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Baptism as Church Foundation

David P. Scaer

The Missteps of Youth

In coming to the seminary, then in Springfield, in 1966, I was faced with teaching the first three courses in dogmatics. The department chair suggested that I use Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*.¹ By then it had gone through nine printings, which may prove that the Reformed write and read more dogmatics books than Lutherans. Melancthon's *Loci* is no match in scope and size for Calvin's *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (though by Gerhard's time the Lutherans were no longer lagging behind). Those first students—among whom were synodical and district presidents and several now ELCA via the AELC pastors—recognized the stratagem. In those turbulent days, belief in the Bible was a commonly celebrated achievement. Later, it became evident that Lutheran and Reformed branches had sprung from different roots.² Each held to biblical authority, but for different reasons.

Caught between embarrassment and amusement over a deception easily detectable to everyone but myself, I lived with the guilt that I had been an unwitting conduit for Reformed theology into the Lutheran psyche. However, this contagion was already in place in the body ecclesiastic and so my transgression was not unique and no antibodies engaged the transgression. Mutations replace eliminated viruses. Much of what passes itself off as Lutheran may be closer to Reformed thought.³ Having evolved from Schleiermacher's minimal *Bewusstsein* of a Reformed influenced consciousness to the *Selbstbewusstsein* of a Lutheran

¹Fourth revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1965).

²See the cover of *Logia* 9 (Reformation 2002), which displays a seventeenth century Dutch engraving of Luther and Calvin sitting side by side with a candle signifying that the gospel's light was their common inheritance to Protestants. This issue is appropriately titled "Wittenberg & Geneva."

³As a church body we have even leapfrogged over Geneva and adopted the non-liturgical worship practices traceable to the Radical Reformation. Many Lutheran church services can hardly be distinguished from the Assemblies of God, with bouncing balls on the silver screen showing aroused worshippers which words are now being sung.

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self-awakening, one experiences the contours of the bone structure of the Reformed whale's belly from the inside out (*von Haus aus*.) After the beast's hearty belch up onto the beach, one happily breathes sweet Lutheran air. To remedy former lapses, I have labored to identify Reformed motifs that still flow from roaring "grand rapids" into Lutheran theology.

The Grand Awakening: Lutheran Style

A chance remark by Walter Kaiser, then at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and now at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, located the fundamental difference between Reformed and Lutheran theologies not in how we understood Christ (*extra Calvinistium*) and the sacraments (*finitum non capax infiniti*), but in where each begins theology. The Reformed begin with God and Lutherans with Christ—roots, trunk, branches and not just the shapes of the leaves are different. Calvin defined God's existence philosophically and then proceeded to the locus on Scriptures and the Reformed confessions followed suit. Their concern is God's rule, which is reflected in their doctrines of divine sovereignty, providence, and election. Lutherans begin with Christ (or at least they should) and then proceed to the Scriptures. This approach predetermined for Luther a christological interpretation of the Bible and so Lutheran and Reformed *Weltanschauungen* are worlds apart. Parallel doctrines may be identically worded, but the similarity is superficial. For example, Calvin defines faith as obedience and so even our doctrines of justification are different.⁴ Zwingli and Luther came to a marvelous (now suspicious) agreement in the Marburg Articles (October 1529). They parted company only over the third part of the fifteenth article on the spiritual versus material understandings of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. However, rapprochement evaporates when one discovers that the articles were thoroughly Luther's and, perhaps for this reason, the Reformed have not

⁴For a thorough discussion of Lutheran and Reformed differences see Armand J. Boehme, "Justification by Grace through Faith: Do Wittenberg and Geneva See Eye to Eye," *Logia* 11 (Reformation 2002): 17-27, especially 18-19.

made them a platform to accommodate union with the Lutherans.⁵ For Zwingli, fourteen and two-thirds loaf was better than none.

Theistic Wars

Though "theology" can refer to the entire seminary curriculum or a system in which religion is studied in detail, it is, etymologically at least, synonymous with theism, the doctrine of God. The issue of whether theism can be a legitimate point from which to begin theology might not have aroused attention without the current Evangelical debate over whether open theism is an acceptable option alongside the traditional classical theism.⁶ This controversy threatens to divide the Evangelical Theological Society, an organization in which conservative non-Lutheran scholars find common ground.⁷ Lutherans are allowed, but Roman Catholics need not apply. Classical theism understands God as self-existent, self-sufficient, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.⁸ Open theism challenges this and holds that God keeps these attributes in abeyance, so that He can join His creatures in stumbling along into a future unknown to both.⁹ Open theism faults classical theism as a philosophical construct derived from Philo of Alexandria and mediated through Saint Augustine into the body of

⁵Article 8, "On the External Word," "Rather, the Holy Spirit works and creates faith through and with this spoken Word where and in whom he wills," hardly preserves the Reformed view that the Spirit works directly. Quotation taken from Robert Kolb and James A. Nestigen, editors, *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 90.

⁶Nine essays representing both positions are contained in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (June 2, 2002).

⁷At its 2001 meeting the Evangelical Theological Society passed a resolution denying open theism and defined classic theism: "We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate, and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future, including all future decisions and actions of moral agents." Two open theists were expelled from the group, one by a vote of 171 to 137 and other by 166 to 143. Doug Koop, "Closing the Door on Open Theists?" *Christianity Today* (January 2003): 24-25.

