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AQUINAS, LUTHER, MELANCHTHON, AND BIBLICAL APOLOGETICS

JONATHAN SELDEN

Viewed historically and theologically, the apologetical views of Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and Philip Melanchthon may be understood in terms of a dialectical schema, that is, in relationship to one another these three views fall into the pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. If the relationalist apologetic of Aquinas is viewed as a thesis position, then the reformed apologetic of Luther stands in antithesis to Aquinas and scholastic rationalism. Although Melanchthon upheld Luther's biblical apologetic during his early career, he diverged from this reformed position in later life. His apologetic, then, may be described as a synthesis of Aquinas' rationalist view and Luther's scriptural view. Although the Protestant tradition eventually strayed toward a more scholastic view of apologetics, with Martin Luther we have a clear example of a thoroughly reformed and thoroughly biblical apologetic.

* * *

THROUGHOUT the history of the church great effort has been undertaken to provide an adequate defense of the Christian religion. In Athens at the Areopagus, the apostle Paul gave a defense of his faith against the Stoics and Epicureans, reasoning with them that, although they were religious, their religion was false. Beginning with "the God who made the world and everything in it," Paul asserted that man, "God's offspring . . . should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill" (Acts 17:17, 24, 29; NIV). Paul's defense began with an unproven assumption of God as Creator, not with human speculation about divinity. It was to counter Greek speculation about divinity that Paul built his defense of the Christian faith.

The challenge of Greek speculation did not end with Paul's encounter at the academy in Athens. Throughout the first several centuries of church history, various speculative heresies such as Arianism and Gnosticism threatened to stifle the Christian religion. The early church, however, responded as Paul did, basing its defense,

often embodied in a creed, upon the revelation of God. Such creeds as those of Nicea and Chalcedon affirmed the revealed truth of the deity of Christ and the tri-unity of the God-head.

As the Church developed as an institution, and as it granted more and more authority to its bishops, especially the bishop at Rome, it subsequently moved from its creedal foundation and espousal of scriptural supremacy. This development continued until the authority of scriptural revelation was matched by the authority of church councils and tradition. The prominent challenge against which Paul and the ancient church had successfully defended their faith—human speculation and non-revealed authority—progressively became a dominant aspect of the Medieval Church.

In the course of Medieval Christianity the antagonist assumed the role of the protagonist. Although it was once regarded by Paul as Christianity's enemy, Greek rationalism was adopted as a means for the defense of the faith.

This development was to reach its apex in the revered, if not "canonized," work of Thomas Aquinas. Though the Church had not always been aware of the growing role of reason, Thomas Aquinas consciously employed human reason, and thus human authority, in his defense of the Christian religion. His extensive use of Aristotle's non-Christian philosophy attests to this. It is understandable that Aquinas adopted the use of free and autonomous human reason, since in his semi-Pelagian view of God and man he had already adopted the concept of a free and autonomous human will. But with Martin Luther's reformation Aquinas' medieval apologetic and semi-Pelagianism met a biblical response.

Because he recognized the supremacy of divine authority over all areas of life and its direct relationship to the defense of the Christian religion, the great reformer Martin Luther completely rejected Aquinas' apologetic along with medieval semi-Pelagianism. Luther's apologetic necessarily differed from that of Aquinas because of his view of scriptural authority. In apologetics as in soteriology Luther began with a free and sovereign God, not with human merit and reason. Based on his acceptance of divine revelation as the sole and supreme standard for man in all areas of life, including apologetics, Luther's defense of the faith in both method and content was antithetical to the rationalist apologetic of Thomas Aquinas.

Philip Melanchthon, Luther's comrade in the German reform movement, also differed from Aquinas and medieval Christianity. However, he returned somewhat to a synergistic concept of salvation. His synergism, his concept of human freedom, and his view of revelation as a limited authority for man allowed Melanchthon to stray to a more scholastic, less consistently reformed apologetic. Although he

was a leader of the reformation, in some respects Philip Melanchthon synthesized the scholastic apologetic of Thomas Aquinas and the biblical apologetic of Martin Luther.

Apologetics by nature is a broad, interdisciplinary activity. No apology of any sort, be it philosophical or theological, is free from the epistemology which is its basis for acquiring truth. To defend truth it is necessary first to acquire truth. In many respects, apologetics and epistemology cannot be distinguished. Thus, in apologetics one's concept of authority is central, and in Christian apologetics then, the questions of epistemology, authority, and scripture must be considered.

