

Faith and Reason in Martin Luther

[October 1957]

By Siegbert W. Becker

Roland Bainton, in his *Here I Stand* (p. 125), speaks of the great Reformer's "stupefying irrationalities." He has reference, of course, to the many instances in which Luther expressed the truths of the Christian faith in paradoxical form. Luther says, for example, that when God wants to make a man alive, he first puts him to death, and thus God does not kill to death, but he kills to life. When he wishes to take a man into heaven, he first leads him into hell. These paradoxes Luther insisted on taking seriously. He refused to use them simply as rhetorical tricks to draw attention to his message. He would have disagreed with L. H. De Wulf, who says that paradox is meaningful only when it stimulates reason to search out a solution to the apparent contradiction (*The Religious Revolt Against Reason* [Harper, N. Y., 1949], pp. 141 f.). Luther often deliberately resists the temptation to work out a synthesis in which the difficulty will be resolved. He was no Hegelian in his theological method.

What is of double interest to us at this time is the fact that Luther's views of the place of reason in the life and thought of the Christian man exhibit this same paradoxical quality. Almost everyone who knows something of Luther's estimate of reason and its place in theology knows that Luther said that reason is the devil's bride. Often he calls reason the devil's harlot, but at least it should be noted that in the last sermon that he preached in Wittenberg before his death he said that reason is the most beautiful harlot the devil has. On the one hand he called reason a big, red murderess, and on the other he said that reason is the greatest gift of God to men. (10, 1, 271; 40, 3, 612) [*All references are to Weimar edition.]

In the *Small Catechism*, in the explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed, he lists reason as one of the great gifts of the Creator, and he says: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures, that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses." But then, in the explanation of the Third Article, he denies to reason all competence in conversion and writes, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him." On the one hand, he said that reason is the enemy of faith and that the Gospel does not require a rational decision and assent, but a superrational faith (10, 1, 1, 218); and on the other hand he wrote that the possession of reason distinguishes men from beasts and that if our souls were not formed differently from those of animals, the Gospel could be preached to us for 100,000 years, and it would make no impression on us. (16, 447)

It is evident that when we must contend with such apparently contradictory statements, it will be rather difficult within the confines of a short paper to deal adequately with the views of Luther on faith and reason. We will therefore endeavor to mention only a few of the basic considerations which must be kept in mind in evaluating Luther's thought on the subject.

It is well known that fulminations against reason are commonplace in the writing of Martin Luther. To understand his vehemence in his denunciations of reason it is necessary to keep in mind the characteristics of the age in which he lived. It was a rationalistic age. In spite of everything that may be said to the contrary, the late Middle Ages were not an age of faith. Four characteristics of that age should be noted especially before we approach the study of Luther in this area.

First of all, it was an age in which it was generally believed that Christian theology could be called into court before the bar of reason and there stand acquitted. The doctrine that the Gospel is an offense to natural reason had been forgotten. Aquinas had persuaded many churchmen that the Christian message could be undergirded and defended by arguments drawn from experience by the powers of reason.

Secondly, Aquinas had taught the church that natural theology could lead men to the very threshold of the Christian faith and that it was possible on the basis of natural theology to bring men to the point at which the next logical step was the acceptance of the Biblical revelation or, to be more specific, the authority of the church. It was an idea which was similar to the fundamentalistic view which believes that men must be argued

into an acceptance of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, and that once men have been convinced of the truth of Scripture on the basis of historical or archaeological arguments, they will accept all the doctrines of the Bible without further ado.

Thirdly, it was an age which delighted in theological or, more properly, philosophical speculation. It read the story of the creation of man and then found its greatest delight in debating whether men have one rib more on one side than on the other, or whether Adam had one rib too many before the creation of Eve or one rib too few afterward (42, 97). This question Luther was willing to leave to the doctors of medicine, who knew more about such matters than doctors of theology.

Fourthly, it was an age in which the modern scientific attitude was being born, when men began to test and to question on an empirical basis doctrines and beliefs which had been accepted for centuries.

Though the Lutheran Reformation has some kinship with the age in which it came to fruition, yet it must be said that all four of these tendencies were opposed by Luther as inimical to the theology of Holy Scripture. Luther is not willing that the doctrines of the Bible should be judged by the same standards which are used to judge the doctrines of men.

There can be no doubt that Luther must be called an antimetaphysical theologian. J. V. L. Casserley says that the danger in this position is that, when it is consistently followed, it leads to a destruction of the very foundation upon which language and all human communication is built, and thus it is destructive even of divine revelation which comes to us through the medium of human speech (*The Christian in Philosophy* [Scribner's, N.Y., 1951]. (Pp. 150; 172 ff.)