⁸For a defense of classical theism see articles by Michael Horton in *Modern Reformation* 11 (May-June 2002). In one he refutes open theism, "Is the New News Good News," 11-19, and in another he defines classic theism, "The Incommunicable Attributes of God," 14-17.

⁹Craig Blomberg, a classic theist, says that "[Open theists] are not denying that God cannot choose to know in advance what creatures can do, but that he has chosen not to know everything in advance." Quoted in Koop, "Closing the door," 25.

Christian doctrine. Open theism stems from futuristic philosophies that have spawned process theology and the theologies of hope and history in the late twentieth century.¹⁰ Each side in the debate claims biblical support for its position, but without a christological reference. The controversy is purely theistic. It is about God as God. Among open theism's biblical supports is the Book of Jonah, in which God changes His mind about Nineveh's destruction, opting instead to save the city.¹¹ Lutherans do not believe that God is subject to historical variables and hence we are classic theists; however, God relates to mankind in different ways. In the atonement, He moves from condemning humankind to accepting it. His negotiations with Abraham and Moses about the fate of rebellious peoples were not a divine charade. Traditional Reformed thought holds that God is the cause of all things and so He never really negotiates. He knows, determines, and is responsible for all conclusions, even tragic ones. If life were a bridge game, He would sit at all four sides of the card table playing through His surrogate creatures, whose reason and will would not matter all that much in determining the outcome. Abstract theism of any kind is not without its drawbacks, especially in explaining how God can become man. Incarnation is more of a problem for the Reformed, who can never accept it completely, than for the Lutherans, but we still have to rearrange divine attributes in order to explain it. It is tempting to accept classic theism as it is defined in the Evangelical debate, but we do not want to discount the biblical references to God's changing His mind about repentant sinners. We should be hesitant to interpret those sections of the Bible that, at first glance, do not correspond to our particular way of thinking (system). A solution for some of God's allegedly contradictory actions cited by the open theists may be the law-gospel dialectic: the God who threatens sinners (law), then places Himself under His own threats by sending Jesus as the world's redemption (gospel). God approaches man in seemingly contradictory ways, but He is consistent in desiring humankind for Himself. At present, only Evangelicals are involved in the theistic quarrel. It had no place on the agenda at the November 23-26, 2002 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, which studies God not as He is in

¹⁰See for example Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, editors, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 volumes (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹¹See John Sanders, "Be Wary of Ware: A Reply to Bruce Ware," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (June 2, 2002), 221-231.

Himself (Reformed) or in Christ (Lutheran) but sociologically. Yet this debate provides opportunity to examine what role theism has played and should be allowed to play in Lutheran theology.

Theism as Theological Topic

By placing theism and how God reveals Himself (revelation) in the introduction (prolegomena) of the theological task, we run the risk of defining a God before we examine the biblical data or know Christ. An ill-defined theism can infect the entire theological system, as in the case of Calvin and Reformed theology in general. It also raises the question, as mentioned, of how was it possible for God, who is defined theistically, to become man. Lutherans and the Reformed give different answers. The classic versus open theism debate is arguably an extension of the Reformed-Arminian debate over whether God or man is ultimately responsible for one's salvation. In the current debate extreme forms of monergism and synergism come into conflict with one another. God as God as a topic is more characteristic of non-Lutheran Protestant theology theologies, though it is not unknown in Lutheran dogmatics. By placing Christology, that is the person of Jesus, before theology (theism), this question does not have to be faced or, should we say, it is already answered before it is asked.

Berkhof devotes approximately the first sixty pages of his dogmatics to the topic of God. James Montgomery Boice wrote a book on God that left the topic of the Trinity to a second volume.¹² Wherever God is the first topic in the theological system, reasons for denying His existence become significant antitheses. Berkhof distinguishes between dogmatic atheism and skeptical atheism, and ordinary atheism and agnosticism.¹³ These distinctions have diagnostic value in dealing with those who have no use for God. So we might conclude that without moral norms the post-modern world is agnostic rather than dogmatically atheistic. Atheists have a dogmatic conviction about reality that agnostics do not, but agnostics are dogmatic about the impossibility of knowing anything at all. Practical atheists do not care about the issue at all. Matters are not always clear about who is who. In a letter in the October 2002 column of

¹²James Montgomery Boice, *The Sovereign God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1978).

¹³Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 22-28.

the successor to Ann Landers, an agnostic asked not to be confused with an atheist. Prior to the Godless Americans March on November 2, 2002, a controversy arose about who qualified as godless.¹⁴ Satanists have their god, as even Paul would grant (2 Corinthians 4:4). The bottom line is that for all (g)God deniers, he/she does not count or he/she does not count for much. Reasons for denying theism may be remedied by counter-philosophical arguments, as the Reformed do, but even if they are successful, a philosophically convincing theism does not necessarily translate into faith.

