

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 67:3/4

July/October 2003

## *Table of Contents*

---

<b>Eugene F. A. Klug (1917-2003)</b> .....	195
<b>The Theological Symposia of Concordia Theological Seminary (2004)</b> .....	197
<b>Introduction to Papers from the 2003 LCMS Theological Professors' Convocation</b>	
L. Dean Hempelmann .....	200
<b>Confessing the Trinitarian Gospel</b>	
Charles P. Arand .....	203
<b>Speaking of the Triune God: Augustine, Aquinas, and the Language of Analogy</b>	
John F. Johnson .....	215
<b>Returning to Wittenberg: What Martin Luther Teaches Today's Theologians on the Holy Trinity</b>	
David Lumpff .....	228
<b>The Holy Trinity and Our Lutheran Liturgy</b>	
Timothy Maschke .....	241

<b>The Trinity in Contemporary Theology: Questioning the Social Trinity</b>	
Norman Metzler .....	270
<b>Teaching the Trinity</b>	
David P. Meyer .....	288
<b>The Bud Has Flowered: Trinitarian Theology in the New Testament</b>	
Michael Middendorf .....	295
<b>The Challenge of Confessing and Teaching the Trinitarian Faith in the Context of Religious Pluralism</b>	
A. R. Victor Raj .....	308
<b>The Doctrine of the Trinity in Biblical Perspective</b>	
David P. Scaer .....	323
<b>Trinitarian Reality as Christian Truth: Reflections on Greek Patristic Discussion</b>	
William C. Weinrich .....	335
<b>The Biblical Trinitarian Narrative: Reflections on Retrieval</b>	
Dean O. Wenthe .....	347
<b>Theological Observer .....</b>	<b>360</b>
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i> and the "Theology of the Cross"	
Affirming Our Exclusive Claims in the Midst of a Multi- religious Society: Advice From a Partner Church	
Confessional Pastors Organize Non-Geographical Swedish Mission Province	
The End of Theological Amateurs in Global Missions	
Kenyan Bishop Responds to Swedish Archbishop	
Antinomian Aversion to Sanctification?	
<b>Indices for Volume 67 .....</b>	<b>382</b>
<b>Books Received .....</b>	<b>384</b>

# Returning to Wittenberg: What Martin Luther Teaches Today's Theologians on the Holy Trinity

David Lumpp

## I.

Martin Luther's affirmation of catholic trinitarian theology is well known. Indeed, the same Luther who had little good to say about the papacy or scholastic theology observed, almost matter-of-factly, "this article [of the Trinity] remained pure in the papacy and among the scholastic theologians, and we have no quarrel with them on that score."<sup>1</sup> Many presentations of Luther's theology therefore understandably move on to other more obviously controverted topics. Those who would comment on Luther's trinitarian work are left with two questions. First, if Luther accepted the received trinitarian theology and even acknowledged his agreement with both Rome and Zurich in this area, is there anything distinctive about his use of the Trinity in his mature theology? Second, does Luther continue to inform the thinking of those currently working in this area, and, if so, in what ways?

This second question implicitly acknowledges the explosion of trinitarian theological reflection in the last half century. Arguably most incited by and indebted to Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, contemporary theologians of various persuasions and from many traditions have discovered that perhaps one can say more about the Trinity than the earliest councils had, both in terms of the trinity's historical formulation and its dogmatic status and function.<sup>2</sup>

This essay does not aim to survey or critique that still-growing and often rich body of trinitarian reflection, nor will it summarize Luther's trinitarian theology as such. Rather, the aspiration of this paper is more modest, namely,

---

<sup>1</sup>"Treatise on the Last Words of David, 2 Samuel 23:1-7," in J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann, editors, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 15:310. (Hereafter abbreviated *LW*). Most *LW* citations will also have the parallel citation to Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 vols. (Weimar, 1883-), hereafter abbreviated *WA*. See also the more familiar remark in Smalcald Articles, Part I.

<sup>2</sup>For an accessible survey of trinitarian thought in the last half of the twentieth century, see Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993). A standard English-language history of the doctrine remains Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972).

