

The Depth of the Riches of Knowing God

**Two Sermons by Martin Luther
on the Holy Trinity**

**Translated
by
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Introduction

Luther as Student and Teacher of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The sermons combined in this volume are found in Martin Luther's Church Postil. Both were published in 1544 as part of Caspar Cruciger's *Summer Postil*.¹ While one of them had been published and preached in 1535,² the other is based on a sermon Luther preached in 1537.³

In addition to these sermons, Martin Luther constantly taught the doctrine of the Trinity, including that of the *immanent* Trinity (i.e., the relations of the three Persons of God to each other), in his academic lectures and disputations, in his catechisms, in his sermons, and even in his hymns.⁴ A few highlights must suffice here to demonstrate Luther's life-long engagement with this doctrine—a doctrine which Luther, in the sermons included in this volume, called “the first, lofty, incomprehensible chief article” of the Christian faith, without which “the other articles of faith also cannot be discussed purely and fruitfully.”⁵

In 1505, after completing his philosophical studies at Erfurt University with a master's degree, Luther entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt instead of studying law.⁶ Because offering the sacrifice of the mass, not teaching or preaching, was the central task of the priesthood at the time, Luther prepared for his priestly ordination in 1507, not by obtaining a degree in theology, but by studying the lectures on the canon of the mass by Tübingen theologian Gabriel Biel (1410-1495).⁷ After his ordination, Luther began to study theology at Erfurt University and earned his biblical bachelor's degree in March 1509. In the fall of the same year, he earned the

¹ Weimar Edition (WA) 21:508-524. The translation below is based on the German text in the St. Louis Edition of Luther's Works, vol. 12, pp. 628-659. Another recent English translation of these sermons is found in the American Edition (AE) 78:3-29.

² WA 41:XXII-XXIII, 270-279.

³ WA 45:XXIV, 89-93.

⁴ See Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, rev. ed. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017). In addition to the two sermons found in this volume, Helmer interprets Luther's 1544 trinitarian disputations of George Major and Johannes Faber—now conveniently accessible in AE 73 in an English translation—as well as the hymn *Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice* (see, e.g., *Lutheran Service Book* # 556).

⁵ Helmer, *Trinity*, pp. 6-27, helpfully summarizes the pertinent history of Luther research in the 19th and 20th century. As Helmer notes, their almost exclusive focus on saving faith in the context of the doctrines of justification and *economic* Trinity (the personal *fides qua*), prevented leading interpreters of Luther—such as Albrecht Ritschl, Paul Althaus, Werner Elert, and Gerhard Ebeling—from appreciating the importance of the doctrine of the *immanent* Trinity (a key part of the objective *fides quae*) in Luther's theology. While the former was celebrated and emphasized as the new, exciting center of Luther's theology, the latter tended to be set aside as dead letter and, therefore, a favorite topic for medieval scholasticism's penchant for fruitless metaphysical speculations that were existentially fruitless. All this was owed to Kantian philosophy that distinguishes the inaccessible “thing in itself” from the phenomena, the things as they are perceived by man in time and space—or, in theological terms, God “for me” is privileged at the expense of God as he is in himself. Other renowned scholars, including Karl Holl, accused Luther of various trinitarian heresies. This accusation, however, may say more about the modern interpreter's preferred views than about Luther himself.

⁶ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, tr. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 44.

⁷ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, p. 71.

degree of bachelor of sentences, requiring him to lecture on the standard theological textbook of the time, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (1100-1160).⁸

The first book of Lombard's *Sentences* contains an extensive discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity. Luther apparently prepared for his lecture on this particular doctrine by working through the treatise on the Trinity written by the patron saint of his order, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and by studying the treatise on the Trinity by Hilary of Poitiers (310-367).⁹ Luther's marginal notes to Lombard's *Sentences* and Augustine's treatise on the Trinity are extant.¹⁰

The fact that Luther studied Augustine and Hilary more extensively than the commentaries on Lombard's *Sentences* to prepare for his lecture on the Trinity is significant for his eventual theological method because Augustine and Hilary established and defended the doctrine of the Trinity based on the Scriptures. Luther himself would engage in this approach to this and every other Christian doctrine in his later writings, including the sermons translated in this volume.¹¹

In 1520, Luther published a brief explanation of the three chief parts of the Christian faith, i.e., the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.¹² In the preface, Luther noted that these three parts contain everything set forth in Scripture and everything a Christian needs to know to be saved: The Ten Commandments teach what people should do and leave undone. Once people realize that they cannot do or leave undone what the Ten Commandments teach out of their own strength, the Creed teaches where to seek and find what is necessary so that they may soon do and leave undone what the commandments require. The Lord's Prayer finally teaches how to seek and get what is necessary.¹³

When discussing the Apostles' Creed, Luther divided it into three articles according to the three persons of the Trinity—Father/creation, Son/redemption, and Holy Spirit/sanctification—not into twelve articles according to the number of apostles, as had been common at Luther's time.¹⁴ For Luther, the article concerning the Holy Spirit “is the most important article of the Creed; all the others are based on it.”¹⁵

⁸ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, pp. 93-94.

⁹ Jun Matsuura (ed.), *Martin Luther, Erfurter Annotationen 1509-1510/II* (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna: Böhlau, 2009), pp. LIII, CVII.

¹⁰ Matsuura, *Erfurter Annotationen*, pp. 266-380 (on Lombard's trinitarian distinctions 2-34 in book I of the *Sentences*), 564-614 (on Augustine's *On the Trinity*)

¹¹ E.g., in AE 41:25, Luther quoted from Augustine's *On the Trinity* the following: “My dear man, do not follow my writing as you do Holy Scripture. Instead, whatever you find in Holy Scripture that you would not have believed before, believe without doubt. But in my writings you should regard nothing as certain that you were uncertain about before, unless I have proved its truth.” Following Augustine's example, Luther took the same position regarding his own writings, e.g., in his preface to the Wittenberg edition of his German writings (AE 34:283-285), where he stated: “[I]t behooves us to let the prophets and apostles stand at the professor's lectern, while we, down below at their feet, listen to what they say.”

¹² WA 7:204-229. Beginning in 1522, the *Short Form* became part of Luther's Personal Prayer Book. AE 43:6-7, 13-38.

¹³ AE 43:13.

¹⁴ AE 43:24; Brecht, *Martin Luther*, p. 353.

¹⁵ AE 43:24; see LC II, 61: “Creation is past and redemption is accomplished, but the Holy Spirit carries on his work unceasingly until the last day.”

Additionally, Luther distinguished between historical faith, i.e., what is believed as true *about God*, and saving faith, i.e., believing *in God*. Saving faith cannot be had without historical faith. The former is, in fact, based on the latter, that is, it takes as true *for me* what historical faith receives as objectively true from Scripture, and deals with God accordingly.¹⁶ As Luther explained, “Such faith risks everything in life and death based on what is said about God. It alone makes a Christian and obtains from God everything it wishes. No evil, false heart can have this faith because it is a living faith. It is commanded in the First Commandment which states: ‘I am your God. You shall have no other gods.’”¹⁷ Over the next decade, Luther would go on to refine these teachings in a series of sermons on the catechism in 1528,¹⁸ eventually summarizing them in his 1529 Large and Small Catechisms.

Luther concluded his 1528 *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* with an expansive trinitarian confession that includes all articles of the faith, beginning with the Trinity and creation, discussing the sacraments, all the way to eternal life.¹⁹ This confession foreshadowed the catechisms and the 1536/37 Smalcald Articles. Luther added this confession to forestall any and all arguments after his death that, if he were still alive, he would change his mind on certain or all of his teachings:

[L]et me say once and for all that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the sacrament of the altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert the Word of God and the Scriptures, what will he not be able to do with my or someone else’s words?²⁰

Elaborating on his trinitarian confession set forth in the Smalcald Articles,²¹ Luther’s 1538 treatise on *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith*—i.e., the Apostles’ Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the *Te Deum*²²—elaborated on the idea that the devil (by means of various heretics) has attacked Christ by denying his divine nature, by denying his human nature, and by denying his saving work as the God-Man:

One will not let him be God, another will not let him be man, and the third will not let him do what he has done. Each of the three wants to reduce Christ to nothing. For what does it profit you to confess that he is God, if you do not also

¹⁶ AE 43:24-25.

¹⁷ WA 7:215; see AE 43:24-25.

¹⁸ WA 30.1:2-122.

¹⁹ AE 37:361-372.

²⁰ AE 37:360-361 = SD VII, 30-31.

²¹ At Smalcald, Luther preached a sermon on the three articles of the creed in February 1537. AE 57:243-252.

²² In about 1529, Luther had prepared a German paraphrase and musical setting for the *Te Deum*, traditionally attributed to St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. AE 53:171-175.

believe that he is man? Then you do not have the whole, real Christ with that, but only a phantom of the devil's. What does it profit you to confess that he is man, if you do not also believe that he is God? What does it profit you to confess that he is God and man, if you do not also believe that he has become everything and done everything for you? . . . All three articles must be truly believed, namely, that he is God, further, that he is man, further, that he became man for us If one article is lacking, then all are lacking, for the faith is supposed to be and must be whole and complete. Although it can be weak and afflicted, nevertheless it shall and must be whole, and not false. To be weak does no harm, but to be false—that is eternal death.²³

By formulating the indivisible unity of all three articles concerning faith in Christ in this way, Luther staked out the position of his followers as standing in continuity with the apostles and therefore against the errors, not only of the “classic” heretics (the Arians and Manichaeans), but also of the heresy of the pope and his followers. While the latter affirm Christ's divine and human natures, they deny his saving work.

In the following years, as preparations for a new church council under the leadership of the pope would continue, Luther continued this ecclesiological line of argumentation articulated in the Smalcald Articles' assertion: “We do not concede to the papists that they are the church, for they are not.”²⁴

In his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther presented the fruit of his studies of the early history of the church.²⁵ In this treatise, Luther, among other topics, summarized the reasons for summoning the four chief councils—the Council of Nicaea (325), the Council of Constantinople (381), the Council of Ephesus (431), and the Council of Chalcedon (451)—and their doctrinal decisions regarding the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ.²⁶ Luther concluded this summary by quoting St. Jerome (c. 342-420) who advised fleeing “all the councils of bishops” because they were all about ambition, observing that “we too must have something else and something more reliable for our faith than the councils. That ‘something else’ and ‘something more’ is Holy Scripture.”²⁷

Accordingly, Luther formulated this rule for valid church councils: “[T]hey do not introduce anything new either in matters of faith or of good works; but they defend, as the highest judges and greatest bishops under Christ, the ancient faith and the ancient good works in conformity with Scripture. . . . But if they establish anything new with regard to faith or good works, you may rest assured that the Holy Spirit had no hand in it, but only the unholy spirit with his angels.”²⁸ The four chief councils therefore did no more than defended the biblical doctrines of

²³ AE 34:210.

