

DOCTRINE OF GOD & REVELATION

When the Answer Is "He Said It"

Reason Is Not the Enemy of Faith — and It Is Not Its Foundation

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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There is a man in your congregation who has stopped asking questions.

It happened slowly and for the best of reasons. Somewhere along the way he learned that certain questions are not welcome — that a raised hand about election, or about how a body can be in bread, or about why God says one thing here and something that sounds different there, is a symptom rather than an inquiry. He was told, kindly, not to overthink it. Just have faith. So now when a question surfaces, he swallows it, and he has come to believe that the swallowing *is* faith.

There is another man three pews over who has the opposite problem. He got taken apart at work last month, or by a nephew home from college, or by the neighbor whose church has better arguments and worse doctrine. The case against sounded airtight. He had nothing. He has been quietly rattled ever since, and he has drawn the same conclusion as the first man from the opposite direction: thinking is dangerous. The first man swallowed his questions to protect his faith. The second one wishes he had.

Both of them have been handed a false choice, and the tradition they belong to is the one best equipped to take it away from them.

I. Reason has an office

Start with a fact rather than an argument.

Lutherans built schools. Not incidentally, not later — immediately, as the second act of the Reformation itself. Melancthon wrote the textbooks: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, which is to say logic, taught to boys who would go on to be pastors and printers and magistrates. For the next two centuries the Lutheran curriculum ran on those books. The tradition supposedly most suspicious of human reasoning spent its first hundred years teaching people how to reason.

That is not an accident of history. It follows from what Lutherans confess about what reason is.

Reason is a creature. It is not a rival power to God, not a neutral court where God must plead, not a spark of divinity in us. It is a made thing, like the hand and the eye, given by the same God who gave the Word — damaged in the fall, badly and comprehensively damaged, but not destroyed. A wrecked instrument is still an instrument. It is the reason a man can build a bridge that stands, and it is also the reason he can construct an idol with great care.

Luther, who is remembered mainly for insulting reason, is in fact extravagant about it. In the earthly realm he calls it the highest thing we have, the source of the arts and medicine and law, the faculty that makes human society possible at all. He means it. Where the world is to be governed, farmed, healed, and ordered, reason is not a servant but a magistrate. God does not ask the surgeon to pray instead of studying anatomy.

The confessional distinction is not *reason versus faith*. It is a question of jurisdiction, and it has a name: reason is **ministerial, not magisterial**. Ministerial reason serves the Word — it arranges what Scripture says, compares passage with passage, sorts, defines, notices when two things have been confused, notices when one thing has been split. Magisterial reason sits over the Word and rules on what Scripture is permitted to have said. The first is a servant doing careful work. The second is a coup.

This is the context of the famous line. In his last sermon at Wittenberg, weeks before he died, Luther called reason the devil's whore. He was not banning thought. He was describing precisely the coup — reason set against the Word in the one matter where it has no competence, the question of how a sinner stands before God. The man who said it had spent thirty years arguing, and arguing well. *The Bondage of the Will* is a sustained and merciless piece of reasoning. He was not against the instrument. He was against the instrument's mutiny.

So the first man in the pew can be told something simple and true: your question is not unbelief. It is reason doing the job it was made for. Ask it.

II. Reason has a wall

But he will run into something, and it is better to hand him the map before he does.

Somewhere in this tradition — sooner rather than later — he will be told two things that he cannot fit together, and he will be told that both are true and that no one is going to explain how. This is the place where honest people conclude that Lutherans are cheating.

Everything depends on a distinction here, and it is not a subtle one once you see it.

A **contradiction** asserts A and not-A, in the same respect, at the same time. Reason must reject a contradiction, and so must faith, for a theological reason and not merely a logical one: God does not lie (Titus 1:2), and He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13). A God who contradicted Himself would be a God whose promises meant nothing, which is to say no comfort at all. Contradiction is not a mystery we humbly accept. It is an error we are obligated to reject.

A **mystery** is different in kind. It is a claim that stands above reason — reason did not generate it, cannot verify it, and cannot explain the mechanism by which it is so. And it has no standing to refuse it, because the claim does not rest on reason's evidence in the first place. It rests on testimony from the only witness who was there.

How do you tell them apart in practice? Here is the test that costs something. A contradiction is found by examining the *claim*. A mystery is found by examining *ourselves*. When we say "that can't be," we very rarely mean that we have located a formal contradiction. What we mean, almost always, is: *I cannot see how*. Those are not the same sentence, and the distance between them is the whole of this essay.

Watch the Formula of Concord do it. Confronted with the Supper and the entirely reasonable question — how can a body be in bread, how can one body be in a thousand places at once, on a thousand altars — the Formula does not answer. It declines the question. It says, in effect, that the manner is not ours to investigate, and it holds the text: *this is my body*. That looks like evasion until you notice what it actually is. It is a servant recognizing the edge of his jurisdiction and refusing to legislate past it. Reason had a real question. Reason did not have authority to overturn a sentence spoken by the Lord on the night He was betrayed on the grounds that it could not diagram the mechanism.

The same shape appears everywhere you look:

Christ's two natures. Chalcedon gives you four words and no mechanism: the natures are united without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. Every one of those is a fence, and the field inside is empty. The council was not lazy. It was fencing off the errors and refusing to speculate about the middle.

