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## A Gadamerian Analysis of Roman Catholic Hermeneutics: A Diachronic Analysis of Interpretations of Romans 1:17-2:17

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A Gadamerian Analysis of Roman Catholic Hermeneutics:  
A Diachronic Analysis of Interpretations of Romans 1:17-2:17

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Dedication

Ad Sedes Sapientiae. For Kim, Zoe, and Gemma. May Christ be your vision. And may He be nothing to you save that which He is.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1: The Catholic Church in Dialogue .....	1
Whence this Project?.....	1
Why Romans 1:17-2:16? .....	3
A Survey of Hermeneutics .....	7
Gadamer .....	13
Hope for Catholic Exegesis .....	26
Chapter 2. Origen: Early Exegesis .....	34
Origen of Alexandria.....	34
Heretics and Catholics.....	35
Patristic Catholicism .....	40
“Revealed” (Romans 1:15-16) .....	45
“Handed Over” (Romans 1:26) .....	52
According to Their Works (Romans 2:6-9).....	54
Conclusion .....	58
Chapter 3. Augustine’s Interpretations .....	59
Introduction .....	59
Illumination and Neoplatonism.....	61
Manicheanism .....	63
Early Treatment of Romans 1 and 2 .....	64
Ennarations on the Psalms: 1-32 (before 392).....	65
Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount (394) .....	67
The Reply to Faustus (397) .....	69
Summary of Early Responses .....	72
Pelagianism.....	73
Excurses on Pelagius’s Reading of Romans 1 and 2.....	74
Augustine’s Newer Perspective .....	75
The Spirit and the Letter .....	77
Conclusion .....	85
Chapter 4. Aquinas as Hermeneutic Exemplar.....	87
Scholasticism: Distinctions, Systematization, and the Legacy of Augustine.....	88
Aristotle .....	92
Romans 1:17 Faith: Aristotle Allows Paul to avoid Pelagianism and Antinomianism.....	94
Romans 1:19 Abstracting God’s Attributes with the Light of the Active Intellect: Aquinas, Augustine, and Aristotle on the Possibility of Natural Theology .....	98
Romans 1:20 Paul Teaches Participation, Causation, Divine Simplicity, and the Doctrine of Analogy .....	100
Romans 1:24 Aristotle Explains How Sin Brings More Sin.....	103
Romans 1:27 Aristotle Explains What Paul Means by “Nature” .....	105
Romans 2:8 Aristotle Explains Why Hell Is Eternal .....	106
Romans 2:13 Augustine Amends Aristotle: The Infused Virtues .....	107
Romans 2:14 Aristotle’s Resolution to Augustine’s Dilemma .....	109

Conclusion .....	110
Chapter 5. Luther: A Catholic Test Case .....	113
Obvious Rootedness in Tradition .....	118
A New Horizon in Humanism .....	119
Contemporary Questions: The <i>Via Moderna</i> .....	122
Luther on Justification: Situatedness within Catholic Tradition .....	127
Luther on Justification: Development in Augustinian Continuity .....	131
Luther on Justification: A Trajectory toward Rupture? .....	139
Luther's Innovations .....	142
<i>Idolatry</i> .....	142
<i>Hiddenness of God in Suffering</i> .....	145
The Lectures: Beginnings of a Radical Rejection of Tradition .....	148
Romans 1 and 2 in Luther's Preface to Romans .....	155
Conclusion .....	159
Chapter 6. Barth: A Hermeneutic Exemplar .....	164
Why Barth? .....	164
Barth's Theological Background .....	166
The Emergence of Barth's General Hermeneutics .....	170
Barth's Hermeneutics, Gadamer's Hermeneutics .....	172
Barth on Romans 1 and 2 .....	183
Commonalities and Distinctions .....	194
Chapter 7. A Catholic Alternative .....	196
A Catholic Response to Barth .....	196
Christ as Sache .....	197
The Fixity of Words and the Flexibility of Meanings .....	200
Christ as Truth .....	204
Concrete Applications .....	212
Recent Magisterial Statements .....	214
<i>Avoiding Relativism</i> .....	214
The Boundaries of Interpretation .....	216
Tradition's Freedom in Application .....	220
Tradition's Growth in Dialogue .....	221
Conclusion .....	223
Chapter 8. Gadamer: A New Reminder for an Old Approach .....	225
Reading Romans 1 and 2, Again .....	227
Conclusion .....	231
Bibliography .....	232
Appendix—Latin and Greek Versions of Romans 1-2 .....	238

## Abstract

Catholic exegesis of scriptural and dogmatic statements has become rigid in the period following the Enlightenment. Gadamer's account of philosophical hermeneutics, when applied to the Catholic situation, elaborates how Catholic exegesis might return to its premodern, freer form. Following Gadamer, I hold that to understand is to fuse the horizon of the old with today's horizon using the preunderstandings that have been provided by the tradition while at the same time bringing the questions of today into dialogue with the text.

Examples of how Romans 1 and 2 have been interpreted historically serve to support this thesis. Origen reads Romans 1 and 2 using the traditional understandings afforded him by the ancient Catholic tradition. At the same time, he seeks in the text answers to the questions raised by the heresies of his own day. The early Augustine reads in Romans an answer to the questions posed by the Manicheans. Later he places that same text into dialogue with the Pelagians and, though still using the preunderstandings provided by the tradition, finds new meaning. Aquinas robustly exemplifies this conception of exegesis. He places Romans into dialogue with Aristotle and comes away with a creative fusion of the two.

After considering the examples above, I turn to two instances of hermeneutics that fail to be acceptable models of Catholic exegesis. Though the young Luther's commentary on Romans is a Catholic fusion of traditional preunderstandings and late medieval thinking, the older Luther ceases to dialogue with the tradition and thereby fails to give an acceptable Catholic interpretation. Barth, on the other hand, provides a paradigmatic example of Gadamerian hermeneutic principles. His exegesis is insufficient not because of his method but because of the *Sache*, the subject matter, he wrongly reads into the text of Romans.

This historical consideration of Catholic philosophical hermeneutics reinforces my proposition that Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics adequately accounts for the Catholic hermeneutic tradition and provides a manner of approaching how that hermeneutic tradition might be appropriated today. Hermeneutics must not be a mere repetition of scriptural and dogmatic utterances but a placing of dogmatic statements into conversation with the situation today. This productive fusion can provide new, surprising meanings that cannot be predicted simply by reference to how statements have been understood in the past.

## Chapter 1. The Catholic Church in Dialogue

### Whence this Project?

[W]e must overcome two possible temptations: first, condemning everything: ... assuming “everything was better in the past,” seeking refuge in conservatism or fundamentalism, or conversely, consecrating everything, disavowing everything that does not have a “new flavor,” relativizing all the wisdom accumulated in our rich ecclesial heritage. The path to overcoming these temptations lies in reflection, discernment, and taking both the ecclesiastical tradition and current reality very seriously, placing them in dialogue with one another.

—Pope Francis<sup>1</sup>

In Pope Francis’s first magisterial document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he offers a challenge to Catholic theologians and exegetes. While the substance of this pope’s teaching remains in continuity with that of his predecessors, his accent on openness, dialogue, and listening to non-Christian sources is noticeably new. The document insists on “dialogue” with the modern sciences<sup>2</sup> and with people of other faith traditions<sup>3</sup> and speaks of learning from these non-Christian sources. Moreover, the document emphasizes that manners of doctrinal expression can and must change. In particular, the exhortation highlights the need for Biblical exegetes and theologians to search for new ways to express the truth of the faith, which is always alive and active. The pontiff notes that “[t]here are times when the faithful, in listening to completely orthodox language, take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ.” He continues, “‘the expression of truth can take different forms.’ The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, “Video Message to the Second International Congress of Theology” (Buenos Aires: 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: 2014), 132.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 250-54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. Quoting John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Ut Unum Sint* (Vatican City: 1995).



This dissertation is, in part, an attempt to respond to the Holy Father's call for renewed exegesis. In this work, I propose that Gadamer's account of understanding is an adequate philosophical explanation of the Catholic hermeneutic task and that it is this account of understanding that should aid the Catholic exegete going forward. According to Gadamer, to understand a traditional text is to fuse traditional horizons with new horizons. To understand is to dialogue with the text in order to come to an agreement with it. If one fails to do this, one simply does not understand. Understanding requires engagement with a text and application of it in one's own situation. Therefore, mere repetition of a scriptural passage—or of any dogmatic utterance—is not understanding. For texts cannot be understood apart from their application to new situations and new cultural, linguistic, and conceptual horizons.

I aim to show that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic is useful for explaining Catholic theological exegesis in the past by considering historical commentaries on Romans 1:17-2:16. As I look at three Catholic commentators on this text, I argue that new meaning emerges from this singular locus as each commentator dialogues with the words of the text within his own unique historical situation. New meaning becomes evident as new questions are posed to the traditional accounts.

After considering the three Catholic authors, I consider two important Protestant commentators on this text. I look at Luther's work on Romans in order to clarify the hermeneutic boundaries which marked Luther's departure from the Catholic fold. I then turn to Karl Barth's work to see what aspects of this undeniably important exegetical masterpiece can be applied to the Catholic situation. At the end of this analysis, I conclude that Gadamer's account of hermeneutics is adequate and appropriate for grounding a Catholic exegetical endeavor and for bounding the limits of Catholic exegetical wandering.

## Why Romans 1:17-2:16?<sup>5</sup>

The text that I examine reads as follows:

**1:17** For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” **18** For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. **19** For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20** Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; **21** for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. **22** Claiming to be wise, they became fools; **23** and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

**24** Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, **25** because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

**26** For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, **27** and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

**28** And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. **29** They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, **30** slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, **31** foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. **32** They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

**2:1** Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. **2** You say, “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” **3** Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? **4** Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? **5** But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. **6** For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: **7** to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; **8** while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. **9** There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also

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<sup>5</sup> The Latin and Greek texts of this selection are available in Appendix A. Here I use the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

the Greek, **10** but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. **11** For God shows no partiality.

**12** All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. **13** For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. **14** When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. **15** They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them **16** on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

I have chosen this particular passage for hermeneutic analysis firstly because it is found in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. As N. T. Wright notes, Romans

is neither a systematic theology nor a summary of Paul's lifework, but it is by common consent his masterpiece. It dwarfs most of his other writings, an Alpine peak towering over hills and villages. Not all onlookers have viewed it in the same light or from the same angle, and their snapshots and paintings of it are sometimes remarkably unlike. Not all climbers have taken the same route up its sheer sides, and there is frequent disagreement on the best approach. What nobody doubts is that we are here dealing with a work of massive substance, presenting a formidable intellectual challenge while offering a breathtaking theological and spiritual vision.<sup>6</sup>

Romans offers the unique perspective of one of the earliest Christian voices. While the Pauline authorship of many other New Testament epistles (e.g., Colossians and Ephesians) are contested, most contemporary critical scholars place Romans among the apostle's authentic work. The scholarly consensus suggests that the letter was written around 55 CE from somewhere in Greece, probably from Corinth. The letter covers a broad range of topics. It begins with an introduction, including a salutation and prayer of thanksgiving (1:1-17), and then moves to the section that I am considering: a discussion of revelation, law, Jews, Gentiles, and the righteousness of God's judgment (1:18-2:16). From there Paul proceeds to such diverse topics as the relationship between law, faith, and righteousness, the importance of faith, sin in the life of the believer, the spirit and the flesh, the election of Israel, and practical instructions for Christian living.

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<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 395.

Because of its wide scope and the complexity of its arguments, Romans has played a central role in shaping many theological controversies. Numerous examples of varied readings of Romans are available for analysis precisely because the history of Christian exegesis is punctuated by important figures reading Romans anew in order to respond to—sometimes to ignite—these heated controversies.

The first of these disagreements arose around the question to which Paul himself was responding in the epistle: What is the relationship between Christians and Jews? Some followers of Jesus saw Christianity as a movement within Judaism—a purification and fulfillment of it but a part of it nonetheless. Others viewed Christianity as a separation from Judaism, a new and independent religion. One aspect of this early, broad controversy was a dispute about which Jewish ceremonial laws were necessary for Christian Gentiles to observe. According to Acts 15, discussion and compromise regarding which rules were to be imposed on non-Jewish converts go back to the earliest of post-resurrection clashes. As the disputed boundary between Judaism and Christianity continued into the post-Apostolic period, interpretations of Romans, with the epistle's insistence that "works of the law" were not necessary for church membership,<sup>7</sup> played a crucial role in distancing Christianity from Judaism.

Many of the controversies that have since composed Christian theological history are framed in terms borrowed from this first dispute. As a locus for my examination of Gadamer's hermeneutics, I explore how interpreters of Romans, in these varied theological conflicts, have found the language in the epistle to be useful for understanding their own situations. Origen uses this language as he battles against heretical groups' perversions of the Gospel. Augustine finds in Pelagius a return to the works-based righteousness that Paul condemns in the text of his epistle. Aquinas finds in Romans a defense of Aristotle's work. Luther sees in Romans a diagnosis of the medieval Catholic Church's ritualistic righteousness that seeks to earn salvation apart from the grace freely given through faith. Barth sees in the Liberal theologians of the long

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rom. 2:15, 3:20, 3:27-28

nineteenth century a works-based theology that divorces itself from Revelation which arises through the Spirit, in faith and apart from human effort.<sup>8</sup>

Though historical interpretations of Romans have enjoyed and continue to enjoy extensive scholarly discussion, my focus here is unique. The greater part of previous academic consideration has dealt with those passages in Romans which treated the historically controversial dichotomies of law and grace, of faith and works, and of spirit and flesh.<sup>9</sup> The passage that I have chosen has been somewhat neglected. Romans 1:18-2:16 stands out in Romans and indeed in the entire Pauline corpus because the text focuses primarily on epistemological matters. While the passage touches on the more thoroughly treated topics, its focus is on “knowing,” “revealing,” and “possessing.” For instance, while the difference between Jews and Gentiles is explored, the emphasis is not on how these groups behave ritually but rather how they know what they know.

At issue in this scriptural selection is the question: What, if anything, can unbelievers know about God and His law apart from revelation? This possibility is often called natural theology. The text that I have chosen in Romans is the principal locus referenced by theologians for their elaboration of a theory of natural theology. Here theologians look to explore what about God is knowable and what the limitations of such knowledge are. They also use this text to highlight how such natural knowledge is different from knowledge of God given in revealed theology. So while this text is frequently discussed in doctrinal considerations of epistemology, an analysis of the history of the hermeneutics of this text has been, until now, lacking. In this work, I focus not on the content of the various natural theologies that have been developed based on this passage but on the hermeneutic process that leads to such varied readings, and

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<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, a big portion of Barth's critique extends further back to Schleiermacher.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, eds., *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth* (Brazos Press, 2005), and Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2005).

how Gadamer's account of understanding provides a useful framework for looking at what each of these historical interpreters has done.

As the earlier quote from N. T. Wright suggests above, indeed the interpretations of Romans are varied. Some interpreters find in this passage a denial of the possibility of natural theology, while others see a robust defense of it. Still others find a nuanced, limited role that it might play in certain aspects of theology or philosophy. This vast variety of interpretations is the perfect object for the overarching analysis that I wish to conduct in the dissertation. I propose that Gadamer's account explains how it is possible that readers within the same traditions can approach the same text and come away with such radically different answers. Moreover, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics explains how these diverse interpretations can be considered authentic expressions of the same tradition. That is, these varied interpretations can all be true. Finally, I wish to consider what this historical analysis might teach the Catholic theologian and Biblical exegete more generally about the possibility of Christian scriptural and dogmatic hermeneutics today.

### **A Survey of Hermeneutics**

At the outset, we must note the ambiguity of the term "hermeneutics." In the Christian tradition the term has typically been used to denote the process of finding meaning in particular texts. However, from that tradition, the broader notion of philosophical hermeneutics developed. Philosophical hermeneutics, sometimes called general hermeneutics, is a study of understanding in itself. While traditional hermeneutics focuses on textual—and sometimes exclusively scriptural—analysis, philosophical hermeneutics looks at what it is for a person to understand anything at all. Hence I am proposing that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is salutary for a proper conception of the specifically Catholic scriptural and dogmatic hermeneutics. The Catholic theologian must have an adequate notion of understanding itself

before she can move to what it means to properly understand the scriptures or other dogmatic language.

Before I argue in favor of a new hermeneutic theory for understanding Christian scripture, it is useful to survey the history of the Christian hermeneutic tradition in particular and more broadly the hermeneutic tradition of the West that preceded Gadamer.<sup>10</sup> From the beginning, Christianity, like other scriptural traditions, had to apply the writing of another time and another situation to its own contemporary circumstance. The Jewish religious milieu out of which Christianity sprang already had a rich hermeneutic tradition for interpreting the Torah. This tradition, evident in the intertextual references of the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>11</sup> comes to the fore in much of the first-century writing that was later captured in the Mishnah as well as in the much-discussed Dead Sea Scrolls. Already in the New Testament, we see authors struggling to make sense of the Hebrew Scriptures in the new context of the early Christian community. For instance, much of the book of Hebrews consists of elaborate typological explanations of the temple rituals described in the Torah.

During this early patristic period, the criteria for interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures is primarily Christological and moral. The patristic authors interpret many historical and ritual details of the Hebrew Scriptures as pointing to Christ and the Church that he established. For instance, the blood sacrifices found in the Hebrew Scriptures are interpreted to refer to Christ's death on the cross. In addition to this Christological hermeneutic, the Fathers glean moral lessons from the historical events of the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, in the First Letter of Clement, the author argues that God wishes there to be a hierarchy within the Church because there was hierarchy in the Jewish liturgical rites.<sup>12</sup> Over time, various—and sometimes

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed look at the history of hermeneutics, see Jane Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (USA: Yale UP, 1994), or Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern UP 1969). For a specific look at the history of patristic and medieval Christian hermeneutics, see Henri De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* (*Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998*).

<sup>11</sup> See Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> 1 Clement 40–42.

competing—schools of Christian hermeneutics developed more elaborate systems of understanding scripture from both the old and the new covenants.

While the catechetical school at Antioch stressed the literal sense of scripture, the Alexandrian school developed a theory of scriptural interpretation that emphasized the nonliteral sense. Even outside of the Christian community, we see analogical methods of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures in the Jewish literature of Alexandria. Philo, a Hellenistic Jew living there in the first century CE, is perhaps the prime Jewish example of this method of interpretation. Combining Rabbinic and Stoic methods of interpretation, Philo sought to make sense of the Hebrew Scriptures in terms compatible with the learned Gentile milieu in which he was formed. While insisting that all of the Hebrew Scriptures are divinely inspired, Philo uses etymologies, analogies, and complex interpretations of symbols to reconcile the Jewish scripture with the Greek learning of his day.

Following Philo, the Christian school at Alexandria developed its own elaborate interpretative theories. Clement saw two levels in the text: the physical level, which was to be understood literally, and the spiritual level, which was to be understood analogically or typologically. Later, in the second century, Origen proposes three levels of meaning. For Origen these three levels correspond to the three parts of the person: the body, the soul, and the spirit. The bodily level is the literal level. Origen considers this level inferior to the other, higher levels. At the level of the soul is the moral lesson that can be learned from a text. The spiritual level, accessible only to the elite, is the highest level. From this level, doctrine can be learned. It is at this level that Origen employs analogy and typology extensively.

The medieval, Latin project of bringing together the Alexandrian and Antiochian Schools is central to the work of Augustine. Augustine's contribution to hermeneutics cannot be easily summarized. This is especially true because of the influence that Augustine's thought—including his thought that was not explicitly hermeneutic—had on so many hermeneutic philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Augustine's own theory of hermeneutics



grew from an examination of the relationship between signs and referents. Words, for Augustine are signs that point to something. Since signs cannot fully capture the referent that they signify, there is always some distance between the sign and the thing intended. This is especially true of the words of sacred scripture, which deal with sublime referents that far surpass the limits of verbal expression. Nevertheless, Augustine holds scripture in the highest regard and insists that the one who has a rightly directed will can, through Christ, come to understand it.

In scripture, Augustine finds many perspicuous signs. These are easily understood and should be taken literally, although additional, non-literal meanings might also be possible. On the other hand, some passages are difficult or ambiguous and cannot be taken literally. For Augustine, when the literal sense of the text cannot be accepted, the spiritual, analogical, or typological sense should be employed.<sup>13</sup> Thus Augustine shows a preference for the literal sense while always allowing for the other approaches.

As a general principle of interpretation, Augustine established rules with which to interpret the harder, more ambiguous parts of scripture.<sup>14</sup> The first is the Rule of Faith. The Rule of Faith is the received traditional understanding of the Church. According to this rule, scripture had to be interpreted in a way that was consistent with the Church's understanding of the topic at hand. Related to this principle is the idea that ambiguous scriptures should be understood in relation to more clearly understood scriptures. An ambiguous verse ought never to cloud the received, traditional teaching based on the majority of the scriptural evidence. So clearly understood texts ought to be used to understand ambiguous ones, not vice versa. Flowing from this is the Rule of Charity. Since, for Augustine, love is the primary message of scripture and of the Church, no part of scripture should be inconsistent with God's message of love. For

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<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, Augustine doesn't hold to this rule. He describes it in *De Doctrina*, but he frequently sees two or more meanings in the same text with little explanation as to why the text licenses more than one interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> Karla Pollman, "Hermeneutical Presuppositions," *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald, John C. Cavadin (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 426-29.

instance, those passages that called for the murder of whole villages had to be interpreted in a way that was consistent with scripture's main message, God's love.

By the high Middle Ages, exegetes frequently reference four modes of interpretation, or sense of scripture. They are summarized by a Latin verse: *Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia*. According to this, the literal reading of scripture teaches what has historically happened. Allegory teaches what doctrine ought to be believed in the Church. The moral sense shows how one should live, and the analogical sense reveals the eschatological meaning of the text. The relative importance given to the various senses of scripture varied by interpreter. For instance, Aquinas prefers the literal reading, writing that "nothing necessary for faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense."<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, some medieval giants, such as Bonaventure, frequently employed allegoric and analogical readings.

Luther's major contribution to hermeneutics is, as we shall see, his almost complete rejection of any means of interpretation apart from the plain sense of the text. For Luther, the meaning of scripture is clear and perspicuous. Since Luther tests all tradition by its fidelity to scripture, tradition itself cannot be used as a means of scriptural interpretation. Any ambiguity in the text can be interpreted only by reference to other scriptural passages. Hence scripture should interpret scripture.

Perhaps the next worthy stop on this admittedly cursory tour of the hermeneutic tradition is the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Growing out of the Lutheran Pietist tradition, Schleiermacher sought a hermeneutic theory that would be both systematic and universalizable to all genres of literature. For Schleiermacher, understanding language—be it speech or writing—is an attempt to get back into the mind of the original speaker or author of the message. This process has both a grammatical and a psychological component. The grammatical component involves finding out the meaning of a particular word or sentence in the

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<sup>15</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 1, 10 ad 1. "Spiritual sense" here means all of the non-literal senses of the scripture.

context of the original speaker. For no two words can be assumed to have the same definition for two different speakers. The psychological component requires understanding the overall thinking and perspective of the original speaker as well as possible. Thus, for Schleiermacher, understanding becomes a process of reconstruction.

Schleiermacher develops a number of rules for reconstructing the original meaning of the text. He introduces the idea that a passage ought to be understood in terms of the text as a whole. He asserts that in hermeneutics there is always a “divinatory aspect,” a hypothesis that is tested against the text and revised as necessary. These processes, comparing the parts to the whole and comparing one’s best guess about the meaning of the text to the text itself, do not ever lead to a final and complete understanding. Nonetheless, the careful reader can reconstruct an ever more accurate representation of the author’s intended meaning through this process.

One novelty in Schleiermacher’s hermeneutic theory is his idea that misunderstanding is more common and more natural than understanding rightly. Rather than assuming that most people understand most things most of the time, Schleiermacher holds the opposite view. For even a simple word means different things to different people. Thus for Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is not something to be employed in occasional, exceptional situations. Understanding language is, always and everywhere, hermeneutic.

Wilhelm Dilthey broadened the scope of the hermeneutic endeavor even further. He moved away from a myopic focus on textual and linguistic exegesis to a broader focus on the question of understanding the human sciences as a whole. For Dilthey, understanding the human sciences requires a practice distinct from that which is necessary to understand the natural sciences. Human action is always a manifestation of human freedom. Thus hermeneutic questions are especially complex when their object is the lived experience of human beings. Indeed, even the natural sciences, for Dilthey, are situated in human life. And since reason itself must be understood as a part of lived human experience, objectivity can

never be achieved, nor is it even desirable. For the human person is himself a part of that which he is analyzing.

Hermeneutics reaches its broadest scope in the work of Martin Heidegger. Here we see a truly philosophical hermeneutics develop. For, following Dilthey, Heidegger asserts that every human endeavor is an object of hermeneutic inquiry. But, going further, Heidegger asserts that humans are always in the process of understanding themselves. Indeed, what is unique to humanity is that, for humanity, one's own being is a question to be understood. Thus, to be human is to interpret one's own existence.

Heidegger employs Schleiermacher's concept of the hermeneutic circle—the part/whole interaction of interpretation—in order to explain how a person understands his existence in his environment. Rather than asserting that a passage should be understood in relation to a whole text, Heidegger asserts that a person understands his existence in relation to the world as a whole. Moreover, the world is always understood in relation to one's own being. Thus, understanding is always applying what is understood about the world to one's own way of life, to one's own place in the world. Understanding, then, cannot be separated from application.

## **Gadamer**

This minimalist outline of the history of hermeneutics serves as an introduction to the work of Gadamer, the philosopher whose theory of hermeneutics provides the most appropriate framework for the Catholic exegete.<sup>16</sup> Gadamer reappropriates much of what came before him, critiquing and modifying as needed. In broad strokes, Gadamer's project combines Heidegger's conception of how a person's self-understanding is situated in the world with Gadamer's own notions of culture, history, and language. Gadamer's project thereby provides a hermeneutic foundation for the human sciences. Most importantly, Gadamer's approach provides a context

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<sup>16</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004). For the remainder of the text, when no title is provided, any reference to Gadamer is from this, Gadamer's pivotal text.

from which to address the primary concerns of this dissertation. Gadamer's account of philosophical hermeneutics provides the framework by which I consider the hermeneutic factors that have shaped interpretations of Romans 1:17-2:16 and that should continue to shape Roman Catholic scriptural scholarship.

Gadamer's account is meant to be a descriptive account of how meaning emerges, not a concrete methodology. Thus Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutics does not necessarily capture the psychology of each author that I consider. Thus, I make no argument that Origen or Barth had a fully Gadamerian hermeneutic theory themselves. I merely mean that Gadamer's theory describes what these authors, to differing degrees, actually do when they understand. For Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutics is not a methodology for textual analysis. Rather, Gadamer aims to explain in the most general way what it means for anyone to understand anything. Thus Gadamer's broad conception of understanding can adequately contain a multitude of exegetical methodologies, including those employed by the authors I discuss in this work.

Gadamer asserts that each reader approaches a text from his own horizon. The reader's unique approach brings forth a distinctive understanding. The reader of a text brings his own questions and his own preunderstanding of the subjects in the text to the text. He asks the text how it fits within the tradition, how it challenges his own understanding of the tradition, how the parts of the text fit in with the whole of the message given by the tradition, and how the text answers questions arising from his own experience. The reader of a text is thus not endeavoring to get into the mind of the author—as Schleiermacher might say—but to see how the text speaks to the reader in his own day. From this engagement with the text, meaning appears. This distinctive meaning is the result of the fusion of the reader's own horizon with that of the text.

Gadamer's description of how a text is understood does not entail that a text's meaning is up for grabs or dependent on the whim of the reader. Rather, the text is grounded in the

tradition that makes its comprehension possible. While many post-Enlightenment thinkers attempt to distance themselves from tradition in the hope of finding some neutral, objective perspective, Gadamer—following Dilthey—instead affirms that “there is no such unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason.”<sup>17</sup> For Gadamer, the Enlightenment fear of tradition’s obscuring the “true meaning” of a text is unfounded. Instead, Gadamer asserts that tradition makes understanding a text possible in several ways.

First, tradition is what brings a text to the attention of a reader. As Gadamer notes, “anticipating an answer itself [in a text] presupposes that the questioner is part of the tradition and regards himself as addressed by [the text].”<sup>18</sup> A reader who is not part of the Christian tradition, for instance, would have no reason to seek answers in the book of Romans. Tradition highlights particular texts for its member’s consideration. Without tradition’s direction, we would not know where to go for these answers.

Secondly, tradition provides the reader with questions to ask of the text. For instance, a Catholic reader approaches the Bible to seek answers to those questions that arise within her tradition. She will look for the meaning of priesthood, the possibility of purgatory, and the identity of Mary only because Catholic tradition has provided these questions for her to ask. Readers approach traditional texts with an expectation that the text will have something to say about subjects relevant to the tradition precisely because the tradition provides both the text and the subjects about which the text speaks.

Thirdly, tradition provides prejudices about the meanings in the text. Based on the tradition from which a reader comes, she will project onto the text those meanings which she anticipates finding in it. Gadamer follows Schleiermacher in asserting that a reader must always test hypotheses against the text. These hypotheses come from prejudices—traditional understandings about what the text should mean. For instance, if one opened the book of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 370.

Romans having no expectation about the meaning of God, grace, law, and sin in the text, one would not have any access to begin to come to an understanding of what the text says. Against the post-Enlightenment aversion to prejudice then, Gadamer affirms that prejudices are a precondition for understanding anything.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of these important ways that tradition allows readers to understand texts, tradition does not bind a reader to one static meaning. For Gadamer, “in tradition there is always an element of freedom....”<sup>20</sup> That is, no reader understands the text in the same way that other readers in that tradition do. While it is true that tradition provides constraints and suggests possibilities for meaning, the subjective interpreter plays a unique and a creative role in understanding.

For this reason, Gadamer sees the individuality of the interpreter and the consensus of the tradition as engaging in a dynamic interaction. For Gadamer, this is the hermeneutic circle. For Schleiermacher, the hermeneutic circle had meant that a reader must continually move back and forth from attempting to understand a particular part of the text to attempting to grasp the whole of the text. For Gadamer, this movement is not merely from the part to the whole of the text but is movement from the text itself to the whole of tradition and to the world in which the reader lives. Thus the hermeneutic circle “is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter.”<sup>21</sup>

Indeed even when an author merely recognizes a traditional meaning in a text, he is engaged in a productive act. He is not simply repeating a traditional assertion. For Gadamer argues that “the joy of recognition is the joy of knowing more than is already familiar.”<sup>22</sup> In recognizing a known meaning in a text, one is now connecting that prior meaning with a new

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 111.

context. In recognizing the old, one is doing something new. Thus, “[understanding] is in the play between the traditional text’s strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between.”<sup>23</sup> Thus the meaning of the text is neither radically free from traditional meanings nor dogmatically bound to them.

Consequently tradition does not fix the meaning of a text in the past. Rather a reader approaches a traditional text with his own historical perspective, from his own horizon. While utilizing traditional prejudices about what the text has meant in the past, the reader brings his own questions to the text to dialogue with it in his own new context. He applies the text to his life. He searches the text for answers to the questions raised in his own time. His questions draw new meaning from the text. The fusion of his own horizon with that of the text results in understanding that would not have been possible in any other historical context.

For Gadamer, the possibility of fusing the texts of the past with the perspective of today exists because of shared subject matters, *Sachen*, about which the traditional texts speak and about which we are still today concerned. Against Aristotle, Gadamer reads Plato as not postulating some ontologically otherworldly realm. Rather, Gadamer see Plato’s forms, and especially his form of the Good, as the way in which thinking “points beyond itself” to something greater.<sup>24</sup> These *Sachen* are the truths, the forms, that Plato seeks to address in his dialogues. Plato’s dialogues are not mere attempts to intellectually defeat opponents but to better understand these transcendent truths. Gadamer holds that these *Sachen* unite us with texts across time and allow the possibility of dialogue with the texts of the past.

This productive activity—new readers encountering traditional texts over time—allows the meaning of a text to emerge gradually. While one may be tempted to view temporal distance from the production of a text as a barrier to understanding it, Gadamer contends that, in reality,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>24</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trans. Robert R. Sullivan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 186.



this is not so. Instead Gadamer holds that “time is [not] primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted.”<sup>25</sup> Our historicity, our rootedness in the past, provides the possibility for our understanding the past and indeed for understanding our present world.

We mistakenly believe that texts of the distant past are far removed from us. Gadamer corrects our misunderstanding: “[Time] is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us.”<sup>26</sup> The span of time between a reader and the text that he reads is filled with the prior readings, the opinions, and the judgments of other readers who have also labored to understand the text in question. So Gadamer asserts that “our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard.”<sup>27</sup> These other interpreters, whose understanding speaks to us out of the past, help us in our own exegetical task.

Hence Gadamer not only holds that time is no obstacle to understanding, he makes the even stronger claim that “temporal distance lets the true meaning of the object emerge.”<sup>28</sup> We understand things in the past even better than we understand recent occurrences. For Gadamer, a historical object is always changing and developing. For example, the Revolutionary War is different now, some two hundred years after it happened, from what it was in the uncertainty that followed the Colonial victory over England. The Revolutionary War has become what it is because of the events, interpretations, and understandings that came about after the war was over. The history of the United States, the later independence of the other former British colonies, and indeed the fall of the British Empire all change the meaning of the war for US independence. We know what the war means even better than those who fought in that Colonial army.

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<sup>25</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 297.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

So because history is always expanding the perspective from which one can view historical events, the final, complete meaning of something is never available to us. Regarding this, Gadamer states that “historical distance ... lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. But the discovery of the true meaning of a text ... is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process.”<sup>29</sup>

To clarify how the meaning of a historical object emerges over time, Gadamer gives an account of how the meaning of a work of art emerges. For Gadamer, art is a manifestation of truth. A picture, a play, or a sculpture is not simply a replica of something in the real world. A work of art “is not a copy of a copied being, but is an ontological communion with what is copied.”<sup>30</sup> A theatrical play, for instance, is not a mere reenactment of past events. For “the world of the play of presentation does not stand like a copy next to the real world, but it is that world in the heightened truth of its being.”<sup>31</sup> So, when a play is performed, it is always performed anew, yet, if it is performed well, it mixes the new with the old in a way that allows the truths that the play contains to stand out, to be manifest, even across the temporal divide that separates the spectator from the play’s author. Thus the best play is not simply the one that looks most like the original. In the same way, the best understanding of a text is not the one that most resembles the understanding of the author or of the original reader. Every understanding of a text must be an understanding anew. Understanding is always understanding “for us” now.

Of course, Gadamer does not naively presume that ancient texts can be easily understood. He warns:

... a truly historical consciousness always sees its own present in such a way that it sees itself, as well as the historically other, within the right relationships. It requires a special effort to acquire a historical horizon. We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence we approach the testimony of the past under its influence. Thus it is constantly necessary to guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 132.

expectations of meaning. Only then can we listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard.<sup>32</sup>

For Gadamer, the unique medium that makes all understanding possible is language. Gadamer states, "Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all."<sup>33</sup> Without language, discursive thought, and therefore meaning itself, is impossible. Hence a meaningless environment would imprison the one who lacked language which "gives freedom from environment."<sup>34</sup> The human being should not be construed, then, as if she were "imprisoned within a verbally schematized environment. On the contrary, wherever language and men exist, there is not only a freedom from the pressure of the world, but this freedom from the environment is also freedom in relation to the names that we give things...."<sup>35</sup> By our use of language, then, we are able to discover meaning in the environment, to name those objects we encounter, and thereby to create the world we know.

Thus our being in the world depends on our being in language. Since all understanding is necessarily understanding for us and is codetermined by the one who understands and the thing that is understood, then language, the necessary medium of understanding, not only determines the world but determines who we are. In the process of naming, we assert our distinction from those things about which we speak and thereby name ourselves. So Gadamer says, "it is literally more correct to say that language speaks us, rather than we speak it...."<sup>36</sup> For the process of understanding the world, which is the process of labeling the world, is de facto the process of understanding ourselves.

From Gadamer's insistence on language's creation of the world, it follows that "thought and the word belong as closely together as possible."<sup>37</sup> Language is the inescapable means by

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 440

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 441

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 459

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 425

which we understand ourselves and our world. But language is inescapable not because it is a confining prison. Rather, language is inescapable because the entire world we know is accessible only by language. Language is the very means by which we can know. Thus when we say “we must understand in language,” we are at the same time affirming that “language is the possibility that we may understand at all.”

Having considered the import of language for understanding, we can now connect it to all that we have said about tradition. Language, then, is tradition concretely expressed in the community that hands it on.<sup>38</sup> Gadamer asserts:

Just as things, those units of our experience of the world that are constituted by their suitability and their significance, are brought into language, so the tradition that has come down to us is again brought to speak in our understanding and interpretation of it. The linguistic nature of this bringing into language is the same as that of the human experience of the world in general.<sup>39</sup>

To use language to understand our experiences is to allow tradition to speak to these ever new experiences.

Language, like the tradition of which language is itself a manifestation, comes to us with a fixed form but not a fixed meaning. “[T]he word that has come down to us as tradition” is the very “possibility” of a new hermeneutic occurrence.<sup>40</sup> For every new encounter occasions novel use of language. In these encounters, the tradition is active. It “really encounters us and does so as if it addressed us and is concerned with us.”<sup>41</sup> In the hermeneutic event, “what has been said in the tradition” ... “comes into language” as we attempt to use the given language to label the new.<sup>42</sup>

This “coming into language” ... “is once an appropriation and an interpretation.”<sup>43</sup> For the tradition continues anew as new experiences are named with traditional linguistic terms. In this way, we can never escape the tradition which forms us and the language that speaks us. To

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 443

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 452

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 457

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

escape would be to cease to understand. Instead of attempting to escape the linguistically constructed world that we inhabit, Gadamer states that what we can “succeed in seeing ... an ever more extended aspect, a “view” of the world.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, it is part of the very being of language to appropriate itself in the new and thereby to expand. Gadamer writes that “language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to understand.”<sup>45</sup>

Language’s propensity to adapt and change is part of its nature. The meaning of words and the use of expressions is remarkable in its variability.<sup>46</sup> Hence language does not limit the “human mind’s necessary and legitimate range of variation in articulating the essential order of things.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, so varied are the possible meanings of individual linguistic utterances that “a person who speaks—who, that is to say, uses the general meaning of words—is so oriented towards the particularity of what he is perceiving that everything he says acquires a share in the particularity of the circumstance he is considering.”<sup>48</sup> Hence the immense variability internal to any linguistic utterance entails that meaning cannot be taken apart from context in which the utterance is spoken. In a certain sense, every new use of language is a unique, new meaning.

Since context is ever changing, so too is the use of language. There is then always a tension between language, which is “the record of finitude” and the newness of our experiences in the word.<sup>49</sup> This new “world we encounter is not only foreign but is also related to us.”<sup>50</sup> It is language that we use to negotiate this tension between that which is new and that which is known. In the process of using language, we catalog and describe the newness that we encounter in known terms. In this process, the new world offers its “own truth for us.”<sup>51</sup> In this

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 426.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 453.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

interchange, “every language is constantly being formed and developed the more it expresses its experience of the world.”<sup>52</sup>

Gadamer offers as an example of language’s development the linguistic expression, “the sun sets.”<sup>53</sup> This expression, an encapsulation of our traditional way of seeing the world, remains true. While our understanding has adapted to encompass the Copernican conception of the solar system, in our language “appearance retains its legitimacy just as much as science.”<sup>54</sup> Thus in a given context, this statement is certainly true. For we really do still experience the sun as setting while at the same time we can conceptualize—in new uses of language, no doubt—the scientific notion of the earth rotating away from its closest star. The language need not change even as the meaning evolves.

The linguisticity of understanding entails neither linguistic determinism nor linguistic relativity. On the one hand, Gadamer states that “the fact that our experience of the world is bound to language does not imply an exclusiveness of perspectives.”<sup>55</sup> That is, our speaking a particular language does not prohibit our understanding other perspectives. Language’s flexibility yields the real possibility of understanding others. Indeed, we can “enter foreign language worlds” and thereby “overcome the prejudices and limitations of our previous experience of the world.” Yet, “this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world.”<sup>56</sup> To learn the new always requires the already attained. For, “[e]ven if we emigrate and never return, we still can never wholly forget.”<sup>57</sup>

Our human, linguistic finiteness requires that in order to understand we must always be engaged in dialogue. Gadamer learns from Plato that dialogue is the “discipline that guarantees truth.”<sup>58</sup> For “[j]ust as individual words acquire their meaning and relative unambiguity only in the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 453.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 484.

unity of discourse, so the true knowledge of being can be achieved only in the whole of the relational structures of the ideas.”<sup>59</sup> We can ever expand our knowledge by interaction with new perspectives and the new world contained therein. The possibility of dialogue then ensures that we are not trapped in linguistic relativity. For we can come to understand the other and thereby see a greater truth. Hence, dialogue, the expansion of our traditional, linguistic horizons, “guarantees truth.” Our possibility of understanding is only limited by the degree to which we can fuse our own horizon with that of our conversation partners.

At the same time, truth remains linguistically, historically, and culturally bound. The human cannot transcend language. For the linguistic world is not opposed to some “world-in-itself” as if the right view from some possible position outside the human, linguistic world could discover it in its being-in-itself.”<sup>60</sup> All human understanding is linguistic, and every world available to us humans is linguistically constructed. Gadamer wonders what type of narcissism wishes for some non-human knowledge of the world-in-itself. He compares this desire with that of “Lucifer.” A person with such a desire is “one who wants to prove his own divinity by the fact that the whole world has to obey him.”<sup>61</sup> Rather, Gadamer holds that our horizon will always be limited and incomplete while also ever expandable.

Gadamer’s analysis provides an excellent framework with which to understand each of the authors that I will consider. Each author approaches Romans from a particular tradition, with his own preunderstandings, and in a unique historical situation. The interplay between the text, the tradition, and the historical situation of the author raises questions that the author brings to the text. The meaning that emerges from the text is a unique production of both tradition and innovation. The text itself is God-given and unchangeable language. It is the dialogue partner with which the various interpreters engage. The growing doctrinal tradition itself becomes the prejudice with which the author approaches the unchanging language of the text. But new

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 429.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 445.

horizons that emerge are not ignored simply for the sake of traditional readings. Rather, the new horizons are taken into dialogue with the text. They are then accepted, rejected, or modified based on the meaning that emerges from this fusion of horizons. It is this Gadamerian framework that best explains how authors as different as Origen and Barth can approach the same text only to find vastly different meanings.

One objection to my adoption of Gadamer's account might be that I ought to assume that these thinkers, some of whom had their own accounts of hermeneutics, ought to be interpreted in their own terms. That is, rather than using Gadamer's account of hermeneutics to explain Origen's interpretation of scripture, I should look to Origen's own theory of hermeneutics. To that objection, I assert that one of the greatest qualities of Gadamer's account is that it serves as a synthesis of much of the hermeneutic work that came before it. Gadamer does not reject Origen's, Augustine's, or Aquinas's theory of interpretation. Rather, he uses them and builds on them. He sees himself as part of that great hermeneutic tradition and seeks to return to the hermeneutic ideas more widely espoused in pre-Enlightenment times. To be sure, Gadamer's own account can be seen as a synthesis of the interpretive tradition that came before him. More than anything else, Gadamer's retrieval of both Platonic and Aristotelian notions places much of his thought in line with the Western Christian tradition founded upon that same philosophic base. Gadamer retrieves from Plato an account of how dialogue and questioning are essential to comprehension and from Aristotle a practical emphasis on application above theoretical abstraction through Gadamer's unique incorporation of Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*. Gadamer goes on to combine Origen's multiplicity of senses with Augustine's existential reading of texts. He employs Aquinas's theory of the word and his respect for tradition—both religious and philosophic. Moreover, Gadamer openly acknowledges Barth's hermeneutic genius.<sup>62</sup> Thus acceptance of Gadamer's broad philosophical hermeneutics

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 510.



need not entail a rejection of the particular methodological hermeneutic theories of each author in this work. Rather, Gadamer's theory is broad enough to include each of these perspectives.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, if Gadamer's proposal is correct, then it is broad enough to encompass any event of understanding. For Gadamer is not proposing a specific method for reading a text. He is not critiquing exegetical methodology. Gadamer is asserting that when we understand, what we are doing is fusing the old with the new. We are taking the material passed on to us in culture, tradition, and language and using it to comprehend something new through a process of questioning, dialogue, and eventual agreement. Gadamer is proposing that this process simply is what it is to understand—be it textual understanding, artistic understanding, or conversational understanding.

### **Hope for Catholic Exegesis**

At first glance, one might be tempted to think of this dissertation as an account of hermeneutics within **the** Christian tradition or of **the** history of natural theology. This is not the case. Of course it is simplistic to talk about the Christian tradition as a monolithic structure. Even in the first centuries of Christian history, there were, no doubt, many versions of Christianity, each with its own burgeoning tradition. I am, more properly speaking, looking at several traditions and how each of these accounts of Romans 1:17-2:16 arises.

If we take Gadamer's work seriously, as I am proposing that we do, then it is helpful and indeed necessary for me to be up front about the horizon from which I view the material that I cover here. For my Roman Catholic tradition has a profound effect on how I read all of the texts contained herein. I look back through Aquinas, through Augustine, and through Origen to read Paul. Moreover, I read all of these Catholic authors in order to understand my own identity as a Catholic. I read them to understand "for me." I read them to know about the subjects—*die Sachen*—about which I am interested: sin, redemption, faith, works, revelation, and, ultimately,

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Gadamer, 406-36.

Jesus Christ. I am not interested so much in what Augustine said in response to the Pelagians as to what Augustine says to me. I have my own questions that I wish to bring to each Catholic text. It would be futile to attempt in some “objective” or “scientific” way to divorce myself from these commitments and interests.

On the other hand, I read Luther and Barth as authors with whom I share less. I am freer to reject Luther and Barth, to criticize them, and to disagree with them in ways that are not available—or desirable—to me as I read the Catholic texts. For they do not form part of my own tradition.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, one should not exaggerate the difference between my reading of these authors and my reading of Catholic texts. For indeed, while I am not a Protestant, I do share horizons with both Luther and Barth. Like Luther, I am concerned about ritualism, church reform, and church corruption. Like Barth, I struggle with the limitations of liberal theology and the possibility of theology in a post-Kantian context. These shared horizons allow for the prospect of some common understanding of these texts.

Nevertheless, in this work I will offer a strong critique of both Luther’s and Barth’s work. While I by no means dismiss the genius of Luther’s work, I will point out how the meanings that emerged for Luther develop partly from a rupture with traditional sources. Rather than using the prejudices developed within the tradition, he rejected many of them. Rather than dialoguing with the traditional sources that came before him, he proposed his own reading. I will then consider Barth’s *chef-d’oeuvre*, *A Commentary on Romans*, as a successful attempt to come to terms with the Protestant, Calvinist tradition in the early-twentieth-century horizon. While Barth’s notion of coming to understand Romans readily illustrates the account of understanding that Gadamer proposes, I nonetheless will conclude that Barth’s work is, for the Catholic, fundamentally flawed. For while Barth seeks to know God as the unknown, for the Catholic, God

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<sup>64</sup> Of course, a Catholic is free to disagree with and reject many aspects of the Catholic authors as well. Nonetheless, the Catholic authors that I am examining share—and are sometimes the source of—the prejudices that I bring to the text of Romans. Thus my approach to the Catholic authors is undoubtedly different from my approach to the Protestant writers.

is radically available in Jesus Christ. Thus, though much of Barth's method is appropriate for the Catholic exegete, the *Sache* about which Barth speaks—the very *Sache* that he thinks licenses his methodology—is a *Sache* that the Catholic must reject. For the Catholic, the *Sache* of the scriptures is not God unknown in the words of scriptures and the world, but Christ present and ready to speak in those words and in that world.

Through my hermeneutical analysis of these historical Catholic and Protestant sources, I also aim to encourage a renewal of scriptural exegesis within the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has long included many hermeneutic approaches to the interpretation of Holy Scripture. As we have seen, Origen, Augustine, and the exegetes of the Middle Ages had pluriform approach to scriptural interpretation. Nonetheless, despite this variegated, multifaceted history of approaches to interpreting Holy Scripture, Catholicism today lacks a proper standpoint from which to move forward.

Though *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on Sacred Scripture*, acknowledges that the Bible can continually serve as a source of renewal in the Church,<sup>65</sup> modern exegesis has not proven helpful. In traditionalist circles, there remains a tendency to view scripture as a message unpacked once and for all in magisterial statements and dogmatic definitions. In this view, no new reflection is necessary once the magisterium has spoken regarding a particular topic. For this group, the tradition remains stagnant. The scripture cannot answer today's questions because it only speaks to yesterday's.

On the other hand, many of the newer, more creative theologies abandon Catholic tradition and thus fail to be a guide in Catholic scriptural analysis. Some of these exegetes, though still Catholic in name, have in fact given up meaningful dialogue with the magisterium's traditional understandings. Many of these promising new theological exegetes chose to reject dogmatic pronouncements rather than to dialogue with them and thereby interpret them anew. For instance, some leading Liberation theologians and Feminist theologians have been

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<sup>65</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (Vatican: 1965), 23.

sanctioned by the Church for flatly contradicting dogmatic statements.<sup>66</sup> I propose that in this way, these theologians are making the same mistake that Luther made.<sup>67</sup>

In Pope Benedict's introduction to the work *Jesus of Nazareth*, he similarly laments the state of Catholic exegesis. He notes that Catholic biblical exegetes tend to err in one of two possible directions. On the one hand, they may fall into anti-dogmatic historicism. In this error, they divorce their exegesis from traditional accounts, dogmatic pronouncements, and other acts of the magisterium. This results in a Jesus of history that is not clearly identifiable as the Christ of faith.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, some exegetes seem to simply come to the scriptures as if it were a set of texts available for prooftexting magisterial pronouncements. He holds that neither of these approaches is valuable. Against these errors, Benedict offers a new hermeneutic approach. He states that the Bible and indeed all of Church doctrine can be read as a whole centered on its one theme—Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup> For, as Benedict assures us, it is one united figure, the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history that is the *Sache* of the entirety of scripture. Broadly speaking, this dissertation is an attempt to further the project that Benedict advances.

I believe that Gadamer can serve as a useful guide for an authentic Catholic path forward. In this work, I mean to remind the Catholic reader that the scripture does not contain a frozen message. Even a scripture whose meaning has been discussed in magisterial teaching is open to new, different interpretations. For new historical horizons pose new questions to the text of scripture. As a result, new answers will come forth from these contemporary dialogues. At the same time, in order for this exercise to be authentically Catholic, it must be done in continuous dialogue with Catholic tradition. Scriptural sources can never be erased and dogmatic papal and

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<sup>66</sup> See Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Notification on the Book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* by Sr. Margaret A Farley, R.S.M." (Vatican: 2012); Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Notification on the Works of Father Jon Sobrino, S.J." (Vatican: 2006); and Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, "Notification Regarding Certain Writings of Fr. Marciano Vidal, C.Ss.R." (Vatican: 2002).

<sup>67</sup> I do not intend to deny that the magisterium can and does err in these matters. It is beyond my competence to suggest ways that the magisterial offices can better hear and censor Catholic theologians. Nonetheless, it is to the imperfect Church, composed of humans, that Catholic commitment belongs. It is within this community, governed by this imperfect system, that the Catholic theologian must operate if she wishes to remain Catholic.