I. THE THESIS: MEDIEVAL APOLOGETICS

"Scholasticism is the term given to the theology of the Middle Ages."¹ No single figure embodied medieval scholasticism better than Thomas Aquinas. His *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles* stand as the most significant examples of medieval scholasticism. "With Scholasticism we come to a well worked out and a detailed epistemology. . . ."² The scholastic epistemology of Aquinas, however, was not identical with the scriptural epistemology of the Apostle Paul. Aquinas' scholastic epistemology in effect began with human reason.

The first thing to note about the approach of Thomas is that he begins his identification of God . . . by means of the natural reason. In other words at the outset of his theology and controlling everything that he says he not only assumes but assures us that reason can prove the existence of God.³

In the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas contended,

The Apostle Paul says: "The invisible things of Him are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Rom 1:20). but this would not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made; for the first thing, we must know of anything is, whether it exists. The existence of God can be proved in five ways.⁴

¹Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1907) 587.

²Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977) 56.

³Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 169.

⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* in *The Basic Writings of Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945) 22.

This contention illustrates medieval scholasticism's attempt to uphold dogma through dialectical argumentation, independent of scripture.⁵

In order to prove the existence of God, Aquinas made human reason his epistemological starting point. "Scripture," asserted Aquinas, "is not part of the philosophical disciplines discovered by human reasons."⁶ Although scripture is necessary for salvation since "certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to [man] by divine revelation"⁷ that man might obtain salvation, it is not essential for epistemology. Scripture could be called ultimate as it relates to salvation, but not basic as it relates to epistemology. "We must bear in mind," wrote Aquinas, "that there are two kinds of sciences. There are some which proceed from principles known by the natural light of the intellect, such as arithmetic and geometry and the like. There are also some which proceed from principles known by the light" of revelation.⁸ For Aquinas, philosophy deals with those truths which can be proved by the "natural light" of reason, while theology is concerned with the unprovable realm of faith. Natural theology, according to Aquinas, is a combination of theology and philosophy, an overlapping of these two sciences which can be experienced and proven.⁹ Aquinas made his proofs for God's existence, i.e., his concept of natural theology, the central aspect of his system.

"Scholasticism has traditionally been associated with the revival of philosophy which followed the rediscovery of Aristotle, whose work was mediated to the Middle Ages through Arab and Jewish philosophy."¹⁰ Aristotle's logic had been employed by other religions, e.g., Islam, in an apologetic manner. Likewise then, Christian scholars of medieval Europe employed Aristotle's "natural reason" as a basis for their defense of the Christian religion. At the height of the church-dominated Middle Ages Aquinas incorporated an alien apologetical method into his defense of the Christian faith.

Aquinas provides perhaps the most significant demonstration of Aristotelian apologetics in his "proofs" for the existence of God. Aquinas' five ways—his five demonstrations of the existence of a supreme being—epitomize his apologetical priority of reason before revelation. In each of his "proofs," Aquinas drew a rationalistic argument from Aristotle's philosophy. Each of his arguments began with an observable phenomenon such as the existing world and upon that

⁵Schaff, *History*, 5. 588.

⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5.

⁷Ibid., 6.

⁸Ibid., 7.

⁹W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952) 2. 213. See also *Summa Theologica*, 5-10.

¹⁰Per Erik Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957) 3.

premise asserted the logical deduction of an uncaused cause or an unmoved mover, God.

In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself, for it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity. . . . Therefore it is necessary to admit a first cause, to which everyone gives the name God."¹¹

This type of argument "assumes the truth of a particular theory of knowledge. With certain adjustments of detail [Aquinas] takes over the Aristotelian position that all knowledge arises out of sensation."¹² He stressed,

the power of knowing cannot fail in the knowledge of the thing with the likeness of which it is informed. . . . The sight is not deceived in its proper sensible. . . . Sense falsity does not exist as known, as was stated above.¹³

It is ironic but no less true that the master scholastic Aquinas "tried to defend the truth of the church doctrines by employing the Aristotelian method of reasoning."¹⁴

The irony in Aquinas' apologetic grew out of his semi-Pelagian view of God and man. Aquinas could begin his system with reason and logic since he believed that the destructive effects of sin are not found in man's intellect but in his will.¹⁵ Like Aristotle, Aquinas believed in a virtually unimpaired intellect, so it was possible for him to assert that man, in his epistemological and apologetical endeavors, could begin with sense perception and human reason. "Man," wrote Aquinas, "has free choice, or otherwise the councils, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain."¹⁶ Since Aquinas viewed man as unaffected intellectually by the fall, he could formulate a "two-step process in presenting the case for Christianity." In the first step he employed Aristotelian philosophical argumentation as the foundation of his system, and then he completed his work by appealing to revealed Christian teaching.¹⁷ Throughout his system Aquinas drew "a clear line of distinction between knowledge

¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 22.