Simul iustus et peccator. Righteous and a sinner at once — not half of each, not righteous on Sundays. Fully both, because the two are true in different respects, one before God in Christ and one in myself. Reason wants to average them. Averaging them destroys the article.

Election. The Formula affirms that the elect are chosen in Christ, and that God desires all to be saved and none to perish, and then it declines — flatly, and knowing exactly what it is declining — to complete the symmetry. It will not say God chose some for destruction. Reason finds this intolerable, because reason can see that the logic wants a second half. The confession answers that we are to look for election where God has actually put it, in Christ and in the promise attached to our baptism, and not in a secret decree we were never shown.

Notice what these have in common. In every case the confession states both halves plainly and refuses the synthesis. That refusal is not a failure of nerve. It is the recognition that a synthesis would require information we do not have, and that inventing it

would cost us one of the two halves — and in each case the half that gets quietly dropped is the one that was comforting somebody.

Underneath all of it sits the deepest reason for the wall, and it is not epistemological modesty. It is the cross.

God hides Himself under the opposite of what He appears to be. Reason, standing at Golgotha and reading the evidence competently, reads defeat: a failed teacher, executed, abandoned by God as anyone can plainly see. Every inference is sound. Every conclusion is wrong. That is the pattern — power under weakness, life under death, glory under shame, a body under bread, new birth under a handful of water. The place where reason is most confident about appearances is exactly the place where it is most catastrophically mistaken.

So the wall is not reason's humiliation. Knowing the boundary of your competence is part of competence. A good nurse who says *that is the physician's call* has not failed at nursing. She has done it correctly.

III. Reason at work

Which brings us to the second man — the one who lost the argument and has been rattled ever since.

He probably did lose it. And it is worth telling him why, because the reason is not the one he fears. He did not lose because his position is weaker. He lost, most likely, because his opponent's position was *tidier* — the loose ends had been tucked in, the hard half of some pair had been quietly dropped, and everything fit. Tidiness is a real rhetorical advantage. It is not evidence of truth. The whole burden of this tradition is that God has said things that do not tuck in, and that the tucking-in is precisely how the errors get made.

Which gives reason its positive office, and it turns out to be a demanding one. **Reason's job is to keep distinctions from collapsing.**

God has drawn lines. Law and Gospel — Walther's whole life's work is a manual for not letting those two run together, and he calls it the highest art in theology, which is a remarkable thing to say about an act of distinguishing. The two kinds of righteousness, active and passive. The two kingdoms. The hidden God and the revealed one. The two natures. Christ's work for us and the Spirit's work in us.

And here is a claim you can test against every error you have ever met: false teaching is almost always a line rubbed out, or a line drawn where God drew none. Rubbing out the

line between Law and Gospel gives you either despair or license. Drawing a line where God drew none — between the water and the promise, between the bread and the body — gives you a sacrament with nothing in it.

Which means the value of learning to spot bad reasoning is not that you will win arguments. It is that these are the specific tools by which the lines get erased. A short field guide, with the examples taken from inside the house first, because a man who can only spot fallacies in the church down the road has learned nothing:

Equivocation — one word, two meanings, swapped mid-argument. *Faith* meaning trust in a promise, and *faith* meaning a spiritual act I perform well enough to count. *Free* meaning uncoerced, and *free* meaning able to turn toward God unaided.

Category error — applying the rules of one realm to the other. This is the engine of decision theology: the Gospel's gift is restated as a demand to be met, and the moment it is, it stops being Gospel. It runs the other way too, in the Christian who thinks his baptism excuses him from competence at his job.

False dilemma — reason or faith. Assurance or perseverance. Scripture or the confessions. Grace or effort. Each of these presents as a fork in the road where God laid down a distinction, not a choice.

Genetic fallacy — locating an argument's origin and treating that as a refutation. Our house version is unmistakable: *that sounds Reformed*, or *that sounds Catholic*, said as though it settled anything. Sometimes it is a useful early warning. It is never an answer.

Ad hominem — the man who cited the text is a fool, therefore the text does not say what it says. It does not follow, and it never has.

Appeal to emotion — *I felt God leading me*, which is the version we like to point at, and *that hymn moved me to tears, so it must be sound*, which is the version we don't.

The quotation used to end a conversation. Deploying "reason is the devil's whore" to shut down a sincere question is itself the abuse the phrase was coined to describe. That one deserves to sting a little.

Every item on this list should be run on yourself before it is run on anyone else. That is not a pious flourish. It is the only way the tool stays sharp, because the errors we cannot see are, by definition, the ones inside the house.

The answer

So, to the first man: ask the question. It is not a symptom. You were given a mind by the same God who gave you the promise, and He has never once been embarrassed by an honest inquiry. You will find, often, that there is a real answer and nobody ever told it to you. And you will occasionally find that the answer is a refusal — that the church has looked at your question and declined to speculate, and that the refusal is itself a form of care, protecting something you would have lost in the trade.

To the second man: you are not required to win. The faith was not established by an argument and it will not be dismantled by one. What you are required to do is refuse to let the lines be rubbed out — to notice when the tidy version has quietly dropped a half, and to say so, even if you cannot construct the tidier reply.

And when you have reasoned all the way to the wall, you will find that what is standing on the other side of it is not a puzzle. It is a sentence, spoken over bread, on the worst night of the world, and it does not require you to explain it before it will do you any good:

This is my body, given for you.

Reason cannot get behind that. Its honor is to hand you back to it intact.