²⁴ SA III, XII, 1.

²⁵ See AE 41:7-8, where the historical treatises Luther studied are listed.

²⁶ AE 41:54-121.

²⁷ AE 41:120.

²⁸ AE 41:121-122.

the Trinity and of Christ—amply set forth in St. John’s gospel and other NT writings—against the heretics that had arisen at the time.²⁹

In the last years of his life, Luther’s work to teach and defend the doctrine of the Trinity continued unabated. In 1543, for instance, Luther published his treatise *On the Last Words of David* where he, once more, explored the Old Testament basis for the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ.³⁰ Additionally, Luther held three academic disputations on the doctrine of the Trinity at Wittenberg University to train the next generation of theologians in this key doctrine.³¹ In these disputations, Luther once again engaged with the trinitarian teachings of Peter Lombard, Augustine, and Hilary, the three theologians with whom he had begun his career as a theologian teaching the doctrine of the Trinity.³²

In the preface to the 1544 *Disputation on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation of the Son, and on the Law*, Luther warned his students and fellow professors and pointed them again back to the Scriptures, although the heretics themselves appeal to the Scriptures: “[T]here will come other[heretics] who will persecute the article of the Trinity. . . . And as this [article] is a matter set beyond our understanding, it behooves us to be fortified with Sacred Scripture, that we might know how to detect and dismiss slanders and to refute falsehoods because the heretics think that the Holy Scriptures are on their side.”³³

Reason and Revelation: God’s Existence, Essence, and Will

This theme—the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond human understanding and must therefore be believed simply because it is revealed in Scripture, especially in the gospel of John—is also prominent in the two sermons translated in this volume. To make this point, Luther discussed several key biblical passages to demonstrate that the Father, Christ, and the Spirit are three distinct persons while of one divine Essence. He contrasted the clear biblical texts with the ridicule Christians regularly encounter on this point from Jewish, Muslim, and heretical Christians who take pride in their own reason and deride true Christians as fools who believe in three gods. In response to these attacks, Luther simply asked: If humans cannot even fully understand themselves by their own reason, how can they dare to try to understand God’s true Essence without, and even against, his self-revelation in the Scriptures?

Based on Romans 1:20, Luther conceded to human reason that it could, albeit weakly, recognize that there must be one single divine Being who created and preserves the whole world based on the excellence of the creatures and the orderly administration of creation. But Luther denied human reason any insight into the inner Essence of this divine Being as being one God in three persons. God’s innermost essence must be revealed by God himself, as Luther asserted based on 1 Corinthians 2:11.

²⁹ AE 41:121.

³⁰ AE 15:267.

³¹ AE 73:407 (1543), 469 (1544), 516 (1545).

³² E.g., AE 73:471 (# 25).

³³ AE 73:473.

Yet the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is not the only doctrine that must be revealed by God because it is not accessible to human reason. The closely related doctrine of God's Son incarnate in Jesus Christ to save all of humanity without their merit is another such key doctrine where reason will not come to the correct conclusions. Analogizing God to a good ruler or father on earth, reason will instead cling to human actions in conformity with the moral law to be saved eternally. As a result, Jews, Muslims, *and those Christians who follow the pope* deride the doctrine of salvation by faith in the incarnate Son of God alone as foolishness. Without the revelation of the gospel in the Scriptures, human reason is stuck in these pagan, idolatrous notions that God will save only good people.

Luther on Historic Doctrinal Controversies Regarding the Trinity and Christ

As noted earlier, Luther thoroughly studied the history of the trinitarian and Christological controversies in the early church. Luther's sermons repeatedly referred to some of the heretics against whom the apostles and church fathers contended, doing what they could to preserve the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ as it had been revealed by God in his Word.

One of these heretics was Cerinthus (c. 50-100). According to early-church theologian and bishop Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 125-202),³⁴ Cerinthus taught that the Supreme Ruler did not create the world, while the lower powers who had created it were ignorant of the Supreme Ruler. He also claimed that Jesus was the biological child of Joseph and Mary but still more wise and righteous than other people. After Jesus was baptized, Christ descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler of the universe. Before Jesus suffered and rose again, Christ departed from Jesus.³⁵ According to the same Irenaeus, the evangelist John wrote his gospel to refute these teachings of Cerinthus, while those who held beliefs similar to Cerinthus preferred the gospel of Mark.³⁶ Irenaeus also reported that John rushed out of a bathhouse where he had seen Cerinthus, afraid that the bathhouse would collapse to punish Cerinthus.³⁷

Luther also mentioned Arius (c. 250-336). Arius was an elder/presbyter at the church of Alexandria in Egypt who denied the co-equal divinity of the second person of the Trinity by teaching that "there was a time when the Son was not."³⁸ In a comment on 1 John 2:22—"who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ"—Luther noted that this verse referred to Cerinthus and that Arius completed what Cerinthus had begun.³⁹ Luther knew of Arius's gruesome death from the first volume of the supplement to Eusebius's *Church History* written by

³⁴ Irenaeus had heard sermons preached by Polycarp of Smyrna (69-155). Eusebius, *Church History* V, 5. Polycarp, in turn, had heard John the evangelist and other apostles. Eusebius, *Church History* V, 20.

³⁵ *Against Heresies* I, 26, 1. Desiderius Erasmus published the first Latin print edition of this work in 1526. Luther's sermon mentioning Cerinthus was published in 1535. It is possible that Luther had access to this edition because—although only very few manuscripts of Irenaeus's work existed—his 1527 treatise *That These Words of Christ* contains an extensive discussion of Irenaeus's view of the Lord's Supper. AE 37:115-116, 119-120, 143.

³⁶ *Against Heresies* III, 11, 1, 7; see AE 22:7: "It must be viewed as a manifestation of divine grace that Cerinthus assailed this article during the lifetime of the apostles; for this is what prompted John, the foremost of the apostles still living at the time, to write his Gospel."

³⁷ *Against Heresies* III, 3, 4; see Eusebius, *Church History* III, 28, 6; IV, 14, 6; Theodoretus of Cyrrhus, *Compendium of Heretical Accounts* II, 3.

³⁸ Socrates Scholasticus, *Church History* I, 5-6.

³⁹ AE 30:257.

Rufinus of Aquileia (340-410), where the expression *dignam mortem blasphema ac foetida mentis*, cited by Luther, appears.⁴⁰ As Luther noted, the error of Arianism did not die with its founder but persisted over several centuries. In fact, Islam—founded by Mohammed in the early 7th century A.D.—was seen by Luther (as well as other theologians of the time) as a continuation of this Christian heresy because it regards Jesus to be no more than a prophet, i.e., a creature.⁴¹

Luther and the Roman Catholic Church on the Trinity—Controversies Regarding Scripture and the Gospel

It is true that Luther continued the trinitarian orthodoxy inherited from the past. This is certainly what he claimed for himself, as seen in the sermons contained in this volume. It is therefore no accident that Luther's 1537 Smalcald Article begins with a brief summary of "the sublime articles of the divine majesty," i.e., the Trinity, which concludes by stating that "[t]hese articles are not matters of dispute or contention, for both parties confess them."

Consistent with Luther's position, the first three confessions included in the 1580 *Christian Book of Concord*—also known as "the Lutheran Confessions"—are the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds. Similarly, the first article of the 1530 Augsburg Confession confesses the triune God "in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea." And the 1531 Apology of the Augsburg Confession opens by stating: "Our opponents approve Article I of our Confession." The 1577 Formula of Concord expressly "rejected and condemned as wrong, false, heretical, and contrary to the Word of God, the three Creeds, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the Catechisms of Luther" the errors of the new Arians (Unitarians) and anti-Trinitarians.⁴² In the 16th century, these teachings were promoted by Michael Servetus (1509-1553), Giogio Biandrata (15151-1585), Lelio Sozzini (1525-1562), Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604), Matteo Gribaldi (1505-1564), and others.⁴³

At the same time, there are also clear, and important, disagreements between Luther's (and the Lutherans') confession of the Trinity and that of the Roman Catholic Church. The first of these disagreements concerns the basis for the confession of the Trinity. In keeping with his overall approach to Christian doctrine, Luther based the confession of the Trinity exclusively on God's Word. As seen in the sermons contained in this volume—as well as in his other works setting forth the doctrine of the Trinity—Luther carefully established and vigorously defended the biblical basis and contents of this doctrine.

But Catholic theologians of Luther's age taught that Scripture is not enough to arrive at a complete and orthodox confession of who God is.⁴⁴ This too is in keeping with their overall approach to the foundation of doctrine on the magisterium of the church itself.⁴⁵ While

⁴⁰ *Church History* I (X), 13; see AE 41:7. A similar account is found in Cassiodorus's *Tripartite Church History* III, 10, 9-10, a standard church history textbook Luther was familiar with as well. See AE 41:6-7; AE 60:167 note 38.

⁴¹ AE 41:86.

⁴² Ep. XII, 30; see SD XII, 36-38.

⁴³ Currently existing non-trinitarian groups with historical links to Christianity are Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Oneness Pentecostals, and others.

⁴⁴ AE 73:488-489.

⁴⁵ E.g., AE 36:163-164, 186; AE 41:362-363.

contemporary Catholic theologians also hold this view, it is important to recognize that most contemporary academic theologians—including those who are members of denomination emerging in the 16th century—will hold similar views: The Scriptures may contain a generally monotheistic outlook and “triadic formulas” (in the NT), but it was up to the church to develop this maze of hints and “formulas” into a coherent doctrine in a process that took many centuries and may still not be finished.⁴⁶

The problem with the tradition-based approach of Roman Catholic theology even when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity is that it places the church above the Scriptures, the written Word of God. The problem with the modern, academic variant of this theology is that it no longer conceives of the trinitarian doctrine as an accurate description of God’s objective reality based on God’s biblical self-revelation but as an ever-changing series of subjective ideas about God based on human reason and experiences the beginnings of which are documented in Scripture itself. It therefore falls prey to the very same confusion of God’s Word and human reason Luther sought to excise from Christian theology. As Luther recognized, when this happens, reason fashions God in its own legalistic image.

Importantly, however, Luther’s Scriptural approach did not lead him to despise the ecclesial tradition or fashion his own version of creedless religiosity. Instead, he saw himself as the grateful inheritor of the article of the Trinity, clearly taught by God in Scripture, simply confessed in the church’s creeds on the basis of the clear text of God’s biblical Word, and bravely defended by the holy fathers of the church against all heresies by means of that biblical Word. His early studies of Augustine and Hilary certainly contributed to this outlook.

The second disagreement between Luther and Rome is no less fundamental. It concerns the meaning of the Trinity for us. As Luther saw it, while those faithful to the pope confess the orthodox creeds, they do not believe them. He made this claim by deleting the italicized words from the sentence at the end of part one of the 1537 Smalcald Articles: “These articles are not matters of dispute or contention, for both parties *believe and* confess them.”⁴⁷ As noted above, Luther explained in his 1538 treatise on *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith*: “What does it profit you to confess that he is God and man, if you do not also believe that he has become everything and done everything *for you*?”⁴⁸ Put differently, they have a correct historical faith about the Trinity but no faith in the Trinity.