Theism belongs to American history, as is obvious from our coinage, "In God We Trust," a phrase that includes the particular Lutheran definition of faith as *fiducia*. (Some orthodox phrases may not be as airtight as they first appear.) But it takes a leap of faith (fideism) to believe that the "currency god" is the one who appeared to Abraham and took on flesh and blood in Jesus. Ultimately, reasons for denying theism do not really matter. Unbelief of any kind can only be disarmed by the law, which has less of a claim on the public conscience in a morally declining culture. As harsh as it might sound, a God proven by philosophy and reason has as little existence as a stone idol. Early American theism was rooted in Calvinism, and so used biblical images and assigned Jesus a place in defining the public morality of the civic religion. Even for unitarian theistic Deists, the Bible was a source of morality and its stories set a pattern for our history. Civic theism no longer exists under a Christian guise, which, in some cases, may be illegal. Its prominent symbol is the national flag graced by an eagle, which for the Romans was an idol, under whose wings any number of religious options are invited to find refuge. The God in "God Bless America" or "God Bless Our Native Land" takes on different forms depending on whether it is sung in a church, a synagogue, a mosque, a Hindu temple or an athletic arena. (Words, including "God," do not have constant meanings.) Theism asserts God's existence, but is indefinite in identifying who he/she/it may be or how he/she/it is known. It may lead to an exclusive christological definition of God, as with the Reformed, but it can also embrace a God who can be known by direct revelations and hence immune to historic critique (Mormonism, Islam, Barth), by reasoned and scientific arguments (Rationalism), by moral intuition (Kant), by culture (Schleiermacher), or by history (Moltmann,

¹⁴"Interfaith atheists," *World* (September 7, 2002): 13.

Pannenberg).¹⁵ In discussing theism, we have not climbed ivy vines into moldy academic attics. On Wednesday, November 6, 2002, the Reverend Rick Hawks, pastor of The Chapel in Fort Wayne, Indiana, led an event entitled "Monotheistic Symposium 2002" for seventh graders. Rabbi Jonathan Katz and Imam Tamer Rasheed were co-participants.¹⁶ All this is old hat. In the eighteenth century, the Rationalists opened the umbrella of monotheism wide enough to harbor Judaism and Islam. Christianity no longer possessed an exclusive knowledge of God. Theism, even the monotheistic kind, is not benign. It can be offered with Christian characteristics, but happy endings are not inevitable. The theism of pagans may be crude in comparison with that offered by the philosophers, but each has no existence. In his explanation of the Large Catechism, Luther claimed that the pagans "made a god of what their hearts desired most."¹⁷ David Davenport of the Hoover Institute used the same argument in a positive way when he defined "God" as one's highest priority.¹⁸ (This comes close to Paul Tillich's Ultimate Concern.) Thus atheists believe in God and are theists. They just do not realize it. According to this definition, atheism is another form of theism and so the distinction between the two becomes meaningless and also between the God fearing and the godless. If for pagan idols we use "gods," why do we use "God" for a deity that emerges from a philosophy?¹⁹

¹⁵Francis Pieper assumes that most people have a religion and then applies the standard of the law and the gospel to determine that the true religion is Lutheran. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 volumes (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951-1953), 1:7-40.

¹⁶Kenya Woodard, "Leaders Highlight Religions: 7th-graders Learn 'Common Thread,'" *The Journal Gazette* (November 7, 2002): 3C.

¹⁷Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, editors, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 388.

¹⁸"Atheism Is Really Much Ado About Nothing," *The Journal Gazette* (November 21, 2002): 11A.

¹⁹Gilbert Meilaender provides a valuable article on whether Christians and non-Christians pray to the same God. "Interfaith 'prayer': What Is It and Should We Do It," *Christian Century* (October 23-November 5, 2002): 32-37. He asks "whether, when the peoples of the world cry out to god in their need, there are Christian grounds for supposing that, at least sometimes, it may be the true God whom they address" (35). Meilaender seems to allow the idea that Christians pray to the same God the Jews do, but the same cannot be said for Muslims. "But theirs is the god of Abraham and Ishmael—not of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." "And if we cannot make the case with respect to Muslims, it is surely folly to try with respect to Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs—i.e., all those 'non-Abraham' traditions" (35).

From Theism to Biblical Authority

After defining God—often accompanied with evidences for His existence—the Reformed assert the Bible as an authority because of its inspiration by the Spirit, which is accepted because of the Spirit's inner testimony in the believer's heart. So the Spirit is on both sides of the equation without reference to the historical person of Jesus. An authoritative Bible directs the readers from belief in God (theism) to belief in Jesus, which is confirmed by the Spirit's assurance of salvation.²⁰ How God is known and the inner certainty of this knowledge are essential to the Reformed approach and thus it is a religion of revelation. Since theism occupies the prominent place in Reformed theology, philosophy and apologetics are foundational in their theology and in the training of their clergy.²¹ In Lutheran theology man never knows God as an abstraction demonstrated by philosophical arguments or scientific proofs. Rather, man stands before God (*coram deo*) as one judged (law) or redeemed (gospel). Justification belongs at the beginning of man's encounter with God and at the front of the theological system (Pieper).²² Since Lutheran theology confronts man with the impossibility of self-justification and of knowing God apart from Christ, its character is more historical and redemptive than revelational in character and this historical-redemptive feature belongs at its theological foundation (prolegomena). Lutheran theology's redemptive character plays itself out in its sacramental character: the sacraments are the place where the

²⁰Boice, *The Sovereign God*, 41-95. A more recent example of this approach is Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).

²¹For example Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority God*, volume 1, *Who Speaks and Shows*, (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976), 241. "The theology of revelation requires the apologetic confrontation of speculative theories of reality and life." (Italics original). The purpose of apologetics is to "reduce to absurdity the successively proffered alternatives to Christian theism and force the intellectual abandonment of speculative views." "The Mission Statement of Westminster Theological Seminary (PA)" says that "Biblical theology (in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos) and presuppositional apologetics (in the tradition of Cornelius Van Til) are among the crucial methods to be used in interpreting and applying the teachings of Scripture and in developing a biblical world view." Found at the Westminster Theological Seminary's website <http://www.wts.edu/general/mission.html>.