---

*Dr. David Lumpp is a Professor of Religion at Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota.*

to indicate several areas where contemporary Lutheran theologians writing on the Trinity are returning to themes anticipated, emphasized, or even taken for granted in the trinitarian theology of Martin Luther. To that end, I will identify and develop four aspects of Luther's thinking on the Trinity that have counterparts in the writings of the notable Lutheran theologians working in this area.

## II.

The doctrine of the holy Trinity arises not from patristic metaphysical speculation but from the narrative of God's saving, restorative work vis-à-vis humanity in particular and the entire creation in general.

While contemporary trinitarian theologians would not endorse each specific of Luther's biblical exegesis, they nonetheless are sympathetic to his basic trinitarian instinct, namely, that the God confessed as triune at Nicea and Constantinople is the God who raised Israel's Messiah from the dead. Certainly one of the most important and pervasive of Luther's trinitarian themes is his insistence that this dogma is present in both the Old and New Testaments.

The persons of the Godhead are fully revealed (*plene revelatae*), Luther avers, through the Gospel, but they were pointed to immediately at creation (*in initio mundi indicatae*).<sup>3</sup> As one might expect from a pre-modern exegete, Luther finds unmistakable evidence for the Trinity already in Gen. 1. First, there is the grammar of Gen. 1:1: in the beginning *Elohim* (plural) *bara* (singular) the heavens and the earth, where the three persons together create as one.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, *Elohim* is consistently construed as a trinitarian referent.<sup>5</sup> The reference to the Spirit of God in Gen. 1:2 is likewise trinitarian, as is the cohortative of 1:26, "let us make."<sup>6</sup> (Concerning Gen. 1:26, Luther expressly rejects the utterly ridiculous [*extreme ridiculum*] claim of the Jews that here

---

<sup>3</sup>Lectures on Genesis [3:22], in LW 1:224; WA 42:167.

<sup>4</sup>See especially "The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith," where the same rule is also applied to Exod. 23 and Ps. 82. Luther draws the following conclusion: "Therefore our faith is preserved: we believe in no other god than the single eternal God; and yet we learn that the same single Godhead is more than one person" (LW 34:223).

<sup>5</sup>See LW 1:59; and, regarding Gen. 33:20 and 35:3, LW 6:184-185, 232.

<sup>6</sup>See LW 1:12; LW 3:353; see also, in connection with Gen. 35:6-7, LW 6:250.

God is following the custom of princes, or what moderns often call the plural of majesty, or that God is speaking with the angels.<sup>7</sup>)

Luther finds the Trinity in general and Christ in particular throughout the Old Testament, but by his own admission especially so in Isaiah and the Psalter.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, David and the prophets learned their trinitarian theology and at least the rudiments of soteriology from Moses (i.e., the Pentateuch).<sup>9</sup> He consistently reads as trinitarian or christological (or both) such familiar accounts as the patriarchal narratives,<sup>10</sup> Ps. 2, Ps. 110, the last words of David in 2 Sam. 23:1-7, and Dan. 7.<sup>11</sup> In pursuit of such trinitarian texts in the Old Testament, Luther occasionally identifies two working guidelines: first, wherever in the Old Testament one finds God speaking about God, as if there were two persons, one may assume that the three persons of the Godhead are in view; second, whenever the Hebrew Scriptures speak of the two persons of the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit is also necessarily present, for the Spirit speaks those words through the prophets.<sup>12</sup>

For those who might find Luther's approach strained, in a candid remark on Gen. 31:42, he admits his strategy: "Therefore I see the Trinity here, and elsewhere too, wherever I can dig out (*possum eruere*) that mystery from passages of the Old Testament."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, while the older and more polemical Luther sometimes asserts the perspicacity of these references, he elsewhere admits that the light of the Gospel illumines with plain language the dark statements (*tenebras veteris Testament*) or enigmas (*aenigmata*) of the Old Testament. The trinitarian mysteries are more definitively unfolded (*certius explicata*) in such New Testament texts as Matt. 28 and 2 Cor. 13.<sup>14</sup> Both testaments are God's testimony (*zeugnis*) of Himself, and the New Testament is based on and proclaimed in the Old.<sup>15</sup> Had the very clear testimonies of the New Testament been expressed in so many words in the Old,<sup>16</sup> the Arians would have emerged long before Jesus birth.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>7</sup>See LW 1:58 and WA 42:43; regarding Gen. 11:7-9, see LW 7:283; and regarding Gen. 42:7, see LW 2:227.