We have seen, in our own time, this very thing happen in neo-orthodoxy, where words have, in many instances, lost all concrete meaning and theology has become a form of impressionistic art. Luther stood firm against this danger. When he rejected the allegorical method of interpretation and insisted that "natural speech shall be the Kaiser's wife" (18, 180); then he demanded that men believe that the days of Genesis I are real days (and that emphasis may seem a little strange three hundred years before Darwin), that Adam and Eve were real people, that Adam's rib was real rib, that the serpent was a real serpent; when he said that the natural meaning of the words of Scripture shall be given preference over all subtle, clever, sophistic interpretations, he was insisting that the rules of logic shall be applied in determining the meaning of what the Scriptures say. And if a logical (and it should be noted here that we are using logical in its strictest sense), grammatical interpretation of the words of the Bible leads us into rationalistic difficulties, if it leads us into seemingly irreconcilable paradoxes, these must not be permitted to influence our interpretation of the clear words of Scripture. The words of Scripture, which are the words of God, shall be allowed to stand in their natural meaning, whether that meaning be literal or figurative. He says, "Everywhere we must cling to the simple, pure, natural meaning of the words, which is dictated by grammar and common usage, which God has created in man" (18, 700). At another time he wrote: "If a man dares to deny what nature teaches everyone and all human reason and understanding must grant, you should not argue with him, but send him to a doctor, who may sweep out his brain. For that is just as if a man wanted to say that white is not white, but black, and two is not two, but one" (36, 526). Many of us have perhaps felt like taking Luther's advice when dealing with the pretensions of neo-orthodoxy.

It is very evident that Luther gave an important place to reason as an instrument for apprehending the truth of Scripture. When he was asked whether the light of reason is an advantage to the theologian, he answered that we must make a distinction between converted and unconverted reason and that reason possessed by the devil is a hindrance to faith, but reason illuminated by the Holy Spirit serves faith. But he limited it to an ancillary role, and he holds that an enlightened reason takes all its thoughts from the Word (TR, 1, 191). Dialectics, he said, is to be used as a slave, but also in theology we learn from it how to distinguish and to define. According to Luther, Christ is apprehended by reason or the intellect, illumined by faith (40, 1, 447). At another time he wrote that when a man is converted, "another reason is born, which is faith" (40, 1, 412). He defines faith as a "right thinking of the heart about God" (40, 1, 376). He held that "faith is in the intellect." (40, 2, 26)

In this connection, it is noteworthy that when Luther called for the reform of the universities in his *Address to the Nobility*, he asked that Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *On the Soul*, and his *Ethics* be dropped from the curriculum; but, although he calls Aristotle the "damned, proud, rascally heathen," he still wants to retain as textbooks Aristotle's *Logic*, his *Rhetoric*, and his book on *Poetry*. Manifestly, then, Luther would not have agreed with the fundamentalistic journal which said that the study of logic is a curse to candidates for the ministry (*The China Fundamentalist*, quoted by Petty, *Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry*, 1933, V, ii, 280). And Luther's position should certainly also not be called irrational, although he did say that no one can philosophize well unless he is a fool, that is, a Christian. (1, 355)

"Antirational" would be a far better word to use to characterize Luther's point of view. But even this word must be used with certain reservations. All too often Luther has been judged on the basis of a few of his remarks torn out of context. Because of Luther's creative and often startling use of language – and after all it was Luther who taught Germany how to speak German – it is doubly important in the study of Luther to read every sentence in its wide context.

For example, Luther did not, as is so often claimed by some neo-orthodox theologians, reject natural theology. First of all, there are in Luther's thought elements which might well be classified as Platonic rationalism, which is not surprising in view of the fact that he was an Augustinian monk. At the Heidelberg debate he said that the philosophy of Plato was superior to that of Aristotle. The student of Luther is reminded of the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis when he hears Luther say that the knowledge of the Law written in the heart of man is *reawakened* by the Word (16, 447). Luther would, of course, have objected to calling this doctrine Platonic, for he said that whatever was good in Plato, the Greek philosopher had stolen out of the writings of the Old Testament prophets. In his commentary on Jonah, Luther writes that there is in all men a knowledge of God which is not easy to smother or extinguish. The so-called proofs for the existence of God serve to stimulate this knowledge into self-consciousness.