²²Pieper begins by assuming without presenting reasons for the Bible's authority. In dividing the true expression of Christianity from false ones he applies the law and the gospel as the principle of justification. *Christian Dogmatics*, volume 1.

believer encounters God in Jesus, whom God showed to be Lord and Christ by His resurrection within the dimensions of our history (Romans 1:4).

Though Lutheran theology should not begin with arguments for God's existence or offer abstract arguments for the possibility of revelation, as the Reformed do, circumstances since the eighteenth century have dictated that the first course in dogmatics be called "Revelation and Scripture." Rationalist theologians relegated Christian doctrine to the sphere of ordinary knowledge that was discoverable by scientific and scholarly (*wissenschaftlich*) methods. Theology was secularized and was no longer considered what its etymology suggested, "words about God." Its origin and content were no longer seen as supernatural, and formerly divinely given knowledge was amalgamated with philosophical systems. Immanuel Kant's ideas were used by Schleiermacher and formed the basis of the old Liberalism in the programs of Albrecht Ritschl and Walter Rauschenbusch. The theologies of hope and history had Hegelian and Marxist structures. Paul Tillich spoke for his predecessors and successors by defining theology as providing answers to philosophy's questions. Our response to this illegitimate union of theology and philosophies is that theology begins with Jesus (Christology) and in confronting Him we know God (theology). If we must speak of a theism, it must be a christological theism. Without Jesus all our ideas of God are defective and perhaps just plain wrong. Philosophically influenced theologies use different methods, but they agree that knowledge about God (theism) is attainable by ordinary means. In this sense all are cut from one cloth. They hold that Jesus did not provide exclusive knowledge of God and so the door was open to recognize other religions as possessing authentic knowledge of God (theism). So Christianity has something to learn from other religions, a position that Rome endorses.

We may want to ask whether theism, in which God is defined before and apart from His revelation in Christ, that is, apart from the incarnation, falls into the same ditch dug by the Rationalists and their successors from which, to this very day, they have never been able to extricate themselves. According to Robert D. Preus, theism found its way into Lutheran theology in the seventeenth century. Johann Gerhard began his dogmatics with arguments that classic theists use to prove God's

existence.²³ His word for theism is theology, for which he offered five proofs, taken from Thomas Aquinas.²⁴ These proofs are: (1) The first is a self-authenticating understanding of "divine revelation, which is the foundation of theology." Because the biblical writers were recipients of immediate illumination, the Bible possesses a self-authenticating authority.²⁵ The word of God "was revealed and communicated to the prophets and apostles by immediate illumination." Like all first principles, the Bible's assertions are "beyond criticism, credible in themselves, undeniable and unproved."²⁶ "The written Word of God, therefore, is the unique and characteristic principle of theology." Self-authenticating arguments are like axioms, immune to external critique. The biblical writers are informed of the Scriptures' contents by illumination; that is, divine revelation through an internal working of the Spirit. Where today we distinguish between a prior revelation by which a prophet or apostles acquired knowledge about God, and the later inspiring of the Scriptures, Gerhard saw these as one act.²⁷ Defined in this way, inspiration has a more significant role in providing data to the biblical writers than do the historical witness of the apostles to the life of

²³Robert D. Preus notes that Gerhard begins his discussion of God with a discussion on natural theology, but that it plays no role in the rest of his theology which is established from the Bible. Gerhard leaned heavily on the arguments of Thomas Aquinas. Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheran Theology*, 2 volumes (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970-72), 2:33-37.

²⁴Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces of Johann Gerhard: A Sampler for Review by Theological Faculty and Pastors* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 1. The title for this section seems to refer to theology as a discipline, "From the Introduction on the Nature of Theology." Arguments offered for the existence of theology in paragraph 7 are those offered for God's existence. Preus discusses these five arguments, but does not at this juncture discuss their philosophical nature. Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheran Theology*, 1:109-110; 2:35.

²⁵Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 3: "Because [the Bible] is God-breathed, published and spread by divine inspiration, it is therefore credible in itself, having credibility in itself."

²⁶Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 2.

²⁷Pieper also does not see revelation as a topic separate from Scripture. *Christliche Dogmatik*, 3 volumes (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917-24) 1:453. Undoubtedly, he is concerned about how revelation is known now and so he does not address how it may have existed before the Scriptures came into existence.

Jesus.²⁸ (2) God, as the highest good, communicates knowledge of Himself to His rational creatures. This seems to be Aristotle's argument conveyed through Thomas Aquinas, but this is more of an assumption than an argument. (3) Creation's goal is to honor Him. Similarly, this is an assumption of faith and not really an argument. (4) Innate principles in the human mind teach that there is a God whom we must worship. This is also an argument from intuition and anticipates Kant, who held that humans were born with a moral compass. (5) Lastly, all the heathen have a knowledge of God.²⁹ This argument from culture anticipates the Rationalists and Schleiermacher, who observed religious peoples and assumed that there had to be a God.³⁰ Gerhard's arguments may not be as convincing in the post-modern world as they were in the seventeenth century. Even if they were, it has to be asked whether this or any kind of theism is preliminary to faith in Jesus? Since Gerhard insists that only in knowing the Trinity do we know God, as Preus points out, one wonders why he bothers with his theistic arguments at all.³¹ By a felicitous inconsistency the seventeenth century theologians read the Bible christologically and held to a Christology that could not be mistaken for Reformed views.³²

²⁸Robert D. Preus notes that before the Scriptures were written, "the *vive voce* utterance of an inspired spokesman of God could establish articles of faith and was authoritative, but since the establishment of the canon, God's evangelical revelation that is, his revelation . . . is to be sought only in Scripture." *Post-Reformation Lutheran Theology*, 1:257.

