafftige Historia der Augspurgischen Confession . . . Gestellet durch etliche hierzu verordnete Theologen, Im Jar nach der Geburt vnsers Herrn . . . Jesu Christi, 1583* (Dreßden: Stöckel, 1584).

<sup>64</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 33-34.

<sup>65</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 37-38.

<sup>66</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 47.

Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper.<sup>67</sup> In a concluding "warning to children and servants," Nicolai says that the Calvinists have made the devil their lord god, and he claims that they say that people should not worship the man Jesus.<sup>68</sup> Nicolai's rejection of the Calvinists is total and final.

When we step back and consider the points of conflict, rather than the implications of those points of conflict, a few basic themes emerge from Nicolai's polemic. Strongest of all is the focus on God's will, love, benevolence, and predestination. Nicolai cannot stand the Calvinist doctrine of an unconditional, absolute reprobation, which is not in view of foreseen sin and unbelief. The will of God is the center of his critique of the Reformed doctrine of God. Another strong theme is the doctrine of Christ, with the attendant issue of the real presence in the Lord's Supper. But Nicolai does not mention any particular problems with the Reformed doctrine of God with regard to attributes such as eternity, simplicity, immensity, and immutability. His point is not that the Calvinists have a false doctrine of God's essence and attributes *per se*, but that their false doctrine of God's will and work vitiates their doctrine of God and sets a false god in place of the true God of the Bible. Only on omnipotence does he identify an error in an attribute other than God's will, and this stems from the Calvinists' approach to Christology. Everything else stems from their view of God's will and moral character.

Nicolai's book is the harshest of polemic, and the jury is still out as to whether he has criticized mainstream Calvinism or only the extreme statements of individuals. For our purposes, it does not matter. What is important is that Nicolai anticipates the same central concerns that Gerhard would raise a generation later. Divine decrees and Christology are the main problems. Yet for Nicolai, an error concerning God's works immediately implies an error in the doctrine of God. "As is the work, so is also its essence," he said, taking that principle from his Reformed adversaries.<sup>69</sup> Is each and every error with regard to God's will and work immediately a case of idolatry? Philipp Nicolai seems to say yes. His, however, was not the only voice. Pastors and laymen within Lutheran Germany continued to have questions about how they should deal with their Reformed neighbors. For answers, they turned to theological faculties and famous theologians.

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<sup>67</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 41–42, 50–51, 53, 58, 61–62, 67–72, 76, 80–81, 87, 91–96.

<sup>68</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 110–111.

<sup>69</sup> Nicolai, *Kurtzer Bericht von der Calvinisten Gott und ihrer Religion*, 8.

### III. Georg Dedekenn: Treasury of Counsels and Decisions

C.F.W. Walther, the nineteenth-century father of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and a scholar of Lutheran orthodoxy, once wrote these words about a collection of pastoral advice that was published in the age of orthodoxy:

Scarcely any question of conscience could arise on one of the aforementioned topics, which does not find its answer by famous theological colleges or individual well-known theologians, occasionally out of their rarest works and manuscript documents which never appeared in print, which university and consistorial archives contained.<sup>70</sup>

Walther was writing about an enormous collection of casuistry that was compiled by Georg Dedekenn. Casuistry consists of cases of conscience, or the hard questions that arise in life, where one does not know what to do. In seventeenth-century Lutheran Germany, if one had a question of conscience, one could write to a theological faculty and, for a fee, receive a response steeped in Scripture and common sense. Georg Dedekenn was the associate pastor of Philipp Nicolai in Hamburg, and his publication, the *Treasury of Counsels and Decisions*, published first in 1623 and then expanded in 1671, is an important source for understanding pastoral practice, ethics, and the hard doctrinal questions that arose in the lives of seventeenth-century Lutherans.<sup>71</sup>

The Reformed doctrine of God was one of those hard questions. Lutheran pastors and laypeople asked for official opinions from Lutheran faculties and individual theologians as to how they should think about and deal with differences on the doctrine of God. The counsels and decisions in Dedekenn's *Treasury* stress the danger of Calvinist teaching, due especially to their limitation of God's saving will and their approach to Christology. The counsels we will examine, however, which emphasize the seriousness

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<sup>70</sup> C.F.W. Walther, "Lutherisch-theologische Pfarrers-Bibliothek," *Lehre und Wehre* 4 (1858): 347.