Luther explained this in greater detail in the sermons translated in this volume: Jews and Muslims apply reason to determine who God is. Jews, Muslims—as well as the pope and his followers—apply reason to determine how he saves mankind: Good people go to heaven based on their own good conduct in conformity with the law of the Ruler of the universe, while bad people go to hell.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Edmund J. Fortman, S.J., *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972). Regarding Luther, Fortman, *Triune God*, p. 240, claimed that “the doctrine of the Trinity came to a standstill in his theology,” which he apparently meant as a criticism.

⁴⁷ See *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), p. 415 note 1.

⁴⁸ AE 34:210; see AE 38:310-311.

It is important to keep this serious deficiency of the Roman Catholic doctrine concerning the Holy Trinity in mind when being confronted by claims of Catholic apologists that the Roman Catholic Church has preserved the fullness of the Christian faith. For Luther, the biblical doctrine of salvation—“the gospel”—is a strictly and primarily *theological* doctrine, that is, it directly concerns God’s eternal Essence and will toward humanity. It is not some secondary doctrine one can discuss apart from—or sever from—who one believes God to be because it somehow first emerged in the 16th century as Luther’s personal pet idea.

Put differently, there can be no genuine agreement in the trinitarian doctrine of who God is without agreement in the trinitarian doctrine of how God wills to save mankind. The profound disagreements on the latter doctrine among various Christian denominations are just as serious—and seriously dividing—as the disagreements on the former among Jews, Muslims, and Christians.⁴⁹

Luther and the Eastern Orthodox Churches on the Trinity—the Filioque Controversy Continued

As included in the Lutheran Confessions, the Nicene Creed confesses that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, in Latin: *qui ex patre filioque procedit*.⁵⁰ The sermons included in this volume show that Luther fully and consciously embraced this confession. For instance, Luther stated that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son. That is, he is such a person who *has the divine Essence in eternity from the Father and the Son at the same time*, just as the Son has it from the Father alone.”

In the context of this statement, Luther did not give a scriptural reference to support this assertion. But his line of reasoning is clear in that he proceeds from the eternal generation of the Son by the Father to the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. This argument is consistent with John 16:13-15.

In a different sermon, Luther therefore commented on John 16:13:

Christ points in particular to the distinctive Person of the Holy Spirit or His attribute, also to His divine essence together with the Father and the Son, when He says: “Whatever He hears He will speak.” For here Christ refers to a conversation carried on in the Godhead, a conversation in which no creatures participate. He sets up a pulpit both for the speaker and for the listener. He makes the Father the Preacher and the Holy Spirit the Listener. . . . Thus these are two distinct Persons: He who speaks and the Word that is spoken, that is, the Father

⁴⁹ E.g., AE 12:397: “[In Ps. 51:16,] David makes a distinction among all the religions in the world, even the one instituted by Moses and divinely commanded. From all these religions he separates this one which is through faith in Christ, by which sins are forgiven and righteousness is given together with eternal life, without works and without merits, simply because God is merciful and forgives through Christ.”

⁵⁰ See Aaron Moldenhauer, “A Lutheran Perspective on the *Filioque*,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 87 (2023), pp. 151-172. As Moldenhauer points out, the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord puts the phrase “and the Son” in square brackets and supplies a footnote that paints the phrase as a historically secondary product of “the Western understanding” of the Trinity. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 23 note 28. This is not how Luther and the original compilers of the Book of Concord understood the phrase.

and the Son. Here, however, we find the third Person following these two, namely, *the One who hears both the Speaker and the spoken Word*. . . . Therefore *this Listener must be called the Listener of both the Father and the Son*, not of the Father alone or of the Son alone.⁵¹

On John 16:14, Luther commented:

[H]ere Christ . . . also shows the Holy Spirit's relationship in the Godhead. The Holy Spirit is true God together with Christ and the Father. But He does not have His divine essence from Himself; *He has it from both the Father and Christ*. For Christ says here that the Holy Spirit takes "that which is His," namely, the eternal, divine essence, not only from the Father but also from Christ and thus remains one eternal being or Godhead consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet in distinct Persons.⁵²

And, finally, on John 16:15, Luther remarked:

These are all sublime words; for here Christ is speaking in His own way, not about the creatures but about the sublime and inscrutable essence in the Godhead. In these words He includes and comprehends them all—the Holy Spirit, Himself, and the Father. He says: "What the Father has, I, too, have. And what I have, I did not steal, rob, purchase, or earn; it is Mine from eternity, and yet it is My Father's. Thus I am almighty and eternal God just as He is, and all His glory and majesty are also Mine. They were not presented to Me or given as a fief; nor are they Mine by grace. But it is all entirely My own by nature and from eternity. The only difference is that He is the Father and I am the Son." Christ expresses Himself in a similar vein in John 5:26: "For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself." Thus Christ has all this wholly and completely in Himself by nature or by birth just as the Father has. There is no difference except that He is born of the Father.

Accordingly, Christ makes Himself equal with the Father in every respect and ascribes to Himself the majesty, the power, and the might that cannot be given to any creatures, neither to a human being nor to an angel. . . . Christ, however, ascribes to Himself all that the Father has. He glories in it as His own and as His hereditary property. He would not dare say this, and the Father would not tolerate it, if He were not true God.

Now because Christ has said: "All that the Father has is Mine," He concludes from this and repeats what He has said of the Holy Spirit: "Therefore I said that He will take what is Mine." Here the circle is completely closed, and all three—

⁵¹ AE 24:364-365. Already when preaching on the same text in 1528, Luther made a similar point, noting that the Holy Spirit receives his divine essence by hearing the Son, who is Word of the Father, within the Godhead. Luther affirmed that the Spirit, therefore, does not have the Essence from himself but from the Father and the Son. WA 28:52-53; see Helmer, *Trinity*, p. 191 note 203.

⁵² AE 24:372.

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—are embraced in one divine essence. Christ says: “From that which is Mine, which is the Father’s, namely, the fact that I am one God with Him, the Holy Spirit also takes what He is and has. Therefore *He is and has exactly what both the Father and I are and have*. For if He takes and has what I have, it follows that He must be of the same nature and essence, since what I have for Myself and call My own cannot be ascribed to any creature.” Now “to take what is Mine” does not mean to take or cut off a fraction or a particle from the Godhead, for the Godhead cannot be dismembered and divided; it is a perfect, complete, and indivisible essence. Accordingly, where there is a part, there God Himself is; there the whole Godhead is certainly present. Therefore these words, “to take what is Mine,” can have no other meaning than that the Holy Spirit Himself is also true God, without any distinction except that *He has His essence from both the Father and Christ*.⁵³

John 16:14-15 remained a key proof text for the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son during the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy.⁵⁴ But even during this period, this doctrine did not remain unchallenged. In his history of the theological controversies in the Lutheran Church, Johann Georg Walch (1693-1775) summarized the controversy between Johann Conrad Dannhauer (1603-1666) and Johann Reinboth (1609-1673) on this doctrine. Taking his clues from the Eastern Orthodox position rejecting the *filioque*, Reinboth claimed that, because he could not discern a biblical basis for the *filioque* and because John 15:26 expressly said that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, it would be wrong to turn the *filioque* into an article that was necessary for salvation. Dannhauer opposed Reinboth.⁵⁵ Johann

⁵³ AE 24:372-373. See also AE 15:292: “Christ, our Lord, has two births, or two natures, in one indivisible Person; for He is one Christ . . . According to the first birth, He received, not in time but from all eternity, the everlasting dominion, or the Godhead, from the Father. The Father gave this to Him in its entirety and in its perfection, as He Himself possesses it from eternity. He did not transfer this to Him in the sense that He Himself divested and deprived Himself of it; but He gave the Son the selfsame dominion and none other which He Himself had fully and completely from eternity and which He retains in all eternity. . . Christ Himself speaks about this when He says in John 16:15: ‘All that the Father has is Mine.’ He does not say: ‘The Father no longer has anything; I alone have everything now, or: ‘The Father has everything alone; I have nothing.’ But He says: ‘The Father has it all, but, this “all” that He has is Mine.’ That is patently saying that the Father and the Son compose one single Godhead. And of this ‘all’ of the Father which belongs to the Son the Holy Spirit also partakes, as Christ says in the same passage: ‘He will take what is Mine.’ Which ‘Mine’? Without a doubt, from the ‘Mine’ which the Father has. Thus *the Holy Spirit takes from both, from the Father and the Son, the same complete Godhead from eternity*. Christ also says in John 5:26: ‘As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son also to have life in Himself,’ and in verses 21 and 23: ‘As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will . . . that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father.’ All of this is said of the first, eternal, divine birth.”

⁵⁴ E.g., Johann Meisner, *Disputatio theologica de processione Spiritus Sancti* (Wittenberg: Wendt, 1653), p. 34; Abraham Calov, *Systema locorum theologicorum* (Wittenberg: Hartmann, 1659), vol. 3, pp. 811-812; Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica* (Wittenberg: Quenstedt, 1691), vol. 1, pp. 404-405.

⁵⁵ Johann Georg Walch, *Historische und theologische Einleitung in die Religionsstreitigkeiten der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Jena: Meyers Erben, 1739), vol. 4, pp. 658-666; see Quenstedt, *Theologia*, vol. 1, pp. 407, 409-410.

Andreas Quenstedt (1617-1688) addressed this question by distinguishing between simply being ignorant of this doctrine and obstinately denying this doctrine.⁵⁶

Historically speaking, the “filioque” was added to creedal texts, including the Nicene Creed, in the Western Church beginning in the fifth and sixth century.⁵⁷ But while Lutheran theologians—consistent with the Western *and early Eastern* theological traditions⁵⁸—have traditionally seen this addition as a *perfection* of the Nicene Creed based on texts such as John 16, discussed above,⁵⁹ more recent Eastern Orthodox theologians typically have seen it as a corruption and rejected the addition as contrary to tradition.⁶⁰

The first formal dialogue between Lutherans and Eastern Orthodox theologians—initiated with Patriarch Jeremias II of Constantinople (c. 1530-1595) based on the Augsburg Confession in 1576 by theologians of Tübingen University—resulted in a clear disagreement on this point.⁶¹ Commenting on this dialogue, Quenstedt noted that—given that the Eastern theologians accepted the phrase “through the Son”—this phrase could be understood in an orthodox, biblically correct way and in a heterodox way. The orthodox way would be to understand “through the Son” as synonymous with “from the Son” to express the truth that whatever the Son has, he has received from the Father by his eternal birth. The heterodox way would be to understand “through the Son” as expressing some sort of inequality between the Father and the Son, as if the Spirit did not also originally proceed from the Son.⁶² The relationship that is primarily at issue in the *filioque* controversy is therefore the relationship between Father and Son and only secondarily that between the Son and the Spirit.

