

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

A CREEDAL ACCOUNT

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i> . 75 vols. St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–.
NPNF ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , series 1
NPNF ²	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , series 2
WA	<i>Weimarer Ausgabe. D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe</i> . 72 vols. Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883–2009.
WA BR	<i>Weimarer Ausgabe, Briefwechsel</i> (correspondence)
WA DB	<i>Weimarer Ausgabe, Deutsche Bibel</i> (the German Bible)
WA TR	<i>Weimarer Ausgabe, Tischreden</i> (table talk)

PREFACE

Christianity is an amazingly divided religion. In North America alone there are approximately four hundred different Christian denominations. In South Korea, to cite another example, the Presbyterians are split into at least one hundred different groups, some even consisting of just one congregation. None of the other major religions has had such a proliferation into so many different denominations. Is this a Christian disease that will split the body of Christ into more and more fragments? On first glance this seems to be true. But when we look more closely, this is not the case.

Yes, there are many different Christian church bodies. But they share one thing in common: the Bible. This book unites them in their witness to the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Every Christian community that was founded with the premise just to be the church of Christ sooner or later issued a creedal account of its faith. Most enlightening is here the example of the Church of God of Anderson, Indiana. It had been founded in the nineteenth century with the explicit assertion that its only foundation was the Bible. But when it celebrated its centennial anniversary in 1979, the same church body issued a little booklet with its own confession so that people knew what this church stood for.¹ Every church body needs a certain creedal account of the faith it proclaims. But this account dare not exclude other Christians unless it disregards Paul's admonition about the oneness of the body of Christ, and unless it understands the great commission in an exclusive way as a commission to evangelize other Christians instead of the secular world.

Yet as our different denominations and church bodies show, the common creedal basis does not preclude that we accentuate this foundation differently

1. *We Believe: A Statement of Conviction on the Occasion of the Centennial of the Church of God Reformation Movement* (Anderson, IN: Publication Board of the Church of God, 1979).

depending on the traditions that have shaped us. Everybody sees the world from a different perspective depending on where one lives and under what conditions. This is already true for the New Testament. We have four Gospels. Each is different, but all four of them were received into the New Testament canon because the Christians at that time felt that they did not justify different books—a New Testament according to Matthew, another one according to Mark, and so on. They heeded Paul’s admonition that there is just one body of Christ to which we all belong. His body is not to be divided.

This creedal account is written from a certain perspective that is influenced by the reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) and his understanding of the Bible. Many of his insights are still valid today and have been picked up in different quarters of Christendom. This will become even more pronounced as we move closer to 2017, the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther’s posting of his “Ninety-Five Theses.”

One of Martin Luther’s most important insights was that the Bible should not be read in a uniform manner, according the same weight to every page of the Bible. For instance, the instructions concerning sacrifices in Leviticus 1–8 are interesting to read, but they are without actual significance for us Christians. As Luther said, “They were only given to the Jews.” He therefore distinguished between center and periphery in the biblical text. Some items are central and important while others are actually at the periphery for our Christian faith.

Jesus Christ is central. It was through Christ that God made God’s own self known. We learn about Jesus only through the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. We learn in the Bible that we cannot come to God by our own merits but only through God’s undeserved grace. Therefore we can only have hope in life beyond this life by trusting in God, that is, by faith. The foundation of the Christian faith is built on these four fundamental principles: by Scripture alone, by Christ alone, by grace alone, and by faith alone. We gain access to these principles in the Bible.

In the following chapters, I want to show what this faith is all about and how it can help us ascertain a solid foundation for our life in confronting the problems of our times. The references are kept to a minimum. But all quotations are referenced. It is my desire that this book will contribute to a deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

This book could not have been finished without the help of Dr. Terry Dohm, a former doctoral student of mine who improved the style and the content of these pages, and Hildegard Ferme, my long-time secretary who typed this manuscript as a farewell gift before entering well-deserved retirement. To her and her long-standing loyalty, which went far beyond the call of duty, I dedicate this book.

INTRODUCTION

Luther's Central Insights

Not long ago, a young man from South Korea who had just finished his doctorate with me sat in my study at the university to say good-bye. In the course of the conversation he asked me, “Is it all right to pray to become rich?” and noticing my bewildered look, he explained that many Christians in South Korea pray to get rich. “No,” I replied, “because this would be a very selfish prayer, and besides, becoming rich is not that important. If you look at the really great people such as Moses, Buddha, Einstein, or Plato, none of them was rich.” He told me that many people in Korea still consider God in a shamanistic way. If you perform the right actions, then you can, so to speak, use God for this or that purpose to obtain your goal. What lies behind this attitude is not just shamanism. It is the sinful human attitude that Augustine (354–430) described when he said that as a sinner a human being shows “apostatizing pride” and “covetousness.”¹ In our self-assured pride, we seem to think only of ourselves, our well-being, and our own advantage, so that everything else, whether living or nonliving, will be at our service. This is also true of our approach to God. In our thinking, if God makes sense, God must serve our own purpose. If God does not do what we want, then we ask, “How can God act this way?” Yet a God who does what we want and who is at our disposal can easily become a construct of the human mind. Ludwig Feuerbach, the nineteenth-century critic of religion, therefore claimed that God is a projection of our human imagination. In contrast to that claim, Luther had discovered

1. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 12.9.14, in *NPNF*¹ 3:160.

three hundred years earlier that God is not a human construct, but God is God. This, I contend, is the first part of Luther's central Reformation insight.

God Is God

The British Methodist theologian Philip S. Watson wrote a book on Luther in 1947 titled *Let God Be God*. This sums up Luther's important discovery. If God is indeed God and not just some figment of the human mind, then God cannot be domesticated. It was the problem during Luther's time—and it still is in our own—that we attempt to domesticate God. Luther's question, and that of many sincere Christians today, "How do I obtain a gracious God?" expresses this attitude very well. At Luther's time human life expectancy was short, and when Luther died before reaching his sixty-third birthday, he was considered to be a very old man, and he certainly felt like one. Life on earth for people of that time was filled with toil and sorrow. One was virtually helpless against the plague, kidney stones, or high blood pressure, just to name a few afflictions. Human amenities were virtually nonexistent, and when Luther traveled from Wittenberg to Rome, he did so on foot, which took several weeks.