<sup>8</sup>LW 15:344.

<sup>9</sup>See, regarding Gen. 20:11-13, LW 3:353.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, commenting on Gen. 18:2 and 19:24, LW 1:21; commenting on Gen. 18:2-5, in LW 3:194; commenting on Gen. 33:20 and 35:6-7, LW 6:184-185, 251.

<sup>11</sup>LW 15:275, 278-279, 291, 295.

<sup>12</sup>LW 15:280, 282; see also, commenting on Gen. 35:3, LW 6:232; and, commenting on Gen. 1:5, LW 1:21.

<sup>13</sup>LW 6:72; WA 44:53.

<sup>14</sup>See, in connection with Gen. 1:26 and 3:22, LW 1:59, 223 and WA 42:44, 166, 167.

<sup>15</sup>LW 34:227; WA 50:282.

<sup>16</sup>See, regarding Gen. 1:2, LW 1:12; and, regarding Gen. 35:6-7, LW 6:250.

<sup>17</sup>So Luther claimed in connection with Gen. 1:26, LW 1:59.

However one might be disposed to Luther's conclusions regarding individual passages from the Hebrew Bible, any overt or *de facto* Marcionism is precluded by his consistent claim that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is one and the same God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ for humanity's salvation. "The [Old Testament] letter harmonizes readily (*gerne . . . sich reimet*) with the New Testament," Luther insists, "and it is certain that Jesus Christ is Lord overall. To Him Scripture must bear witness, for it is given solely for His sake."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Luther asserted that to affirm with John 1:14, the Word was made flesh, is to affirm simply that the promise of God was fulfilled.<sup>19</sup>

### III.

Contemporary theologians variously cast and unfold Rahner's rule identifying the economic and immanent Trinity. In ways both traditional and innovative, Luther provided a precursor to this axiom with his discussion of the external and internal operations of the Trinity. His affirmations in both contexts are quite traditional; his applications, as expected, are characteristically evangelical and pastoral.

In relation to us He is one God (*einiger Gott*); within Himself He is distinctive (*unterschiedlich*) in three persons.<sup>20</sup> Luther affirmed the Augustinian insight that the external works (or works to the outside) of the Trinity are indivisible, while the internal works or activities admit and even necessitate distinctions.<sup>21</sup>

The Holy Trinity is one God,<sup>22</sup> wherein the inseparable divine essence or substance refers to the total Trinity and majesty of God, which is shared commonly by all three persons.<sup>23</sup> The Father is the source (*quelle*), fountainhead (*brun*), or wellspring (*ursprung*) who begets the Son; or, in other words, from whom the Son is generated.<sup>24</sup> The Son derives everything from the Father, having been given His deity from eternity by the Father, through

---

<sup>18</sup>LW 15:343 and WA 54:92; see also, regarding Gen. 1:26, LW 1:59; and especially in connection with Gen. 20:11-13, LW 3:353 and WA 43:129: Holy Scripture is in such beautiful agreement (*pulchre consonet*) and the New Testament so clearly proves the same thing [as the Old Testament].

<sup>19</sup>*The Disputation Concerning the Passage: "The Word Was Made Flesh,"* in LW 38:266.

<sup>20</sup>LW 15:311; WA 54:65.

<sup>21</sup>LW 15:302, 311; Augustine's assertion appears in *On the Trinity*, Book 2, Chapter 5, Section 9.

<sup>22</sup>*Lectures on Galatians*, 1519, LW 27:290.

<sup>23</sup>LW 38:252.