The phrase “through the Son” has gained new attention in recent conversations between Lutherans and the Eastern Orthodox, for instance in the 2024 “Common Statement on the Filioque” issued by the Lutheran World Federation and Eastern Orthodox churches.⁶³ Without any agreement on the *filioque*, the statement recommended that the Nicene Creed should be used without the *filioque* by all churches involved in this dialogue. The statement expressed hope that

⁵⁶ Quenstedt, *Theologia*, vol. 1, p. 410.

⁵⁷ See August Hahn and Ludwig Hahn (eds.), *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der Alten Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Breslau: Morgenstern, 1897), pp. 210 (First Council of Toledo, 400), 232 (Third Council of Toledo, 589); Quenstedt, *Theologia*, vol. 1, p. 408.

⁵⁸ Quenstedt, *Theologia*, vol. 1, pp. 405, 407; see also, e.g., Augustine, *On the Trinity* V, 14, and *Tractates on the Gospel of John* XCIX, 6, 8; Peter Lombard, *Sentences* I, dist. XI and dist. XII; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 36, art. 2 to art. 4. Lombard is interesting in this context because he not only summarized the Western theological tradition. He also acquainted his Western readers, including Luther, with concordant early Eastern theologians—Didymus the Blind (c. 310-395), Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376-444), and John Chrysostom (c. 347-407)—who taught the *filioque*. E.g., Lombard, *Sentences* I, Dist. XI, ch. 2; see also Matsuura, *Annotationen*, pp. 305-307.

⁵⁹ Quenstedt, *Theologia*, vol. 1, p. 408.

⁶⁰ E.g., Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, tr. Seraphim Rose, 3rd ed. (Platina, Cal.: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2021), pp. 89-93; Vladimir Lossky, *Dogmatic Theology* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017), pp. 48-54.

⁶¹ *Acta et scripta theologorum Wirtembergensium et Patriarchae Constantinopolitani D. Hieremiae* (Wittenberg: Crato’s Heirs, 1584), pp. 57-58 (Jeremias), 158-162 (Tübingen theologians), 200-224 (Jeremias), 270-296 (Tübingen theologians), 349-364 (Jeremias), 372-373 (Tübingen theologians).

⁶² Quenstedt, *Theologia*, vol. 1, p. 408.

⁶³ <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/Lutheran-Orthodox-Joint-Statement-Filioque-EN.pdf>.

exploration of the formula “through the Son”—used by some Eastern theologians—might facilitate the interlocutors’ common effort to reach further agreement on the issue of the procession of the Spirit, without noting that the formula “through the Son” was already explored in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America celebrated this statement—though it is devoid of any substantial agreement on the controversial issues that have divided the churches for centuries—as an “ecumenical breakthrough.”⁶⁴

A Liturgical Endnote

In the Western Church, Trinity Sunday—the first Sunday after Pentecost—was made a universal part of the church year at the beginning of the 14th century by pope John XXII (1244-1334). This decision was not without precedent, as four centuries earlier, Bishop Stephen of Liège (850-920) was the first to institute a feast of the Holy Trinity in his diocese. Around 1100, Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075-1129), likely born near Liège, gave a reason for placing the feast on the Sunday after Pentecost: “[A]fter the coming of the same holy Spirit, the faith in, and confession of, the name of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost immediately began to be preached, and believed, and celebrated in Baptism.” By the 13th century, most Western Church observed the feast. Some kept it on the last Sunday after Pentecost. Others observed it twice, on the Sunday after Pentecost and on the Sunday before Advent.⁶⁵

Luther and the early Lutherans observed the feast of the Holy Trinity on the first Sunday after Pentecost. They even named the following Sundays “after Trinity,” not “after Pentecost.” No matter when it is observed, however, the feast of the Holy Trinity is an excellent opportunity to delve into the depth of the riches of knowing our eternal triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who created, redeemed, and sanctifies us unto life everlasting. The text that follows is a reliable guide on the biblical path into the innermost essence of God.

*Glory be to the Father,
And to the Son,
And to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning,
Is now,
And will be forever.
Amen.*

⁶⁴ <https://blogs.elca.org/eirr/new-study-guide-on-the-joint-statement-on-the-filioque/>

⁶⁵ Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year*, tr. Laurence Shepherd (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2000), vol. 10, pp. 91-93.

The Depth of the Riches of Knowing God

Oh, the depth of the riches, both of wisdom and the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways! For who has known the Lord's mind? Or who was his counselor? Or who has first given him to be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

God Reveals His Innermost Essence in Foolish Scripture

Because the feast of the Holy Trinity requires us to instruct, remind, and strengthen the people in their faith regarding this article concerning the Holy Trinity, we once again wish to say something about it. For if you are not properly instructed and well-grounded in this article, the other articles of faith also cannot be discussed purely and fruitfully. For the other feasts wrap our Lord God in the works and wonders he has done. For instance, on Christmas, we observe that God was made man. On Easter, we observe that he rose from the dead. On Pentecost, how he gave the Holy Spirit and established the Christians Church, and so forth. All these feasts preach our Lord God as he is clothed in some work. But this feast of the Trinity presents to us God as he is in himself, outside of all clothing or works, in his bare divine Essence. Here we must go far above all reason, leave all creatures here below, and only listen to what God says about himself and about his innermost Essence. Otherwise, we will not know him.

Here God's foolishness and the wisdom of the world collide. For when the world hears that God says about himself that he is a single God and yet three distinct persons, it considers this to be an offensive, foolish sermon. And all who follow reason and hear this, consider those who believe and teach this to be complete fools. This is why this article has always been challenged from the time of the apostles and fathers of the church until this day, as the history books and especially the gospel of St. John show. John had to write this gospel only in order to confirm this article against the heretic Cerinthus (c. 50-100) who began to spread his errors while the apostles were still alive. He tried to show from Moses that there was only one God and that, therefore, our Lord Jesus could not be true God because God and man do not fit together. In other words, he was chattering away based on his reason, thinking that things in heaven should be the way he could think about them.

But how gross this is of you, shameful reason! How is it that we humans want to talk about God without God's Word, explaining out of our own brains how things are in his own divine Essence, although we do not even know how our own speaking, laughing, or sleeping takes place, although these are natural works we daily engage in and experience? Is that not blindness above all blindness that a human being—unable to explain even the smallest work that he daily sees in

his body—dares to know that which is outside and above all reason and about which only God himself can speak? Is it not blasphemy for humans to claim that Christ is not God?

To be sure, if speaking about who God is were a matter of our own ideas and thoughts, I'd be happy to join the conversation with my own thoughts. But when you take the conclusions of those who have thought long and hard about these things and compare them to Scripture, you'll find that those conclusions cannot stand. This is why we must speak about these things—or at least stammer about them as best as we can—as Holy Scripture prompts us to do: Jesus Christ is true God. The Holy Spirit is true God. And yet, there are not three gods or three divine natures—as there may be three brothers, three angels, three suns, or three windows—for they are not divided. But there is only one divine Essence that does not allow them to be divided in their Essence, although they are three distinct persons.

Jesus Christ Is True God and Man

For this is what Paul says in Hebrews 1:3 that Christ is the express image of God's Essence. And in Colossians 1:15, he says: "He is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn before all creatures." We should leave the meaning of these words as it is, namely, that God places all creatures—angels and humans and whatever else exists—under Christ. This means that Christ must be God himself, because outside of creation, there is nothing but God. Thus, when Paul says that Christ is the Firstborn before all creatures, it is the same as saying: Christ is true, eternal God.

To make this abundantly clear, Paul adds: Christ is the image of the invisible God. If he is an image of God, he must be a person that is distinct from him whose image he is. But he also must be in the one divine Essence with the Father. Thus, he and the Father must be two persons, not one person. He would not be called the image of the divine Essence if he were not equally God. Indeed, no creature can be an image of the divine Essence, which the creature does not have in itself. At the same time, Christ could not be called an image of God if there were not two distinct persons—one person of him whose image he is; and one person of him who is the image. To put it more clearly according to Scripture, there is one person of the Father who begets in eternity. And there is the second person of the Son who is begotten in eternity. And yet, both are equally eternal, mighty, wise, and righteous.

This is why it does not matter that the Jews and Muslims make fun of us Christians, as if we installed three brothers in heaven. I could make the same joke, if this were a matter of derision and thinking deep thoughts. But they do violence to what we mean and lie about us. For we do not talk about three people or three angels but about a single divine Essence and the most united Oneness. Nothing here on earth, include the unity of body and soul, is as united as God is in himself. We additionally say that holy Scripture teaches us that, in the same single divine Essence, the Father begot a Son in eternity, that is, before all creatures, before the world was created, and, as Paul says in Hebrews 1:10, before the foundations of the earth were laid. This Son is equal to the Father and is by any measure God, as the Father is God. For otherwise Paul could not say that he is an image of the invisible God. This title includes that there is a difference

between the Father and the Son and that they are nonetheless one God. We cannot evade this, unless we want to deny Paul and become Jews and Muslims.

Paul again speaks similarly, albeit with different words, about Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:9: “Let us not tempt Christ as some of them tested him and were killed by the serpents.” Here you can see how lovingly Paul and Moses kiss each other and how they correspond to each other so kindly. Moses says in Numbers 14:22: “This people has now tested me ten times, not obeying my voice.” And Moses here uses the word “LORD” which we have everywhere printed in our bible translation in all capital letters to indicate that it is the name that is due, and is given to, the eternal, one, true God alone. For the other terms that are used for God are at times also used for humans. But this word, “LORD,” is applied only to God. Moses therefore says: The LORD, Adonai (the true God), says: “This people has tested me ten times.” Then Paul appears and says who this God was, stating that this was Christ. Moses says that it was the one, eternal, true God. Moreover, Christ hadn’t even been born back then. In fact, neither David nor Mary had been born. And yet, Paul states plainly: They tested Christ; do not let us test him as they did.

It certainly follows from these words that Christ was the one about whom Moses writes that he is God. Both—Moses many years before Paul—therefore confess with one mouth while using different words that Christ must be God’s Son, begotten of the Father in eternity, in a single divine Essence and yet as something distinct. You can call this “something” however you may, but we call it a person. To be sure, this is not a perfect expression. It is stammering, as the word “Trinity” itself is. But how can we do justice to God? We can’t do it any better. In any case, the Father is not the Son, while the Son is begotten by the Father in eternity, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from God the Father and God the Son. Thus, there are three persons but only one God. For Paul says about Christ what Moses says about God.