Since one could expect little from this life, one wanted to make sure that there was a gracious God who would at least provide one with a pleasant hereafter. To that effect, one did all one could, so to speak, to twist God's arm by going on pilgrimages, giving huge donations to the church, acquiring relics of famous saints, or, like Luther, joining a monastery and becoming a monk. It was not by accident that Luther joined the Augustinian Eremites, who were known as a very strict order. Luther thought that if he lived a disciplined monastic life, chances were better that he could dispose God favorably to him. Therefore Luther took the monastery's demands very seriously. If he missed one of the prescribed worship services, such as early morning or mid-morning or noon prayers, he made it up later. He once confessed, "If ever a monk entered heaven because of his monkish life, I too would have entered."² But Luther did not find spiritual comfort through his pious activities. To the contrary, they only sharpened his conscience, and he felt even more that he was a hopeless case in God's eyes. He could never come into God's presence, because he was human, and God was indeed God.

Following the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), who called this insight the discovery of "'the infinite qualitative distinction' between time

2. Martin Luther, *Kleine Antwort auf H. Georgens nächstes Buch* (1533), in WA 38:143.26–27. Unless otherwise indicated all translations from German and Latin are my own.

and eternity,” the Reformed Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) said this shows that “God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.”³ If there is an infinite qualitative difference, there is no way for us to bridge the abyss between God and us. We can never reach God, nor can we twist God’s arm to do our bidding. God is a sovereign and majestic God, the creator of the universe and everything in it. Modern cosmology has further shown us the immensity of the universe, with regard to both its extension and its age. Our universe is billions of light years in diameter and billions of years old. If there is a God above and beyond this huge universe, how could we ever think that we could manipulate God or dispose him graciously toward us? For Luther, such an attempt was sheer blasphemy, because it was a downgrading of God and an attempt to dethrone God. Yet when he looked around and saw all the things that were invented by pious and frightened people to dispose God graciously toward them, as well as all the ceremonies condoned and favored by the church at the time to obtain a gracious God (for example, to shorten the years one was to spend in purgatory, or to obtain the assurance of heavenly bliss), then Luther rightly became furious. Most of this stuff, he claimed, was an invention of the devil that led us away from the real God and created a god who was a human fabrication.

Luther concluded we can do nothing to dispose God favorably toward us. No prayers, good works, worship services, pilgrimages, or whatever else one could think of would suffice to turn God graciously toward us. As Luther well knew, Augustine once said that since we have forsaken God, we are “forsaken.”⁴ We cannot of our own power turn back to God. Such a reversal is impossible, because if we could do this, it would be an insult to God’s sovereignty and majesty. Just imagine: For years we do not take God seriously. Our career, our family, and our earthly pursuits are more important to us than God, and we do not want God to interfere with them. But as we get older, we become pious and want to make God our priority. Now if we think that God rejoices because we finally take him seriously, we make a charade out of the God who rules the whole universe and is infinitely superior to us. God is not the senile old man in the sky who rejoices when we finally turn to him. No, God does not need us. God is truly God.

In his famous writing of 1525, *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther says it is not up to us to turn either to God or to the devil. It is the other way around. The two quarrel over us, and as a result we are either ridden by the devil or

3. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwin Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 10.

4. Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace* 11.31, in *NPNF*¹ 5:484.

guided by God. So, we might ask, what should be our attitude to such a God whose arm we cannot twist and who is superior to us in sovereignty? Are we simply puppets who must do what God wants us to do? The answer of most people, whether at Luther's time or today, is, "Not quite." Although God is indeed sovereign and powerful, they say, God will eventually reward us if we lead pious lives and do enough good works. Yet it was Luther's discovery—and this is the second point of his central insight—that God does not reward us.

God Does Not Reward Us

In 1098 the scholastic theologian Anselm of Canterbury finished a little book titled *Why God Became Man* (*Cur Deus Homo*). In this treatise he introduces the conviction that if God is indeed God, he must require us to lead a godlike life. Since we are human, however, even with our best endeavors we deviate from this godlike life at one point or another. As my son said when he was little and we wanted to scold him, "Nobody's perfect." But the problem is more serious than that because we cannot make up for any of our deviations. Each person has in his or her life deficiencies, the dark spots in one's biography that preclude us from being godlike. How then can we expect God to reward us for our life performance? We always fall short of the mark. None of us can ever meet God's expectations. This is exactly what Luther phrased so well in his famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress" when he wrote, "No strength of ours can match his might! We would be lost, rejected." Luther talks here about escaping the fangs of the devil. With this remark he focused on the right point. With our limited strength we can never make it to God. If God were to reward us for our efforts and for our blemishes, he would immediately condemn us. The blemishes are just too many.

This discrepancy between what we can accomplish and what God expects from us is the problem Luther encountered in Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul writes: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'" (Rom. 1:16–17). Luther read here the important words "the righteousness of God." If God is a righteous God who will either reward or punish us for what we have done or left undone, then, Luther concluded, we have no chance to ever be accepted by God. Any good works that we do would only endanger the possibility of obtaining eternal bliss. They would underscore the naive idea that we can accumulate enough good works to obtain an eternal reward.