<sup>24</sup>LW 15:309, 316, citing 2 Cor. 1:3 and 1 Pet. 1:3; and WA 54:64, 69.

the eternal birth.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from both the Father and the Son.<sup>26</sup> Both the immanent birth (*innbleibenden geburt*) of the Son and immanent proceeding (*innbleibende ausgang*) of the Holy Spirit are incomprehensible even to the angels, and they exceed all possible analogy.<sup>27</sup> Along with the parallel affirmation of the one indivisible and eternal Godhead, the internal personal distinctions can only be believed.<sup>28</sup> This is what Holy Scripture teaches, Luther states casually, and to say anything less or anything else is to revert to the errors of ancient heretics, the rabbis, or the Turks.<sup>29</sup>

In working with John's Gospel, Luther quotes John 16:15 (all that the Father has is mine) and 16:14 (regarding the Holy Spirit, He will take what is mine) and declares that here the circle is completely closed, meaning that all three persons are embraced (*zusammen gezogen*) in the single divine essence.<sup>30</sup> This one divine essence planned from eternity to embark on one unified rescue mission, the objects of which are God's estranged and congenitally helpless sons and daughters. Slaves to sin destined for death, God's human creatures are the recipients of His saving mercy. In what may be the most theologically profound of all Luther's writings on the Trinity, the Large Catechism calls the three articles of the Apostles' Creed a description of the entire essence, will, and work of God:

In [the Creed] are comprehended all our wisdom, which surpasses all human wisdom, understanding, and reason. Although the whole world has sought painstakingly to learn what God might be and what he might think and do, yet it has never succeeded in the least. But here you have everything in richest measure. For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of His fatherly heart and His pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us His Son and His Holy Spirit, through whom he brings

---

<sup>25</sup>LW 15:309; see also LW 34:217, citing Ps. 2:7; as well as Luther's version of St. Ambrose's hymn, "Savior of the Nations Come," *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982), #13.

<sup>26</sup>For an explicit discussion of *filioque* on the basis of John 14:26 and 15:26, see LW 24:365 and LW 34:217.

<sup>27</sup>LW 34:217-218; LW 38:257; WA 50:274; see also especially stanzas 5 and 6 of Luther's hymn, "All Glory Be to God Alone," *Lutheran Worship*, #210.

<sup>28</sup>LW 38:257.

<sup>29</sup>LW 34:217.

<sup>30</sup>LW 24:373 and WA 46:67; for summaries of both the unity of the Godhead and its personal distinctions, see LW 15:315.

us to himself. For . . . we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

To call creation, redemption, and sanctification *opera ad extra* and leave it there does not do justice to Luther's evangelical and pastoral intent. These are not only works to the outside; indeed, simply to identify a divine work as external may not yet speak Gospel. Most importantly, these are works performed for us human beings and for our salvation, as the Nicene Creed confesses. "The announcement of forgiveness [which] encompasses everything that is to be preached about the sacraments and, in short, the entire gospel and all the official responsibilities of the Christian community" — elicits worship.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, lest one forget this message, especially in times of cross and affliction, the Triune God has ways of bringing the promise to remembrance once more: "I am baptized, instructed with the word alone, absolved, and partake of the Lord's Supper. But with the word and through the word the Holy Spirit is present, and the whole Trinity works salvation, as the words of baptism declare."<sup>33</sup> Duly reminded, one calls upon the name of the Lord by whatever person of the triune Godhead one invokes. Neither Luther nor God care which person: "you need have no concern that the [other two persons] are resentful (*zurne*) on that account, but you may know that you immediately call upon all three Persons and the one God, no matter which Person you may address. You cannot call upon one Person without including the others, since there is one indivisible divine essence in all and in each person."<sup>34</sup>

#### IV.

Contemporary trinitarian thought affirms the relational character of all reality, and the interrelationships and interdependence within the cosmos are held to reflect the dynamics of life in the Godhead. Likewise, Martin Luther understood that the being of the Triune God is known neither speculatively

---

<sup>31</sup>LC II, 63-65. For other excellent summaries of the external works, cast in slightly more abstract trinitarian contexts, see especially LW 15:302 and 309; and, for a superb doxological unfolding of the economic Trinity in action, see especially stanzas 4-9 of Luther's great hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All," *Lutheran Worship*, #353.

<sup>32</sup>LC II, 54. See also Luther's trinitarian hymn, "We All Believe in One True God," *Lutheran Worship*, #213, especially stanza 3.

<sup>33</sup>Commenting on Gen. 49:11-12, LW 8:264.

<sup>34</sup>LW 15:316 and WA 54:69.



nor abstractly, but only in a relationship of trust, insofar as the God of the Gospel is revealed to sinners in the Son and through the Holy Spirit.