¹² Gordon Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957) 278.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 184.

¹⁴ Van Til, *Christian Epistemology*, 57.

¹⁵ Persson, *Sacra Doctrina*, 232.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 787.

¹⁷ Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1969) 33.

and faith."¹⁸ This implies that in the Thomistic system authority lies basically with man according to his natural knowledge, not in scripture accepted by man through faith.

At the outset of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argued for the necessity of scripture.¹⁹ However, the importance for which he contended was only soteriological, not apologetical. Aquinas learned of salvation through faith and revelation but defended his faith externally and independently through the rationalism of Greek philosophy. Here, the Apostle Paul's antagonist—Greek rationalism—became the protagonist of medieval scholasticism. In the view of one contemporary critic of scholasticism,

where a theology is based partly upon the Christian revelation and partly upon philosophical ideas, the result is often a misguided hotch-potch. At best the end product is a mixture containing ideas which cancel each other out. At worst the alien philosophy has been so allowed to crowd out and transform that the result is scarcely recognizable as Christianity at all.²⁰

That medieval Christianity turned to Aristotle for its method of philosophical defense indicates its failure to perceive the discrepancy between theistic and anti-theistic apologies.²¹ Understanding this discrepancy only became possible with the reformation of the medieval church.

II. THE ANTITHESIS: REFORMED APOLOGETICS

The Protestant Reformation, with its resounding challenges of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*²² did not address only soteriological questions. The Thomistic natural apologetic met a formidable challenge in Reformation theology, which was based not on human reason but on divine authority revealed in scripture.²³ No reformer stressed the supremacy of scriptural authority in all matters more insistently than Luther. Where Aquinas was the champion of medieval rationalism, Luther was the champion of the reformation principle of scriptural supremacy. Luther led the reformers who, "throwing off the yoke of human authority, and disparaging the Schoolman, returned to the fountain of Scripture, and restated its truths."²⁴

¹⁸Persson, *Sacra Doctrina*, 228.

¹⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5-6.

²⁰Brown, *Philosophy*, 35.

²¹Van Til, *Christian Epistemology*, 57.

²²James E. McGoldrick, "Three Principles of Protestantism," *The Banner of Truth* (Issue 232, January, 1983) 7-18.

²³Brown, *Philosophy*, 33-34.

²⁴Schaff, *History*, 5. 592.

With Luther, epistemology, authority, and scripture were much more interrelated than they were with Aquinas. This was so because Luther took his epistemology entirely from scriptural revelation. Therefore, although a study of Aquinas can begin with a consideration of his epistemology, since it was independent of scripture, no study of Luther can begin apart from his first principle, the self-revealed God of the Bible. While Aquinas based his system on rationalism and revelation, Luther based his theology and apologetic solely on revelation. As part of his call to reform Luther decried rationalism.

In this whole matter the first and most important thing is that we take earnest heed not to enter on it [reform] trusting in great might or in human reason, even though all power in the world were ours; for God cannot and will not suffer a good work to be begun with trust in our own power or reason.²⁵

Despite this apparently categorical statement, caution is always in order when considering Luther's statements about reason. "Unless [the] Scholastic exaltation of reason is kept in mind when reading Luther, it is easy to misread his fulminations against reason. . . ."²⁶ Luther never denounced reason in general, since it is a gift from God; rather, he denounced improper usages of reason such as those made by Aquinas. Luther's epistemology, then, was the antithesis of scholasticism. "It was Luther's firm conviction that any attempt to defend the articles of the Christian faith by rational argumentation was the greatest folly."²⁷

Let others decide for themselves what they have learned from scholastic theology. As far as I am concerned I know and confess that I have learned nothing from it but ignorance of sin, righteousness, Baptism, and the whole Christian life. I not only learned nothing (which could be tolerated), but what I did learn I only had to unlearn again.²⁸

Luther was well aware of Aristotle's philosophy and how it had become prominent in the church during the three centuries preceding him.²⁹ Nevertheless, he made no concessions to Aristotle or to Aquinas' use of Aristotle. Concerning Aristotle Luther wrote, "the Holy Scriptures and the Christian faith are little taught, and the blind,

²⁵"An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility, 1520." In *Works of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1915) 2. 63-64.