<sup>71</sup> Georg Dedekenn, ed., *Thesaurus consiliorum et decisionum*, 3 vols. (Hamburg: P. Langen, 1623); Georg Dedekenn, ed., *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Appendix, Quædam huic Operi inserenda continens* (Hamburg: Michael Hering, 1623); Georg Dedekenn and Johann Ernst Gerhard, eds., *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum [- Tertium]* (Jena: Zacharias Hertel, 1671); Christian Grübel, ed., *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Appendix Nova, Continens quædam inserenda Operi Dedekenn-Gerhardino* (Jena: Zacharias Hertel, 1671). See Benjamin T.G. Mayes, "Counsel and Conscience: Post-Reformation Lutheran Casuistry According to The Dedekenn-Gerhard Thesaurus Consiliorum et Decisionum and its cases on Marriage and Divorce" (Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2009).

of Reformed errors, also do not contain very much criticism with regard to their doctrine of God.

"Is Calvinism, according to doctrine and person, a damnable sect?" That is a question proposed to the theological faculty of Wittenberg. The faculty gave an answer dated July 30, 1619, which was reprinted in Dedekenn's *Treasury*. The Wittenberg faculty explains that Calvinists are part of the visible church of Christ, for they are baptized in the name of Jesus and confess him, although they do not teach and believe correctly about him in all points. There are four characteristics of a "destructive sect" (*verderblicher Sect*): First, the error must go against the foundation of the Christian faith. Second, it must be defended intentionally. Third, the church is divided and offended by it. Fourth, a destructive sect does not allow itself to be taught, but wants to maintain its correctness, and thus it remains stubbornly in its opinion. With regard to the first point, the Wittenberg faculty states that the Calvinists do, indeed, err in the foundation, which is Christ. They divide his two natures by denying any real communion of natures and properties, and in particular by denying the omnipresence of the life-giving Son of Man, that is, Christ according to his humanity. This is, in fact, the same error that Nestorius made. They also deny that God's Son shed his blood, saying that bloodshed belongs only to the man Jesus, who is united with the Son of God. Regarding Christ's office, the Calvinists deny that Christ is the mediator and high priest for all human beings, and that he died for all, calls all to His kingdom, and desires salvation for all. Regarding justification, they exclude Christ's active obedience from his merit and ascribe his merit only to his suffering and death. They also ascribe suffering only to the human nature in Christ. The Wittenberg faculty notes that the Calvinists have other errors against the foundation of the Christian faith, but for the sake of brevity they do not list them here. The Calvinists are a destructive sect, they say, about whom St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12, "There must be divisions among you." The Wittenbergers conclude:

From this report about Calvinism, one can conclude how those people are to be considered who confess that doctrine, which they understand well and defend steadfastly until their death. Because the doctrine removes the foundation of faith and therefore is destructive, it must follow that all who knowingly and steadfastly cling to this destructive sect are not on the right path. Because they still want to defend it, they make themselves damnable (whether they are teachers or other people), for whoever is not with Christ is against him. And whoever contradicts the truth to the point of death cannot comfort himself with the hope of salvation. Therefore Dr. Luther considered

the Zwinglians and all Sacramentarians as heretics and members cut off from the church of God, simply because of the one error of denying that Christ's body and blood are received in the venerable Sacrament with one's physical mouth (. . . Jena German, vol. 8, fol. 381b). And St. Paul writes, without distinction of preachers and laity, about those who offend and mislead others with their false doctrine: "Whoever makes you err will bear his judgment, no matter who he is" [Gal. 5:10]. And again, "I wish that those who destroy you would be eradicated" [Gal. 5:12]. Gal. 5:4, 10; Ps. 12.<sup>72</sup>

From the Wittenberg faculty we see that in 1619, before the syncretistic controversies of the seventeenth century burned their hottest,<sup>73</sup> the most important Lutheran theological faculty considered Calvinism to be a damnable heresy. Yet on the other hand, when they set forth the Calvinist errors, they centered on the incarnation and the limited scope of God's saving will. The doctrine of God's essence and attributes, as well as the doctrine of the Trinity, were not mentioned as problematic. This was perhaps because the faculty wanted to keep its response short and non-technical, but one cannot avoid surmising that the differences between the Reformed and the Lutherans were not centered on the doctrine of God, since the faculty acknowledges that they are part of the visible Church of Christ. "Are they heretics?" Yes, but not because of their doctrine of God *per se*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Georg Dedekenn and Johann Ernst Gerhard, eds., *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum, Ecclesiastica Continens: . . . Der Erste Theil: In welchem die Geistliche und Kirchen-Sachen begriffen . . . In richtigerer Ordnung/ mit gantzen Sectionibus, vielen Quæstionibus, Remissoriis und Responsis vermehret/ und mit vollkommenern Indicibus verbessert* (Jena: Zacharias Hertel, 1671), 273–274. The translation is my own.

