

## A Layman's Guide to ~~Quantum~~ Physics the Use of Reason: Insights into what Luther Saw as the Proper Role for Reason in Christian Deliberation

Gary R. Jepsen, Pastor

“‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD.” (Isaiah 1:18)

In his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul writes, <sup>4:3</sup>“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings,<sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.”

The purpose of this essay is similar to that of a previous essay, “A Layman's Guide to *Quantum Physics Scripture: How Luther Meant Lutherans to Read the Bible*.”<sup>1</sup> It is to give the average person some tools for understanding the proper role for reason in the faith, life, and proclamation of the church.

It is no secret that reason can be used and abused in so many different ways. Some have used it to discover and unlock the principles of science that have made space exploration possible, while others have used it to try systematically to eradicate other ethnic groups. Some have used it to seek cures and medical breakthroughs, while others have used it to do perform torture and ghastly medical experiments (e.g., Nazi doctors like Josef Mengele). Christopher Hitchens (in God is Not Great: How Religion Ruins Everything) and Richard Dawkins (The God Delusion) have used “reason” to argue against the existence of God where as C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Malcolm Muggeridge, Ravi Zacharias, and so many others have used their gifts of reason to argue for faith and for God. Some have used it to study the Bible and to discern what the clear message of Scripture truly is while others have used their reason to tear down the Bible, rob it of all true meaning, and/or remake it to fit their own wants and desires.

Insofar as reason can be used in such dramatically different and contradictory ways – for both good and evil, our intention here is to discern the proper role for reason in Lutheran deliberation so we might also discern its proper use and application as opposed to its many abuses. In effect, to borrow a biblical metaphor, we want to be able to “separate the wheat from the chaff” when it comes to both reasoning processes and the conclusions to which those processes lead.

While engaging in this exercise of discernment, we will also consider two other biblical words which, although not synonymous with reason, are closely related to it, namely, “wisdom” and “Word”. The point will be made that the proper use of reason must be in relation to “wisdom”, in the sense of the purpose, rationale, or reason, with which God has called all

things into existence by the power of His Word. In other words, we want to bring our use of reason into accord with the way things actually are, the way God created them, as opposed to how we might perceive, imagine, or want them to be. In the course of that discussion, we will discover that, although they can at times be used interchangeably, “wisdom” is an essential aspect of the “Word of God”. Indeed, while we can on the one hand, speak of “the Word of God” and the Wisdom of God”, we can also say that “God is wisdom” and “the Word was God” (John 1:1c).

So, too, not only can “wisdom” and “Word” at times be used interchangeably, there are also distinctions between them. On the one hand, with regard to “wisdom”, the accent is on the purpose/reason/rationale that is behind creation. It is comparable to the purpose and intention that guides an architectural plan. For example, if the purpose or intent of an architectural plan is to build a functional and humane hospital, then everything about that plan will harmonize with the twin purposes of function and humaneness.

On the other hand, “Word” encompasses both the sense of a mind as the ability to conceive of a plan and purpose but also the sense of will as the ability to effect the accomplishment of that plan and purpose. Picking up on the architectural metaphor from above, “Word” would be similar to the architect who conceives of a plan for a great architectural achievement – e.g., the Willis (Sears) Tower in Chicago – and the will to see that plan come to reality. In an infinitely greater way, “Word” is both the plan and purpose of God for “*the fulness of time, to unite all things in Christ*” as well as the will to accomplish that purpose. “Word” is the means by which God called all things into existence, as is most clearly revealed and seen in Jesus Christ and as is witnessed to via the testimony of the Bible.

In other words, for the purpose of this essay, our goal ought to be to bring our living, our thinking, and our reasoning into accord with the rationale and purpose that God has woven into the fabric of all that exists.

With that in mind, we continue our examination of these two key biblical words.

\* \* **WISDOM** \* \*

Generally speaking, wisdom is a virtue that is valued all over the world, although what constitutes true wisdom may in fact vary from culture to culture. As such, it is also an important concept in Hebrew culture and scripture. There are in fact hundreds of references to “wisdom” in the Bible. For example, both the RSV and the NRSV have well over three hundred references where the word “wisdom” appears. However, in that regard, what is perhaps most interesting in the Bible is its distinctive perspective on wisdom. We will endeavor to capture that in the material below.