²⁹Pieper also uses this premise.

³⁰Francis Pieper claims that religion of the heathen is one of the law and is hence different from Christianity, which is one of the gospel. He claims that one excludes the other so that a common religion cannot be attributed to non-Christians and Christians. Since Christianity is a religion of the law and gospel, as even he defines it, the law is the common possession of all, even though it is not known perfectly by the heathen. See Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, 1:6-19. His second volume on christology appeared seven years before his volume on prolegomena, so it is possible that he began the theological task with christology and appended—a misuse of the word—the prolegomena as an introduction. Thus, there was a certain detachment between the two volumes.

³¹Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheran Theology*, 2:116.

³²Preus points out that the classical Lutheran dogmatists first defined God (theism), but in a strange contrast their exegesis was marvelously christological, Preus, *Post-Reformation Theology*, 2:110-11.

Though Gerhard believes in the apostolic witness to Jesus' resurrection and the testimony of the historic church (tradition), his arguments for God and biblical authority do not include them. The Bible is God's word because of its self-attested inspiration by the Spirit, a definition which did not include historical evidences.³³ Gerhard's theism was followed by a thoroughly christological theology. A transcendental theism can progress to incarnation (Lutheran), but in some cases it does so only partially (Reformed) and still in other cases not at all (Deism; Unitarianism). Gerhard's arguments for making inspiration the authoritative touchstone for knowledge about God (*principium cognoscendi*) were, in part, a reaction to the Roman Catholic argument that the church was the final arbiter in determining the canon.³⁴ His arguments resembled those of the Reformed.³⁵ Aversion to the Roman position was not so severe to prevent Gerhard from arguing for the authenticity of Christian truth from the church and its history, as he did in *Roma enim Ecclesia particularis est, Catholic vero universalis*, in which he defined theology by what the church

³³Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 7.

³⁴"We therefore believe the canonical Scriptures *because they are canonical* Scriptures, that is, because they have been brought about by God and written by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit." Gerhard seems to make no distinction between the Scriptures' inspiration and its canonicity. This becomes evident when he argues that the biblical canon is principium that "cannot be proved by something intrinsically prior to it." He distances his position from the Roman Catholic one by saying that "we do not believe in Scripture because of the church, that is, the testimony of men, but because of itself, because it is the voice of God." The Gerhard quotes are taken from Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheran Theology*, 1:305. Preus notes that Quenstedt, besides using inspiration as a criterion for canonicity, used prophetic or apostolic authorship, Hebrew or Greek language, recognition by the Hebrew or Christian church, and use in the ancient church. Christocentricity is offered by other Lutheran dogmaticians. Preus seems to be alluding to Jerome Kromayer (1610-1670) (306). Quenstedt begins with historical proofs by requiring authorship by a prophet or an apostle, but moves toward the Catholic view when he cites recognition by the church. Arguments based on the Hebrew and Greek languages are somewhat baffling. Some of Daniel was written in Aramaic, a Hebrew dialect. Church use of a document is an historical argument. Another problem is how we know what the Hebrew church used.

³⁵Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, translated by John Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 39. Using inspiration as the basis for canonicity actually gives the decisive role to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. This is evident from the Westminster Confession: "our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof [sc. the Bible], is the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts."

believes.³⁶ Lutherans are not only the true catholics, but in a sense the real Roman Catholics because they believe what that church has always taught. In this he is in sync with the Augsburg Confession.³⁷ For all his dependency on inner illumination of the biblical writers in setting the boundaries of the canon, Luther amazingly relies on a dubious post-biblical tradition that the Apostle John lived long enough to identify which books belonged in the New Testament.³⁸ He steps outside of the Bible to determine its limits. Ultimately, tradition trumps the biblical writers' inner illumination as the *principium cognoscendi*. In Gerhard, two disconnected engines are operating separately.

Problematic with Gerhard's argument is not that through its inspiration Scripture is the *principium* (source) of doctrine and that in this function it is not susceptible to external critique, but to arrive at this conclusion he first puts into place a theism based on inner illumination of the writers and reasoned arguments. A theism, which is supported by inner illumination and rational arguments, is made foundational for his theology. Gerhard, among the Lutheran theologians, is not alone in

³⁶Gerhard cites Pope Gregory's answer to a question from Saint Augustine to show that Rome is not equivalent with Catholic: "However it is my opinion, that you can find the church in Rome or Gaul or in any place." *Confessionis Catholicae, in qua Ecclesiae Augustanae Confessionis addicti profundius, ex Romano-Catholicorum Scriptorum suffragiis confirmantur*. Editiona appeared in 1634 and 1662 at Jena. Another edition is known to have appeared in 1690. The two volumes of the 1634 edition contain 2251 pages total. Rome's fallibility is discussed in volume one, pages 209-306.

³⁷Conclusion of Part One: "As can be seen, there is nothing here that depart from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers."