<sup>68</sup> Benedict, *Jesus of Nazareth, Vol 1*. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xvi. Note: This is a person work of Pope Benedict, not a magisterial work of the pope.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

conciliar pronouncements must always be considered authoritative. Nonetheless, new interpretations of these documents are also always possible. These new interpretations cannot be predicted by old interpretations.

A cursory look at the history of dogmatics reveals clearly that the meaning of dogmatic statements is not predictable by their meaning in the past. One example of a significant change in doctrinal meaning relates to the dogma that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church. St. Cyprian (d. 258 CE) writes, “*Salus extra ecclesiam non est.*”<sup>70</sup> That is, “there is no salvation outside the Church.” The Fourth Lateran Council (1213 CE) dogmatically interprets this doctrine thus: “There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved.” Pope Eugene IV (d. 1447 CE) asserted the ancient understanding of this doctrine when he wrote:

The Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and preaches that none of those existing outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, can have a share in life eternal; but that they will go into the “eternal fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels”, unless before death they are joined with Her.<sup>71</sup>

This papal bull typifies the explanation of this doctrine throughout the ages of the Great Schism and the Reformation.

By the twentieth century, however, a dramatic shift has occurred. The meaning of being “outside” the Church is questioned. It slowly became accepted that people could be united with the Church in some way even if not practicing Christians. The heresy of Feeneyism was condemned.<sup>72</sup> The Second Vatican Council, while never denying the words of the dogma, goes on to boldly reinterpret the meaning of the dogma. The council repudiated the older, established interpretation by teaching that “those who ... seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—

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<sup>70</sup> Letter LXXII, *Ad Jubajanum de haereticis baptizandis*.

<sup>71</sup> Pope Eugene IV, *Cantate Domino* (1441). See Matthew 25:41.

<sup>72</sup> Father Leonard Feeney was a Jesuit priest who strictly interpreted “*extra ecclesia nulla salus.*”

those too may achieve eternal salvation.”<sup>73</sup> It seems that the Church espouses contradictory doctrines in these dogmatic, conciliar teachings.

We see clearly that interpretation of the original formulation of the doctrine has shifted, but the language of the dogma remains fixed. The dogmatic formulation, “No one is saved outside of the Church,” is retained while the propositions associated with it are altered or even rejected. In particular, the concepts of “outside” and “Church” were expanded to include the possibility of salvation and the possibility of one’s being “in the Church” without being “visibly a member of the Church.” Associated dogmas such as “he who believes and is baptized shall be saved” were likewise reread to include a redefinition of baptism.<sup>74</sup> The validity of a “baptism of desire” is accepted to admit that those who have not been baptized with water might already reap the benefits of baptism in some way.

As a result of this interpretive upheaval, the traditional dogmatic language was not erased. Rather it was reread in the new context. Just as Gadamer’s example of how “the sun sets” remains, even while its meaning has changed, so too in this situation the old interpretation simply ceased to make sense. As Christians dialogued with non-Christians, sanctity was found in non-Christian religions. As history was analyzed, the importance that accidents of history had on creedal allegiance seemed to make salvation simply a matter of where one was born. In this new context, the old interpretations ceased to make sense. It was clear that the old interpretation was not true. Instead, truth was manifest in the new reading. Eventually, this new reading became so essential to the tradition that it has itself been written new in the dogmatic assertions of the Second Vatican Council. Nonetheless, it would be naive to think that this new dogmatic language is not itself open to reinterpretation, indeed to interpretations that are unpredictable now and that might be surprising.

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<sup>73</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), 16.

<sup>74</sup> Mark 16:16.

Gadamer did not propose a method of interpretation but an account of understanding. If we accept Gadamer's account, we can judge various interpretations as adequate or inadequate understandings of scripture based on what it means to understand rightly. Based on Gadamer's account, we can say that Aquinas, who though proposing important amendments to the tradition, continued to dialogue with Catholic sources, remained Catholic. On the other hand, Luther, who in his significant proposal rejected much of the tradition, severed his relationship with the Catholic Church. Even today tradition remains an authoritative guide to new understandings while offering the possibility of new, surprising developments. Thus Gadamer offers a middle way between stagnation in the tradition and rejection of it.

Gadamer's account of understanding presents a criterion for judging exegesis that is more basic than judgment according to simple propositional conformity to traditional readings. Understanding is coming to an agreement. For Gadamer, what it means to understand a traditional text is not to extract from the text some set of propositions. Rather it is to come to an agreement with the text on a particular issue. For a Catholic theologian, to interpret the scriptures rightly is then to dialogue with them until the horizons of today—horizons of science, feminism, globalism, and other postmodern concerns—fuse with the horizons of the texts. This is not an attempt to revolt against the tradition. Indeed, the texts themselves—be they texts of scripture or of dogmatic pronouncements—must not change. Moreover, the exegete comes at these texts carrying all of the prejudices of the tradition that forms him. That is, the exegete will, no doubt, first seek to read the texts using the old propositions associated with it. This is the inevitable, normative, and essential use of prejudice. It opens the text to the exegete. Thus the successful exegete will not reject all doctrine that fails to reach the level of dogma in some sort of minimalist adherence to only dogmatic definitions. However, the exegete will read the text with new horizons. In so doing, he will question it and make it speak to those questions. A successful exegesis will be the one that most convincingly fuses the past and present horizons. In these new contexts the dogmatic language of scriptures, creeds, councils, and popes will

provide new messages today. Indeed, the Catholic believes that Christ himself will speak these messages to us anew.



## Chapter 2. Origen: Early Exegesis

### Origen of Alexandria

Any thorough historical consideration of Christian hermeneutics must consider the work of Origen Adamantius of Alexandria. Origen was perhaps “the most prolific author of all the Fathers of the [early] church.”<sup>75</sup> As I noted in chapter one, Origen’s work in hermeneutics exerted a notable influence over the whole of the Middle Ages. In fact, his work in diverse areas continues to influence both eastern and western Christianity.

Because he wrote in many genres, his work touches on nearly every aspect of Christian thought: liturgy, doctrine, homiletics, polemics, and—as we have already seen—hermeneutics. In fact, the immensity of Origen’s work is only matched by the erudition that he demonstrates in these genres. He employs his knowledge of disciplines as varied as philosophy, linguistics, rhetoric, and history. For these reasons, he is considered the “most important theologian between St. Paul and St. Augustine.”<sup>76</sup> Thus his commentary on Romans, written around 246 CE,<sup>77</sup> is the ideal place to begin a consideration of the history of the hermeneutics of the epistle. Moreover, Origen’s commentary is the oldest extant commentary on Romans,<sup>78</sup> and its influence on later Christian thought (Augustine, Pelagius, Abelard, Aquinas, Calvin, etc.) is hard to overestimate.

Though the import of Origen’s commentary is indisputable, the reliability of the scribal tradition that brings it to us today is not. No complete copy of Origen’s original Greek

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<sup>75</sup> Ronald Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 189.

<sup>76</sup> Thomas Scheck, *Origen and the History of Justification* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 2008), 2. Also see K. H. Schelkle, *Paulus, Lehrer der Vater* (Dusseldorf: Patmos, 1956), 413, and W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical commentary on the epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), xcic.

<sup>77</sup> Scheck, 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

commentary on Romans has survived. As a result, we must rely on his fourth-century translator, defender, and commentator, Tyrannius Rufinus. While Rufinus's translations have certainly not been above criticism, they are now generally viewed as accurate representations of Origen's thought.<sup>79</sup> For the purposes of this study, I will assume what Henry Chadwick asserts of Rufinus's translation, "The voice is the voice of Origen, even though the hands are the hands of Rufinus."<sup>80</sup>

Though Origen remains faithful to the words of Romans, the meaning that he finds in the verses is uniquely his own. Origen approaches the work according to the prejudices supplied by his tradition to address the questions of his own day. In so doing, he finds meaning related to philosophy, continuity, free will, and the one nature of humanity. Hence, Origen's reading of Romans serves as a prefatory model of the successful Catholic fusion of scriptural language with one's own contemporary horizon.

### **Heretics and Catholics**

In order to understand the historical horizon from which Origen comments on the opening chapters of Romans, we must consider two factors that impact Origen's encounter with the Pauline text: 1) the heretical groups who offered their own interpretations of Paul's work and 2) the Catholic tradition out of which Origen's preunderstandings arises.

1) At the time Origen wrote, there were numerous competing interpretations of the message of Jesus and the message of the Apostle Paul. These competing interpretations called Origen's own understanding of the text into question. In looking at Origen's commentary on Romans, it is necessary to understand some of the competing accounts offered by three groups: the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics. Origen's encounters with these groups

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<sup>79</sup> Heine, 196.

<sup>80</sup> Chadwick, quoted in Heine, 196.

occasioned the questions that Origen brings to the text and thus the meaning that emerges from Origen's dialogue with it.

2) The churches in which Origen participated—the Church of Alexandria and, later, the Church of Jerusalem—were part of a network that spanned the Roman Empire. These local churches were united in basic agreement about doctrine and practice. Throughout this work, I will call this tradition the Catholic tradition.<sup>81</sup> I resist the using of other terms (such as the especially ugly, if accurate, “Proto-Orthodoxy”).<sup>82</sup> Those such as Ehrman who are attempting to undertake an “objective” and “scientific” historical analysis might be drawn to such neologisms. I, on the other hand, resist them on Gadamerian grounds. I am a Catholic who in fact reads Origen as a member of the Catholic tradition. The meanings that emerge from my reading stem from Origen's place—a rather nuanced and controversial place—in the Catholic tradition. By calling Origen a Catholic author, I in no way mean to suggest that Origen already held the Chalcedonian definitions or that he would have taken a particular position on the Great Schism or the Protestant Reformation. Rather I mean that the tradition which I now call Catholic is the same tradition that developed from the group with which Origen identified himself. I should also point out that the term Catholic is not itself anachronistic. Already Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyon used the term.<sup>83</sup> It is the Catholic tradition that presented Origen with the text of Romans and that provided his preunderstandings about the subjects that he would encounter within it. It is that same tradition, broadly construed, that presents Origen to me.

We shall first look at the heretical groups of Origen's time before turning to the nascent Catholic tradition out of which Origen's own understanding emerges. One third-century heretical understanding of Jesus's life and message was found in Ebionism. Ebionism, like Origen's Catholicism, was a movement—or perhaps a set of movements—based on the belief that Jesus

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<sup>81</sup> For a splendid analysis of the dangers inherent in reading Paul (and other canonical and non-canonical sources) as early Christians, see Arnal and Wiliam, “The Collection and Synthesis of ‘Tradition’ and the Second Century Invention of Christianity,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011): 193–215.

<sup>82</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Battles for Scripture and Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003.)

<sup>83</sup> See Ignatius's *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8.

is the Jewish messiah. The term Ebionite is itself derived from a Hebrew term meaning “the oppressed poor,” and perhaps comes from a term used to identify Jesus’s original audience, the poor people of the Levant.<sup>84</sup> The term Ebionite is used by the fathers, especially the Latin Fathers after Irenaeus, to denote groups of ethnically Jewish believers until the fourth century. Moreover, since most of what we know about the Ebionites is based on the Fathers’ somewhat sloppy generalizations, the description below is perhaps best understood not as a description of the Ebionites but as a description of what the Catholics thought the Ebionites to be.

The Ebionites saw Jesus’s Jewishness as central to his message. According to the Fathers, the groups denied the Virgin birth and insisted on Christ’s Jewish lineage through Joseph.<sup>85</sup> These Ebionite groups saw Jesus as a perfectly holy yet mortal man who aimed to restore the true interpretation of the Jewish law.<sup>86</sup> Because Jesus kept the law more perfectly than any other person, he was adopted as the son of God and messiah at his baptism, but did not become God himself.<sup>87</sup> Jesus was thus offered on the cross as the perfect and final sacrifice to God.<sup>88</sup> Hence the Ebionites rejected the need for sacrificial animal slaughter in the temple but continued to observe most other Jewish ceremonial laws such as the Sabbath, dietary laws, and circumcision.<sup>89</sup>

For the Ebionites, then, Paul was the archheretic. The Ebionites, like the Catholics, read Paul as having rejected the literal interpretation of the ceremonial law in favor of a symbolic interpretation of much of it. Paul saw no need for Gentiles (and perhaps even for Jews) to be circumcised or to keep kosher requirements. Moreover, Paul emphasized the deity of Jesus in his writings, calling Jesus “Lord” and insisting on Jesus’s pre-existent divine origin.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>84</sup> Oskar Skarsaune, “The Ebionites,” *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 420.

<sup>85</sup> Skarsaune, 431.

<sup>86</sup> Erhman, 99.

<sup>87</sup> Skarsaune 431.

<sup>88</sup> Erhman, 101.

<sup>89</sup> Erhman, 100.

<sup>90</sup> See especially the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:6-11.

Ebionites rejected Paul's writing, thereby rejecting much of what would become the Catholic New Testament.

The Ebionite canon of scripture, then, was very different from that of the yet-emerging Catholic canon. While the movement did use a Gospel—perhaps one that is very similar to the Gospel of Matthew—it rejected much of the rest of what would become the New Testament Canon.<sup>91</sup> So the Ebionite canon probably consisted of the Hebrew Scriptures and their own Gospel, perhaps nothing more.<sup>92</sup>

Another interpretation of Jesus's message came from the Gnostics. Gnosticism is a poorly understood, multifaceted phenomenon in early Christianity. Some sects, such as Ebionism and Marcionism, were easily identifiable because of their separate meeting places and separate leadership. Gnosticism, on the other hand, seems to have existed mostly within the Catholic communities.<sup>93</sup> Gnostics believed themselves to have extra knowledge, a special *gnosis*, which was not available to the general Christian population. This special knowledge, including a unique interpretation of the Catholic Scripture and tradition, offered these enlightened ones salvation above and beyond the salvation that the Church promised.

For the Gnostics, the world was an evil place, the creation not of God but of another, imperfect creator, the Demiurge. So the material world, including human flesh, was not the good work of the true God. Rather, it was an evil prison, fashioned by a false god and from which souls hoped to escape. Jesus, as a messenger from the true God, could not then have a material human body, a prison of the soul. Rather, Jesus was incorporeal and only appeared to be human.<sup>94</sup>

One consequence of the Gnostics' unique doctrine of creation is the peculiar anthropology found in some Gnostic texts. Rather than offering a single anthropology of all

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<sup>91</sup> Ehrman, 103.

<sup>92</sup> Skarsaune, 435.

<sup>93</sup> Ehrman, 126.

<sup>94</sup> Some versions of Gnostics say that he had a spiritual body but not a fleshly body.

humankind, the Gnostics believed that people were made with different natures.<sup>95</sup> Origen refers to this doctrine as the “Doctrine of Natures.” Ehrman explains:

Some Christian Gnostics maintained that there were three kinds of humans. Some are the creations of the Demiurge, pure and simple. Like other animals, they have no spirit within; like the animals, when they die, their entire existence is annihilated. Other people have a soul within, but not a spark of the divine spirit. Such people have an opportunity for an afterlife, if they have faith and do good deeds. These in fact are regular Christians, those who believe in Christ but do not have the full understanding of the secret knowledge that leads to ultimate salvation. The third group of people have this knowledge. They are the Gnostics, those “in the know,” who have within them a spark of the divine, who have learned who they really are, how they got here and how they can return. These people ... will return to the Divine realm from which they came and live eternally with the presence of God....<sup>96</sup>

Just as the Gnostic interpretation of the creation account is peculiar, so the Gnostic interpretation of other Catholic scripture is unique. While Gnostics did have many of their own scriptures (including Gospels, epistles, and writings of other genres), they also read and interpreted the same scriptures used in the Catholic Communities. Gnostics viewed the Hebrew Scriptures as containing a mixture of truth and error.<sup>97</sup> On the one hand, the Hebrew Scriptures contained beautiful commandments and prophecies about the coming of Jesus. On the other hand, they contained imperfect laws and commands—i.e., go kill all the Canaanites—that were patently contradictory to Christ’s teachings. At least one Gnostic solution to this problem was to assert that the Hebrew Scriptures were the work of the Demiurge.<sup>98</sup> Having a status below that of the one true God and above that of the evil Devil, the Demiurge issued laws that have some authority but are not perfect in the way that the one true God’s laws are.

A third group that was very common in Origen’s day is the Marcionites. Marcion was a mid-second-century teacher whose views were rejected by the Catholic community at Rome. Marcion taught some doctrines similar to those taught by Gnostic groups. On the other hand,

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<sup>95</sup> Ehrman, 125.

<sup>96</sup> Ehrman, 125-26.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 131.

unlike most Gnostic sects, Marcion founded his own community with its own distinct hierarchy. Thus Marcionism's relationship to Gnosticism is difficult to categorize precisely.

Marcion reads Paul as the messenger of the Gospel par excellence. Marcion saw in Paul a radical rejection of the Old Testament and of the Jewish god. For Marcion, Paul seemed to teach that there were two gods: the true, all-powerful, and all-loving God, and the wrathful, capricious god of the Jews. The god of the Jews was real but was a pretender to the rightful worship due to the true God. Jesus came as the messenger of the true God to share his message of love and mercy. Marcion mined the resources found in Paul and, according to the Catholics, redacted those parts of the Pauline text which he viewed to be imperfectly presented in the Catholic textual tradition.<sup>99</sup> Marcionism, with its message of love and acceptance, was a hugely attractive movement during Origen's time and is the heresy that Origen most often mentions by name in his commentary on Romans.

### **Patristic Catholicism**

Now that we have a basic understanding of the heretical groups to which Origen sought to respond, we turn to Origen's own Catholic tradition. Origen lived and wrote in the third century in the Churches of Alexandria and of Jerusalem. While by no means homogenous, the Catholic communities, though spread throughout the Roman Empire, were already in agreement about a wide range of beliefs and practices. This reflected broad consensus about many aspects of the correct understanding of the teachings of Jesus and of the interpretation of the Pauline message in Romans. It is this tradition that formed Origen's preunderstandings about God, revelation, creation, Jewish/Gentile relations, philosophy, and many other topics that Origen addresses in his commentary. The creativity and inventiveness of Origen's work is thus grounded in the nascent Catholic tradition that brought the text of Romans to him.

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<sup>99</sup> Tertullian, the second-century Catholic—and later Montanist—thinker accuses Marcion of reading Paul “with a knife.” See *Contra Marcion*, V, 18.

Perhaps one of the most important priorities of the Catholics of Origen's day was that of maintaining continuity with the received tradition. In the first few decades after Christ, new revelations from God in private visions and prophecies were common in the Catholic community. Many early Catholic writings, including the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, approvingly acknowledge the occurrence of such individual revelation. Indeed, even in the mid-to-late second century, Montanus, a prophet who arose in the Catholic community of Phrygia, claimed to have received private revelation that contradicted some of the received tradition. Montanus was able to attract such elite adherents as the Catholic theologian Tertullian.<sup>100</sup>

As a response to the division created by Montanism and other new prophecies, the Catholic communities increasingly emphasized the nature of the faith as something received from the past: *Fides tradita*. For instance, Irenaeus of Lyon, a prolific Catholic bishop of the late second century, repeatedly turns to the idea of continuity in his magnum opus, *Contra Haereses*. For Irenaeus, the guarantee of correct belief is consistence with that which has been handed down in the written and oral tradition.<sup>101</sup> Outright rejection of any aspect of the received tradition was prohibited, while innovation was judged by its conformity to that which had been received.

Of course, such reliance on tradition required determining what was and what was not part the authentic tradition. Of special importance was the written word. Already Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian note the importance of the scripture written by Jesus's followers, though they were sometimes in disagreement as to the particulars of which books belonged in the canon. In spite of a broad consensus on much of the New Testament Canon, the agreed-upon books offer conflicting theologies of who Jesus was and what it meant to be a member of his Church. For instance, each of the four canonical Gospels offers a different portrayal of the way that Jesus approached his passion and death: from unwilling martyr to divine sacrifice. Paul too

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<sup>100</sup> Ehrman, 150.

<sup>101</sup> *Contra Haereses* 3.3.2.



offers a distinct account of Jesus's life and teaching that had to be reconciled with the Gospel accounts. So while a written record of Catholic tradition was an essential and foundational aspect of the Catholic faith, the written record alone was insufficient to ensure cohesion and continuity. While Catholic authors could not simply redact those parts of the traditional material that did not conform to their own opinion, they had to interpret the traditional material in order to address the questions created by the intertextual inconsistencies and also to answer the questions raised in their own new historical and cultural situations.

Another response to the Catholic emphasis on continuity was the Catholics' insistence on a succession of leadership that could trace its roots back to the original Apostles.<sup>102</sup> In the Catholic communities, the bishop was appointed by another bishop who could eventually trace his appointment back to Christ. As such, the bishop of a particular community and the hierarchy that surrounded him formed an important voice in determining the authenticity of particular traditions. Indeed, already in the early second century, there is an increasing demand that the laity be subject to the hierarchy. As Ignatius of Antioch wrote (c. 110 CE), "For whenever you are subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, you appear to me to be living not the ordinary life of men, but after the manner of the life of Jesus Christ.... Act ... in nothing without your bishop."<sup>103</sup>

The importance that the Catholic Church placed on continuity with the past extends even beyond continuity with Jesus and with the apostolic writers to continuity with the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. This was necessary for two reasons: 1) The developing Catholic canon frequently cited the ancient Hebrew texts. Since the authors of the Christian scriptures referred to the Hebrew texts with frequency, the Church had to develop a method of dealing with the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole. 2) The sociology of the Roman mind encouraged viewing the Christian message in ancient Hebrew terms. For in the ancient world, new ideas, particularly new religions, were viewed with suspicion. Thus a religion that began with a messianic figure some

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<sup>102</sup> Contra Haereses 3.3.1, Clement 42. See any of the Ignation Epistles.

<sup>103</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Traillans*, 2.

two hundred years earlier would offer little appeal to most Romans.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, a religion that had its roots in the ancient practices of the Jews—practices that stretched back thousands of years—offered the possibility of acceptance. Catholicism’s nuanced acceptance of the Jewish scripture thus increased its acceptance in the sociological milieu of ancient Rome.

Like the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics, the Catholics needed to explain in what ways Jesus’s message was a continuation and extension of the message of the Hebrew Scriptures and in what ways it was a rupture from them. The Catholic Church offered something of a middle ground between the position of the Ebionites and that of the Marcionites. On the one hand, the Church asserted that Jewish practices and writings, if interpreted correctly, offered a real possibility for understanding God and the plan that God had for all of humanity through Jesus and through the Church that he instituted. On the other hand, the Church separated itself from ethnically linked Judaism and particularly from most of the Jewish ritual observances by often interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures and the rituals described therein typologically and allegorically. Thus for the Church, the Hebrew Scriptures were indeed authoritative scripture inspired by the one true God, but these scriptures had to be interpreted by the message that Jesus left in his Church, the message handed on in the tradition of that Church.

As mentioned in chapter one, Catholicism’s nuanced interpretation of the Hebrew texts was already highly developed by the time of Origen’s writing. The letters of Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews contain early examples of this tendency: Paul interprets Jesus’s death as a fulfillment of the Passover requirements,<sup>105</sup> and Hebrews explains that Jesus is the new high priest who intercedes for Christians in the heavenly tabernacle.<sup>106</sup> By the second century, many Catholic writers read the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures from a Christocentric hermeneutic. Laws, rituals, and historic accounts of the Hebrew Scriptures are interpreted as symbolic, allegoric, or typological signs of Christ or of various aspects of his Church. Origen’s

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<sup>104</sup> Erhman, 145.

<sup>105</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:7.

<sup>106</sup> Hebrews 4:14.

development and use of this technique, while not central to his interpretation of Romans 1 and 2, is perhaps one of his most important legacies.

In addition to accepting the Jewish scriptures, the Catholics maintained the Jewish presupposition that there was but one God. This God, the creator of all, was portrayed in both wrathful and loving ways. He is the God of the new and of the old Covenant. He created a good world, but that world had been tainted because of human and angelic sin. While he promised wrath and rightly deserved vengeance to evildoers, to those who accepted his message of salvation, he offered forgiveness and mercy. In order to receive this forgiveness, one had to accept the Christian message in faith, be baptized, and live a life in ritual and moral conformity to Catholic teaching.

This monotheism was held in tension with the developing understanding of who Jesus was. In the decades immediately following Jesus's death, Catholic authors proposed varying accounts of the exact nature of Jesus's pre-existence, divinity, and humanity. By Origen's time, Catholic groups agreed that Jesus really existed before his incarnation, that he was both divine and human, and that he assumed a real, corporeal body. Questions relating to the exact nature of his relation to God the Father and of how he could be both divine and human were not settled. Thus individual exegetes maintained the freedom to interpret the various scriptural accounts in varying directions so long as they maintained the traditional prejudices and operated in dialogue with the whole of the burgeoning New Testament canon.

Finally, by the time of Origen's writing, Catholicism had developed a nuanced, and still disputed, opinion of pagan philosophy. On the one hand, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics seemed to say some things that were true about God, religion, and ethics. On the other hand, the whole of their message was mixed with falsehood. Some Fathers, such as Tatian, rejected philosophy outright. However, a growing consensus of Christians embraced philosophy and employed it as a sort of propaedeutic for the Gospel. Justin Martyr of Rome, for instance, considered himself a philosopher and used philosophy to argue for the truth of Christianity. In that same way,

Clement of Alexandria, who preceded Origen as the head of catechetics in the school at Alexandria, saw philosophy as particularly useful in transmitting the faith.<sup>107</sup>

Origen's encounter with Romans 1 and 2 cannot be understood apart from the historical horizon from which he views the text. The possibility of Origen's understanding the text depends on those preunderstandings that had emerged over the course of the two centuries between Origen and Paul. Origen comes to the text with a commitment to the Catholic tradition handed on in the Churches in which he was a part. He approaches the text believing in one God, the deity of Christ, the fixity of the scriptural texts and the reality of Christ's incarnation. He does not seek to prove these from the text; rather these prejudices open the text to him and allow him to make meaning from it.

On the other hand, Origen questions the text with those questions raised by the heretical groups of his day. While he in no way discards previous Catholic answers to these questions, his dialogue with the text results in genuine innovation and development. The creativity that emerges from the interplay between the traditional preunderstanding of the text, the questions posed by the heretical accounts, and the text of Romans itself are evident in Origen's account of "revelation" (Romans 1:15–16), of "handing over" (1:26), and of judgment "according to works" (2:6-9).

### **"Revealed" (Romans 1:15–16)**

Origen begins his exposition of this passage by placing all responsibility for revelation on God and all blame for ignorance on individual humans. For Origen, the text compels him to assert that all knowledge of God is the result of God's action.<sup>108</sup> As Romans 1:15–16 points out, "the righteousness of God is **revealed** ... the wrath of God is **revealed**.... What is known of God

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<sup>107</sup> David Rankin, *From Clement to Origen* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 127.

<sup>108</sup> M861-M863.

has been **manifested** to them, for God has **manifested** it to them.” So for Origen the thrust of the passage is humanity’s passivity with regard to the process of revelation.

God manifests knowledge of himself by the “progression of the world” and by “reason.”<sup>109</sup> The “progression of the world” is God’s creation, i.e., the objects by which humanity can learn about God. For “by inference from the creation,” humans are able to deduce God’s power, divinity, and some of his other attributes.<sup>110</sup> Creation by itself, however, is not enough to reveal God. Revelation also required that God provide humanity with a means to decipher its encrypted message in creation. God supplied this by giving reason to each person. According to Origen, humans can know God

by means of the natural reasoning capacities which God has implanted into the soul. Enough wisdom has been granted to them that they should recognize what is known of God, that is, what can be perceived about God by way of inference from the creation, from the things which can be seen, his invisible things ought to be recognized.<sup>111</sup>

Thus God not only supplies the objects by which He could be recognized, He also provides the means by which that recognition is possible. Hence, no one can boast that he has discovered God except by God’s self-revelation.

Though Origen generally uses the term reason to describe the human power by which God can be inferred from creation, he also hints that God provided something more to every human—some cognitive content in addition to the simple power to infer from nature. For Origen argues that a person has not only “natural reasoning capabilities,” but also “wisdom.”<sup>112</sup> Origen even asserts that “the image of God” can be found in each person and that the Spirit has “written the law on [human] hearts” in such a way that they should know it.<sup>113</sup> So people all know not to steal, kill, or lie and even “possibly... that God is one and [is] the Creator of all things.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> M863.

<sup>110</sup> M864.

<sup>111</sup> M863.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> M864.

<sup>114</sup> M892.

While Origen does not catalog which truths are known a priori and which require reason's operation on nature, it is clear that, for Origen, God has offered everyone ample knowledge of his existence and of his expectations.

Origen's reading of Romans 1:15-16 is already something of a fusion of horizons between Christian textual account of "logos" and the Platonic, Hellenistic account of it. Origen prefers to interpret John 1's account of Christ as "logos" not so much as speech but as "reason." Thus for Origen, reason originates and is most clearly manifest in the person of Christ, Reason-made-Flesh.<sup>115</sup> Fallen human beings then, in as much as they have reason, participate in Christ in whom reason is found.<sup>116</sup> Thus the Platonic notion of reason originating in God is here fused to the text of Romans as God "implants" reason "into the soul."<sup>117</sup>

Origen's account of God's universal revelation raises the question: Why then is God not widely accepted and worshiped? For if God makes Himself known to all through reason and nature, then it would seem that more people—and perhaps everyone—would know and worship Him. Origen answers this riddle with an account of how the sins of individuals have obscured the truth.

Origen places the blame for human ignorance about God squarely on human beings. Unlike the Gnostics or the Marcionites, Origen reads the text with the Catholic presupposition that there is only one God and that, moreover, God is good and blameless. Hence God can have no culpability for sin. This is why Origen asserts that human beings suppress the truth: they choose sin, and they turn away from God. For Origen, individual sins such as fear of authority or unwillingness to resist the status quo cause people to obscure the truth. Moreover sin itself obscures—and even destroys—the very "image of God" which is imprinted on the soul of each human. Thus, because of sin, people can no longer rightly discern the truth about God

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<sup>115</sup> Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.24.151. See A. Orbe, "Origenes y Los Monarquianos," *Gregorianum* (Rome: 1991), 72: 39-73.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Origen, *Principio* 1.3.5.

<sup>117</sup> This is not original to Origen. Already it seems Clement read the text in this way. See Armstrong, 1960.

and the precepts of the moral law. So Origen concludes: “On this basis, then men become without excuse, hence although they knew God (since God made himself) known, they have not, as is fitting worshipped God or given thanks, but through their own futile ways of thinking, while they seek after forms and images for God, they have destroyed the image of God within themselves.”<sup>118</sup>

In continuity with the Catholic tradition, Origen sees two groups of people as particularly culpable for the suppression of divine revelation: heretics and philosophers. These groups “either covered up [the truth] when they denied the existence of freedom or they reject [it] through the wickedness of their deeds.”<sup>119</sup> The Catholic faith before Origen vigorously defended itself against heresy. Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses* is but one example of the great lengths that the Church took to define itself in contrast to outside groups. Already in the later canonical books of the New Testament, we see stringent warning about groups with non-Catholic understandings of the incarnation and groups who propose “another gospel.” For Origen, heretical groups such as the Gnostics and Marcionites, who subscribe to the doctrine of natures, deny that people can choose God and worship Him properly. In so doing, they do not allow the truth about Him to be known.

On the other hand, when Origen treats philosophy, the preunderstandings proposed by the Catholic tradition are somewhat less clear. While not rejecting any traditional preunderstandings, Origen advances the tradition regarding philosophy with his own creativity. He writes that “[a]lthough [philosophers] knew the truth and righteousness of God, they did not honor him ... and claiming to be wise they became fools.”<sup>120</sup> Thus Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers who inferred God’s existence from the particulars of creation did know the truth

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<sup>118</sup> M864.

<sup>119</sup> M862.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

and ought to have then rejected idolatry and the pagan sacrificial system. On the other hand, because of their sin, they did not properly respond to the truth that they knew.<sup>121</sup>

This emphasis on God's self-revelation in the human soul and in the created world allows Origen to preserve the tradition while expanding on it and developing it creatively. First, by emphasizing reason as humanity's way of accessing God, Origen acknowledges the special work that philosophers have done while at the same time preserving the tradition's skepticism regarding philosophical pursuits. Origen says that God reveals Himself to "all men in whom natural reason exists" but "in particular to the wise men of this world and those who are called philosophers, whose job it is in particular to discuss the created things of the world and everything which has been made in it. They use reason to draw conclusions about the things which are not seen from the things which are seen."<sup>122</sup> Here Origen recognizes what the Church's tradition—through people like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria—is already saying: philosophy had gotten a lot of things about God and about morality correct. While it is true that all—or at least, most—people have access to reason and to the observable things which reveal God, the philosophers devote themselves both to the use of reason and to making inferences about that which is not observable from that which is. The philosophers then should be expected to know God better than ordinary people. And yet none of the success of philosophy can be attributed to the philosophers themselves. For both their capacity to reason and the object of their reflection come from God.

On the other hand, Origen is able to follow the tradition by concluding his reflection with a harsh condemnation of philosophers: "Although [philosophers] knew the truth and righteousness of God . . . [they] did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became bankrupt in their thinking, having turned to idols and claiming to be wise they became fools, for they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of the image of man

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> M864.



and birds and four-footed animals and reptiles.”<sup>123</sup> And again, “That which the wise men of this world have attained in respect to the knowledge of the truth, they have attained as God reveals them. But they strive for vain glory or fawn over ancient errors or become intimidated by fear of the rulers, they themselves become the judges of their own damnation.”<sup>124</sup> Thus though the philosopher’s advancement in knowledge makes them even more responsible to worship God correctly, on account of their sins, they have not done so. This results in their greater culpability.

This reading of Romans 1 and 2 is a moment of creativity emerging from the tradition. Such a reading of the text preserves and synthesizes the traditional accounts of philosophy—both positive and negative—in a way that occasions Origen’s new understanding of the text, an understanding that recognizes philosophy’s success as the result of God’s goodness but condemns philosophy as a result of man’s sinfulness.

Origen’s insistence on revelation through creation also provides a novel defense of the Catholic tradition against the Gnostics. For, since these Gnostics deny that the true God created the world, the world cannot be an artifact used to make inferences about Him. For if the world were the creation of the Demiurge, then it ought not to have led the philosophers and others to correct conclusions about the one God. But since the philosophers did know something, however imperfect, about God, then God must have created the world.

Finally, Origen’s account of revelation maintains the Catholic understanding of the continuity of the law from the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Covenant. In fact, Origen begins his discussion of this selection on natural law with an exegesis of what is meant by revelation “from faith to faith.” For Origen, this term signifies the continuity of revelation. By “faith to faith,” the passage indicate continuity from faith in the Hebrew covenant to faith in the New Covenant of Jesus. So “he who is under the law must believe in the Gospels,” and he “who is under the Gospels must also believe in the law and the prophets. For a person does not possess

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<sup>123</sup> M862.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

complete life who has one but not the other.”<sup>125</sup> Hence Origen reads in the text a defense of the Catholic understanding of the continuity of the old and new covenants. On the other hand, the Catholic notion of the continuity between the old and new covenants does not do all the work. Origen does not simply repeat the Catholic idea that the New Testament is in some way connected to the old. Rather, Origen moves the tradition forward by his own elaboration of a theory of the unity of the law.

For Origen, there is one law that exists for all people. Already in Alexandria, Philo had proposed a unity of knowledge between the Torah and the philosophical systems of the Greeks. Origen continues this project of fusing Alexandrian and more broadly Catholic horizons in his elaboration of a unified theory of natural law.<sup>126</sup> For Origen, this one law appears in various forms. Origen writes, “It seems to be that the things which are said to be written in [Gentile] hearts agree with the evangelical laws ... everything is ascribed to natural justice.”<sup>127</sup> Calling the moral law variously the evangelical law, the law of justice, and the natural law, Origen argues that the basic precepts of this law are agreed upon by all people. The similarities between the morality of the Gentiles and that of the Hebrew covenant demonstrate this unity. While the Hebrew covenant has many additional rituals—which, for Origen, following Philo, must be interpreted analogically—it is in fact the same law revealed to the Gentiles in nature, the one moral law. Moreover, the basic tenets of this law are the same as those found in the Gospel. Note that Origen uses the term “Evangelical” law.<sup>128</sup> For the law is not in opposition to the Gospel. Rather, for Origen, the Gospel is the perfection of the law, already revealed in writing and in nature.

In this reading, not only does Origen fuse the Biblical and Hellenic horizons, he addresses the questions raised by the heretics. According to Origen’s interpretation, the

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<sup>125</sup> M861.

<sup>126</sup> See David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revisions in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992).

<sup>127</sup> M892.

<sup>128</sup> In Greek, the term “evangelical” is the adjectival form of the word Gospel, εὐαγγέλιον.

Ebionites are wrong to keep the worthless, particular rituals of the old covenant. Moreover, the Marcionites are incorrect to see a rupture between the old and new covenants. Origen's reading, while original, preserves the traditional Catholic notion of continuity and advances that notion of continuity to include Hellenistic thought.

### **“Handed Over” (Romans 1:26)**

Origen deals at length with the idea of people being “handed over” to sin. He does this partly because the text compels him. For the text uses this verb three times. In addition, the Greek word used here, *παρέδωκεν*, can mean to betray. It is the same verb used of Judas's actions against Jesus. So in order to preserve the Catholic presupposition that God is good and sinless, Origen needs to explain how this text does not entail God's betraying humanity by somehow compelling individuals to sin.

At the same time, Origen sees in this verse an answer to the heretical doctrine of two natures. Gnostics misused this verse to claim that there are some people who by nature have the capacity for being righteous and pleasing God and that there are others who, again because of their nature, can never be righteous. Origen, aware that he could use this text to maintain that God turned His back on some people—handing them over to their sins—on account of their nature, reads the text in a way that preserves the important notion that there is but one nature, the same human nature assumed by Christ at the incarnation.

Origen was aware that Marcionites might use this text to yet another, different end. Since Marcion denies that the God of the New Testament is a god of wrath, Marcionites might be tempted to associate the judgment described in these verses with the “god” of the Hebrew Scriptures but not with the God of Jesus. This would give Marcionites further reason to reject this epistle from their canon. Origen, on the other hand, reads the text with the Catholic prejudice that God is a perfectly just judge. His judgments are never undeserved or arbitrary. In order to combat the doctrine of natures while at the same time maintaining that the one God is

perfectly just, Origen argues that God's handing humans over to their sinful desires does not cause them to sin but is rather the result of their sin.

Origen evidences the burgeoning Catholic understanding of the human person, a fusion of Hebrew and Greek notions of the human being. He proposes a tripartite anthropology: the body, the soul, and the spirit. The spirit is good and wills good things, while the flesh is evil, willing bad things. The soul, the arbiter of the will, must decide whether to follow the spirit in good things or the flesh in evil things. Each person is free to make his own choice.

Another Catholic presupposition that Origen brings to the text is the idea of the "two ways."<sup>129</sup> Origen notes that each person is constantly choosing between a right and wrong path. This idea seems to pervade the background of early Christian thinking. Acts seems to indicate that Christianity was at least at one time identified as "the way."<sup>130</sup> Moreover, the Didache<sup>131</sup> and the Epistle of Barnabas<sup>132</sup> rely strongly on this concept that there is one way to do right and everything else is sinful. One must choose not moderation, not from an array of good paths, but the one good path. It is this presupposition that undergirds Origen's understanding of how the human soul chooses simply between good and evil. These preunderstandings allow for Origen's defense of God's justice.

Origen asserts that the human soul must choose between good and evil. However, Origen notes that there are "angels who are patrons and helpers for both sides, or rather for the two ways."<sup>133</sup> If the soul "should turn aside to the flesh and to those beings which lend support to the desires of the flesh . . . [good angels] withdraw from it or hand it over to the desires of its own heart, by which it is united and joined to the flesh."<sup>134</sup> These angelic presences, sent from God to help a person make good decisions, never force those decisions on the person. In that same way, there are evil influences that entice the person to sinful behavior, though again,

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<sup>129</sup> M866.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Act 9:2, Act 19:9, Act 19:23, Act 24:14, and Act 24:22.

<sup>131</sup> Didache 1:1.

<sup>132</sup> Barnabas 18:1.

<sup>133</sup> M866.

<sup>134</sup> M687.

these forces do not compel the person's actions. Indeed, over every person a war rages between these two sets of forces. When a person persists in sin, God eventually stops sending His angelic forces to aid the person to make better decisions. God allows the person to do as he has repeatedly shown that he wishes to do. Both before and after God hands the person over to sins, she is responsible for her own choices. At no point is she blamed for anything other than what she has freely chosen. Origen concludes: "The duty of free choice is preserved. For the matter is not done by force nor is the soul moved in either of the two directions by compulsion. Otherwise neither blame nor virtue could be ascribed to it, nor would the choice of the good earn a reward or the turning aside to evil merit punishment."<sup>135</sup> Hence, Origen's exculpation of God is an original reading of that text that, at the same time, preserves the Catholic understanding of God's goodness.

Origen's resolution of this dilemma provides an authentically Catholic answer to the questions posed by the heretical groups. For Origen argues that God—the God of both the New and Old Covenants—justly judges each person for his choices and his choices only. Moreover, as the Catholic tradition maintains, all people are made of the same nature, a nature which allows them to choose between good and evil, and a nature that they share with the person of Jesus Christ.

### **According to Their Works (Romans 2:6-9)**

A final concern of Origen is the interpretation of Romans 2:6: God "will repay each person according to his works.... First for the Jew and then for the Gentile." On the one hand, Origen sees in these verses a clear defense of the Catholic view of salvation against the Gnostic doctrine of natures. That is, God judges people according to their own actions, not according to how He, the one God, made them. Moreover, Origen points out here that God is a judge. Thus, against Marcion, the passage asserts that the God of Jesus is a God of

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<sup>135</sup> M866.

judgment.<sup>136</sup> He expects righteousness. So Origen, reading the verse with this Catholic prejudices, wishes to highlight these aspects of works and of judgment in order to answer the heretical groups.

On the other hand, this verse seems to call into question the Catholic Rule of Faith. The Rule of Faith, as mentioned in chapter one, is the received tradition of the Catholic Church. It is the expectation that the major teachings of the Church, the somewhat loosely defined and largely yet-to-be-written dogmatic teaching of the Church, will be preserved and passed on. In this case, the Rule of Faith establishes that one can have eternal life only if he is baptized into Christ.<sup>137</sup>

It is important to note that Origen in no ways attempts to defend Catholicity against what would later be called Pelagianism. The tradition does not yet have that concern. Instead, Origen is comfortable asserting that works are the criteria on which God's judgment will be based. Origen sees "works of the law" primarily as ritualistic works that are in fact unnecessary for salvation. He reads those as unnecessary and thereby discredits the Ebionites. On the other hand, salvation "apart from works" is not possible. God's judgment is based on our works.

Origen's concern here is how to read the verse in a way that does not make baptism unnecessary. Since the Rule of Faith asserts that those who are not baptized cannot be saved, it seems that the good works of the unbaptized cannot be rewarded. Yet this passage affirms that, "to those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life ... to the Jew first and then to the Greek." Thus Origen worries that this verse might be read to affirm that non-baptized Jews and Greeks can "by persistence in doing good" receive eternal life without faith and without baptism.

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<sup>137</sup> M887.

Before offering his own interpretation, Origen first rejects a few possible readings.<sup>138</sup> First, he dismisses the idea that by “Jew” the passage means true Jew or spiritual Jew. Origen notes that, in other places, Paul uses the term Jew to mean a member of the Church.<sup>139</sup> However, Origen rules out this reading here because, if the text were read this way, then the term “Gentile” would have to mean true Gentile, a non-believer. Such a reading would then mean that the Church could receive eternal life and so could the non-believer. Tradition clearly rules out this interpretation.

On the other hand, another erroneous reading of the text might be that by “Jew” the verse means actual Jew, but by “Gentile” it means only the believing, baptized Gentile. Origen sees this reading as blatantly wrong as well. For this reading places the Church behind the Jews—the text says for the Jew first—and again, this reading seems to assert that Jews could receive eternal life for their works in spite of their lack of faith and lack of baptism.

Origen’s rejection of the above interpretations illustrates an important aspect of how he views his role as an exegete. While he certainly approaches the text with Catholic prejudices and remains committed to those prejudices, he is in actual dialogue with the text. He is compelled to read the text with some consistency of meaning. He is bound to take the text seriously. His insistence that the text be internally coherent evidences his assumption that interpretation cannot be mere exegesis. He cannot for instance hold that in one verse “Jew” can mean something entirely different from what it means in another verse. Thus the text becomes something more than a simple reiteration of his preconceptions. The text is not simply there for manipulation and prooftexting. It is an actual partner in dialogue.

Against all of these unacceptable interpretations, Origen insists that the verse means what it says on the face of it: both actual Jews and actual Gentiles will be judged according to their works. Again Origen affirms that “God pays back to each one not on account his nature but

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<sup>138</sup> M886-87.

<sup>139</sup> Romans 2:28-29.

on account of his works.”<sup>140</sup> However, Origen is able to maintain the Rule of Faith and maintain fidelity to the text by introducing the idea that different works receive different rewards.

Following the Rule of Faith, Origen affirms that the only work that merits eternal life is believing in Christ and accepting him in the Church’s baptism. And Origen does consider belief and baptism to be works. To believe, for Origen, means to act, to do, and to follow. So to believe in Christ is to comply with him.<sup>141</sup> No other work will merit eternal life. As Origen says: “anyone who has not known the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only true God, and his Son Jesus Christ is a stranger from eternal life.”<sup>142</sup>

But this unique criteria for meriting eternal life does not negate the fact that God will judge all works. These other works, some deserving honor and some deserving punishment, will also be somehow judged and rewarded, although not rewarded with eternal life. Those works done by Jews will be rewarded or punished fairly because the Jews had knowledge of the Law revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The judgment of Gentile works will likewise be fair since the Gentiles had knowledge of the Law revealed to them by nature through reason. Thus no one will “be excluded [from reward] when they themselves do well and behave correctly.”<sup>143</sup> Moreover, just as unbelievers can be rewarded for their good deeds—albeit not with eternal life—so can believers, who will receive eternal life, receive some type of punishment for their sins.<sup>144</sup> Origen thus dissolves the apparent conflict between the Rule of Faith and the rewarding of works.

Not only does this interpretation preserve the Catholic Rule of Faith while attacking the doctrine of natures, it also offers a response to one of the assertions of the Marcionites. Marcion argued that the god of the Jews was wrathful and vindictive while the God of Jesus did not enact judgment. For Origen, God is a fair judge always rewarding good and always punishing evil. He is merciful in His offer of eternal life through Christ but, at the same time, is a meticulous

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<sup>140</sup> M878.

<sup>141</sup> M885.

<sup>142</sup> M887.

<sup>143</sup> M878-79.

<sup>144</sup> M889.



judge, ever rewarding good and punishing evil. There is but one God who is both “good and just.”<sup>145</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Out of Origen’s reading of Romans 1 and 2, original meanings emerge. Origen establishes a privileged place for reason in his conception of the natural law, thus establishing a limited role for philosophy in the thinking of the Church. His reading thereby preserves important Catholic prejudices: the usefulness of philosophy and, at the same time, its utter failure to acknowledge Christ. Additionally, Origen’s reading of the text recognizes the Catholic notion of continuity between the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, the Greek philosophers, and the Gospel. Finally, Origen reads in the text that human beings have free will and that baptism is necessary while at the same time defending the justice of God’s judgment. In so doing, he is not simply manufacturing random proof texts against the assertions of the heretical groups, rather he is bringing Catholic prejudices to the text, questioning the text about the challenges raised by the heretics, and finding answers in the dialogue that ensues. Hence, Origen’s reading provides an excellent example of how the horizon of the scriptural text could be fused with the horizon of Origen’s own day, and new meaning could thereby emerge.

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<sup>145</sup> M866.

## Chapter 3. Augustine's Interpretations

### Introduction

Augustine stands as the most important interpreter of scripture in the history of western Christian exegesis. The immensity of his corpus, the breadth of his thought, and the influence of his originality on later thinkers are unmatched. Indeed, nearly every western Christian today reads Paul through Augustine. For Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist formations are all heavily indebted to him. As Simon Gathercole writes even that Reformation can be seen as, “among many other things, a battle for Augustine.”<sup>146</sup> For these reasons, any serious survey of Christian thinking must necessarily thoroughly consider Augustine's work.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in understanding Augustine's views of the Epistle to the Romans is the enormity of the corpus in which they are laid out. As Pamela Bright notes, “What we have is forty-three years of pastoral exhortation, of fierce debate, of spiritual reflection, and of intense theological creativity through which to sift in an attempt to discover the different phases of Augustine's encounter with the Epistle to the Romans.”<sup>147</sup> Moreover, Augustine's use of the epistle increases gradually throughout his life. In his early works, the epistle is mentioned less frequently than it is in later works. In these earlier references Augustine's treatment of law, grace, works, and faith, while sometimes original, are not startlingly different from what we saw in Origen. Gradually, however, as Augustine encountered the epistle in different contexts, newer meanings emerged. At some point he becomes acquainted with the thinking of Ambrosiaster.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Simon Gathercole, “A Conversion of Augustine: From Natural Law to Restored Nature,” in *Engaging Augustine on Romans*, ed. Daniel Patte and Eugene TeSelles (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 162.

<sup>147</sup> Pamela Bright, “Augustine,” in *Reading Romans through the Centuries*, ed. Jeffery Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 60.

<sup>148</sup> Augustine refers to Ambrosiaster as Hilary. Modern scholarship still is not sure who Ambrosiaster really was. See Gerald L. Bray, “General Introduction,” in *Ambrosiaster: Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians*, by Ambrosiaster (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Christian Press, 2009), xxi.

While it is beyond the scope of this work to examine when and to what extent Augustine borrowed directly from Ambrosiaster, it is enough to assert that Augustine begins to take up many themes associated with the tradition that Ambrosiaster represents, e.g., an emphasis on original sin and predestination. When we first see Augustine systematically expounding portions of Roman, in his *Reply to Simplicianus* (396), we see him using ideas found in Ambrosiaster and drawing original conclusions about the necessity of grace for right action. Here we find Augustine beginning to emphasize the total inability of fallen humanity to choose God, the necessity of grace for faith and for all good works, and God's sovereign ability to choose whom He will and will not save. As a result of this new horizon, Augustine's interpretation of Romans 1 and 2 significantly shifts in its focus.

Because Augustine's reflection on Romans 1 and 2 is peppered throughout his works, in this chapter I must survey a broad swath of his writing. His *Enarrations on the Psalms*, his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, and his *Reply to Faustus* all provide loci in which to identify Augustine's early reading of these chapters. As we turn to the later part of Augustine's corpus, we find *The Spirit and the Letter* as the primary source for examining Augustine's thought on Romans.<sup>149</sup> Though not a commentary, this work explores key questions in Romans 1 and 2—and indeed all of the epistle—in detail. Here we see new meanings emerge from the text as a result of the new horizons in which the text is read.