In the OT, the word most commonly translated “wisdom” from **the Hebrew** is “**chokma**” or one of its variations. Among other things, it can refer to:

- the ways of God, particularly the way and the design with which God created all things;
- wisdom as in discerning the ways of God; knowing & practicing godly and upright living;
- wisdom as in discerning ethical and religious considerations;
- wisdom or prudence in religious affairs;
- wisdom regarding things in general;
- wisdom in relation to the art of war;
- wisdom in administration;
- worldly wisdom and shrewdness.

In the NT, **the Greek word** most often translated “wisdom” is “**sophia**”. In the New Testament it carries many of the senses of the Hebrew word. Again, among other meanings there are the following:

- the wisdom of God in forming the world and the order of creation (purpose, intention & plan);
- the wisdom of God imparted through the Scriptures.
- knowing and practicing godly and upright living;
- having a breadth of intelligence;
- having knowledge of diverse matters;
- a sense for how worldly things (institutions, devices, etc.) work;
- human wisdom summarized in various proverbs;
- the ability to interpret dreams and give sage advice.

Just as in our contemporary use of the word, the biblical use of “wisdom” carries a variety of meanings. The exact meaning is often determined and indicated by context.

\* \* **WORD** \* \*

The word “**wisdom**” is very closely related to “**the Word**” (logos) as it is used in John 1:1. As noted, the meanings are not exactly the same but they do considerably overlap. “Word” carries the following senses:

- \* the wisdom & power of God;
- \* the wisdom (plan, purpose, intent) with which God made all things;
- \* the reason, purpose, cause, ground (as in foundation) of existence; the intention of God in creation.
- \* a mandate, decree, or an order (as from a king);

Notice how the understanding of “Word” overlaps with “wisdom” in the sense that the “Word” not only is the power of God to speak and call all things into existence, but it also implies the organizing principle, purpose, and intention of God when He created. Similarly, “wisdom” carries those same meanings. Both point to the reason or rationality behind why God made things the way He did. We may or may not understand God’s purposes, but, until that day when He makes all things new and reveals His purposes to us, we are called to conform our wills to His revealed Word and wisdom.

*“Do not be conformed to this world  
but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,  
that you may prove what is the will of God,  
what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom.12:2).*

*“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the  
passions of your former ignorance” (1Peter 1:14).*

\* \* \* \*

In the Bible, whether the Old or New Testaments, all true wisdom comes from God; it is called forth by His Word. The explanation for this is quite simple – God made all things! In other words, because true wisdom means the ability to conduct oneself in the world in a way that is in concert with reality (the way things really are), that means one must live and act in a way that is in concert with how God created all things – the wisdom/purpose/intention that God has woven into the fabric of all that He has made. Psalm 104 says,

<sup>104:24</sup>“O LORD, how manifold are Your works!  
In wisdom You have made them all...” (NRSV)

Ps 51:6 – “Behold, You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart” (NRSV).

In short, the way to live properly is to bring one’s life into accord with the wisdom of God – the way, the intention, and the rationale with which God has ordered His creation. To go against the order and

purpose of God would be infinitely more foolish than to try to paddle a canoe against the current in a whitewater rapids; it would be as foolish as to try to use a sledgehammer to repair a delicate watch. It would make no sense.

### SOME BIBLE PASSAGES DEALING WITH WISDOM

In addition to the Psalms quoted above, let us consider some of the many biblical quotes about wisdom.

Jeremiah 10: <sup>12</sup>***It is He** (the LORD) who made the earth by His power, **who established the world by His wisdom**, and by His understanding stretched out the heavens*” (see also 51:15).

Jeremiah here clearly affirms “wisdom” as the underlying purpose and intention of God that undergirds all that He has made.

Psalms 111: <sup>10</sup>*“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who practice it”* (see also Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33).

Here the psalmist clearly expresses the importance of bringing our human wisdom into accord with the will and purposes of God.

1Kings 3:28 *“And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king (Solomon) had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived **that the wisdom of God was in him**, to render justice.”*

Solomon’s wisdom was a gift from God due to his expressed desire to conform his will to God’s.

Job 12:13 – *“**With God are wisdom and might; He has counsel and understanding.**”*

From whom does “wisdom” generate? From God!

Ps. 14:1 – *“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, They do abominable deeds, There is none who does good”* (also Ps.53:1).

If all wisdom flows from God, those who deny God and His existence can be nothing but foolish.