<sup>73</sup> See "Consensus Repetitus Fidei Vere Lutheranae," in Abraham Calov, Johann Meisner, Johann Andreas Quenstedt, and Johann Deutschmann, eds., *Consilia Theologica Witebergensia* (Franckfurt am Mäyn; Nürnberg: Endter, 1664), 928–995; Heinz Staemmler, *Die Auseinandersetzung der kursächsischen Theologen mit dem Helmstedter Synkretismus: eine Studie zum "Consensus repetitus fidei vere Lutheranae" (1655) und den Diskussionen um ihn*, Texte und Studien zum Protestantismus des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts (Waltrop: Spenner, 2005); Benjamin T.G. Mayes, "Syncretism in the Theology of Georg Calixt, Abraham Calov, and Johannes Musäus," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68 (2004): 291–317.

<sup>74</sup> On September 23, 1619 (just a few months later), the Wittenberg faculty again gave an opinion on whether Calvinists can be saved. Here, again, they stress that "the Calvinist sect is damnable, since it goes against the foundation of faith." But they make a distinction: "Not everyone who holds this misleading doctrine is to be damned for that reason." Those who do the misleading, whether preachers or laity, who intentionally and stubbornly contradict the true doctrine, have no hope of salvation. Others are not well informed about true doctrines (such as the oral eating of the body of

In a long opinion dated March 18, 1619, the theological faculty of Tübingen deals with the same question. As the Calvinist errors, they list God as the cause of sin, predestination, limited atonement, the call of the gospel, the misuse of the distinction of "will of the sign" and "will of good pleasure" (i.e., when the gospel is preached, God does not really mean it for the majority of mankind), Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Their conclusion is that Calvinists cannot find consolation from their doctrine.<sup>75</sup> Here, once again, there is no mention of problems with the Calvinist doctrine of the divine essence, attributes, and the Trinity *per se*. But of course, they also do not mention the christological errors which underlie the error on the Lord's Supper. Here the focus is on comfort, and the cluster of doctrinal errors is centered on the divine decrees and the limitation of God's will to save.

The doctrine of God and the Trinity becomes concrete in Holy Baptism, where the confession of the Trinity is a constitutive element of the sacrament. In the answers given to many questions, Dedekenn's *Treasury* makes clear that Calvinists cannot be admitted as sponsors at a Lutheran baptism, though one judgment from Tübingen says that if they are not public detractors of our faith, they can be *witnesses* of the baptism.<sup>76</sup>

But what should be thought about Calvinistic baptism? If the Reformed have so many errors that impinge on the doctrine of God, can they even give a legitimate baptism? Michael Muling (fl. 1602–1623)<sup>77</sup> says

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Christ, or ubiquity), and yet they blaspheme the true doctrine which they do not understand. "To these people, too, we cannot give much hope of their salvation, although it may be more tolerable for them than for the misleaders. For the blaspheming of holy truth always damns, whether it occurs knowingly or unknowingly." Others among the misled, however, remain in their simplicity and believe their false teachers, but do not blaspheme the truth. The Wittenberg faculty explains, "Although such people, if God wanted to deal with them according to his justice, would also have little hope of their salvation—for a blind man leads the blind and they both fall into a pit—nevertheless it is right to have patience with them, as with people weak in faith, and with Christian love to hope for the best, and to pray for them, that God may be gracious to them, for they know not what they do." Also, Christ rules among his enemies and preserves his seed among such poor, misled people. Thus, the Lutherans do not condemn entire churches. Dedekenn and J.E. Gerhard, *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum*, 281–282, referring to the preface to the Formula of Concord.

<sup>75</sup> Dedekenn and Gerhard, *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum*, 283–289.

<sup>76</sup> Dedekenn and Gerhard, *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum*, 474–476, 483–487.