This development in Augustine's thinking about Romans has been widely noted.<sup>150</sup> In this chapter, I augment that literature using a Gadamerian framework to explain how new meanings emerged in Augustine regarding natural knowledge of God and natural theology in

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<sup>149</sup> I will quote the works of Augustine from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Alexander Roberts (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.), ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <[www.newadvent.org/fathers/0134.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0134.htm)>. I have occasionally adapted archaic and British conventions. Where necessary, and especially when engaging particular lexical items, I have consulted the *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (1859). This is available on multiple websites, for instance <[patristica.net/latina](http://patristica.net/latina)>.

<sup>150</sup> For a good survey of the literature relating to Augustine's treatment of major themes in Romans, see Pamela Bright, "Augustine," in *Reading Romans through the Centuries*, ed. Jeffery Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 60.

general. As I trace Augustine's use of Romans 1 and 2 chronologically, I show that in the earlier stages of his work, his Neoplatonic preunderstandings of epistemology and the questions raised by Manichean interlocutors occasion readings that emphasize free will and the goodness of humanity and creation. Later, however, in the context of the Pelagian heresy and indeed in the context of Augustine's own maturation, Augustine rereads these chapters drawing from the tradition represented by Ambrosiaster. From this new horizon, Augustine gives a novel account of the utter fallenness of humanity, of the limitation of its natural knowledge of God, and of its inability to will the good without God's grace.

As we consider how Augustine rereads the texts, how he asks different questions of it in different circumstances, his hermeneutic presuppositions become apparent. Augustine does not see one acceptable meaning in the text. Rather, he sees in the words of the text the possibility of multiple right readings. As new questions arise, the acceptability of various meanings changes in these new contexts. Moreover, though he reads the text using the presuppositions provided by the traditions that form him, these presuppositions do not preclude original, sometimes ingenious, exegetical insights.

### **Illumination and Neoplatonism**

In order to understand how the younger Augustine encounters the text of Romans, it is necessary to briefly explain the Neoplatonic tradition in which he was formed, especially the Doctrine of Illumination which he frequently employs. Augustine, like many other Christians of his day, maintained a thoroughly Platonic anthropology. In this view, the soul is independent from and indeed superior to the body. Since, for the Neoplatonist, it is self-evident that the superior cannot act on the inferior, Augustine believed that the soul acts on the body and not vice versa. Thus since truth is determined in the soul, it is not determined by the sense

experiences of the body. While the body provides sensory experiences for the soul's analysis, understanding these experiences comes from something greater than even the soul itself.<sup>151</sup>

While for other Neoplatonists, the Intellect—or, sometimes, the One—was the source of human understanding, for Augustine, God—or more explicitly, the Logos, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity—is its source. The ability to understand is not something once given at birth but is provided in a continuous action. As Richard Pasnau explains, “The mind needs to be enlightened from outside itself.” He notes that for Augustine “truth ‘walk[s] with me,’ rather than merely setting me in motion at the start.”<sup>152</sup> So for Augustine, “God ... provide[s] not the information itself, but the insight into the truth of the information.” We “frame beliefs on our own, and God ... illuminate[s] our minds so that we [can] see the truth. In other words, God ... suppl[ies] the justification.”<sup>153</sup> The issue of seeing truth, then, is more one of the will than one of the intellect. For the Divine Light is always shining, always available. The one who chooses to look toward the Divine Light will see while the one who willfully looks away into the darkness cannot but be blind.

As we shall see in Augustine's treatment of Romans 1 and 2, the Doctrine of Illumination plays an ongoing role in his understanding of natural theology. We see Augustine reading Romans with this preunderstanding both in his early emphasis on how unbelievers can know theological truths and in his later account of how the unbeliever's knowledge of truth is insufficient on its own for salvation and gravely deficient when compared to the knowledge of the believer.

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<sup>151</sup> Michael Mendelson, “Saint Augustine,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/augustine/>>.

<sup>152</sup> Robert Pasnau, “Divine Illumination,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/illumination/>>.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

## Manicheanism

Augustine knew Manicheanism well, for he was one of its adherents for nearly a decade.<sup>154</sup> Mani, an early-third-century teacher from southern Mesopotamia, formed his religion as a synthesis of inspiring teaching, aesthetic hymnody, engaging literature, and “effective organization.”<sup>155</sup> Mani incorporated into his doctrine concepts from Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and other religious and philosophical systems. For instance, he believed himself to be the Paraclete of John 14, leading his followers into to a special knowledge of truth.<sup>156</sup>

Like the Gnostics of Origen’s day, Manicheans believed that the physical world is a struggle between good and evil. Manicheans, teaching that good and evil are equal, preexistent powers, sought release from this battle. The human soul, for the Manicheans, is a part of God—or “a fragment of light”—that has fallen from its heavenly home and has become entrapped in a physical body. On the other hand, the body is a part of the kingdom of darkness and as such is necessarily evil. The human has no free will to escape from this corporeal prison on his own.<sup>157</sup> For Manicheans, Jesus was a pure spirit who provided the way out of this endless struggle by means of unique ascetic and cultic practices.

There were two orders of Manicheans, the elect and the hearers. The elect were the spiritual elite who fully embraced the ascetic teaching of Mani. On the other hand, hearers, such as the young Augustine, supported the elect and followed a less rigorous way of life. Gillian Clark notes that Augustine’s status as a hearer in Manichaeism proved a particularly appropriate way of life for the young Augustine. Referencing Augustine’s own words in the *Confessions*, she notes,

Manichaeism offered Augustine a way to accommodate his conflicts: he could pursue his career, and retain his partner, while purging his sins through his service to the pure Elect (4.1.1); and he could blame those sins on his lower, alien nature, which like the material world had been made by the power of evil,

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<sup>154</sup> Gillian Clark, introduction to *Confessions, Books I-IV*, by Augustine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 16.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Richard Lucien, introduction to *The Manichean Debate, Volume 1*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press of the Focolare, 2006), 10.

but which his true self would eventually shed (5.10.18). Manichaeism also responded to his need, instilled by his childhood, for the name of Christ, and his initial distaste for the Christian scriptures (3.4.8-6.10). He could regard the Bible as a crude and contaminated attempt at the truth, whereas the Manichaean scriptures offered both the name of Christ and what seemed to be a profound understanding of the universe and of human life (3.6.10).<sup>158</sup>

Augustine escaped Manicheanism when he grasped the Platonic idea that something incorporeal could exist. Until that time, Augustine, like other Manicheans, had always thought of God as a corporeal entity.<sup>159</sup> After his conversion Augustine would repudiate this and many other Manichean teachings. In his early writings, he attacks the Manicheans' rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures, their fatalistic anthropology, their assertion that the material world is evil, and their belief in the corporeality of God.<sup>160</sup> These Manichean doctrines challenged the Catholic interpretation of Romans and provided questions that Augustine brought to the text of Romans 1 and 2. The young Augustine brings the text of Romans, understood with the prejudices afforded by the Catholic, Neoplatonic tradition, into dialogue with the questions raised by the Manicheans. Out of this dialogue, Augustine's early understanding of Romans emerges.

### **Early Treatment of Romans 1 and 2**

In order to understand Augustine's original treatment of this passage, it is necessary to look at a broad range of his early texts. Romans 1 and 2 figures notably in Augustine's early treatment of the Psalms. By 392 CE, the bulk of Augustine's *Enarrations* on Psalms 1 through Psalm 32 had been written.<sup>161</sup> In these commentaries, we find that Augustine employs Romans 1 and 2, understood with Neoplatonic prejudices such as the Doctrine of Illumination, in order to insist against the Manicheans that God's creation is neither evil nor the cause of evil. This leaves the human will free to choose between good and evil. In his later *Commentary on the*

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<sup>158</sup> Clark, introduction to *Confessions*, 16.

<sup>159</sup> Richard Lucien, introduction, 11.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 12

<sup>161</sup> Michael Cameron, "Enarrations," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, OSA (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 290-306.

*Sermon on the Mount* (394), we see a related reading of these texts as he employs passages from the beginning of Romans to show the universality of the “law written in the heart.” Finally, in *The Reply to Faustus*, Augustine’s direct response to a Manichean Bishop, Augustine engages with Paul’s words to reiterate the themes of the goodness of creation, the goodness of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the freedom of the human will as an answer to Manichean questioning of these readings.

### **Ennarations on the Psalms: 1-32 (before 392)**

In Augustine’s commentary on Psalm 5, he wishes to explain what the psalmist means to be understood by “Judge them, O God: let them fall from their own thoughts.”<sup>162</sup> Augustine argues that this is a declarative statement about what will happen, not an optative curse. He uses Romans 2:15-16 to explain in what way people fall “from their own thoughts.” He explains that, because a person “deserves” to fall, his thoughts and his consciences will accuse him at the last judgment. The conscience, which knows right and wrong by the innate law, accuses because of the past action of the evildoer. Thus the thoughts are the result of evil action, which is the ultimate route of downfall. Note that in this early reading Romans 2:15-16 is applied to the unjustified sinner.

Augustine goes on to link this reading with his Neoplatonic prejudice, illumination. In exegeting, “According to the multitude of their ungodlinesses drive them out,” Augustine argues that the evildoer is “driven out from that inheritance which is possessed by knowing and seeing God.” The one who does evil cannot bear to look at God, “as diseased eyes are driven out from the shining of the light when what is gladness to others is pain to them. Therefore these shall not stand in the morning, and see.... Cast him into outer darkness.”<sup>163</sup> While Augustine concedes that, in the end, this verse certainly applies to those in Hell, he holds that it

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<sup>162</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms*, 5,13.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*



likewise applies to those who, rejecting Christ, are as yet in this wayfaring state. Augustine is comfortable finding multiple meanings in the one verse. Regardless of whether the verse is applied to the one who suffers in Hell or to the wayfarer, it is Augustine's doctrine of illumination that licenses his interpretation. In these verses, the sinners' sin causes them to look away from God. This leaves them in darkness, which makes it more difficult for them to see. Thus blindness is the result of their sinful choices.

We see a similar reading in Augustine's explication of Psalms 6. Here Augustine exegetes the meaning of how an "eye can be disordered by anger." The eye, as elsewhere in Augustine, is interpreted as the access to the mind, that by which one knows. Augustine again uses the explanation given in Psalm 5: the mind is blinded by its own sinfulness, and sin results in darkness. Here Augustine also employs Romans 1:28 to explain how God gives people over to a reprobate mind. Augustine explains that people who sin "are given over to" more sin not by some positive action of God but by the necessary result of their sin. When one chooses to do wrong, one simply is looking away from God. The eye is thus darkened. So when one sins, one loses some ability to understand rightly. This results in more sin and thus more misunderstanding.

But it is important to note that Augustine maintains that the wayfaring sinner is not wholly blinded by his sin. Unjustified sinners live in darkness while retaining some light: "For such is the blindness of the mind. Whosoever is given over to it is shut out from the interior light of God, but not wholly as yet while he is in this life."<sup>164</sup> That is, some basic functioning of reason and of conscience remains. On the other hand, in Hell, there is "outer darkness, which is understood to belong rather to the Day of Judgment; that [the one who is in hell] should rather be wholly without God.... Now to be wholly without God, what else is it, but to be in extreme blindness?"<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 6, 8.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

A final example from *Enarrations* should suffice to establish the general emphasis of Augustine's early use of Romans 1 and 2 in this work. Augustine explicates Psalm 9 by again using Romans 1:28: "when they did not think good to retain God.... God gave them over to a reprobate mind." Here once more, Augustine speaks of how sinners get to hell by their own choice. Sinners are "given into their own hands."<sup>166</sup> Thus, contra the Manicheans, the sinner's will makes the choice that leads to his destiny. That is, as sinners move further away from God, God allows them to have what they wish. In the end, Hell is their choice.

### **Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount (394)**

In Augustine's commentary on the sixth petition of the Our Father, "and bring us not into temptation," Augustine considers the question of how God allowed various figures from the Hebrew Scriptures to be tempted. In Augustine's attempt to defend the Hebrew Scriptures from the Manichean, the "heretical enemies of the Old Testament," Augustine uses Romans 2:14-15 to explain how Satan could "speak to God" before tempting Job. Here we see how Augustine fuses the horizon of Romans with his Platonic preunderstandings of illumination and of the incorporeality of God to answer the question posed by the Manicheans: How could Satan speak to God?

For the Manicheans, God was understood "bodily." Thus if the Manicheans were to accept the Hebrew story of Job, they would need to understand in what way Satan could come into God's corporeal presence. For the Manicheans, it was not possible that God would allow the evil of the Devil into the sacred space of God's physical presence. Thus the Manicheans considered the story of Job to be one more example of the inadequacy of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Augustine begins his response to the Manichean objection by asserting the Catholic, Neoplatonic prejudice that God is not confined to any spatial limitation. Augustine does not find

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 9, 17.

this idea in the text of Job. Rather Augustine brings this preunderstanding to the text as an assumption that makes the text comprehensible. Augustine says, “God does not occupy space by the mass of His corporeity and thus exist in one place, and not in another... but ... He is everywhere present in His majesty, not divided by parts, but everywhere complete. ...”<sup>167</sup> This emphasis on God’s omnipresence entails that God is already present before the Devil and before every soul wherever it may be. Augustine goes further by using Romans 2:14-15 to show that God speaks “in the conscience” of every soul, “even the soul of the Devil.”

Augustine uses Romans 2:14 to establish that the “law of nature” is written by God in the hearts of men.<sup>168</sup> He notes that if God wrote a law on a heart, God must have been present there in that heart. However, Augustine quickly moves from the image of writing, which implies a completed event, to the images of illumination and locution, which suggest God’s ongoing action and presence. He writes:

And therefore, as in the case of every rational soul, which thinks and reasons, even though blinded by passion, we attribute whatever in its reasoning is true, not to itself but to the very light of truth by which, however faintly, it is according to its capacity illuminated, so as to perceive some measure of truth by its reasoning.<sup>169</sup>

And:

... the Devil ... should be represented as having heard from the voice of God Himself, *i.e.* from the voice of the very Truth.<sup>170</sup>

Thus whatever true thought the Devil had about Job—or about anything for that matter—is but an instance of God’s light shining on the soul of the Devil, speaking to him. Moreover, anything that any soul “sees” rightly, she sees because of God’s action. Thus while the law was written on the heart in the past, the conscience actively bears witness, accuses, and excuses. For this reason, Romans 2:15 speaks of the present action of God in all souls.

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<sup>167</sup> Augustine, *Discourse on the Sermon on the Mount*, 32.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

On the other hand, any false thought of the Devil or of any rational soul is the result of evil will. Notice that the soul is only illuminated, “according to its capacity.” The evil soul is blinded, to varying degrees, “by passion.” As Augustine says of the Devil: “... whatever is false is to be attributed to that lust from which he has received the name of Devil. ...”<sup>171</sup> Hence no soul, so long as it retains reason, is without God’s presence and without God’s active voice. So when one reasons rightly, it is a conversation with God. When one reasons wrongly, it is because of one’s own evil will.

Again, Augustine’s careful fusion of traditionary preunderstandings—in this case, incorporeality and illumination—and the texts of scripture provides a meaningful response to the Manicheans and thereby a defense of the use of the Hebrew Scriptures, of the goodness of God, and of the freedom of the human being.

### **The Reply to Faustus (397)**

In his *Reply to Faustus*, Augustine continues the themes developed above. In this work, Augustine replies directly to questions raised by Faustus, a Manichean bishop. Hence in this work we see more clearly how the questions raised by the Manicheans occasion Augustine’s reading of Romans. In this response, Augustine continues reading the text as an explanation of how sin inhibits understanding and as a demonstration of the continuity between the natural law and the Jewish law.

As we saw in his early expositions of the Psalms, Augustine uses Romans 1:28 to explain how God allows people to sin while remaining blameless for their sin. In *His Reply to Faustus*, Augustine argues that, though scripture says God “blinded” the unbelievers—both Jews and Gentiles—from the truth of Christ, this happened not in the sense that God made unbelievers unable to understand the truth of Christ by some positive action on his part. Rather Augustine holds that this blinding occurred only in the sense that, since unbelievers willfully

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

turned from the light of truth, they could not see the truth. Thus while “this blindness is the just punishment of ... secret sins known to God,” the blinding is intrinsic to the sinner’s decision to turn from God.<sup>172</sup> So, more carefully speaking, it is not God who blinds any unbeliever. Rather, “the Devil blinds the minds of unbelievers ... by his evil suggestions.”<sup>173</sup> When people yield to these suggestions, they “lose the light of righteousness.” “God’s righteous retribution” is thus essentially part of the sin itself.<sup>174</sup>

For Augustine then, there are two judgments of sin: the final judgment at the end of time and the actual judgment that occurs as part of the sin itself. Augustine holds that “in one action, besides the craft of the deceiver and the wickedness of the voluntary agent, there is also the just penalty of the judge.”<sup>175</sup> In the very act of sinning, the mind is rightly turned from the truth. Accordingly, “the devil suggests, and man consents, [and] God abandons.”<sup>176</sup>

Augustine offers idolatry as an archetypal example of how the punishment for sin is itself more sin. Augustine, quoting Romans 1:20, concedes that “the Gentile philosophers had the knowledge of God.”<sup>177</sup> However, like Origen, Augustine concludes that the philosophers are “without excuse.”<sup>178</sup> For the philosophers sinned by their pride. Thus, “professing themselves to be wise, they became fools and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man....”<sup>179</sup> For Augustine the worship of idols was the result, the judgment, of the philosophers’ sinful pride which darkened their mind and left them foolish. The result of one sin was more sin.

Augustine applies this verse immediately to his own horizon, to the Manicheans. For the Manicheans, who “worship many phantasms,” do not even acknowledge the “single principle” of the “one true God” Who is not “liable to subjugation and corruption.” Hence Augustine

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<sup>172</sup> *Contra Faustum*, 8, 11.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 9.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 19.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

concludes that Manicheans are in a state far worse than even the idolatrous Gentile philosophers.

In this *Reply to Faustus*, Augustine also stresses the continuity of the natural law with the Hebrew law. Faustus held that there are three distinct laws: “the law of the Hebrews,” “the law of the Gentiles, which [the apostle] calls the law of nature” (Here Faustus quotes Romans 2:14-15.), and “the law of the truth” of Christ.<sup>180</sup> Thus for Faustus an important question arises: “Since then there are three laws, we must carefully inquire which of the three Christ spoke of when He said that He came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it.”<sup>181</sup> Faustus argues that Christ fulfilled the original, natural law but came to destroy the Law of Moses and establish his own, new law.<sup>182</sup>

Augustine rejects Faustus’s tripartite distinction as a “vain attempt ... to escape.”<sup>183</sup> Augustine first points out the continuity between the Jewish law and the natural law. The law written on stone tables and the law written on human hearts were the same in content. Both showed the sinfulness of man. But the written law simply made sin increase. For example, Augustine argues, “As the law brought the proud under the guilt of transgression, increasing their sin by commandments which they could not obey, so the righteousness of the same law is fulfilled by the grace of the Spirit in those who learn from Christ to be meek and lowly in heart; for Christ came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it.” For Augustine, even now Christians are bound to that same law. Augustine concedes that “even for those who are under grace it is difficult in this mortal life perfectly to keep what is written in the law.... [So] Christ by the sacrifice of His flesh as our priest obtains pardon for us.”<sup>184</sup> For Augustine, there is really but one law: written in every conscience, emphasized in the Hebrew, fulfilled perfectly in Christ and imperfectly followed by the believer. Here the Catholic prejudice in favor of continuity between

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 19, 2

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 19, 3.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 19, 7.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. By the time of this writing, Augustine had begun to focus on the Donatist controversy. Here, while emphasizing the continuity of the law, Augustine points out how Christians often err and can be pardoned.

Christian and Hebrew Scriptures allows Augustine to answer the objection of the Manichean bishop in an original way while maintaining fidelity to the text of Romans.

### **Summary of Early Responses**

Augustine's use of Romans 2:14 in *The Confessions* provides a locus to summarize his early reading of Romans 1 and 2. In this monograph, perhaps the most celebrated of all Augustine's writings, as he prepares to recount his theft of the pears, he writes: "Theft is punished by Your law, O Lord, and by the law written in men's hearts, which iniquity itself cannot blot out." The one law of God is written on every heart and in the Hebrew Scriptures which he so frequently quotes. Iniquity can never extinguish the light with which God illumines the conscience of all humanity.

However, the one who turns from that light becomes less rational as he is "handed over" to his sin. Augustine writes that he and his friends, having "according to [their] disgraceful habit, prolonged [their] games in the streets," decided to steal fruit "which was tempting neither for its color nor its flavor." After sins of youth, Augustine moved on to sins which had no rational basis whatsoever. Augustine recounts the irrationality of his action: "I loved my own error—not that for which I erred, but the error itself. ... not seeking anything through the shame but the shame itself!"<sup>185</sup> Thus the punishment of his sin was more sin. He was a "base soul falling from [God's] firmament to utter destruction."

So again in *The Confessions* we see similar meanings emerge. Not because Augustine holds that this is the one, singular meaning of Romans 1 and 2, but rather because Augustine reads these verses in a particular context to answer particular questions. As Augustine brings these verses into conversation with the questions of Manicheism, and with his own Catholic, Neoplatonic prejudices, these are the answers that emerge. However, as we shall see, new contexts occasion a different, sometimes contradictory, reading of these same verses.

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<sup>185</sup> *Confessions*, II, 4, 9.

## Pelagianism

Soon after the composition of *The Confessions*, in perhaps 405 CE, Pelagius encounters Augustine's theology of grace. Though Augustine's later view was not yet fully elaborated, Pelagius was already highly critical of certain suggestions in Augustine's early works. While this chapter certainly cannot pretend to cover the totality of Pelagius's view, a brief discussion of his salient teachings will suffice to demonstrate the way in which Pelagius's account of human goodness, free will, and grace called Augustine's account of these same concepts into question and called for Augustine's rereading of Romans in this new context.

Pelagius held that the human being was radically free. God would only command what was possible. Thus, since Christ ordered that we "be holy" as he is holy, Pelagius concluded that it is possible for us to live in a state of perfect holiness. For Pelagius, every human being is free not to sin; his will is radically free. Humans do not inherit a sinful nature from their parents, rather they imitate the sinfulness of Adam by choices of their free will. Therefore, Pelagius concludes, children, who are yet to make such sinful choices, do not need baptism.

This interpretation does not mean that Pelagius rejected the idea of grace outright. Rather, for Pelagius, "grace resides in the area of exchange between natural endowment, environment, and a providence that strengthens human beings with helps given to all."<sup>186</sup> Every human can already choose not to sin, and no infusion of sanctifying grace is necessary for salvation. Pelagius wishes to preserve a robust account of free will by ensuring that grace "does not determine ... actions."<sup>187</sup> While additional graces may be given in various forms to aid the life of holiness, such graces are not necessary in order for a person to live a holy life. "The difference between Pelagius and Augustine" then can be summarized this way: "for the former

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<sup>186</sup> J. Stuben, "Pelagius," in *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Siegmund Dopf and Wilhelm Geerlings (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2000), 413.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*



“grace is given in order that human beings may more easily do what is good; for the latter grace is give that human beings may be able to do it at all.”<sup>188</sup>

While it would be an exaggeration to say that Augustine developed his later views of original sin, the necessity of sanctifying grace, and the divided will solely in response to Pelagius—for they are already seen burgeoning in his *Response to Simplicianus*—it is certain that the Pelagian controversy offered the context in which his views crystalized. It isn’t until Augustine’s first detailed response to the heresy that he offers a thorough exegesis of the Epistle to the Romans. There, in *The Spirit and the Letter*, he argues that God’s help in bringing about our righteousness consists, not in the letter of the law given for our moral instruction, but in the Spirit’s enabling our fallen will to choose rightly. Augustine’s focus there becomes human inability to meet God’s moral requirements. It is in this new context that we will see his exegesis of Romans 1 and 2 shift profoundly.

### **Excurses on Pelagius’s Reading of Romans 1 and 2**

Before looking at the later Augustine’s exposition of Romans 1 and 2, it is worth taking a brief look at Pelagius’s understanding of these texts. Pelagius produced his commentary on Romans before his interaction with Augustine’s thought.<sup>189</sup> In this commentary we note that his exposition of Romans 1 and 2 is not markedly different from what we see in Origen or in the earlier writings of Augustine. Like Augustine, Pelagius was concerned with the teaching of the Manicheans and was interested in preserving an account of the goodness of creation and the freedom of the human will. At the same time, Pelagius respects, as does Origen and Augustine, the Rule of Faith that understands Baptism to be necessary for salvation.

Expounding Romans 1:19-20, Pelagius gives a robust account of all that can be known

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<sup>188</sup> M. Petschenig, “Augustine,” in *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Siegmund Dopf and Wilhelm Geerlings (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2000), 70.

<sup>189</sup> Pelagius, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, ed. Theodore De Bruyn (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2002).

about God “by nature.” Pelagius includes some brief philosophical arguments of how God can be known from creation and concludes that “[God’s] invisible properties are so plainly understood that they are said to be ‘clearly seen.’” He goes on to expound Romans 1:21 using language similar to the early Augustine’s. Pelagius even gives an account of how sin corrupts the mind, which is reminiscent of Augustine’s theory of illumination. Here Pelagius writes, “[Gentiles] had been made in such a way that they could recognize God if they wanted.... Imagining that they could grasp God’s greatness with the mind, they degenerated from their natural instinct by worshipping creatures instead of the creator.... And their foolish heart was darkened ... because it withdrew from the light of truth.”

In examining Romans 2:12-14, Pelagius emphasizes that Jews and Gentiles are judged in the same way before God. Both have the law: the Gentiles have it in their conscience while the Jews have it, additionally, on tablets of stone. Based on this reading, Pelagius states that God “places Jews and Gentiles on a similar footing when he says that doers, rather than hearers, of the law are righteous.” Pelagius here follows Origen in asserting that part of being a doer of the law is believing in Christ. Belief in Christ is one of the things a “doer of the law” must do. This is true for the Jew and the Gentile. Hence Pelagius asks rhetorically, “For does anyone doubt that those who have been placed under the law will perish just as those who lived without the law unless they have believed in Christ?” For Pelagius, as for Origen and for the early Augustine, it is the doer of the law who will be justified before God. Thus we Christians “too should fear ... lest we, hearing the law but not doing it, perish along with the Gentiles, as he himself says elsewhere, ‘Lest we be damned along with this world.’” For Pelagius, initial repentance and baptism are just the beginning of a journey that must lead to holiness.

### **Augustine’s Newer Perspective**

In spite of the similarity between Augustine’s and Pelagius’s initial readings of Romans 1 and 2, Augustine’s interaction with other aspects of Pelagian teaching caused him to reread

these chapters in a way such that new meaning emerges. This is most especially seen in Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, which represents the closest work we have to anything that could be called Augustine's commentary on Romans.<sup>190</sup> While the work does not provide a verse-by-verse exegesis as a traditional commentary would, it touches on the theological highlights of the epistle. As such it treats Romans 1 and 2 extensively. Augustine gives the purpose his book this way:

For in this letter of mine we have not undertaken to expound [Romans], but only mainly on its authority, to demonstrate, so far as we are able, that we are assisted by divine aid towards the achievement of righteousness—not merely because God has given us a law full of good and holy precepts, but because our very will without which we cannot do any good thing, is assisted and elevated by the importation of the Spirit of grace, without which help mere teaching is the letter that kills, forasmuch as it rather holds them guilty of transgression, than justifies the ungodly.<sup>191</sup>

Some have exaggerated the novelty of Augustine's reading of Romans. They see his emphasis on original sin, predestination, and the necessity of faith to please God as if he invented these ideas himself. While we do not have a robust textual tradition to examine precisely how these doctrines developed during the Nicene period—that is, between Origen and Augustine—we do have evidence to suggest that Augustine's later reading of Romans, while uniquely systematic, powerfully convincing, and particularly influential in the later Catholic tradition, did not originate outside the context of other traditional readings. Ambrosiaster's work, probably composed around the time of Augustine's conversion, anticipates and indeed elaborates many of the themes that will come to be associated with the Bishop of Hippo.<sup>192</sup> For example, Ambrosiaster places a strong emphasis on both original sin and predestination.<sup>193</sup> While we know that Augustine read Ambrosiaster's work, we cannot say that any commonality between the two readings indicates that Augustine simply borrowed ideas from Ambrosiaster. Rather where we see commonalities between the two writers we can say with certainty that the

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<sup>190</sup> He did start a commentary on Romans but never finished more than a few verses of chapter 1.

<sup>191</sup> Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 20.

<sup>192</sup> As mentioned in a previous footnote, Ambrosiaster's identity is unknown and is not important for our purposes here. What is important here is the tradition that he represents.

<sup>193</sup> Bray, xxi.

idea was already afoot in the tradition. This tradition represents part of the horizon from which Augustine reads Romans 1 and 2 to answer the questions brought by the Pelagian controversy. Indeed Augustine fuses the prejudices elaborated in this tradition with Romans to answer Pelagius in a way that seemingly contradicts his earlier elaborations on this same text.

### **The Spirit and the Letter**

Augustine's new perspective on Romans yields a reading of chapters 1 and 2 that denies the ability of man to choose God and underlines the necessity of sanctifying grace. In *The Spirit and the Letter*, we find a new emphasis in Augustine's use of Romans 1. Where before, Augustine emphasized how "handing over" to sin was an event that originated in human choice, we now find Augustine offering an account of how all righteous action originates not in human will, but in God's grace.

Augustine departs from his earlier exegesis with a new analysis of the phrase "the righteousness of God." Rather than contrasting this phrase with "the wrath of God," as the text seems to suggest, Augustine contrasts this with "the righteousness of man," or "the righteousness of [one's] own will."<sup>194</sup> Augustine holds that there is no possibility for the will to be righteous apart from the righteousness "with which [God] endows man when He justifies the ungodly."<sup>195</sup> The righteousness of God ceases to be understood as God's own fairness in His dealing with humanity, as we saw in Origen or in Pelagius.<sup>196</sup> Instead, the "righteousness of God" is that which makes humanity righteous. Here Augustine follows the tradition that Ambrosiaster represents. As Ambrosiaster wrote in his commentary on Romans: "Paul says ... the righteousness of God is revealed in the person who believes.... [Paul] calls it the righteousness of God because God freely justifies the ungodly by faith, without the works of the law.... This same righteousness is revealed in the Gospel, when God grants faith to man,

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<sup>194</sup> Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 15

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

through which he may be justified.” While we can already see Ambrosiaster having suggested this concept in his commentary on Romans, we now find Augustine employing this reading systematically and weaving it into his entire understanding of the text of Romans 1 and 2.

Augustine finds a useful analogy for understanding “the righteousness of God” in the phrase “the faith of Christ.” Just as “the faith of Christ” means “the faith wherewith one believes in Christ [and] not ... the faith with which Christ Himself believes,” the “righteousness of God” does not mean “the righteousness whereby God is Himself righteous.” Rather it means the righteousness that God bestows on those who have faith. For Augustine, both faith and righteousness “are called God's and Christ's because it is by their bounty that these gifts are bestowed upon us.”<sup>197</sup>

Thus the meaning that now emerges from Romans 1 is not that God is fair to Jews and Gentiles by providing both with knowledge of God. That meaning emerges when older questions were asked in another horizon. Now, in this new reading, Romans begins with an exposition of how the law—be it written or in nature—points to the inability of the human will to be righteous on its own. The righteousness of God is “witnessed by the law” but is given apart from the law.<sup>198</sup> The law merely shows the sinner his inability to avoid transgression. Thereby the law manifests the righteousness of God “which God by the Spirit of grace bestows on the believer without the help of the law....”<sup>199</sup> Without this bestowed righteousness, the sinner would experience “the wrath of God” that, as Romans 7:7 points out, is brought about by the law.<sup>200</sup> Hence, in this new reading, discontinuity between the law and the Gospel is evident.

The discussion of the natural knowledge of God is then subordinated to this discussion of the righteousness that God infuses in the one whom He justifies. As in Augustine’s earlier works, he continues to maintain that Gentiles were not “ignorant of the truth but that they held

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<sup>197</sup> Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 15

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 25

down the truth in unrighteousness.” Moreover he continues to invoke illumination terms to explain how sinners “darken themselves” and “turned aside” from the very “light of unchanging truth.”<sup>201</sup> However, with this new understanding that the righteousness of God comes only in the recognition of one’s own inability, Augustine now places a special emphasis on pride’s being the sin of the will that turns the sinner away from the gift of God’s righteousness. Earlier, in his *Reply to Faustus*, Augustine had already mentioned how pride causes sin to increase in the pagan philosophers. Here, however, Augustine explicates the special role that pride plays in the sinfulness of all people. As Augustine states, “... the ungodly... by reason of their pride profit not by the knowledge of God since they did not glorify Him as God.” For pride is the exact opposite of the revealed, externally derived righteousness from God. Pride is the denial that one needs God’s help. Thus “in that swelling pride ... they turn aside, and their foolish heart is darkened.”<sup>202</sup>

Augustine, emphasizing pride, chooses a reading of Romans 1:21 that is inconsistent with the original Greek. Augustine wrongly reads the Vulgate’s *evanuerunt* to mean “they became arrogant.” This Latin verbal form of “*vanus*” can carry either the meaning “become arrogant” or “become worthless.” However, the original Greek, “ἐματαιώθησαν”—a verbal form of ματαιότης—does not offer the possibility. The Greek can only mean “to become futile or worthless.” This (mis)interpretation fits well with the new meaning that arises: those who “think themselves to be something” do not recognize that “they are nothing.”<sup>203</sup> In this newer emphasis, the “vanity” that these intellectuals had on account of their ability to come to know God is the antithesis of “the righteousness of God” which rests in the recognition of one’s inability.

According to this analysis then, Augustine emphasizes that there is no benefit in the natural knowledge of God, per se. As Augustine writes, “those who come to know the Creator

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

through the creature received no benefit towards salvation from their knowledge.”<sup>204</sup> Just as “they who know from the law how man ought to live are not made righteous by their knowledge ... [because] they have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God,” so those who come to know God by nature try “to establish their own righteousness” by that knowledge. Their knowledge then profits them nothing.

Augustine goes on to look at what is meant in Romans 2:13—and implied in 2:6—by the phrase “doer of the law.” Here he adds something found in neither Ambrosiaster’s nor Origen’s tradition. Ambrosiaster had read this verse in a way reminiscent of Origen.<sup>205</sup> While Origen had noted that belief was a part of doing the law, Ambrosiaster took this a bit further. For Ambrosiaster, the whole point of “doing the law” simply is believing in Christ. Ambrosiaster says, “Those who hear the law are not justified unless they believe in Christ, whom the law itself has promised. This is what it means to keep the law.” On the other hand, for Augustine, one is a “doer of the law” only after one is already justified. Justification is taken out of the context of the law. Augustine writes, “Justification does not subsequently accrue to them as doers of the law, but justification precedes them as doers of the law.”<sup>206</sup> For Augustine reads this verse in the context supplied later in Romans—for example in Romans 11:6. Thus he states:

Now [Paul] could not mean to contradict himself in saying, ‘The doers of the law shall be justified,’ as if their justification came through their works, and not through grace; since he declares that a man is justified freely by His grace without the works of the law, intending by the term *freely* nothing else than that works do not precede justification.<sup>207</sup>

So for Augustine, it is only the justified, those who have been given faith, who can fulfill the law. Though the unjustified might occasionally fail to break the law, they do not follow it with proper motives. Augustine holds that the motives of those without grace “would hardly be found

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>205</sup> Keep in mind that it is unlikely that Ambrosiaster had himself read Origen. For Ambrosiaster didn’t read Greek, and Rufinus had not yet translated Origen’s work into Latin.

<sup>206</sup> Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 45.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

to be such as deserve the praise and defense which are due to righteous conduct.”<sup>208</sup> The unjustified may follow the law out of fear or chance but not out of the love poured into the hearts by the Spirit. Only the justified fulfill the law in this way, “embracing the righteousness of the law with innermost affection, where faith works by love.”<sup>209</sup>

Augustine is also particularly troubled by Romans 2:14’s phrase “do by nature.” Pelagius had asserted that what was necessary to do God’s will could be found in human nature. Hence no additional grace was necessary to aid the natural human will. Even Ambrosiaster had read this phrase as indicating a power that came from “the creature” recognizing its “Maker” by the natural power of “reason.” In this new context, Augustine sees such a reading as leaving too much of an opening for Pelagius’s arguments about the power of unredeemed humanity. Thus Augustine vehemently opposes this idea. Even if “by nature” is read as applying only to the justified and not to the unjustified—which we shall see is Augustine’s view—it still seems to indicate that the possibility of doing God’s will resides in human nature. This is inconsistent with Augustine’s newer reading, i.e., the total inability of human nature to please God.

Augustine resolves this dilemma by noting that “nature” here means only rehabilitated human nature. That is, nature as it has been restored by grace. Augustine often makes the strong statement that, in the unjustified sinner, “the law of God is erased out of their hearts.”<sup>210</sup> At other times he reluctantly concedes that God’s law is not “completely blotted out” but what remains is all but worthless.<sup>211</sup> When the sinner is redeemed by grace, God’s “writing in the heart is effected by renovation.” For Augustine writes, “It is grace that heals [human nature]. ... Therefore it is by nature that men do the things which are contained in the law.”<sup>212</sup> Thus it ought not “disturb us that the apostle described them as doing that which is contained in the law ‘by

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.



nature’—not by the Spirit of God, not by faith, not by grace. For it is the Spirit of grace that does it, in order to restore in us the image of God in which we were naturally created.”<sup>213</sup>

According to this new reading, Pelagius cannot make the argument that the phrase “by nature” indicates that grace is unnecessary for right action. For without grace, the image of God and God’s law as written on the human heart is all but gone as a result of sin. Hence it is useless for salvation. Sinners “are incapable of renovation except by the grace of Christ.”<sup>214</sup> So Augustine concludes that grace is not denied by Paul’s use of the term “by nature.”

Perhaps the most profound change in Augustine’s reading of Romans 1 and 2 comes in his treatment of Romans 2:14-16, especially “the law written on the heart.” In the tradition represented by Ambrosiaster, we see Ambrosiaster’s own uncertainty about how to take the verse. Ambrosiaster reads the text as referring to both Christian and non-Christian Gentiles. Those who believe in Christ will have their conscience excuse them as they will have fulfilled the law by their belief. Those who do not believe will have their conscience condemn them, as they do have the law, but they will have not kept it since they will not have believed in Christ. In his earlier works, Augustine was happy to read this entire passage as the law written on the hearts of unbaptized individuals, but now he strongly discourages—but still technically admits—this earlier reading. Instead he prefers to interpret this phrase as referring solely to Christians as Gentiles.

He makes this hermeneutical shift for two reasons. First, having the law written on one’s heart is better than having the law written on stone tablets.<sup>215</sup> Thus if Romans 2:14 were read to be referring to unjustified Gentiles, then it would seem that they are in a better situation than the Jewish people were. Instead, Augustine proposes that the text refers to “those Gentiles as having the law written in their hearts who belong to the new testament.”<sup>216</sup> Secondly, the Rule

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 44.

of Faith compels Augustine to read the text this way. For the text promises “glory, and honor, and peace” to these Gentiles.<sup>217</sup> Since God would not promise these things to those “living without the grace of the Gospel,” the text must refer to those “justified freely by His grace.”<sup>218</sup>

Augustine lays out the entirety of his argument this way:

Evidently, therefore, no others are here signified under the name of Gentiles than those whom he had before designated by the name of Greek when he said, To the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” Since then “the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes, to the Jew first, and, also to the Greek;” and since “indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, are upon every soul of man that does evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Greek: but glory, honor, and peace, to every man that does good; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek;” since, moreover, the Greek is indicated by the term Gentiles who do by nature the things contained in the law, and which have the work of the law written in their hearts, it follows that such Gentiles as have the law written in their hearts belong to the gospel. Since to them, on their believing, it is the power of God unto salvation.<sup>219</sup>

Though Augustine clearly prefers this new reading to his older exegesis, his hermeneutic theory allows multiple meanings in the text. He admits that it is possible to say that God has written his law on the heart of the all people, even those who have not been justified by grace, while preferring his newer explanation. For Augustine concedes that “not worshipping the true God with true godliness, [these Gentiles] do yet exhibit some good works in the general course of their ungodly lives.”<sup>220</sup> Thus “God's image has not been so completely erased in the soul of man by the stain of earthly affections as to have left remaining there not even the merest lineaments of it....”<sup>221</sup> So Augustine does not completely rule out reading Romans 2:14 as referring to unjustified Gentiles. Rather, in this new horizon he does not prefer it.

Augustine’s epistemological prejudices explain in part the reason for his continuing to allow his earlier reading of this text. He must continue to hold that the image of God “has not been wholly blotted out”<sup>222</sup> and remains as, at least, the “faintest mark.” For without such a

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

mark, the human being would cease to be “rational in any sense.”<sup>223</sup> Because Augustine’s theory of epistemology requires that God continue to act in all rational souls, he admits that their sin “had not quite abolished” the image of God in them.<sup>224</sup> So Augustine reluctantly states that even the fallen can be said to have God’s law written within them and that they will sometimes commit some good works, though these “scanty works”<sup>225</sup> are “of no avail ... towards the attainment of everlasting life.”<sup>226</sup>

Augustine deals with these “scanty” good works performed by the unredeemed in two ways. First, in order to maintain God’s fairness, he offers an account similar to that which Origen offered. That is, the good that these fallen humans do might “procure for them a milder punishment.”<sup>227</sup> For just as the justified will receive less reward if they have committed some “venial sins,” so might the damned differ “in the condemnation of everlasting punishment” that they will receive.<sup>228</sup> Nonetheless, these good works cannot bring about salvation. Secondly, as I mentioned earlier, Augustine discounts the goodness of these apparent works of righteousness by questioning the motive out of which they are done. He notes that, “were we to discuss the question with what motive they are done, they would hardly be found to be such as deserve the praise and defense which are due to righteous conduct.”<sup>229</sup> Thus, even when the law is obeyed by the unredeemed, it is obeyed not out of love, but out of some inferior, perhaps blameworthy, motive.

Augustine concludes his analysis of how God’s law is written on the heart by acknowledging that even if one reads Romans 2:14 to refer to unbelievers—as the early Augustine had done himself—the state of the believer is infinitely better than that of the unredeemed. He writes:

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<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

Whichever of these views is accepted, it is evident that the grace of God was promised to the new testament ... and that this grace was definitively announced to take this shape: God's laws were to be written in men's hearts, and they were to arrive at such a knowledge of God that ... all were to know Him, from the least to the greatest of them. This is the gift of the Holy Ghost by which love is shed abroad in our hearts. Not, indeed, any kind of love, but the love of God, out of a pure heart, and a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith, by means of which the just man, while living in this pilgrim state, is led on, after the stages of the glass, and the enigma, and what is in part, to the actual vision, that, face to face, he may know even as he is known.<sup>230</sup>

## Conclusion

This new interpretation of Romans 1-2 is not unique to *The Spirit and the Letter*. Indeed this becomes Augustine's new reading of the text. Some ten years after the book's writing, Augustine doubles down on this interpretation of Romans in his *Reply to Julian*, a Pelagian interlocutor. It is unnecessary to elaborate a detailed treatment of each verse in this reply. For the work repeats in an abbreviated form the ideas found in *The Spirit and the Letter*.<sup>231</sup> What is notable, however, is that here Augustine increases his commitment to his later position. Using Hebrews 11:6, Augustine rejects any possibility that an act committed without faith can please God, for "without faith it is impossible to please God." Moreover, Augustine concludes that the one who teach that "those who do by nature the things of the law" means those who "can please God by the law of nature without the faith of Christ" is an "enemy of the Gospel of Christ."<sup>232</sup> While he still concedes that the unredeemed may occasionally appear to perform righteous acts, they can never have true virtue. Thus they can never please God. Augustine's reading of Romans 2:14-15 has now all but dismissed the possibility of reading the "law written in their hearts" as referring to non-Christians. As Gathercole notes, "Augustine's acknowledgement of the possibility of the non-Christian reading here in *Against Julian* is much more faint [sic] than it had been ten years earlier."<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>231</sup> Contra Julian, IV, 23-25.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., IV, 23.

<sup>233</sup> Gathercole, "A Conversion of St. Augustine," 157. Gathercole's chapter is an excellent place to continue an exploration of how Augustine changed his mind about Romans 2. He includes an analysis of the "defending and

As Augustine's horizon broadened with time and as he encountered new questions, new meanings emerged from Romans 1 and 2. When confronting the Manicheans, the text of Romans 1 and 2 shows Augustine 1) the continuity between the testaments, 2) how the unbeliever brings sin on himself by his freely chosen, sinful choices, and 3) how the law is written on the heart of all rational souls. When confronting the Pelagians, the meaning that emerges from the text is 1) the superiority of the Gospel over the law, 2) the inability of humanity to choose good, and 3) the uselessness of the law as written on the unredeemed human nature.

Augustine's newer reading of Romans is not a reject of traditional readings, such as those represented by Origen and the younger Augustine, nor is it a mere preference for newer ideas, such as those represented by Ambrosiaster. Rather the text of Romans gives different answers to different questions. In this process of application to new situations, the tradition develops and new meaning emerges. It would not be an overstatement to assert that the next millennium of Christian thinking would be an attempt to work out the nuances left by Augustine's encounters with Romans in the multiple horizons that would emerge.

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excusing" thoughts of Romans 2:15 which I have largely chosen to ignore in this chapter.

## Chapter 4. Aquinas as Hermeneutic Exemplar

On the seven hundredth anniversary of Thomas Aquinas's death, Pope Paul the Sixth wrote to praise the work of the Angelic Doctor. In particular, the pope praised Aquinas's "great liberty of spirit in dealing with new questions and the intellectual honesty characteristic of those who, while not permitting any contamination of Christian truth by a secularist philosophy, refuse to reject such philosophies *a priori* and without examination."<sup>234</sup> The pope goes on to hold up Aquinas as "a pioneer on the new road to be travelled thenceforth by all philosophers and scientists." In this chapter, I examine how Aquinas's open, unhesitating, engagement with new questions and seemingly anti-Christian philosophies results in the genius of his hermeneutic work. Along with so many others in the Catholic tradition, I here look to Aquinas as a model for how Catholic theological exegesis can move forward in our own contemporary situation, allowing new horizons not to "contaminate" the message of the Gospel but to serve as vehicles for its transmission.

To explore any of Thomas Aquinas's work is to enter into a labyrinthine complex of interconnected ideas. To understand just one aspect of it is necessarily to interact with many others. So is it with the Angelic Doctor's treatment of Romans 1 and 2. Aquinas fuses the horizon of Paul's text with the horizon of his own complex system. Thus meaning emerges from the text nuanced by characteristically scholastic and uniquely Aristotelian concepts. In particular, it is Aquinas's creative adaptation of Aristotle's accounts of anthropology, of causality, and of human cognition that allows Aquinas to read the text of Romans in a manner surprisingly consistent with traditional understandings. Paradoxically, it is sometimes the Pagan philosopher who allows Aquinas to speak new truths orthodoxly.

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<sup>234</sup> Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, *Lumen Ecclesiae* (November 20, 1974), 8.

## **Scholasticism: Distinctions, Systematization, and the Legacy of Augustine**

On first examining the style of Aquinas's commentary, we are confronted with a method of exegesis that is startlingly more elaborate than that which we saw in Origen and Augustine. In this respect, Aquinas brilliantly exemplifies the Scholastic hermeneutic tradition. It is this scholastic style of commentary that opens the possibility for Aquinas's detailed, original, and creative fusion of scriptural, traditionary, and Aristotelian sources.

Scholasticism can be broadly defined as the theological culture that developed around the medieval cathedral schools of the eleventh to sixteenth centuries. During this period, theological masters such as Aquinas offered advanced students formation within the theological faculty. This training was available only to students who had first completed more basic educational requirements in the lower arts faculty. Theological masters taught principally by lecturing on scripture. In fact, Aquinas's commentary on Romans is the written record of one such lecture series.

Before teaching in the theological faculty, a theological master had to prove his versedness in the sacred tradition by completing a commentary on the *Sentences*, a collection of scriptural and patristic ideas compiled by Peter Lombard. This patristics-based gate-keeping examination ensured the maintenance and defense of traditional theological accounts even as new work was carried out in the faculty of theology. Since the tradition had developed for over one thousand years by the time Lombard compiled the *Sentences*, the work contained numerous hermeneutical difficulties that threatened the coherence of the Catholic tradition. Various authors would contradict—or at least appear to contradict—one another's interpretation of scriptural or traditional texts. Others would offer radically different visions of important theological realities, such as interpretations of the Eucharist or of grace. While patristic opinions did not carry the irrefutable weight of divinely inspired Sacred Scripture, they were nonetheless authoritative voices whose opinions could not be ignored. So a successful commentary on the *Sentences* navigated these patristic sources without discounting them. This

ensured that the theological faculty was committed to and fully conversant in the entirety of the patristic tradition before elaborating their own visions.

Of course, such a foundation in patristic exegesis meant that traditional references would be frequently employed in scholastic theology. As we see in Aquinas's commentaries on Romans 1-2, he overtly incorporates early Christian thought from sources as diverse as Pseudo-Dionysius<sup>235</sup> and the *Glossa Ordinaria*.<sup>236</sup> Ralph McInerny does not exaggerate when he states that "Augustine is a massively important presence..." in Aquinas.<sup>237</sup> For, as mentioned in chapter 3, Augustine's corpus was enormous and the influence of his thought on western Christian theology—and on scholastic theology especially—is difficult to exaggerate. In this chapter, I point out where Augustine's thought has been obviously influential on Aquinas's commentary, but a thorough treatment of Augustine's influence on Aquinas would require its own chapter. For Aquinas's theories of original sin, of human fallenness, of sanctifying grace, and of ontological participation are only a few of Aquinas's ideas that can be traced back to Augustine.

Scholastics such as Aquinas worked to resolve any difficulties within the multitude of traditional materials by drawing distinctions, by systematizing differences, and certainly by employing whatever creative genius they had at their disposal. Scholastic exegetes frequently used semantic distinctions to offer creative interpretations. We have seen that, starting with Origen and continuing through Augustine, the Christian tradition has long recognized multiple senses of scripture. The scholastic tradition continues this and builds on it robustly. Even when dealing with the literal sense of Scripture—which Aquinas seems to prefer—scholastics draw numerous distinctions between the meaning of particular terms and phrases. Aquinas describes his own version of this scholastic practice: "In the case of the things whose definitions we know,

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<sup>235</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Fabian R. Larcher (USA: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 115. The work is referenced by paragraph number.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 122, 187, 208.

<sup>237</sup> Ralph McInerny and John O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2014), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/aquinas/>>.



we locate them in a genus, through which we know in a general way what they are. Then we add differences to each thing, by which it may be distinguished from other things. In this way, a complete knowledge ... is built up.”<sup>238</sup>

In his commentary on Romans, we see Aquinas practices such systematizations and classifications. First, he considers the many different instances of particular meanings that fall within a general description. He sometimes allows these different meanings to stand as adequate interpretations, often allowing such multiple meanings in order to take into account some diversity of traditional readings. Other times, he considers multiple senses but in the end rules out some meanings and allows only select others. He often does this to avoid some heretical misreading or some undesirable implication of the misreading.