The *opera ad extra/opera ad intra* distinction sketched above is an ideal transition to the main point of this section, namely, that one enjoys life with God by virtue of this God's incarnate self-expression in Jesus Christ, a promise conveyed and sealed by the Holy Spirit, [who] has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith. Indeed, Luther consistently insists that the Father cannot be known except through the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>35</sup> He states the matter simply in connection with Gen. 35:2: "Let us therefore apply our hearts and all our efforts to the one God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and let us remain in the Mediator Christ. This is the first part of the reformation (*inchoat reformationem*)."<sup>36</sup>

In fact, Luther seldom considers the Trinity without either including or following the discussion with a further elaboration of the person *and* work of Jesus Christ (with person and work often developed in the same paragraph, that is, the work of Christ is described in concert with an affirmation of the communication of attributes).<sup>37</sup> Many of the essential attributes of deity cannot be grasped or understood. Thankfully, however, God manifests Himself through His works and the word.<sup>38</sup>

It is folly (*insania*) to argue much about God outside and before time, because this is an effort to understand the Godhead without a covering, or the uncovered divine essence (*comprehendere nudam divinitatem, seu nudam essentiam diviniam*). Because this is impossible, God envelops (*involvit*) Himself in His works in certain form, as today He wraps (*involvit*) Himself up in baptism, in absolution, etc. If you should depart from these, you will get into an area where there is no measure, no space, no time, and into the merest nothing, concerning which, according to the Philosopher, there can be no knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

Citations of this sort are brought together in Luther's famous axiom, namely, "outside Christ there is no other God."<sup>40</sup> The truth of this axiom, which in Luther's words was "to be noted well and to be observed most

<sup>35</sup>SC II, 6; commenting on Gen. 1:26, LW:58-59.

<sup>36</sup>LW 6:230 and WA 44:171.

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, LW15: 340-341, 343. Sometimes Luther completes his discussion with a consideration of the Holy Spirit too, but this is not as common. In that connection, see LW15:310.

<sup>38</sup>Regarding Gen. 1:2, LW1:11.

<sup>39</sup>LW1:11 and WA 42:10; see also LW 1:14, both in connection with Gen. 1:2.

<sup>40</sup>LW 38:258.

emphatically (*maxime observandum*),"<sup>41</sup> underscores what was at stake soteriologically in Athanasius' debate with Arius, or, for that matter, in the protracted conflict over the errors of Apollinarius, Nestorius, or Eutyches. Of these patristic controversies, Luther spends more time rebutting subordinationism, and he often seems to prefer Gospel arguments to specific exegetical considerations.<sup>42</sup> Endorsing the precious books of especially Augustine, Hilary, and Cyril of Alexandria,<sup>43</sup> Luther anticipates to some extent the twentieth- and twenty-first-century tendencies to begin with the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth, as depicted in the Gospels: "The Son is revealed in humanity, for the Son alone became man, He alone was conceived by the Holy Spirit, was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered and died for us, as our Creed informs us. However, it is also correct to say that God died for us, for the Son is God, and there is no other God but only more persons in the same Godhead."<sup>44</sup>

The Arians foundered on precisely this point. They regarded Jesus as an intermediate being, midway between the divine nature and the created nature of angels.<sup>45</sup> Ironically—or perhaps characteristically—Luther traces Arius' fundamental error to his attempt to comprehend God's majesty without a covering. In doing so, the Arians fell to their destruction.<sup>46</sup> In connection with this dispute, Luther shared the great patristic insight that linked this most central matter of dogma with Christian worship: "When we worship the Man born of Mary, we do not worship a detached person (*abgesordneten Menschen*), a person apart from and outside of God, a separate, independent person. No, we worship the one true God, who is one God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and who is one person with His humanity."<sup>47</sup>

In terms of the relationships between God and human creatures, Luther echoed the consensus catholic position: only God can save, or, in his words, if God is not in the scale to give it weight, we, on our side, sink to the ground.<sup>48</sup> Luther elaborates on this trinitarian and christological point:

---

<sup>41</sup>LW 38:258 and WA 39-II:25.