Paul also talks this way in Acts 20:28 when he blessed those who were at Miletus where he exhorted the pastors whom he had called together to carry out their office faithfully: “Keep watch over yourselves and the entire flock over whom the Holy Spirit has placed you as bishops to shepherd the congregation of God whom he (God) has purchased by his own blood.” This too is a clear text. Without any objection, it follows from it that our Lord Christ, by whose blood the church was purchased, is God to whom belongs the church. For he clearly says that it was God who won the church by his blood and to whom the church belongs. Thus, because, as we have heard, the persons are distinct, while it here says that God himself purchased the church by his blood, it follows powerfully that God has his own blood which he shed for his church. This means that Christ our Savior is true God. He was begotten by the Father in eternity. And then, in time, he was made man and born of the virgin Mary.

For if this blood—that is, the bodily, tangible, red, shed blood of one who is by nature human—is truly to be called God’s blood, then this human must be true God, an eternal, almighty person, of the one divine Essence. About this blood, we could truly say: This blood that flowed from the side of the crucified Christ and was shed on the ground—this blood is not the blood of a simple plain human, as in the case of everybody else. Rather, this blood is God’s own blood. For St. Paul does not speak like this in a careless manner. Rather, in this highest of matters, he issues an exhortation with great seriousness to remind us clearly of the high office of ruling the church and

shepherding it with God's Word, lest we take the office to be a joke. Instead, we should know that the office is as precious and great before God as the blood of his dear Son which paid a price all creatures combined are unable to pay. We should also know that, if we carry out this office without diligence and faithfulness, we sin against and become guilty of the blood of God that it must be shed in vain for the souls over whom we are to preside.

There are many more similar verses, especially in the gospel of John, which no one can evade but must say that God Father, God Son, and God Holy Spirit are three distinct persons but in one single divine Essence. For we do not worship three gods, as the Jews and Muslims derisively say of us, but only one single God whom Scripture draws before our eyes as being three persons yet only a single God. For instance, Christ says to Philip in John 14:9: "Philip, he who sees me also sees the Father." Here Christ places himself in a single, equal divine Essence with the Father, just as Paul does in Colossians 1:15, where he calls Christ an image of the invisible God. In John 14, Christ nonetheless shows that there are two persons: The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father, and yet they are one single God. As I said, there are many more of such verses here and there. Using these verses, the faithful theologians of the past valiantly preserved the doctrine concerning the Holy Trinity against the devil and the world. This is how we have inherited this doctrine.

What do we care that reason considers this doctrine to be foolishness? For it is nothing special to think deep thoughts about this matter. I certainly could do it just as well as others. But, praise God, I have the grace that I do not desire to engage in many disputations on this point. Rather, if I know that it is God's Word and God said this, then I do not ask any other questions about how this could be true. I am content with God's Word alone, unconcerned about how it may or may not agree with reason.

This what every Christian should do when it comes to all the doctrines of our holy faith: Do not think too deeply or engage in discussions about how it is possible. Only be concerned about whether it is God's Word. If it is the Word he spoke, then firmly rely on it. He will not lie or deceive you, even if you do not understand how or when it can be so.

Therefore, because we certainly have God's Word concerning this article of the Holy Trinity and because faithful theologians from the beginning of the church have preserved this article by so valiantly defending it against all sorts of heretics, we should not dispute about it how it can be that God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a single God. For this is incomprehensible. Instead, we should be satisfied that God himself talks and testifies about himself this way in his Word. He knows better than you could ever imagine who he is and how one should speak of his Essence.

And what do you dare to comprehend and know so precisely this lofty, incomprehensible divine Essence, although you know nothing about your body and life? You do not know how it is that your mouth laughs, that your eyes see a castle or mountain from a great distance, that a person, while sleeping, is dead according to the body and yet alive. We do not know the least about ourselves, for instance, how a hair grows. And yet, in the devil's name, we want to climb into heaven without God's Word by means of our reason, although it is so blind in human affairs, to grasp and figure out God in his majesty. If you want to use your reason and your deep thoughts,

why do you not apply them to yourself concerning the matters that occur daily? Why do you not ask what happens to your five senses when you sleep, where your voice is from, when you laugh etc.? Reason may investigate these matters without sin. But here, when it comes to the single Essence, there stick simply to the Word which says that Christ is an image of the invisible God and the Firstborn before all creatures. This means that he is God equal with the Father.

This is why he again says in John 5:23: They are to glorify the Son as they glorify the Father. And in John 12:44, he says that “he who believes in me does not believe in me but in him who sent me.” And in John 14:1, he says: “If you believe in God, believe in me as well.” And in John 16:15, he says: “Everything the Father has is mine.” These and similar verses do not tolerate attempts to hollow them out. For God said them. He does not lie. He alone knows how one should rightly talk about God. Thus, the foundation of this article concerning the Trinity in holy Scripture is firm enough.

The Holy Spirit Is God, Proceeding from the Father and the Son

Once the relationship between Father and Son in the one Essence is established, the third person follows—the Holy Spirit. Scripture calls the Spirit the Spirit of God or the soul of God. He is not called “begotten,” as the Son. Rather, he proceeds from the Father and the Son. That is, he is such a person who has the divine Essence in eternity from the Father and the Son at the same time, just as the Son has it from the Father alone. Thus, there are three distinct persons, yet in one single divine Essence and Majesty. For this is how Scripture presents it to us: The Lord Christ is God’s Son from eternity and the image of the Father, of equal greatness, might, wisdom, and justice. As a result, there is nothing in the Father in terms of Godhead, wisdom, power, and might that is not also in the Son and in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Thus, if someone wants to know how this works, just tell him that God is an incomprehensible Essence, above all angels and creatures. We cannot know more about it than what Scripture tells us.

God’s Biblical Self-Revelation Is Summarized in the Apostles’ Creed for Simple Christians

This is why the faithful theologians of the past did the right thing when they summarized the faith or creed in a simple manner. As the children pray, “I believe in God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, . . . , and in the Holy Spirit etc.” We did not write or come up with this confession. The previous theologians also did not do so. Rather, as a bee collects honey from many beautiful, lovely flowers, so this creed was collected from the books of the dear prophets and apostles. That is, the creed is a brief summary drawn from Scripture for the children and simple Christians. It is justly called the Apostles’ Creed because it is written in such a way that it could not have been summarized better and more clearly. It remained in the church from the beginning. Either the apostles themselves wrote it. Or their best students put it together from their writings or sermons.

First, this is how it begins: I believe. In whom? In God the Father. This is the first person of the Godhead. And in order to be able to distinguish the three persons more fittingly, the creed briefly indicates the work and property of each person, by which it expresses itself properly. In the case of the first person, this is the work of creation. To be sure, it is true that this work does not

pertains to one person alone but to the single, whole, divine eternal Essence, so that we have to say: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit has created heaven and earth. Still, this work is properly attributed to the person of the Father, as he is the first person, because he does not visibly and externally show himself in any work besides the creation of all creatures, which is the first work of the divine Majesty in relation to the creatures. But properly and specifically, he is distinguished from the other persons by this word “Father,” to indicate thereby that he is the first person who is not from any other, while the Son and the Holy Spirit are from the Father.

Our creed continues: I believe in someone else who is God as well (for believing is owed to no creature but only to God). What is his name? Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son. This is how the Christians have prayed for over 1500 years. Indeed, this is how all believers prayed from the beginning of the world. And even though they did not have these exact words, they believed and confessed the same things.

Thus, the first distinct feature of the Son of God is that he is called the only Son of God. For although otherwise all angels and even all Christians are called the sons and children of our Lord God, no one else is called the only or only begotten Son. Only the Lord Christ is begotten of the Father in such a way that none of the creatures—including the angels—are like him: He alone is the true, natural Son, that is, of the same divine, eternal uncreated Essence of God the Father.

The creed next enumerates his specific works: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of Mary, the virgin, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried; descended into hell; risen again on the third day, ascended into heaven, seated at the right hand of God, his heavenly Father. And he will come again on the Last Day, to judge the dead and the living, etc. Hereby, the Son is distinguished by his own work. For he alone—neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit—became a natural man out of blood and flesh like we, suffered, died, risen, ascended into heaven, etc.

The third part follows: I believe in the Holy Spirit. Here another distinct person is mentioned. This person is of the same divine Essence with the Father and the Son. For one should and may not believe in anyone except the true God alone, according to the First Commandment: I alone am your God. Thus, this confession grasps the unity of the divine Essence—we believe and worship a single God—as well as the three distinct persons. This distinction is also indicated in holy baptism where we are baptized in the name of a single God, while Christ commands to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The specific property of the third person is that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. This is also why he is called the Spirit of both the Father and the Son [Matth. 10:20; Gal. 4:6]. He is poured out into the hearts of the people and reveals himself in the work of gathering and enlightening the church of Christ in all languages, and in setting the hearts ablaze in one faith by the word of the gospel. The Spirit also sanctifies the church, makes it alive, and saves it.

This confession of the creed, therefore, grasps the three persons in one divine Essence as well, while still distinguishing one from the other, clothing each with a particular work. This is so that the simple Christians may know that there is only one divine Essence and one single God but nonetheless three persons. To indicate this, distinct works are added to the persons lest the

persons be commingled. The work of creation is given to the Father. The work of redemption is given to the Son. The Holy Spirit is given the power to forgive sins, make glad, strengthen, and to bring from death to eternal life at last.

The reason for doing so is not to confess that the Father alone is the Creator or that the Son alone is the Redeemer or that the Holy Spirit alone makes holy. Indeed, creating and preserving all things; doing satisfaction for sin; forgiving sin, raising from the dead and giving eternal life are the works of the whole divine Majesty. Nonetheless, the Father is shown in the work of creation, which has its origin in him as the first person. The Son is shown in the work of redemption which he carried out in his own person. And the Holy Spirit is shown in the work of sanctification because it is this work which he is sent for and in which reveals himself. This is done so that the Christians may have the simple, certain understanding that there is only one God while there are nonetheless three persons in one, single divine Essence. This is how the faithful theologians of the past diligently collected it from Moses and from the writings of the prophets and apostles, preserving this doctrine against all heretics.

We have inherited this faith. And God powerfully preserved it in his church against all sects and devils until this day. This is also why we should remain with it in all simplicity and not desire to be smart when it comes to this article. For Christians are the kind of people who should believe what is foolish to reason. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:21, our God wants to turn the world into fools through the preaching of the gospel. For how can reason accept that three are one and one is three? That God became man? That a person, when bathed in the water according to the command of Christ, is bathed in the blood of Christ and cleansed from all sins? Such articles are complete foolishness to reason. This is why Paul properly calls the gospel a foolish sermon by which our God saves those who do not want to be smart but simply believe the Word. The others, who want to follow reason in such matters and despise the Word, are to fall down and perish on account of their wisdom.

Miracles in the History of the Early Church Prove the Divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit in Addition to Scripture and the Creed: The Deaths of Cerinthus and Arius

We therefore now have derived sufficient proof of the Holy Trinity from Scripture and from the creed, as much as is necessary for the instruction of a simple Christian. Beyond such proof, there are also the miracles which also prove the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We should not disregard or dismiss them. For our Lord God causes such miracles to take place for the benefit of his Christians and for the strengthening of the faith.