Luther uses every one of the ordinary proofs for the existence of God. It is not difficult to find in Luther clear statements of the cosmological, the teleological, and the moral proofs. He never criticizes them after the manner of Barthianism. He would never have asked, as Hutchison does, "What kind of proofs are these which lack the ability to convince?" For Luther the weakness or the inadequacy did not lie in the proofs. He would rather have said: "How fallen, how blind, is man who fails to see what is so clearly revealed in the works of God!" for he wrote, "The footsteps of God are in the creature" (43, 276). Luther goes so far as to say that the heathen *must* know that there is a God (24, 640), that we are forced to the conclusion that there is a God. (40, 3, 322)

Still it is true that Luther lays little stress on this natural knowledge, but for reasons which are far different from those which are given by modern theology. There are basically five reasons for Luther's low estimate of natural theology.

First, Luther was not satisfied with probability. This he was sure that natural theology could give men, and if he had been willing to live by the maxim that probability is the guide of life, he would have been in agreement with those who have laid great stress on the natural knowledge of God. But Luther was satisfied with nothing less than "sure knowledge," as he called it (28, 91). He thirsted with all his soul for certainty, for *Heilsgewissheit*, and this he knew rational argument could never give him. To Luther all doubt about God's goodness was a sin (43, 240; 40, 3, 71). And long before Kant, Luther held that there is no conviction that is based on reason, which cannot again be undermined by reason (TR, 1, 530). Certainty can be found only in the words and promises of God.

Secondly, Luther held that the natural knowledge was inevitably legalistic, that is, man by nature is of the firm conviction that if he wants to be saved, he must be good, for salvation is given on the basis of human merit. To a man who was sure that the only possible salvation for men lies in the forgiving grace of God alone, the natural knowledge of God often seemed to be a hindrance to true faith. Especially in times of great stress even Christians will have difficulty forgetting the natural knowledge, which in the end becomes only damnable knowledge of our own destruction (22, 376; 46, 670). Luther would have found the position ridiculous which on

the basis of Kantian philosophy rejects the notion of a natural knowledge of God and then goes on to teach that men will be saved if they live according to their own best lights. Precisely this, he would have said, is your legalistic naturalistic knowledge of God. (46, 667-670; 21, 514; 40, 2, 7)

Thirdly, Luther held that natural knowledge of God always leads to idolatry. Aquinas had taught that natural knowledge brings men to the point where they recognize the need of God's revelation through the church. Luther said that it inevitably leads men to invent false gods. (10, 1, 1, 240)

Fourthly, Luther had a low estimate of natural theology because he considered all debate about the existence of God to be a waste of time (46, 666-670). All men know that there is a God, and if they are so wicked and depraved that they deny what nature itself teaches them, they should be treated with the contempt they deserve. The existence of God must not be allowed to become a problem in theology.

Finally, Luther believed that an objective knowledge of God's existence cannot begin to satisfy man's need. To him the great question in life was, "How can I find a gracious God?" He saw little profit in knowing God as Aristotle and Plato and the Jews and the Turks knew him. I know God truly, said Luther, only when I know that he is *my* God, *my* Lord, *my* Savior, that he has redeemed *me*, that He has forgiven *me my* sins. No one really knows God until he knows him in this way, and in this way God cannot be known on the basis of the rational proofs but only through the Word (21, 510; 51, 150-151; 44, 591). I can know God in that way only when I know that he is the Savior of all men, that he died for all, that he took away the sins of the world when he tasted death for every man. This I can know only on the basis of the words of God which I read in the Scriptures.

Still Luther sees value in the natural knowledge of God. This value is chiefly twofold. First, it helps to maintain order and discipline in the world (40, 2, 264). Secondly, it provides a point of contact with the unbeliever. It is the common ground on which we can approach those who have not yet come to a real knowledge of God. (16, 447)

While we are on the subject of common ground, it may be of special interest to take note of the fact that as Luther enunciates the principle which underlies Kant's antinomies two centuries before the city of Koenigsberg saw the birth of its most illustrious son, so he also anticipates Van Til. In his Genesis commentary, Luther says that nothing in creation can be truly known except by a believer in Christ. Natural reason does not know the creature of God (42, 511). He says, for example, that one cannot know what a man is or what a woman is unless one is a believer, for nothing can be known truly until it is known as a creature of God. Luther would also have agreed wholeheartedly with Hume's philosophical agnosticism in regard to the element of cause in nature, for he said that men can, by the use of their reason, never know either final or efficient causes. He would say also that modern science is deceiving itself when it imagines that it has discovered efficient causes. (J. Hutchison, *Faith, Reason, and Existence* [Oxford U. Press, N. Y., 1956], pp. 138 ff.)