²⁶Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982) 8.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 172.

²⁸Quoted in Robert O. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970) 235-36.

²⁹"The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520." In *Works of Martin Luther* 2. 190.

heathen master Aristotle rules alone, even more than Christ. In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle's [writings] . . . should be altogether discarded. . . ."³⁰ Likewise, Luther assessed the scholastics' use of Aristotle: "they mix the dreams of Aristotle with theological matters, and conduct non-sensical disputations about the majesty of God, beyond and against the privilege granted them."³¹ From Luther's perspective, Aristotle was a heathen³² standing in contradiction to scripture and therefore of no use to the Christian religion. Aristotle's writings drew men only further from the Bible.³³ With the logic of Aristotle, Aquinas paved his own road to God with speculation. Luther abhorred this effort. "Nothing is more dangerous than to build one's own road to God and to climb up by our own speculation."³⁴ Aquinas, believing that man's intellect had survived the fall essentially unaffected and that man's will was free and thus able to choose good (i.e., truth), began his apologetic with human reason. Luther, however, contended that man cannot base his religion on human reason because man is fallen, his will bound to sin, and his intellect depraved. It is

something fundamentally necessary and salutary for a Christian, to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that he foresees and purposes and does all things by his immutable, eternal, and infallible will. Here is a thunderbolt by which free choice is completely prostrated and shattered, so that those who want free choice asserted must either deny or explain away this thunderbolt, or get rid of it by some other means.³⁵

Furthermore, through the fall, man retained only

a depraved intellect and will inimical and opposed to God which is able to think nothing except what is contrary to God. Whatever is in our intellect is error.³⁶

Because man is bound to sin and error he needs a divine, transcendent reference point, a standard by which he may live righteously, know truth, and correctly defend that truth. Apart from this external

³⁰"An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility, 1520." In *Works of Martin Luther*, 2. 146.

³¹"Disputation on Indulgences, 1517." In *Works of Martin Luther*, 1. 46.

³²"A Sermon on Keeping Children in School, 1530." In *Works of Martin Luther*, 4. 173.

³³"To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany, 1524." In *Works of Martin Luther*, 4. 127.

³⁴Becker, *Foolishness of God*, 15.

³⁵"The Bondage of the Will, 1526." *Luther's Works*, ed. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 33. 37.

³⁶Quoted in Becker, *Foolishness of God*, 23.

standard, man in his depraved state has no basis for knowledge. Unlike Aquinas, who implicitly demonstrated that man in his ability to defend Christianity rationally was at least to some degree his own authority, Luther claimed divine revelation as his sole authority. Knowledge of the triune God

never would have been heard nor preached, would never in all eternity have been published, learned and believed, had not God himself revealed it.³⁷

The teaching of human experience and reason are far below the divine law. The Scripture expressly forbids us to follow our own reason, Deuteronomy xii, 'Ye shall not do . . . every man whatever is right in his own eyes,' for human reason ever strives against the law of God, as Genesis vi. says: 'Every thought and imagination of man's heart is only evil continually.' Therefore the attempt to establish or defend divine order with human reason, unless that reason has previously been established and enlightened by faith, is just as futile as if I were to throw light upon the sun with a lightless lantern, or rest a rock upon a reed.³⁸

Luther's apologetic rested on the revealed truth that the Christian faith could be

proved [only] by the Scriptures, and not by temporal analogies and worldly reason. For it is written that the divine commandments are justified in and by themselves and not by external help.³⁹

In contrast to Aquinas, Luther contended:

It is most deplorable that we should attempt with our reason to defend God's word, whereas the word of God is rather our defense against all our enemies, as St. Paul teaches us. Would he not be a great fool who in the thick of battle sought to protect his helmet and sword with bare hand and unshielded head? It is no different when we assay with our reason, to defend God's law, which should rather be our weapon.⁴⁰

Moreover, concerning scholastic apologetics, Luther stated:

From this, I hope, it is clear that the flimsy argument of this prattler fails utterly, and, together with everything he constructs upon it is found to be without any basis whatever.⁴¹

³⁷"Epistle Sermon, Twelfth Sunday after Trinity." In *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 3.