One instance of allowing multiple, competing senses occurs in Aquinas’s dealing with the term “justice of God” in Romans 1:17. Aquinas distinguishes between two possible meanings for the phrase. He states that “in one way it can refer to the justice by which God is just... Or it can refer to the justice of God by which God makes men just.”<sup>239</sup> In allowing the phrase “be understood in two ways,”<sup>240</sup> Aquinas is able to allow both strands of the interpretive tradition to continue: namely the tradition that we saw in Origen as well as that which we encountered in Ambrosiaster and the later Augustine. Similarly when Aquinas considers the phrase “from faith to faith,” he makes allowance for multiple meanings from the tradition. The phrase could mean the movement from faith in the old covenant to faith in the new, the passing on of the faith of the preacher to the faith of the hearer, or the faith that moves “from faith in one article unto faith in another ... because justification requires belief in all the articles.”<sup>241</sup> Augustine is not committed to the text’s expressing only one set of propositional meanings.

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<sup>238</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 14, 2.

<sup>239</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 102.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

Rather, the words of the text provide a multitude of possible propositions that can be drawn from them.

Other times, Aquinas makes a distinction between varying senses of scripture in order to remain faithful to some significant traditional prejudice. For instance, when Aquinas considers the meaning of “wrath,” he distinguishes between the wrath of humans, *ira*, “who seek vengeance exteriorly,” and that of God, *vindicta*, which he enacts “with a tranquil spirit.”<sup>242</sup> Aquinas draws this distinction in order to specify that only one possible reading can be considered. God’s wrath can be considered only as *vindicta*, and only “interiorly.” Romans 1:18 uses *ira* only as anthropomorphism. For it would be heretical to hold that God suffered the passion of *ira*.

Another scholastic tendency that licenses an extensive part of Aquinas’s approach is the penchant for systematization. Aquinas finds and creates patterns in nearly everything that he reads. For instance, in Romans 1:18, Paul mentions two sins: ungodliness and injustice. While there is nothing “in” the text to suggest that Paul intends to refer to particular classes of sins, Aquinas identifies the possibility of structure here. Aquinas states that “ungodliness is a sin against divine worship”<sup>243</sup> and “injustice” is a sin against fellow human beings. For, he says, “justice is that through which men come together and engage one another reasonably.”<sup>244</sup> Thus Aquinas reads here sins against the two greatest commandments: love of God and love of one’s neighbor. His scholastic horizon fuses with the text to create two classes of sins where the text, taken at face value, does not suggest such a reading.

Later in the same lecture, Aquinas notes that Romans 1:20 includes three attributes (invisible things, power, and divinity) that can be known about God. Aquinas couples these three attributes with the three ways that God can be known by nature<sup>245</sup> and again later with the three

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<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Persons of the Blessed Trinity.<sup>246</sup> A modern reader would not likely find such connections in the text because, for such a connection to become apparent, one has to be working from this scholastic framework. Aquinas, along with his scholastic counterparts, sees a system where others would see none.

It is unnecessary to continue pointing out instances of Aquinas's exemplifying the scholastic propensity for distinctions and systematizations. For indeed, such examples appear in nearly every exegetical remark of the commentary. Nonetheless it is important to note how these tendencies create a new opportunity for reading scripture differently. Not only can the multiple senses of scripture be exegeted, but even within the literal reading of the text, multiple senses of each term can be considered. Such multiple readings allow for the recognition of the validity of various interpretive and theological traditions. Moreover, as patterns are found in—post-Enlightenment readers might say “projected onto”—the text, new opportunities become available for connecting the text with various aspects of the tradition that would otherwise appear unrelated. Indeed Aquinas capitalizes on these hermeneutic tendencies in order to connect the text not only with sources from the Christian tradition but also with the new horizon that the rediscovery of many Aristotelian works afforded.

## **Aristotle**

While the typical scholastic commentator already had an enormity of traditional material with which to work, Aquinas had an entirely new corpus to consider when reading the text of Romans. Though Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* and his *Categories* had long been available in the West, the bulk of Aristotle's writing was introduced into Western academic and ecclesial thought through a series of new translations in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Aquinas read and appropriated these avant-garde Aristotelian ideas enthusiastically. While Aquinas is certainly not the only thinker of his day to eagerly embrace Aristotle, his synthesis of Aristotelian

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 122.

and Christian thought is uniquely and singularly enduring. Sometimes modifying—and very rarely rejecting—Aristotle’s account, Aquinas uses the Stagirite’s work to better understand the world and indeed even to better understand scripture itself.

Such an approach was not uncontroversial. In fact there was a wide range of opinions on how Aristotle’s thought should have been dealt with. Some accepted it wholeheartedly, but thought that it only taught a truth confined to the natural world. For proponents of this view, there were two truths: one philosophical and another theological. Aristotle could speak to the former but not to the latter. Others rejected Aristotle either as a whole or in large part. They viewed the opinions of this pagan philosopher, who denied the resurrection, suspect through and through.

Aquinas, on the other hand, believed there was but one truth. No sharp distinction between knowledge that could be used in philosophy, and knowledge that could be used in theology should be permitted. Thus while Aquinas admitted that there were some deficiencies in Aristotle’s thought, this was no reason to reject whatever was true in it. Thus as we shall see in Aquinas’s commentary, the horizons of Aristotle, Paul, and Aquinas himself fuse in a way that allows meanings, impossible in an earlier historical situation, to emerge.

Aquinas fuses the horizon of Romans to that which he encounters in these newly translated Aristotelian texts. Aquinas’s Aristotelian understanding of cognition and of virtue explain the meaning of faith and clarify conceptual difficulties about it. Aristotle’s account of causality explains how sin multiplies. Moreover, Aristotle’s overall anthropology allows Aquinas to account for human fallenness and redemption by grace. Thus for Aquinas, it is, in the end, Aristotle who most effectively answers many of the questions and clarifies many of the ambiguities that arose from traditional Christian sources. For Aquinas dares to put Paul and Aristotle in dialogue.

Furthermore, the problem of how Aristotelian ideas were to be accepted in the Western Church provided an open question about which the text of Romans 1 and 2 could speak. For

instance, Aristotelianism's wide acceptance by the arts faculties and his general rejection by the theological faculties called the relationship between faith and reason into question. The vigorously contested question of how much a non-Christian philosopher could be trusted on matters of epistemology and morality no doubt related to what God "made known to the Gentiles" in Romans 1 and to the "law written on their hearts" in Romans 2. In particular, the rediscovery of Aristotle's works brought about the heresy of Latin Averroism, which denied the resurrection and the existence of the individual active intellect. The questions that arose from the general reception of Aristotle and in particular from the reception advanced by the Averroists provide Aquinas with a number of questions for the text of Romans 1 and 2 to address. Much as Origen and Aquinas had seen this text as providing answers to the question of philosophy's place in Christian thought, Aquinas returns here for a defense of Aristotle's acceptance. But Aquinas's reading of the text provides insight that is no mere repetition of Origen's or Augustine's analysis. Out of Aquinas's unique scholastic horizon, new meanings emerge.

### **Romans 1:17 Faith: Aristotle Allows Paul to avoid Pelagianism and Antinomianism**

Aristotle's influence on Aquinas's reading of Romans can be seen straightaway in Aquinas's treatment of faith in Romans 1:17. Aquinas categorizes faith within the elaborate set of possibilities provided by Aristotle's anthropology. In so doing, he is able to specify what type of faith justifies. Aquinas asserts that the human being is saved by faith, but that for this faith to be salvific, it must be faith moved by a will "informed" by charity. So before we can look at what Aquinas says specifically about faith, we must have a basic understanding of what Aristotle says about the human person.

For Aristotle, a human is a rational animal. Hence human beings share certain sensory powers and appetites with non-rational animals. However unlike these brute beasts, the human being has an intellect and a will. While the brute animal merely experiences sensory perception, the human intellect is able to abstract truth from those sensations. Similarly, while the appetites

of brute animals are directed toward mere sensations, the human will, a unique appetite, is directed towards that which the intellect takes to be good. So just as animal appetites move the beast toward that which the senses deem to be good, so the human will moves the human being toward that which the intellect deems best.

Moreover human beings, like other animals, form certain habits within. A habit is a propensity for action, an aptness to behave in a certain way.<sup>247</sup> Humans develop habits of the intellect and of the will. Only when a habit is perfected—that is perfectly ordered according to reason’s dictates—is it called a virtue. Aquinas reads Romans 1 and 2 with this elaborate, though here grossly simplified, anthropology as a framework in which he is able to work out the conceptual difficulties occasioned by reading the chapters the context of thirteenth-century scholastic theology.

Aquinas considers faith to reside in the intellect. This is evident because he categorizes it within the same genus as scientific knowledge and opinion.<sup>248</sup> However Aristotle, in his lists of intellectual virtues, has not accounted for faith.<sup>249</sup> Aquinas notes that faith is like opinion in that faith is not held on the basis of scientific knowledge. However, unlike faith, Aristotle thinks that opinion is something “about which we may be mistaken.”<sup>250</sup> But for Aquinas, faith is certain. So faith cannot be opinion.

On the other hand, the one who has scientific knowledge, like the one who has faith, knows with certainty. Aquinas notes, however, that, for Aristotle, the one who has scientific knowledge “assents by the necessity of reason.”<sup>251</sup> That is, he cannot but believe the evidence as presented. Unlike scientific knowledge, faith is “willed assent ... to that which is not

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<sup>247</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, Ia-IIae, 50, 1.

<sup>248</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 105.

<sup>249</sup> See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI.

<sup>250</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 105.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

seen....”<sup>252</sup> Reason does not necessitate the acceptance of faith which comes from the will, “*ex voluntate*,” not from the necessity of reason, “*ex necessitate rationis*.”

Thus Aquinas must amend Aristotle’s system to account for faith: “Faith is midway between scientific knowledge and opinion.”<sup>253</sup> He fuses the horizon of Christian philosophy with the system that Aristotle provides. Aquinas notes that faith, like opinion, is not necessitated by reason. But like scientific knowledge, faith is held “with certitude.” Thus Aristotle provides the genus, the intellectual virtues, whereby faith can be understood. Paul provides a new species for this genus.

Aquinas’s identification of faith as an intellectual virtue is only part of his method for navigating the heretical rocks of Pelagianism and antinomianism. For while Aquinas concedes that faith is necessary for salvation, he stipulates that only the *virtue* of faith saves. Faith is not always perfected and thus is not always a virtue. Though faith is always a habit of the intellect, always a propensity to believe, “sometimes it is a virtue and sometimes it is not.”<sup>254</sup> As we have seen, Aquinas has stipulated that faith must be intellectual “assent” and “from the will.” So “the act of faith ... depends on the intellect and on the will moving the intellect to assent.”<sup>255</sup> Thus for faith to be a virtue, it must be perfect both in the intellect and in the will.

But since faith, properly speaking, resides in the intellect, there must be some distinct habit of the will that moves the intellect to assent. In Aquinas’s fusion of Christian and Aristotelian notions of virtue, it is charity, the “form of all the virtues,” that resides in the will directing it towards the “Final End,” God. So “[f]aith formed by charity is a virtue, but not faith without the form.”<sup>256</sup> As Aquinas concludes: “the will must be perfected by the habit of charity and the intellect by the habit of faith.” So faith is a virtue only when the intellectual habit of faith is accompanied by charity, a habit of the will.

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid. “...non autem fides informis.” The translation here is my own. For the non-Thomist, “unformed” does not provided the sense of the text.

This distinction between faith qua virtue and faith qua habit allows Aquinas to explain how a person can have faith but not be justified. For if the “just lives by faith,” it would seem that anyone who believes should be justified. Such a reading, if taken flatfootedly, seems antinomian and hence does not easily conform to traditional preunderstandings of the necessity of charity and of those works associated with charity. However the classification scheme that Aquinas has set up allows faith to be merely an intellectual habit in the mind, not a saving virtue. This system explains how the mere disposition to believe facts about the faith affords no reward of eternal life. For, as Aquinas argues, the “indwelling [of faith] is not perfect unless it is formed by charity ... which unites us to God.”<sup>257</sup> In this way, Aquinas maintains the traditional emphasis on charity as the virtue that ensures that the will is directed toward God. That the justified must have the virtue of charity also ensures that no antinomian reading of Romans 1:17 is possible. For whoever has the virtue of charity acts in accordance with it.

Moreover, since charity is an infused virtue—as we saw already in Augustine—it can only be poured in our heart through grace. That charity must be infused from without preserves the anti-Pelagian emphasis on the necessity of divine grace for salvation. No matter whether the intellect has the habit of faith, the will cannot move itself toward the ultimate Good without charity, which must be poured into the heart by God. So Aquinas affirms, “The soul lives the life of grace through God.”<sup>258</sup> In this way, Aristotle allows Aquinas to understand the passage in conformity with Augustine.

By this insistence on faith formed by charity, Aquinas also blocks a reading of the text that would allow living by faith while remaining in mortal sin. For there are people who have faith—that is, they believe all the articles of the creed—yet have sinned mortally. Aquinas answers that “because charity is outside the essence of faith the substance of faith is not

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*



changed by the coming or going of charity.<sup>259</sup> Thus the substance of faith, the intellectual habit that resides in the intellect, remains even after a person sins mortally and thus destroys charity in the will. Such a person really does believe and, in this sense, can be said to really possess the habit of faith. However, without charity moving the will to choose God above all natural goods, this faith is no longer a virtue and is no longer salvific.

### **Romans 1:19 Abstracting God's Attributes with the Light of the Active Intellect: Aquinas, Augustine, and Aristotle on the Possibility of Natural Theology**

In the most general of terms, Aquinas's account of coming to know God is quite similar to Origen's. For like Origen, Aquinas holds that "God manifests something to man in two ways: first, by endowing him with an inner light through which he knows ...; second, by proposing external signs of his wisdom, namely, sensible creatures...."<sup>260</sup> Aquinas, however, is able to deepen his account of both "inner light" and "external signs" using resources from both Augustine and Aristotle.

The thrust of Aquinas's interpretation of "inner light" is somewhat different from Augustine's emphasis on divine illumination. While Aquinas echoes some terminology from Augustine's doctrine, he clearly sees the "light" as something internal, something placed inside by God but not as God's continual immediate activity. Indeed, Aquinas equates the "inner light" with the Aristotelian concept of the active intellect.<sup>261</sup>

We know from the *Summa* that Aquinas thinks of the inner light as the active intellect "through which we cognize truth about intelligible things."<sup>262</sup> The active intellect is that power of the soul that abstracts the universal from the particulars presented by the senses. Hence, in the commentary on Romans, Aquinas notes that "it is by the intellect that God is known, not by the

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>261</sup> Robert Pasnau, "Divine Illumination," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, (Summer 2011), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/illumination/>>.

<sup>262</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia 84, 6, ad 1.

sense....”<sup>263</sup> In describing the active intellect’s ability to see truth, Aquinas follows—and adapts—Augustine. Aquinas states that the intellect possesses this ability to cognize truth by its “participation” with the “eternal reasons.” Aquinas states that “the intellectual light that is in us is nothing other than a certain likeness of the uncreated light, obtained through participation, in which the eternal reasons are contained.... This is as if to say, through that seal of the divine light on us, all things are shown to us.”<sup>264</sup> So as Pasnau notes, it is an “oversimplification” to see Aquinas as having simply replaced Augustine with Aristotle.<sup>265</sup> While Aquinas does maintain the idea that we comprehend self-evident truths through participation, Aquinas assigns this capacity to the active intellect which does not continually rely on divine intervention. Thus Aquinas still reads Augustine however he does so through Aristotle.

In reading Romans 1, Aquinas follows Aristotle’s emphasis on the priority of sense perception. For while he mentions the “inner light” briefly, he dwells on its connection to the “visible creatures, in which, as in a book, the knowledge of God may be read.”<sup>266</sup> Aquinas’s concentration on how man moves from knowledge of created things—via sense perception—to knowledge of God allows Aquinas to read in the text of Romans an implicit account both of divine simplicity and of Aquinas’s own doctrine of analogy.

Divine simplicity is a central, perhaps even dominating, concept in the metaphysics of the middle ages. Divine simplicity is the doctrine that God has no parts. Thus while it can be said that God is good, mighty, and beautiful, in God, no attribute can really be distinct from another. God’s goodness is His might which is His beauty.

Nonetheless, human beings know goodness, might, beauty, and any other predicate because the active intellect abstracts the knowledge of these attributes from created things.<sup>267</sup>

As Aquinas says, “... man’s knowledge begins with things connatural to him, namely sensible

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<sup>263</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 119.

<sup>264</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 84, 5.

<sup>265</sup> Pasnau, “Divine Illumination.”

<sup>266</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 116.

<sup>267</sup> I have here departed from Thomistic language to avoid prolixity. See Ralph McInerney and John O’Callaghan, “Saint Thomas Aquinas,” for a more detailed account.

creatures.”<sup>268</sup> But the beauty that we learn from sensible creatures is distinct from the attributes of, say, benevolence or power. Thus, the “attributes that we speak of ... are not proportioned to representing the divine essence.”<sup>269</sup> When we attribute beauty to God, we can only do so in an analogical way. For God’s beauty is not the same as the beauty that we learn from created things. The same can be said of any other attribute that we wish to ascribe to God. Hence God can only be spoken of analogically. Aquinas’s reading of Romans 1:19 thus sets up the more detailed account of divine simplicity and of the doctrine of analogy that he reads in verse 20.

### **Romans 1:20 Paul Teaches Participation, Causation, Divine Simplicity, and the Doctrine of Analogy**

Aquinas’s account of human knowledge of God is based on fine nuance. On the one hand, “some things about God are entirely unknown to man in this life, namely, what God is.”<sup>270</sup> In this way, Aquinas preserves God’s utter transcendence. On the other hand, Aquinas maintains that man is cable of knowing God “from creatures” albeit only imperfectly and “analogically.” Here God’s immanence is sustained. Aquinas employs Paul’s mentioning of “power,” “divinity,” and “invisible things” as a springboard for an elaboration of Pseudo-Dionysius’s three ways of knowing God: causality, excellence, and negation.<sup>271</sup> In this dialogue with traditional notions, Aquinas preserves both the imminence and the transcendence of God. Moreover, Aquinas interweaves his doctrine of simplicity into this account in order to show how simplicity effectively synthesizes Pseudo-Dionysius’s affirmative and negative ways.

In order to understand Aquinas here, it is helpful to note Aristotle’s notion of causation, which hides in the background of Aquinas’s account of Pseudo-Dionysius’s three ways.<sup>272</sup> In

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>272</sup> See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, DN VII.3. It is unclear from the text whether Pseudo-Dionysius actually intended there be two ways or three. But Aquinas holds that there are three. See the *Summa Theologica*, Ia, **12, 12**. He takes Dionysius’s way of remotion and way of excellence as two separate ways. It is not clear that Dionysius

Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, Aristotle elaborates four types of causes: the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final.<sup>273</sup> The material cause is that from which something is made. Bronze is the material cause of a statue, for instance. The formal cause is what makes something to be what it is and not another thing. So the shape of a statue is its formal cause. The efficient cause is the source of change. It is the artist who changes the unshapen metal into the statue. Lastly, the final cause is the end toward which something is directed. Perhaps the statue is directed toward aesthetic enjoyment.

Aquinas identifies each of these types of causes with the “ways” of knowing God that he extracts from Pseudo-Dionysius. He further connects these with the “power,” “invisible things,” and “divinity” that Paul mentions in Romans 1:20. First, God’s “power” can be known.<sup>274</sup> God is here considered as the efficient cause of the world, as “all things proceed from him as from a principle.”<sup>275</sup> Since all “creatures are subject to change and decay,”<sup>276</sup> it is evident that there must be something which does not decay from which every created thing must spring. While this is Pseudo-Dionysius’s argument, it also happens to be, in very broad strokes, the arguments that Aristotle uses to argue for the existence of God as the prime mover and first principle.<sup>277</sup>

Secondly, God can be “known by the way of excellence.”<sup>278</sup> Here Aquinas uses Paul’s term “divinity” to defend affirmative theology in general and in particular to explain how his own doctrine of analogy is a successful affirmative theology. God is here considered as both the formal and the final cause of the world. As Aquinas states: “The divine good is called the common good in which all things participate.”<sup>279</sup> That is, any goodness we see in the world is a participation in, a manifestation of, the divine good. Aquinas maintains that the term “divinity” is

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meant them as such.

<sup>273</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* II, 3, and *Metaphysics* V, 2.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>277</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 1072a.

<sup>278</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 117.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

used specifically to “signify participation,” rather than deity “which signifies God’s essence.” Thus since the world receives forms that are likenesses of—or participate in—the divine good, we can use concepts from the world to speak of God. Moreover, while considering the way of excellence, Aquinas mentions that God’s divinity is “the ultimate end unto which all things tend.”<sup>280</sup> Thus not only does the world show God’s formal causality by way of participation, it is also teleologically directed at God. Thus a natural affirmative theology is possible as God is the formal and final cause of the world.

Aquinas reads Paul’s “invisible things” as referring to that which is “known by the method of negation.”<sup>281</sup> It is the distinction between God and creation that necessitates the way of negation. For, “if God is a cause exceeding his effects, nothing in creatures can belong to him...” Hence Aquinas notes that “we say that God is **unchanging** and **infinite**, and we use other negative expression to describe him.” For affirmations about God from the way of excellence cannot fully capture him. Such affirmations are imperfect and must be qualified by the negative way that Aquinas here identifies with Paul’s “invisible things.”

But Aquinas goes further to show that his doctrine of analogy is as well situated within the context of negative theology as it is in that of affirmative theology. For Aquinas notes that the plural “invisible things” (*invisibilia, ἀόρατα*) is used because “God’s essence is not known to us in regard to what it is, i.e. as it is in itself one.” God’s singular essence “is the way it will be known in heaven ... but it is now manifested to us through certain likenesses found in creatures, which participate in manifold ways in that which is one in God.”<sup>282</sup> Thus we speak of God’s attributes in the plural but know that we do so only by analogy. Thus the doctrine of analogy, in conformity to the negative way, stresses that we cannot know God’s essence. For, as Aquinas states, “all things are not traced back to [God] as to a common and univocal cause, as when man produces man, but to a common and exceeding cause. From this it is known that God is

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

above all things.”<sup>283</sup> That is, though God’s goodness might be the “cause” of any particular creaturely goodness, this same “common” goodness cannot be attributed “univocally” to God who “exceeds it” and is “above it.” So while “our intellect considers the unity of the divine essence under the aspects of goodness, wisdom, [and] power,” in reality “all of [these] are one in God.”<sup>284</sup> Thus the affirmative aspect of the doctrine of analogy must be contextualized within the negative way: we can make affirmative predications about God, but we must recognize the limitations of such statements. These statements do not describe God “as he is.” Romans 1:20, in dialogue with Pseudo-Dionysius and Neoplatonic prejudices, clarifies this for Aquinas.

### **Romans 1:24 Aristotle Explains How Sin Brings More Sin**

Like the other authors whose work we have examined, Aquinas carefully considers how, in Romans 1:24, “one’s first sin is a cause of the next.”<sup>285</sup> Aquinas considers two ways that sin can cause more sin: indirectly and directly. Indirectly, sin results in exclusion from grace. For after sin, God justly withdraws the grace through which men are kept from sinning.”<sup>286</sup> Thus He “removes the preventative.” As a result people may sin. In this sense God can be said to indirectly cause sin. However, “God does not give men over to impurity directly.”<sup>287</sup> For, since He “ordains all things to himself,” He does not “incline” the heart of man to sin. So God cannot be said to cause sin directly.

Nonetheless, sin can be said to cause sin directly. Here Aquinas enlists Aristotle’s classification of causes to examine the types of causation possible. First, sin might be the final cause of another sin. In this case, a person might have a goal, an end, to sin. In order to accomplish that goal, they may need to commit other sins along the way. For example, “when someone from greed or envy is incited to commit murder,” the greed or envy is the final cause of

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<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

the murder.<sup>288</sup> Secondly, sin might be a material cause of another sin. As Aquinas says, “gluttony leads to lust by administering its material cause.”<sup>289</sup> That is, once a person has drunk and eaten too much, he becomes the type of person who is more likely to be moved to lust.<sup>290</sup> Finally, sin can be an efficient cause. For “many repetitions of the same sin produce a habit inclining a person to repeat the sin.”<sup>291</sup>

Aquinas’s Aristotelian reading of Romans 1:24 brings about a unique interpretation of how being handed over to sin is a punishment. While, as we saw above, sin can directly be the cause of more sin, God can never directly cause sin. On the other hand, when God “hands over” the sinner to sin as punishment, God is “indirectly” the cause of sin. Now it would seem that allowing a person to sin is not a punishment; it is simply allowing them to do what they wish. But Aquinas lists several reasons that allowing sin is a punishment. One of these reasons is that sin results in a “deranged mind.”<sup>292</sup>

As we have seen above, Aquinas follows Aristotle in his definition of the human as a rational animal. Thus for Aquinas, “man holds a place midway between God and the beast and has something in common with both.”<sup>293</sup> For with God, man has “intellectuality” in common. With the other animals, he has in common “sensibility.”<sup>294</sup> While intellection is the faculty whereby the human being sees truth, sensibility is the faculty whereby sensory input is determined and arranged. Now in the intellect, man determines truth by reasoning. On the other hand, the sensible appetites—namely the irascible and concupiscible appetites—are faculties that

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> See *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, 148, on gluttony. Aquinas seems to think of lust as a greater sin of indulgence to which “gluttony” might lead. The alternative reading of the phrase is that the gluttony of a woman might lead to her greater sexual appeal and thus lead to inciting lust, thus becoming the material cause of lust.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

humans share with brute beasts. In the rightly ordered man, “reason dominates the sense appetites.”<sup>295</sup> In this case, the will acts toward that which the intellect determines to be the good.

But Aquinas notes that, “man exchanged that which was of God for what is beastly in man, so God subjected the divine in man, namely reason, to what is of the beast in him, his sensual desire.”<sup>296</sup> Thus instead of human will following the good as conceived by reason in the intellect, sensible appetites direct the sinful man. Aquinas notes that this is why Paul says “unto uncleanness,” “because it is especially through such sins that man turns to and is drawn to what is beneath him.”<sup>297</sup> Here Aquinas cites Aristotle’s *Ethics* to note that pleasures of touch are per se more brutish because they are shared with the animals.<sup>298</sup> Thus for Aquinas—and for Paul in Aquinas’s reading—it is not the sensual desires that are themselves bad. Rather the sensual desires as desires not subject to reason indicate “bestial derangement.” In fact, for Aquinas this simply is the definition of a “carnal sin”: “an act following the sensitive appetite that is not in accord with right reason.”<sup>299</sup> So when God “hands over” the sinner to his sensitive appetites, God is giving him to something lower. This is his punishment.

### **Romans 1:27 Aristotle Explains What Paul Means by “Nature”**

Aquinas continues to employ Aristotle’s definition of the human as rational animal to explain how the sins described in Romans 1:27 are not “natural.” Aquinas states that “[s]omething is against man’s nature in two ways”<sup>300</sup> First, sin “is against right reason.”<sup>301</sup> Thus even when a person does something that his sensitive appetite directs him toward, such as to sleep or to eat, he does so unnaturally when he acts on those desires that are not in accord with reason’s dictates. That is, reason is particular to the human. It is what should, by nature, govern

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>298</sup> See Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book III.

<sup>299</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 138.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.



each human being. Thus it is unnatural for man to act—to sleep or to eat—unless the act is licensed by reason. In this way sin is against the nature of the rational animal qua rational.

Secondly, some sins can be classified as unnatural in a more general way: rational animal qua animal. For some actions would be unnatural “even if reason were not considered.”<sup>302</sup> That is, Aquinas thinks that some actions are not in accord with the natural, bestial sensitive appetites that make up the human. This is the case of the sexual acts described in Romans 1:27. Aquinas states that “it is obvious that according to the intent of nature, sexual union in animals is ordained to the act of generation; hence every form of union from which generation cannot follow is against the nature of animal as animal.... The same is true of every act of intercourse from which generation cannot follow.”<sup>303</sup> So Aquinas thinks that some sins are unnatural even when considered according to humanity’s merely bestial appetites, to say nothing of reason’s dictates.

Here too we note that Aquinas follows Aristotle in observing a certain teleology in nature. As Aristotle states in the *Physics*, “It is absurd to suppose that ends are not present [in nature].”<sup>304</sup> So sexual activity, Aquinas says, is directed at procreation. Procreation is the final cause, the end, of sexual activity. Hence any instance of sexual activity that does not allow for the possibility of this natural end is, for Aquinas, per se unnatural. In this way, Aristotle’s anthropology explains the double depravity that Aquinas finds in the sexual sins of verse 27.

### **Romans 2:8 Aristotle Explains Why Hell Is Eternal**

The anthropology that Aquinas adapts from Aristotle allows him to propose an original explanation of why it is appropriate that Paul call God’s wrath “eternal” in Romans 2:8. Aquinas’s account is based on what can and what cannot move the will. According to Aquinas, the will is the center of desire for the human. But “[w]hoever sins mortally turns from the

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* 2.8, 199b27-9.

unchangeable good and fixes his end in a changeable good....”<sup>305</sup> That is, when one sins mortally, according to the doctrine of the depravity of the will as developed since Augustine, charity is extinguished from the soul. With it goes all the theological virtues. Thus the will without the theological virtues, without charity in particular, cannot help but desire temporal, changeable goods. For, as Augustine taught, only by grace can the will seek God. But since, after mortal sin, the will has no grace, it will always desire natural goods as ends in themselves rather than as means by which to arrive at God. As Aquinas says, “Because the end is sought for itself, whoever seeks the end is carried toward it and wills to possess it always if something does not hinder it.”<sup>306</sup> He goes on, “Hence, one who sins mortally has the will to remain in sin forever unless something changes him accidentally as when he fears punishment.”<sup>307</sup> But an “accidental” change does not itself restore grace and charity directly, though it could indirectly if, as a result of the fear, the person seeks sacramental penance and is thereby restored to grace.<sup>308</sup> Thus without grace, and therefore without charity, the will in Hell will ever seek to enjoy sin. So Aquinas concludes, “Consequently, it is fitting that if a man through his will seeks sin to be enjoyed forever, he should be punished for it eternally.”<sup>309</sup>

### **Romans 2:13 Augustine Amends Aristotle: The Infused Virtues**

Perhaps the most controversial and indeed most historically important debate from Romans 1 and 2 relates to the reading of Romans 2:13. Here again, Aquinas’s answer to a question, in this case the question of who the “doer of the law” really is, relies heavily on the Aristotelian horizon from which Aquinas reads the text. On top of Aristotle’s natural anthropology, which Aquinas fully accepts, Aquinas proposes that God gives supernatural virtues. Aristotle, not having access to revelation, had no knowledge of these supernatural

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<sup>305</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 193.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> I have chosen to ignore Aquinas on substances and accidents here. That would be a fascinating, though long, addition to this chapter.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

virtues. Thus Aristotle provides a correct account of only how natural virtues are acquired. However, the tradition emphasizes that an abundance of supernatural virtue is poured into the believer. Since the text of Romans 2 seems to imply that eternal life can be earned by virtuous action, Aquinas's account of these supernatural virtues allows Aquinas to avoid any Pelagian reading of Romans 2 in which natural effort would seem to merit eternal reward.

Aquinas states, "It must not be supposed, however, that the doers of the law are justified as though acquiring justice through the works of the law."<sup>310</sup> Natural virtues, such as the natural virtue of justice, can and indeed must be acquired through effort. However, following Augustine—and indeed following the entire anti-Pelagian tradition that Augustine inaugurated—there are virtues that can never be acquired by effort. According to Augustine, these are virtues "by which we live righteously ... which God works in us, without us."<sup>311</sup> Hence along with the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—Aquinas holds that God infuses into the soul supernatural virtues of every kind. He does so "without us." That is without our working. For instance, while there is a natural virtue of temperance developed by effort, there is also a supernatural virtue of temperance, infused in the soul by grace.

In the case of Romans 2:13, Aquinas refers to "the habit of justice" as a supernatural virtue which inheres in the will to perfect it. The natural virtue of justice is developed by effort and directs the will toward natural happiness. But here Aquinas reads the text as talking about the infused virtue of justice that directs man not towards natural happiness but toward supernatural happiness. This infused virtue can never be earned. Thus self-justification cannot be accomplished "by moral works, from which the infused habit of justice is not acquired."<sup>312</sup>

Instead, we do these "works of the law" only by an "infused habit of grace."<sup>313</sup> For without an infused habit of grace, which includes the theological virtues and the supernatural infused

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<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>311</sup> Augustine, *On Free Will*, II, 19; See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, 55, 4.

<sup>312</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 212.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

virtues, the natural will is not directed toward eternal life. Thus only the one who already has the infused habit of justice, and all the habits that come with it, can do the works that lead to eternal life. When a person does not have the infused virtues—because they are not Christians or because they have sinned mortally—then their observance of particular moral works are only directed toward natural happiness, not eternal life.

### **Romans 2:14 Aristotle’s Resolution to Augustine’s Dilemma**

Finally, Aquinas, having already bypassed any Pelagian accusation with his account of infused virtue, tackles Romans 2:14 in a surprisingly flatfooted way. Aquinas, in having followed Aristotle so completely, implies that unredeemed humanity can “by nature” get a lot right. For while Aristotle lacked revelation, which is necessary to move from natural to supernatural virtue, his overall account was correct. Thus, had Aquinas followed the later Augustine’s thoroughly negative appraisal of the ability of the unregenerated to do good works, it would be difficult for Aquinas to explain in what way Aristotle could be trusted.

Aquinas escapes having to follow Augustine’s negative appraisal in several ways. First, he acknowledges that nature could mean “nature reformed by grace.”<sup>314</sup> In this reading, the verse could mean what the later Augustine supposed. That is, Paul could be “speaking of Gentiles converted to the faith who began to obey the precepts of the law by the help of Christ’s grace.”<sup>315</sup>

On the other hand, Aquinas’s distinction between the intellect and of the will as well as his distinction between natural and supernatural virtue allow him to readily defend the notion that in some way the law can be written on the hearts of the unredeemed. For “by nature” can mean by the natural law showing all humanity “what should be done ... the light of natural reason, in which is God’s image.” In this case, nature is the intellect’s ability to decide what is

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

good. Here Aquinas also quotes Aristotle in the very definition of law “proceeding from prudence and understanding.”<sup>316</sup> So the unaided human intellect can determine what is right and good. Nonetheless, Aquinas notes that “[a]ll this does not rule out the need of grace to move the affections any more than the knowledge of sin through the [written] law exempts from the need of grace to move the affections.”<sup>317</sup> Thus people’s intellects’ having knowledge “by nature” does not entail that their will be moved toward the things of eternal life by nature. You can know God’s law by nature but cannot will to do it by nature.

Moreover, since Aquinas holds that natural happiness is possible without grace, the verse has another conceivable meaning. For natural happiness is in accord with reason and in accord with the natural law that God has established. Humans can know and do that which is necessary for natural happiness, though Aquinas notes that even natural happiness is difficult to achieve without grace.<sup>318</sup> On the other hand, in order to merit eternal life, the will must be moved toward the Supreme Good, toward God. This is not possible without “grace to move the affections” to God. So Aquinas reads Paul using Aristotle’s anthropology and thereby finds nothing Pelagian in asserting that without grace we can know aspects of the natural law and indeed carry them out by nature. In fact, we can attain natural happiness. At the same time Aquinas follows Augustine to assert that it would be Pelagian to say that the unregenerated human will could move us toward supernatural happiness in God. For that, we cannot move ourselves one bit.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, perhaps more clearly than in any of those preceding, is the thesis of this dissertation advanced. For here Aquinas exemplifies so many of the principles that Gadamer identifies as necessary for successfully coming to understand traditionary material. Aquinas

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<sup>316</sup> See Aristotle, *Ethics*, Book 11.

<sup>317</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary*, 216.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

reads the text of Romans as a real dialogue with Paul. Aquinas allows his own scholastic tradition, and especially Augustine, to speak to Paul. This allows the text of Romans to speak along with the voice of the entire tradition that had since reflected on Romans.

Moreover, Aquinas engages with Aristotle's thought in a truly productive fusion of his own horizon with Paul's and with Aristotle's. Aristotle's accounts of causality, virtue, and philosophical anthropology provide a context for interpreting both Paul and Augustine that would have been impossible before the rediscovery of Aristotle's works. The result of the dialogue that Aquinas constructs between Paul, Augustine, and Aristotle, along with the scholastic techniques that his contemporary environment provided, allowed new meaning, meaning impossible before, to emerge. Perhaps it is because of Aquinas's wholehearted commitment to this dialogue with the past that Cajetan notes, "in a certain way [Aquinas] seems to have inherited the intellect of all."<sup>319</sup>

In spite of that commitment to tradition and intense dialogue with it, Aquinas's creativity cannot be denied. For precisely because of the passage of time and the productive work of various historical voices, the truth of Paul's message—and indeed the truth of Aristotle's message—shines more clearly in Aquinas than it had before. For these reasons, as Pope Leo XIII summarizes, the work of St. Thomas Aquinas is held "in singular honor."<sup>320</sup>

In the concluding chapters of this work, I will return to Aquinas as an inspiration for what Catholic hermeneutics should look like today. For it is my hope that modern Catholic exegetes and theologians might continue Aquinas's work by fusing the horizons that the Catholic tradition provides with the horizons of today, even with those horizons which are seemingly anti-Christian. For it is not a commitment to one set of propositions that guides the proper exegesis of scripture. Rather, it is the rich possibility of meanings that the very words of scripture and of other dogmatic formulae provide when coupled with new philosophical systems and new

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<sup>319</sup> Cajetan, *Commentary on Summa Theologiae*, Ila Ilae, 148, 9. Art. 4; Leonine edit., Vol. 10, p. 174, n.6.

<sup>320</sup> Pope Leo XII, *Aeterni Patris*, 22.

methods of exegesis. By dialogue with postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist thinking the whole of scripture can be reread and new meaning can emerge. St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor, pray for us.

## Chapter 5. Luther: A Catholic Test Case

When Martin Luther first lectured on Romans, he was a Catholic<sup>321</sup> monk and a scholastic academic. Out of this typical late-medieval horizon, Luther would come to develop a revolutionary understanding of Christian theology. I argue in this chapter that one important aspect of Luther's revolution can be understood as a dramatic shift in the philosophical hermeneutics that underpinned his work.

In this chapter, I defend the widely accepted claim that the Luther's early lectures on Romans are an attempt to address the ecclesial, existential, and pastoral issues of his time in a manner that is not yet world-shattering. I augment this widely accepted notion with observations about how Luther's hermeneutic can still be considered Catholic. I go further to assert that Luther's early theology could have been a remarkable watershed within Catholicism, an advancement of authentically Catholic Christianity. In 1515, when Luther lectured on Romans, he was not yet proposing a radically new conception of justification, ecclesial government, or sacramental practices—though some important novelties are evident. Rather, an analysis of Luther's early prejudices suggests that he was taking sides in intra-confessional debates about how scripture should be read, how God's sovereignty should be understood, and how Augustine should be received. Luther's critique of the excesses and extravagances of the Catholic hierarchy offered hope for the renewal and purification of the Roman Catholic ecclesial structures of the time. His struggle with personal doubt about how the true God could be distinguished from the vanity of one's own imagination and about how suffering could be understood in one's own Christian journey were genuine innovations that, in both Luther's time and in ours, should be considered genuinely Catholic innovations.

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<sup>321</sup> The terminology "Catholic" is somewhat tricky in this chapter. As I said in chapter 1, by "Catholic," I generally mean that which the Catholic Church would look back at today and consider to be within the range of acceptable teaching at the time it occurred. This is that which the Church today considers to be part of her tradition. I shall point out those instances when the term is understood in some other sense in this chapter.



In his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther makes use of both traditional scholastic and avant-garde humanist methods of examining scripture. He questions the text, dialoguing with it and with the tradition, to fuse his own horizons with that of Paul. He does so using the prejudices offered him by the tradition. Thus, I argue that one important reason for considering this text as a Catholic document is the philosophical hermeneutics by which Luther comes to understand Paul.

In the first part of this paper, I point out that the preunderstandings that occasioned the Reformation were ideas already widespread in the Catholic Church.<sup>322</sup> As we shall see, Luther's concepts of sin, grace, justification, predestination, God's will, and ecclesial reform are all frequently discussed within the broad range of Catholic theological opinions of Luther's time. Thus the course of the Reformation was not somehow determined by those innovations we discover in Luther's early lectures. Indeed, the most original insights we find in Luther's lectures are not those which end up being the most significant after the Reformation is fully underway. Namely, Luther's doctrine of justification as it is expressed in his *Lecture on Romans* is not noteworthy for its novelty and is certainly not yet revolutionary.<sup>323</sup> Instead, Luther's theology of idolatry, and his Theology of the Cross—which in these lectures is expressed as a theology of suffering—are Luther's most notable advancements. So when reading Luther's *Lectures on Romans*, we must avoid seeing the Reformation as a foregone conclusion, as if the Reformation were the "logical, inevitable, and necessary public outcome of Luther's theological development."<sup>324</sup> Indeed as Yeago notes, as late as 1518, "[o]n the one occasion when Luther's theological proposals received a somewhat careful hearing from a representative of the Roman Church, at his meeting with Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg ... the conclusion reached was that

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<sup>322</sup> See Steven Strehle, *The Catholic Roots of the Protestant Gospel* (New York: Brill, 1995) for an extensive introduction.

<sup>323</sup> Again, I don't intend to argue that Luther's fully developed doctrine of salvation could have been situated within the broader Catholic tradition. I am making the much more humble suggestion—and much more widely accepted notion—that the early Luther's doctrine of justification is not yet fully elaborated and thus fails to be revolutionary at this time.

<sup>324</sup> Yeago, "The Catholic Luther," in *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 16.

his doctrine of justifying faith was *not* obviously heretical or in clear opposition to the tradition of the church.”<sup>325</sup>

Yet, sadly, as we shall see in the second part of the chapter, “Luther’s quest for the unique ‘grammar’ of theology,” in particular his desire to remove philosophy “from the foundations ... of Revelation,” results in a hermeneutics which, among other factors, leads Luther outside the Catholic fold.<sup>326</sup> As my analysis of Luther’s treatment of Romans 1 and 2 will demonstrate, indications of Luther’s coming rupture with Catholic theology are beginning to emerge in the early lectures, though at this point the break is by no means inevitable or predetermined. Then, as we briefly turn to Luther’s *Disputations against the Scholastics*, we see how fully Luther’s rejection of traditional prejudices had become. We finally turn to Luther’s later *Preface to Romans* for evidence that Luther has fully rejected how thoroughly Greek thought had been fused into the Catholic tradition. At least partly as a result of this rejection, Luther has abandoned a tradition-based hermeneutic in favor of an unmediated return to the original sources. In the preface, it is not so much the novelty of Luther’s now fully developed doctrine of justification that illustrates his distance from Catholic faith. Rather it is his elimination of Aristotle, marginalization of philosophical reason to the periphery of theology, and refusal to dialogue with traditional accounts<sup>327</sup> that serve to demonstrate the distance he has traveled outside of Catholic thought. Luther’s marginalization of Greek thought is only nascent in his 1515 lectures. But by 1522, when he writes his preface, Luther has expunged reason—at least reason as embodied in philosophical thought—from theology. This hermeneutic turn is a very important aspect of the Reformation event.

Two points of clarification are necessary at the outset.

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<sup>325</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, Ichthus ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 34.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>327</sup> Luther does continue to occasionally reference traditional sources. However, by the preface, these sources no longer have the authority that they once had. Instead of reading the scriptures through these sources, the sources become marginal and indeed optional.

1) I do not intend to argue that Luther marginalized Hellenistic philosophy solely based on a diachronic analysis of his exegesis of Romans 1 and 2. That Luther marginalized and eventually rejected the tradition spawned by the medieval synthesis of Hellenistic and Christian thought is uncontroversial. I merely mean to show that his treatment of Romans 1 and 2 evidences this gradual excision both of Greek thought and of the scholastic thought that it encouraged.

2) My claim about the role that Luther's rejection of Hellenistic philosophy played in his separation from the Church is not intended to compete with other accounts of Luther's Reformation Breakthrough. I recognize that the literature is vast and multifaceted. From a historical point of view, many political, theological, and sociological impulses contributed to the Reformation. The goal of my analysis is to argue that, looking back from the perspective of modern Catholicism, Luther's expurgation of Hellenistic philosophy can be understood to have played an important role in why his work is not considered Catholic today. We should not expect that his treatment of scholasticism or his rejection of Aristotle would be among the list of reasons for his excommunication enumerated in *Exsurge Domine*, the bull that announced his excommunication. For no doubt, the various political, theological, and historical circumstances surrounding the conflict were the more apparent factors in Luther's excommunication. Nonetheless, I do wish to argue that it is Luther's eventual lack of engagement with Hellenistically affected traditionary sources that makes him notably different from those writers in his day which we look back on and still call "Catholic."

Luther's unique situation in history makes him an excellent case study in Catholic philosophical hermeneutics gone awry. The early Luther, like Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas, is an appropriate subject of Catholic hermeneutic inquiry. For using Catholic preunderstandings to address the text of Romans and to answer those questions raised in his own day, the early Luther is attempting to fuse the horizon of Romans, Augustine, and other Catholic traditionary texts with his own. In this way, Luther is involved in the productive activity of reading the text

with the tradition for himself and in his own time and thereby creating something new out of this fusion with the old. In all of these ways, Luther shows and well exemplifies those hermeneutic elements that Gadamer underlines as essential to understanding within a tradition. Hence, in all these ways, the early Luther fits well with the other Catholic authors that we have examined up to now.

On the other hand, the older Luther ultimately fails as—or perhaps refuses to be—a Catholic theologian in part because his theology increasingly removes foundational Catholic preunderstandings from his account. Especially, Luther removes reason as typified in Platonic and particularly in Aristotelian thought from the foundations of his theology. In his early *Lecture on Romans*, he continues to engage with Aristotle and with philosophy in general. Thereby he remains Catholic. However, after the Reformation is fully under way, in Luther's *Preface to Romans* Aristotle has been impeached from his role as Catholicism's preeminent philosopher, and philosophical reason itself has been almost fully bowdlerized from theology. At this point, Luther is no longer in dialogue with much of the Catholic tradition, which, until Luther, had included a growing synthesis of Hellenistic and Semitic thought. Luther no longer engages the scholastics which came before him nor the magisterium that was his contemporary. As Gadamer might say, he has removed the bridge of tradition which unites him with the text of Romans itself. Thus Luther's hermeneutic divergence from Catholic theology forms an important part of his conceptual journey away from the Church. In this way, Luther's development becomes an important test case for the limits of Catholic theological innovation even today. As I will argue in the final two chapters of this dissertation, when a theologian begins to neglect a wide swath of the tradition and to refuse to dialogue with it, he ceases to appropriate an authentically Catholic understanding of the tradition and thereby ceases to propose a Catholic theology.

## Obvious Rootedness in Tradition

The young Luther was a Catholic, working in dialogue with Catholic sources. This can be seen clearly in the traditional material which he employs in commenting on Romans 1 and 2. Luther cites Bernard of Clervoux to explain the meaning of a “hardened heart”<sup>328</sup> and follows Lyra in quoting Cicero to condemn how false virtue increases when applauded.<sup>329</sup> He uses Aristotle to clarify the meaning of “the righteousness of men”<sup>330</sup> and draws heavily from Augustine. In particular, Luther uses Augustine’s *Letter and the Spirit* in order to further develop his own idea of “the righteousness of God,” rereading Paul through Augustine to develop something new. So Luther’s use of Catholic preconceptions should not be seen as incidental or occasional. Rather, at the point of Luther’s first commentary on Romans, they are standard.

Moreover, Luther’s own hermeneutic techniques are deeply affected by traditional preunderstandings. In particular, Luther follows Lyra’s modes of interpretation. Lyra provided his own adaptation of the *Quadrige*, the traditional four senses of scripture. Lyra’s refined model included the principles of moving from part to whole and of looking for a moral rule by which the meaning of a particular passage could be more widely applied. Luther uses Lyra’s part-to-whole principal to assert—contra Lyra himself—that Romans 1 and 2 is a reference to the sinfulness of the whole world. He states, “[Paul] can attribute all these faults to the whole body and not to the head alone.”<sup>331</sup> Thus he affirms an Augustinian notion that humanity is a “*universa massa perditionis*.”<sup>332</sup> Similarly, Luther uses Lyra’s “moral rule” to state that “the preacher of the Gospel must first of all rebuke the prominent leaders among the people.”<sup>333</sup> Thus he takes Romans 2:1, “Do not judge,” to be an injunction that can be broadened and applied to all those in power,

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<sup>328</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 41. Hereafter, references to the lectures will simply be marked as “Luther.” References to other works will be specified.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>332</sup> Augustine, *On Grace and Original Sin*, 2, 29, 34.

<sup>333</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 22.

particularly those in ecclesial governance. While Luther's hermeneutics will eventually shift, his early hermeneutics are "thoroughly medieval"<sup>334</sup> and are "essentially the *Quadrige*."<sup>335</sup>

### **A New Horizon in Humanism**

Nonetheless, Luther's early reading of Romans is not simply a rereading, taken from his predecessors. For Luther engages the horizon of his day, the horizon of humanism in particular, to create something new. Humanism's philological and textual emphases were already ascending in Wittenberg during the period immediately before Luther lectured on Romans.<sup>336</sup> This humanism urged a return to the sources of Christianity, including a renewed emphasis on textual and grammatical detail.<sup>337</sup> Luther considered this development positive and championed the shift from an emphasis on logic and Aristotle, to an emphasis on language and the biblical text.<sup>338</sup>

Though humanism did not necessarily entail a rejection of scholasticism, there was a tension inherent in the two perspectives. For instance, in Erfurt, from which Luther came, Nicholas Marschal championed the opposition between scholastic and humanist methods.<sup>339</sup> The entire system of reliance on scholastic glosses and on abridged handbooks of quotations for access to early patristic and biblical sources would eventually be replaced with direct access to Hebrew, Greek, and Latin originals. Moreover, this humanistic return *ad fontes* occasioned criticism of popular piety, with its emphasis on the cult of relics and the hyperadulation of saints.<sup>340</sup>

From Luther's lectures on Romans 1 and 2, it is evident that Luther drew deeply from this well. His textual criticism caused him to bypass Peter Lombard's canonical reading of "a

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<sup>334</sup> McGrath Alister, *The Intellectual Origins of the Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 113.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>339</sup> Chung, *Luther and Buddhism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishing, 2008), 36.

<sup>340</sup> No doubt the practical and political implications of this revolution exerted considerable pressure even when considered apart from the somewhat academic discussion of the weight of patristic sources.

*creatura*” as “by man” for a close reading of the Greek, “by creation itself.” Thus Lombard, and many other scholastics’ reading of Romans 1:20, was replaced by a close reading of the sources. Similarly, in reading Roman 1:21, Luther uses close grammatical analysis of modifier phrases to advance his understanding of how idolatry increased.<sup>341</sup> Most notable in the text is the manner in which Luther reads Augustine. For rather than reading Augustine simply through the *Glossa Ordinaria* or through other commentators, he returns directly to the text of *The Spirit and the Letter*. As we shall see later, this return to original patristic thought would provide important insight from which Luther would eventually develop his entire account of justification.