His purpose here is not only to punish those who taught incorrectly. For he could leave this for the life to come, as he otherwise allows many people to go their way without punishing them for ten, twenty, even thirty years. But when it comes to the leaders of the sects who blaspheme and revile God by false doctrine, God publicly attacks them here in this life with especially unusual punishment so that other people should be offended by it and have this punishment as a testimony—in addition to being publicly being convicted of their blasphemy, and even condemned by their own conscience—that these were the originators and initiators of blaspheming God's name and Word. This should cause everybody to say that God is not pleased

with their false doctrine because he makes an example of them by letting them perish by a punishment that exceeds the usual punishment inflicted on other bad people.

Accordingly, the historical accounts say that there was a heretic by the name of Cerinthus at the time of John the evangelist. He was the first to preach against the doctrine of the apostles and desecrated our Lord Christ by claiming that he is not God. This blasphemy grew so strong that the holy evangelist John had to write his gospel after the other evangelists. More than the others, he, as we can see, had to make it the goal of his gospel to defend and preserve the divinity of Christ against this Cerinthus and his gang. As we can see, John—more than the other evangelists—begins his gospel with lofty words. He does not collect many miracles of the Lord Christ but draws especially on his sermons in which Christ powerfully said about himself that he is true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, being in equal power, glory, wisdom, justice, and all other divine works.

On one occasion, dear John went with some of his students into a public bathhouse. When he realized that the heretic Cerinthus with his gang was also there, John did not hesitate long, saying to his disciples that they should quickly leave with him and not remain among the blasphemers. The students followed John and quickly left. Once they had left the bathhouse, the ceiling quickly collapsed, killing Cerinthus with his following, leaving not one alive.

We also read about the heretic Arius (250-336) who, above all others, violently attacked the article that our Lord Christ is true God, doing noticeable damage among the Christians. His heresies kept the church busy for four hundred years. And even today, it is not completely exterminated. Here, too, our Lord God intervened and defended his glory with a remarkable miracle. For this is what the historical account says: Arius had successfully ingratiated himself with emperor Constantine (272-337) and his advisers. He even had persuaded them under oath to consider him to be one who had never taught wrongly. And emperor Constantine commanded bishop Alexander (241-337) at Constantinople to recognize Arius to be a Christian and to restore him to the priesthood. Because the good bishop refused to do so (for he well saw the intentions of Arius and his crowd), Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341) and the other bishops allied with Arius threatened him. They said that if Alexander were not to take Arius back according to the imperial edict, they would drive him out by force and have Arius taken back in by the whole congregation. They gave him an ultimatum to think about it until the next day.

The good bishop was afraid. Because Arius's following was so big and powerful, and because Arius had the imperial edict and the whole imperial court on his side, Alexander decided to seek help from God. In affairs that concern God's glory, only God can help. And so Alexander prostrated himself in church and prayed all night long that our Lord God would send such means for the preservation of his name and glory that the evil plan would be restrained and that his Christians would be helped against the heretics.

In the morning, when it was time that they should gather at the predetermined place in the church and that bishop Alexander should either receive Arius or be expelled from his office, Arius arrived on time with his following. He walked toward the church in splendor and with a large following. But on the way, Arius fell ill in the body and desired to withdraw to a room. But as the

solemn procession delayed on the way and the people waited for him, word came that he had died in the room and that his lung and liver disappeared from his body. The historical account justly notes that his end was appropriate for a blasphemous and stinking heart.

This is, then, how this article concerning the Holy Trinity has been powerfully preserved against the devil and his blasphemous mouthpieces by the writings and battles of the apostles and by miracles or signs. This is how it will be preserved in the future. We should not doubt it but believe in God Father, God Son, and God the Holy Spirit, as our children and we daily confess it in the Creed, lest we turn God into a single lump or a single person. For this is why three different works are added, so that the regular Christians get the difference between the persons while not dividing the nature and letting the one God be in his undivided Essence.

The Difference Between Knowing God's Essence, Will, and Works by Revelation and by Reason

As I have said, the Holy Trinity, or the three persons of the divine Essence, is the first, lofty, incomprehensible chief article that must be preserved in Christendom by God's Word, so that people may know God the way he wants to be known. For although St. Paul does not discuss this article in his letter to the Romans in detail but only touches on it in a few words at the end, as we shall see, he does want to teach the following: In these lofty matters, when people want to talk about God—whether about his divine Essence or about his will and works—they should not do so according to human wisdom but only according to God's Word. For these divine matters are too lofty and far above all reason and can never be comprehended or known by human reason.

Although I have often taught and written about this article, we must now say something about it in summary fashion. "Trinity" is not an ideal term but because there is no better word, we have to speak as best as we can. For, as I just said, this article is so high above human reason and language that God must make allowances for babbling and gurgling as well as we can, as a father does with his children, so long as the faith is pure and right. For this word "trinity" means that we should believe that the divine Majesty is three different persons in one true Essence.

For this is the revelation and knowledge of God the Christians have. They do not only know that there is one true God, outside and above all creatures and that there cannot be more than this one God. The Christians also know what this one God is in his inner unfathomable Essence.

For human reason, by itself, can still progress to the point of concluding, albeit weakly, that there must be a single, eternal, divine Essence which created, preserves, and rules all things. Because human reason sees that beautiful, excellent creatures, both in heaven and on earth, are so marvelously, orderly, and certainly comprehended in his rule, it must say: It is impossible that all this came about by chance or from itself. There must be a Creator and Lord from whom everything comes and by whom everything is ruled. Human reason must therefore know God from the creatures, as St. Paul also says in Romans 1:20: "God's invisible Essence, that is, his eternal power and Godhead, is seen when one perceives it by the works, namely, the creation of the world." That is the knowledge of God a posteriori, when God is seen from the outside in his works and rule. This is just like looking at a castle or house from the outside to perceive the lord or householder who built it.

But a priori, from the inside, no human wisdom has ever seen what and how God is in himself or in his innermost Essence. No one can know or say anything about it, unless the Holy Spirit reveals it. For St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:11, just as no one knows what is in man except the human spirit who is in him, so no one can know what is in God except God's Spirit. I may well see from the outside what you do, but I cannot see what is in your mind and what you think. Likewise, you also cannot see what I think, unless I tell you by means of words or signs. When it comes to God, we can see and know even less what God is in his own, hidden Essence, until it is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit who searches and sees the depth of the Godhead, as Paul says there. He does this by preaching this article by which he teaches us that one undivided Essence is in the divine Majesty. At the same time, there is in this Essence the person called the Father, from whom the other person, which is the Son, is begotten from eternity; and there is the third person, proceeding from the Father and the Son, namely, the Holy Spirit. These three persons do not separate themselves from each other, like two or three brothers or sisters, but remain in a single eternal, undivided, and indivisible Essence.

As I said, human reason did not research and figure this out from below. Rather, it has been revealed from heaven above. This is also why only the Christians can talk about what the essential Godhead is in himself, how he shows himself in his creatures, and what he has in his mind about how people should be saved. For the Christians hear all this from the Holy Spirit who reveals and proclaims it through the Word.

The others, however, who do not have this revelation and evaluate everything by their own wisdom—e.g., the Jews, the Muslims, and the pagans—they certainly must consider such proclamation to be the greatest error and most outrageous heresy. Indeed, they say that we Christians are so crazy and foolish that we believe in three gods, although there can be no more than one God according to reason and even according to God's Word. For it simply makes no sense that a house has more than one owner or that a government has more than one lord and prince. It makes even less sense that more than one God rules over heaven and earth.

They think that they have won a great victory over us by their wisdom and have exposed our faith to the mockery and ridicule of the whole world, as if we were such great idiots and fools who are unable to realize that there is only one God. Indeed, we—praise God—have just as much reason as they, so that we are able to give better and more reasons than they can from their entire Quran or Talmud for why there is only one God.

But we say and know also this from Scripture: When it comes to this divine matter, it is not at all enough to come up with clever ideas from our reason and to pretend to have great wisdom. Rather, here a higher knowledge is necessary to discuss this and all articles of our faith. This knowledge is far beyond the reach of human reason. It is only a small part of the knowledge of God if you know about him no more than what the pagans see by their reason and their reasonable conclusions. In book 4 of his *Politics*, the pagan philosopher Aristotle quotes Homer, their wisest poet, who said in book 2 of his *Iliad* that there can be no good government where there is more than one ruler, e.g., when there is more than one person who wants to be in charge of the household staff. Every government must therefore have one lord and ruler. That is certainly right and true. For God has implanted such light and reason in human nature to give it

an indication and simile of his divine government, namely, that he is a single Lord and Creator of all creatures. But by saying this, you have by no means fully researched and figured out the lofty, eternal, divine Essence. For although I have already learned that a single divine Majesty rules all things, I do not yet know what goes on within the same divine Essence. As has been said, no one will be able to tell me this unless God himself reveals it to me through his Word.

Now, we Christians have Scripture, and we are certain that it is God's Word. The Jews have it as well. And it came to us from their fathers. From Scripture—and from nowhere else—everything people know about God and divine works was taken from the beginning of the world, even among Muslims and pagans, unless they cling to obvious fables and fantasies. Scripture's revelation concerning God has been, and is being, proved by great miracles to this day. Scripture now tells us this about God: To be sure, there is no god or divine Essence outside the one true God. But Scripture not only presents us God as if from the outside. Rather, it also leads us into his internal Essence and shows that in it, there are three persons, but not three gods or a threefold godhead, but a single, undivided divine Essence.

The Incarnation of the Son and the Pouring Out of the Holy Spirit Reveal the Triune God's Eternal Essence, Will, and Counsel in Time

Such revelation follows and breaks forth from the highest work of God. This work is an indication of his divine counsel and will which he decided from eternity and which he proclaimed in the promises. The highest work of God is that his Son should become man and die to reconcile all humans to God. Nothing else could help us from our horrible fall into sin and eternal death. It had to be an eternal person who had power to erase sin and death and to give righteousness and eternal life. No angel or any other creature could do this. God himself had to do this. The person of the Father could not do this, as he had to be reconciled. Rather, the other person had to do this with whom this counsel had been decided that through him and for his sake this reconciliation should take place.

This is why you have two persons here—the person of him who is reconciled and the person of him who is sent and becomes human to accomplish the reconciliation. The first is called the Father, as the first one, who did not originate in anyone else. The second is called the Son, begotten of the Father in eternity. Scripture shows and testifies to this when it calls him God's Son, as in Psalm 2:7: "You are my Son. Today, I have begotten you." In Galatians 4:4, we read: "When the time was fulfilled, God sent his Son." This necessarily leads to the conclusion that the Son, since he is called a person, must be distinct from the person of the Father.