<sup>42</sup>Luther's indictment of the Arians is consistent: "What kind of wisdom is this—to depart from the word and to invent something (*ingere quiddam*) from one's head and later to adorn this with badly distorted (*male detortis*) citations from Scripture to give it a kind of polish? So I, too, could speculate over, and falsify (*depravare*), any passage I might choose." See *Commentary on Psalms* 45, v. 11, in LW 12:284 and WA 40-II:588.

<sup>43</sup>LW 15:310.

<sup>44</sup>LW 15:310; see also, especially, LW 15:325.

<sup>45</sup>Regarding Ps. 45:11, LW 12:283; and regarding Gen. 1:2, in LW 1:14.

<sup>46</sup>LW 1:14, commenting on Gen. 1:2.

<sup>47</sup>LW 15:342 and WA 54:91.

<sup>48</sup>*On the Councils and the Church*, LW 41:103-104.

[I]f it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man, we are lost; but if God's death and a dead God lie in the balance (*in der wogeschuessel ligt*), His side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale. Yet He can also readily go up again, or leap out of the scale! But He could not sit on the scale unless He had become a man like us, so that it could be called God's dying, God's martyrdom, God's blood, and God's death. For God in His own nature cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is called God's death when the man dies who is one substance or one person with God.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, in terms of the revealed relationships among the persons of the Godhead, Luther is equally emphatic, and at the same time soteriological in his application:

Consequently, when Christ speaks thus of the Father, do not flutter about, do not run away, do not seek God in heaven while you ignore this Man Christ. Outside this Man Christ I must not search for God, and I will find no God. If I do find one, it will not be the true and the right God, but a wrathful one. Thus the Father draws us to the Son by His mouth, His doctrine, and His word. The doctrine passes from the Father through the Son, and at the same time He thereby draws us to the Son. And when you have Him, you are grasping the very Son of God; and then you see and grasp God the Father Himself. *The entire Holy Trinity is known in the Person of Christ.* If we come to the Son, we are at the same time with the Father. He who sees the Person born of the Virgin Mary also sees the Son of God, for the Father places the Son's word and Person before you. This includes all, so that all comes to rest in that Person, lest anyone conceive of God otherwise. Whenever this Person speaks, whenever you hear the Son's word and voice, it is God the Father's voice that speaks and proclaims that the Son was sent into the world for you, suffered and died, etc. With this message He delights your heart and leads you only to Christ. He does not lead you beyond that; nor does the voice of the Father direct you elsewhere when He speaks through the Son.<sup>50</sup>

## V.

While the Triune God discloses Himself in the Gospel of both testaments, the dogmatic formulation of the Trinity was the product of a convergence of Spirit-given revelation and varied, sometimes diverse, applications of reason.

<sup>49</sup>LW 41:103-104 and WA 50:590.

<sup>50</sup>*Sermon on John 6:46*, LW 23:89.

Luther recognized reason's decidedly ambivalent role, and he offered his own contribution to the church's rational reflection on what always remains an article of faith.

None of the foregoing christological emphases diminishes the person or role of the Holy Spirit in Luther's trinitarian reflections. The Christ who discloses the Trinity is in turn proclaimed to contemporary men and women by the Holy Spirit through the light of the word of God.<sup>51</sup> Following the precedent of the New Testament and the Apostles' Creed, Luther ascribes to the Spirit the external working (*eusserliche Wirkung*), that is, physically speaking, baptizing, and reigning through the prophets, apostles, and ministers of the church.<sup>52</sup> This work of the Spirit, and not conciliar creativity, is the source of the church's developed doctrine of the Trinity: "the articles of faith must not grow on earth through the councils, as from a new, secret inspiration (*heimlicher eingebung*), but must be issued from heaven through the Holy Spirit and revealed openly; otherwise, . . . they are not articles of faith."<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, the *formulation* of trinitarian theology undeniably exceeds the biblical vocabulary as it seeks to express the personal relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Luther is well aware of the terminological issues involved—in Greek, Latin, and German. He knows the nuances and limitations, the uses and misuses, of *Dreifaltigkeit*, *Trinitas*, *hypostasis*, and *persona*—not to mention the notorious *homoousios*.<sup>54</sup> Yet his insistence that one should teach nothing outside of Scripture pertaining to divine matters<sup>55</sup> does not mean that one may never use more or other words than those expressly used in the Bible. Hilary, and Luther, mean only that one should not teach anything "at variance (*nichts anders*)" with the Scriptures. Luther explains:

[E]specially in a controversy and when heretics want to falsify things with trickery and distort the words of Scripture, [it becomes] necessary to condense the meaning of Scripture, comprised of so many passages, into a short and comprehensive word, and to ask whether they regarded Christ as *homoousios*, which was the meaning of all the words of Scripture which they had distorted with false interpretations among their own people, but had freely confessed before the emperor and the [Nicene] council.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup>LW 24:374.

<sup>52</sup>LW 15:276 and WA 54:35.

<sup>53</sup>LW 41:58 and WA 50:551.

<sup>54</sup>See, for example, *Exposition of John 1 in Sermons of 1537 and 1538*, in WA 46:550; *Sermon on Trinity Sunday, 1537*, in WA 21:508; LW 38:262; *Sermon on John 1:1*, LW 22:16; LW 41:83.

<sup>55</sup>Citing Hilary, *On the Trinity*, Book I; in LW 41:83.

<sup>56</sup>LW 41:83 and WA 50:572.

Luther's discussion of these topics provides an excellent case study for his understanding of the relationship between faith and reason. In summary, the matters considered here, which Luther almost incessantly describes with the adjective sublime,<sup>57</sup> seem "uncompromisingly contrary (*herter widder*)" to reason,<sup>58</sup> the normal applications of arithmetic,<sup>59</sup> as well as the typical use of the Aristotelian syllogism.<sup>60</sup> The matters under consideration here are too profound for reason to fathom,<sup>61</sup> and, even if they were within human wisdom's ken, fallen reason is utterly corrupted by original sin.<sup>62</sup> The problem, as Luther sees it, is that those who speculate or err on this topic fail to see Scripture, God's good gift of reason, and logic in their proper relation to one another (*recht zu samen*)—which begins with knowing when the latter two are appropriate and when they are not.<sup>63</sup> Luther argues for a better approach: in the mysterious articles of faith one is to make use of another dialectic and philosophy, namely, the word of God and faith.<sup>64</sup>

In this very context, Luther asserts that the first concern of a theologian is to be a "good textualist (*bonus textualis*),"<sup>65</sup> which in turn begins with listening to and comprehending the word of God in faith.<sup>66</sup> Here again, the work of the Holy Spirit is preeminent, for finally only the Holy Spirit is able to create listeners and pupils.<sup>67</sup> Such listeners and pupils have as their sole concern what God has revealed and commanded in the word, in baptism, and in the Lord's Supper.<sup>68</sup> A good textualist, moreover, will adhere strictly (*nude adhaerendum*) to the word and truth of the Bible and will decline to argue from "philosophical reasons (*rationibus philosophicis*)" in such articles of faith.<sup>69</sup> Luther applies this counsel to a consideration of the Trinity:

[W]e Christians believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We concede that it is a sublime article of faith beyond the grasp of reason, but we know that nothing is too sublime or impossible

<sup>57</sup>See, for example, the *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, in LW 37:297; LW 23:54, regarding John 6:37; LW 22:5-6, 76, regarding John 1:1-3 and 1:10; and LW 15:277.

<sup>58</sup>LW 37:297 and WA 26:440.

<sup>59</sup>*The Promotion-Disputation of Georg Major and Johannes Faber*, Thesis 13, in WA 39-II:287.

<sup>60</sup>LW 38:241.

<sup>61</sup>LW 23:54.

<sup>62</sup>WA 39-II:253; as a consequence, reason abhors all articles of faith; see LW 12:284-285; LW 22:76.

<sup>63</sup>LW 37:297 and WA 26:440; see, for example, LW 22:6.

<sup>64</sup>LW 38:277, 241.

<sup>65</sup>Regarding Ps. 45:11, LW 12:288 and WA 40-II:593.

<sup>66</sup>LW 22:8.

<sup>67</sup>Regarding John 1:1, LW 22:8.