The problem is not only, as Anselm asserted, that there is always a deficit in all our endeavors, but also that we can never offer anything to God that is truly our own since God is the creator and sustainer of everything that is. Therefore the Lutheran liturgy rightly says, “We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us.” If we think about it, we are so caught up in our existential deficiency and our inferiority to God that we cannot expect anything from God but his rejection. Augustine stated it fittingly by quoting Ambrose of Milan (339–397): “To be spotless from the beginning is an impossibility to human nature.”⁵ This means that we can neither offer anything to God nor expect anything in return. We have no bargaining power. But, like Augustine, Luther did not quit at this point. Shortly before his death, Luther summed up our situation in the famous words: “We are beggars. This is true.”⁶ It would be a misunderstanding and against everything we have said so far if Luther exhorted us here to beg God for forgiveness or for our acceptance. Here comes the third point of the central Reformation insight that Luther learned from Scripture, namely, that this hopeless situation is typical in God’s script, because God creates out of nothingness.

God Creates Out of Nothingness

If God is indeed God, it is an impossible thought that we do our part and God adds his part. With anything that goes beyond our world, such as salvation, life eternal, or acceptance by God, cooperation between us and God is impossible. The reason for this is not only that God does not need our help but also that if we cooperated with God, we could never be sure that we did the right thing or did enough. While God’s part would stand assured, since God is God, our part would always be in jeopardy. No assurance of salvation and of acceptance by God would be possible. Luther never condoned the idea that we have a free will toward our salvation. He was a realist who realized that regardless of how high we jump, we always fall back to this earth. We cannot save ourselves. Salvation is God’s work alone. Luther claimed, in line with Augustine, that at the most we have a free will toward running away from God.

If we are accepted by God, it is not because of what we have done or left undone. It is not because God rewards us, because we never deserve a reward. If we are accepted, it is because of God’s graciousness. God does it all without any necessity and without being coaxed into accepting us. Wherever there is

5. Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ* 50.55, in *NPNF*¹ 5:236.

6. Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (no. 5677, February 16, 1546), in *LW* 54:476.

cooperation between humans and God, uncertainty creeps in as to whether our part is sufficient and therefore whether God really accepts us. Luther experienced this when he questioned in his monastery cell whether he had done everything properly and pleasing to God. As mentioned, all his pious activities never soothed his conscience. Yet if it is God who does everything pertaining to our salvation, we can totally rely on God and can in this way trust his Word.

Luther also observed that God's accepting us out of free grace, this creation out of nothingness, is typical of the whole biblical history of salvation. Neither Moses nor David, neither Isaiah nor Amos was selected for the things he did or because he was so great. To the contrary, all these men had their blemishes, and it was God who made them the people they finally became. This example of creation out of nothingness again shows us the sovereignty of God and that God freely creates without any precondition. This was Luther's discovery with Romans 1:16–17. God is not a righteous God who rewards us for what we have done. If this were so, we could expect only divine punishment and ultimate rejection. Everything else would be wishful thinking. But Luther discovered that that is not what God does. God creates something out of nothing. God's righteousness is through faith for faith. Righteousness is attributed to us without any precondition. We are set into it through a new relationship with God. In the same manner in which God created the world, without any precondition, God now establishes a new creation, the new people of God.

If God is such a sovereign and gracious God at the same time, how can we react properly to this God? The problem contained in this question was enunciated by Jesus when he healed the ten lepers (Luke 17:11–18). Nine took the healing for granted, while only one returned and thanked Jesus for having been restored to new health. This story shows a typical human problem: thanking is not our strong point. Yet Luther was adamant about showing gratitude.

While he contended that a bad tree does not yield good fruit, he was equally assertive that a good tree cannot but yield good fruit; otherwise it is not a good tree. Or, as he put it, "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works."⁷ In the same way he also asserted that faith cannot be without many great and good works. Yet we should also take heed that good works are not those that we perform toward God but those we perform toward our neighbor. Jesus reminded his audience that at the end of these days God will say, "As you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). Once we have realized that God has done everything toward our salvation, for us and on our behalf, we cannot but rejoice. This rejoicing,

7. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *LW* 31:361.

however, has a very concrete dimension. As the Lutheran theologian George Forell (1919–2011) put it in a book title, it is *Faith Active in Love* (1954). Good works, or our social involvement on earth, are not the precondition for our salvation. They would be far too insufficient to achieve that purpose. Yet they are the natural result of our totally undeserved acceptance by God, creation out of nothingness. The train of thought is: “Since God has been good to me, I will also be good to others. Since God has been gracious to me, I will also be gracious to others.”

But how do we know that God is gracious? How do we know that God does not condemn us? Everything on our side would point in the direction that we have nothing good forthcoming from God. Is all of this not simply imagination, a figment of the human mind? The examples of Moses and David, Isaiah and Amos do not suffice. The Bible also tells us about the failure of King Saul and, despite all his wisdom, the still dubious figure of Solomon. That God is God and therefore infinitely superior to us, that God creates everything out of nothingness, that we cannot work our way to God but only God can bridge the gap between God and us—all these are insights that can be found in other religions too; and, as Luther drastically suggested, even the devil could come up with such insights. The crucial question, however, is how this God is disposed to me. How can I find the answer? It was evident for Luther that if God “would talk to me in his majesty, I would run away like the Jews did. But when he is clothed in the voice of human beings and accommodates himself to our capacity to understand, I can approach him.”⁸ Exactly this kind of accommodation has happened in Jesus Christ, because there God has shown us his heart.

God Has Shown Us His Heart

In Jesus Christ the infinite and the finite have come together. Through God’s action the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity has been bridged. As Luther wrote in his Christmas hymn “From Heaven Above”:

These are the signs which you will see
to let you know that it is he:
in manger-bed, in swaddling clothes
the child who all the earth upholds.⁹

8. Martin Luther, *Vorlesung über Jesaia* (1527–29), in WA 25:106.44–45, in his *scholium* or comment on Isa. 4:6.

9. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, hymn 268, stanzas 5 and 3.

In the Christ-child the creator and sustainer of the whole world has come to us. And in another stanza of the same hymn Luther writes:

This is the Christ, God's Son most high,
 who hears your sad and bitter cry;
 who will himself your Savior be
 and from all sin will set you free.