Luther and many of his colleagues at Wittenberg parted ways with humanism over which particular patristic texts deserved scholarly emphasis. For while humanism accepted the importance of all patristic thought, it tended to emphasize style and the principal of eloquence in choosing authoritative sources. On the other hand, the faculty at Wittenberg tended to emphasize Augustine as the most authentic interpreter of scripture.<sup>342</sup> Unlike the humanists, Augustine was thoroughly pessimistic about human ability and about the importance of stylistic concerns—consider his heavy criticism of rhetoric. Luther, in particular, follows Augustine in this “anthropological pessimism” contra the “anthropological optimism” of Erasmus and other humanists.<sup>343</sup> This turn away from humanistic optimism is essential to understanding how Luther eventually develops his own account of the total fallenness of the human person.<sup>344</sup>

Not unrelated to Luther’s connection with humanism is Luther’s critique of Church authority. Humanists often criticized the excesses of the Church hierarchy. Yet even in this critique they find themselves firmly in the Catholic tradition which has long included a tension

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<sup>341</sup> Luther, 20, 25.

<sup>342</sup> McGrath, 63.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid. Also, McGrath notes that “The controversy between Luther and Erasmus of 1524-5 over the freedom of the will is already prefigured in their differing attitudes toward theological sources in the period 1515-19.” Later, when Luther and Erasmus eventually part ways, Luther downplays the importance of this humanist interaction, saying Lyra had already said everything the humanist taught. See also A. Skevington Wood, “Nicolas of Lyra,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 33.4 (1961): 196-206, 203.

between the simplicity of the monastic and mendicant orders and the opulence of the Papal and episcopal courts.

In Luther's era, critique of ecclesial structures and a call to end various abuses were run-of-the-mill. For instance, Giles of Viterbo, an Augustinian who eventually became a bishop and even a cardinal, sought ecclesial reform. He observed the "disintegration of true piety"<sup>345</sup> and sought to bring the Church back to "its early piety, its ancient light, its original splendor, and its sources."<sup>346</sup> His project included the reform of the cult of the saints, the end of the sale of relics, and the call to stop the widespread neglect of priestly and episcopal duties. As long as one deferred to papal authority, a great deal of criticism and even doctrinal originality was tolerated.<sup>347</sup>

At the point that Luther lectures on Romans, he is not critiquing the authority of the bishop or of the pope but is critiquing the abuse of those offices. He reads Romans 1 and 2 as directed especially at those in authority.<sup>348</sup> Particularly in Romans 2:1 and more generally in the whole of chapter 2, he reads the injunction against judging as a warning to those with spiritual authority. He points out that "the secular as well as the spiritual lords are guilty of pride, dissoluteness, adultery, and still worse sorts of thievery...."<sup>349</sup> He saw this "desolation of holy church"<sup>350</sup> by "those who regard themselves as holy"<sup>351</sup> to be so blatant that "even children in the street can know that the spiritual princes, being almost totally blinded, commit the same if not worse crimes; luxury, ambition, pomp, envy, avarice, gluttony, and an utter neglect of religion do not seem to faze them."<sup>352</sup> While this blistering critique sounds like a roadmap toward schism, in the context of the widespread calls for reform, Luther's opinion falls firmly within

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<sup>345</sup> Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006) 41.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> McGrath, 32. He states: "Heresy, in the late medieval ages, had been so politicized that it was conceptualized more as an issue of challenging Papal power than an issue of doctrinal adherence."

<sup>348</sup> Luther, 20, 37.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.



traditional Catholic boundaries. So Luther's adoption of humanistic methods and concerns, while evidencing a genuine fusion of new and traditional horizons, cannot be thought of as a harbinger of inevitable schism.

### **Contemporary Questions: The *Via Moderna***

Perhaps the clearest indication of the Catholicity of Luther's *Lectures on Romans* is the fact that Luther's philosophical horizon is clearly situated within the horizons of his Catholic contemporaries. Broadly construed, much of Luther's thought can be characterized as part of the *Via Moderna*. Although Occam is considered the father of the movement, in actuality, its specific, local forms in Oxford, Paris, Heidelberg, and Tübingen were shaped by different scholars and interests.<sup>353</sup> Two important concepts typified this manner of philosophizing: nominalism and voluntarism. Nominalism is the belief that universals are the products of the mind, which do not correspond to real-world, extra-mental realities. Nominalism arose in contrast to the universalist position of earlier thinkers in the so-called *Via Antiqua*. Voluntarism, on the other hand, was a late-medieval notion that emphasized God's ability to will anything that was not in contradiction to his nature. Voluntarism was a response to the so-called intellectualism of the *Via Antiqua*, which emphasized how God's will—and thus His actions—necessarily conformed to his nature.

It was typical of each university to employ representatives of various philosophical schools in its faculty. It seems that Luther was sent to Wittenberg, where he would eventually present these lectures on Romans, as a representative of the *Via Moderna*. In particular, Luther represented the school as its thought had been developed by Gabriel Biel, whom Luther references frequently in the lectures.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> McGrath, 74.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

Voluntarism, following Scotus and, later, the more radical Occam, conceive of God's will in two ways: His absolute will and His ordained will. God's absolute will can never be in contradiction to His nature. God's ordained will, on the other hand, was whatever God committed Himself to do. Simply because He chose to do something in a particular way does not mean that He is bound by his nature to act thusly. The voluntarism of Scotus was primarily a theoretical tool for ensuring God's sovereignty. However, as the *Via Moderna* proliferated, more extreme and more inventive applications of the two wills of God became common.

The distinction between God's absolute will and His ordained will becomes a tool used to analyze the dichotomy between the "hypothetical" and the "actual."<sup>355</sup> For the voluntarist, the way that God acts in history is only a window into His ordained will, the way He has promised to act, and not to His nature. Thus little could be said about what was necessarily true of God. God could hypothetically act in ways much different than He has acted. For example, the fact that God has committed himself to punishing particular sins in His ordained will does not necessarily entail that God must punish those sins according to His absolute will. Hence much of the ontological knowledge of God proposed in the *Via Antiqua* was called into question while God's sovereignty was magnified.

The nominalism of the *Via Moderna* further shook the foundations of the rich ontology of the *Via Antiqua*. Occam's nominalism had denied the existence of universal forms. But many nominalist thinkers went further to resist positing any ontological entity that was not necessary to explain experience. This impulse greatly reduced the catalogue of ontological items needed to explain the universe. The effect was a kind of minimalist ontology that asserted itself both in philosophical and theological realms.

Luther was a voluntarist. As such, he was suspicious of attempts by intellectualists to limit God's sovereignty based on the ontology that they devised. Intellectualism seemed to dethrone God by proposing restrictions on Him based on its own inflated sense of

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 75.

understanding. That is, since intellectualists thought that a great deal could be known about God from natural theology and revelation, they held that it was possible to say what was and what was not consonant with God's nature. In contrast, Luther sought to magnify God's sovereignty even at the expense of the possibility of ontological speculation about God's nature.

Luther's voluntarism undergirds his treatment of Romans 1 and 2. He brings this contemporary horizon to the text of Romans and comes away with novel theological insights. We see these in Luther's defense of God's sovereignty regarding how God punishes sin. Romans 1 presents God as "handing people over to sin." For thinkers in the *Via Antiqua*, that would be impossible since willing sin would be contrary to God's nature. Luther, on the other hand, rather than seeking to explain away how God might "will sin," accepts it at face value: "This, to be sure, God alone may will. For he is not bound not to will that there be sin...."<sup>356</sup> On this point Luther dares to contradict traditional accounts—mentioning Peter Lombard explicitly—that God does "will evil and sin."<sup>357</sup>

Luther uses the voluntarist notion of God's two wills to explain how God can "hand over" sinners to more sin without contradicting His nature. Every Catholic author that we have examined thus far has denied that God wills sin. For these thinkers, God is understood to allow sin by some very indirect means such as by removing angelic help or by withholding grace. Luther, however, is able to use the doctrine of the two wills to say in unequivocal terms that God wills that people sin. This allows the most radical, though perhaps the most literal, reading of the text: "It is not correct to say, as Lyra does, that because God withholds grace and thus make sin possible, sin is *per accidens* also the penalty of sin. NO, NO! Sin ... is itself the penalty. The fact that grace is withheld is not the punishment...."<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Luther, 28. Luther also conjectures that "so also God wills sin, not for the sake of sin ... but for the sake of punishment and the ill that is contained in it so that he may have regard for the punishment rather than the sin." Luther seems to be most interested here in arguing the radical position that God in fact wills sin. He seems determined to do it even if He isn't entirely consistent in his philosophical arguments.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29. In actuality, Aquinas gave an intellectualist account of this verse that still holds to the literal meaning of sin as a punishment (though Aquinas does not assert that God wills sin.) But here, as elsewhere, Luther seems

To further defend this account, Luther argues that willing evil “must be understood in a twofold way.”<sup>359</sup> First, willing evil could mean that God wills evil directly from His nature. That is, He could bring evil “forth from His own will in the same way in which man wills evil.” Luther concedes that this would be against God’s nature and is therefore “impossible with God.” Instead, Luther argues that God “wills evil in a different way—in view of the fact that it remains outside him and that someone else ... does it.”<sup>360</sup> Thus evil becomes part of His ordinate will: something that He wishes to occur given the state of the world as it is.<sup>361</sup> Given the state of the world, God can will that someone else perform evil. In Luther’s use of the two wills here, God’s ordinate will becomes the realm in which God has the greater freedom. For in more typical applications of the two-wills theory, it is God’s absolute will which is unknown and unlimited, whereas in God’s ordinate will, He is limited by that which He has committed Himself to do. Despite its unique application in this passage, the doctrine of the two wills serves to preserve the maximal freedom of action for God just as it does in other situations. For in this scenario, God’s freedom is preserved by His willing that another do something in a particular circumstance within His ordinate will. Thus the overall purpose of the two-wills technique here typifies the *Via Moderna* thinking.

In explaining God’s ordinate will, Luther makes even more radical assertions. Since it is not contrary to God’s nature that He will that others sin, we must not conclude that God “must will the good.”<sup>362</sup> To do so is to unnecessarily limit God’s sovereignty. In fact, Luther states that “[God] does not will the good....” Rather, God wills “that we all should be bound to his commandments yet does not will that all obey them.” Thus God’s will, that we be bound to His law and yet that we in fact do not follow His law, is what creates sin in the first place. For Luther, that is not philosophically inconsistent. Hence Luther is able to choose a close reading of the

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unfamiliar with Aquinas.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

text in place of a forced reading that conforms to metaphysical assumption about God's limitations. Luther's voluntarism gives him the tools to make this literal reading consistent with his metaphysics.

Luther's situatedness within the *Via Moderna* is also evident in his distrust of the idea of habits to explain justification. In the thirteenth century, theologians of the *Via Antiqua* were virtually united in their assertion that justification involved certain "created habits of grace."<sup>363</sup> By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many were suspicious of this notion. Some thinkers in the *Via Moderna* were willing to concede that God used these habits to justify the sinner, following Occam in his concession that the habits were the result of a "divine decision" and part of God's ordinate will.<sup>364</sup> For these thinkers, God could have chosen to justify by other means. On the other hand, some in the *Via Modern* went further to reject this concession. Being nominalists, they tended to oppose unnecessary ontological postulates, and so they also avoided the postulation of unnecessary "theologumena." This led many in the *Via Moderna* to think of God as acting directly on the individual without intermediary means. For them, divine acceptance comes to be seen as the immediate cause of justification rather than any intermediary substance.<sup>365</sup>

We can see in Luther's treatment of Romans 1 and 2 how Luther distances his theology from the notion of created habits. When discussing the possible meanings of the phrase "from faith to faith" in Romans 1:17, Luther rejects the idea that this could mean from "unformed faith to formed faith." Such an interpretation, as we saw in Aquinas, argues that unformed faith is faith without the created habit (or virtue) of charity. Luther sees such a distinction between "formed" and "unformed" faith as meaningless. For "[a]ll that one can accomplish by [unformed faith] is to get an insight of what one must believe and thus to remain in suspense."<sup>366</sup> A broader

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<sup>363</sup> McGrath, 21.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

rejection of “created habits,” only hinted at here, is evident in the rest of Luther’s lectures. As McGrath notes, “Although this radical critique of the role of created habits in justification was once thought to mark a complete break with the theology of the medieval period, it is clear that Luther merely reproduced the common late medieval attitude to such habits.... Far from marking a break with the late Medieval tradition, Luther demonstrates his continuity with it at this point.”<sup>367</sup>

### **Luther on Justification: Situatedness within Catholic Tradition**

While Luther’s thoughts on voluntarism and nominalism are clearly categorizable within the Catholic theological current of the *Via Moderna*, his early thoughts on justification in his *Lectures on Romans* are harder to catalogue. Further complicating the classification of thinkers like Luther into various schools is the fact that all theologians of the period, are, at least in name, “Augustinian.”<sup>368</sup> In fact, disagreement over the writings of Augustine are one of the noteworthy emphases of the period,<sup>369</sup> which can be understood in part as a “search for the authentic interpretation of St. Augustine.”<sup>370</sup> As a result, all of these thinkers held that grace is necessary for salvation and that Pelagianism is heretical. These “Augustinian” thinkers disagreed, however, over the operationalization of these terms.

Many in the *Via Moderna* struggled to translate their theology into practical, yet non-Pelagian, terms. Scotus had argued that the worth of a moral act could not be considered apart from anything other than whatever God accepts as its worth.<sup>371</sup> There was no intrinsic value attached to moral actions apart from God’s decision to accept or reject them. This thinking marked a turn away from an ontological understanding of how God must act to a covenantal understanding of how God has promised to act. It bases knowledge of God’s action on God’s

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<sup>367</sup> McGrath, 110.

<sup>368</sup> Oberman, 127.

<sup>369</sup> McGrath, 18, 23.

<sup>370</sup> Oberman, 126.

<sup>371</sup> McGrath, 80.

choice to abide by His covenant as ordained in His ordinate will.<sup>372</sup> Based on this covenantal, sometimes called “*pactum*,” understanding, there is no necessary connection between a moral act and its reward. Ultimately the worth of any act depends on God’s valuation of the act, not on ontological properties about the intrinsic worth of individual actions.<sup>373</sup>

Growing out of this view and out of the need for pastoral application of Augustinian ideas was the belief that God would not despise the sinner’s best efforts. Many theologians in the *Via Moderna*—such as Gabriel Biel—held to the conception of doing whatever one can do on his own, “*in se*,” in order to obtain salvation. To be clear, these theologians, following Augustine, held that the sinner could never earn her salvation. However, even the sinner should do her moral best in all things. These meager actions could not be truly meritorious since they are performed apart from saving grace. However, God could, and, as He showed in His covenant, would regard these acts as meritorious and deign to confer saving grace on the sinner who performed them. These works, though performed before God has given sanctifying grace, were said to earn congruous merit. After justification—given only by God’s grace—the sinner could continue to perform works that actually were meritorious. These works, performed in a state of grace, earned so-called condign merit.

From 1513 to 1515, as Luther lectured on the Psalms, he endorsed this covenantal, “*pactum*” theology of “doing whatever is in you.”<sup>374</sup> By the time of his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther is moving away from this manner of thinking. When discussing Romans 2:14, he still gives a nod to his older notion. There, when considering how people do the law by nature, Luther states that the verse refers to “people who by some good action toward God, according to the measure of their natural ability, earned grace which then directed them farther, not as if grace were given to them in recognition of such a merit, because then it would not have been

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<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

grace, but because they thus prepared themselves for receiving it as a free gift.”<sup>375</sup> On the one hand, Luther recognizes the importance of works before justification and even states that the unjustified “earn grace.” On the other hand, he seems to deny congruous merit: “not as if grace were given to them in recognition of such a merit.”

As we have seen, Luther’s position is consistent with the *Via Moderna* regarding the rejection of “created habits,” the emphasis on God’s sovereignty, skepticism regarding speculations about God’s nature, and perhaps even the possibility of preparing oneself for grace. On the other hand, as Luther lectured on Romans, his doctrine of justification begins to more closely resemble the position of another theological school, the *Schola Augustiniana Moderna*. This school of thought held various ontological views—or rather denials of ontology—that were found within the *Via Moderna*.<sup>376</sup> Many of the school’s exponents were voluntarists, and some were also nominalists. Moreover, this school tended to prioritize acts over habits and to agree with Scotus that “divine acceptance” is the critical criteria for justification. Like those in the *Via Moderna*, those in this Modern Augustinian School combine Augustinian and Scotist ideas to assert that “the formal cause of both justification and merit [is] the extrinsic denomination of the *acceptatio divina*....”<sup>377</sup>

However this Modern Augustinian School thoroughly rejects *Pactum* theology. Instead of positing any role for congruous or condign merit, it radically assigns justification to God’s independent action. For this school, divine acceptance itself is the immediate cause of justification with no intermediary.<sup>378</sup> Accepting Augustine’s notion of predestination, adherents to this theology no longer needed to contextualize divine acceptance in terms of human action, merit, or virtue. Justification becomes simply God’s unexplainable sovereign decision.

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<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



I do not here intend to argue that Luther was definitively a member of this so-called Modern Augustinian School. For even the degree to which this “school” formed a unified manner of thought and of transmission is debated.<sup>379</sup> As I stated earlier, its supposed members held theories of ontology and of the will that often overlapped with much *Via Moderna* thinking.<sup>380</sup> Moreover, the influence of this putative school on Luther’s thought by the time of his *Lectures on Romans* is difficult to prove. For instance, McGrath is reluctant to see Luther as having been influenced significantly by this school before 1519. Nevertheless, we can see that many thinkers held views that coalesced around their rejections of the notion that human beings are able to merit justification in any way. Instead, they asserted the radical centrality of God by emphasizing the Augustinian themes of predestination, the inability of the human will to choose the good, and the insistence that justification depends wholly on God’s sovereign action. Here I only mean to argue that this type of hardline rereading of Augustine preceded Luther and that this rereading was very much within the Catholic mainstream. Thus the concepts with which Luther was working were indeed still Catholic concepts.

Furthermore, Luther received many of these Augustinian notions from others who themselves had possible affiliations with this “school.” Staupitz, the young Luther’s confessor at Erfurt, held many of these uncompromising Augustinian opinions. After the Reformation was underway, Luther would freely admit that nearly all of his ideas regarding justification came from Staupitz.<sup>381</sup> Staupitz himself followed Gregory of Rimini whom Luther would call “the one true interpreter of Augustine.”<sup>382</sup> So whether or not there was a definitive *Schola Augustina Moderna*, we can nevertheless conclude that there was indeed some consistency in the Augustinian order regarding this uncompromising, inflexible reading of Augustine.<sup>383</sup> Moreover Luther himself

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<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 104 and 109.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> See WA 1.173. It is notable that Staupitz repudiated the Reformation—albeit under pressure—and died a Catholic monk. His relationship to Luther and to Lutheran ideas is admittedly more complicated than this simple assertion. In fact, as I point out elsewhere, Luther’s own recollections tend to exaggerate links and influences.

<sup>382</sup> Chung, 42, and WA 2:394.

<sup>383</sup> McGrath, 84.

admitted to have been influenced by these “theological currents and methods associated with his order.”<sup>384</sup> Thus Luther’s doctrine of justification should not here be thought of as the radical novelty that breaks with Catholic thought.<sup>385</sup>

### **Luther on Justification: Development in Augustinian Continuity**

In Luther’s lectures on Romans 1 and 2, several salient features of his view of justification stand out. The views that become clear in these lectures should be understood as part of the Catholic tradition both in terms of the theological assertions that Luther expresses and the hermeneutic techniques that produce such assertions. Luther’s interpretation of the phrase “the righteousness of God,” his emphasis on faith as the instrument of justification, his dialectic between God’s alien-righteousness and self-righteousness, and his view of the law’s purpose, while sometimes original, do not stray from the broadly Augustinian tradition in which Luther’s thought was formed.

Luther’s reading of Romans 1:17 follows Augustine and engages Aristotle. The righteousness of God is God’s righteousness that becomes our righteousness. Luther states that “‘the righteousness of God’ must not be understood as that righteousness by which he is

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<sup>384</sup> McGrath, 109.

<sup>385</sup> Moreover this evidence, and—as we shall soon see—Luther’s own analysis of Romans 1 and 2, suggests that Luther’s account of the “tower experience” could be somewhat misrepresentative of how Luther came to his understanding of “the righteousness of God.” Canonical accounts of Luther’s Reformation breakthrough often hinge on this supposedly pivotal conversion experience. According to Luther’s memory—looking back after twenty-five years—Luther had been terrified at the phrase “the righteousness of God,” a phrase that for him pointed out his own inadequacy and sinfulness. In these accounts, sometime before 1518, in the tower of his monastery, Luther suddenly realizes that the righteousness of God is credited to the believer and depends not at all on the believer’s own works of righteousness. Such a reading is not easily reconciled with the evidence presented above nor with an analysis of Luther’s lectures below, both of which suggest that Luther and others around him were familiar with this prevalent Augustinian idea. Moreover, Luther’s acceptance of this idea would not signify a dramatic redefinition of his ecclesial loyalties (Cf. Stehle, 16). Nevertheless, my thesis does not hinge on a rejection of Luther’s later autobiographical account. I have primarily followed McGrath and Kolb’s—Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009)—view that the reformation ideas occurred as gradual realizations, culminating in an eventual revolutionary reading. For other views see Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (London: Yale UP, 2006) and Scott H. Hendrix, *Pillars of Theology: Luther*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009). While Oberman’s and Hendrix’s emphases on the idea of singular instances of “Reformation Breakthrough” are less in line with my reading than McGrath’s or Kolb’s, all interpretations admit the basic thesis necessary for my argument: Luther’s theological shift included a major shift in hermeneutics away from scholastic thinking and Hellenistic philosophy. This shift was crucial in the development of his thought and his movement away from institutional Catholicism.

righteous in himself, but as that righteousness by which we are made righteous by him.”<sup>386</sup> Luther insists that the “righteousness of God must be distinguished from the righteousness of men.”<sup>387</sup> For Luther, the righteousness of men “comes from works.”<sup>388</sup> Luther equates this with that virtue of righteousness of which Aristotle speaks in the *Ethics*.<sup>389</sup> Luther notes that for Aristotle, “righteousness follows upon and flows from actions.”<sup>390</sup> Luther contrasts this with “the righteousness that comes from God.” For “according to God, righteousness proceeds works, and works result from it.”<sup>391</sup> Thus Aristotle’s system of virtues, for Luther, becomes the antithesis of the righteousness here revealed by God. Aristotle’s concept of virtues is still useful only as a foil for the righteousness that God gives.

Luther innovates on this hardline Augustinian understanding of righteousness as he begins to equate righteousness with the very act of believing itself. Following—though not directly invoking—Scotus’s idea that divine acceptance is the sole criteria for justification, Luther asserts, “Righteous is he who believes, and unrighteous is he who does not believe.”<sup>392</sup> On the other hand, unrighteousness becomes for Luther “the sin of unbelief and the absence of that righteousness which comes from God.”<sup>393</sup> Thus in Luther’s dialogue with Scotist and Augustinian sources, believing and righteousness become coextensive terms when describing the human being’s situation before God.

We also see in Luther’s depiction of faith something of an existential turn. The recognition of human inadequacy becomes not simply a theological truth, as we see in the scholastics. Rather Luther—following Staupitz—insists that humility and self-accusation are the beginning of faith.<sup>394</sup> The recognition of one’s own inability then becomes the existential criterion

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<sup>386</sup> Luther, 18.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> Oberman, 139.

for having faith in Christ. It is not humanity that is fallen; I am fallen. It is not humanity that sins, but I am sinful. Throughout Romans 1 and 2, Luther denounces theological hubris which, in his view, prevents the imputation of the exterior righteousness of God through faith. For instance, Luther quotes Matthew 7:23, “Depart from me you who work iniquity.” Luther notes that Christ pronounces this sentence “precisely with reference to the mighty works they claim to have done in the name of Christ.”<sup>395</sup> So for Luther, “iniquity” in this parable is defined as the “sin of self-righteousness,” which results from “foolish zeal for piety.”<sup>396</sup> For Luther people ought to realize how bad they are rather than trying to be good. Indeed Luther says that the whole of Romans 2 is directed at showing how those who “regard themselves as holy” are mistaken.<sup>397</sup>

In Luther’s analysis of the concept of self-righteousness, he fuses the horizons of Augustinian and that of humanistic thought to critique scholastic theology. While Luther was certainly aware of other Augustinian theologians, he broadly categories scholastic thinking as if all—or at least nearly all—scholastics were ignorant of Augustine’s concerns. Luther seems to have no firsthand knowledge of Aquinas or even of the details of Scotus’s thought. Thus Luther’s growing concern with widespread scholastic Pelagianism is situated within his limited understanding of the theological options available in the various teachings.<sup>398</sup>

For Luther, scholastics “emphasize the good they do to such an extent that they are incapable of seeing their own faults.”<sup>399</sup> Moreover, their rational accounts of human righteousness are in opposition to the righteousness that comes from God. For in yet another definition of iniquity, Luther says that “iniquity consists in ... that you fail to live up to what you are bound to do and do instead what seems right to you.” Thus the scholastic ethical arguments, basing action on “what seems right” in the light of reason, magnify iniquity. Instead, for Luther, “uprightness in contrast [to iniquity] consists in this, that you do what you ought to do,

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<sup>395</sup> Luther, 35.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>398</sup> McGrath, 25. See the discussion of whether Luther was actually challenging dogma or the mere theological opinions of the *Via Moderna*.

<sup>399</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 40.

regardless of what seems right to you.”<sup>400</sup> Scholastics, in their “hardheartedness ... cling to their own opinion and wisdom, stubbornly maintaining their own holiness in the manner of Jews, heretics, schismatics, and individualists.”<sup>401</sup> They ignore that “[t]he whole scripture teaches nothing else than humility” and that “we must be subject not only to God but also to every creature.”<sup>402</sup> The desire to understand and thereby subject everything to the ontological and ethical analysis of reason is nothing but “a perverse tendency of our mind.”<sup>403</sup>

While it is tempting to note that Luther is beginning to become critical of the scholastic establishment, his hermeneutic technique is still, broadly speaking, scholastic. He still engages the tradition and speaks to those questions that Catholic academics were considering. He merely does so from a decidedly voluntarist, nominalist, and Augustinian perspective.

It is in this context that Luther affirms that all people having some natural knowledge of God and of the natural law. For he says that all do receive a “spiritual law”<sup>404</sup> and that “the whole law handed down to us is, therefore, nothing else than this natural law which everyone knows and on account of which no one is without excuse.”<sup>405</sup> The law becomes for Luther something that drives us to the humility necessary for faith and makes our sin so egregious that we cannot but recognize it. Luther quotes Augustine on this: “I do not know what it is that what one desires becomes more agreeable when it is forbidden.”<sup>406</sup> Luther argues that “every law occasions sin unless under the influence of grace.” This is because our “feeling, mind and will are bent toward the law.”<sup>407</sup> That is, “the will always tends to go in a direction opposite to that in which it should go.... Indeed, when it is brought under the laws, it is stimulated in the direction of sin rather than helped against it.” So the law cannot help us avoid sin, rather it increases sin. In this way, “the severity of God also works toward salvation. For He breaks down and heals, ‘He kills and

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 35. So much for Holl’s reading of Luther as a defender of conscience.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 49. See Augustine, *The Spirit and The Letter*, 4.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 49.

makes alive.”<sup>408</sup> Thus in the law He kills, and, as Luther will develop later in his theology, in the Gospel He makes alive.

Luther states that “the whole argument of [the second] chapter ... is nothing else than the demonstration that all ... are sinners in need of the grace of God.”<sup>409</sup> While the ungodly listed in chapter 1 are obviously in sin, the sin in chapter 2 is more subtle and thus more dangerous. For chapter 1 explains the sins of idolaters, while chapter 2 is addressed to those who think themselves holy because of their outward piety.

Luther cites Augustine’s *The Spirit and the Letter* as he argues that outward obedience is not sufficient to please God.<sup>410</sup> Augustine noticed the insufficiency of those who “do the works of the law according to the letter without the spirit, i.e. for fear of punishment and not out of love for righteousness.”<sup>411</sup> Luther concurs. If one obeys the law “from fear rather than love of righteousness,” then he has not really fulfilled the law. For, “before God is the will.” So while some may appear to keep the law based on their outward works, all people inwardly resist and resent it. God sees this in their will and judges it.

As Luther considers the meaning of “doer of the law,” he considers resolutions to the interpretive difficulties we noted in chapter 3 on Augustine: 1) Who is a “doer of the law”? and 2) Who “does by nature the things of the law”? On the one hand, Augustine says these verses could indicate that it is the believing Gentiles who do the works of the law by nature.<sup>412</sup> However, Luther sees this reading as “forced.” On the other hand, Augustine mentions that the text could mean that some Gentiles do some good so they should be regarded as people who “do and understand the law.”<sup>413</sup> Based on their paltry good works, they would have a “milder

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>410</sup> Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 8, 13.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

punishment.”<sup>414</sup> Luther rejects this as well and instead chooses a more literal reading of the text.<sup>415</sup>

Luther sees this passages as referring to something between “godless Gentiles and believing ones.”<sup>416</sup> These Gentiles observe the “things of the law,” but this does not mean that they “fulfill the law.” Luther notes the distinction: “it is one thing to say that ‘the work of the law is written in their hearts’ and another to say that ‘the law is written in their hearts.’”<sup>417</sup> For Luther, the tradition, and even Augustine had wrongly read the verse as a fulfillment of the prophecy from Jeremiah 31:33, that God would write “his law” on people’s hearts. Luther concludes that “the work of the law is written in their hearts” means that the “knowledge of the law is written in them, i.e., the law written in letters concerning what must be done but not the grace which enables one to do this.”<sup>418</sup> On the other hand, had the verse said “The law is written in their hearts,” it would mean “the same as ‘love is shed abroad in their hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). This love is the law of Christ and the fulfillment of the law....”<sup>419</sup>

Thus, in Luther’s reading, the Gentiles described in chapter 2 fit nicely into the theme of the chapter: all people sin even when they appear to observe the “works of the law.” These Gentiles “observed the law as little as the Jews did.”<sup>420</sup> For this reason “they are still found to be in need of the grace and mercy of Christ.”<sup>421</sup> For “just as it was of no advantage to the Jews that they had observed the law externally,” it is no advantage to the Gentile to observe particularities of the law. Luther concludes: “Both, therefore, are under the sway of sin, regardless of the good they have done: the Jews with respect to the inner man ... and the Gentiles with respect to

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 52.

something twofold: namely that they fulfilled the law only in part and then not wholeheartedly.<sup>422</sup>

When Luther considers Romans 2:15, he concludes that faith in Christ is the solution to the utter sinfulness outlined in the chapter. The law, be it the natural law revealed in the conscience or the written law revealed in scripture, both convinces us of our guilt and drives us to sin more. Romans 2:15 then says our thoughts condemn us based on the law that we know we have broken so blatantly. On the other hand, our conscience can excuse us. However, the conscience does this not by reminding us about our good works. Rather “we take the thoughts that excuse us ... only from Christ and in Christ.”<sup>423</sup> Thus whenever the believer feels ashamed of his sin, “he presently turns away from [the shame] and turns to Christ and says: He made satisfaction, he is righteous, he is my defense, he died for me, he made righteousness to be mine, .... And if he made his righteousness mine, then I am righteous in the same righteousness as he is.”<sup>424</sup>

Though Luther follows Augustine quite frequently and cites him often, Luther ought not to be thought of as merely parroting Augustine. Indeed Luther’s reliance on these traditional horizons occasions creative innovations. Perhaps one of Luther’s most notable points of originality is his insistence on the alien, external righteousness of God. For instance, when Luther considers the various interpretation that Augustine offers for how “the doer of the law” will be justified, Luther notes that Augustine entertains the possibility that this phrase means that a person is made into a doer of the law by justification, as if the habit of supernatural justice is infused into the person. Luther firmly rejects this.

Instead, Luther prefers another option, which he reads both in Augustine and in the *Glossa Ordinaria*. Luther writes, “[The doer of the law] will be justified in the sense that they will

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.



be considered and declared righteous.<sup>425</sup> In this reading, God's righteousness remains in Himself, but He imputes righteousness to believers. While Augustine had mentioned this interpretation, he had more frequently spoken of infused righteousness, an interpretation that gave way to the majority of scholastic thought on the infused virtues. Luther's emphasis on alien righteousness, on the other hand, leads to several unique theological developments.

From Luther's rejection of the infused habits of grace and his general reluctance to consider theological realities as substances, grace, for Luther, ceases to be an ontological entity apart from God. Rather, grace becomes a disposition of God, God's choice to love us, experienced only in faith. Thus in expositing Romans 1:17, Luther can say that "the righteousness of God is entirely from faith."<sup>426</sup> For Luther thinks of grace not as some intermediary substance or force, but as a disposition of God recognized in faith. Righteousness then requires no ontological change in the believer effected by the transmission of a substance.

Another way to note the originality of Luther's interpretation of Augustine is to consider the work of Andreas von Karlstadt. Karlstadt was a contemporary of Luther and, eventually chancellor of the University of Wittenberg. On the one hand, Karlstadt demonstrates that Augustinianism and concerns about Pelagianism were by no means particular to Luther. On the other hand, Karlstadt exhibited a different, yet equally hardline interpretation of Augustine's theology. In contrast to Augustine, Karlstadt "develops a dialectic between law and grace rather than law and gospel."<sup>427</sup> Karlstadt uniquely emphasizes the "priority of grace in justification rather than faith."<sup>428</sup> For instance, while Karlstadt interprets "*iustitia Dei*" in "thoroughly Augustinian terms," he maintains the idea that grace is "intrinsically present" in the believer while avoiding "any notion of an externally imputed ... righteousness."<sup>429</sup> Moreover, Luther's "radical dichotomy between divine and human righteousness is consciously absent..." in

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 50. See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 213-23, for a full account of the uniqueness of Luther's view.

<sup>426</sup> Luther, 19.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

Karlstadt's work.<sup>430</sup> These differences illustrate that, though both authors read Paul through Augustine, their readings were not mere repetition. Rather in dialogue with the traditional sources, each maintained an element of freedom.

### **Luther on Justification: A Trajectory toward Rupture?**

Though "Luther's 'new' views on justification were still well within the spectrum of contemporary Catholic theological opinion," it is true that "radical Augustinianism" has had a tendency to become "unmoored from the Catholic tradition."<sup>431</sup> Moreover, as McGrath points out, Luther's ideas, while individually not falling outside of the broad spectrum of Catholic thought, when taken as a whole, seem to be "radical points of departure" from other Augustinians such as Karlstadt.<sup>432</sup> Because of this and because of the later revolutionary outcome of Luther's thought, some have argued that Luther's doctrine of justification by faith in Romans is already the burgeoning of a break with the "dogmatism, sacramentalism, and mysticism of the Catholic tradition."<sup>433</sup> As Yeago notes: "One might be concerned that Luther's comparative disinterest in the sacraments, innocent enough in his early lectures on the Psalms, is growing somewhat ominous in the *Lectures on Romans*, especially in the context of his single-minded focus on the inner life. It is, surely, a bit strange for a theologian to expound Romans 6 without ever talking about the sacrament of baptism!"<sup>434</sup>

Even here, as Luther is beginning to take original steps and propose novel theories, these steps cannot yet be considered to be obviously and definitively outside of the Catholic fold. Luther is clearly turning from the widespread "*Pactum*" theology of the *Via Moderna*<sup>435</sup>—

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<sup>430</sup> McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*, 178.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>433</sup> Yeago, 29.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>435</sup> McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*, 112.

which Luther will ultimately rework and completely reject by 1519<sup>436</sup>—to something different. So Luther is indeed making a shift. Yet as Yeago notes,

Much of Luther's criticism of contemporary theology focused on the way in which it naturalized grace, played down its radically transformative and inevitably disruptive impact on human normalcy. In this, Luther was not breaking with Catholic tradition but self-consciously retrieving the tradition, bringing to bear the deepest insights of Augustine and the great monastic teachers on a scholasticism out of touch with its own roots.<sup>437</sup>

Since Luther seemed to be familiar only in passing with anything outside of the exaggerated piety of his time and outside of the theology of the *Via Moderna*, and since he was likely unaware of the teaching of Aquinas or of others who interpreted Augustine in less naturalistic ways, we must not make too much of his rejection. Moreover, his growing concern with what he saw as the near “universal” Pelagianism of the Catholic Church was perhaps unfounded.<sup>438</sup>

Though Luther was prone to speak in emphatic hyperboles, he was himself aware that others in the tradition read Aquinas as he did. Luther, at least in his *Lectures on Romans*, still acknowledged this and cited these traditional sources.

McGrath and others are correct in noting that some of the ideas that would later become central to Luther's theology are already present in Luther's lectures on chapter 1 and 2 of Romans. Here I simply point out that it would be a misreading of the text, and indeed of history, to try to chart a simple line of departure beginning with his presentation of justification in 1516 away from the Catholic understandings of justification. For by the time Luther dialogues with Cajetan in 1518, Luther had indeed “rethought” and come to emphasize his Augustinian “theology of grace.”<sup>439</sup> However, this rethinking was not definitely in the direction away from the Catholic faith, but was in some ways a theology more fully rooted in it. Whereas the young

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>437</sup> Yeago, 18.

<sup>438</sup> McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*, 25.

<sup>439</sup> Yeago, 25.

Luther who lectured on Psalms and Romans makes little use of the sacraments in his theology, by 1518, Luther's theology is fully rooted "in the context of the theology of the sacraments."<sup>440</sup>

For Luther, in 1518 and beyond, "[t]he concrete, external, public sacramental act in the church is the concrete, external, public act of Jesus Christ...."<sup>441</sup> While in his *Lecture on Romans*, Christ must be believed and trusted in an abstract, existential sense, by 1518, Luther sees the sacramental words and actions of the Church as those which must be believed with faith.<sup>442</sup> For instance, it is faith in the words of absolution that assures the penitent of his forgiveness, not faith in his own contrition or his own penance.<sup>443</sup> It is likewise faith that makes Christ present in the sacrament of the altar. This is why, for Luther, the sacraments accomplish as much as one believes.<sup>444</sup> So if any chart of development in Luther's theology of justification were graphed, the line would chart various movements within Catholic theological boundaries, not in a steady direction outside of them. Looking back on content of Luther's work, I see no material that would be deemed ipso facto heretical before Trent. Indeed, there is nothing in these lectures that would necessarily be condemnable even after Trent.

Without taking explicit sides on when exactly Luther had a pivotal breakthrough, we can say that Luther, when he gave these first lectures on Romans, was still academically, juridically, and sacramentally a Catholic. The arguments that I have elaborated so far in this chapter suggest that Luther's hermeneutics likewise remain consistent with the overall Catholic exegetical approach. Thus, in my estimation, Luther's continued Catholicity parallels his continued Catholic hermeneutic approach.

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>442</sup> WA 2:13-14

<sup>443</sup> Stehle, 9. See WA 1.323 and 6.166.

<sup>444</sup> WA 7.366f.

## Luther's Innovations

The discussion above attempts to situate Luther's views, even his view on justification, firmly and definitively within the Catholic tradition. Even this brief consideration of Romans 1 and 2 indicates that Luther was working with Catholic preunderstandings within Catholic theology to answer the questions raised within the Catholicism of his day. He was fusing his horizon with that of the text and with that of other Catholic authors to engage in a debate both with the text and with his contemporaries. Out of this Catholic fusion of horizons, new tradition emerges. Indeed, aside from his doctrine of justification, there are several elements in Luther's analysis of Romans 1 and 2 that are particularly original and that serve prominently in Luther's exegesis of the chapters.

### *Idolatry*

Though Luther's memory of his troubled conscience and its relief in the Tower Experience may be faulty, the textual evidence from that time does suggest that Luther's conscience was in actual fact troubled. Moreover, a general sense of religious unease was prevalent in this era. Societal shifts included the rise of the mercantile class in which the monetization of goods encouraged a type of quid pro quo thinking that sought expression in the religious sphere.<sup>445</sup> Additionally, the art and literature of the time indicate a general sense of unease, a widespread fear of damnation, and a sense of impending judgment by God. Furthermore, a pastoral dilemma resulted from the application of "*Pactum*" theology—do whatever you can, and God will supply grace for justification. This theology created a struggle of conscience: Have I done my best? No doubt this problem troubled Luther and those with whom he came in contact. This is part of the contemporary horizon out of which Luther approaches the text of Romans.

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<sup>445</sup> Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 56-58.

However, a close examination of Luther's writing during this earlier period suggests that Luther's central concern was not with how one knows that she is receiving God's grace. Rather Luther is preoccupied with how one knows that she is dealing with God and not some false god that she has invented for herself. As Yeago summarizes, "All evidence in the texts suggest that it was the threat of idolatry, not a craving for assurance of forgiveness, that troubled Luther's conscience...."<sup>446</sup> Without definitively rejecting the idea that Luther's Tower Experience revolved around the question of justification, we can say with certainty that the fear of idolatry figures more prominently in Luther's account of the failure of natural theology in Romans 1 and is more central to his theology at this time.

Idolatry, rather than disproving natural theology, confirms it. Luther notes that, according to Romans, all people have knowledge of God. Those who created idols which they "worshiped and called gods or god, believed that God was immortal ... and also capable and able to help." If these idolaters had not known that there was such a thing as an eternal and helpful being, they would not have known to ascribe such attributes to their images. Thus their act of worshiping idols itself provides "evidence that they had the knowledge of God in their hearts."<sup>447</sup> Moreover, according to this analysis, idolatry consists not in simply worshiping a false god but in ascribing some of God's genuine attributes to something to which they do not belong.

In Luther's early *Lectures on the Psalms*, Luther had elaborated his concern about the possibility of inadvertently worshiping a product of his own imagination rather than worshiping the true God. Here Luther puts that notion to great use. The sin of idolaters was the sin of changing their conception of God "by fitting it to their own needs and desires...."<sup>448</sup> This is what is meant when Romans 1:25 says that they "change the truth of God into a lie." For they did not simply reject the real God; they misappropriate His attributes to create an image of their own

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<sup>446</sup> Yeago, 17.

<sup>447</sup> Luther, 23.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

liking. In this way, “[e]veryone wanted to subsume the Godhead under his own interest.”<sup>449</sup> This was the sin that the children of Israel committed when they worshiped the Golden Calf at Sinai. They “intended to worship the true God” but ended up in idolatry.<sup>450</sup> For they wrongly ascribed God’s attributes to the image.

Thus idolatry becomes a real possibility even in Luther’s—and indeed our—time. For self-righteousness and the love of self often cause people to create a God of their own liking.<sup>451</sup> In order to avoid idolatry, one must see the God who “has manifested himself ... by his commandments.” Only in experiencing God as He has revealed Himself can you avoid “exchanging the glory of God for a likeness of the imagination and your own fancy.”<sup>452</sup>

Luther identifies two concrete examples of idolatry in his day. First, Luther sees idolatry in contemporary popular piety. He states, “How many there are even today who worship him not as if he were God but as if he were as they themselves imagine him for themselves! Look at the odd practices of superstition and see how utterly vain they are.”<sup>453</sup> In this, Luther is echoing concerns that many scholastics and humanists had voiced. These superstitious practices—touching relics, using special oils, and making unique pilgrimages—often had dubious, if not ridiculous, theological foundations. Thus God could not be found in them.

Secondly, Luther argues that the scholastics, or at least the intellectualists,<sup>454</sup> themselves are guilty of such idolatry. For though they were not involved in the exaggerated and imaginative piety of the age, they nonetheless fashioned a God “in their own image.” These theologians “think of God in a way that is unworthy of him; in bold and daring arguments, they define God to be such and such....”<sup>455</sup> Luther is leveling a voluntarist argument against intellectualists when he states that “not one among them grants God so much honor as to elevate God’s all-excelling

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<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>454</sup> It would be a fascinating study to look at who exactly Luther has in mind when he criticizes “scholastics” throughout the course of his work.

<sup>455</sup> Luther, 33.

majesty above his own judgment and comprehension. Instead, they raise their own thinking to such a level that it is for a simple cobbler to appraise his leather. In their presumptuousness they dare assert that God's nature, his righteousness, and his mercy are what they think it ought to be...."<sup>456</sup> Thus scholasticism, or at least intellectualism, is placed in suspicious territory precisely because of its ontological presumptuousness. Just as the commoner was involved in practices that emerged from imaginative and non-scriptural accounts, so the scholastic fashioned a God not based on God's self-manifestation in the commandments but on the scholastic's own ontology.

### *Hiddenness of God in Suffering*

Another unique aspect of Luther's theology is evident in his treatment of Romans 1 and 2: the importance of suffering. Already in Luther's first public academic lecture series, he presents the Psalter as "the book of *Anfechtung*."<sup>457</sup> *Anfechtung* indicates a challenge, struggle, or temptation. This is the term that Luther will later use to describe his struggle with the phrase, "the righteousness of God." However, in this early Luther, *Anfechtung*, and suffering more generally, is the privileged manner in which God is experienced.

This emphasis on *Anfechtung* will later be somewhat eclipsed by Luther's emphasis on faith. While *Anfechtung* is always a part of Luther's thought, in his later work, suffering is to be transcended by faith as faith in Christ rescues the believer from suffering.<sup>458</sup> But even after faith becomes the privileged event of encounter with God, Luther maintains an emphasis on God hidden and revealed in suffering. This emphasis is especially evident, for instance, in the *Heidelberg Confessions*.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Chung, 40.

<sup>458</sup> Stehle, 13.

<sup>459</sup> Yeago, 22.



The importance of suffering in Luther's early thought stands out in his interpretation of Romans 2:7. The Latin text of the phrase "patience in well-doing" reads "*secundum patientiam boni operis.*" The term *patientiam*, the accusative of *patiens*, carries several senses including patience, passivity, and suffering. Thus an amplified reading of the Latin text would be something like "according to or with patience, acceptance, and suffering in or for good works."

Luther highlights suffering's role in Christian good works by contrasting human virtue and Christian virtue. The scholastics had wrongly conflated the two by trying to reconcile Aristotle's and Augustine's accounts of virtue.<sup>460</sup> Luther, still in dialogue with Aristotelian texts, holds that the Christian and Aristotelian accounts of virtue are in opposition to one another. Luther states that "[h]uman virtue ... increases when it is applauded because it wants to be praised; Christian virtue, however, grows when it is scolded and subjected to suffering; and is reduced to nothing when it is applauded."<sup>461</sup> For Luther, it is mistaken to think that "to be righteous" is the same as "to be in honor acceptable to oneself and other men."<sup>462</sup> For, as we saw earlier, to be righteous in human eyes is a feature of idolatry. Rather, "[Christian] virtue is made perfect through weakness i.e. good works are made perfect through suffering."<sup>463</sup>

Suffering then becomes for Luther the criterion by which one can judge her own works. If one is suffering for her works, one can be assured that she is working with proper motives. That is, for God's own sake, not for her own. For Luther, suffering assures the sufferer that she is doing a good work entirely "for love and humility" and "for God's sake alone."<sup>464</sup> The one who is not willing to suffer shows that his good work is performed "for his own sake ... (out of hidden

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<sup>460</sup> Luther, 44. Luther further situates this doctrine of suffering in an Augustinian framework. Luther quotes Augustine: "the righteous man understands that the severity of God also works toward salvation. For he breaks down and heals, "he kills and makes alive." Luther favors this phrase "kills and makes alive" from 1 Sam. 2:6 and uses it frequently in his lectures on Psalms and Romans. Sometimes this idea is in connection to the works of the law, which bring death and then life. Here he follows Augustine in equating death with suffering and life with the good works that spring from it.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid., 43.

pride and self-love).<sup>465</sup> Thus the assurance of good works and even of one's own righteousness, at this point in Luther's theology, does not lie exclusively in their origin in faith. Rather one can be assured that her works are genuinely good if they are performed in patient travail. On the other hand, if one is "impatient" and "complains," he shows that his "doing the good is not from God but that it is, rather, ... human righteousness by which man does the good for his own sake." Conversely, "[w]hen in doing the good, we do not suffer persecution, hated, and evil or adversity, we must fear that our work does not yet please God. For then it has not yet been tested by patience, nor has God approved it.... For he approves only what he has first tested."<sup>466</sup>

Here too we see a glimpse of Luther's early Theology of the Cross. For Luther situates his doctrine of suffering within a staurological context. He states that "... all that comes from God must be crucified in the world." That is, anything that is from God must be experienced in suffering. On the other hand, "so long as [a good work] is not led to the cross, i.e. the readiness to endure shame, it cannot be recognized as coming from God."<sup>467</sup> It is this relationship to the cross that allows Luther to say, "so necessary is patience [that is, *patiens*, suffering] that no work can be good if it lacks patience."<sup>468</sup>

In this way, Luther's early Theology of the Cross is a somewhat exemplarist account of redemption. We see God revealed in Jesus's suffering. Hence we too can recognize God in our own suffering. This exemplarist emphasis is not a mere side note; rather, in the *Lectures on Romans*, "especially in the latter part of the lectures, much of Luther's rhetorical passion appears to be invested in [this] exemplarist Christology for which Christ as Savior is the productive archetype of a pattern of experience which is repeated in those who believe."<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>469</sup> Yeago, 22.

Since suffering is contextualized as the privileged place in which God's presence can be sure, suffering becomes an occasion for rejoicing. On this point, Luther cites the beatitudes to point out that the persecuted are blessed.<sup>470</sup> Unlike those who trust in human virtue, "the saints are troubled, but in their very tribulation they are consoled."<sup>471</sup> For "[t]his kind of comfort flows from hope and faith in God. But the godless in duress are filled with anxiety through despair, for they have no hope nor faith in anything...."<sup>472</sup>

Luther's doctrine of suffering also provides a resolution to the ever-present threat of idolatry with which, as we have seen, Luther is troubled. Yeago notes:

In the theology of the cross, ... Luther addressed the problem of idolatrous self-seeking with what might be called a strategy of contrariety. It is a very specific, very simple, and quite perversely brilliant theological move. How can we tell that we are really clinging to God and not to an idol of our own self-seeking? Luther answers that the gracious presence of the true God is so excruciatingly painful and distastefully unpalatable to our nature that we can have no imaginable self-interested motivation for enduring it.<sup>473</sup>

### **The Lectures: Beginnings of a Radical Rejection of Tradition**

I have argued extensively that Luther's early thought is firmly situated in the Catholic faith in part because of the philosophical hermeneutics that underpinned it. Moreover, I have noted that Luther's doctrine of justification, while offering original insights, is not a definite point of departure from the Catholic tradition at this time or even some years later. Mirroring many of the Augustinian thinkers of his time, Luther lies within the "astonishingly broad spectrum of the theologies of justification [which encompassed] practically every option that had not been specifically condemned as heretical by the Council of Carthage." In addition, Luther's account of idolatry and his early Theology of the Cross are original and authentic Catholic theological developments in that they arise from a thoroughly Catholic hermeneutic. Nonetheless, Luther's relegation of the tradition spawned by the fusion of Hellenistic and Christian thought to the

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<sup>470</sup> Luther, 43.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Yeago, 20.

periphery of his theology marks a major hermeneutic shift that results in a new kind of theology. This tendency, obscure and uncertain in the early lectures, later becomes clear and decisive. While this element is not fully developed in his treatment of Romans 1 and 2, in later documents it becomes evident that Luther is now employing a non-Catholic—and, by the way, non-Gadamerian—hermeneutic.