Proverbs 2:6 *“For the LORD gives wisdom; **from His mouth come knowledge and understanding**”*  
(re. “mouth” – think Word).

Notice how wisdom is a direct expression or result of the proclamation (Word, purpose, intent) that flows from the mouth of God.

Proverbs 3:19 *“**The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens.**”*

This proverb underscores the fact that the earth and creation itself were and are founded on the wisdom – as in purpose and intent – of God. God’s purposes are the ground or foundation for all that exists.

Colossians 3:16 says, *“Let the **Word** of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all **wisdom...**”*

In this Colossians passage, “wisdom” and “Word” can be seen as almost interchangeable.

Note the marvelous relationship that exists between “wisdom” and “Word”. Indeed, regarding the passages above, wisdom is at times virtually synonymous with God – i.e., His Word and His ways. In answer to the question, “Can there be wisdom apart from God and His revelation?” the Bible clearly answers, “no”.  
*“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”*

### WISDOM OF THE WORLD VIS-À-VIS THE WISDOM OF GOD.

There is in Scripture, especially in the NT and the writings of Paul, a clear distinction between the wisdom of God (especially in the gospel) and the wisdom of this world.

Job 28: <sup>20</sup>*“**Whence then comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding?**”*

<sup>21</sup>*It is hid from the eyes of all living...*

<sup>28</sup>*And He (the LORD) said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’”* (RSV)

Proverbs 3: <sup>5</sup>*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, **and lean not on your own understanding.**”* (NKJV)

Jeremiah 8:9 *“The **wise men** shall be put to shame, they shall be **dismayed** and taken; lo, they have rejected the word of the LORD, **and what wisdom is in them?**”* (RSV)

In 1Corinthians 1 Paul writes:

<sup>21</sup>*“For since, **in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom**, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.*

<sup>22</sup>*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,*

<sup>23</sup>*but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...”* (RSV)

And again in 1Corinthians 3:

<sup>19</sup>*“For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness.’”*  
(RSV)

As was indicated above, there is a direct correlation between God's Word and true wisdom. Notice...

Jeremiah 8:9 *"The wise men shall be put to shame, they shall be dismayed and taken; lo, they have rejected **the word** of the LORD, and what **wisdom** is in them?"* (RSV)

In other words, although by human standards there are those who appear to be wise, in God's view, there is no true wisdom without the Word of the LORD.

### MARTIN LUTHER ON WISDOM AND REASON:

#### The Place for Worldly Wisdom and Reason

As we begin this section on Luther's view of reason/wisdom, let us first lay some groundwork by looking at Luther's "Two Kingdoms Doctrine". By doing so, by understanding this doctrine, we might better understand the proper role for reason unaided by revelation as well as reason under the dominion of revelation.

There are for Luther two different realms or kingdoms in which Christians live and in which we employ reason. As such, there are also two different kinds of wisdom that pertain to each respective realm or kingdom. First, there is the human realm which Luther sometimes referred to as "the Kingdom of this World." In this realm, human reason, properly used, is regarded as a wonderful gift from God. One need not receive divine revelation to know that two plus two equals four ( $2 + 2 = 4$ ) or six times ten equals sixty ( $6 \times 10 = 60$ ), or how to build a bridge, or what might be an effective form of government. One can discover these "truths" by simple observation of reality and the application of reason. In other words, there are certain aspects of human life where reason without revelation or faith is quite competent. One can, unless one's heart is closed, even get an insight into the awesome majesty of God and at least some aspects of the order God has woven into all that He has made. For example, consider Psalm 19,

<sup>1</sup>*"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork"* (RSV).

In other words, to the receptive heart, the awesome majesty of God is revealed simply by looking at the heavens on a starry night whether as a simple shepherd looking from a tranquil mountain glen or as a scientist peering through a telescope at a high-tech observatory.

Again, consider Romans 1,

<sup>19</sup>*"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup>Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His*

*eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made."* (RSV)

Paul is here echoing some of the same sentiments as Psalm 19:1 about God's majesty revealed in creation. God as the Creator of all that exists is worthy of our awe, wonder, and worship.

<sup>Ps.8:1</sup>*"Oh LORD, our lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth"* (RSV).

The point is there are some aspects of life for which divine revelation is not necessary to engage in wisely.