Christ is our savior. He will set us free from our bondage to sin and open for us the gates of heaven. He can do this because he is the human face of God, the one in whom God shows us his heart. According to Luther, this is the major difference between the Christian faith and all other religions and philosophies. While they contain valuable insight into how God is in general, in Jesus Christ alone do we realize how God feels toward us. Through Jesus Christ we see that God is a gracious God, that God invites us to trust him, and that God spares nothing to save us from finitude and human self-deception.

The cross of Christ becomes the hermeneutical key to God's salvation history and more specifically to the Christ event. Nobody, Luther claimed, could have invented the cross as a means of salvation. If we had invented a sign of salvation, we would have naturally chosen something great and wonderful, not a shameful cross. But the cross shows God's characteristic way of creating out of nothingness. Since it could not have been invented, it reflects true history and God's working in that history toward our salvation. Therefore Luther asserted, "The cross alone is our theology."¹⁰ And, "True theology is practical, and its foundation is Christ, whose death is appropriated to us through faith."¹¹ By practical theology Luther meant existential theology in contrast to speculative or theoretical theology. This practical aspect becomes clear in Luther's explanation of the second article of the Apostles' Creed in his *Small Catechism*. Once Luther asserts the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus Christ, he then shows the immediate consequences of this twofold nature for salvation. Salvation was accomplished by the innocent suffering and death of Christ. And this was done for our sake.

The emphasis on the cross is not some kind of negative theology, or a theology of the absurd, that Jesus must suffer and die. To the contrary, it is realistic, because it shows the characteristic working of God. While nobody would assume that anything good could come out of somebody dying on the cross, abandoned by all his companions, exactly this sign of defeat was used

10. Martin Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), in WA 5:176.32–33, in his explanation of Ps. 5:12.

11. Martin Luther, *Table Talks*, no. 153 (1531/32), in WA TR 1:72.16–17.

as God's starting point for the victory of life. In his utmost compassion God turned around this sign of defeat and made it into the sign of the conquest of death and the beginning of a new creation. God is the one who provides salvation in and through Christ, without our doing anything.

How do we know that Christ shows us God's heart? Are not there many other embodiments or avatars of the Godhead? While Luther had no knowledge of the numerous gods of Hinduism and the various human embodiments of these gods, he was confronted in his time with the cult of the saints and of Mary. Luther said of Mary, "She is the servant because she has born to me God's son so that I can believe in him."¹² While he appreciated the saints insofar as they could provide us with exemplary godly lives and therefore serve a pedagogical function, he realized that they have no redemptive value. The reason was simple: God had not chosen to disclose God's self to us in any of them, but only in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ as the Ladder to God

Only through the human being Jesus can we approach God, because "the humanity is that holy ladder of ours, mentioned in Genesis 28:12, by which we ascend to the knowledge of God."¹³ Only through the impression of the life and destiny of Jesus do we realize that God loves us. Only through Jesus do we obtain the appropriate understanding of God and God's activities. This means that Jesus is not important because he was such an effective preacher or because of the miracles he performed or the saintly life he led. Jesus is decisive for us because he is the mediator of God's salvational activity. This emphasis on Christ collapsed all the other ways in which medieval Christians approached God, understood God's will, or attempted to dispose God favorably to them. Christ alone was Luther's decisive insight.

As we have seen, the reason for Christ alone was founded in God's decision to disclose God's self only in Jesus. Yet Luther realized that this divine self-disclosure hinged on the unique relationship between God and Christ. To mediate God completely, Christ could not be just a saint or an avatar. He had to be completely and totally God. Otherwise he could not have mediated God. At the same time Christ had to be completely and totally human. Otherwise he could not have reached us and identified himself with us. Only as one being with the Father, a point that Luther affirmed with the Council of Nicaea,

12. Martin Luther, *Sermon on John 1:1ff* (1522), in WA 11:227.12–13.

13. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517/18), in LW 29:111, in his comments on Heb. 1:2.

could Christ mediate God. Therefore Luther claimed, “Christ does not consist of soul and body, but of humanity and divinity. He has not only assumed human nature, meaning that he consists of body and soul.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Luther affirmed “that that which Christ suffered can also be transferred to God, because they are one.”¹⁵

In listening to tradition, especially to the church fathers, Luther did not put his trust in human words. He claimed that he would follow neither the writings of Augustine nor those of any other theologian if the Bible did not affirm their teachings. He even stated, “One can rather believe a simple lay person who quotes Scripture than the Pope or a council that does not quote Scripture.”¹⁶ Our knowledge of Christ cannot rest on theological deductions or human conclusions, but must ultimately be substantiated through God’s Word as reflected in Scripture. Scripture alone is the ultimate foundation of our faith. Yet by emphasizing the Bible as our sole source of salvific knowledge, does not Luther introduce a printed pope, the Bible, instead of the pope in Rome? Luther would vehemently reject such a conclusion since the veracity of that which is contained in the Bible was never founded on the basis of its simply being printed there.

Luther was not a biblical literalist, and unlike John Calvin (1509–64) he did not expound one biblical book after the other. For him, there were central biblical writings and passages and there were peripheral ones. Central for him was whatever communicated Christ most clearly. Peripheral was everything else that had hardly anything to do with Christ, such as large parts of the Jewish ceremonial law or the Letter of James. Luther commented that though James “mentions Christ several times, he does not teach about him but promulgates a general belief in God.”¹⁷ Faith for Luther was no longer simply holding certain things to be true, such as the pronouncements of the church councils or of the pope, or even every letter of the Bible. Faith for him was a personal trust—trust in Jesus Christ, who is communicated to us through the Bible and who leads us to God the Father, from whom alone we can have salvation in the hereafter and guidance in the here and now. Therefore Luther returned to the central tenet of the Christian faith, God in Christ, who is both sovereign and compassionate, who accepts us without any precondition, and to whom we respond with a faith active in love.