³⁸"The Papacy at Rome, 1520." In *Works of Martin Luther*, 1. 346.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 347.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 347.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 347.

Luther could accept no method of acquiring truth or defending truth which was not completely submissive to revelation.

He wrote that the principles of the Lutheran Reformation can be defended by clear Scripture, and he went on to say that whatever cannot be so defended has no place in the Christian religion. It is the very nature of the Christian faith that it seeks no foundation on which to rest except the bare word of Scripture.⁴²

On this point Luther was adamant,

for once the pure and certain Word is taken away, there remains no consolation, no salvation, no life.⁴³

Even defending God's word was unacceptable to Luther, since this would elevate man to a place of authority and judgment over scripture. Man must not judge scripture; rather, he must judge according to scripture.⁴⁴

Among Christians the rule is . . . to hear, believe, and persevere in the Word of God, through which alone we obtain whatever knowledge we have of God and divine things. We are not to determine out of ourselves what we must believe about Him, but to hear and learn it from Him.⁴⁵

Not only did Luther view a rationalistic defense of Christianity as immoral, but also as utterly unnecessary, since God's Word is self-authenticating.⁴⁶ Concerning human, or rational, defenses of scripture Luther, with tongue in cheek wrote:

What a splendid argument! I approve Scripture. Therefore I am superior to Scripture. John the Baptist acknowledges and confesses Christ. He points to Him with his finger. Therefore he is superior to Christ. The Church approves the Christian faith and doctrine. Therefore the Church is superior to them.

To refuse this wicked and blasphemous doctrine of theirs you have a clear text and a thunderbolt. Here Paul subordinates himself, an Angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters at all to Sacred Scripture. This Queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to, her. The Pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from

⁴²Becker, *Foolishness of God*, 170.

⁴³"Lectures on Galatians, 1535." In *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslov Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963) 26. 77.

⁴⁴"Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, 1530-32." In *Luther's Works*, 23. 237.

⁴⁵"Psalm 110." In *Luther's Works*, 13. 237.

⁴⁶"The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520." In *Luther's Works*, 36. 107-8. See also *Works of Martin Luther*, I. 347.

heaven— these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters, but only witnesses . . . and Confessors of Scripture.⁴⁷

It is no point of irony that Luther, the champion of justification through faith, believed that man possesses no authority in epistemology or apologetics, just as possesses no authority in his salvation. *Sola scriptura*, the

Protestant doctrine of the Bible, does away with the dualism of Scholastic epistemology. It is no longer possible for man to have true knowledge about anything apart from the Bible. And especially is it impossible to have any true knowledge about God apart from the Bible.⁴⁸

With the Protestant endeavor to learn the distinctly scriptural doctrine of salvation came a Protestant desire to employ a distinctly scriptural apologetic which upheld, not denied, divine authority. In the work of Martin Luther this apologetic was firmly established. The responsibility of the reformation movement subsequent to Martin Luther, then, was the maintenance and development of Luther's distinctly scriptural apologetic.

III. THE SYNTHESIS: POST-LUTHER PROTESTANT APOLOGETICS

Following Luther's death, the mantle of leadership in the German Reformation fell to Philip Melanchthon. Melanchthon, however, did not maintain all of Luther's views, diverging from them on several significant issues, including apologetics. It was the continuing development⁴⁹ of Melanchthon's thought that allowed him to revert to several pre-Reformation concepts and thus to diverge from Luther's biblical defense of the faith. In this respect, it can be said that Melanchthon stood as a synthesis between scholastic and reformed apologetics.

Melanchthon was born in 1497, when the humanist method of learning which characterized the northern Renaissance had already reached Germany. During his university years Melanchthon studied with several humanist scholars. While Luther had been educated in the scholastic tradition of the middle ages, Melanchthon was educated in the humanist tradition of the Renaissance. Following the completion of his degree, Melanchthon was recommended by his grand uncle, Reuchlin, one of the foremost humanists in Germany, to a faculty chair at the recently founded University of Wittenberg.

⁴⁷"Lectures on Galatians, 1535." In *Luther's Works*, 26. 57-58.

⁴⁸Van Til, *Christian Epistemology*, 65.

⁴⁹Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* underwent numerous revisions and editions between the years 1521 and 1555.