#### The Supreme Importance of Divine Revelation for Human Wisdom and Reason

That said, there are also other areas in which human reason without revelation is totally incompetent, for example, in discerning God's nature or His loving purpose for all of Creation. In other words, thinking there is a God is one thing (James 2:19); knowing God, believing in Him, and trusting in His Word and purposes are quite something else. For the latter we need God's Word and revelation. These are, for Luther, the foundation for true wisdom and proper reason – not trying to think or reason our way up to God but relying on His revelation and then reasoning on the basis of that revelation.

In making a similar point, the late professor, Gerhard Forde, refers to a book that was popular in the late 1960s titled Up the Down Staircase by Bel Kaufman.<sup>2</sup> In her book Kaufman told of her experiences as an enthusiastic young teacher in a New York inner city high school. Kaufman often found herself running behind schedule. As a result she often took a shortcut to get to her classroom by going up a staircase that has been designated for down foot-traffic only. Administrators were constantly catching her and reprimanding her for this violation of the rules.

Professor Forde uses this story as a metaphor for diagnosing what he regards as a major error that has all too often crept into Christian thinking, namely, thinking we can work or reason our way up to God. Forde writes:

*"Something like that (Bel Kaufman's metaphor) is what is wrong with our usual understanding of the Christian faith. We tend to think it has to do with 'going up' somewhere either to heaven or some kind of 'religious perfection.' The Christian faith is often likened to climbing a ladder of, if you like, a staircase... In my younger days, for instance, youth groups used to sing, 'We are climbing Jacob's ladder... Every rung goes higher, higher,' with much pious fervor. And I suspect that most people*

*still have that kind of picture in mind when they think about the Christian faith.”<sup>3</sup>*

Forde then goes on to acknowledge that there are perhaps ways in which such a sense of making progress in our Christian life may be helpful. However, Forde continues,

*“The difficulty with the idea of the ladder, however, is that it tends to send us off in the wrong direction... it involves us in the task of ascending to heaven when we should be seeking like our Lord to come down to earth, to learn what it means to be a Christian here on this earth.”*

Forde’s main point here is the same as Luther’s, namely, *“to base faith entirely on a God who came ‘down to earth’ and to foster a Christian life which is likewise ‘down to earth.’”* In other words, to borrow a common line, we are not to be *so heavenly minded as to be of no earthy good.*

Another application of this insight is in relation to the proper role and use of reason. Can we reason or think our way up to God? No, says Forde following Luther. To be sure, as we have seen, reason based on simple observation of reality can tell us some things about God and His majesty, but it cannot tell us anything about God’s heart. We cannot ascend “up the down staircase” or ladder in order to peek in on God and to see what His heart is like or how God is inclined towards us. For that, we need revelation; we need God to come down to us, to become one of us and to reveal to us His true nature – His intent and purposes. And that is exactly what God has done through Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, Luther says, we see the heart of God.

There is a biblical story that wonderfully illustrates the danger of trying to go “up the down staircase”, namely the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). In this story, the leaders and people of Shinar decide to make a city with a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. In other words, they are trying to make a staircase or ladder to God. The end result, however, is that God comes down and confuses their speech thereby thwarting their plans.

Whatever else one takes from this story, it is in many ways like a parable that warns us of what happens when we try to reason or otherwise work our way up to God rather than realizing that God comes to us. Thus, when employing reason with regard to divine things, it is for us to turn to God’s revelation of Himself as our starting point. Otherwise, when we seek by our own reason and strength to storm the gates of heaven, it inevitably ends in disaster and confusion.

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Luther’s view of wisdom is very closely related to his view of the role of reason. It is a simple fact that one’s ability to reason properly is dependent upon the assumptions, philosophy, or “wisdom” with which one begins. In other words, if your assumptions are wrong or misguided, so will be your conclusions (or, even if the conclusions by chance happen to be correct, they will be at best grounded on the sandy soil of faulty assumptions and logic). In short, a fool lacking in the basic wisdom that comes from God’s Word and revelation can talk him/herself into anything (see Proverbs 13:16; 14:16; 18:2; 23:9, et. al.).

One of the clearest expressions of Luther’s understanding of the role of reason, and thus the true foundation for wisdom, is found in his famous “*Here I Stand*” speech. Luther had been called before the Emperor at a council convened in Worms, Germany, to give an accounting of his writings.<sup>4</sup> However, rather than being allowed to give an accounting for those writings or discuss their merits, Luther was told on arrival that he must simply recant all that he had written. After a night in prayer and anguish, Luther responded as follows.