<sup>68</sup>Concerning John 3:11, LW 22:314.

<sup>69</sup>LW 38:277 and WA 39-II:30.

for faith. For faith relies on God's Word and is guided by it, not by reason. Faith is firmly convinced that the divine truth is unshakable and eternal; for God has said this, and His Word testifies to it. No, this doctrine is not derived from reason; it is derived from the Holy Spirit. And therefore, I suppose, it will always remain incomprehensible to reason without the aid of the Holy Spirit.<sup>70</sup>

The Trinity doubtless is incomprehensible,<sup>71</sup> but that has never stopped theologians of different epochs from speculating about it or seeking to describe it. To that end, they have come up with various analogies to illustrate if not explain the mystery.<sup>72</sup> Predictably, Luther finds them all wanting.<sup>73</sup> They are not so much wrong or even inadequate as they are beside the point. In most cases, they fail to explicate the Gospel, which is the acid test of any Luther-an theological discourse. In place of the typical patristic analogies, Luther offers his own triads, not to substitute for the older sets but to describe better the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Luther's three most striking candidates are Speaker, Spoken Word, and Listener;<sup>74</sup> the Father as the one who wants to comfort, the Son who prays for the comforter, and the Spirit who is the Comforter;<sup>75</sup> and, admittedly in more scattered form, the Promiser, the Promised One, and the one who points to, illumines, and glorifies the one promised.<sup>76</sup> Such depictions, born not of rational reflection but of Gospel-informed exegesis, represent an evangelical trinitarianism of the highest theological order. At their best, today's trinitarian theologians express themselves in these kerygmatic terms.

## VI.

The above four points are neither a summary of each point of Luther's trinitarian reflection nor a survey of contemporary thought on the topic.

<sup>70</sup>LW 22:76, regarding John 1:10.

<sup>71</sup>The translation of the Athanasian Creed (paragraph 9) in *Lutheran Worship*, 134, renders the Latin *immensus* with "incomprehensible." Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, editors, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) renders the term "unlimited": "The Father is unlimited; the Son is unlimited; the Holy Spirit is unlimited."

<sup>72</sup>See Luther's discussion, for example, in LW 34:219; and LW 38:276, where Luther cites Augustine's remark that the [Neo-]platonist philosophers took much from the fathers and from John's Gospel.

<sup>73</sup>LW 22:6, concerning John 1:1-3.

<sup>74</sup>Regarding John 16:13, LW 24:364-365.

<sup>75</sup>Regarding John 14:16, LW 24:111.

<sup>76</sup>See LW 4:171, regarding Gen. 22:17-18; LW 15:276; LW 24:292, 295, 363, and especially 371-372, regarding John 15:26-27 and 16:13, 14; see also stanza 2 of "Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord," in *Lutheran Worship*, #154.

Instead, they seek to identify those areas that might be most fruitful for those interested in working on this topic within the tradition of Martin Luther. As one reads Luther's lectures, sermons, and disputations on these topics, one notices that he frequently almost stops and summarizes the most basic aspects of both the doctrine of the Trinity and catholic Christology. Often these summaries offer the reader nothing new, either in connection with these topics or Luther's thinking on them. Cumulatively, however, their effect is different—and profound. It is as though Luther cannot be reminded enough of these most fundamental truths, on which his very existence before God depended.

Near the end of the research for this essay, I glanced through the American Edition of the Table Talk. There, in an entry from 1540, one gets a glimpse of why Luther repeats these doctrines so often, why he unfolds the incarnation as he does, and why he invariably discusses Trinity and Christology together. The entry also provides an autobiographical glimpse of *the* theologian of the cross against whom all subsequent efforts are necessarily measured.

However, I have learned, not only through the Scriptures but also from severe inner struggles and trials (*in maximis agonibus et tentationibus*), that Christ is God and has put on flesh, and likewise I have learned the doctrine of the Trinity. Today, therefore, I don't so much *believe* as I *know* through experience that these doctrines are true. In the worst temptations (*in summis tentationibus*) nothing can help us but faith that God's Son has put on flesh, is bone [of our bone], sits at the right hand of the Father, and prays for us. There is no mightier comfort.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup>LW 54, #4915, 371 and WA-TR, 577-578.