At Wittenberg, under the influence of Luther, Melanchthon for the moment set aside his classical humanist studies, giving his full attention to the study of Greek and theology. Soon he was at the forefront of the Reformation as one of its most significant leaders. By 1520 he had written on Pauline doctrine against scholasticism, and by 1521 he had published the first edition of the *Loci Communes*, a paramount work of the Reformation. These and other early writings appear to demonstrate that he underwent a clear and final break from his earlier notions. Repeatedly, he denounced the rationalism of scholasticism and upheld the reformation principles of the supremacy of scripture⁵⁰ and justification through faith alone.⁵¹

Under the influence of Luther, Melanchthon set aside his belief in the importance of human merit in salvation. He came to realize that rationalism had crept into the synergistic soteriology of medieval Christianity.⁵² He realized that man is not free to earn the merit of Christ, but bound to sin. Because all men are depraved, no one by his own ability can avoid sin.⁵³ Since "man by his natural powers can do nothing but sin,"⁵⁴ all human powers are impure. This implies that, just as the human will is insufficient for acquiring salvation, human reason is insufficient for acquiring and defending a true knowledge of God.

Melanchthon attacked Scholasticism because it upheld the freedom of the will as a meritorious agent in salvation. "In place of faith, the anchor of the conscience, Scholastic theology has taught works and satisfactions by men."⁵⁵ Melanchthon knew the Scholastics were wrong⁵⁶ when he wrote, "all that stupid and godless men have written about free will and justification by works is nothing but a pharisaic tradition."⁵⁷

Inspired by his identification with Luther,⁵⁸ Melanchthon's anti-Scholastic attitude carried over from soteriology to philosophy. "How corrupt," he wrote, "are all the theological hallucinations of those who have offered us the subtleties of Aristotle instead of the teachings of Christ."⁵⁹ Early in life Melanchthon rejected the teachings of

⁵⁰Philip Melanchthon, "Paul and the Scholastics, 1520." In *Selected Writings*, trans. Charles Leander Hill (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1962) 48.

⁵¹Philip Melanchthon, "Circular Themes, 1520." In *Selected Writings*, 59.

⁵²Philip Melanchthon, "Loci Communes, 1521." In *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauk (LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 23.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 19.

Aristotle, the same teachings which Aquinas had employed in his attempt to know and to prove God apart from scripture. Melanchthon wrote "not to call students away from the Scriptures to obscure and complicated arguments, but rather to summon them to the Scriptures,"⁶⁰ for "it is not necessary to believe in any other articles than the ones Scripture approves."⁶¹ In 1521 there was nothing Melanchthon desired more

than that all Christians be occupied in greatest freedom with the divine Scriptures alone and be thoroughly transformed into their nature. For since the godhead has portrayed its most complete image in them, it cannot be known from any other source with more certainty or accuracy. Anyone is mistaken who seeks to ascertain the nature of Christianity from any other source except canonical Scripture. For how much of its purity the [Scholastic] commentaries lack! In Scripture you will find nothing unworthy of honor; in the commentaries how many things depend on philosophy, on the judgement of human reason! And these clash absolutely head on with spiritual judgement."⁶²

Although early in his career he rejected Scholasticism and its use of ancient philosophy, viewing it as "darkness and untruth,"⁶³ Melanchthon's views were always developing and even then beginning to change.

In his early years Melanchthon clearly resembled Luther in his stance against Scholasticism and its dependence upon human reason. Yet, a study of his later writings, especially those composed after the death of Luther in 1546, show a growing dependence upon both the human will in salvation and, subsequently, human reason in knowing God. This can best be explained in terms of his strong humanist background and later continuation of humanist studies related to his establishment of educational curriculum for German schools and universities.

In the 1533 edition of his *Loci Communes* Melanchthon omitted the disparaging remarks he had made against the Scholastics and their philosophical approach in the 1521 edition.⁶⁴ Although in 1521 Melanchthon repudiated any concept of free will and denied any capacity of natural man for knowing God, in the 1555 edition of *Loci* he wrote of man's "natural light" and active will, and even included proofs for the existence of God.⁶⁵

⁶⁰Ibid., 19.

⁶¹Melanchthon, "Paul and the Scholastics, 1520." In *Selected Writings*, 48.

⁶²Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, 1521, 19.

⁶³Quoted in *ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁴Richard R. Caemmerer, "The Melanchthonian Blight." *CTM* 18 (1947) 325.