We have seen that Luther, following the humanistic impulses that dethroned Aristotle at Erfurt and at Wittenburg, begins to slowly excise reason from theological discourse in the lectures. He already ceases to seek a synthesis between Aristotle and Augustine, and instead pits them against one another.<sup>474</sup> Luther's extreme voluntarism blocks the possibility of making assertions about God's nature. Indeed, Luther's explanation of idolatry seems to rule out any ontological speculation about God. While we first saw Luther explaining that "[n]obody has the right to define the rule by which God punishes sins or rewards the good,"<sup>475</sup> Luther goes further to assert that nobody has the right to define any rule by which God does anything. God is "above ... judgment and comprehension."<sup>476</sup> Thus "God's nature, his righteousness, and his mercy" cease to be objects about which reason can legitimately inquire.<sup>477</sup> For Luther, "bold and daring arguments [by which] they define God to be such and such" are all "unworthy of him."<sup>478</sup>

Luther likewise sidelines philosophy from Christian ethics. Aristotelian ethics begins to represent only "human virtues" which are in opposition to "Christian virtues." Uprightness consists not in doing what reason says is best. Instead, "... uprightness ... consists in this, that you do what you ought to do, regardless of what seems right to you."<sup>479</sup> Reason interferes with uprightiness, it doesn't contribute to it.

Luther is beginning to dismiss the development of Catholic philosophy that we have traced from Origen to Aquinas and instead delights in the "foolishness of the cross." He

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 35.

references 1 Corinthians 1:18 to contrast philosophy with the Gospel: “to no one [does] the preaching of the cross appear so foolish as to the philosophers....”<sup>480</sup> Hence, when Luther sees inexplicable elements in the text, he is content to leave them unexplained rather than to subject them to reason’s philosophizing or to explanations from Hellenistic systems. For instance, Luther notes the apparent conflict between God’s desire to save all and his decision to elect only specific people. Rather than engaging in theological speculation, Luther is content not only to leave the matter undecided, but to conclude that “faith is the conviction of things unseen.”<sup>481</sup> In this way, he seems to equate faith with something that does not make sense; faith becomes at home most especially in that which can’t be explained.

Luther’s defense of the fallenness of the will also resonates with this type of non-rational fideism. For after Luther has asserted a sort of doctrine of double predestination, he foresees that some may cry out that “[o]ne is innocently condemned because he is bound to the commandments and is yet unable to keep them, or one is obliged to do what is impossible.”<sup>482</sup> Rather than attempting to address these concerns, Luther rebukes the question itself as arrogant: “Nay, but, O man, who are you that replies against God?”<sup>483</sup> For Luther, the proper response to paradox is faith, not reason.

I argued earlier in this paper that the development of Luther’s doctrine of justification does not constitute a sort of trajectory necessarily pointing outside the Catholic faith. On the other hand, I note here that Luther’s rejection of philosophical reasoning offers a more steady departure away from traditional understandings. For we see Luther’s consistent movement from acceptance and use of philosophy in the *Lectures on the Psalms* to the strong critique that we

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 29-30.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

see in the commentary on Romans 1 and 2 to the outright rejection and eventual banishment we shall soon see to his *Disputations against the Scholastics* and to his *Preface to Romans*.

Oberman rightly notes that Luther proposes a dramatic “redefinition of theology’s relation to philosophy.”<sup>484</sup> However, the most important consequence of this redefinition lies not in the peculiarities of how Luther thinks reason and philosophy fit together, but in the hermeneutics that flow from this redefinition. For Luther’s theology is narrowing on a message that, by disallowing a privileged place for philosophical reason, detaches itself from the tradition which serves as its interlocutor.<sup>485</sup> For as Luther continues to reject larger parts of the tradition, he removes those anchors that keep him within the safe harbor of Catholic discourse. As long as Luther is talking about those questions that are important to other Catholics, using traditional sources, and employing traditional understandings, he can expound novel theological propositions and remain Catholic. As we have seen, his thoughts on justification, idolatry, and suffering articulate theologies that Catholics today could look back on and consider Catholic opinions. The culmination of Luther’s humanistic return to the sources, his voluntarist denial of intellectualists accounts, and his hyper-Augustinian contempt for the natural intellect results in his refusal to dialogue with the synthesis of Greek and Christian thought that had come before him. As a result, Luther must reject so many of the Catholic prejudices that opened the text of Romans to him that his new reading is no longer identifiably Catholic.

It is true that Luther later develops a more nuanced account of reason. In his account of the two kingdoms, he will concede that, in the kingdom of this world, righteousness has a special role. He will likewise allow Greek philosophy some areas of competence so long as they never presume to enter the theological realm.<sup>486</sup> But Luther maintains his insistence that “reason

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<sup>484</sup> Heiko Oberman, “Luther and the Via Moderna: The Philosophical Backdrop of the Reformation Breakthrough,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (2003): 641-70, 642.

<sup>485</sup> Luther, 53.

<sup>486</sup> See Luther, *Disputation Concerning the Two Natures of Christ*.

is a 'whore'—perverted—when it arrogates to itself alone judgment in question of faith and salvation"<sup>487</sup> In these cases, "reason is to be 'slaughtered' by faith."<sup>488</sup>

That Luther's hermeneutics changes dramatically cannot be established simply from a reading of Luther on Romans 1 and 2. Ebeling, in his seminal work on Luther's hermeneutic development notes the shift in Luther's thinking. He notes that in Luther's early lectures on the Psalms, Luther remains firmly scholastic. For instance, Luther "uses this fourfold sense of Scripture even more intensively and far more on principle than the tradition and the exegetes of his day."<sup>489</sup> But already, Luther is employing the possibility of reading the literal sense theologically, and not merely historically.<sup>490</sup> As a result, when Luther lectures on the Psalms, he "started from the notion that Jesus Christ is the 'I' of the psalms, that he is the one who prays even in the penitential psalms...."<sup>491</sup> This tendency to bypass other methods of reading eventually made the other modes of interpretation—and their interaction with complexities of philosophy—superfluous. Ebeling notes that "to connect the psalms with Christ in the *sensus literalis* promoted a Christology which clearly emphasized ... the God-forsakenness on the cross, thus a theology of the cross."<sup>492</sup> While the Theology of the Cross we see in the *Lectures on the Psalms* and *the Lectures on Romans* is not necessarily anti-philosophic, Luther will eventually opposed it to a theology of glory that seeks to find God in the created order. Moreover, as theological readings of the literal sense become available to Luther, he is freer to reject the traditional senses of scripture and the scholastic system that governed their elaboration.

Though we see hints of this new hermeneutic early in his *Lectures on Romans*, it crystalizes quickly in Luther's *Disputations against the Scholastics* (1517). Published immediately after his *Lectures on Romans*, the disputations are a list of propositions that Luther

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<sup>487</sup> Lindberg, *Reformation Theologians*, 57. See also Luther WA 40 I:362

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> Ebeling, "The New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," *Theology Today* 21 (April 1964): 34-46, 40.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 41

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

objects to within scholasticism. In the work, Luther continues his apparent retrieval of Augustine; so he is still in contact with Catholic traditional sources. In so doing, however, he emphasizes only Augustine's negative assessment of unaided human ability. On this ground he asserts, "In vain does one fashion a logic of faith, a substitution brought about without regard for limit and measure."<sup>493</sup> He goes further to reject Aristotle and concludes that "[v]irtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace."<sup>494</sup> And that "no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle."<sup>495</sup> Luther's critique, however, does not stop at Aristotle. He goes on to attack the Platonic concept of universals, asserting that it "would have been better for the church if Porphyry with his universals had not been born for the use of theologians."<sup>496</sup> Luther closes by asserting that he has said "nothing that is not in agreement with the Catholic Church and the teachers of the church." However such a statement is difficult to take at face value. For, in fact, Luther has rejected Plato and Aristotle, whose philosophical systems supported the vast majority of the tradition that formed the teachers of the faith.

McGrath's account of Luther's development also notes the importance of the hermeneutic elements in Luther's journey from Catholic nominalism to a Theology of the Cross. Without wishing to argue for the precision of McGrath's timing for the Reformation Breakthrough—he thinks 1518—I note that in McGrath's narration of the development of Luther's Theology of the Cross, philosophy's exile from theology plays a pivotal role. McGrath highlights as a pivotal turning point in Luther's theological development the *Heidelberg Disputes*. In these disputes, Luther firmly rejects Aristotelian philosophy and makes central the hidden God revealed in the cross. McGrath states that the "*theologia crucis* is a theology of revelation, which stands in sharp contrast to speculation. Those who speculate on the created order have, in effect, forfeited their right to be called 'theologians.' God has revealed himself, and it is the

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<sup>493</sup> Luther, *Disputations*, 46.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 52



task of the theologian to concern himself with God as he has chosen to reveal himself, instead of constructing preconceived notions of God which ultimately have to be destroyed."<sup>497</sup> Thus Luther leaves no room for dialogue with philosophically soiled scholastic thought or even the Neoplatonist sources of the earliest medieval ecclesial voices.

By the time Luther gives his famous response at the Diet of Worms, Luther's new hermeneutic approach had crystalized. Luther declared, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything. For to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." We see that while Luther does accept reason as an authority, he only accepts "plain" reason—not the elaborate, Hellenistic systems developed by the tradition. For he reads the scriptures in the privacy of his conscience, understanding them directly, unmediated by the perverting influence of philosophical thought. While he doesn't deny the possibility that Patristic thought might be helpful in his reading—in fact he will never deny that possibility—traditional accounts are certainly not necessary or authoritative. As we shall see in Luther's later "Preface to Romans," Luther's new hermeneutic approach leads to a decidedly non-Catholic elaboration of theology.

Another obvious point of departure in Luther's hermeneutics is his refusal to admit papal and conciliar authority as ultimate authorities. One might be tempted to think that this rejection was the crucial hermeneutic change that occasioned Luther's exit from the Catholic theological fold, and I acknowledge its importance. For as we read in *Exsurge Domine*, the issue of papal authority loomed large in the decision to excommunicate Luther. The papal bull lists a variety of reasons for Luther's fate, especially Luther's understanding of penance, of the papacy, and of the war against the Turks. In this paper, I do not deny the importance that these largely political issues played in Luther's trial and subsequent condemnation. For even the apparently theological issue of penance centers on the limits of papal authority. Nevertheless, I maintain

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<sup>497</sup> McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 149.

that disagreements on papal and conciliar authority cannot be fully understood apart from the development of Luther's new hermeneutic approach. As Luther left behind philosophic interlocutors and scholastic methods of analysis and traditional sources, he becomes increasingly convinced of the importance of scripture's immediate effect on its hearers. As he came to see more and more Church fathers contaminated by Greek thought, he was forced to read the scriptures more directly and to subject all later interpreters to the original message. It was partially as a result of this new hermeneutic that Luther rejected the pope and councils as ultimate authorities.<sup>498</sup> Moreover, at Luther's time, the words of popes and councils were still far from unquestionable. At the time of Luther's declaration, the limits of conciliar and papal authority were still debated. Hence, Luther's questioning of pope and councils did not alone suffice to definitively place him outside of the Catholic theological vein.

Imagine for a moment that the political implications of Luther's message had not been what they were. Luther might have been left alone to teach. Had this occurred, an early document like the *Lectures on Romans* would have been categorized neatly in history within the broad array of Catholic theological opinions of the time. It would be an interesting blend of extremely Augustinian, voluntarist, nominalist, and humanist views. It might even be catalogued as a late objection to Aristotle. But it would have been Catholic. On the other hand, after the long course of Luther's hermeneutic development, what we have is much different, something not easily placed within the broader Catholic vein. Luther's *Preface to Romans* exhibits this novelty.

### **Romans 1 and 2 in Luther's Preface to Romans**

By the time Luther writes his *Preface to Romans*, some seven to ten years after his *Lectures on Romans*, his new hermeneutics is evident. Because of the nature of a preface,

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<sup>498</sup> Luther continued to value the first seven ecumenical councils as orthodox interpretations of scripture. But, for Luther, the authority comes from the scripture, not from the council. In fact, Luther hoped for and asked for another council to meet and discuss his ideas. He thought councils were useful, but not authoritative.

Luther's treatment of the themes found in Romans 1 and 2 are necessarily brief and introductory. Yet even in these cursory remarks, the distance he has traveled is obvious. He covers the themes found in Romans 1 and 2 in two places: first as he defines the important terms in a sort of introductory glossary, and second as he briefly summarizes the epistle chapter by chapter. Throughout the preface, we see that Luther has removed philosophical reason—and all traces of Hellenistic thought—from his exegesis. While maintaining a theory of justification that, at least before the Council of Trent, could still be considered Catholic, Luther has so removed his theology from those questions that are salient in the Catholic discourse that he is no longer in dialogue with Catholic traditional sources—apart from the scriptures themselves—at all. Moreover, he has abandoned the terminology of the Catholic tradition, speaking a new language whose definition does not depend on Catholic preunderstandings but on novel readings. So while the content of Luther's doctrine of justification has not significantly changed, it has been uprooted from the Catholic tradition. On this basis, I argue that here we see a non-Catholic theology.

In the preface, Luther has removed nearly all metaphysical elements from his exegesis.<sup>499</sup> As we saw earlier in the lectures, grace is not a substance but is simply “God's favor and good will towards us.” Grace does not come into the believer but is a trait that God “cherishes in Himself.”<sup>500</sup> In the preface, faith is not even considered as a habit but only as an existential act. Luther defines faith as “a living, daring confidence in the grace of God, of such

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<sup>499</sup> Luther's removal of all scholastic thought from theology fits well into his account of the law and into his robustly negative anthropology. While he emphasizes that the purpose of Romans 1 is to bring to light the “gross sin and unbelief” of idolaters, he asserts that human epistemology is not the problem that causes such ignominy. For even these sinners “know, and perceive every day, that there is a God.” The problem, rather, lies in perhaps the only substance Luther seems willing to posit: human nature. Human “nature outside of grace is in itself ... evil.” Thus human beings “inflict blindness on themselves.” That is they cause themselves not to see the truth and then “without ceasing fall into worse evils, until, after practicing idolatry, they commit, without shame, the most abominable sins and every vice....” Thus human evil comes not from a lack of knowledge but a knowledge perverted by humanity's innate depravity. Luther concludes: “Thus St. Paul ... denounces the wrath of God to all who would lead a good life by their natural strength or free will.” For such “natural strength” is the strength of evil human nature, and “free will” is free only to sin. See *Preface*, 22 and 23

<sup>500</sup> Luther, *Romans*, 13.

assurance that it would risk a thousand deaths.”<sup>501</sup> Moreover, since the one who has faith is accounted righteous, faith is now, for Luther, fully equivalent to righteousness.<sup>502</sup> For “this act of faith is the only righteousness that is valid in God’s sight.”<sup>503</sup> Indeed, God “counts [faith] for righteousness....”<sup>504</sup> Thus justification operates entirely outside of the believer in God’s juridical action. God creates even our faith. Thus “grace”—that is God’s favor—“does so much that we are accounted wholly righteous before God.”<sup>505</sup>

From Luther’s short glossary, we see that he rejects the byzantine catalogue of Catholic theological terminology for simplified, yet remarkably productive, antinomies: the righteousness of man vs. the righteousness of God, works vs. faith, and Law vs. Gospel. This final antinomy, Law and Gospel, is particularly productive in Luther’s new system. Ebeling notes that this distinction fully replaces the elaborate hermeneutic techniques of the scholastics. For this later Luther, “the one, plain, grammatical sense [of a text] is the truly theological one which includes within itself the duality of law and gospel in its orientation to the substance of Holy Scripture; or, to say it more exactly, the basic task of theological hermeneutics occurs in the distinction between law and gospel.”<sup>506</sup>

Based on the definition Luther supplies, the law is God’s revelation of Himself outside of Christ: awesome, holy, and unapproachable. The law’s purpose, then, is “to reprove and denounce as sin everything in a person’s life that does not proceed from the Spirit and from faith in Christ, in order that men be enabled to know themselves and their misery, become humble, and crave help.”<sup>507</sup> God’s law, by definition, cannot be satisfied by humanity and should not be compared to human laws. For with human laws “you satisfy the demands of the law with works, whether your heart is in it or not.” But “God judges what is in the depths of the heart. Therefore

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>506</sup> Ebeling, 44

<sup>507</sup> Luther, *Preface*, 22.

his law also makes demands on the depths of the heart and does not let the heart rest content in works; rather it punishes as hypocrisy and lies all works done apart from the depths of the heart.” Since, according to Luther’s anthropology, all human desire falls short of God’s standard, even if particular people do not always act on those desires they are sinful. For “[e]veryone finds inside himself an aversion to good and a craving for evil.” Thus, according to the law, everyone deserves “the wrath of God, whether a lot of good works and an honorable life appear outwardly or not.”

On the other hand, the Gospel is that help toward which the law drives us. While the law proves our inability to please God, the Gospel offers God’s free gift: righteousness credited to the believer. In the Gospel, Christ can be held in faith. In this faith, we experience God’s grace, and God accounts us righteous. Then, as a result of the grace we receive and as a result of the “love poured out on our hearts,” we can truly perform good works. In the Gospel, we do these good works not to earn righteousness, but as a result of our faith and of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us.

For Luther, the whole purpose of Romans—and indeed of all scripture—is now subsumed under this distinction between Law and Gospel. Thus he uses this distinction as a new hermeneutic lens for reading the scriptures. For instance, when Paul writes in Romans 2:13 that “only the doers of the Law are justified in the sight of God,” Luther no longer sees subtle distinctions to be made about habits, infused grace, or even about interpretations of Augustine. Rather than a discussion of the history of how the verse has been read and the difficulties with each of these readings, Luther confidently asserts “[Paul] means to say that no one is a doer of the Law by works.”<sup>508</sup> For Luther’ new glossary, not the tradition, becomes the guide to interpreting these difficult passages. So while Luther’s theory of justification has indeed evolved and crystalized in the preface, it is not so much the content of this theory that reveals its non-

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<sup>508</sup> Luther, *Preface*, 5.

Catholicity. Rather it is the theory's decontextualization from the Catholic tradition that marks its radicalism.

In fact, Luther unabashedly proclaims the importance of accepting these new definitions without any need to engage the traditional accounts. He cautions that “[w]ithout such an understanding of these words, you will never understand this letter of St. Paul, or any other book of Holy Scripture.” Thus he warns against a return to traditional readings: “Beware of all teachers who use these words in a different sense, no matter who they are, even Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Origen, and men like them, or above them.” For even the early Fathers, before the supposed rampant perversion of the high Middle Ages, had to be subject to this new hermeneutic lens. Luther’s new glossary no longer footnotes the saints. Instead, it boldly stands without reference to them.

## **Conclusion**

For Gadamer, understanding a traditionary text requires accessing that text using the tools that tradition provides. Tradition opens the text up to the interpreter by providing dialogue partners with which to discuss the text and by providing prejudices from which the text’s meaning may emerge. Luther’s early work on Romans shows that he accomplishes this understanding using the full array of traditionary tools available to him. He fuses Romans, Augustine, and the Catholic scholastic methods of the sixteenth century with novel humanist horizons to make something new. While Luther was operating using the scholastic’s methods, asking questions occasioned by their work, and reading traditionary texts whose authority they all recognized, he was a part of their tradition and could understand it. It was a bridge whereby he could access Paul.

By the time Luther writes his preface, however, he does not dialogue with the concepts that Catholicism inherited from its fusion with Aristotle or even with those it inherited from its earlier Platonic sources. Not only does Luther abandon the vocabulary that the tradition

provides to talk about the text, he abandons the entirety of Greek thought that had so fused itself into theology as to be part of its foundation. Rather than attempting to come to an understanding of how Aristotle, for instance, fits into the tradition—even into Luther’s new accounts of tradition—Luther seeks to bypass it and return to earlier sources. His attempt at going back to the sources causes him to bypass all the productive work of the tradition that had come before him. He thus rejects the wisdom of the 1,500 years that separated him from Paul, thereby removing the bridge that presented Paul’s work to him. In Luther’s preface, there is no place for the rich ontology and creative subtlety that had developed over the one and a half millennia of Church thinking. Today, one looks back on the preface not as a Catholic source but as something else.

In the first half of this chapter, I went into great detail to show that Luther’s early lectures on Romans were indeed Catholic documents. It is certainly possible to imagine how Luther might have continued to carry out his work within the Catholic tradition. Perhaps even after his excommunication his work might have been reconsidered and incorporated into the Catholic canon (as St. Joan of Arc or Occam have been rehabilitated in some ways). Even while bringing nominalist and voluntarist concerns to bear on the inherited Greek categories, Luther could have carried out his insistence on faith as an existential act that gives power to the sacraments and relativizes all human work in the Cross of Christ. Luther’s concept of being “in Christ,” of the work of the Holy Spirit, and of the diversity of spiritual gifts are also examples of real possibilities for explaining the virtues in a way that might have freed them from some of the conceptual, ontological difficulties that some scholastic interpretations seem to entail.<sup>509</sup> In fact, even a thorough account of how ontological, intellectualist theology is misplaced could demonstrate Luther’s position within the philosophical tradition if Luther had maintained a dialogue with that

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<sup>509</sup> Whose lived experience seems to exemplify the reality of the infused virtues, for instance?

tradition. Instead, Luther sought to liberate theology from the entire tradition spawned by the marriage of Greek and Semitic thought.<sup>510</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI notes that Luther's movement outside of the Catholic faith comes in part from Luther's rejection of philosophical reason's place in theology. Benedict notes that "in the late Middle Ages we find trends in theology which would sunder this synthesis between the Greek spirit and the Christian spirit. In contrast with the so-called intellectualism of Augustine and Thomas, there arose with Duns Scotus a voluntarism which, in its later developments, led to the claim that we can only know God's *voluntas ordinata*." This "dehellenization," Benedict notes, is an important part of the intellectual novelty of the Reformation. Benedict argues:

Dehellenization first emerges in connection with the postulates of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Looking at the tradition of scholastic theology, the Reformers thought they were confronted with a faith system totally conditioned by philosophy, that is to say an articulation of the faith based on an alien system of thought. As a result, faith no longer appeared as a living historical Word but as one element of an overarching philosophical system. The principle of *sola scriptura*, on the other hand, sought faith in its pure, primordial form, as originally found in the biblical Word. Metaphysics appeared as a premise derived from another source, from which faith had to be liberated in order to become once more fully itself.

Benedict, of course, rejects this Protestant account. Instead he suggests that "[t]he encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance." In fact, for Benedict, even the Septuagint, which the Church would take as her authorized version of the Hebrew Scriptures, can be seen as "more than a simple ... translation of the Hebrew text: it is an independent textual witness and a distinct and important step in the history of revelation, one which brought about this encounter in a way that was decisive for the birth and spread of Christianity." This fusion of intellectual systems would deepen in the Christian age. Benedict posits that "[t]he vision of Saint Paul ... who saw a Macedonian man plead 'Come over to Macedonia ...' can be interpreted as a 'distillation' of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement

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<sup>510</sup> Oberman, Article, 643.



between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry.”<sup>511</sup> Thus Benedict concludes that a “profound encounter of faith and reason is taking place here, an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion. From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, [we] say: Not to act ‘with *logos*’ is contrary to God’s nature.”<sup>512</sup>

From Benedict’s analysis of the importance of the fusion of Christian and Greek thought, we can draw more authoritative support for the claim of this chapter. Luther’s refusal to accept the “profound encounter of faith and reason” was an important factor leading to the fracture of the Western Church. Moreover his “dehellenization” was not a retrieval of a primitive Christianity but a rejection of tradition. This rejection left Luther reading the scriptures in isolation. Indeed, as we begin to hone in on the overarching message of this dissertation, this chapter on Luther serves a pivotal role. Luther illustrates an important way in which Catholic understanding can go awry. It was Luther’s rejection of a major point of tradition that initiated his journey outside of the Catholic faith. It was his refusal to dialogue with the Hellenistic prejudice given in the tradition that formed a significant part of the intellectual rupture that ensued.

Catholic theology today must heed the warning that Luther’s fate provides. For in quests for originality and relevance, theologians are often tempted to leave the tradition behind. For instance, some Catholic thinkers reject the developments of the medieval period in supposed loyalty to dictates of new philosophical systems. Hence Marxist and Feminist theologians propose new readings of the Gospel that do not fully engage the 2000 years of Catholic thought that separates them from the traditional sources. On the other hand, some traditionalists aim to purify the faith from accretion and thereby risk ignoring the tradition that unites them with the past. Just as Luther sought to read Paul without scholastic influence, these traditionalists sometimes wish to read the Gospel, Paul, Augustine, or even Aquinas as if their access to the

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<sup>511</sup> Benedict, “Regensburg Address” (September 12, 2006).

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

author is immediate and unmediated by new horizons. Sometimes these thinkers write as if a mere repetition of the hollowed words of canonized authors should end debates about modern day questions. Both those advancing “new” philosophical agendas and those with restorationist agendas should heed the warning that Luther’s fate affords.

Catholic authors, if they wish to produce Catholic texts, must engage traditionary sources, including the recent theological and philosophical happenings in the Catholic tradition. These authors must situate their innovations within the tradition. Hypertraditionalists, on the other hand, must note that no return to an earlier Catholicism—perhaps one unsullied by modernism—is possible. Catholic scholars today wishing to answer the questions posed by scientism, feminism, and post-modernism are encouraged to do the work necessary to appropriate the tradition in original and relevant ways. They should draw inspiration from Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and even the young Luther. However, when their work causes them to discard, to ignore, or to bypass a significant part of the tradition, they should remember Luther’s fate.

## Chapter 6. Barth: A Hermeneutic Exemplar

### Why Barth?

Before concluding our consideration of how Catholic hermeneutics should conceive its task in Gadamerian terms, we approach the exemplar of theological hermeneutics that Gadamer himself proposes as something of a “hermeneutic manifesto”: Karl Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>513</sup> Gadamer’s praise is not lavished without reason. The impact of Barth’s commentary on Romans is far reaching and profound. With the publication of this work, Barth rejects the hermeneutic tradition inaugurated by Schleiermacher and the Liberal Theology so prevalent in the long nineteenth century. He thereby transforms the landscape of twentieth-century Protestant theology, his commentary quickly becoming the new landmark around which all theology—even Catholic theology—must situate itself.

Gadamer’s high praise for Barth’s work does not remove the necessity of explaining this chapter’s place within a purported analysis and elaboration of **Catholic** hermeneutics. For clearly, Barth was not proposing a Catholic reading of Romans. In fact, in some ways Barth seems to see his project as finally liberating theology from the vestiges of Catholic epistemology and metaphysics. Nonetheless, if we accept Gadamer’s praise for the work, its place as a hermeneutic exemplar should not be ignored. For, as Gadamer notes and history attests, Barth’s commentary exemplifies a successful fusion of the horizons of the traditional texts with those of his own day. Thus, from Barth we see perhaps the twentieth century’s best example of how understanding Romans entails fusing our understanding of the text with all those doctrinal, philosophical, existential, and conceptual commitments that we hold. While Barth’s work does not illustrate how the Catholic tradition can be understood, his work does evidence hermeneutic

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<sup>513</sup> Gadamer, 510. And Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford UP, 1968).

genius that must be recognized, applauded, and—to some extent—emulated. Thus we come to Barth not as catechumens of his doctrine but at least as an admirer of his technique.

Barth sees in Romans 1 and 2 a message of condemnation for the historical, scientific project of his immediate predecessors. Against their various projects, Barth proclaims that God's Revelation is unpredictable, undefinable, and uncategorizable. God reveals Himself as He wills, when He wills, to whom He wills. Human categories cannot capture past Revelation nor apprehend it. Instead, Revelation apprehends the one to whom it is manifest. Thus Revelation is beyond the categories of human understanding, beyond theology, history, and religion itself. Indeed, Revelation shatters these categories and is their negation.

In this chapter, I will proceed by first considering the theological background out of which Barth's theology, including his hermeneutics, emerged. Then I will turn to Barth's own account of his hermeneutic process as explained in the prefaces he wrote to the various editions of his commentary. I will examine some specific instances of genius in Barth's interpretation of Romans 1 and 2 before finally exploring the concrete lessons that Catholic theologians and exegetes can learn from Barth's approach.

A final note about my treatment of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*: though Barth's commentary appeared in numerous distinct editions, I generally ignore these distinctions. The first edition, in 1919, signaled his original break with Liberal Theology. Nonetheless, after extensive consideration of new sources, and particularly of Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction" between time and eternity, Barth thought it necessary to significantly revise the commentary. The result was the widely known second edition, published in 1922. I have only dealt with the first edition in as much as I have considered the series of draft prefaces to that edition in which Barth elaborates his hermeneutic approach in detail.<sup>514</sup> For textual analysis, I have focused solely on Barth's final edition, which is substantially the same as the second.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> I am especially indebted to Richard E. Burnett's *Karl Barth's Theological* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004) for the English publication of the draft prefaces that Barth wrote for the first edition of the

## Barth's Theological Background

The theological milieu in which Barth came of age lay in the shadows of the towering figures of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Kant's first and second critiques had eliminated the possibility of any metaphysically robust theology. For, according to Kant, reality was dependent on the categories of the mind, which exist *a priori* and thus cannot provide unfiltered access to the world of "things-in-themselves." Following Kant, all ontological speculation became suspect. Moreover, Kant argued that, while human beings cannot know whether God exists, they need to believe that He does in order for the human moral order to be coherent. So Kantianism "saved a place for religion by reducing faith to a postulate of morality, but this strategy rendered the reality known to religious faith as an object of human creation."<sup>516</sup> For Kant, human beings cannot know that there is a God or that there is eternal life, yet they must believe in these religious "ideals" to sustain the moral order. So religion's origin is, in the Kantian analysis, ultimately in the human mind.

In response to this restricted role that Kant allowed for religion, Schleiermacher proposed that religion is a fundamental experience of the human mind. In fact, for Schleiermacher, religion is prior to all other operations of the mind: "true religion is rooted in a deep prereflective awareness of reality that underlies all thought and sensation."<sup>517</sup> Against Kant's insistence that God's existence and human immortality had to be postulated by the human mind, Schleiermacher wrote:

Religion is the outcome neither of the fear of death, nor of the fear of God. It answers a deep need in man. It is neither a metaphysics, nor a morality, but

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commentary. They demonstrate that even before the significant revision of the second editions, Barth's later sense of the hermeneutic task was already well established.

<sup>515</sup> Such an approach is not without its problems. For as McCormack notes in *Karl Barth's Critically Realist Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 130-322, Barth's own understanding of history and thus his understanding of hermeneutics does undergo a shift. It seems to me that this shift does not negate—albeit it may weaken—the degree to which Barth and Gadamer can be said to converge. In Barth's earlier "process eschatology," history has some productive work which aids the exegete in understanding God's Otherness. In Barth's later work, his more "consistent eschatology" places all of history under an equal negation of God's absence. Nonetheless, Barth maintains throughout the editions of his commentary that conversation with the voices from the past are appropriate for understanding our situation today. In this way, the two hermeneutics remain very similar in substance.

<sup>516</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>517</sup> Dorrien, 19.

above all and essentially an intuition and a feeling. ... Dogmas are not, properly speaking, part of religion: rather it is that they are derived from it. Religion is the miracle of direct relationship with the infinite; and dogmas are the reflection of this miracle.<sup>518</sup>

Barth encountered the influence of Schleiermacher in all of his teachers. For as Barth would repeatedly assert, Schleiermacher's conception of religion had become nearly inescapable, even for himself.<sup>519</sup>

Perhaps the most influential thinker in terms of Barth's early relation to Kant and Schleiermacher was his teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann. For Herrmann, a neo-Kantian scholar of the Ritschlian school, revelation was about the inner life: the inner life of Christ and that of the believer.<sup>520</sup> Herrmann, following his influential teacher, Ritschl, asserted that no particular point of the historical narrative about Jesus needs to be held non-negotiable or dogmatic. Rather, the "historicity of Christ's redeeming and reconciling action" as Christ experienced them in his own inner life showed the truth and significance of the Gospel.<sup>521</sup> In that same way, people interiorly experienced faith in Christ that did indeed save and redeem them, regardless of the factual particularities of the historical narrative about Christ. Christian faith needed no justification outside of itself. Thus revelational experience had a "self-authenticating" character.<sup>522</sup>

Herrmann's radically individualistic, internalist conception of Christianity centered on the crucial insight of the Reformation, justification by faith. This central doctrine was to be held against any dogmatism or systematization. For Herrmann, the very concept of revelation needed to be rethought in terms of "justification by faith."<sup>523</sup> Divine revelation—and even Christology itself—could only be understood "from within."<sup>524</sup> Thus the historical-critical theologies seeking to ground Revelation in particularities of history were ill-conceived.

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<sup>518</sup> Schleiermacher, "Address on Religion," 1799. Accessible at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schleiermach/religion>.

<sup>519</sup> Burnett, 38-39.

<sup>520</sup> Dorrien, 19.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Herrmann articulated this theology against other Ritschlian theologians, such as Ernst Troeltsch. Unlike Herrmann, Troeltsch sought to discover the historical truths contained within the largely non-historical Biblical accounts. Synthesizing Kant's philosophy, Schleiermacher's theology and Max Weber's sociology, Troeltsch's school of thought, sometimes called the *Religionsgeschichtliche* School, relativized Christianity within the larger framework of historical religions. Christian history, then, like any other mythical histories, required criticism and redaction. Troeltsch was committed to taking this critical project as far as it would go. As Troeltsch was fond of saying, "as soon as one concedes an inch to historical criticism, it takes a mile."<sup>525</sup> In fact, Troeltsch would soon boast that "the rise of a comparative history of religions has shaken the Christian faith more deeply than anything else."<sup>526</sup> For indeed, Troeltsch's system called into question the historicity of all the major points of the Gospel account including the crucifixion and resurrection.

Barth's reading of Romans is in continuity with Herrmann and thus is a rejection of Troeltsch in several important ways. Like Herrmann, Barth sought to rescue something of the radical, existential nature of the Gospel from historicizing and reductionary readings of some theologians. Moreover, as Burnett points out, Herrmann taught Barth that

the object of religious perception is entirely different from something that can be perceived in the phenomenal world.... The reality known by faith is beyond all sense perception and ... one must guard against confusing it with something else or domesticating it in any way. He taught Barth, in short, to be suspicious of metaphysics, apologetics, and natural theology, to be wary of positivism, historicism, psychologism, and other forms of theological reduction.<sup>527</sup>

Barth continued to share the broadly Kantian epistemological formation he inherited from his predecessors. In fact, following both Kant and Herrmann, the distinction between faith and knowledge remains a crucial underpinning of Barth's thought. Barth always maintains that an

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid. 20

<sup>526</sup> Ibid. 16

<sup>527</sup> Burnett, 70.

un-traversable “chasm existed between faith and knowledge.”<sup>528</sup> Thus a kind of “epistemological dualism was necessary if faith were to be preserved.”<sup>529</sup> Despite these important points of ongoing convergence between Barth’s thought and Herrmann’s, Barth soon came to realize that all of his Liberal teachers, even Herrmann, presented an unacceptable theology.

In 1914, Herrmann, Troeltsch, and many other German teachers of Liberal Theology, signed a manifesto of support for the German state’s invasion of Belgium and the beginning of World War I. This event, more than any particular doctrinal dispute, finalized Barth’s break with Liberal Theology and with Herrmann in particular. For Barth, this act of accommodating the Gospel to the demands of the nation-state signified the theological bankruptcy of the entire project. If the entirety of Liberal Theology could be employed for such an obviously evil end, there must have been something inherently wrong with the system. In fact, Barth came to think that the whole of the project spawned by Schleiermacher’s original insights had to be abandoned.

Barth soon realized that Schleiermacher set the course for German theology’s secularization and eventual cooptedness by nationalistic interest. Schleiermacher sought to save religion from Kant’s critique by emphasizing that religion is the deepest and most fundamental of **human** needs. Nonetheless, Schleiermacher’s insistence that religion came from humanity assured its eventual captivity to other human interests. Religion’s human-rootedness assured religion’s status as a human, and thus only human, artifact. Even Herrmann’s resistance to the “historicizing and psychologizing” of Christianity had proved insufficient.<sup>530</sup> In the end, Herrmann’s system was focused on the faith of the individual rather than on the God in whom this faith was placed. Thus Herrmann was no better than other Liberal Theologians in that, for Herrmann, the object of theology was found in the individual, in a

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<sup>528</sup> Sean Turchin, “Examining the Primary Influence on Karl Barth’s Epistle to the Romans” (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2008), 12.

<sup>529</sup> Turchin, 12.

<sup>530</sup> Dorrien, 53.



human.<sup>531</sup> Against all this, Barth would argue that God's revelation is distinct from humanity. Thus it is distinct from history, metaphysics, and from religion itself. God is outside all categorization.

### **The Emergence of Barth's General Hermeneutics**

Barth's insistence that God is wholly Other drove the entirety of his project, including the hermeneutics that underpinned that project. Barth believed that "any attempt to bind or contain [God] or any attempt to force Him to conform to any method or hermeneutic came down not simply to a matter of inadequacy but to a matter of reduction and distortion."<sup>532</sup> In fact, Barth's refusal to establish one particular method or principle of interpretation has led some to accuse Barth of trivializing hermeneutics.<sup>533</sup> While Barth was in fact reluctant to speak of hermeneutics "in *abstracto*,"<sup>534</sup> Barth was not hermeneutically naive. Instead, Barth's hermeneutic theory consciously and intentionally moved past Schleiermacher's inadequate hermeneutics to an approach that was appropriate for conversation about God, or at least for conversation about God's absence.

Schleiermacher had prepared for the historical reduction and humanistic psychologizing of religion by centering religion in humanity. Similarly, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics sought to find the meaning of a text in the mind of the authors who wrote the texts.<sup>535</sup> In the time immediately preceding Barth, the widespread methodology of Dilthey—that of reconstructing the psychological and historical view of authors—assured a nearly ubiquitous revival of Schleiermacher's overall hermeneutic project.<sup>536</sup> Moreover, as theology was under intense pressure to frame itself as a science, Schleiermacher's and Dilthey's approaches provided methodology for analyzing theological texts in terms that mirrored the sciences. This "special

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<sup>531</sup> Burnett, 71.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-45.

hermeneutics” ensured that theological reflection remained grounded in religious texts via established, concrete principles. Thus these principles situated theology among the other human sciences. Man became the subject of theology with God as its proper predicate.

While Barth would reject the bulk of Schleiermacher’s and Dilthey’s projects, he did accept their instance that “that the scope of interpretation should always be as compressive as possible.”<sup>537</sup> Unlike Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the liberal theologians who had inherited their project regarded Biblical hermeneutics as a specialized system with its particular “scientific” methodology. Against this, Barth held that understanding anything entailed a hermeneutic approach. Thus hermeneutics, even theological exegesis, was not simply about understanding religious texts. Hence Barth’s move from this “special hermeneutics” to general hermeneutics was in some sense, a return to Schleiermacher’s original aim. Interpretation of the Bible then became for Barth not a hermeneutic exception but rather the general pattern by which all hermeneutics can and should be carried out.<sup>538</sup> This theological exegesis should not be conceived as a subdiscipline of the sciences. Rather other sciences must come to relate to theology—or, more strictly speaking, to Revelation—which relativizes all human knowledge.

The hermeneutic methods of Barth’s predecessors, both Liberal and orthodox, were inadequate for understanding truth. The specialized techniques of historical criticism were necessary and useful only as “prolegomenon” before moving toward actual understanding.<sup>539</sup> For the historical-critical method limited the scope of the text’s meaning to its situation in the past. On the other hand, “[o]rthodox commentators [were] ... better placed than their more liberal colleagues.”<sup>540</sup> For orthodox thinkers better concealed “their lack of any tenacious determination to understand and to interpret.”<sup>541</sup> At the very least orthodox commentators repeated historical truths. But Barth held that interpretation—that is, application to the

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 7.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

contemporary situation—was necessary. As Gadamer said, they failed to see that the meaning of the text cannot be divorced from its application. For “application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning.”<sup>542</sup> Hence Liberal and orthodox commentators’ failure to understand how the text speaks today reveals the timidity of their objective and the inadequacy of their scope.

For Barth, then, the primary reason his hermeneutic project is unique is that general hermeneutics had been so “mortally sick” that it had forgotten its real task.<sup>543</sup> Theologians, seeking acceptance in academia, established a specialized hermeneutic technique when the hermeneutics necessary for genuine theology really ought to encompass all the sciences. Not only had his predecessors become tied to the human events of the past, but God, the wholly Other, had been ignored. The judgment of the all-holy God under which all human knowledge stands had been erased from theological understanding. Barth arrived at “the conclusion that the subject matter of the Bible was the standard by which he was to read all other books....”<sup>544</sup> Barth’s recognition of this forgotten truth led him to see its significance for all disciplines. His hermeneutic, then, was not really specialized for reading the Bible but was the hermeneutic standard for all understanding. For Barth, all human knowledge, including the scriptures, had to be read as a conversation about God’s Revelation which remained apart, separated, and uncontained in science, in literature, and even in religion itself. This is the truth that, for Barth, had to be found in any text and applied to all contemporary knowledge.

### **Barth’s Hermeneutics, Gadamer’s Hermeneutics**

Having transcended the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Barth arrives at an approach to hermeneutics that is startlingly similar to that which Gadamer proposes in *Truth and Method*. In place of the psychological and historical deconstruction of texts, Gadamer argues

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<sup>542</sup> Gadamer, 321.

<sup>543</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/2:726

<sup>544</sup> Burnett, 55.

that any understanding of traditional material is an attempt to understand a particular subject matter, the *Sache* of the text. In the same way, Barth sees the subject matter of his inquiry, God's Revelation, as conditioning his exegesis from beginning to end. For Barth, once the Crisis of God's Revelation is acknowledged, it becomes the subject matter that relativizes not only the history and psychology of the author but all human knowledge.

This subject-matter-centered, or "*sachlicher*," method of reading a text did not originate with either Barth or Gadamer. Indeed, Barth would identify Herrmann's earlier approach as "*sachlicher*." For Herrmann, the subject matter of the Bible was the faith of the individual. On the other hand, for Barth, the *Sache* of the Bible is not in any way human. Therefore it cannot be faith. Rather the *Sache* of scriptures is the unknowable God.<sup>545</sup>

Burnett notes that a discussion of Barth's understanding of the *Sache* of the Bible is difficult for at least two reasons.<sup>546</sup> First, as I mentioned in chapter 1, "*Sache*" has no real English equivalent. Perhaps object, subject, or subject matter are the closest equivalents. Secondly, "the *Sache* of the Bible is not ... an object which gives itself to us without reservation or qualification such that it is ever 'at our disposal' as it were. He is an Object which always remains Subject even as He gives Himself as Object." Thus for Barth, the *Sache* of the Bible is even more determinative of his hermeneutic method than any natural subject might be in Gadamer's analysis.

Barth is explicit about the determinative role of God's Otherness in his interpretation:

What do I mean when I say that the inner dialectic of the *Sache* and the recognition of it in the wording of the text is the decisive factor in understanding and interpretations?... "God is in heaven and thou on earth." The relationship of *this* God to *this* man, the relationship of *this* man to *this* God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the sum of philosophy in one. The philosophers call this crisis of human knowing the source. At this crossroads the Bible sees Jesus Christ.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>545</sup> Nonetheless, it would be a "serious mistake" to think that Barth consciously modeled his interpretation on Herrmann, tweaking it for his own theological agenda. Only later would Barth recognize the model that Herrmann had been in his own hermeneutic development. See Burnett, 72.

<sup>546</sup> Burnett, 75.

<sup>547</sup> Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," 8.

Barth saw in the diverse texts of the Bible a “unified witness” to this one theme, the unknowable God.<sup>548</sup> Because Barth seemed to freely pick and choose parts of the Bible to dialogue with one another, disregarding their obvious historical, cultural, and thematic differences, some saw Barth’s commentary as a work of “Biblicism.” In fact, this missed the point. Rather, “[t]he most revolutionary feature [of Barth’s hermeneutics] was in fact not about the Bible at all but about *what* or *who* the Bible bore witness to.”<sup>549</sup> Indeed for Barth, “If God is the *Sache* of the Bible, and God must be understood as something whole, then the *Sache* of the Bible must be understood as something whole as well.”<sup>550</sup> *A fortiori*, if God is the *Sache* of all human knowledge, then all writing that bears witness to this truth should be brought to bear to understand this *Sache*. This is why Barth freely included “contemporary parallels” from multiple sources in his exegesis.<sup>551</sup>

This belief that the Bible and indeed all human knowledge had a certain unifying feature prompted Barth to center his interpretation not on the meaning of particular verses but on this holistic theme. Barth writes that the “proper concentration of exegesis presses behind the many questions to the one cardinal question by which all are embraced.”<sup>552</sup> Gadamer calls this same idea the “for-conception of completeness.”<sup>553</sup> That is, one comes to a text asking the question, “What is this work, as a whole, about?” Because of his for-conception of completeness, Barth assumes that Romans is not only about a diversity of minor topics (epistemology, ontology, religion, etc.) but that the overall theme of the absolute transcendence of God is determinative of Roman’s treatment of these less important topics. As Barth puts it, “The Word ought to be exposed in the words.” Barth maintains through his commentary that grasping the big picture, answering the central question, is the ultimate, decisive task before him.

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<sup>548</sup> Burnett, 77.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>551</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 12.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>553</sup> Gadamer, 294.

Thus for Barth, the text must be considered not so much in order to understand Paul's mind or his historical situation but to understand this subject matter. Barth sees himself as engaging in a conversation with the text about this subject. Similarly, Gadamer notes that this conversational understanding of hermeneutics is *sachlicher*: "When we try to examine the hermeneutical phenomenon through the model of conversation between two persons, the chief thing that these apparently so different situations—understanding a text and reaching an understanding in a conversation—have in common is that they are concerned with the subject matter (*Sache*) that is placed before them."<sup>554</sup> Barth notes that "documents contain answers to questions" and that these "answers must be brought into relation with the questions which are presupposed...."<sup>555</sup> When we read a text, we must figure what question the text is trying to answer and then ask that question. This leads to another question. Consequently, this conversation around the subject matter is, for both Barth and Gadamer, the process of exegesis. The meaning of the text emerges in this dialogue between our questions and answers the questions and answers that arise from the text.

As Barth says in his preface to the first edition of the commentary, this conversation is not limited to himself and Paul's epistle. Rather his understanding of history "is an uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow."<sup>556</sup> It is this conversation between various authors—diverse as Lao Tzu and Luther—held together by the one *Sache* that unites them. For their wisdom, centered on the same subject matter, is "one and the same."<sup>557</sup> For both Barth and Gadamer, history is then not some chasm that separates the reader from the text. Rather, as Barth claims, the "walls which separate" the centuries collapse in the process of exegesis.<sup>558</sup> This is why, for Barth, the historical-critical method is really only

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>555</sup> Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," 8.

<sup>556</sup> Barth, "Preface to the First Edition," 1.

<sup>557</sup> Barth, Fifth Draft of the "Preface to the First Edition." In Burnett, 292.

<sup>558</sup> Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," 7.

useful to illustrate the ways in which temporal and cultural “differences are purely trivial.”<sup>559</sup> For Barth’s work sees “through and beyond history” to the *Sache*.<sup>560</sup>

Hence both Barth and Gadamer hold that meaning cannot be found simply in the text itself. For understanding is always understanding “for us.” There can be no distinction between understanding a supposed thing-in-itself, and the subjective application of that understanding. This is why Barth asks if a commentary that fails to “interpret” the meaning of the text into the contemporary situation is in fact a successful commentary.<sup>561</sup> For Barth, the text’s meaning is trivial if its message is not applied to the contemporary situation. Gadamer agrees, “... all reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. He belongs to the text he is reading.”<sup>562</sup> Since the reader and his situation belong to the text, the text’s meaning cannot be divorced for the reader’s situation and the text’s message in that situation.

Barth acknowledges that this is not a simple task: “The matter contained in the text cannot be released save by a creative straining of the sinews...” to make the text speak today to us.<sup>563</sup> Barth takes Calvin’s commentary on Romans for his inspiration in this regard. He writes, “Calvin wrestles with the text until the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent. Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the subject matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible.”<sup>564</sup> Thus Calvin asks the questions of his time—questions about the role of sacraments, the nature of predestination, and

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<sup>559</sup> Barth, “Preface to first Edition,” 1

<sup>560</sup> Ibid. Gadamer goes a bit further than Barth to assert that the “efficacy of history is at work” as a number of voices from history speak about the *Sache* in question (Gadamer, 300). He asserts that “historical distance,” rather than being an impediment to understanding a text, “lets the true meaning ... emerge fully” even if “the discovery of the true meaning of a text ... is in fact an infinite process” (Gadamer 298). In the period of the first edition of Romans, the young Barth’s “process eschatology” is nearly identical to Gadamer’s notion of the productive work of history. On the other hand, the later Barth sees history as basically irrelevant to exegesis since God’s otherness, in the end, negates historical distinctions. For Gadamer, history is never irrelevant but is part of the connective being that brings the *Sache* too us. This distinction is notable.

<sup>561</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 12.

<sup>562</sup> Gadamer, 335.

<sup>563</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 8.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 7.

the differences between forensic justification and sanctification—only to have those questions answered by the words of scripture. Never mind that these could not have been the concepts that Paul had in mind when he was writing. In Romans, Calvin found information about this subject matter, not about the particularities of the situation in which Paul wrote.

Barth understand his work in the commentary to parallel Calvin's work. He notes, "I embark on [the epistle's] interpretation on the assumption that [Paul] is confronted with the same unmistakable and immeasurable significance of that relation [between God and humanity] as I myself am confronted with, and that it is this situation which molds his thought and its expression."<sup>565</sup> Barth believes that the text of Romans has an answer to the very question that he wishes to ask because this question is, in some way, also Paul's question. This is why Barth can assert that he forgets he is not the text's author. For, in reading Romans, the question presupposed by the text really is Barth's own question.

A Platonic notion of eternal truth undergirds both Barth's and Gadamer's understanding of how this is possible. Barth see his own work as "participating in the subject matter" with the writers of the past.<sup>566</sup> Barth's belief in the eternal validity of his unique subject allows Barth to read earlier texts as if they "presuppose" questions that, for those of us who do not accept Barth's thesis, seem to have been impossible at the time of the text's composition. Thus, in the context of these eternal truths, the historical distinction between Barth and Paul really does seem to dissolve.<sup>567</sup> Barth really can "stand with" the original authors in discussion about the subject matter at hand.<sup>568</sup> Hence, a distinction must be made regarding the reasons that Gadamer and Barth think that subjects can endure. For Gadamer, numerous subjects transcend history and encounter the individual precisely because they transcend history and culture. While Gadamer stops short of elaborating a fully Platonic ontology, he nonetheless accepts that many

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>566</sup> Barth, Draft 1A in "Preface to the First Edition," in Burnett, 281.

<sup>567</sup> Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," 10.

<sup>568</sup> Barth, Draft 1A in "Preface to the First Edition," in Burnett, 281.



*Sachen* are not bound to our particular temporal and cultural situation. As such, discussion across times and cultures is possible. On the other hand, for Barth, the particular subject of his inquiry is that which encounters all humanity—the chasm that separates man from God. Thus for Barth, it is not any topic that can be understood generally, but the particular topic, the *Krisis*, that offers this possibility. In the next chapter, we will turn to this difference and suggest a Catholic response.

