

Why Luther's Magisterial/Ministerial Dialectic Does Not Denigrate the Authority of Science and History

"Go and tell John what you hear and see..." (Matthew 11:4)

The predominant theological view of the magisterial/ministerial employment of reason-dialectic (MMD) holds that rational inquiries are undertaken according to either one of two completely disparate postures. The magisterial (MAG) view holds that the inquirer stands as both arbiter and judge of truth-matters on the basis of human reason alone. The ministerial (MIN) posture by contrast exercises reason solely *under* the authority of *revealed* truth as is expressed in Scripture. Consequently, MIN exercises no autonomous judgment, but rather acts and reasons in a manner that is consistent with the dictates of the omniscient and all-wise God who is the author of Holy Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). With respect to the Bible, this principle is alleged by many adherents to indicate that reason cannot be employed for the purpose of clarifying or correcting biblical interpretation in the light of established scientific and historical facts. And indeed it is the case that, in the absence of other mediating factors, this principle would bar all non-biblical data from impacting our interpretation of Scripture; most notably Genesis chapter 1. It is on these grounds that Martin Luther is said to have forbidden the employment of MAG at any point in our proclamation of the Gospel. The purpose of my essay is to challenge what I judge to be a serious misrepresentation on the issue of his adherence to MMD in light of **two relevant fundamental mediating factors** with respect to his bringing MMD to bear on *actual* practice.

It should first be highlighted however that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) fully adheres to the *authority* of MMD without qualification. For example, in its study text, *In Christ All Things Hold Together*, the LCMS makes two statements that highlight these limitations:

"[The proper function of reason] is that of a servant oriented to the service of neighbor, rather than that of a usurping judge that aims to correct or to supplant God... The wrong use of reason...allows human reason to judge which aspects of God's Words are (or are not) acceptable."

*"Science is a spectacular manifestation of human reason. But for all its success and power, still science is rightly understood as a servant... **Science is not authorized to stand as an arbiter over God and His Word**" (Boldface mine).*

Yet in its endeavor to identify where MAG may legitimately be exercised in light of Scripture, these statements both over-simplify and misconstrue, and are consequently invalid. For example, the task of honing an interpretation of Genesis 1 in light of scientific facts entails an altogether different venture from "*supplanting God*." Also, the second quote invalidly assumes that the LCMS view of Gen. 1 is unassailable. Yet that position has never been critically substantiated and so commits the fallacy of *begging the question*. Thirdly, since the context of the second paragraph entails discerning a correct interpretation, it must be noted that knowledge that is attained by the scientific method is categorically distinct from knowledge that is attained by means of revelation (either from Scripture or inter-human verbal communication). For this reason, the *scientific* claim that the "Big Bang" describes the beginning of the universe out of nothing does not entail usurping the authority of Gen. 1:1 (a text which in any case is **non-science specific**). As science is not equipped to override doctrine that is attained from biblical revelation, likewise theology has neither the authority nor the competence to dismiss out-of-hand scientific conclusions that are reached by employing scientific tools according to established scientific methods. This charge must also be judged to be invalid for two more reasons: Firstly even

though Scripture never forbids *honest* reasoning, YECs neglect a vital “first principle” of logic known as the *law of non-contradiction*. In addition, in actual practice, YECs refuse to consider the entire array of relevant evidence, but instead selectively *sift* through *which* of the field of scientific facts they will accept based solely on whether or not they harmonize with their prior interpretation of Genesis 1.

Romans 1:18-20 (taken as a whole) deals a fatal blow to the LCMS posture with respect to MMD. I have elsewhere written extensively on the Apostle Paul’s positive affirmation there, concerning the validity of the witness of nature as a clear indicator of “[God’s] *eternal power and deity*,” while it also categorically **forbids “suppress[ing]”** that same testimony. By their neglect of St. Paul’s stricture, YECs commit three damaging errors: They (1) effectively neutralize that visible evidence from nature which indicates that the heavens and the earth must have been created by God in the manner of Genesis 1:1. (2) They contradict the revelatory aspect of *nature* Psalm 19:1 describes which declares that it is “*the heavens* [as distinct from the Word] *which highlight the glory of God, even as* [it is] *the firmament* [sky] *that proclaims His handiwork.*” (3) They thereby undermine the *convicting* aspect of this testimony (Rom. 3:19-20) by denigrating such evidence as “*untrustworthy.*” By that ploy they nullify St. Paul’s pronouncement that humans have “*no excuse*” for their disbelief in a creator (Rom. 1:18b). Consequently, this integral aspect of God’s means of convicting sinners of the folly of their unbelief is negated as null and void. Yet, I repeat, this LCMS posture of suppressing the testimony of nature blatantly contradicts the very same Scriptures that it seeks to defend.