In the same way, God's Spirit is called a distinct person who is sent or proceeds from God the Father and the Son. For example, it says in Joel 2:28: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." Here a Spirit is poured out who must be of God or a divine Spirit, who must be of the same divine Essence. Otherwise, he would not say "my Spirit. And yet, the Spirit is a person distinct from the one who sends or pours out the Spirit. Similarly, because the visible form in which the Spirit is sent from above reveals himself or appears as a dove (Matthew 3:16) or flames of fire (Acts 2:3), he must be a person distinct from both Father and Son.

The Son's Incarnation and Death to Reconcile All Humans to the Father Without Their Contribution, Revealed in Scripture, Is Rejected by Human Reason as Complete Nonsense

When we say that God's Son became man, of the same nature as we are, to redeem us from sin and death and to bring us eternal life, without any merit or contribution of ours, then this is just as ridiculous to Jews and Muslims as when we say that there are three persons in the one God. For this is complete nonsense to human wisdom which preaches this sermon, whether with a Jewish, Muslim, or pagan accent: God is a single, almighty Lord over all. He created all people and gave them the law to tell them how they should live. From this it follows that God is gracious to those who are good and obedient but punishes and condemns all who are disobedient. Therefore, God will reward those who do good works and refrain from sins etc. These are completely pagan ideas, taken by analogy from life on earth, as if God's kingdom must work the same way as a father rules his children and servants. For on earth, good rulers are those who distinguish between their obedient and disobedient subjects.

The pope also teaches and urges this pagan wisdom and holiness and worship. We all—myself included—believed this, and knew nothing else, when we lived under him. Otherwise, we would have taught and acted differently.

In short, those who do not have this revelation and God's Word are unable to believe or teach differently. But how did this belief make us any better than pagans and Muslims? Indeed, how could we fend off certain temptations and worthless lies that were alleged to be good works and worship? We had to follow every priest, who came along with his cowl and cincture, in the stead of Christ, thinking that, whoever did what the priest said, would be saved thereby.

Human Reason Does Not Know the Lord's Saving Counsel Revealed in Scripture and Fashions Him in Its Own Image as Rewarding only Good People

This is how the whole world was filled which false worship—which Scripture properly calls idolatry—that emerged out of human wisdom. Human wisdom is quickly captivated by such allegations that were presented as good works that should be done in obedience to God. For human wisdom does not know any better. And how should it know any better, if the truth is not revealed to it? Or, if the truth is preached to human reason, it does not want to hear it but despises it and follows its own ideas. As a result, the truth remains hidden and incomprehensible to human wisdom, as St. Paul here says: "Who has known the Lord's mind?"

To us, however, such counsel and mind of God is revealed and proclaimed—how and why God sent and gave his Son into our flesh. For we have received this wisdom from God's Word: No one can out of himself be righteous before God because our whole life and all our actions are subject to God's wrath because we are entirely born in sin and are disobedient by nature. But if we are to be freed from our sin and saved, we must believe in this one Mediator, God's Son, who took upon himself our sin and death, who paid for them by his blood and death, and who freed us from them by his resurrection.

We cling to this, even though we are ridiculed by pagan wisdom that teaches us that God rewards only good people. Even without being taught by them, we understand better than they that this is

what human wisdom thinks. But we must have here a higher wisdom, a wisdom that did not emerge from our mind but that was given to us through divine revelation by grace alone.

For we do not want to figure out God's counsel, mind, and ways by means of our own brain and thoughts. We do not want to become his counselors as those do who invade his Godhead. Contrary to what Paul says here, they dare to give things to God so that he must repay them instead of taking and learning from God. By doing so, they make as many gods as there are thoughts by which they picture and fashion God in their own image.

As a result, every shabby monk's cowl or other self-chosen work must do for them—and be worth to them—as much as what God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit decides and does in his eternal divine counsel. In the end, they remained nothing but cowl bearers and works teachers. Even those who know nothing of God and are public evildoers can fill these roles very well. And even if they deal with cowls and similar “good works” for a long time, they do not know what God thinks about them. What Paul says certainly remains true: “Who has known the Lord's mind, who was his counselor?”

Having Interesting Ideas about God Is Different from Knowing God's Mind from Scripture

For knowing God's mind is not the same as what people can come up with in their own brains, what they can find, figure out, or understand by their own reason without any divine revelation. And how are you helped if you can say nothing else than that God is gracious to good people and punishes evil people? Who makes you certain that you are good and please God with your popish and Muslim monasticism and holiness? Is it really enough for you to say: God will give heaven to those who follow this monastic rule?

No, my friend, imagining or saying what seems good to you does not count here. I could do this as well as you. Indeed, this is also what happens: Everyone comes up with their individual ideas about how to please God—some join the Franciscan Order, others join the Benedictines, etc. What counts instead is to hear and know what God's counsel, will, and mind is. No one knows this out of his own mind. No book will teach this to you except the one Word and Scripture, given by God himself. This Word and Scripture proclaims to us that God sent his Son into the world to redeem it from sin and God's wrath so that those who believe in him should have eternal life.

See, this is what Paul wants to show to the Christians in this letter: These lofty matters—God's divine Essence as well as his will, kingdom, and work—are simply above the thoughts, reason, and wisdom of all people. In short, these lofty matters are and remain incomprehensible, unfathomable, and completely hidden for all human reason. Indeed, what human reason dares and intends to search, teach, and discuss about these lofty matters is utter darkness and lies. And if you want to learn, know, and hit upon something of these lofty matters, you must receive it through the revelation, that is, God's Word given from heaven above.

Our Predestination to Salvation Is Known by Faith in Christ, not by Some Special Revelation

For we do not apply Paul's words here to the question of the divine predestination of each human being, that is, who will be saved and who will not be saved. For God does not at all want us to

ask or search him about it. This is also why he does not give any special revelations about it but directs all people to the word of the gospel, which they are to take as their guide, which they are to hear and know: If they believe the gospel, they will be saved.

Indeed, all the saints before us certainly took comfort in, and laid hold of, their election and eternal life by faith in Christ, not by some special revelation concerning their predestination. This is also why Paul—when he talks about predestination in the three chapters before this text—does not want anybody to ask or search whether he is predestined or not. Instead, he presents the gospel and faith to all, as he taught previously that we are saved by faith in Christ and says in Romans 10:8: “The Word is near, in your heart and in your mouth” etc., explaining that this Word is proclaimed to all people, that all should believe it, as he says in Romans 10:12-13: “There is one Lord of all, rich to all who call upon him; for whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

But he talks about the wondrous rule of God in his church: Those who have the title and glory of being God’s people and the church—namely, the people of Israel—are rejected because of their unbelief. The others, however, who initially were not God’s people and were under unbelief but who now receive the gospel and believe in Christ—these others now become the true church before God and are saved. Thus, their own unbelief alone is to be blamed for why they are rejected. For, by contrast, God’s grace and mercy in Christ unto eternal life, without any merit, is offered to those who were first stuck in unbelief and sin, to all who want to accept and believe it, as he says: “God has shut them all up in unbelief so that he may have mercy on all,” Romans 11:32.

Those Who Recognize that They Deserve God’s Eternal Wrath Are God’s Elect

Here then follows this text where he begins to speak about the rule and works of God out of a great sense of wonder, saying:

*Oh the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and
the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are
his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!*

Romans 11:33

These are the lofty thoughts and counsel of God which by far exceed the senses and understanding of all humans and even all creatures: He richly poured out his goodness and elected those who are poor, miserable, unworthy, who are shut up in sin to receive this goodness. In other words, he elected those who truly recognize that they are worthy and deserving of eternal wrath and condemnation before God. He elected them so that they should know who he is inside of his divine Essence as well as what is in his heart, namely, that he wants to give eternal life and salvation through his Son to those who believe. But God rejects and condemns those who proudly and securely boast of the great gifts—God called them to be his people before all others; they have special promises, prophets, and fathers—and who think that God would not recognize any nation but them to be his people and church. God rejects these because of their

unbelief in which they are held captive by the pride and arrogance of their own wisdom and holiness.

This truly is a rich, unspeakable, divine wisdom and knowledge! Only those who believe in Christ are able to look into the deep abyss to know what the mind and intent of the divine heart are. Due to their weakness, however, they can neither fully reach it nor fathom it further than what they grasp by faith in the revealed Word as a mirror or image, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12. What they grasp by faith remains foreign and hidden to blind unbelieving reason. None of this occurs to reason's mind or thoughts. Indeed, human reason does not want to hear or know anything about this, even if it is revealed to it.

This is what Paul saw and experienced, in particular how the arrogant Jewish people firmly and with a stiff neck opposed this preaching of the gospel. This caused him to wonder and say: What is there much to talk about? I see well that it is nothing but the deep, unfathomable wisdom of God and his incomprehensible judgments and unsearchable ways etc. As he also says elsewhere, 1 Corinthians 2:7-8, "We preach a mysterious, hidden wisdom of God, which God ordained before the creation of the world for our glory, which none of the nobles of this world knew."

Such depth and riches of wisdom and knowledge we Christians are to know by faith. Otherwise, as Paul himself says, it cannot be grasped or comprehended. By faith, we certainly believe—while the world does not—and give God the glory from our hearts that he is truly a wise, just, good God and Lord whose riches and depth cannot be uttered. He is to be praised justly by all creatures because he governs his church so wondrously by his Word and revelation: Those who hear and accept his Word receive from it light to turn to him and to have the knowledge of their salvation, which the others are simply unable to find. God is also to be praised because he shows such unspeakable mercy to all those who are in sins and under God's wrath that he transfers those who are unworthy and condemned from the power of death and hell into the kingdom of eternal graces and life, if only they seek grace and believe in his Son Christ.

At the same time, as a just Judge, God justly rejects and condemns those who do not want to believe or respect such revelation and witness of his will in his Son but who want to arrogantly insist on their own blind idea of wisdom and righteousness. Deprived of God's light, grace, and comfort, these must eternally be separated from and cast out of God's kingdom, no matter how great their name and calling that they are considered to be God's people and church.

And these are the incomprehensible judgments and the unsearchable ways of God. This is his kingdom and work. For "judgments" means what is righteous or unrighteous before him, what pleases or displeases him, what is to be praised or punished before him—in short, what one is to follow or what one is to avoid. Similarly, "his ways" means what he wants to show and do for the people. People are unable to perceive these out of their own reason or search with their thoughts. Here they should not try to become God's masters with their judgment and thoughts regarding what is right or wrong or how God's acting and governing should look like. Instead, they should humble themselves before God and confess that he—as their God and Creator—knows and understands better who he is and how he should govern than we poor, miserable worms.

Ignorant of God's Mind, Reason Seeks to Tell God What to Do and Seeks to Help Him, but God Does the Opposite of What Reason Thinks He Should Do

For who has known the Lord's mind? Or who was his counselor? Or who has first given him to be repaid?