Nevertheless Luther believed that there was an area where the reason of the unbeliever and that of the believer overlap. He said that the pagan philosophers knew material and formal causes and that they treated them "beautifully and well" in their writings (40, 3, 203). He pointed out the fact that the heathen by the use of their reason had set up excellent systems of government, which excelled those in Christian lands (16, 354-355). He was more inclined to use the works of heathen writers for the study of morals and ethics than those of the scholastic theologians. Even the hated Aristotle is to be preferred to them. (42, 373)

LUTHER'S APOLOGETICS

In passing over to the rational defense of the Christian faith as it was viewed by Luther, we might say at the very beginning that the Reformer believed that philosophy had a place in the theological curriculum. He said that young men studying to be leaders in the church must learn philosophy so that they may, as slaves in barbarous Egypt, be able to speak with the tyrants who rule over them until they are freed. (6, 188)

He did not believe, however, that philosophy had any positive contribution to make to theology. Any attempt to construct a rational defense or to provide a rational explanation for the mysteries of the faith he

considered to be utter blasphemy. We are not to make any effort to explain the whys and the wherefores of the Christian faith. It is enough to know that God says these things in His Word, and we are not to ask him why he acts as he does. He is his own norm, and if he had to answer all our questions, he would be the poorest kind of God (TR, 2, 584f.). The mouth that asks God, “Why?” he said, belongs on the gallows.

Luther rejected also the Butlerian method of defending the Christian faith by analogy. He said that arguments drawn from analogy, by which we argue from human affairs to divine truth, are the weakest of all arguments (40, 1, 459). Analogies may be used to illustrate and illumine, but they prove nothing (ibid.; TR, 1, 606). And they can be used in support of false doctrine just as well as in defense of the truth. (47, 328)

Above all, Luther warned against the view which holds that faith is a “resting of the heart in the sufficiency of the evidence” or that faith is the end product of a logical or rational process. Faith is a gift of God (33, 284). And he meant exactly what those words say. Faith is not something to which we attain. It is something freely given. It is something done to us rather than something done by us (42, 452). Men do not come to faith by the use of their rational powers.

This is clearly demonstrated by Luther’s defense of infant Baptism and by his insistence that infants can believe. To Luther those two were necessary concomitants, for he said that if we do not believe that infants can have faith we ought not to baptize them (17, 2, 82). The regeneration of infants through Baptism was no problem for him because he believed that the conversion of adults was as great and even a greater miracle than the conversion of an infant which had not yet learned to use its reason. Human reason can teach the hand and the foot what to do, but only God can teach the heart.

Because this is true, because man has no free will and conversion is solely the work of God’s almighty but resistible grace, it is, therefore, ridiculous to think that men can make the Gospel so sweetly reasonable that intelligent men will be attracted to it. To make the Gospel reasonable is to destroy it (36, 492). The surest proof for the truth of the Gospel is its rejection by human reason. If once we have a Gospel which is not foolishness to the Greeks and no longer a stumbling block to the Jews, that is, to the best and most learned men on earth, we shall no longer have the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the very nature of all articles of faith, says Luther, that all reason, *universa ratio*, shrinks back from them (40, 2, 589). A reasonable Gospel was to him a contradiction in terms. Reason is diametrically opposed to faith (47, 328). When the opponent in a theological debate said to Luther, “*Das reumt sich nicht*,” “That makes no sense,” Luther simply answered: “Indeed it doesn’t. I say that, too. It makes no sense in reason and in your head, but it must make sense in faith and according to God’s Word” (37, 43). If it sounds foolish, he said, what do we care? (41, 273-274)

The only true defense of Scripture is Scripture itself. The Lutheran watchword *Sola Scriptura*, the Scripture alone, was applicable here, too. We shall be well equipped to defend the articles of our faith if we know the texts of Scripture from which those doctrines are drawn (40, 2, 592; 22, 40). If men will not accept the articles of faith on the authority of Scripture, we ought not even to desire their assent on other grounds (36, 526). For that the cursed devil may thank them, because we will not (ibid.). He told his congregation in Wittenberg that they should become accustomed to proving and defending their faith only with Scripture (32, 60). If men want to argue, we are to throw the texts of Scripture before them and stop there (40, 2, 592). The devil must be overcome with Scripture and not with reason (20, 770). To defend God’s Word with reason is to defend one’s armor and sword with the bare hand and the bare head. (6, 291)

Commenting on the text from 1 Peter which is so often quoted in defense of a rational apologetic, Luther said that the scholastics misinterpreted this text when they said that the Scripture should be defended by reason. Luther says that it means that we are to show men that our faith is grounded in the Bible. But if they do not want to believe that the Scripture is God’s Book and God’s Word, then we are to remain silent. We are under no obligation to force men to accept the Word (12, 362). If we find people who deny that the Scriptures are the Word of God, we are not to speak a word to them. We should be ready always to give them proof out of Scripture, but if they will not believe, we need give them nothing more. (Ibid.)