Gadamer and Barth agree that this manner of approaching the text, though requiring extensive creativity, does not arbitrarily impose meaning on the text. Gadamer writes, “We who are attempting to understand must ourselves make [the text] speak.... [T]his kind of understanding, ‘making the text speak,’ is not an arbitrary procedure that we undertake on our own initiative but that, ‘as a question, it is related to the answer that is expected in the text.’”<sup>569</sup> Therefore, we cannot make a text say just anything by asking random questions of it and using haphazard proof texts to support our own agenda. Barth sees his own *Sache* as “presupposed” by the text itself and thus available for inquiry. Nonetheless, the theological exegete must demonstrate how the questions and the answers that she finds in the text actually relate by means of careful textual evidence.<sup>570</sup> Similarly, Gadamer does not hold that an interpreter’s freedom is unbounded or capricious. The reader is tied to the text itself because her creativity comes only from “rethinking the thoughts of the text after it.”<sup>571</sup> For the thoughts of the reader, the text, and the other traditional material with which the exegete engages must all “participate” in the same subject matter found in the text. In this way the conversation we have with the text is limited to the actual content of the work under consideration while at the same time it occasions, and indeed requires, inventiveness.

Gadamer explains that this conversation with the text, this fusion of horizons, is possible only because tradition brings the text to the reader and joins him to it. While Barth subordinates

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<sup>569</sup> Gadamer, 370.

<sup>570</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 10.

<sup>571</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 11.

the role of tradition to that of his unique subject, the technique that he employs is nonetheless consistent with that which Gadamer explains. As we already saw, Barth uses Calvin, the father of the Reformed tradition, as his model to defend the “creative energy” found of his own exegesis. Moreover, when reading both Calvin and Luther, Barth sees the intention of Paul and that of the tradition to be intertwined indistinguishably. Hence Barth’s commentary quotes Luther more than any other author.<sup>572</sup> Though Barth’s horizon and that of the text “supposedly exist by themselves,” they are in fact connected not only by a Platonic, transcendent eternal truth but also by the historically mediated tradition through which Barth reads the text.<sup>573</sup>

Barth’s approach to exegesis within tradition, licensed by his unique *Sache*, allows him to rely on examples and insights from that tradition in order to explain the meaning of Romans. But Barth maintains that exegesis need not only include revered traditional sources. He writes, “I entirely fail to see why parallels drawn from the ancient world ... should be of more value for an understanding of the Epistle than the situation in which we ourselves actually are, and to which we can therefore bear witness.”<sup>574</sup> Barth’s desire, then, is to fuse the ancient horizon with that of the present day. One particular example of Barth’s audacious nontraditional sourcing is his reinterpretation of Franz Overbeck’s work. Barth reads Overbeck, an atheistic philosopher, as a true interpreter of Paul against Albert Schweitzer, a Liberal Christian theologian.<sup>575</sup> In so doing, Barth is able to reject Schweitzer’s relativistic attempt to read Paul as part of the “religious experience and ethical progress of humanity” and instead reclaim the eschatological possibility of Paul’s thought.<sup>576</sup>

Barth’s free use of both traditional and contemporary sources allows him to readily admit that he comes to the text of Romans with predetermined ideas. Indeed, in some ways, Barth

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<sup>572</sup> Boon Woo, 230.

<sup>573</sup> Gadamer, 305. Though again, Barth emphasizes the Platonic truth, while Gadamer emphasizes the tradition.

<sup>574</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 11.

<sup>575</sup> David Paul Henry, *The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21*, Dissertation Series Number 5, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1985), 106-7.

<sup>576</sup> Henry, 108.

approaches Romans already convinced that its *Sache* is that of Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and man.<sup>577</sup> In admitting that this preunderstanding is not merely exegeted from the text, Barth is boldly contradicting the method of the Liberal Theologians who proceeded him. These theologians, using various historical-critical methods to understand the scriptures, were operating with a post-Enlightenment understanding of objective truth.<sup>578</sup> To discover this objective truth, one had to detach oneself from prejudgments and contemporary presuppositions. For these thinkers, this detachment allowed the reader to find the most authentic understanding of the objects-in-themselves. This, unbiased, methodological approach also figured into theology's overarching goal of situating itself within the human sciences as a whole.

Barth summarizes the inadequacy of the "scientific" Liberal project and the necessity of his alleged eisegesis, this way:

To understand an author means for me mainly to stand with him, to take each of his words in earnest ... in order to interpret him from the inside out. But today's theology does not stand by the prophets and the apostles.... It stands smilingly albeit condescendingly beside them, it conceitedly distances itself from them and outwardly examines them historically and psychologically. This is what I have against it. What I call "to stand with him" means to begin with the presupposition that what was once true will always be true and that conversely, the problems with which we are concerned today, if they really are serious problems, are the same as those with which serious people of all time have wrestled. Without this presupposition, history is chaos. The words "history" and "understanding" make no sense for me at all without this living context between the past and the present which cannot be achieved through some empathetic art, but is given in the subject matter. Whoever in this sense does not read in, i.e. participate in the subject matter, cannot read out. I speak therefore of Paul's questions as if they were our own questions in the belief that they really are. If it were otherwise, what would we have to do with him? "You may only interpret the past out of the highest power of the present: only in the strongest efforts or your noblest qualities will you divinize what in the past is great, worth knowing, and preserving. Like through like! Or else you will pull the past down to yourself!" (Nietzsche, 1874). Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear! I, on the contrary, will readily accept the reproach that I have *read in* too little!<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>577</sup> Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," 10.

<sup>578</sup> Gadamer, 274.

<sup>579</sup> Barth, Draft 1A in "Preface to the First Edition," in Burnett, 282.

Here, Barth's similarity to Gadamer is startling. Gadamer asserts that "prejudice is the condition of understanding" (278). These prejudices, or prejudgments, are—particularly in all the human sciences—the prerequisites for any act of understanding. These prejudices form the horizon that the reader brings to the text. The reader brings this set of preunderstandings before he or she even opens the text to begin reading. Indeed these preunderstandings allow the reader to make inferences about the content of the text and eventually to come to an understanding of it. They don't simply impose these prejudices on the text; they dialogue with it until their prejudices are either disproven or upheld by the text's words. Barth embraces this: "I know that I have laid myself open to the charge of imposing a meaning upon the text rather than extracting its meaning from it, and that my method implies this."<sup>580</sup> Barth sees the only problem with eisegesis in his work is that he has, perhaps, imposed "too little" meaning the text.

Barth's prejudices, like all those prejudices which allow us to understand texts, come from tradition. In a certain way, Kierkegaard's "infinite qualitative distinction" is itself part of the Protestant philosophical tradition that formed Barth and that formed the central prejudice that Barth brings to the text.<sup>581</sup> Barth believes that he is justified in approaching the text with this prejudice for he holds that the "infinite qualitative distinction" is the rightful *Sache* of the epistle as it is of all human knowledge. As I shall argue in the coming chapter, we can agree that Barth brings this prejudice to the text, but the Catholic must hold that such a prejudice is unwarranted and ultimately fails.

Moreover, Barth's focus on the Bible, and on Romans in particular, arises from the tradition. It is because of tradition that he is "prejudiced in supposing the Bible to be a good book and ... to be profitable for men to take its conceptions at least as seriously as they take their own."<sup>582</sup> Gadamer notes that "anticipating an answer" in a text "presupposes that the

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<sup>580</sup> Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," 10. Note that this second quote is from Barth's second edition after the shift in his thinking about history.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>582</sup> Barth, "Preface to the Second Edition," 12.

questioner is part of the tradition and regards himself as addressed by [the text at hand].”<sup>583</sup> In this instance, Barth tests the “system” that he learned from Kierkegaard by dialogue with the words of the text and finds that new meaning emerges in this interchange. So the shared tradition that brings the text to Barth does not blind him to its meaning. Tradition does not somehow obscure some actual, objective intention in the text. Rather, tradition both highlights the importance of the text itself and provides Barth with assumptions about what the text might mean.

It is essential to note how different Barth’s commentary is from one that suppresses one’s own prejudice. Such “objective” and “historical” commentaries merely consider what Paul said in his own context. They contextualize the meaning of the term “law” and “faith” as it was supposedly used in Paul’s time. They are “detached” from its commentator’s own interests and attempt to remain historically situated in the problems of the first century. On the other hand, Barth’s commentary embraces and address the modern problems of Christology, epistemology, ontology, and the possibilities of human religion.<sup>584</sup> In fact, by modern standards, Barth’s commentary seems to be so removed from Paul’s own situation that today it is necessary to defend the very notion that what Barth has written is in fact a commentary.<sup>585</sup>

Thus Barth’s theological exegesis is both radically traditional and thoroughly novel. While Barth embraces tradition, he does much more than simply return to the readings proposed by Calvin or Luther. Barth reads Romans not only with the reformers but also with Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Kant, Overbeck, and Nietzsche. This reading brings about something radically new. Consider the audacity of Barth’s paying “attention to what may be culled from the writings of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky that is of importance for the interpretation of the New Testament”!<sup>586</sup> While Kierkegaard is, at least broadly construed, part of the larger Protestant

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<sup>583</sup> Gadamer, 370.

<sup>584</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 12.

<sup>585</sup> Consider John Webster, “Karl Barth” in Greenman and Larsen, *Reading Romans through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 205-23.

<sup>586</sup> Barth, “Preface to the Second Edition,” 4.

theological tradition, Dostoevsky is a Russian Orthodox novelist. Barth hears all these voices as witnesses of one truth. Therefore, in Barth's exegesis of Romans 1 and 2, tradition is not left to statically repeat itself but to speak the eternal truths anew with new voices in new words in a new time.

### **Barth on Romans 1 and 2**

Barth, following Luther, finds the theme of the epistle in Romans 1:17: "The righteous shall live by faith." Barth reads this verse as an affirmation of the theme of the whole Bible: the *Krisis* under which we all stand, the God who cannot be known in the world, whose reply to all of our moral and cognitive effort to know Him therein is a profound and definitive "No!" Barth considers the dialectic of the God known only in the unknown, the *Deus Absconditus*, to be a resolution to the long-debated question—the question we first noticed in Augustine—of whose faith and whose righteousness are signified by the phrase "the righteous shall live by faith/faithfulness." Barth puts it this way:

Whether we say of the faithfulness of God or of the faith of men, both are the same. The form in which the prophet's words have been handed down already point in both directions. It is the faithfulness of God which we encounter so unescapably in the prophet's "no"; God the holy one, the altogether other. It is the faith of men which we meet in the awe of those who affirm the no and are ready to accept the void and to move and tarry in negation. Where the faithfulness of God encounters the fidelity of men, there is manifested His righteous. There shall the righteous man live. This is the theme of the Epistle to the Romans.<sup>587</sup>

Having proffered this thematic introduction, Barth holds that the central message of the second half of chapter 1 is the elaboration of how God cannot be known in this world. Rather than an affirmation of natural theology, Barth finds in this chapter a denial of its possibility. For Barth, Romans 1 is the recognition of human inability to know God in anything in this world. To all ability or human power, God responds with a definitive "No." Even the Gospel story, insofar

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<sup>587</sup> Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 42.

as it is a human retelling of historical events, contains no divinity. For “no divinity remains this side of the resurrection.”<sup>588</sup>

Thus God can in no way be thought of as part of this world. As Barth asserts: “the power of God,” spoken of in Romans 1:20, is not the most exalted of observable force in the world, nor is it their sum or their fount. Being completely different, it is “the KRISIS of all power.”<sup>589</sup> Thus any possible place for a positive natural theology is removed. God is neither the first principle nor the *telos* of this world. He is fully OTHER. This profoundly negative theology denies all possibility for knowing God on the basis of any worldly resources. Because of this, Barth admits that the question, “Is there a God?” is “entirely relevant.”<sup>590</sup>

There are two possible answers to this question. On the one hand, the answer can come from the “criminal arrogance of religion.”<sup>591</sup> In answering the question this way, religion arrogates to itself to describe God and give Him the highest place in this world. This is the idolatry of Romans 1:23. In religion’s idolatrous arrogance, God is known as the Highest Good and the Supreme Being. However, when “we assign to him the highest place in our world,” we give God a huge demotion.<sup>592</sup> God is set up not as the unknown God but as the “No-God,” the highest, most prized object of our own creation.<sup>593</sup> In this way God is replaced with an idol. Furthermore, in religion’s vain attempt to know God from creation, God becomes a “thing-in-itself.”<sup>594</sup> That is, when God is known as any object of perception, the knowledge that we gain is subject to all of Kant’s critique. Thus this “knowledge” about God cannot accurately represent God. This is why, according to both Kant and Romans, God can only be known “by faith.”

Yet, paradoxically “God in his wrath” is, in a sense the very same as the false god which religion creates, the No-God. Romans asserts that God in His wrath is the One who punishes

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

the idolater. For Romans states that since idolaters “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images,” God in his wrath “gave them over to their desires.” On the other hand, Romans assigns the blame for the increase in sin to the very error of attributing to God the attributes perceived in the world. Thus Barth asserts “[v]antiy of mind and blindness of heart inevitably bring into being corrupt conduct.”<sup>595</sup> For “[w]hen God is so deprived of His glory, men are also deprived of theirs.”<sup>596</sup> Thus the host of sins described in the end of Romans 1 is both the punishment of God in His wrath and the result of men’s internal debasement from worshipping the No-God. So Barth holds that insomuch as we do not affirm the negation of God’s situatedness in this world, the No-God is God, but only God in His wrath! Barth writes: “[The wrath of God] is the No which meets us when we do not affirm it. It is the protest pronounced always and everywhere against the course of the world in so far as we do not accept the protest as our own. It is the questionableness of life insofar as we do not apprehend it.”<sup>597</sup> Thus those who suffer the horrible punishment of idolatry “have wished to experience the known god of this world, well,” Barth snarkily writes, “They have experienced him!”<sup>598</sup>

There is another possible answer to the question, “Is there a God?” Instead of erecting the “No-God,” we can recognize that nothing in this world is God. God’s absence is in fact all that can be recognized from nature. When Romans 1:20 asserts that the “invisible things of God” were known, it means precisely that. What can be known about God is that He cannot be known. Barth even asserts that Plato knew something of this in his insistence that there be a world wholly apart from this one. With this recognition of God’s absence comes the possibility that God might speak from outside of this world, the possibility of revelation “which proceeds from God outwards.”<sup>599</sup> Therefore, if we deny the No-God, the idol of our own invention, then God can affirm our negation.

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<sup>595</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid., 37.



In explaining the difference between “knowledge” that leads to the “No-God” and true faith that affirms the negation of God’s presence in the world, Barth turns to Kierkegaard. Barth quotes Kierkegaard some twenty-eight times in the second edition of the commentary—Luther is the only source that Barth favors more—and credits Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity” as the single most important reason that he needed to revise the first edition.<sup>600</sup>

On the one hand, Barth has been often criticized for having appropriated a “somewhat clumsy” reading of Kierkegaard, perhaps reading Kierkegaard as more antirational than the text demands.<sup>601</sup> Moreover, it is evident that Barth’s acquaintance with Kierkegaard is limited; Barth seems to have read only one—perhaps as many as three—of Kierkegaard’s books.<sup>602</sup> Boon notes that though “Barth used many important concepts from Kierkegaard’s philosophy, such as ... Christendom, communication, paradox, and moment ... he did not use them according to the meaning intended by Kierkegaard, but he gave them new meanings to suit his own theology.”<sup>603</sup>

On the other hand, if we take Barth’s account of general hermeneutics seriously, we can assert that Barth is not really trying to understand Kierkegaard’s usage of these terms or to present them in an “unbiased” manner. Barth is using whatever resources are available in his limited reading of Kierkegaard to better understand the subject matter of Romans: the unknowable God. As Boon later writes of Barth, “Barth is not just a musician, but a composer. As one of the most productive composers, he endorses the main theme from Kierkegaard but also reorganizes the scheme and transforms the details.... The Kierkegaard of the early Barth is ... a productive catalyst.”<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> Boon Woo, “Kierkegaard’s Influence on Karl Barth’s Early Theology,” 230.

<sup>601</sup> See McKinnon for a detailed analysis of Barth’s relation to Kierkegaard.

<sup>602</sup> Boon Woo, 203.

<sup>603</sup> Boon Woo, 200.

<sup>604</sup> Boon Woo, 241.

In exegeting Romans 1, Barth follows Kierkegaard in noting that faith is “awe in the presence of the divine incognito.”<sup>605</sup> For Kierkegaard, “The God-man is the sign of contradiction.” For the truth of the Hypostasis can never be known or captured in the understanding.<sup>606</sup> It is always experienced now, in the contemporaneous moment of faith. In this way, Kierkegaard proves an invaluable resource for Barth’s exposition. Kierkegaard writes in *Practice in Christianity*—the one book of Kierkegaard that Barth certainly read:

[T]he whole of modern philosophy has done everything to delude us into thinking that faith is an immediate qualification ... having made Christianity into a teaching, having abolished the God-man and the situation of contemporaneity. What modern philosophy understands by faith is really what is called having an opinion or what in everyday language some people call “to believe.” Christianity is made into a teaching; this teaching is then proclaimed to a person, and he believes that it is as the teaching says. Then the next stage is to “comprehend” this teaching, and this philosophy does. All of this would be entirely proper if Christianity were a teaching, but since it is not, all this is totally wrong. Faith in a significant sense is related to the God-man. But the God-man, the sign of contradiction, denies direct communication—and calls for faith.<sup>607</sup>

For Barth and Kierkegaard, Christianity then is unintelligible. The proper response to God’s revelation is not comprehension but faith in the presence of the One who cannot be comprehended. Hence Christ cannot be understood “directly.” To understand God directly is to make Him the No-God, the idol of Romans 1. Barth quotes Kierkegaard: “[The power of God] can therefore be neither directly communicated nor directly apprehended.... If Christ be very God, He must be unknown. For to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol.”<sup>608</sup> Instead, God can only be met in the moment of faith, “the moment when the human being stands before God, and is moved by him alone from time to eternity, from the earth to which (s)he belongs to the heaven where God exists.”<sup>609</sup> God cannot be held in time nor examined

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<sup>605</sup> Romans, 39.

<sup>606</sup> Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 126.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>608</sup> Barth, Romans, 38. See Kierkegaard, 129.

<sup>609</sup> Boon Woo, 240-41.

directly, as if Christianity were some sort of teaching or even some sort of romanticized experience.<sup>610</sup>

Since knowledge of God gained from perception or direct experience is impossible, Barth asserts that “we can only receive the Gospel.”<sup>611</sup> Any attempt to build an account of God based on natural theology, religious anthropology, or emotional experience is a compromise with the truth. It is an avoidance of our epistemic and existential poverty, the KRISIS and judgment under which we stand. Only in our poverty does Christ “display his mercy” precisely “by inaugurating His KRISIS and bringing us under judgment.”<sup>612</sup> Therefore, any attempt to circumvent this crisis is to turn from the mercy of the hidden Christ back to the No-God. Any attempt at direct epistemological access to God is idolatry.<sup>613</sup>

Moreover, Barth employs Kierkegaard to illustrate how the recognition, and indeed the existential horror, at our complete epistemological bankruptcy in the face of the wholly Other is essential to Christianity. For Barth, any compromise regarding this Krisis would be a turn from Christianity to “Christendom.” As Kierkegaard writes, Christendom is Christianity “without any fear and trembling before the Deity, without the death throes that are the birth pangs of faith, without the shudder that is the beginning of worship, without the horror of the possibility of offense.”<sup>614</sup> In Christendom, “one immediately and directly comes to know what cannot be known directly.”<sup>615</sup> Thus Barth concludes that “an ineffective peace-pact of compromise with that existence which, moving with its own moment, lies on this side of the resurrection” is the idolatry which causes the immorality of Romans 1. Because of this compromise, Liberal theology has “lost all relation to the power of God.”<sup>616</sup>

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<sup>610</sup> Barth, Romans, 51-52.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>613</sup> Kierkegaard, 129.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>616</sup> Barth, 36-37.

In elaborating his concerns about Christendom, Barth surprisingly marshals Franz Overbeck. Barth found Overbeck's criticism of contemporary Christian theology "provocative."<sup>617</sup> Overbeck held that Christian theology had betrayed the originality of its message by denying its unique irrationality and its eschatology. For Christianity, a faith founded on contradiction, to be coherent, it must be "satisfied to live with the contradiction and not attempt to escape from it."<sup>618</sup> Moreover, Overbeck's "distinction between ... 'history' and 'primal history' (Urgeschichte)" led Barth to rethink his own conception of Revelation's relation to history. Overbeck argued that the early Christians were not only countercultural, they were ahistorical. They lived in the eternal moment, the "primal history" of the imminent eschaton.<sup>619</sup> This led Barth to understand the moment of Christianity to be something totally independent of historically narrated Christendom, reinforcing his distinction between time and eternity.<sup>620</sup> Thus Overbeck taught Barth that Revelation was outside of history and that Christianity must not attempt to reconcile itself with history.<sup>621</sup>

Of course, Barth also employs traditional sources in his exegesis of Romans 1. While Luther finds in Romans a soteriological message, Barth finds an epistemological one. Barth builds on Luther's critique of moral striving to note that we cannot even know God by our own efforts. Later in the commentary, Barth freely interchanges the language from the Lutheran reformation, *iustitia forensis*, *iustitia aliena*, about salvation by faith alone, to explain his conception of knowledge "by faith" alone.<sup>622</sup> Such a reading allows Barth to not only offer an exegesis of Romans, but to also make Luther speak to the same issue—indeed the one issue—that Barth wishes to address.

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<sup>617</sup> Kenneth Oaks, *Reading Karl Barth: A Companion to Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 28.

<sup>618</sup> Barth, 39.

<sup>619</sup> Dorrien, 63.

<sup>620</sup> Oaks, 17.

<sup>621</sup> See McCormack, 226-35, for a more detailed analysis of Overbeck's influence.

<sup>622</sup> Barth, 93.

In Romans 1, Barth quotes Luther saying that “only nothing shall be something.” God can only be known when epistemological striving ceases.<sup>623</sup> Barth notes that Luther says this “despair ... has its own consolation.” For the epistemological poverty and the existential crisis which God’s ever present absence entails is at the same time the possibility of God’s revelation. In this way, “[w]hen He leads us to heaven, He thrusts us down into hell.”<sup>624</sup> For only in abandoning all hope in our own efforts and in fully confronting our own inability can we ever hope that God may deign to appear. Thus Barth’s notion that God’s wrath is also the possibility of his righteousness is fully in line with the Reformation tradition that Luther inaugurated.

Barth continues this insistence on poverty and emptiness when he turns to his consideration of the proper understanding of the Law in Romans 2:

The law is the impression of divine revelation left behind in time, in history, and in the lives of men; it is a heap of clinkers marking a fiery miracle which has taken place, a burnt out crater disclosing the place where God has spoken, a solemn reminder of the humiliation through which some men had been compelled to pass, a dry canal which in a past generation and under different conditions had been filled with the living water of faith and of clear perception, a canal formed out of ideas and conceptions and commandments, all of which call to mind the behavior of certain other man, and demand that their conduct should be maintained. The men who have the law are the men who inhabit this empty canal. They are stamped with the impress of the true and unknown God, because they possess the form of traditional and inherited religion, or even the form of an experience which once had been theirs. Consequently, they have in their midst the sign-post which points them to God, to the KRISIS of human existence, to the new world which is set at the barrier of this world.<sup>625</sup>

Thus the Law itself is not Revelation! Neither is any scripture nor indeed the written words of the Gospel. The Law, being part of this world, cannot be thought to contain Divine Revelation. For Revelation is not part of this world. It comes from God and does not remain in this world to be captured even in Holy Scripture.<sup>626</sup>

The Law, properly understood, is merely the void left behind after Revelation has occurred. This is why Barth uses the imagery of a dry canal. Revelation is the water that once

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<sup>623</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid.

flowed to form the canal. But after the event of Revelation, the empty canal is left dry. Moreover, Revelation “cannot be compelled to flow between empty banks” again.<sup>627</sup> Though God has once revealed Himself in a particular way, there is no guarantee that God will reveal Himself again under these same conditions.

While on the one hand, the Law is nothing, on the other hand, the people who have the Law really are a privileged people. For those who possess the Law dwell in the canal remembering the event of revelation. Thus the “true Jews” of Barth’s day “are the idealists, the especially favored, those who have an experience of God, or, at least a remembrance of such experience. Their impress of revelation, their religion, and their piety, demonstrate and bear witness to God.”<sup>628</sup> However, they cannot hold to their remembrance of past revelation as if it is Revelation itself. For Barth, this is the error of the “spiritual Jews” in Romans chapter 2. They remained in the canal demanding that Revelation reappear.

Barth holds that Revelation cannot be contained by any old canal. He states, “The living water fashions its own course, and the visible pre-eminence of the inhabitants of the canal is destroyed.”<sup>629</sup> Old ways of religion, of thinking, and of doing religious history are destroyed by Revelation. Clinging to the past events of Revelation is no way to avoid the destructive power of God’s ever-new apocalypse. For God’s Revelation will not be captured, predicted, or compelled by any human effort. As Barth argues, “If divinity be so concreted and humanized in a particular department of history—the history of religion or the history of salvation—God has ceased to be God, and there can be there no relation with him.”<sup>630</sup>

On the other hand, Barth reminds us that the past events of Revelation are not useless. They are signposts that point to the Unknown God. In the very void that these empty canals of past Revelation contain, they demonstrate that something was. The Law is one such signpost.

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<sup>627</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., 79.

The Law, itself an impossibility, points to the KRISIS in which man can recognize the true God as the unknown God. In these voids, “we are able to see that the whole occurrence of the known world derives its content and significance from the Unknown God.”<sup>631</sup> That is, God’s otherworldliness relativizes and negates all knowledge in this world. The knowledge contained in this world is but a questionable parenthetical in the face of God’s unknowability.

After defining the Law as a void, Barth goes on to consider Romans 2:7: How does God render “to every man according to his works”? Barth notes that “God alone is the merchant who can pay in the currency of eternity. He alone can make a valuation which is eternally valid.”<sup>632</sup> Thus “we must not overestimate our works.”<sup>633</sup> For outward works can never indicate eternal value. As Barth notes, the “vessel of faith” may be clean or dirty. Yet it contains that which is necessary for eternal life—a void in its center. Ultimately, as is true with all Revelation, God’s presence to us and acceptance of us depend only on His will. Thus we can only make space—by ceasing from all striving—in the hope that God might appear. This is the work which God might reward with eternal life. For “where such faith is discovered by Revelation, there is Christ.”<sup>634</sup>

Just as epistemological reaching and arrogance prevent the affirmation of the God’s definitive negation, so too can moral striving be a clinging to the No-God and a rejection of God Himself. Thus, when Gentiles, who do not have the Law, do the things of the law by nature, they are recognizing the void in their lives. It is still God Who justifies. God’s “rewarding according to man’s works” is thus no nod to human righteousness. For “the righteousness of men ... comes [only] by the revelation of God.”<sup>635</sup>

The void that is the possibility of God’s alien righteousness is perhaps, then for Barth, expressed better in the manifest sinfulness of the Gentiles than in the observance of the Law of

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<sup>631</sup> Ibid..

<sup>632</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid., 63.

the Jews. For “the Gentile world no doubt lies in wickedness; but it may be a world so disintegrated, so disorganized, and so undermined, that the mercy of God seems closer and more credible than where the ‘Kingdom of God’ is displayed in full bloom.”<sup>636</sup> Hence Gentiles, justified by God, are “the doers of the law ... the Jew which is one inwardly.... They shall be accounted (declared) righteous.”<sup>637</sup> These Gentiles shall not be, humanly speaking, righteous. For their righteousness, the law written in their heart, has “no positive content.”<sup>638</sup> It too is but a void, a lacking.

Here Barth finds in Dostoevsky a genuine interpreter of Romans. Dostoevsky presents “a powerful dialectical criticism of religion ... in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* between the godlessness of religion manifested in the church attendance by the St. Petersburg bourgeoisie and a religion of godlessness in the form of atheistic, nihilistic, proto-communists.”<sup>639</sup> Righteousness is found in neither extreme. Barth considers “[t]he religion and the experiences of the characters in the novels” to be relevant examples of how “those who have the law—even if it be the Gospel!—have no occasion to regard [the seemingly non-religious people] merely as objects of missionary enterprise, or to speak of them in superior fashion as people possessed of “elementary forms of religion.”<sup>640</sup> For in those characters, whose religion is in “no way derived from the Church,” we find human beings who are at the “last stage of human nakedness.”<sup>641</sup> Only in the broken characters, the manifestly unrighteous, those with no religious or political clout, can Christ be found. Thus their situation is ideal for the appearance of God’s righteousness, should He deign to appear. They are the “doers of the Law” praised by Paul in Romans 2.

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<sup>636</sup> Ibid., 67

<sup>637</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>639</sup> Brazier, *Barth and Dostoevsky* (Indiana: Paternoster, 2007), 166.

<sup>640</sup> Barth, 67.

<sup>641</sup> Barth, 68.



## Commonalities and Distinctions

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, it is Barth's method, not the content of his thought, that Catholic thinkers should most deeply consider. For, as Catholics, we must firmly reject the notion that nothing remains on this side of the Revelation. In fact, for us, it is in this world, through and through, that God has written His word. Our epistemology, anthropology, and ontology all point to the God Who is Being itself and in Whom all goodness, truth, and beauty participate as one.<sup>642</sup> We hold that nature actually speaks about God to us, imparting positive content. Hence our language can really be about God. Above all of this, Jesus Christ is the eternal Hypostasis who entered into history and remains in it even on this side of the resurrection. For "everything in Christ's human nature," his psychology, sociology, history, etc., "is to be attributed to his divine person as its proper subject...."<sup>643</sup> God is still flesh and blood. God is thoroughly in this world!

Paradoxically, I have argued that Gadamer's account of hermeneutics is correct but that the very thesis that makes Barth's hermeneutic similar to Gadamer's is wrong. Since Barth finds all human knowledge, even the scriptures, to be nothing more than sign posts of God's absence, all knowledge is relativized. For Barth, God's absence in time and history makes all time and history available sources for consultation and dialogue. For the Catholic, as we shall see in the coming chapter, all history is available for dialogue but for the opposite reason than that which Barth gives. It is Christ's presence in time and history that makes conversation with multiple sources relevant. Hence, it is paradoxical but true that Catholic thinkers must emulate the approach that Barth grounds in a premise that Catholics cannot accept.

With Barth, Catholics must affirm that simple repetition of tired orthodoxy does not address the questions of today. Moreover, liberal redactions of the faith betray it. Instead, a fusion of tradition and all that is new at hand must occur. Just as Barth took Kant and

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<sup>642</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 41.

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.

Overbeck's critiques seriously, so must Catholics engage post-modern, post-structuralist, Marxist, feminist, and atheistic critiques. Just as Barth was unafraid to find truth in the new, so too must Catholic exegetes look to these new sources of knowledge for insights which must never be declared anathema simply because of the ideological leaning of their source.

While Barth could listen to atheistic and nihilistic voices because of his insistence of the eternal truth of the Crisis of God's absence, we Catholics can hear dissenting voices because of our insistence on God's ubiquitous presence. We hold nature to be God's manuscript. We see in every human God's image. Hence all voices today, when speaking the truth, speak to the one who is truth itself, to Jesus Christ. Thus though we disagree with Barth's rationale, we must affirm his conclusion. The voices of today can and must interpret the tradition of our past. Rather than attempting to "move beyond" or "leave behind" these traditional signposts, Catholic traditional texts must be reread and rethought so that the questions and answers that these texts presuppose can emerge today, in this context, and in this situation in which we find ourselves. It is in this world that Jesus Christ came. It is in this history that the Sacrament of His Presence, the Church, remains. It is here and now that Christ must continue to speak.

## Chapter 7. A Catholic Alternative

The living Tradition of God's people on pilgrimage through history does not come to a stop at a particular point in that history. It arrives at the present only to move on to the future. A dogmatic definition is not only the end of a development but equally a new start. If a truth of faith has become dogma it becomes part for good of the *Paradosis* which travels on. Following on definition comes acceptance, which is a living grasp of the dogma in the common life of the Church and a deeper insight into the truth the dogma presents. For dogma should not simply be a relic of times past; it should bear fruit in the life of the Church. For that reason, attention should not be limited to the negative or restrictive side of it, but to its positive side since that is its doorway to truth.<sup>644</sup>

—“The Interpretation of Dogma,” Vatican Theological Commission

### A Catholic Response to Barth

As I noted in the last chapter, the Catholic must appropriate Barth's method in a manner paradoxically opposed to the thesis that Barth so forcefully advances. While Barth grounded his method in the relativizing unavailability of God, the Catholic grounds his approach in the relativizing availability of God. For Barth's project, all supposed knowledge is useful in that it points to the absence of God, even the scriptures are merely a record of God's past presence through which He may or may not chose to speak again.<sup>645</sup>

For the Catholic, on the other hand, because Christ is “a specific figure in history,” “Christianity is ... dogmatic in its intimate nature.”<sup>646</sup> That is, because God entered into history—in various and sundry ways but most clearly in the person of Christ<sup>647</sup>—Christianity makes linguistic assertions about God. Moreover, because this historical person promised to actively guide his Church, we trust the language—or at least the most precious instances of that language—that this Church writes about him. It is this historical person who is the ultimate

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<sup>644</sup> Vatican Theological Commission, “The Interpretation of Dogma,” Vatican City, 1989, C 3 1. Hereafter: VTC.

<sup>645</sup> It is important to note that in this dissertation, I have dealt only with Barth's thought in his *Commentary on Romans*. Barth has addressed many of my concerns, and thoroughly so, in the larger corpus of his work.

<sup>646</sup> VTC, B III 1.

<sup>647</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2.

*Sache* of these irreformable assertions. On the other hand, because Christ remains an active subject within language, and because language is given to being interpreted in new ways as it is brought to dialogues in new situations, there is always possibility for new interpretations of even these unalterable dogmatic assertions.

For non-Catholic readers, the distinction between dogmatic and doctrinal language must be highlighted. Dogmatic language is held to be infallible and irreformable. Other, non-dogmatic doctrine language, though authoritative, might err and is always subject to revision. Thus my argument is that dogmatic language, i.e., the creeds, the scriptures, papal and conciliar decrees, must constantly be reinterpreted but never erased and rewritten. On the other hand, doctrinal language serves as an important prejudice in interpreting dogmatic language, but doctrinal language remains open to revision and rejection.

### **Christ as Sache**

As I noted at the start of the dissertation, the early Christians began their interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures by viewing them through a thoroughly Christological lens. This is reflected perhaps most clearly in the Letter to the Hebrews in which many concepts from the Torah—such as Moses, priesthood, sacrifice, and prophet—are reinterpreted in a Christological fashion. The Christological lens is a pattern of interpretation that finds Christ as the ultimate *Sache* of all scriptures, “the culmination of the Torah.”<sup>648</sup> St. Jerome continues this close association between Christ and the scriptures: “Ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”<sup>649</sup> Christ continues to be the *Sache* of Christian dogmatic language in the history of early Church reflection. Indeed, each of the first seven ecumenical councils revolves around Christ: his deity, his two natures, and his two wills. Hence it is no surprise that Jesus Christ is the ultimate *Sache* of the three Catholic authors whom we analyzed in the early chapters.

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<sup>648</sup> Romans 10:4.

<sup>649</sup> St. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri xviii* prol.:PL 24,17B.

As Origen considered the questions of the heretical groups, he was in fact defending the faith whose tradition bourgeoned from the words of this historical Christ and the hierarchy whose succession connected him to Jesus of Nazareth. Origen's assertion that God was not arbitrary was a defense of the fairness of Christ, who came not to condemn indiscriminately but to love all. His fervent railing against the doctrine of multiple natures was a defense of the one human nature that Christ assumed for humanity's salvation.

Similarly, Augustine's readings of Romans 1 and 2 are readings about Christ. In his earlier years, Augustine read the text in a way that preserved Christ's justice and his availability to all. On encountering Pelagian thinkers, he reread the text in this new context. Nonetheless, around this same Subject, in order to preserve Christ's central, determinative role in the salvation of the elect, Augustine now insists on the necessity of grace and the total inability of the unredeemed to cooperate in salvation.

Aquinas likewise read Romans 1 and 2 to learn not about Aristotle but about Christ. Aristotle's insights into logic, human nature, and epistemology, in the end, are not simply statements that tell us about nature. Rather, these truths are necessarily directed toward the one Truth, the object of all knowledge. Whatever Aristotle says well about nature, he says well about that which God created by the Logos. Whatever Aristotle says well about human virtue, he says about He Who is Virtue incarnate. For this reason, when, according to tradition, Christ asked the Angelic Doctor what he sought as his reward, Aquinas could reply, "Non nisi te, Domine."<sup>650</sup>

Even today, for the Catholic, the proper *Sache* of the scripture, and indeed of all knowledge, is not, as Barth asserted, the unknown God. It is God revealed in Jesus Christ. He is "the key, the centre, and the purpose of the whole of man's history."<sup>651</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, the magisterial defense of the centrality of Jesus, proclaims:

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<sup>650</sup> "Nothing but you, Lord."

<sup>651</sup> *Dominus Iesus*, 13.

The revelation of Christ will continue to be “the true lodestar” in history for all humanity: “The truth, which is Christ, imposes itself as an all-embracing authority.” The Christian mystery, in fact, overcomes all barriers of time and space, and accomplishes the unity of the human family: “From their different locations and traditions all are called in Christ to share in the unity of the family of God’s children”....<sup>652</sup>

In the final analysis, the “deposit of faith,” given to the Church as the Church’s object of faith is really the Person of Christ, the Object to whom our faith ultimately reaches.<sup>653</sup> That Christ is the final Object of faith does not negate or in any way reduce the need for dogmatic assertions.<sup>654</sup> On the contrary, Christ is active in the dogmatic language of the Church, most especially in the Holy Scripture.<sup>655</sup> Hence Catholics should never cease to speak these received assertions. For unlike the “empty channels” we found in Barth, we see in these words the means of Christ’s presence, flowing rivers of revelation. In this sense the Catholic Church is profoundly conservative regarding dogmatic language.

Even as our understanding of these words changes, even as we come into contact with new ways of thinking about this dogmatic language, inspired by the “Spirit of truth” who leads us to He Who is Truth, the words of our formerly proclaimed dogmatic statements retain full validity. That which we hold to be preserved from error cannot suddenly become error.<sup>656</sup> Hence the Church never ceases to proclaim anything—starting with the Scriptures—that we have dogmatically proclaimed to be true.<sup>657</sup>

As Pope John Paul II continues:

... the full and complete revelation of the salvific mystery of God is given in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the words, deeds, and entire historical event of Jesus, though limited as human realities, have nevertheless the divine Person of the Incarnate Word, “true God and true man”<sup>13</sup> as their subject. For this reason, they possess in

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<sup>652</sup> Dominus Iesus, 23.

<sup>653</sup> “Actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem.” The Latin is: “the act of the believer does not terminate in a proposition, but in the thing itself.” See Aquinas *Ila Ilae*, q. 1, a.2, ad 2.

<sup>654</sup> Catechism, 170.

<sup>655</sup> For this reason the word of God is “living and active.” Cf. Hebrew 4:12.

<sup>656</sup> The infallibility of scripture, conciliar statements, and infallibly proclaimed papal dogmatic pronouncements.

<sup>657</sup> Of course, this does not mean that every theological statement of the magisterium is preserved from error and must be repeated as truth. Indeed, only dogmatic definitions, and most especially the Holy Scriptures, hold this kind of eternal validity. On the other hand, the various theological opinions and doctrinal decisions made by the Pope and the bishops in union with him require obedience, not theological faith.

themselves the definitiveness and completeness of the revelation of God's salvific ways, even if the depth of the divine mystery in itself remains transcendent and inexhaustible. The truth about God is not abolished or reduced because it is spoken in human language; rather, it is unique, full, and complete, because he who speaks and acts is the Incarnate Son of God. Thus, faith requires us to profess that the Word made flesh, in his entire mystery, who moves from incarnation to glorification, is the source, participated but real, as well as the fulfilment of every salvific revelation of God to humanity, and that the Holy Spirit, who is Christ's Spirit, will teach this "entire truth" (*Jn* 16:13) to the Apostles and, through them, to the whole Church.<sup>658</sup>

Whereas for Barth, God's absence could be found and demonstrated in the dialogical use of language, for the Catholic, Christ is given to be present in language. To understand how Christ's presence is communicated linguistically requires an understanding of how language operates in general terms. I propose that the Gadamerian account of language, which I outlined in chapter 1, offers a great deal of explanatory power for the notion of an active Christ in irreformable word that at the same time allows for the possibility of doctrinal change.

### **The Fixity of Words and the Flexibility of Meanings**

Gadamer's account of language can elucidate a Catholic account of dogmatic language and how Christ operates in that language. For Gadamer, "[b]eing that can be understood is language."<sup>659</sup> In order for Christ to be available for our comprehension, He must be in language, not merely an object in the unintelligible, non-linguistic environment. Since God concretely entered into history in the person of Jesus Christ, he entered into our world, to the world mediated by language to speak to it and to act in it.

Catholics hold that language is a unique medium of Christ's presence, especially as He is knowable in scripture. God remains here and now available particularly in linguistic form. Christ's presence in the words of the scripture is highlighted in the liturgical veneration of the scriptures with incense and with the osculations of the Gospel. He is said to speak to us in the

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<sup>658</sup> Redemptor Matris, 28-29.

<sup>659</sup> Gadamer, 474.

words of the sacramental formulas and in the words of preacher to move the heart to conversion. Hence for the Catholic, it not only a matter of scriptural assertion but also a matter of religious experience that Christ is the Word, the Logos.

It is a matter of faith that Christ is active in particular instances of language—so I make no effort to prove that here. It is a result of this faith that Catholics hold that all dogmatic language, from Scripture to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, remains valid and preserved by the Christ who is active in it.<sup>660</sup> This, it seems to me, is what the Catholic today means by the “infallibility” of scripture or of other dogmatic assertions. The infallible statement is the irreformable statement, the statement that communicates Christ’s presence in such a way that it can never be erased. The Christian tradition has always been transmitted, at least in part, in irreformable words: the creed and the New Testament being paradigmatic instances of this. Such instances were repeated throughout conciliar and later papal declarations. These words have been judged so important that they cannot be simply excised from the tradition.

Scripture is the surest and most evident example of such irreformable statements.<sup>661</sup> Following the scriptural tradition already established by the people of Israel, the Church continued to view language as a primary vehicle of truth.<sup>662</sup> The canonization of the Christian scriptures in a final and thereafter unchangeable form is continued to express the Church’s confidence in the possibility that a fixed linguistic form could perdure the needs of successive generations. The infallibility of Scripture—and of later infallible dogmatic utterances—should be understood, then, to mean that truth has been and will continue to be encountered in the language of these statements. Hence I conclude that Catholics must hold fast to these statements as they are handed down to us. Even so, from Gadamer, I offer that we must

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<sup>660</sup> In traditional language, it is the Holy Spirit who preserves the Church from error. On the other hand, that idea that Christ acts through the Church and especially through the Scriptures is also an important doctrinal emphasis. Here I attempt to reconcile the two ideas by highlighting the latter.

<sup>661</sup> The scripture is unique in that it is divinely inspired. Other infallible statements are fully human statements only guarded from error.

<sup>662</sup> Of course, the language is not the only vehicle of encountering God. Prayer, liturgy, and sacraments are also means of such an encounter. These means, however, are not usually fully removed from linguistic realities.



interpret these instances of language in an event of reading, a dialogue with the language that has been given to us, in order to encounter truth in them today. In this dialogue with the past statements, truth is indeed manifest in new ways and in new situations. This process, accepting the given language while fusing it to one's own contemporary horizon, has been evidenced in the authors we have considered up to this point and, I propose, is a process that needs recovery today.

In spite of our faith in Christ's divine presence in these words, dogmatic statements maintains their character as human linguistic utterances. Just as Christ's divine nature did not destroy his human nature, so too must we say that dogmatic utterances, despite their divine nature retain their full human character. Grace perfects their nature but does not destroy it. Thus these statements retain the ambiguity of human utterances and the inevitability of radically new understandings.

While it is in fact necessary for the Church from time to time to assert new language, the old language cannot be transcended or reduced to something more fundamental. The scriptures can never be replaced by a catechism. Old dogmatic formulations cannot be erased by future councils. The traditional language itself is the mode by which Christ reveals himself. Hence we hold that Christ really will be met in these words of re-proclamation.<sup>663</sup> Though every statement of scripture or of dogma is culturally and historically bound, we do not simply rewrite it when we find the old meaning inadequate. Instead, we reinterpret it.

The nature of language entails that all scriptural and dogmatic assertions are always open to new interpretations. Indeed, as Gadamer argues, understanding any traditional language requires engagement with new historical horizons. Even recognizing an old meaning in a new context is itself a productive act of tradition. The old, given language must become

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<sup>663</sup> 1 John 1:1-3 "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

alive in new dialogue here and now for it to mean anything at all. Just as we keep the linguistic expression “the sun rises” though we understand it differently today, so too do we keep the traditional dogmatic assertion that there is no salvation outside of the Church even while we understand it as expressing radically new propositions.<sup>664</sup>

The Church’s faith in these irreformable, infallible statements does not prevent her engagement with new cultural, scientific, and religious horizons. The multiple possibilities present in all language and the necessity that language be spoken in particular conversations requires that these venerable dogmas be continually applied and explained anew. Scriptural and other dogmatic assertions’ meaning today cannot be simply determined by their meaning yesterday. Since meaning is negotiated in dialogue, meaning today will be sometimes surprising, and meaning tomorrow cannot be anticipated.

Language as a medium of Christ’s presence ensures the possibility of Christ’s continued activity, of his not becoming an object that lacks subjective power.<sup>665</sup> In language, there is both knowability and indeterminacy, limitation and freedom. This flexibility allows for the possibility of Christ’s continued subjective movement. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The person is a unity over and above entity and non-entity; it is objective, that is, knowable and recognizable. And yet, on account of its true, qualified objectivity, and by virtue of its freedom from the knower and its freedom not to be, it never falls into the power of the knowing I.”<sup>666</sup> Dogmatic formulations regarding Christ are knowable and determinative. Nonetheless, these dogmatic assertions, like all linguistic assertions, afford Christ the element of freedom proper to his personhood. He can speak anew even in old utterances. As Pope Francis asserts, “God cannot be reduced to an

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<sup>664</sup> Of course there are varying levels of traditional teaching. Scripture and dogmatic papal and conciliar announcements can never be abandoned.

<sup>665</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, like the Catholic exegete today, was confronted with understanding how the word of God could be understood in a post-Kantian, post-Liberal, post-Barthian framework. Bonhoeffer follows Barth in identifying the naturalized theology of the nineteenth century as having misunderstood Revelation by treating it as a thing-in-itself. For the Liberal Theologians, revelation was being which could be understood as such. Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth’s rejection of this characterization of God. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer does not follow Barth in his conclusion that revelation is simply an incomprehensible act which has no durability over time and no possibility of interaction with the human mind. Instead, Bonhoeffer proposes that God’s revelation is the unity of act and being: a person.

<sup>666</sup> Act and Being, 126.

object. He is a subject who makes himself known and perceived in an interpersonal relationship.”<sup>667</sup> Hence the Person of Christ, even considered dogmatically, acts unrestrained, free from the “knowing I.”

### **Christ as Truth**

For Gadamer truth is manifestation, *aletheia*, a disclosure that presupposes involvement in and existential commitment to the subject at hand. Truth at its most basic level is not the relationship of a list of propositions to some language-independent reality. Rather, truth is the recognition of something about one’s own world. Other types of truth, such as truth as correspondence or truth as coherence, presuppose this more basic event of recognition. This event of recognition requires involvement in, not detachment from, the subject at hand. For instance, when one recognizes some truth as it is presented in a work of art, one must already share something in common with the work of art that she is seeing. Because of this shared background, the art is intelligible and can be interpreted as something new. This shared commitment, this common history that one has with the work of art also entails that the event of understanding is a recognition not only about something in the world but is also about oneself. For understanding something in one’s world is always also self-understanding. In this respect, the event of truth is, at heart, an existential event. It calls the interpreter to move outside himself to something greater and then to return to himself having changed.

If one accepts this conception of truth, then the true interpretation of scripture need not be reduced to correspondence with some list of propositions, which are supposedly contained “in” scriptural utterances. For all propositions that one might abstract from scripture are themselves linguistic statements that are reducible to other propositions. A more basic, more fundamental notion of truth is necessary to avoid this unending series of interpretations.

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<sup>667</sup> Lumen Fidei, 36.

Against the interpretation of dogma as a list of propositions, I propose that dogmatic statements, and preeminently the scriptures themselves, are irreducible from the language in which they are written. The correctness of the interpretation of scriptural and other dogmatic statements cannot be examined by reducing those interpretations to a set of propositions and then comparing those propositions to something in the “real world.” Rather, the true interpretation of dogmatic statements should be judged in how clearly the interpretation allows for the manifestation, the *aletheia*, the disclosure of truth.

For the Christian, this disclosure of truth is a disclosure of Christ. For the Christian, Christ is the truth. Pope Francis expresses the notion of truth as an encounter with Christ this way:

The question arises: does “the” truth really exist? What is “the” truth? Can we know it? Can we find it? Here springs to my mind the question of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Procurator, when Jesus reveals to him the deep meaning of his mission: “What is truth?” (Jn 18:37, 38). Pilate cannot understand that “the” Truth is standing in front of him, he cannot see in Jesus the face of the truth that is the face of God. And yet Jesus is exactly this: the Truth that, in the fullness of time, “became flesh” (cf. Jn 1:1, 14), and came to dwell among us so that we might know it. The truth is not grasped as a thing, the truth is encountered. It is not a possession, it is an encounter with a Person.<sup>668</sup>

The Christian has committed his life to interpret the world according to Christ whose voice he hears and whose action he observes in every aspect of his world. The entirety of a Christian’s world is, ideally, centered on Christ. The Christian’s life, and everything in his world, is then seen in relation to Christ. In the New Testament, the Church encounters Christ speaking not only in scriptural words but also in visions, events, coincidences, and inner feelings. For them, everything was Christ.