³⁸Gerhard assigns the function of determining the canon to the Apostle John. "Consequently, a very long life was given to the blessed John that he might be able to teach the church about the genuine canonical books of the evangelists and apostles and to distinguish them from the spurious works of fiction." Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 4. Gerhard has to assume that certain post-biblical sources are accurate in claiming a long life for John. Without citing any post-apostolic evidence, he asserts that John was aware of other truly apostolic writings. This raises another question of why writings, which were endorsed by John, later were regarded as antilegomena and then deuterocanonical, that is, they were not universally accepted in the early church. With John's *imprimatur* this secondary category would have never existed. Gerhard may have found his own arguments for biblical authority so unconvincing, that he had to hypothesize that the Apostle John constructed the canon.

placing a theism at the base of his theology.³⁹ He still comes to marvelously Lutheran conclusions. Theology's material (content) is law and gospel. The latter includes the prophecies and types of Christ in the Old Testament and the Gospels: "we call the material of Scripture divine topics [christology] reduced by God to writing."⁴⁰ As Preus points out, the Lutheran dogmaticians saw Christ as the Scriptures' author and their content. As the hypostatic Word, He was in the inspired word. "[Christ] is the chief and central message of Scripture. Therefore, if one does not seek in the Word of the Bible the Word that was made flesh, it would be better to spend one's time reading adventure stories."⁴¹ The Lutheran dogmaticians stood in Luther's line in reading the Scriptures christologically, but theism was not foundational for his theology.

Antidotes to Theism

Claiming that the Scriptures contain no theistic arguments is stating more than can be proven. Both classic versus open theists support their reasoned arguments with biblical citations. Psalm 14:1 and 53:1, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,'" may support theism, but the fool is more probably the one who ignores the God of Israel. A worshiper of the god Baal is a fool. Hebrews 11:6 might at first glance support an abstract theism, "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him." God, in this context, is not deity in general, but the God who revealed Himself to the prophets. None of the books of either the Old or New Testaments begin with arguments for God's existence, an essential feature for theistic arguments. At the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures, God appears as creator, and in Matthew Immanuel, God with us, is introduced before the First Person (the Father). Our knowledge of God begins not with an abstract definition of deity (theism) or even with the Father, but with Jesus. Our knowledge of the Father is accessible only through Jesus, who is the introduction to

³⁹Francis Pieper in his section "The Sources of the Two Existing Religions" assumes that one religion is of the law and the other the gospel. Of the latter "men know of it only through God's revelation in the Word," by which he means the Scriptures. *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:20-21; 213-16. Belief in the Scriptures is prior to and separate from Christology.

⁴⁰Cerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, 3-4.

⁴¹Preus, *Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:373.

the trinitarian definition of God (Matthew 11:27). A theology that begins with the Father without the Son is, for that moment, an abstract theism.

“The Lutheran theologians,” notes Preus, “refused to debate about how Christ is present in the Word of Scripture and how Scripture brings Christ to us.”⁴² Perhaps they should have. The Gospels claim to have their origins in the words and acts of Jesus, especially His crucifixion and resurrection, from and out of which the Spirit is given to the apostles and in this giving of the Spirit the church is born. Scriptures are inspired by the Spirit not directly from a transcendently remote God, but from Jesus who abides with His church (Matthew 28:20). “If you have seen me you have seen the Father” can just as easily be understood as “If you have heard me you have heard the Father” (John 14:9). Hence the inspired words of the Spirit are necessarily those of Jesus first, and ultimately the Father’s. Knowing the Father requires knowing Jesus first (John 14:7). This is required by the *filioque* and Jesus’ sending of the Spirit.⁴³ Jesus is present in the inspired word, as the Lutheran theologians taught, and through it works faith first in Himself and then in His Father and finally in the Spirit, whom He gives from the Father. Faith is worked no differently now than it was when Jesus was with His followers. Faith in Jesus as God’s Son embraces faith in His word preserved by the apostles and inscribed in the Bible. Putting it the other way around, belief in the Scriptures or God first involves belief in Jesus. These are not separate kinds of faith. God cannot be known apart from and before Jesus and the Scriptures cannot be accepted as God’s word apart from faith in Jesus. Christianity is a religion of revelation only in the sense that God works through events that are historically accessible and not because the Spirit works directly in our hearts to believe the Bible or God (Reformed). Remove this historical dimension from revelation, and Christianity becomes a Gnostic mystery religion offering otherwise inaccessible knowledge. Christianity is not revealed knowledge for the sake of itself, but redemptive knowledge having its origin in God’s historic redemptive acts for His salvific purposes. God is known in what He does for us in

⁴²Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:374.

⁴³John 16:13-15: “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that He will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Jesus (*propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem; crucifixus pro nobis.*) He never merely exists (theism) but He exists *pro nobis* to rescue His fallen creatures and in His acts of redemption He is known. Only after He is known in Jesus do we know the Father. Then baptism brings into focus the creedal order of Father-Son-Spirit and the believer knows God for who He is.