*“Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason  
- for I do not accept the authority of the popes and  
councils, as they have too often contradicted each  
other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God.  
I cannot and I will not recant anything,  
for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.  
Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”*  
(M. Luther – 18 April 1521)

We note that Luther began by saying, “*Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason.*” The word order Luther chooses here is not incidental but is instead intentional and instructive. In his mind it is always first a matter of **Scripture** first and then of **plain reason**. In other words, Luther believed that for the Christian it is always reason in the service of Scripture, not the other way around.

Neither is it a matter for Luther of individual conscience without any commitments except to itself (solipsism). Notice, Luther says, “*My conscience is captive to the Word of God.*” Some have tried to make Luther into a hero and model for the modern wandering soul – the rugged individualist of western civilization who commits to no one but his or her own sense of right, i.e. his or her own groundless conscience. For Luther, nothing could be further from the truth. Luther’s conscience was not groundless; it

was captive to the Word of God. And he employed his reason in service to that Word.

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Luther had some very harsh things to say about reason (and, thus, about worldly wisdom based on faulty/human reason); a few of his harshest statements were as follows:

- “We dare not consult reason here (re. John 1:4 –“In Him was life...”), but we must honor the Holy Spirit by believing His words and accepting them as the divine truth. To this end, the eyes of reason must be blinded, yes, gouged out, as it were.”<sup>5</sup>
- “Therefore the flesh and the understanding of the flesh and reason must be mortified, and all human wisdom must be reduced to nothing. It must finally come to this! All things have been made and are restored through the Word; we are created from the Word, and we must return to the Word.”<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, his most notorious statement about reason:

- “Reason is the Devil’s greatest whore; by nature and manner of being she is a noxious whore... Throw dung in her face to make her ugly. She is and she ought to be drowned in baptism...”

These statements have led some who want only to read a few excerpts from Luther’s writings out of context to conclude that he was irrational and anti-reason.<sup>7</sup>

Again, nothing could be further from the truth. Given proper assumptions/premises, Luther was an intensely rational man who eloquently used reason in the application of the biblical message to the challenges with which he was confronted. He was, however, suspicious of reason left to its own devices because he had seen how reason could be so easily abused. Luther scholar, Brian Gerrish, writes:

“When Luther said that Reason was ‘the Devil’s Whore’, he meant that Reason may be prostituted for ends of evil.”<sup>8</sup>

And if not for evil ends, then at the very least reason can be used in support of a kind of thinking that leads people away from faith and the Gospel and thus away from true rationality. His thinking was that, if God is truly the Creator of all that exists, then one cannot live a truly rational life when one is at odds with God’s purposes. These are most fully perceived in faith and via revelation, i.e., the Word.

### LUTHER ON REASON AND PHILOSOPHY

Luther was highly critical of several theologians of his day, for example, Thomas Aquinas & Ulrich Zwingli,

who sought to build their theologies on philosophies, or even on their own reason, to such an extent that they rejected or tried to supplement the clear Word and revelation of God in Scripture. Let us consider for example several controversies that erupted over the question of Christ’s presence in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Aquinas attempted to explain Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper by using the categories of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Aristotle taught that all things have aspects that are *essential* to their nature and other aspects that are *accidental* or incidental, that is, not essential. Consider the classical example of a chair. Chairs may come in a variety of types – desk chairs, kitchen chairs, rocking chairs, easy chairs, and so many more. They all have in common legs or some similar platform, a seat, and a backrest. These characteristics are essential to the nature of a chair. They are the *substance* of what makes a chair a chair. However, there are also characteristics of each chair that are not essential or substantial to the nature of a chair. A chair may have armrests or it may have rockers. It may have padding or be stuffed as with an easy chair. These characteristics are not essential to the chair’s “*chairness*” but are instead accidental and incidental. A chair can be a chair without them.

Borrowing from Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas thereby developed the doctrine of “Transubstantiation” with regard to Holy Communion. He argued that Christ was present in the bread and wine because, when the Words of Institution are spoken during the liturgy, the elements are changed in substance from bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ. They still had the accidental/incidental appearance of bread and wine but they were changed in essence or substance to body and blood.