14. Martin Luther, *Disputation on De divinitate et merita Christi* (1540), in WA 39/2:110.22–23.

15. Luther, *Disputation on De divinitate et merita Christi* (1540), in WA 39/2:121.1–2.

16. Martin Luther, *Contra Malignum I. Eccii iudicium M. Lutheri defensio* (1519), in WA 2:649.2–3.

17. Martin Luther, *Vorrede auf die Epistel S. Jacobi und Jude* (1546), in WA DB 7:385.20–22.

PRESUPPOSITIONS FOR THE FAITH

Three presuppositions are essential if we want to understand the Christian faith: theology, revelation, and the Bible. In contrast to Islam, the Christian faith is not a faith that requires foremost obedience. As we can gather from the story of the conversion of the court official of the queen of Ethiopia, Philip did not ask him, “Do you believe what you are reading?” but rather, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30). The Christian faith is not an obedient faith but a discerning faith. Therefore it is necessary that we espouse our faith in a logically coherent manner without any contradictions. This is exactly the task of theology. The Christian faith is not an assortment of ideas according to one’s gusto. It presupposes that God has made known God’s self to us. This self-disclosure of God, not our own ideas, is the presupposition for our faith. Only when we have been exposed to this self-disclosure of God are our thoughts about God in order. Furthermore, we are not the first Christians. There is a long history of God interacting with humanity. This history has been reflected in the Bible, so to speak, as a faith witness. If we want to talk about our faith, we must compare it with this scriptural witness and correct our faith accordingly, lest we advance our own ideas instead of the historically validated Christian faith. But now let us first turn to theology.

THEOLOGY

As with many concepts of the Christian faith, the term “theology” comes from the Greek language, since Greek was the dominant language in the Roman Empire during the time of nascent Christianity. In this language, theology first meant a (mythical) narrative of the gods. This explains why Greek poets such as Homer (ca. 800 BC) and Hesiod (ca. 700 BC) were called theologians. A few centuries later Aristotle (384–322 BC), who was the most famous student of Plato (428/27–348/47 BC), wrote in his *Metaphysics* that there is a scientific philosophy that comprises all knowledge. He called this science “theology.” For the Christians, therefore, theology was the science of the all-encompassing meaning of God.

Consequently, one can refer to the authors of the Gospels and to Paul as the first Christian theologians. But this designation would not fit these authors. They composed their writings to convince people of the truthfulness of the Christian faith and not primarily to espouse the Christian faith in a logically coherent fashion. They were most of all interested in proclaiming this faith. This is even true for the so-called apostolic fathers of the second (Christian) century, such as Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215) and the famous Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (ca. 69–ca. 155).

Beginning and History of Christian Theology

Theologians in their own right appear only with the early Christian apologists of the second century, such as Quadratus (d. ca. 130) and Aristides of Athens

(d. ca. 125). The apologists attempted to defend Christianity against various attacks and tried to show that the Christian faith is no superstition but can be presented in a reasonable manner. This strategy of defense became necessary since in the second century more and more people accepted the Christian faith and the secular authorities became increasingly suspicious. Aristides, for instance, attempted to portray Christians as a new race that led humanity from its decay to new life. Justin Martyr, who died in Lyons in 165 during a persecution of Christians, showed in two apologies that the Christian faith is the true philosophy in contrast to the pagan philosophies in which one cannot sense God's Spirit at work.

The most important apologist of early Christianity was Origen of Alexandria, Egypt (ca. 185–ca. 253). Around 246 Origen attacked the eclectic Platonist Celsus, who had claimed that a reasonable Christian theology is a contradiction in itself because Christianity is hostile to all human values. Origen defended the Christian faith as intellectually credible and showed that Christians are at least as decent a people as pagans, or even better. While Christians at that time did not serve as soldiers of the pagan state and refused to function in various public offices, Origen emphasized that they helped the country by offering prayers and by teaching the people to lead honest lives. His work *On First Principles* was the first Christian systematic theology. In the introduction he showed that the apostles had rendered only that which was necessary for salvation, while the rest was up to later theologians to expound. Origen was convinced that the Christian faith offered a new and comprehensive understanding of the world that was superior to that offered by Hellenistic culture, but it was not necessarily opposed to that culture.

What Origen endeavored to do for the whole church was accomplished five centuries later by John of Damascus (ca. 650–749/753) for the Orthodox Church with his *Fountain of Knowledge*. In part three of this apologetic writing, John presented *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, which is often printed separately and contains a systematic exposition of the whole theological tradition. It gained virtually normative status in the Greek Church. John's intention was not to introduce new teachings but to answer—with the help of the church fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzen (ca. 329–390) and Basil the Great (ca. 330–379)—the most important questions about faith during his time. John's work is still influential for Eastern Orthodoxy.

Looking at Western Christianity, we must mention Augustine, bishop of Hippo Regius in present-day Algeria. In his voluminous work *The City of God* he demonstrated the superiority of the kingdom of God over the worldly kingdom, a notion that in the Middle Ages furthered the struggle between the emperor's and the pope's supremacy over Christianity. The reason for

his book, however, was the pagan claim that the sack of Rome in 410 by King Alaric and his Visigoths was due to the wrath of the ancient gods over the conversion of so many people to Christianity. Augustine showed that the devastation of Rome was rather the result of God's wrath over the moral depravity of the pagans. As we saw in the introduction, Martin Luther learned as an Augustinian monk that one can obtain eternal bliss only through God's undeserved grace. As a sinful human being, one can only expect God's rejection. For Augustine it was important that an individual Christian always be part of an ecclesial community, the only institution through which one could hear about a gracious God. The Christian faith is not a private thing but is nourished and strengthened through the Christian community.

One could name many other theologians who contributed to an explanation of the Christian faith in an intellectually acceptable fashion. In the Middle Ages we must at least mention two, Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109) from northern Italy and Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274) from southern Italy.