Where theism is placed in the foundation of a theological system, as is characteristic of the Reformed approach, the next likely topic is how God is known in revelation or Scripture, which are often treated as one topic. Luther may offer a theism in his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, but he brands it as useless. The Augsburg Confession, like the other confessions, lacks theistic arguments. God is believed as Trinity in accord with the decree of Nicaea (Augsburg Confession 1). A council, but really councils—Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon—reflects the church environment in which divine things are known, which engenders faith (*fides qua*), and in which the rule of faith is preserved (*fides quae; didache; paradosis*). Unlike Reformed theology, which moves from the doctrine of God to revelation and Scripture, the Second Article of the Augsburg Confession sees humanity in the dilemma brought by original sin from which no one can extricate him/herself. Attempts at self-resolution (self-justification) offend against Christ's merits and work, add to His person, and are an affront to the Trinity, who alone is the source of our salvation. God is known as the one whom humanity has offended (law) or who rescues it (gospel). Christology within the law-gospel definition is placed at the beginning of the system, but then so is sacramentology, since Christ and His benefits are known and received in baptism. Rather than proposing an abstract doctrine of God (theism) and listing the canonical books in which true knowledge is found (revelation), as the Reformed confessions do, Lutheran theology presents a God who is either condemning (law) or saving the sinner (gospel). Since gospel is God's last word, Christology is the ultimate and purest revelation of who God is. Not only can divine revelation be characterized as incarnational (Jesus of Nazareth), but also as sacramental, since in baptism He makes Himself known to believers (revelation) and incorporates sinners into Himself (redemption). In response to confronting the Trinity in baptism, the believer responds with the trinitarian confession and, from God's encounters with believers in baptism, the creed was born and still is. In this sense, baptism is the church's foundation.

Scriptures, Community, and Baptism as Places of Revelation

Reformed theology first establishes God's existence and then proceeds to His revelation in the inspired Scriptures, belief in which is authenticated by the Spirit's internal testimony, which then engenders faith in Christ. The historical apostolic witness to Jesus and the baptized community of believers play a subsidiary, or at best an ancillary, role in our coming to knowledge about God. Our position is that the Spirit is encased in the apostolic witness to Christ's redemptive acts, out of which the baptized community of believers has its origin. From this witness to and within this community, the Spirit gives the Scriptures. Inspiration has its origins in the Spirit's accompanying Jesus' acts and words. This culminates in Jesus fully giving the Spirit at His crucifixion and resurrection to His apostles from and through whom the New Testament documents possess their inspiration and authority. The Spirit's working on the writers cannot be isolated or divorced from the historical incarnation of the Son of God and His words and deeds, but it is an extension of them as they were witnessed and preserved by His followers who are recognized by their being baptized. Faith finds its origins both in the Scriptures and in the community in which they arose. Scripture and community form one reality in and from which faith is engendered.

Baptism is a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit, a confrontation with the Trinity, and an historical practice, originating with John, administered by Jesus through His disciples, elevated into a trinitarian mystery by Him and first administered by the apostles and then His other ministers. So baptism provides the church with her historical continuity with those who knew Jesus in His earthly existence. He who was first known in Jesus of Nazareth is known sacramentally in baptism, and so this sacrament becomes the church's foundation and binds it together. Baptism is the mark of the church by telling us where the church is, but more importantly incorporates the church into the trinitarian mystery and so gives the church salvation and provides her with the knowledge of the only true God. Faith finds its certainty and object in Christ through baptism, not as if they were two separate objects of faith, but one. Christ is believed as He is present in baptism, not apart from it. Are we then left with a bifurcation so that faith finds its certainty in Christ in baptism and theology finds its certainty in the Scriptures? In this case, belief for salvation would be something different from how our theology or system of beliefs is constructed. This is only a problem if the theological task is begun outside of the church with philosophical and scholarly proofs for

God's existence (theism), which then proceeds to establish the truthfulness of the Scriptures by the Spirit's working in our hearts and through philosophical and other scholarly proofs.

Norma Normans and Norma Normata Reversed for the Moment

Each beginning Lutheran theological student learns that *norma normans* applies to the Scriptures as the primary and originating standard of the faith and *norma normata* to the Lutheran Confessions, a secondary standard of faith dependent on the Scriptures. At one time, things may have been just the opposite. Church confessions were in place before the Scriptures were written and were preserved in them. Only those documents that preserved these confessions and were in agreement with them came to be considered our New Testament. The creed(s) was the canon. Confessions were not isolated, autonomous, unproven fideistic axioms, but they were responses of believers made at baptism to what Jesus had first said of Himself. All early church creeds were baptismal as ours must also be. Jesus is the absolute truth and standard of all truth and not subject to critique by any other standard. He alone is, in the terms of the Lutheran dogmaticians, "credible credibility beyond criticism," and "this credible credibility beyond criticism" is preserved in the apostolic word. Scriptures derive their authority from Him through the apostles — not the other way around! The earliest creeds from which our Apostles' Creed evolved were not mere human formulations, but Jesus' own self-understanding that believers at their baptism confronted and responded to in creeds: "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Thomas' confession, "my Lord and my God," is the foundation of Christian truth. Belief in the God whom Jesus revealed and the confession made at baptism were not disparate things, but they constituted one reality in which the Spirit worked. God can only be known in the one who died for sins and rose again. Just as Jesus' disciples were given the full revelation of God in baptism as Father-Son-Holy Spirit, so the same revelation is given to subsequent baptized generations. Without the trinitarian presence, "the water is plain water and no baptism." But with it, baptism is the foundation on which the church is built because here believers find and meet God. It is that event in which the Trinity is present to reveal His saving purposes to the believer and so He is the church's foundation. First God is known in Jesus, who then reveals the Father, and then the Spirit, and baptism reveals God as He is in Himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The order of revelation is 2-1-3, as Paul does

in 2 Corinthians 13:14, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Baptism then provides the order of divine essence as it is in itself, "Father and Son and Holy Spirit," 1-2-3, the outline and content for the church's creed. Out of baptism the church is born and this sacrament becomes the foundation of what the church believes and marks off her boundaries. No other moment in the church's life is so specifically trinitarian as baptism and every recitation of the creed is a response to that moment. Without baptism, the followers of Jesus constitute little more than another religious community, but with it that community becomes church, God's chosen people, the people in and with whom God is present and who are incorporated in Him.