Romans 11:34-35

Paul here says three things to take from the world all boasting in divine matters. First, to know the mind of the Lord, to know what he thinks and intends to do, or to know what he decided by himself from eternity. Second, to give advice or to direct what he should do or how he should go about it. And third, to give him something, that is, to help him with our ability, power, and deeds to carry out what is in his mind. All these things are impossible for human nature. For because human nature cannot know his mind, it is even less able to give him advice with its wisdom and actions, or to give him anything at all.

It is therefore a shameful arrogance that the world dares to do this: It thinks that, by itself, it perceives and hits up God's Essence, will, and work. The world also has this idea of giving him advice on how to do it and what to put up with. Indeed, the world wants to earn heaven in exchange for its works and to do so much that he must repay the world. Then the world will have glory and honor that it has done great, excellent things in God kingdom of the church, that they have strengthened and preserved the church, and that they have filled heaven by their great holiness.

In order to overthrow such perverted minds, God only needs to do the opposite of what they think and intend to do in his kingdom and work. Then they will be offended and get mad at God, fooled by their own wisdom. This is how God will prove by deed and experience that it should not go the way we think it should and how we recommend it to God. Then we must confess that we have not understood his mind, counsel, and will or been his counselors. For no man or angel was the first to think about it or was able to foretell it. And there is certainly no need for God to take our advice or to repay us for anything we have given to him.

Christians Live Among Three Kinds of People on Earth: Materialists, Rationalists, and Spiritualists

This plays itself out among the three kinds of people among whom the Christians must live on earth. The first are the coarse pigs who do not ask any questions about who God is and how he governs. They despise all of God's Word and faith, except that they believe in their mammon and belly, thinking only about how to live for their own advantage, like the pigs in their barn. To these people, one should not preach anything about this text: "Oh, the depth of the riches, wisdom, and knowledge of God" etc. For they will not understand anything about it, even if you preached to them forever. They prefer to hear about their pods (Luke 15:16) and swill by which

they fill their belly. This is also why we let them be pigs and remain as they are. And they are already separated from us, although it is sad that one must see and hear such pigs, even among the Christians.

The second kind of people are those who use their reason to figure out what God's mind and opinion are, what his judgments and his ways are, and how they might be saved. This is why the pagans, and we under the papacy, argued about such things according to reason. Here begins all idolatry on earth because here everybody proceeds and teaches about God according to his own thoughts. Mohammed says: God is pleased with those who observe my Quran and faith. A monk says: If you observe this rule and holy orders, you will be saved. The pope says: If you keep my law and worship, go on a pilgrimage to the apostles in Rome, buy my indulgences, you will obtain the forgiveness of sins. But if you despise my rules, you are under God's wrath. These too are judgments and ways, by which they rule consciences and point the way to eternal life, believing these to be God's judgments and ways.

But God's Word says against these judgments and ways that he did not want them, that they are nothing but error, darkness, and vain worship—that is, idolatry—which is total enmity against God and which makes him very angry. Indeed, the whole world must confess that they cannot say or conclude for certain whether God is certainly gracious to them or pleased with them on account of their life and actions, no matter how long they are engaged in such self-chosen works of theirs. And yet, they take their chance, as they go forth in their blind madness and presumption—until God strikes their heart by the revelation of the law. Then they must recognize in terror that they have lived without the knowledge of God and did not know anything about his will. And that they have no counsel or help, unless they lay hold of the word of the gospel concerning Christ.

Until now, we were all like these people. Even I, as a spiritual, learned doctor, did not know or understand anything differently. Indeed, I dreamed that my monk's cowl should please God and be my way to heaven. I thought that I knew well the mind of the Lord. I even wanted to be his counselor and give him something, so that he would have to repay me. But I now see that this was error and blindness. I must learn from his Word that nothing avails before him except faith in the crucified Christ, his Son, and to live in such faith and to do what one's calling and station in life demands. This is how you can become certain of what is right and wrong before him because we did not make this up out of our own minds but have it by revelation where he shows us what he has in mind, as Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 2:10, 16: "We have the mind of Christ" and "God has revealed it to us through his Spirit."

The third group of people are also going against what Paul says. To be sure, they hear the Word or revelation. But then, led by the devil, they want to grasp God's ways and judgments beyond and besides God's Word, where he has not revealed them. (For I'm not now talking about those who deliberately persecute God's Word, as they belong in the first group, as those who do not ask anything about God. Instead, I am talking about those who set the revelation aside.) If they were Christians, they would be content with his Word and thank God for giving his Word where he shows what pleases him and how they are to be saved. But now they let the devil lead them and want to seek other revelations and speculate who God is in his invisible Majesty, how he

governs the world in some mysterious way, and what he has secretly decreed for each of them in particular in the future. Human nature and reason cannot completely deny themselves after all. They want to reach into God's judgment and know God's most secret counsel. They want to teach him and be his master. That is the arrogance of the miserable devil because of which he was cast into the abyss of hell. He too wanted to reach into the divine Majesty and additionally wanted to cause man to fall down. He did this in paradise in the beginning. He tempted the saints and even Christ himself, when he placed him on the pinnacle of the temple.

Against these, Paul adduces these words, to respond to the inquisitive question of smart reason: Why did God punish and reject the Jews in this way, and why did he let the condemned pagans come to the gospel? And why does he govern the world in such a way that he lifts up godless, evil people, while he allows good people to suffer and be oppressed? Why does he first select Judas to be an apostle and then reject him, and why does he save the murderer and robber? Paul therefore wants to prohibit them from climbing into the hidden Majesty by their reason and to urge them to stick with the revelation he has given us. For such searching and climbing is not only fruitless. It is also harmful. Even if you search our God's hidden Majesty, you will not achieve anything except to break your neck.

The Christian Way: Grasping God in His Son on the Cross, as Revealed in Scripture

But if you want to proceed properly, there is nothing better than occupying yourself with his Word and works, where he has revealed himself, where he makes himself heard, and where he lets himself be grasped, namely, how he presents to you his Son, Christ, on the cross. This is the work of your redemption where you can certainly grasp God. There you see that he does not want to condemn you on account of your sin, if you believe. Rather, he gives you eternal life as a gift, as Christ tells you: "This is how God loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him would not be lost," John 3:16. In this Christ, Paul says in Colossians 2:3, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are already hidden. You will have more than enough to learn, study, and consider these. You will marvel about this lofty revelation of God and become fervent in your love of God because of it. For Christ's work is such that we cannot learn enough about it in this life. And Peter says in 1 Peter 1:12 that even the angels cannot stop looking at it but have their unceasing joy and delight in it.

I say this so that you would know how to instruct and advise those who are tempted and plagued by such thoughts of the devil to test God, when the devil entices them to go outside the revelation, to search off-road, to figure out what God thinks about them, thereby leading them into such hesitation and doubt that crushes them. These people, then, should be pointed to Paul's words to rebuke them—just as Paul did with his Jews and smart-alecks—so that they might realize that they want to grasp God by their wisdom and teach him a lesson as his counselors and masters; that they want to deal with him without any means; and that they want to give him so much that he must repay them. But this will not work. He has surrounded himself with walls so high that you will not reach him with your reason's climbing. He has so much wisdom, counsel, and riches; you will never be able to fathom or exhaust them. Rather, you should be glad that he has given you to know and receive some of these by means of the revelation, as follows:

The Beginning, Middle, and End of All Things Belong to God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

For from him and through him and in him are all things. To him be glory forever.

Romans 11:36

Paul wants to say: why do we want to boast much? All things that exist—including our wisdom and abilities—do not exist out of themselves. Rather, they must have their beginning in him, be preserved through him, and consist in him, as he says in Acts 17:28: “In him, we live, move, and have our being.” And in Psalm 100:3, it says: “It is he who made us, and not we ourselves.” That is to say: Whatever we are and are able to do, that we are alive, enjoy peace and protection—in short, all the good and evil that happens to us does not happen by chance or accident. Rather, everything happens out of and through his divine counsel and good pleasure. For he provides for us as for his people and sheep; he governs us; he gives us good things; and he helps and preserves us in times of need. This is also why all glory and honor from all creatures is due him.

But when Paul says: “From him, through him, and in him is everything,” he simply means to say that beginning, middle, and end all belong to God. All creatures come from him, and their increase is also from him, how great, how long, how wide, and how far they should go. To put it in the simplest terms, the beginning of every seed is that a root grows out of the dead seed in the ground. Then it sprouts and becomes a stalk, a leaf, an ear, and a seed. This is how it goes through the three phases it is supposed to have—beginning, middle, and end. In the same way, all creatures have their beginning, middle, and end for as long as they are to abide and remain. When the end is reached, every creature is gone. And even if the creature begins and grows but does not reach its end so as to become perfect, it is also nothing. In summary, everything must belong to God so that where he does not make a beginning, there nothing can be nor become. And where he makes an end, there nothing can exist. For God did not create the world like a carpenter who builds a house and then goes away, leaving the house as it is. Rather, God stays with the world and preserves all things the way he made them. Otherwise, it could neither stand nor remain.

Note that Paul here does not simply say (as he does elsewhere): From him are all things. Instead, he adds two elements to make a set of three elements while bringing all three together and concluding it into one thing: “To him be glory forever.” By doing so, he, no doubt, wanted to indicate the article of the three persons in a different way, although he does not mention them by name, which was not necessary here. Indeed, the ancient teachers saw this verse as a testimony to the Holy Trinity in this way: All things are created from God the Father and through the Son (as he does all things through the Son) and are preserved by the Holy Spirit through God’s good pleasure. Paul similarly says elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 8:6: “We have only one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are,” etc. And about the Holy Spirit, he says in Genesis 1:31: “God looked at all his works that they were very good.”

This is how Scripture teaches us that the work of creating all creatures is the work of the one God or the entire Godhead. And yet, the three persons are distinguished in the single Essence, so

that it is proper to say that everything comes, consists, and remains from the Father, as from the first person, through the Son, who is from the Father, and in the Holy Spirit, proceeding from both the Father and the Son, all three of whom remain a single undivided Godhead.

But how and in which way the differences between the persons take place in the divine Essence from eternity, that is certainly something we must leave unfathomed. We are unable to fathom God's creature according to this rough model. Indeed, no creature is so intelligent that it would be able to understand the three phases of beginning, middle, and end in itself. Although they are distinct from each other, they are connected in such a way that our external senses cannot distinguish them from each other. Who has ever been able to say, or gain insight into, how it is that a leaf grows out of a tree, how a seed turns into a root, and how a cherry grows out of the blossom through wood and pit? Or how the body and members of a human being grow and increase more and more. How it is that the tongue makes so many different sounds and words who are understood by so many ears and hearts. Much less what the innermost powers of the soul are with its thoughts, senses, memory, etc. Why, then, do we presume to measure and grasp God's eternal Essence by our human reason?

This is what we preach on Trinity Sunday so that the people may learn and know that we did not happen upon this doctrine by a dream. Rather, we arrived at it out of God's grace through his Word and the holy apostles and the faithful teachers of the past. May God help us all that we would be found steadfast and pure in this doctrine and faith until the end of our life on earth. Amen.