<sup>77</sup> Zedler gives only a list of his works, but no other information. Johann Heinrich Zedler, "Muling (Michael)," *Grosses vollständiges Universallexicon aller Wissenschaften und*

that the baptisms given by heretics who err and speak falsely about the Trinity are to be condemned. Muling gives as examples "the Arians, Servetians, Antitrinitarians, Tritheists, and the like." If these people are converted to the true faith, they must be given Christian Baptism for the first time, not a "rebaptism." But other "sectarians" err in some articles of Christian doctrine, yet they hold an orthodox position on the three distinct Persons and the one, indivisible divine essence. These groups, whom Muling leaves unnamed, have true Baptism if it is administered according to Christ's word.<sup>78</sup> Johann Gerhard makes the same distinction, and puts Arians, Manichaeans, and Photinians in the first class. In the second class he puts the Roman Catholics ("Papists"). He also gives an example of a true baptism that took place in Reformed Heidelberg.<sup>79</sup> Paul Tarnov (1562–1633) makes the same distinction and adds Macedonians and Valentinians to Gerhard's first class, while making clear that the Calvinist errors do not affect the substantial parts of Baptism, but only their purpose and effect. Tarnov says clearly that this latter class, including the Reformed, can baptize legitimately.<sup>80</sup>

From this brief foray into the casuistry literature of Lutheran orthodoxy, we have seen that according to the Lutherans, the Reformed errors center on the divine decrees, with related issues such as predestination, limited atonement, and Christology. The Reformed doctrine of God is not so corrupt that they could not administer true Christian Baptism, even though many of their other errors are set forth as destructive and damnable.

#### IV. Conclusions

For Gerhard, Nicolai, and the counsels presented by Dedekenn, the Reformed errors stem from and center on the will of God and Christology, not from the essential attributes of God, such as eternity, immutability, and simplicity. Because of God's simplicity, however, the will of God cannot be

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*Künste* (Halle and Leipzig: Johann Heinrich Zedler, 1732), <http://www.zedler-lexicon.de>, accessed on November 22, 2008. From the title page of a printed funeral sermon, we gather that Zedler was a parish rector and superintendent in Belzig, Brandenburg, around the year 1606. Michael Muling, *Eine Christliche Leichpredigt . . . Bey dem Begräbnus des Erbahren Wolweisen Herrn Johann Otto/ weiland Bürgermeisters zu Beltzig/ welcher den 15. Julii dieses instehenden 1606. Jahrs . . . verschieden . . . Gehalten durch M. Michael Mulingius, Pfarrern und Superintendenten doselbst* (Wittenberg: Müller, 1606).

<sup>78</sup> Dedekenn and Gerhard, *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum*, 399–400.

<sup>79</sup> Dedekenn and Gerhard, *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum*, 397–399, quoting Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, locus *De baptismo*, § 22ff.

<sup>80</sup> Dedekenn and Gerhard, *Thesauri Consiliorum Et Decisionum Volumen Primum*, 400.



separated from his essence. Nicolai connects the will of God with the doctrine of God's nature and concludes that the Reformed have a false God, the devil. The other authors we have examined emphasize the severity of Reformed errors, but do not go so far as to exclude them from the visible church. Except for this issue, we have noticed remarkable consistency in the Lutheran objections to the Reformed doctrine of God. They center on the will of God (decrees, predestination, limited atonement) and on Christology (denial of the real communication of properties, and also the denial of the presence of Christ's body and blood on earth in the Lord's Supper). Gerhard, writing at the most length among our samples, also adds the misuse of human reason as a central problem with the Reformed doctrine of God.

As Lutherans in our day struggle to know who they are and what the truth of God's revelation is, a look at the history of polemics from Gerhard, Nicolai, and Dedekenn can yield much fruit. First, from history one can sometimes learn what worked and what did not. Of course, this can be difficult. Scholars continue to debate the legacy of Lutheran orthodoxy, particularly as to whether it should be blamed for what followed (e.g., pietism, rationalism), or whether it should be studied and valued for its own achievements. Second, from the study of the doctrine of God in the age of Lutheran orthodoxy, we can come into contact with rich insights into Scripture, and with a wisdom that transcends the ages. Finally, the history of polemics can serve as a mirror, showing whether we take these issues as seriously as both the Lutherans and Reformed of that time did. If we do not, we can ask ourselves whether our lack of concern is better or worse than their zeal.