Anselm is still well known today because of three slim books. In his *Mono-*logion** he deals with an issue still bothering many people today: how God's wisdom and justice can be reconciled with the existence of evil in this world. In his *Proslogion*, addressed to God, he deals with the so-called ontological proof of the existence of God. Anselm starts with the notion that God is the most perfect being and concludes that God's perfection entails God's existence, otherwise God would not be perfect. This kind of reasoning has often been misunderstood as an actual proof of God's existence. Yet Anselm confesses at the conclusion that so far he had only believed in God's existence, but now he understood that God must indeed exist. In this, Anselm wanted to show that God's existence can be intellectually credible. In his already mentioned work *Why God Became Man*, Anselm develops the so-called theory of satisfaction to show why God became human. Since a human can never do what God requires of a person, someone else must make up for that person's deficiencies so that those deficiencies can be equalized before God. Yet such a feat can never be accomplished by a human being but only by God's own self. Therefore God must become human so that this work can be attributed to a human person. From these writings we see that Anselm's whole theological work is dedicated to the intelligibility of the Christian faith, but not to replacing faith by reason. The point for him is that what one believes, one must also be able to understand.

The Roman Catholic Church holds Thomas Aquinas in highest esteem as a theological teacher and declared him at Vatican I (1869–70) to be the principal theologian of the Church. Thomas spent nearly ten years on his most important work, the *Summa Theologica*, in which he offered a comprehensive

and clear exposition of the Christian faith in the framework of questions and answers. He achieved a reasonable exposition of the Christian faith with the help of Aristotle's philosophy. God is understood as the rational cause of the universe toward whom humans strive. The *Summa* is divided in three parts: (a) God, creation, and anthropology; (b) ethics; and (c) the person and work of Christ, which includes the sacraments. An envisioned fourth part concerning eschatology was never finished by Thomas but was by a later theologian.

Following Aristotle, Thomas considers God as the unmoved, or prime, mover and then arrives at five proofs for the existence of God: (1) God as the unmoved mover brings the world into existence. (2) As the necessary first cause of all things, God is the first cause of the chain of causes and effects. (3) As an absolutely necessary being, God endows all not-necessary beings with existence. (4) All imperfect beings are dependent on God as the absolutely perfect being. Finally, (5) God is the reasonable architect of the world. One can rightly ask whether such an unmoved mover is identical with the Father of Jesus Christ or only a lifeless construct. This and similar questions were raised by Martin Luther, often in direct contradiction to Thomas and Aristotle, whom he always called "the pagan."

Luther himself was not a systematic theologian who wrote a treatise on the Christian faith. His writings were occasioned by the problems people encountered in daily life or were a defense of his Reformation principles against attacks of his opponents. It was Luther's coworker Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) who wrote a textbook containing the theology of the Reformation. His *Loci* (general points of theological matters) was first published in 1521 and reworked several times. The doctrine of God and of humanity is only briefly noted. The salvational emphasis becomes clear when Melanchthon states at the beginning of his treatise that to know Christ means "to know his benefits and not as they teach to perceive his natures and the mode of his incarnation."¹ With this verdict he significantly reduced the medieval proliferation of theological items and the often minute distinctions and obscure applications. Important for him is what Christ has done for us.

John Calvin, the Reformer of Geneva, Switzerland, composed the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. First issued in 1536 and reissued until 1559 in various improved editions, the *Institutes* is an attempt to explain the Christian faith. More than a thousand pages long, this treatise starts just like the Apostles' Creed with God the creator and Christ the savior and covers all

1. Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, trans. Charles Leander Hill (Boston: Meador, 1944), 68.

significant aspects of the Christian faith. Calvin emphasizes the sovereignty of God as well as God's activity in history, which can be gleaned from the Bible. Through his activity in history God affects salvation for his people, whom he has chosen and even predestined. Calvin's emphasis on salvation through God alone and not through human cooperation shows that he is in line with the Lutheran Reformation.

Before we come to the present situation of theology, we must mention two important theologians of modernity. The first is Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), a Reformed theologian active at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In contrast to the Enlightenment period in which Christian religion was often reduced to morals, Schleiermacher argued that religion "is neither thinking nor acting but intuition and feeling."² Religion touches the inner human being and must be cultivated in the communion of a person with the universe. Humans have a capacity for religion, and in contemplating the universe one has the feeling of being touched by the infinite. Schleiermacher was influenced by Romanticism and also indebted to the Moravian piety in which he had been educated. In his dogmatics, *The Christian Faith*, he shows that the Christian self-consciousness issues from salvation achieved by Jesus. In Jesus of Nazareth the absolute dependence on God becomes visible in an unbroken way, and we become cognizant of our own dependence on God, a dependence strengthened by Jesus. The Christian faith is founded on Christ alone. Schleiermacher is often called the father of Protestant theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although Schleiermacher was often too liberal for Karl Barth, since, according to Barth, he did not emphasize God's Word strongly enough, Barth still had Schleiermacher's picture hanging over his desk.

The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, whom we have already mentioned, is the second important theologian of modernity. He is famous for his *Church Dogmatics*, which comprises more than six thousand pages and, like Thomas Aquinas' *Summa*, was never finished. He is also the founder of the so-called dialectic or neo-Reformation theology. In contradistinction to the liberal theology of the nineteenth century, and similar to Søren Kierkegaard, Barth emphasized the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity. If we want to know something about God, he argued, we cannot obtain this knowledge through reason, but through God's Word alone. Therefore any talk about God as expounded in the religions of the world is a human fabrication and sinful. In his theological writings Barth attempted to strictly

2. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. and ed. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

delineate his insights from God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Since this was also the concern of the Reformation, the designation of this movement as neo-Reformation is fitting. The most important Protestant theologians of the second half of the twentieth century, such as Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926) from the Reformed tradition and the Lutheran Wolfhart Pannenberg (b. 1928), took God's self-disclosure as the starting point for their theological deliberations.