⁶⁵Philip Melanchthon, "Loci Communes, 1555." trans. and ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965).

Melanchthon's later view of salvation can be said to be reformed in that he advocated justification through faith. "God forgives us our sins," he wrote, "and accepts us, in that he imputes righteousness to us for the sake of the Son, although we are still weak and sinful. We must, however, accept this imputed righteousness with faith."⁶⁶ Melanchthon certainly did not hold the same view as the Scholastics who claimed that "man merits forgiveness of sins through his own fulfillment of the divine law. . . ."⁶⁷ In his later view of the role of the human will, however, Melanchthon differed with Luther. Whereas Luther viewed man's will as passive in salvation, Melanchthon viewed man's will as active. "We should not think that a man is a piece of wood or stone," in response to God's work of salvation.⁶⁸ God "draws the one who is willing, not the one who resists."⁶⁹ For Luther, the will of man is acted upon by God in salvation, but for Melanchthon (in 1555) the will of man acts with God in accepting salvation. This synergistic concept of salvation was a significant step toward a synthesis of medieval and reformed beliefs.

Not only could man's will choose salvation through faith, believed Melanchthon, but his reasoning capacities could gain a knowledge of God. In his later writings Melanchthon referred to man's natural ability to know God apart from scripture. In man is a natural understanding

that God is an eternal, omnipotent, wise, true, good, just, and pure being, who created all things, who wills that all rational creatures be like him in virtue and who will punish and remove the rational creatures who are repugnant to his wisdom and righteousness.

This is a legal understanding of the law, and it remains in man even after he sins.⁷⁰

By the "natural light" of his own nature, man could come to know God and uphold him in civil obedience.

By nature all men know that there is an eternal omnipotent being full of wisdom, goodness, and righteousness, that created and preserves all creatures, and also by natural understanding, that this same . . . Lord is called God. Many wise people, therefore, such as Socrates . . . Aristotle, and Cicero, have said that there is an almighty, wise, good, just God, and that we must serve this one Lord in obedience to the light he has built into our nature . . .⁷¹

⁶⁶Ibid., 161.

⁶⁷Ibid., 75.

⁶⁸Ibid., 60.

⁶⁹Ibid., 190.

⁷⁰Ibid., 128.

⁷¹Ibid., 5.

Revelation, then with its message of salvation, could be only supplementary to Melanchthon's naturalistic approach to God. Revelation only adds something to that which man himself can and ought to say about God.⁷² With this and other similar claims, Melanchthon reverted toward Scholastic theology and in effect synthesized several of its elements with elements of the reformed faith.

Melanchthon even came to use rational proofs for the existence of God in his commentary on Romans and later editions of the *Loci Communes*. These proofs were structured just as those used by Aquinas and the Scholastics, whom he had once condemned. Melanchthon employed such concepts as the orderliness of nature, the rational nature of man, the necessity of a single first cause, and the teleological goal of a final cause, asserting that each of these necessitates the existence of God, therefore God exists.⁷³

Whether these proofs in Melanchthon's scheme were merely to aid believers or intended to be used as common ground with unbelievers in defending the faith cannot be known with certainty. Melanchthon did, however, elevate the capabilities of human reason and stressed this in his later theological discussions, whereas earlier he had denied that man had any ability to know God through reason. Because he elevated the role of natural reason, Melanchthon, like the scholastics before him, necessarily held revelation not in a position superior to reason, but coordinate with reason.

Because he was a transitional figure whose thinking was constantly in flux, Melanchthon is a difficult person to evaluate. It is evident, however, that although he was once an advocate of Luther's biblical theology and scriptural method of defending that theology, Melanchthon drifted somewhat from the original views of the Lutheran reformation. This he did as he came to embrace certain elements of scholastic Christianity. Thus, Melanchthon shifted from the views of Luther to a position significantly closer to that of Aquinas.

In the final analysis it was Martin Luther (in contrast to the scholasticism of Aquinas and the synergism of Melanchthon) that upheld the supreme authority of revelation in all matters. It was Luther who without compromise returned to the text of scripture, not only for the truth of God concerning knowledge and salvation, but also for his defense of that truth. Luther claimed no ability of his own either in salvation or apologetics. Rather, by faith, he obediently restated the truths of scripture, and upon those truths placed his complete confidence.

⁷²Ibid., xxx.

⁷³Ibid., xxix-xxx.