On the other hand, the Reformed theologian, Zwingli, argued that Christ could not be present in the bread and the wine of Holy Communion because he (Zwingli) could not conceive of how Christ could be ascended into heaven and at the right hand of God while at the same time present in the sacrament. So, Zwingli said, what Jesus really meant in the words of institution was, “*This symbolizes my body.*”

Both theologians were regarded by their followers as having provided well-reasoned and appealing approaches to understanding the presence of Christ, or lack thereof, in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Luther, however, adamantly rejected both approaches because in his mind such speculation/reasoning undermines faith and trust in the clear Word, namely,

the promise of Christ. In other words, through the use of reason and the application of their respective philosophies, they tried to make Christ's presence in the sacrament subject to human reason and explanation, rather than a simple trust in the Word and promise of God.

Luther's response to Zwingli was clear and straightforward and in no small way representative of his trust in the plain word of Scripture. He basically said, *If I cannot trust that Christ is present in the sacrament, as He promises, how can I trust He will be with me at my time of death, as He promises?*

In both cases, as different as Zwingli and Aquinas were theologically, Luther believed they both were making the same grave and fundamental error. They both were giving human reason (understanding, philosophy, logic – wisdom!) precedence and primacy over Christ and His Word of promise. But for Luther, God's Word, which comes to us through the witness of Scripture, must always have primacy over human reason and human reason must be subject to and in service of the Word!

The key, then, for Luther was always to give primary emphasis to Scripture and its clear meaning as opposed to clever and elaborate interpretive schemes. He had little patience with those who would take a philosophical system and try to make the biblical message conform to it. For Luther the question always was and is: *What is the clear meaning of the text?* He was adamantly opposed to those who would try to impose clever interpretive devices on to the biblical text (e.g. those who through the use of allegory or anagogy seek to find hidden spiritual meanings in every detail of a text). Similarly, Luther was opposed to those who would try to make the biblical text adapt to a particular philosophy (Aristotle's, existential, liberation, etc.). If the reader will pardon the emphatic language, Luther might be paraphrased to say, *“Human reason, philosophy, and cleverness be damned! Cling to the text! Cling to the clear Word and promises of Christ.”*

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Thus, for both the New Testament and for Luther, a radical transformation must take place in the individual, i.e., in his/her life orientation. Jesus said to Nicodemus:

<sup>John3:3</sup> *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you are born anew (again!), you cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Part of what that implies is a transformation in thinking.

The Apostle Paul in Romans 12:2 writes:

*“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

In other words, having a transformed and renewed mind means to see, think, and reason in a wholly new way with radically different assumptions.

These are closely related to what Jesus says to Pontius Pilate in John 18,

<sup>36</sup> *“My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world”* (RSV).

In other words, in order to understand Christ as King, His Kingdom, and its wisdom one must learn to think in a radically new way.

### WISDOM AND THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE.

For Luther, God's wisdom comes to us through the witness of Scripture. As such the Bible is the norm with which we measure or consider new ideas/wisdom, especially in relation to matters of faith & religion. There is a sort of rule of thumb regarding new ideas:

*What is forbidden by Scripture is forbidden;  
what is commanded by Scripture is commanded;  
what is permitted by Scripture is permitted.*

The point is that, for the Bible and for Luther, we do not stand in judgment over the Word; the Word stands in judgment over us. We do not impose our ideas on the Bible; the Bible shapes our ideas and our thinking. We do not determine what is relevant and then try to get Scripture and faith to conform to our sense of relevance, the Word declares its own relevance. It thereby becomes the foundation from which we endeavor to reason things out because otherwise, for Luther, our philosophies and ideologies, our wisdom and reason, inevitably push us towards disobedience, if in no other way than in the endeavor to be judge over God. Indeed, like the serpent of old we might be tempted to ask: “Did God really say...?” (Gen.3:1)

### SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The purpose of this essay has been to give the average reader some handles on what Luther saw as the proper role and function of reason in Christian deliberation.

◆ We have noted the similarity that exists between the words *reason* and *wisdom* in that, for our purposes, they can be understood almost synonymously and that they flow from God, that is, *the Word*.

As such, there can be no true wisdom or reason apart from God and His Word.

◆ We have also noted that human wisdom and reason can be easily abused and distorted.

We as human beings have great difficulty in discerning what is true wisdom or what is proper reason.

Without proper assumptions we can use reason to justify almost anything (e.g., Hitchens & Dawkins).