Luther was well aware of the logical weakness of this approach. He admitted that it involved a begging of the question (36, 525). But he was sure that the Word was still the power of God unto salvation. If such an

approach is weak in logic, it is strong in the power of His might. In spite of its dialectical weakness, he insists that it is the correct way to guard and defend every article of faith. (36, 525-528)

And yet Luther used rational argumentation in his own apologetics, which at first seems strange and yet is entirely consistent with his view. We have heard him say that every argument based on reason can be overthrown by reason. He held that it was wrong, indeed, to defend Scripture with reason, but he was sure that it was perfectly proper to combat reason with reason. As the Law is used to destroy man's confidence in his own ability to save himself, so reason may be used to undermine man's trust in his own dialectic powers. We hear him repeatedly challenging his enemies to show him by sound reason that he is wrong. He offered to defeat the Anabaptists, as he said, "with their own cleverness" (17, 2, 85). When the faculty of Louvain attacked the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther wrote that they argue like a bunch of women who say, "It is! It is not! Yes! No! You are wrong! I am not wrong!" And he complains that they have used neither reason nor Scripture against him. In the *Tischreden* he said that the senseless, asinine pope has dealt so crudely that it would be possible to overcome him with the arguments of reason even if we did not have Scripture. (2, 60)

In his *De servo arbitrio*, the answer to the *Diatribes* of Erasmus, he uses rational arguments again and again. Erasmus had argued that man must have the power to repent and believe since God had commanded him to do this. Luther said that if Erasmus is right in this argument, then he is wrong in his basic theological position and the Pelagians are right. So, Luther says, the *Diatribes* has her throat cut with her own sword. (18, 675) It must be noted throughout, however, that Luther never sought to establish the truth by reason. But what he attempts to do is to show that the arguments of those who attacked the Christian faith are not as foolproof as the men who use them seem to think. Again and again he applies the epithets *unsinnig*, senseless, and *unvernünftig*, unreasonable, to his adversaries. While Luther would never have written a book on the reasonableness of the Christian faith, he could conceivably have written one with the title *The Irrationalism of Unbelief*. In using this approach Luther is giving left-handed expression to his basic and consistent distrust of reason. Reason always leaves us in darkness and uncertainty, but still he said that if you must dispute with a Jew or a Turk or a sectarian about the wisdom and the power of God, then use all your skill, and be as subtle and as sharp a debater as you can be. (40, 1, 78)

Again here neo-orthodoxy has often misrepresented Luther's point of view by seeing only one side of Luther's paradoxical position. Luther does argue in a thoroughly logical way against unbelief. And to understand why he does this we must remember that he said that when reason is illumined by faith, it makes an excellent servant.

When rational arguments are advanced against any articles of the Christian faith, Luther often appeals to the omnipotence of God. Whenever men say anything is impossible, Luther says that God is almighty. And he says that reason itself must grant that, if God is almighty, then all things are possible. (49, 404)

It is true, as we would expect, that Luther lays little stress on Christian evidences. But he does say that the Bible has proved itself to be the Word of God by the fact that it has survived all the attacks made on it. He sees this very opposition to the Gospel as a proof of its truth. It must, of course, be recognized that both these arguments, which are often looked upon as rational evidences, are really Scripture-based and Scripture-oriented.

One last thing needs to be said, although it does perhaps not properly belong under our topic. Those who call Luther irrational often are tempted to classify him as a subjective theologian. But Luther railed against *sensus*, feeling, experience, with the same vehemence that he used against *ratio*, reason. Luther did not believe that Christian experience validates itself. He said that experience must follow faith and never precede it. Men must never, in any way, build on anything that they find in themselves. (10, 1, 1, 611)

And when all is said and done, the whole of Luther's apologetic can still adequately be summed up in a sentence which he wrote into the margin of his copy of the works of Peter Lombard: "Arguments based on reason determine nothing, but because the Holy Scriptures say that it is true, it is true."