Now returning to the “two relevant fundamental mediating factors” that I broached at the close of my first paragraph, they firstly pertain both to Luther’s employment of his “Two Kingdoms” paradigm and its application of MMD to the interpretation of biblical passages it interfaces with. And secondly, they pertain to Luther’s distinction between his “theology of glory,” on the one hand, and his “theology of the cross” on the other. Yet as I intend to make clear, these two factors share a logical commonality. Firstly it should be noted that the specific aspect of “reason” which Luther opposed was the arrogant presumption that human reasoning could ascertain the ontologically *hidden* aspect of God’s innate being and character. This abuse extended to traits that can in principle be known only through verbal revelation. I believe that this intellectual blunder is comparable to the interpersonal error of assuming the capacity to literally read the mind of, say, one’s spouse in the absence of having an actual conversation. Luther’s view of the depravity of sin is persuasively laid bare in his essay, “The Bondage of the Will,” where he connects the absurdity of that presumption with serious ontological and hamartiological errors. While it is true that God’s *works* can be perceived by our five senses, His *character* and *will* by contrast can only be known by the revelation of Holy Scripture. In summary, Bernard Lohse contrasts these arenas as follows, “*On the basis of Luther’s statements it is necessary to distinguish reason’s tasks within the **scientific sphere** ... and reason in view of the **revelation of God.**”*

Indeed, Luther didn’t deny human beings the capacity to correctly perceive and understand the natural order. He has stated, “*Free choice is allowed to man ... with respect to what is beneath him* [even though] *not what is above him.* The CTCR study book, *The Natural Knowledge of God*, notes that in contrast to matters of salvation (which can only be known by revelation—that is, the *Kingdom on the Right*), “*...for the ordering of the civil realm* [the *Kingdom on the Left*, by contrast]...*appeals to Scripture ... are not, strictly speaking, necessary. Here, Luther notes, not only does one need ‘no light but that of reason’; he can, in the same context observe that in some obvious respects even Scripture itself is **not sufficient** for guiding and directing temporal affairs:* [Luther continues], ‘*Hence God does not in the Scriptures teach us how to build houses, to make clothing, to marry, wage war, to sail the seas, and so on.*’” Indeed, Luther states elsewhere, “*It is certainly true that reason is the most important and highest rank among all things ... best and something divine. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts,*

medicines, laws ... By virtue of this fact it ought to be named the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the beast." Further, *The Book of Concord* states that "human nature still has reason and judgment about the things that the senses can grasp."

I now cite specific examples from the three distinct realms of, firstly, philosophical reflection and disputation, secondly historical analysis, and thirdly natural philosophy (scientific inquiry), in which Luther in each case deferred to the validity of *rational* inquiry and deliberation as opposed to biblical revelation, even though the ramifications in each instance were plainly theological:

1. **Theologically:** "Whenever you consider the doctrine of justification and wonder how or where or in what condition to find a God who justifies or accepts sinners, then you must know that there is no other God than this Man Jesus Christ. Take hold of Him; cling to Him with all your heart, and spurn all speculation about the Divine Majesty; for whoever investigates the majesty of God will be consumed by His glory..."

Philosophically (note the contrast): "But when you leave the doctrine of justification and have to engage in controversy with Jews, Turks, or sectarians, etc., about the power, wisdom, etc., of God, **you must use all your cleverness and effort and be as profound and subtle a controversialist as possible; for then you are in another area...**"

2. **Historical events:** "Christ says, 'If my preaching does not make you willing to believe that God dwells in me ... then believe this because of the works **you see before your eyes**. These works, as no one can deny, are not human; they are divine. They prove and attest powerfully enough that He speaks and works in Me and through Me.' These are the works and miracles which He performed **publicly before the world** giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf—solely by the Word. These are not only divine works, but they also witness of God the Father."

3. **Scientific investigation:** with respect to Augustine's *theological* discussion on the sun and the moon, Luther says: "But I am giving no consideration to [his] ideas, **for the astronomers are the experts from whom it is most convenient to get what may be discussed about these subjects.**

Luther also writes, "It is not an evil thing to investigate the nature and quantities of things ... the causes of the objects of this world **are the most evident of all, far from difficult to know**" (in all of the above indented quotes, boldface mine).

As for the Church of Luther's time, S. Joshua Swamidass writes, "Luther's doubts [concerning Copernicus] notwithstanding, the Lutheran Church never took an official position against Copernican theory. To the contrary, the Lutheran University of Wittenberg played a central role in promoting the study of heliocentrism. It was Georg Joachim Reticus who played a central role in promoting the study of heliocentrism."

At the same time, it is also vital for us to understand that the ultimate authority on this matter is, as Luther himself affirmed, not Luther Himself, but Jesus Christ as manifested in the inerrant Holy Scriptures. It is highly consequential to the point of my essay that the two CTCR quotations on page 1 above, deeply conflict with the following four passages in the Gospel of John: 1) Jesus asks Nicodemus in John 3:12, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" 2) In John 10:37-38 Jesus said

to an angry crowd, *“If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, **believe the works that you may know and understand that the Father is in me.**”* 3) To Jesus’ disciples in the upper room He said, *“Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else **believe me for the sake of the works themselves.**”* Each of these passages highlight a firm consistency between Jesus’ view of extra-biblical evidence and that of the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-20 (p. 2, above). 4) Furthermore, in Matthew 11:21 Jesus indicates that the **public aspect of Jesus’ miracles were so evident** to even non-believing crowds as to bring judgment onto such Galilean towns as Chorazin and Bethsaida, an additional factor which harmonizes Jesus words with Romans 1:20 (boldface mine).

The goal of this essay has been to clarify that Luther’s discriminative employment of reason was contextually specific and by no means monolithic. I have also noted the frequent employment of apologetic arguments by Jesus. In truth, the Scriptures frequently employ such strategies from beginning to end. Since however the focus of my paper is specifically Luther’s opinion on this matter, it is these that I have chosen to emphasize. On the basis of the above quotations, I have offered abundant reasons to reject the extreme posture of the LCMS with respect to MAG on the basis of Luther’s sophisticated application and employment of MMD to a positive end, which is turning sinners from unbelief that they may be led into saving faith in Christ Jesus, not only in his own time, but in our age too!

Rev. Gary Jensen, © April 17, 2018
Zion Lutheran Church (LCMS), Snohomish, WA