But where was Lutheran theology during the past few centuries? In Germany, one must think of the nineteenth-century Erlangen School and its founder Adolf von Harless (1806–79). In this school of thought, theology has to be related to the church. Contrary to Schleiermacher's view, theology is not a discipline for church governance, since it has its origin in the faith experience within the church. Therefore true Christian theology must stem from the ecclesial faith of the Christian community. Under Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810–77), Erlangen theology reached its climax. In his most well-known publication, *The Proof of Scripture: A Theological Investigation*, he attempts to establish a biblical foundation for the Christian doctrine. The starting point for him is "Christianity, the communion of God and humanity, personally mediated by Jesus Christ."³ Theological assertions can be attested to by the personal experience of a theologian. This theology is also called the Erlangen theology of experience, a movement that cannot deny its pietistic influence. Outside of Erlangen one must mention Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802–69), the guardian of Lutheran confessional identity. A son of a Reformed pastor, he embodied ever more strongly a Lutheran theology. As editor of the *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* (Protestant church gazette), he exerted significant influence on church and theology. Influenced by the awakening in northern Germany, he endeavored to stem the tide of an alleged pantheism caused by Schleiermacher and representatives of a rationalistic theology. His main strength and his merit were in a critical apologetics and in showing that the Old Testament was an actual disclosure of God, in contradiction to what one often heard from rationalistic exegetes.

But now let us return to the twentieth century. Jürgen Moltmann in the second half of the century wrote his seminal publication *Theology of Hope* (1964), in which he refuted Karl Barth's approach. For Barth, God's self-disclosure occurred, so to speak, vertically from above, resulting in a static understanding of history. According to Moltmann, however, God is a history-making God, and therefore history is always directed toward the goal predestined by God. With his emphasis on the future-directedness of God's activity,

3. Johann Ch. K. von Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis. Ein theologischer Versuch*, 2nd ed. (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1857), 18.

Moltmann rediscovered the eschatological structure of the Christian faith. He continued this approach in numerous publications, always emphasizing the social relevance of the Christian faith. As a result, he became one of the most influential theologians of the World Council of Churches.

When Wolfhart Pannenberg published in 1961 his “Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation,” he immediately received the attention of the theological world. Pannenberg argued that God’s self-disclosure had not occurred in a historical salvation ghetto but in the context of world history and therefore must be accessible to anybody who has eyes to see. With this approach he freed the Christian faith from the ecclesial ghetto of pious people into which Barth had steered that faith. While Barth had emphasized the opposition of worldly knowledge and faith knowledge, for Pannenberg there is only the commonly accessible arena of world history since faith and reason belong together. Faith does not mean to believe certain things or certain statements, but to trust that the God who has proven to be trustworthy in the past will also be trustworthy in the future. Pannenberg has also had a decisive influence in the ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, since in Roman Catholicism the congruence of faith and reason has always been important.

In addition to the theological approaches discussed above, there are many other ways of doing theology today. This is evident in the many “theologies of,” such as theology of liberation, theology of the environment, theology of the underprivileged, and so on. These approaches show that theology often concerns itself with issues that are neglected in the world.

Three Essential Functions of Theology

We have seen how theology has changed through the centuries as a result of the context in which it originated and the new questions and issues constantly being raised. Examples of this are the discussion of indulgences during the time of the Reformation and the endeavors of the church in the fourth century to correctly determine the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and to phrase it in acceptable terminology. Nevertheless, Martin Luther’s assertion in his *Commentary on Galatians* that love should issue from faith is timeless when he says, “This is the perfect doctrine of both faith and love. It is also the shortest and the longest kind of theology—the shortest so far as words and sentences are concerned; but in practice it is wider, longer, and deeper, and higher than the whole world.”⁴ Theology comprises both dogmatics

4. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* ([1531] 1535), in *LW* 27:59.

(the doctrine of faith) and ethics (the doctrine of love). How then should we expound the doctrine of faith? The German American theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) writes, “Theology, as a function of the church, must serve the needs of the church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message, and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.”⁵ Theology is concerned with the truth of the Christian message, and this message must be pronounced anew in every generation so that it satisfies the demands of its time. The Lutheran theologian Christian Ernst Luthardt (1823–1902) writes, “While the church simply has to proclaim God’s salvational revelation to humanity, theology has the task to justify academically the proclamation of the church.”⁶ This proclamation must be justified before the one who proclaims, meaning the church; then before the people who hear the proclamation; and finally before God, whose proclamation is being heard. This proclamation involves the three functions of theology: (1) to be critical of itself in propounding an ecclesial theology, (2) to be apologetic in expounding its content to the world in a logically coherent way, and (3) to be oriented doxologically before God, whom it praises with its work.

The *critical function of theology* is often misunderstood. In contrast to the attitude of many critical and liberal people, a theologian’s purpose is not to show what we can no longer believe today. The opposite is true! The function of theology is to critically construe the content of our faith. Thoughtful Christian faith is founded on God’s activity in history. Lest it degenerate into superstition, it must always critically reflect on its own history. As humans we can reflect on our actions and thoughts and do not primarily live instinctively as animals do. So, for instance, when a synod of the church convenes, it should ask how we can most effectively proclaim the gospel in word and deed under the changed conditions of the church and world. The conclusion of our deliberations cannot be that we must say something different. In so doing we would abandon the gospel. Yet often we must say the same thing differently so that the gospel does not sound antiquated.

The world does not stand still, and we should answer the questions not of yesterday but of today. The answer, too, should not be in a language of yesteryear, but of the present. If the critical dimension is missing, we are in danger of becoming anachronistic and a stumbling stone for people instead of a beacon that points to the way of the future. We would also overlook the

5. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation: Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 3.

6. Chr. Ernst Luthardt, *Kompensium der Dogmatik*, 14th ed., ed. Robert Jelke (Leipzig: Dörfpling & Franke, 1937), 5.

admonition of Paul: “For now we see in the mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Since we are not yet in heaven, we must endeavor to explain the gospel in the most convincing way.