One or Multiple Foundations

We have already discussed the connection between theism and the Bible as theological foundation for the Reformed. In their different interpretations of Matthew 16:18, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church," Lutherans and most Protestants have given the honor of the church's foundation to Peter's faith or confession, and Roman Catholics to Peter, and thus find a mandate for a succession of Petrine authority. If the stakes were not so high, this would dissolve into a non-issue. Confession, what we say, *fides quae*, (Lutherans) is embodied ultimately in real people like Peter (Rome), who really believe, *fides qua* (Evangelical Protestants). What people confess (*fides quae*) expresses what they believe (*fides qua*). Paul saw faith and confession as parts of one thing: "because, if you *confess with your lips* that Jesus is Lord and *believe in your heart* that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For man *believes with his heart* and so is justified, and he *confesses with his lips* and so is saved" (Romans 8:9-10). He could also say that the church "was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Ephesians 2:19-20), among whom he certainly included himself and Peter. Paul turns the tables over and calls the "household of God . . . the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15) in language that is clearly reminiscent of the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Son of the living God on which (whom) the church is built. It is awkward to claim multiple foundations for theology, but we can claim a multifaceted foundation.

Lutherans and Roman Catholics have also divided themselves over whether the Scriptures or the church, specifically the Roman

magisterium, is the final standard of truth.⁴⁴ Evangelicals are unlikely to surrender the Bible's role as the arbiter of the truth to Rome's magisterium, since they hold that no church organization can be the final arbiter of the truth. This is in line with their hesitancy to give allegiance to any human confessions, which for them can only approximate biblical truth but not absolutely contain it. In holding that the Scriptures are foundational, we want to acknowledge that they arose within the community of baptized believers as statements of what they already believed. Paul wrote to confirm the gospel already preached to them (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). The Scriptures exercise their authority from within the church for whom alone they are intended and not *extra ecclesia*. Such a principle is hardly new for Lutherans who require acceptance not only of ancient creeds, but sixteenth-century documents. Community interpretation of the Scriptures is accepted as a subsidiary standard (*norma normata*), but with this caveat. Where "our church has always taught" takes the place of biblical arguments, we disregard the *sola scriptura* and fall into the same kind of traditionalism we find unacceptable in others. A theistic approach to theology establishes the authority of the Scriptures outside the church and then applies it as an external standard. In this scenario the church is hardly the pillar and the foundation of the truth. She is incidental to it.

In Search of a Bible Passage

Things of which we have been speaking are brought together in Ephesians: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (4:4-5). Terms here are ecclesiastical, confessional (doctrinal), baptismal, and trinitarian. Church and the Holy Spirit are bound together. Jesus, His teachings (*fides quae*), and baptism form the next constellation, reminiscent of Matthew 28:16-20, "baptizing . . . and

⁴⁴Evangelical and Roman Catholic scholars have tried without success to reconcile these differences, but they have discovered that the positions of each may not be as extreme as the other thinks. See Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, editors, *Your Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002). Along with other topics, this one is presented as a project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Lutherans are not included. ELCA theologians might be seen as too much in the mainline and LCMS ones too entrenched for these kinds of discussions. Among current ecumenical dialogues, these are among the most productive.

teaching." Finally, the Father is revealed as the God who is as much a part of His creation as He is distinct from it (a good counter argument against open theism.) In the midst of a marvelously abbreviated statement of what the church believes is baptism, not as a self-contained ritual, but originating as divine command from the divine Lord who in His own baptism by John assumed the role of the world's redeemer and gave His first followers a foretaste of a fuller trinitarian revelation to come. The presence of God and the Spirit at that baptism anticipated the complete revelation of Father-Son-Holy Spirit in the baptism that Jesus would give to His church after He had offered Himself as an atonement and was found by God to be acceptable by being raised from the dead. Though now we know God as Father-Son-Holy Spirit, this God today can still only be approached through Jesus of Nazareth, who works faith in Himself by the Spirit given in His words and deeds.

In defining our knowledge of God by incarnation (revelation), the sacraments — which have their reality first through incarnation and then crucifixion — can be understood as revelatory. Such thinking is impossible for the Reformed, who can attribute as little to a full revelation of God in the sacraments as they can to His revelation in Jesus (*extra Calvinisticum*). In their system revelation is not a flesh and blood matter either in Jesus or in the sacraments or, for that matter, in the Scriptures, but is found ultimately in the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum*. An immediate working of the Spirit in the human heart to receive divine knowledge and assurance bypasses the full incarnation of God in Jesus, through whom alone we know Him as Father. It also circumvents the creation that necessarily belongs to our understanding of God, whom Jesus addresses as "Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (Matthew 11:25). Incarnation is neither an embarrassment nor an impossibility for God but His own self-endorsement as creator. Theism is the pursuit of philosophers, even Christian ones, but theology is the privilege of the community of believers in Jesus who have found Him and still constantly find Him in baptism.