- ◆ Thus, in order to begin with proper assumptions and premises, we need God to reveal to us not only His true nature but also what are His plan, purpose, design, and intention for creation.
- ◆ God has revealed Himself to us through His dealings with Israel and especially through Jesus Christ as witnessed to via the testimony of the Old and New Testaments.
- ◆ Luther regarded himself, his life, his conscience, and his reason as captive to the Word of God in Scripture.
- ◆ The task of the true theologian and interpreter is to discern the clear Word of Scripture and to avoid imposing on Scripture clever interpretive schemes (e.g., allegory & anagogy) and philosophies that are foreign to it (e.g., Aristotle via Aquinas).

Luther insisted on letting the text speak with its own integrity.<sup>9</sup>

All of this relates back to Luther's primary assumption, namely, that the Bible was inspired and guided (not dictated as when a boss gives dictation to a secretary) by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the proper approach to interpreting Scripture is not to seek to poke holes in its witness. Neither is it to look for loopholes. It is not to try and twist it to get it to say whatever we want it to say. It is not to try to make the Bible fit some foreign template or philosophy. Instead, while recognizing that there are a variety of literary forms in the Bible, the proper approach to the study of Scripture is to ask in all humility: what is it that God is trying to say to me/us through this text, that is, the witness of Scripture?

This leaves us with a terrifying and yet unavoidable question. If we were to look at the track record of mainline Protestantism in recent decades, denominations whose heritage flows out of the Reformation – especially those that bear the name of Luther, would we find churches that are faithful to their Reformation legacy from which they sprang or those who have been seduced by the spirit of our times and the philosophies that undergird that spirit? If the truth be told, we would probably find churches and denominations that are more interested in being palatable to the culture and the spirit of the times than in being faithful to the Scriptures and their heritage. To which we can only say, “God save us!”

*“May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His holy Word with all our hearts. Amen.”<sup>10</sup>*

#### APPENDIX: SOME OF LUTHER'S BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING THE BIBLE<sup>11</sup>

- ✚ the Bible as inspired by the Holy Spirit;
- ✚ the Bible as Christocentric (anticipates Christ; proclaims Christ; expects His return; He is the final authority on all issues);
- ✚ the “Scripture interprets Scripture” principle to discern clarity (e.g., one verse may help bring clarity to another more obscure verse);
- ✚ the clear and/or consistent witness of Scripture (there are some issues that the Bible consistently maintains; there are others where the clarity comes from another verse, e.g., Jesus on forbidden foods in Mark 7:19 vs. Deut.14:7);
- ✚ and human reason must be in service of biblical witness to divine revelation as opposed to the Bible being subservient to human reason, or whatever philosophical categories one might want to impose upon it.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The interested reader may find this essay at: <http://wordalone.org/docs/wa-layman-guide-jepsen.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Forde, Gerhard, *Where God Meets Man*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), p.7. This little book serves as a marvelous introduction to Luther's theology. Its only drawback is that it was written before the advent of emphasis on using inclusive language. The lay reader is encouraged to overlook this shortcoming and purchase this book. As of this writing, the book is still available at Amazon.com.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Such an assembly was often called a “Diet” (dee-eh) from the Latin word *dies* – day – due to the fact that such a meeting was either a day's journey for participants or a day-long meeting, or both. Thus this particular assembly was called :the Diet of Worms {pronounced “vorms”}

<sup>5</sup> LW. vol. 22 (re. John 1:4).

<sup>6</sup> LW vol. 6: (re. Gen.37:21).

<sup>7</sup> Bainton, Roland, *Here I Stand*, (Nashville/New York: Abingdon Press, MCML – 1950), notes on p.223, “Luther often railed against reason, and he has been portrayed in consequence as a complete irrationalist in religion. This is quite to mistake his meaning. Reason in the sense of logic he employed to the uttermost limits... but what God does is utterly incomprehensible.”

<sup>8</sup> Gerrish, Grace and Reason, p.137.

<sup>9</sup> See the “Appendix” for an outline of some of the interpretive principles that Luther employed.

<sup>10</sup> LW15, p.275.

<sup>11</sup> For a further elaboration of these principles, see my article as noted in footnote #1 titled “A Layman's Guide to *Quantum Physics* Scripture: How Luther Meant Lutherans to Read the Bible.” at: <http://wordalone.org/docs/wa-layman-guide-jepsen.shtml>.