This critical dimension is not only directed in a self-critical way against ourselves; it is also at work in our association with those who are fellow sojourners. For instance, it was one of the great discoveries of the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II (1962–65) that Christians of other traditions also have a serious interest in the gospel. The representatives of the Vatican Council recognized that these others are sisters and brothers in Christ, and therefore ecumenical cooperation is not the private hobby of some Christians but intrinsically belongs to every Christian. While listening to these other Christians, Vatican II rediscovered, among other things, how important the knowledge of the Bible is for all Christians and that the laity has a very important function in the church.

In ecumenical dialogue we become aware of how others see us, and we learn that things we take as a matter of fact are not necessarily so. Lutherans, for instance, take for granted that Christ is really present in, with, and under bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper. In ecumenical dialogue, however, Roman Catholic partners questioned this belief, to the surprise of the Lutherans. They concluded that since Lutherans do not say how Christ is actually present in the Lord’s Supper, they did not believe in the real presence of Christ. Only the assurance by the Lutherans that it is Christ’s own business how he is present convinced the Roman Catholics that Lutherans take the bodily presence of Christ as seriously as they do. Therefore a presumed difference was abolished, and both parties grew closer together.

The *apologetic function of theology* is also often misunderstood. It does not mean that Christians should apologize that we are still around, but that we should heed 1 Peter 3:15–16: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Apologetics also does not mean throwing mud at each other. But we should explain to everyone who wants to know, in an intellectually convincing way, what we believe and why we believe it. It is of utmost importance to explain our faith in an understandable and convincing manner, because Christianity is often rejected out of ignorance or misinformation. There are many people, especially natural scientists, who believe that faith in the God who created the world and still maintains it excludes a biological understanding of the development of life, and vice versa. Yet even Charles Darwin (1809–82), who promulgated the theory of evolution, thought

that God had created everything from one species or from several species.⁷ Therefore it comes as no surprise that the American popular scientist John Fiske (1842–1901) claimed, “Evolution is God’s way of doing things.”⁸

In our apologetic endeavors we relate God’s self-disclosure to our world and ask which conceptuality is most appropriate for today. Since the world continuously changes, this is an ever new task. We can discern this, for example, in the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. The narrative in Genesis 2 mirrors the experience of the Israelites in the climate of the steppe in Palestine. The Israelites depended on God sending rain for something to grow and thrive. The red earth reminded them of their own skin, which was tanned by wind and weather, and also of the fact that they came from dust and returned to dust. Nevertheless, they were commanded to cultivate the earth and to integrate the animals into their own sphere of life by giving the animals names. Yet the drudgery of daily life eventuated through human sinfulness and therefore could not be attributed to God.

When the Israelites entered the Babylonian captivity, this creation narrative no longer sufficed to explain the Israelite faith in God the creator. The Babylonians were convinced that the stars, sun, and moon had considerable influence on the destiny of every person. Furthermore, they thought that the god Marduk had created the earth by killing the goddess Tiamat and forming the world from her body. It was the task of humans to be servants of the gods. Against these ideas the Israelites affirmed in Genesis 1 that the world could have come into being only through their God, who in unique sovereignty had created everything through God’s word, including the sun, the moon, and the stars. These heavenly bodies were not powers in their own right but only fulfilled the functions for which they were designated by God. Moreover, humans were not servants of God but were created in God’s image and as God’s representatives. In God’s name and according to God’s intentions, they were to become stewards of creation. In this new situation of the Babylonian exile, the confession of God the creator had to be reformulated in confrontation with the Babylonian creation myths.

The apologetic function of theology does not demonstrate that the Christian faith is true, because faith is always founded on trust and not on empirical knowledge. But this function attempts to explain the faith in the most convincing way so that everybody can understand what this faith in God is all about. Therefore apologetics invites all kinds of questions that move human hearts

7. Cf. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), in *The Works of Charles Darwin*, ed. Paul H. Barrett, and R. B. Freeman (London: Pickering, 1988), 15:346–47.

8. As quoted in Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897), 460.

and minds. By so doing it need not be afraid that it surrenders to unbelief. Since God has endowed humans with reason, Christians are always summoned to understand their own faith in order not to indulge in credulity.

The *doxological function of theology* results from the very exposition of the Christian faith. We are to glorify God with all that we do, which includes our exposition of what and in whom we believe. Though God does not need us, he accepts our service to explain in the best possible way God and God's working. From the very beginning, the Christian faith was no private enterprise but was transmitted into the world in word and deed. This missionary activity serves to glorify God and to make him known to all humanity. Theological reflection is not conducted to glorify us or to increase the influence of Christianity; it is conducted only for God's sake and for the sake of the gospel. Theology therefore is fundamental to being a Christian. It belongs essentially to the Christian faith and to the glorification of God. As Christians we owe it to God to make God and God's deeds known to everybody in the best possible way.

Our whole life is intrinsically theological, whether we think so or not. We may do something in a certain way because we have always done it that way, or because we have fun doing it, or because it is the simplest way of doing it. Each of these motivations has theological consequences. We always act theologically, and the question is whether our actions are congruent with God's will.

Theological considerations show us what kind of theology is behind our activities and those of the church. Theological thinking therefore is the intentional attempt to raise into consciousness the motivations behind our actions. For instance, we can fall prey to working for righteousness' sake without knowing why this approach is wrong. Yet when we realize the problematic aspect of this attitude through theological reflection, we can attempt to avoid working for righteousness in our actions. This means that theological reflection does not automatically make us better people, but in applying it we can at least attempt to avoid mistakes. Even our best theology is not perfect, because we are sinful people living in the sinful context of this world. Theology is always on the way—on the way to articulating more convincingly the unchangeable gospel. Since theological work is always fragmentary, we are dependent on God's assistance and on God's forgiveness of our theological mistakes. This saves us from self-assuredness. As theologians we live by God's grace to be granted the right insight into God's activities. But theology remains a barren shell if it is not filled by God's self-disclosure as its norm and content.

Yet how can we still talk about God's self-disclosure in a world shaped by reason? Here we turn to the topic of revelation.