Christ’s manifestation, Christ’s voice, is then the ultimate truth. It is fundamental to any other assertion of truth. For the Christian, the manifestation of Christ, the sense that Christ is speaking, is the criterion of truth at its most fundamental level. For the Christian, all other

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<sup>668</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, May 15, 2003.

commitments in this world, and thus all other manifestations of truth, are evaluated by the truth that is Christ's presence. Christ "has become wisdom for us."<sup>669</sup> Knowing Christ and having an experience of Him thus relativizes all other wisdom and all other assertions of truth.<sup>670</sup>

This feeling and interior sensation of Christ must never be divorced from the Christ of history, language, and tradition. One cannot speak of Truth as if it were somehow loosely connected with the historical person of Christ or simply as if Christ were one manifestation of some greater Truth whose voice we hear. For the Catholic, Truth and Christ are one and the same. Though all time and all people can witness this Truth in various ways and with varying degrees of success, He can never be relativized into some higher category. As Pope John Paul II writes:

Jesus Christ is the very Word of God. He is not a word among many, but he is the word. To introduce any sort of separation between the Word and Jesus Christ is contrary to the Christian faith. St. John clearly states that the Word, who "was in the beginning with God," is the very one who "became flesh" (Jn 1:2, 14). Jesus is the Incarnate Word—a single and indivisible person. One cannot separate Jesus from the Christ or speak of a "Jesus of history" who would differ from the "Christ of faith." The Church acknowledges and confesses Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16): Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth: he is the Word of God made man for the salvation of all.<sup>671</sup>

Christ is "[t]he presence of the Eternal in a specific figure in history" and is God's "definitive answer" to man's deepest questions.<sup>672</sup> Indeed even those truths which seem most disjointed from Christ, which seem to be in opposition to Him must, if they are to have any lasting value, be understood in relation to Christ.<sup>673</sup> Like Barth, Catholics recognized the unicity of an all-encompassing Truth. However, unlike Barth, we assert that this Truth unites all others. Truth is not an absence that necessarily relativizes other truths and brings them to nothing. Rather this Truth has the possibility of grounding other truths inasmuch as these truths can manifest

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<sup>669</sup> 1 Cor . 1:30.

<sup>670</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 1:18-30.

<sup>671</sup> RM 6.

<sup>672</sup> VTC B III 1.

<sup>673</sup> This, no doubt, is a difficult task. Some truths seem quite easily understood in their reference to Christ. For instance one can easily see how the discovery of an economic principle that reduces poverty can be incorporated into the Church's message of salvation. It is more difficult to understand how truths of quantum mechanics might do that. Nonetheless, if these types of "wisdom" are to be of any ultimate use to the Christian, they must be understood in their relationship to Christ. The Christian always asks himself, "How does this help me love God and love others?"

Christ's presence. Therefore knowledge that originates outside of the traditional deposit of faith is no "alternative to Christ nor does [it] fill a sort of void which is sometimes suggested as existing between Christ and the Logos."<sup>674</sup> For "[w]hatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions, ... can only be understood in reference to Christ, the Word who took flesh by the power of the Spirit 'so that as perfectly human he would save all human beings and sum up all things'".<sup>675</sup>

Against Barth, the Catholic holds that the Logos by which the world was created is the very Logos who is working through the Church, the pillar and foundation of truth. In some sense, He has already spoken in the very structure of how the world works. Hence whatever is true about the world is true because it is Christ who wrote an intelligible world. Nonetheless, the intelligibility of that world rests on its ability to be reconciled with and understood in the context of the historical figure who came on earth. Moreover, the Church holds that the Holy Spirit is active in the entirety of the created world. In this sense, there is a "historical-salvific function of the Spirit in the whole universe and in the entire history of humanity."<sup>676</sup> Nonetheless, this is "the same Spirit who was at work in the incarnation and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and who is at work in the Church."<sup>677</sup>

Truth, the existential experience of Christ's presence, is in the final analysis unverifiable outside of faith. Just as Christ is present in the Eucharist, his presence is encountered when scripture, dogmatic assertions, or any truths about him are rightly interpreted. Yet just as only faith can make Christ's presence in the Eucharist known, only in faith can Christ's presence in new interpretations be encountered.<sup>678</sup>

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<sup>674</sup> DJ 12.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid.

<sup>678</sup> But one can be wrong. Of course one can have genuine faith but receive Eucharist from an invalidly ordained priest. The faith doesn't make Christ present. It is the possibility of recognizing Christ's presence. Other factors are necessary for Christ to be present. There are other factors: that handed on by tradition (ordination) and the acceptance by the community (using a valid Eucharistic formula).

The notion that truth is a disclosure of Christ is indeed a personalistic, perhaps even internalist, notion of truth. In some ways this seems fitting with the Catholic tradition. As Pope Francis says, Christ is “perceived in an interpersonal relationship.”<sup>679</sup> However, the moment of dogmatic and scriptural exegesis does not remain simply up to the individual’s reading. For the Church trusts that Christ speaks to all her members to reveal Himself anew in the world today. His presence is assured in conformity to the tradition that he has handed down and is then confirmed by the acceptance of the community in which his Spirit resides. Thus an individual, personal interpretation is not only tied to a private reading of the dogmatic language but also to its acceptance in the community.

This internal, faith-based notion of Christ as truth does not preclude external, rational criteria for evaluating interpretations. While exegesis ought to include prayer and meditation, it cannot be carried out successfully apart from scholarly and rational consideration of what the whole of the tradition teaches. The novel interpretation of one verse must be explained in terms that make sense with other verses. Moreover, such individual interpretations are tested in the community of the Church, Christ’s corporate body, as she works to interpret the traditionary material as a whole. From time to time, the community recognizes the disclosure of Christ in profoundly new ways, e.g., the dogmatic constitutions of the Second Vatican Council.

Whether it is an individual interpreter or the magisterium at work, Christ remains the protagonist of his own disclosure. For it is the work of Christ in his body, the Church, that brings this about. It is he who speaks even in the signs of the time and in the voices of non-Christians so that the truth may continue to emerge. Nonetheless, each of these events of truth must be seen as partial and incomplete. For even when the church comes to full, indeed supernatural, clarity and is willing to speak infallibly—that is, to put the experience of Christ into new language—her understanding remains limited and open to new unpredictable interpretations.

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<sup>679</sup> LF 36.

As an interpreter “comes to agreement” with the text of scripture and with the community of the Church, there truth is encountered. Truth then is—as Gadamer says— an event. In reading new texts and encountering new horizons—scientific advancements, cultural shifts, etc.—the dogmatic statements handed down to us become the locus of this encounter.<sup>680</sup> While the various propositions we associate with the text indeed serve as prejudices with which we approach the various questions, our faith is placed in the statements—the words of the scripture, the Creed, or the conciliar document—themselves because it is by these very words that Christ is mediated. We must be honest in asserting that the propositions we use to understand the statements do not themselves grasp the truth of Christ in a way that can definitively predict how Christ might manifest himself in the future. Thus as we “read the signs of the times,”<sup>681</sup> we can encounter Christ in the old words but in surprising new ways. This does not cause us to abandon our traditional sources—we do not rewrite the creed, the Gospels, or conciliar statements—but to reread them in ever new contexts. In this rereading, this dialogue, we can find new truths which are new manifestations of Christ’s presence. These new interpretations were never available before and might cease to be available tomorrow.

For this reason we see the scriptures in Romans 1 and 2 interpreted in such varying, and sometimes apparently contradictory, ways. For the propositions we associate with these verses are the important prejudices with which we understand the text. On the other hand, depending on the questions asked of the text and the horizon in which the text is read, Christ appears in the text differently. He speaks a new message from the old words. It is these instances of Christ’s voice that have sometimes found acceptance in the Church in such a way that they have become part of the irreformable linguistic record.

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<sup>680</sup> This commitment is unique among other commitments that people make in that it is the primary, fundamental existential commitment of the Christian. People died for the very statement “Jesus is Lord” and for the precise term “hypostasis.”

<sup>681</sup> Pope John XXIII, Inauguration of Vatican II.



To the non-Catholic it might appear that my proposal is simply relativism. If, as I am indeed asserting, dogmatic utterances are not really made up of undoubtable propositions, then it seems that doctrines might mean anything that a crafty interpreter might bend them to mean. Indeed, when viewed from the outside, this accusation makes some sense. For it seems that the Church has simply changed its doctrine based on political expedience and historical accidents. Indeed, Gadamer has been accused of such relativist leanings. For Gadamer asserts that the meaning of a text is not fixed and that it changes through history. Moreover, in asserting that understanding is coming to an agreement, it seems that for Gadamer truth is simply relative to what any set of interlocutors are willing to accept as agreement on an issue.

Whether Gadamer escapes the charge of relativism is a complicated question.<sup>682</sup> On the one hand, for Gadamer, truth is always limited. It is always related to a particular subject matter and the disclosure of some particular aspect of the world in a set of finite horizons. Thus any hope of understanding an absolute truth is naive and arrogant. The “event of truth” is always understood to be finite. This event is recognition in which some limited aspect of the world is clearly shown while other aspects remain hidden. On the other hand, Gadamer always sees the possibility of people coming to a better, broader understanding through dialogue. There is always a possibility of people from varying perspectives coming together to see some greater, more general truth. Nonetheless, this newly discovered truth cannot be deemed final or all-encompassing. The human being cannot escape his limited perspective.

The Christian’s assurance against relativism, on the other hand, does not just depend on Gadamer’s response. Though I argue here that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is an appropriate hermeneutic for the Catholic exegete and theologian, the Catholic is not simply Gadamerian. It is ultimately not just Gadamer’s philosophy, even if we accept it is correct and useful, that must resist the charge of relativism. For the Catholic Christian, the assurance that

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<sup>682</sup> For an excellent analysis of the charges against Gadamer’s hermeneutics, see Lawrence Schmidt, *The Specter of Relativism: Truth, Dialogue, and Phronesis in Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1995). The introduction alone provides a valuable introduction into commentary on Gadamer’s notion of truth.

Christ has spoken in his Church and that he will continue to speak in her protects the Church against relativist charges. It is this assurance that transcends, but does not reject, reason. It is the assurance that Christ can say something we didn't expect. He can operate in new ways and yet remain the same Christ. It is the acceptance that, this side of the *Eschaton*, the Christian's knowledge of Christ remains linguistically mediated while Christ remains the one Truth.

Another possible objection to the notion that truth is the manifestation of Christ is the difficulty that such an assertion presents for understanding what truth might mean when not directly applied to Biblical and dogmatic exegesis. For instance, it is difficult to see what truth could mean in relation to geometry, Civil War history, or biology.

Since truth is the manifestation of Christ, truth is more easily disclosed and concealed, the more it has to do with Christ. A true interpretation of some obscure quote about geometry bears little relation to Christ. Little is at stake, and Christ is unlikely to be manifest in a geometrical analysis. Perhaps it can be conceded that something about Christ is very remotely at issue in interpretations of geometry. For if Christ is the logos that wrote the laws of an intelligible world, then geometry's consistency might bear witness to that law. In the same way, truths about power and oppression can reveal Christ when considering the Civil War, and truths about Christ's human nature can emerge in a study of biology.

Even if one does not concede that Christ can be revealed, albeit in remote, obscured ways, in such overtly non-theological topics, one can accept the account I propose. For accepting this most basic principle of truth need not negate other, derivative types of truth. Coherence and correspondence theories of truth need not be rejected in particular domains of knowledge. Nonetheless, for the Christian, anything that is not directed toward Christ is, by comparison, worthless.<sup>683</sup> Its truth is ultimately inconsequential to the Christian, no matter how important it may be to her as a geometrician, a historian, or a biologist. On the other hand, with

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<sup>683</sup> Phil. 3:8: "What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ."

questions such as how gay people ought to be treated, whether abortion is justifiable, and how the Eucharist ought to be celebrated, much to do with Christ is at stake. So with these issues, Christ is most possibly revealed or concealed. Here truth is most at issue. Here the Spirit is likely to bear witness to Christ in the action of his body, the Church.

For the Catholic, individual truths should each be seen as incomplete and finite. So the Catholic should accept that her own understanding is always limited and dependent on her own perspective. In her interpretation of scriptural and other dogmatic utterances, she can rest fully secure in the *words* of the doctrine, but must always hold as tentative and incomplete her own understanding of those words. Moreover, if interpretations of the Gospels will vary in the degree to which they manifest Christ, how much more likely are obscure points of history or psychology to vary in the strength of their truth claim? All “truths” are relativized, irredeemably finite, and dependent on the breadth of the perspective with which they are viewed. Whatever is true of scientific statements and of historical documents is most true when it is mediating Christ’s presence in conformity to the tradition that was handed down and accepted by the living body of Christ on earth.

### **Concrete Applications**

Concretely, this means that the scriptural exegete must first wrestle with the scripture to make sense of it his own mind. The scriptural exegete takes as fundamental and unquestionable the dogmatic words of scripture, creeds, and other infallible pronouncements. Moreover, his understanding of these statements is guided by the great array of prejudices that tradition furnishes in doctrinal teachings. While these prejudices—but not the dogmatic language itself—are always subject to revision and exploration, the exegete does not view them as something that limits his understanding but rather as something that gives access to new understanding. He is not seeking novelty, he is seeking Christ.

In spite of his great reverence for these traditional understandings, he recognizes that the interpretation of the scriptural and creedal statements is not set in the interpretations given in the past. New understandings of history, science, and psychology will fuse with the words of the old texts to bring about meaning that never came about before. He trusts that Christ is at work in the words, in the world, and the prayerful act of his interpretation. This is why exegesis must always include prayer and meditation. Alone he has limited, humble confidence in his work, a work that is tied to the tradition but limited to his own perspective. As the community of the Church, the *sensus fidelium*, comes to accept this exegesis, confidence in it will grow. Indeed this new understanding may one day find its way into the Spirit-guided, infallible work of an ecumenical council or infallible papal statement. It will then itself become dogmatic language to be interpreted anew.

The possibility of new meaning and reinterpretation should not be exaggerated in a way that encourages the exegete to seek maximal novelty and revolutionary readings. Since a novel interpretation of a scriptural or dogmatic assertion requires consonance with the whole of the tradition, the interpreter must work out what any new interpretation might mean when considered from other aspects of the tradition. In this way, the whole of tradition must be the horizon out of which she works. Even non-dogmatic doctrines provide important prejudices that open the meaning of the traditionary texts to her and provide hypotheses about what these texts might mean in new situations. Hence when the interpreter approaches scripture, she does not come to it as if each term is meaningless and unfixed, rather the whole of tradition suggests meaning to her. For instance, when the possibility of salvation outside the church was first explored, other related doctrines had to be reinterpreted in a way that continued to make sense. The meaning of ideas such as faith, baptism, and church all had to be adjusted accordingly.

## Recent Magisterial Statements

Having laid out my full proposal that Christ is the subject matter of the scriptures and of all theology and having explained how language affords the possibility of reading scriptural and dogmatic texts as both permanently valid and yet having indeterminate meaning, I now turn briefly to consider whether my proposal adheres to the vision outlined by the contemporary magisterium.

### *Avoiding Relativism*

From the outset, I must address the concern that appears frequently in the writings of the contemporary magisterium: the dangers of moral and religious relativism. While this concern was developed and repeatedly elaborated during the papacy of Benedict the XVI, it was already expressed in the working paper, “The Interpretation of Dogma,” prepared by the Vatican’s Theological Commission, which then Cardinal Ratzinger chaired. The paper begins with this concern:

As a result, the fundamental problem of interpretation may be stated as follows: how can man take the hermeneutic circle between subject and object seriously without becoming victims of a relativism which recognizes nothing but interpretations of interpretations, which, in turn, gives birth to further interpretations. Is there, not as something external, but at the very heart of the historical process of interpretation, a truth existing of itself? May man claim an absolute truth? Are there certain propositions which must be admitted or denied, no matter what the culture is, or the particular point in mankind’s history?<sup>684</sup>

And again:

The question, then, of the interpretation of dogma brings us face to face with the fundamental problems of theology. In the last analysis, it is a question of theological understanding of truth and reality. Also, from the theological viewpoint, the question spills over into that of the relationship between universal truth, always valid, on the one hand, and the historicity of dogmas, on the other. The concrete question is how the Church today can pass on her teaching of the faith and its obligation so that from her memory and tradition hope will arise for

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<sup>684</sup> Interpreting Dogma A 1 1.

now and for the future. And bearing in mind the different socio-cultural situations in which the Church lives today, the question also arises of unity and pluriformity in dogmatic explanations of the truth and reality of revelation.<sup>685</sup>

I contend that the Church provides her own answers to this concern: it is the person of Christ, theology's Object who is Subject, who is the only Truth that ensures safety from relativism. I have already cited numerous instances of the prevalence of the notion that the "Christological axis" must "be preserved, in such a way that Jesus Christ remains the beginning, center and measuring rod for all interpretation."<sup>686</sup> If Christ is the alpha and omega of Scriptural exegesis and dogmatic understanding, it is only he then who can guard against this relativism. Based on a cursory analysis of scriptural and dogmatic exegesis, it seems the any attempt to avoid relativism by pointing to some fixed meaning of scriptural and dogmatic assertions is simply not historically verifiable.

Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous of me to ignore the very firm condemnation issued at the First Vatican Council, in *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*—which, you will note, is named after the subject of this faith, *Dei Filius*, the Son of God. The document closes with this warning:

For the doctrine of faith, which God has revealed has not been proposed, like a philosophical invention, to be perfected by human ingenuity. Rather, it has been delivered as a Divine Deposit to the Spouse of Christ, to be faithfully kept and infallibly declared. Hence also, that meaning of the sacred dogmas is perpetually to be retained which our Holy Mother the Church has once declared. Nor is that meaning ever to be departed from, under the pretense or pretext of a deeper comprehension of them. Let then the intelligence, science, and wisdom of each and all, of individuals and of the whole Church, in all ages and at all times, increase and flourish in abundance and vigor; but simply in its own proper kind, that is to say, in one and the same doctrine, one and the same sense, one and the same judgment.

On the face of it, the First Vatican Council seems to contradict the goal of my project. For, one aspect of my project seems to hinge on the wording of the doctrine remaining the same even while the meaning or the sense of the wording changes. However, perhaps now, in a less

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<sup>685</sup> A 2 3.

<sup>686</sup> C 3 4.

reactionary time, we might read this same warning in a more general tone. For the meaning of all doctrine ends not in the formulation, but in Christ himself. Thus my project not only holds that the wording of doctrine should be retained, but that the very meaning of doctrine is ever fixed on Christ. Indeed our understanding, though advanced by historical distance, does not license a disregard for any sense of sacred doctrinal formulations. Instead, I assert with the First Vatican Council “that one and the same doctrine, one and the same sense, one and the same judgement” remains. Ultimately, the one doctrine, one sense, and one judgment is Christ, knowable yet active, who requires the nuances of doctrine to be open and to change in His living history.<sup>687</sup>

Moreover, even the meaning that emerges in contemporary dialogue with particular scriptural and dogmatic utterances is not simply relative to the desires or whims of the individual. For the individual exegete must deal with the entirety of the tradition in order to make sense of individual utterances. Thus if the imaginative exegete attempts to impose some meaning on the text that cannot be understood in the context of the whole tradition, that meaning will be rejected. Moreover, it is only in the community that the scriptural and dogmatic exegesis receives final acceptance. So no individual can advance his or her own agenda without the approbation of the ecclesial community.

### **The Boundaries of Interpretation**

Just as Gadamer insists that the process of right understanding depends on both traditional formation and communal consensus, so too does the Church call the exegete to “apostolicity,” interpretation within the tradition, and “communion,” interpretation within the ecclesial body.<sup>688</sup> The magisterium insists that the linguistic communication of Christ’s presence

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<sup>687</sup> The one thinker who has long received some tacit approval, and recently more official approval, is Henry Newman. His thought has been compared to Gadamer’s and found that his area of examination would be quite worthwhile. See VTC, C 3 5.

<sup>688</sup> VTC, C 3 4.

through the historically and geographically extended communion of the Church. For “tradition in the end is nothing else but the communication of Himself which God, the Father, gives through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, with a view to a presence forever new in the community of the Church.”<sup>689</sup> The consistent transmission of linguistic expression over time and in various places ensures that individual members are ever tied to the Church’s memory of the past and to her community in the present.

The magisterium recognizes that, through this written tradition, God makes himself present “through the Logos in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>690</sup> At the same time, the Church sees “that the task of evangelization operates within the limits of language and of circumstances.”<sup>691</sup> Hence the Church uses

the expressivity and universality of human language, and of language’s images and concepts.... This is made possible because the *Paradosis* incarnates itself in the symbols and languages of all mankind, purifies and transforms their inherent values and inserts them into the whole process of the unique mystery of salvation (Eph 3:9). In this process in history, the Church adds nothing new (*non nova*) to the Gospel, but she constantly renews (*noviter*) the newness of Christ. Everything new that she picks from her treasure dovetails with what was there from the outset.<sup>692</sup>

The magisterium insists that dogmatic and scriptural statements are “authentic statements of the truth revealed by God in the Old and New Testaments.” This is why the Catholic “affirms that the revealed truth, transmitted by the *Paradosis* of the Church, is universally valid and unchangeable in substance.”<sup>693</sup> While “substance” can be understood in varying ways, it is my proposal that substance must not be understood as if there were some propositional core, or nonlinguistic foundation that supports the language of scripture or of dogma apart from Jesus Christ.

That the Gospel message must be applied today does not mean that the Church forgets or abandons the language of old. For “the Church must at all times have the history of her faith

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<sup>689</sup> VTC, C 2 2.

<sup>690</sup> VTC, B III 1.

<sup>691</sup> EG 45.

<sup>692</sup> VTC, B III 1.

<sup>693</sup> VTC, A 2 1.



in a *memoria* animated by the Holy Spirit; and she must present it vibrantly and vitally in a prophetic way for now and for the future.”<sup>694</sup> For an “interior continuity of the *Paradosis*” exists even in its diversity and in its development.”<sup>695</sup> Hence the Church must never abandon the scriptures nor indeed the dogmatic statements of councils and popes.

The experience both of community and of tradition is concretely realized in adherence to the magisterium of the Successor of Peter and of the successors of the apostles. As Pope Francis writes, “theology cannot consider the magisterium of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him as something extrinsic, a limitation of its freedom, but rather as one of its internal, constitutive dimensions, for the magisterium ensures our contact with the primordial source and thus provides the certainty of attaining to the word of Christ in all its integrity.”<sup>696</sup> The theological commission agrees:

It is the fact then that we do not “possess” the truth and reality of Christ except as it is mediated to us by the testimony of the Church animated, as it is, by the Holy Spirit. Without the Church, we “have” nothing of Christ, nor do we have Gospel or Sacred Scripture. An a-dogmatic Christianity which would subtract itself from such a mediation through the Church would be simply tinsel.<sup>697</sup>

Doctrinal pronouncements and traditional readings, produced by the historical action of the magisterium, form the presuppositions that are necessary for any theological advancement. For, “[a]s far as the relationship between truth and history is concerned, it has become evident that, in principle, there is no human knowledge without presuppositions: what is more, all human knowledge and all human language depend on an already built-in structure of understanding and judgment.... Tailored in that way, in a very general sense one could speak of man being cut fundamentally to a dogmatic measure.”<sup>698</sup> While these doctrinal definitions remain alterable and open to development, they are nonetheless necessary for understanding and interpretation.

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<sup>694</sup> VTC, B III 1.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> LF 36.

<sup>697</sup> VTC, B III 1.

<sup>698</sup> VTC, A 1 4.

Dogmatic definitions “do not define truth in an undetermined, changing or approximate fashion, much less do they transform or maim it. Truth must be kept to a determined form.”<sup>699</sup> This is why dogmatic pronouncements are irreformable. On the other hand, “dogmas are historical creations in the sense that their meaning “depends in part on the power of expression the language used had at a particular point in history and in particular circumstances.”<sup>700</sup> As “new questions and errors” arise, the Church proposes explanations and clarifications of older definitions and by this process “makes them alive to the benefit of the Church.”<sup>701</sup>

The magisterial commitment to historical dogmatic statements then is not tentative or wavering. For “the basic expressions of faith may not be revised, even when it is claimed that the reality they express will not be lost to sight. The effort must always be made to assimilate them more and more, and to push on with explaining them....”<sup>702</sup> Theology must not view doctrine as some system of accretions in which some “primitive reality” lies to be discovered as if it were a nugget of truth hidden within the doctrinal language.<sup>703</sup> So doctrine cannot be reduced in any way to something “purely symbolic” or to an “original existential experience.” At the same time “the question of truth” must not “be lost to sight ... in harping on the practical, existential or social meaning of dogma....”<sup>704</sup> For doctrine’s situatedness in the community must not be exaggerated.<sup>705</sup> Finally, doctrines cannot be viewed merely as a “thing of convention.”<sup>706</sup> Indeed, any reduction of dogmatic formulation is inadmissible because “the precise language of the Church must be maintained.”<sup>707</sup>

However, explanation for new times and new situations is essential. For, as Pope Francis asserts, “There are times when the faithful, in listening to completely orthodox language,

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<sup>699</sup> VTC, B II 2.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

<sup>701</sup> Ibid.

<sup>702</sup> VTC, C 3 3.

<sup>703</sup> VTC, C 1 2.

<sup>704</sup> VTC, A 22.

<sup>705</sup> VTC, B III 4.

<sup>706</sup> VTC, A 2 2.

<sup>707</sup> VTC, B II 1.

take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, because that language is alien to their own way of speaking to and understanding one another.”<sup>708</sup> So the theologian must never forget that “the expression of truth can take different forms. The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning.”<sup>709</sup>

### **Tradition’s Freedom in Application**

The contemporary magisterium asserts that the proper hermeneutic of scripture and of other dogmatic formulations occurs in the area between fixity and freedom. Pope John Paul II, in his response to a hypertraditionalist schismatic group asserts that mere repetition of traditional ideas yields an “incomplete” understanding of the tradition “because it does not take sufficiently into account the *living* character of Tradition, which, as the Second Vatican Council clearly taught, “comes from the apostles and progresses in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>710</sup> Because of this, “there is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on.”<sup>711</sup>

Just as the exegete must not “detach the dogmatic formulation ... from the *Paradosis*,” neither may she “isolate it from the living life of the Church.”<sup>712</sup> These fixed formulations find meaning in lived communities in different times and places. Tradition “displays its fecundity by way of ‘inculturation’ in different local Churches according to their local cultural situation.”<sup>713</sup> Hence tradition must not be thought of as static or intransigent. As Pope Francis wrote in his first magisterial document, the language of the tradition, codetermined by the text itself and the reader’s situation, “cannot be constricted to the limits of understanding and expression of any one culture. It is an indisputable fact that no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our

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<sup>708</sup> EG 41.

<sup>709</sup> Ibid.

<sup>710</sup> Ecclesia Dei 4.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>712</sup> A 22.

<sup>713</sup> C 2 2.

redemption in Christ.”<sup>714</sup> So Francis goes on to assert that there can be no “monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance.”<sup>715</sup> For the variety and flexibility of the interpretation of dogmatic statements “might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion” but actually are part of the nature of the Gospel message. Thus “such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel.”<sup>716</sup>

Pope Francis emphasizes that one way that these “inexhaustible riches” are brought forth is in their application to specific realities as they are “put into practice” in specific situations of life.<sup>717</sup> Francis identifies the danger of the Gospel becoming merely an “idea” that is never concretely implemented in a “reality.” He writes, “There ... exists a constant tension between ideas and realities.... There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric....”<sup>718</sup> Rather, concrete application of ideas to realities ensures that the gospel message comes alive in particular situations today. For “the principle of reality, of a word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew, is essential to evangelization.”<sup>719</sup> In this very process then of renewal and explanation, the Church’s understanding develops. For “[the Church] needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth. It is the task of exegetes and theologians to help ‘the judgment of the Church to mature.’”<sup>720</sup>

### **Tradition’s Growth in Dialogue**

Maturation is accomplished through a process of dialogue. The Church’s dialogue partners include the sciences and those in other faith traditions. While it is true that the physical

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<sup>714</sup> EG 118.

<sup>715</sup> EG 40.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid.

<sup>717</sup> EG 233.

<sup>718</sup> EG 231.

<sup>719</sup> EG 233.

<sup>720</sup> EG 40.

and the human sciences don't seem to directly involve a conversation about Christ, in reality, they do. For the magisterium holds that nature is the text on which the Logos is written and the human being is the reflection of His image. Hence Faith and reason speak to one another about the one Subject. Pope Francis writes,

the light of faith is an incarnate light radiating from the luminous life of Jesus. It also illumines the material world, trusts its inherent order and knows that it calls us to an ever widening path of harmony and understanding. The gaze of science thus benefits from faith: faith encourages the scientist to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness. Faith awakens the critical sense by preventing research from being satisfied with its own formulae and helps it to realize that nature is always greater. By stimulating wonder before the profound mystery of creation, faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation.<sup>721</sup>

The sciences, then, “help to accomplish” the development of the Church’s teaching.<sup>722</sup> For the Church learns her conceptual schemata, methodologies, and genuine truths from her dialogue with the sciences.<sup>723</sup>

This dialogue is not simply exploitative. The Church does not pillage the sciences in order to advance her own message. Rather, the magisterium holds that “[a]ll of society can be enriched thanks to this dialogue, which opens up new horizons for thought and expands the possibilities of reason.”<sup>724</sup> For the Church, truth is Christ, and Christ is love. Thus, since “it is a truth disclosed in personal encounter with the Other and with others, it can be set free from its enclosure in individuals and become part of the common good.... Far from making [Catholics] inflexible, the security of faith sets us on a journey; it enables witness and dialogue with all.”<sup>725</sup> The flexibility required for dialogue explains why fundamentalism is an “obstacle and difficulty for dialogue, as much on the Catholic side as on other sides.”<sup>726</sup>

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<sup>721</sup> LF 34.

<sup>722</sup> EG 40.

<sup>723</sup> VTC, C 3 3..

<sup>724</sup> EG 242.

<sup>725</sup> LF 34.

<sup>726</sup> EG 250.

Just as the Church's dialogue with the sciences occasions real development, so too does her interaction with other faith traditions. Pope Francis is paradigmatically optimistic about the possibilities inherent in interfaith dialogue: "[w]e must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God's face. Trusting others is an art and peace is an art."<sup>727</sup> Hence the Pontiff holds that Catholics can really learn from our fellow sojourners.

On the other hand, Pope Francis asserts that the development occasioned by interreligious dialogue is not a "facile syncretism" which "says 'yes' to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others." Instead he holds that "[t]rue openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one's own identity," while at the same time being "open to understanding those of the other party" and "knowing that dialogue can enrich each side."<sup>728</sup>

The Holy Father's high regard for dialogue comes from a confidence in the robust working of the Holy Spirit. The pope asserts:

How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.... Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.<sup>729</sup>

## Conclusion

The contemporary magisterium asserts that in the process of application and dialogue, Catholic theology genuinely develops. For Catholics must not "betray the tradition," but neither

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<sup>727</sup> EG 244.

<sup>728</sup> EG 251.

<sup>729</sup> EG 246.

should they “in the guise of loyalty, pass on an ossified tradition.” Instead, “[t]he tradition must release from its memory hope for the present and for the future. A [dogmatic] definition, *in fine*, can have no significance here and now except to the extent that it is true. The permanence of truth and its contemporary form interact.”<sup>730</sup> Out of this interaction, this fusion, the new emerges.

Gadamer’s understanding of hermeneutics is consistent with the vision outlined by the magisterium. Following Gadamer, I have presented a theory of dogmatic language that is irreducible to sociology, to psychology, or any other system. I have maintained the insistence on the precise wording of the dogma, seeking never to erase but always to explain anew. I have followed the magisterial and traditional account of truth, eschewing all relativism by asserting the one Truth, Jesus Christ. In this way, I find Gadamer’s account of philosophical hermeneutics to set the standard for Catholic philosophical hermeneutic henceforth. It is my hope that Catholic thinkers may now move past an unquestioning attachment to the specific propositions associated with every dogmatic utterance of the past. Instead, Catholics should cherish the prejudices that such propositions offer while recognizing the tentativeness of every individual proposition. For while we hold to the dogmatic words of scripture, creeds, popes, and councils, the object of our faith is Christ, the historical figure whose life, death, and resurrection gave birth to the Church and whose continued action and presence enliven her still today.

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<sup>730</sup> VTC, C 3 1.

## Chapter 8. Gadamer: A New Reminder for an Old Approach

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.

—Revelations 1:18-19

In this project, I have considered Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutics to be paradigmatic for all understanding, including scriptural and exegetical understanding. I have shown that the work of some of the most important Catholic exegetes demonstrate the principles that Gadamer offers as necessary for understanding to occur. Moreover, I have suggested that an important aspect of Luther's ceasing to hold a Catholic understanding of the scriptures was his rejection of the fusion of horizons proposed by the tradition that immediately preceded him. Finally, in considering Barth, I examined the exegete that Gadamer himself recommends and learned from Barth what a successful understand of scripture looks like in the Protestant tradition.

In this project, I do not intend to turn Gadamer's descriptive account into a frozen methodology. Rather, because I hold that Gadamer's account of understanding is correct, I reject those interpretations of scripture and dogma which refuse to fully engage the tradition and those which seek to rewrite the dogmatic language that tradition provides. Furthermore, I see in those exegetes who refuse to engage contemporary scientific and philosophical horizons a failure to understand. Therefore, I propose that bold engagement with the contemporary horizon is necessary if the Church wishes to continue to understand the dogmatic language that has been handed down.



While maintaining the language handed down in Scripture and tradition, we must engage all current philosophies, religions, and manners of thinking. We must recognize truth wherever it is found, all the while reconsidering the meaning of those statements given to us by apostles, popes, and councils. We must not be afraid when this dialogue brings something new: some meaning we had not considered or perhaps a meaning that we had previously even ruled out. For in the very words by which Christ has revealed himself, there is freedom and openness to novelty. He who is the Word continues to breathe new life into the old words.

Two dialogues strike me as most pressing. The first involves the issues of sexuality and gender. It has been said that, in the past, doctrinal disputes primarily centered on the idea of three Persons in one God. On the other hand, today, the primary doctrinal issues surround two persons in one bed. Indeed, in order for the Church to make sense of sexuality and gender today, she must engage in dialogue with the social sciences, gender and feminist theorists, and the biological sciences. The magisterium's reaction to questions about the role of women in the Church and about permissibility of homosexual unions has been primarily to repeat the old dogmas. Perhaps John Paul the Second's "Theology of the Body" is the last great magisterial development in this regard. However, some thirty years later, horizons have indeed changed. Explanations based on Natural Law theory do not speak to people who note the wide variety of cultural readings of nature. Moreover, the biological, anthropological, and psychological sciences have suggested important factors in the formation of genders and sexualities that seem to call into question the assumptions that Natural Law theorists take as given realities. People do not understand why women cannot be priests and why gay couples cannot be married. It is telling, for instance, then, when one Cardinal was asked about the issue of female leadership in the Church, he said, "If I were founding a church, I'd love to have women priests. But Christ founded it..."<sup>731</sup> He too must find old repetitions of dogmatic language unintelligible.

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<sup>731</sup> <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2014/11/16/cardinal-omalley-if-i-started-a-church-id-have-women-priests/>.

For if he understood Christ's reasoning, and found that reasoning intelligible, would he not have explained it in his televised interview?

Secondly, the Church must engage in a dialogue with secularism. Religious news frequently touts the decline in both the number of religious adherents and the influence that those religions have on institutional and intellectual structures. The Catholic Church has long lost its influential role in the cognitive, moral, and institutional formation of much of the West. Indeed much of the West seems to see science as a sort of new religion, whose answers consistently belie traditional religious assertions. As a result of this scientistic and secularistic trend, the Church's relationship to the non-Catholic world is in question. She must ask what her role should be in this new situation. For instance, the Church must ask to what degree she should align with secularist and scientific values and to what degree she might choose to fortify a countercultural institution. All the while she must consider her alignment with other faith traditions as she situates herself in this new, secular paradigm. In the Church's quest to grapple with these questions, a rereading of the scriptures is necessary. Romans, once again, proves to be a fecund starting place.

### **Reading Romans 1 and 2, Again**

The reader has undoubtedly noted that I do not possess the genius of any of the commentators that we have considered over the course of this work. Moreover, as I am not trained in systematic, dogmatic, or biblical theology, I would not presume to offer an original, detailed exegesis of Romans 1 and 2. I do, however, note that several important questions come to mind when reading this text from my own horizons and with the Christological *Sache* that the Church proposes. The fact that I am asking these questions does not mean that I believe that they should be answered in a particular way. Rather, I only mean that they might begin the dialogue about the meaning of Romans today and about where Christ is leading his Church. It is because I believe in Christ, given to me in the Catholic tradition, that I am unafraid

to confront these questions, to dialogue with those outside the faith, and to find Christ anew in the answers that arise.

1. Regarding Romans I:17

- a. In what way is faith necessary to combat the totalitarian tendencies of scientism? Is scientism a “worship of creatures rather than the creator”? Should the church partner with other faith traditions to stop scientism’s advance? Can some element of truth be found even in the radically anti-religious ideology proposed in some “scientific” circles?
- b. In what way can non-Christian traditions be understood to have the “faith” by which the righteous live? What is their relation to Christ, and how is their relationship to Him mediated by their “faith”?
- c. How do we explain the experience of many people having faith but lacking righteousness (clerical abusers)? What about the many who are righteous but seem to lack faith (righteous atheists)?
- d. How has the new emphasis on the possibility of salvation without explicit faith in Christ decreased evangelistic outreach? How has it decreased motivation to form one’s own family in the faith?

2. Regarding Romans 1:18

- a. Is not the critique of Romans 1 a cultural critique? If so, should the church be involved in political and cultural affairs actively?
- b. If a rejection of God is at the root of the problems referenced in Romans 1, how might the church be engaged in stopping these problems in atheistic societies today?
- c. Is secularism simply the newest instantiation of idolatry?
- d. How might the human sciences (especially sociology, anthropology, psychology, and economics) contribute to the Church’s efforts in engaging the secular culture? Is the

Church's political and sociological capital limited, and if so, on what should it be spent?

3. Regarding Romans 1:24

- a. In what way has the Church been guilty of “degrading the body”? Might this sin be expanded to include areas of health, nutrition, consumerism, etc.?

4. Regarding Romans 1:26-17

- a. What do feminist thought and social constructionist theories teach definitively about sex and gender? How tightly must these categories be held together? If they are not held tightly together—that is, if masculinity and femininity can be considered apart from biological sex—what implication does this hold for teaching about sexual ethics? Female clergy?
- b. If sexual disorder is, in some way, a punishment from God, in what way is homosexual sexual disorder understood to be uniquely distinct from that of heterosexual sexual disorder?
- c. How does Augustine's insistence that there be sin in all sexual activity figure into any assertion that marital sex is the only acceptable sexual act? If some sin is tolerable, does that not mean that categories of “not ideal, but permissible” should be explored?
- d. How do gay men and women experience Christ in the Church? What structures create these experiences? What structures hinder them?
- e. What can psychology contribute to our understanding of shame? How might psychological principles guide ethical decision-making?

5. Regarding Romans 1:23

- a. Given our desire to dialogue with other religious traditions, can we still speak of idolatry at all? If so, what criteria distinguishes idolatrous religions from healthy, positive religious experiences?

- b. Are there religious traditions that the Church should criticize at all?
6. Regarding Romans 2:1-4
- a. In what way is the church warned by the injunction not to judge in Romans 2? In what way are the Church's doctrinal pronouncements human judgments on others?
  - b. Has the Church's culpability in the sexual abuse crisis created an obligation that the Church pronounce fewer judgments, particularly in the area of sexual ethics?
  - c. In what way might the Church's teachings "show contempt for the riches of [God's] kindness, forbearance and patience...."? Is there a road between condemnation and acceptance?
  - d. In what way have we behaved like the primitive Roman church? Has the exodus from the Church in the West been in part a result of judgmentalism?
7. Regarding Romans 2:11
- a. In what ways might Catholic doctrines betray the teaching that "God does not show favoritism?" Were not the majority of Catholics simply born into their faith, growing up uncritically accepting of it? Can this be understood to offer them a privileged place in God's kingdom?
8. Regarding Romans 2:12-15
- a. In what way is discussion of the "law" and the "Jew" a destructive anti-Semitic force? Is a different interpretation possible whose effect would advance a respect for the Jewish tradition and its people?
  - b. What can dialogue with the human sciences and the natural sciences teach the Church about human nature today? What elements of this truth has the Church of the twenty-first century ignored or suppressed? For instance, what do psychology, anthropology, sociology, and neurosciences contribute to our understanding of human decision-making, human responsibility, and the possibility of free will? How does this affect our understanding of Christ? Sin? Agency?

- c. What do comparative anthropologies contribute to our understanding of natural law?
- d. What is the place of canonical law in the life of the Church? If Gentiles who lacked the written record of the divine law sometimes followed the “Law” more than those who had it, how might this be applied to Catholics and non-Catholics today? If law is rejected or reduced, what point does a state of anomie ensue?
- e. What ought our response to the growing legalistic fundamentalism within the Church today be? In spite of its attractiveness to many, in what way does it betray the message of Christ that we wish to offer?

## Conclusion

John closes the book of Revelations, and thus the Christian New Testament, with words of warning:

Do not add! Do not take away! The manner of exegesis that I have proposed takes seriously this warning. For I seek to be faithful to every word of the scriptures and of the tradition handed down to me. I do not wish to take away from the words by ignoring them or rewriting them, but I also do not wish to add to them by including in their interpretation a modernism, propositionalism, or literalism that their words in no way entail. I wish to hear scriptures' words today and in them to hear the voice of Jesus who beckons from the future. Jesus says “I am coming.” I wish to meet this Jesus who is coming. I prefer Him to stories from the past about him. For this reason, I aim to respond, “Marantha: come Lord Jesus.”<sup>732</sup>

This dissertation is my “Marantha.”<sup>733</sup>

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<sup>732</sup> Maranatha is Aramaic for “Come our Lord,” and possibly “Our Lord has come.”

<sup>733</sup> See Revelations 22.

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Appendix—Latin and Greek Versions of Romans 1-2

**Romanos 1:18-2:16**

**Biblia Sacra Vulgata (VULGATE)**

**18** revelatur enim ira Dei de caelo super omnem impietatem et iniustitiam hominum eorum qui veritatem in iniustitiam detinent

**19** quia quod notum est Dei manifestum est in illis Deus enim illis manifestavit

**20** invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur sempiterna quoque eius virtus et divinitas ut sint inexcusabiles

**21** quia cum cognovissent Deum non sicut Deum glorificaverunt aut gratias egerunt sed evanuerunt in cogitationibus suis et obscuratum est insipiens cor eorum

**22** dicentes enim se esse sapientes stulti facti sunt

**23** et mutaverunt gloriam incorruptibilis Dei in similitudinem imaginis corruptibilis hominis et volucrum et quadrupedum et serpentium

**24** propter quod tradidit illos Deus in desideria cordis eorum in inmunditiam ut contumeliis adficiant corpora sua in semet ipsis

**25** qui commutaverunt veritatem Dei in mendacio et coluerunt et servierunt creaturae potius quam creatori qui est benedictus in saecula amen

**26** propterea tradidit illos Deus in passiones ignominiae nam feminae eorum inmutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam

**27** similiter autem et masculi relicto naturali usu feminae exarserunt in desideriis suis in invicem masculi in masculos turpitudinem operantes et mercedem quam oportuit erroris sui in semet ipsis recipientes

**28** et sicut non probaverunt Deum habere in notitia tradidit eos Deus in reprobum sensum ut faciant quae non conveniunt

**29** repletos omni iniquitate malitia fornicatione avaritia nequitia plenos invidia homicidio contentione dolo malignitate susurriones

**30** detractores Deo odibiles contumeliosos superbos elatos inventores malorum parentibus non oboedientes

**31** insipientes inconpositos sine affectione absque foedere sine misericordia

**32** qui cum iustitiam Dei cognovissent non intellexerunt quoniam qui talia agunt digni sunt morte non solum ea faciunt sed et consentiunt facientibus

**2** propter quod inexcusabilis es o homo omnis qui iudicas in quo enim iudicas alterum te ipsum condemnas eadem enim agis qui iudicas

**2** scimus enim quoniam iudicium Dei est secundum veritatem in eos qui talia agunt

**3** existimas autem hoc o homo qui iudicas eos qui talia agunt et facis ea quia tu effugies iudicium Dei

**4** an divitias bonitatis eius et patientiae et longanimitatis contemnis ignorans quoniam benignitas Dei ad paenitentiam te adducit

**5** secundum duritiam autem tuam et inpaenitens cor thesaurizas tibi iram in die irae et revelationis iusti iudicii Dei

**6** qui reddet unicuique secundum opera eius

**7** his quidem qui secundum patientiam boni operis gloriam et honorem et incorruptionem quaerentibus vitam aeternam

**8** his autem qui ex contentione et qui non adquiescunt veritati credunt autem iniquitati ira et indignatio

**9** tribulatio et angustia in omnem animam hominis operantis malum Iudaei primum et Graeci

**10** gloria autem et honor et pax omni operanti bonum Iudaeo primum et Graeco

**11** non est enim personarum acceptio apud Deum

**12** quicumque enim sine lege peccaverunt sine lege et peribunt et quicumque in lege peccaverunt per legem iudicabuntur

**13** non enim auditores legis iusti sunt apud Deum sed factores legis iustificabuntur

**14** cum enim gentes quae legem non habent naturaliter quae legis sunt faciunt eiusmodi legem non habentes ipsi sibi sunt lex

**15** qui ostendunt opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis testimonium reddente illis conscientia ipsorum et inter se invicem cogitationum accusantium aut etiam defendentium

**16** in die cum iudicabit Deus occulta hominum secundum evangelium meum per Iesum Christum

## ΠΡΟΣ ΡΩΜΑΙΟΥΣ 1:18-2:16 SBL Greek New Testament (SBLGNT)

Scripture quotations marked SBLGNT are from the The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition. Copyright © 2010 by Society of Biblical Literature and Logos Bible Software

**18** Ἀποκαλύπτεται γὰρ ὀργὴ θεοῦ ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων, **19** διότι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστιν ἐν αὐτοῖς, ὁ [a]θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανερώσεν. **20** τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα καθορᾶται, ἢ τε αἰδῖος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θειότης, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογήτους, **21** διότι γνόντες τὸν θεὸν οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠύχαριστησαν, ἀλλὰ ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν καὶ ἐσκοτίσθη ἡ ἀσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδιά· **22** φάσκοντες εἶναι σοφοὶ ἐμωράνθησαν, **23** καὶ ἥλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ ἐν ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνος φθαρτοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ πετεινῶν καὶ τετραπόδων καὶ ἐρπετῶν.

**24** [b]Διὸ παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς ἐν ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις τῶν καρδιῶν αὐτῶν εἰς ἀκαθαρσίαν τοῦ ἀτιμάζεσθαι τὰ σώματα αὐτῶν ἐν [c]αὐτοῖς, **25** οἵτινες μετέλλαξαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῷ ψεύδει, καὶ ἐσεβάσθησαν καὶ ἐλάτρευσαν τῇ κτίσει παρὰ τὸν κτίσαντα, ὃς ἐστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας· ἀμήν.

**26** Διὰ τοῦτο παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς πάθη ἀτιμίας· αἱ τε γὰρ θήλειαι αὐτῶν μετέλλαξαν τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν εἰς τὴν παρὰ φύσιν, **27** ὁμοίως τε καὶ οἱ ἄρσενες ἀφέντες τὴν φυσικὴν χρῆσιν τῆς θηλείας ἐξεκαύθησαν ἐν τῇ ὀρέξει αὐτῶν εἰς ἀλλήλους, ἄρσενες ἐν ἄρσεσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην κατεργαζόμενοι καὶ τὴν ἀντιμισθίαν ἣν ἔδει τῆς πλάνης αὐτῶν ἐν [d]ἐαυτοῖς ἀπολαμβάνοντες.

**28** Καὶ καθὼς οὐκ ἐδοκίμασαν τὸν θεὸν ἔχειν ἐν ἐπιγνώσει, παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς εἰς ἀδόκιμον νοῦν, ποιεῖν τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα, **29** πεπληρωμένους πάσῃ [e]ἀδικίᾳ πονηρία πλεονεξία κακία, μεστοὺς φθόνου φόνου ἔριδος δόλου κακοηθείας, ψιθυριστάς, **30** καταλάλους, θεοστυγεῖς, ὑβριστάς, ὑπερηφάνους, ἀλαζόνας, ἐφευρετὰς κακῶν, γονεῦσιν ἀπειθεῖς, **31** ἀσυνέτους, ἀσυνθέτους, [f]ἀστόργους, ἀνελεήμονας· **32** οἵτινες τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπιγνόντες, ὅτι οἱ τὰ τοιαῦτα πράσσοντες ἄξιοι θανάτου εἰσίν, οὐ μόνον αὐτὰ ποιοῦσιν ἀλλὰ καὶ συνευδοκοῦσιν τοῖς πράσσουσιν.

**2** Διὸ ἀναπολόγητος εἶ, ὃ ἄνθρωπε πᾶς ὁ κρίνων· ἐν ᾧ γὰρ κρίνεις τὸν ἕτερον, σεαυτὸν κατακρίνεις, τὰ γὰρ αὐτὰ πράσσεις ὁ κρίνων· **2** οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι τὸ κρίμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐστιν κατὰ ἀλήθειαν ἐπὶ τοὺς τὰ τοιαῦτα πράσσοντας. **3** λογίζῃ δὲ τοῦτο, ὃ ἄνθρωπε ὁ κρίνων τοὺς τὰ τοιαῦτα πράσσοντας καὶ ποιῶν αὐτά, ὅτι σὺ ἐκφεύξῃ τὸ κρίμα τοῦ θεοῦ; **4** ἢ τοῦ πλοῦτου τῆς χρηστότητος αὐτοῦ καὶ τῆς ἀνοχῆς καὶ τῆς μακροθυμίας καταφρονεῖς, ἀγνοῶν ὅτι τὸ χρηστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ εἰς μετάνοιάν σε ἄγει; **5** κατὰ δὲ τὴν σκληρότητά σου καὶ ἀμετανόητον καρδίαν

θησαυρίζεις σεαυτῷ ὀργὴν ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὀργῆς καὶ [g]ἀποκαλύψεως δικαιοκρισίας τοῦ θεοῦ, **6** ὃς ἀποδώσει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ· **7** τοῖς μὲν καθ' ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ ἀφθαρσίαν ζητοῦσιν ζωὴν αἰώνιον· **8** τοῖς δὲ ἐξ ἐριθείας καὶ [h]ἀπειθοῦσι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πειθομένοις δὲ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ [i]ὀργὴ καὶ θυμός, **9** θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία, ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου τοῦ κατεργαζομένου τὸ κακόν, Ἰουδαίου τε πρώτον καὶ Ἕλληνας· **10** δόξα δὲ καὶ τιμὴ καὶ εἰρήνη παντὶ τῷ ἐργαζομένῳ τὸ ἀγαθόν, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρώτον καὶ Ἕλληνι· **11** οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν προσωποληψία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ.

**12** Ὅσοι γὰρ ἀνόμως ἥμαρτον, ἀνόμως καὶ ἀπολοῦνται· καὶ ὅσοι ἐν νόμῳ ἥμαρτον, διὰ νόμου κριθήσονται· **13** οὐ γὰρ οἱ ἀκροαταὶ [j]νόμου δίκαιοι παρὰ [k]τῷ θεῷ, ἀλλ' οἱ ποιηταὶ [l]νόμου δικαιωθήσονται. **14** ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου [m]ποιῶσιν, οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἑαυτοῖς εἰσὶν νόμος· **15** οἵτινες ἐνδείκνυνται τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, συμμαρτυροῦσης αὐτῶν τῆς συνειδήσεως καὶ μεταξὺ ἀλλήλων τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων, **16** ἐν [n]ἡμέρᾳ ὅτε [o]κρίνει ὁ θεὸς τὰ κρυπτὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου διὰ [p]Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