

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

DISCLOSING THE HIDDEN GOD:  
CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN DOCTRINE AND CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

SUBMITTED FOR  
THE WLS 2019 SYMPOSIUM ON CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

BY  
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SEPTEMBER 16-17, 2019

In her now-published journals, Mother Teresa once wrote, “I am told God loves me—and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”<sup>1</sup> How is it possible that someone known for her faith in God—in fact *sainted*, so highly do many think of her faith—should have such thoughts? Our world is deeply marred with hopelessness, a hopelessness which seems to be able to drive *anyone* to despair. We have a word for the source of this hopelessness: sin. The sinful mind looks at life under the sun as empty of meaning and purpose, empty of anything or anyone transcendent, as if we “are straying through an infinite nothing” feeling only the “breath of empty space.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet in the midst of this hopelessness, some are able to find hope and have described this in their artwork and literature, such as this passage from a fictional story about the journey of two friends carrying a heavy burden into the darkness:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tower high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to find hope. Or better, hope finds us, like a shaft of light piercing the darkness. Hope discloses itself to us. And we have been given a word for this hope: Christ. We can say with

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<sup>1</sup> Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 186-7.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887) para. 125; ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181-82.

<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 922. Tolkien’s story is about a ‘fellowship’ of friends providentially brought together. I’m grateful for the fellowship and aid given me in the writing of this paper, especially from Ken Cherney, Glen Thompson, Joshua Busch, and Harland Goetzinger II.

certainty, and we find ourselves in the midst of a great urgency to say, that the Shadow is only a passing thing. Good will triumph over evil. Our redemption draws near.

The activity of disclosing this hope to a world that at times seems so hopeless we call *evangelism*, the disclosing of good news. And for millennia, those engaging in evangelism have also engaged in what we call *apologetics*, in some sense a defence of, or the use of reason in presenting, that hope. From the Greek word ἀπολογία, originally referring to a legal defence (Acts 25:16, 22:1; 1 Cor 9:3-4) or representing one's position in public debate (Phil 1:7), in today's Christendom the term refers to either the practice of reasonably refuting attacks on the Christian faith or the scholarly pursuit of reasonably integrating the Christian faith into fields such as philosophy, science, and history.

But definitions of apologetics are not particularly helpful for teaching Confessional Lutherans how to *do* apologetics. The common thread which typically runs throughout most discussions of apologetics, and which is most important to us, is the use of reason in Christian evangelism, and Confessional Lutherans like to be very precise in talking about the role of reason. This is true especially because our theology emphasizes a God who *hides*, who wears masks, and who makes himself known in ways both reasonable and foolish.

Our goal is to provide a series of theses<sup>4</sup> which we might all agree on as the doctrinal starting point for doing apologetics as Confessional Lutherans. We will do this by showing how the practice of apologetics arises out of theology drawn from the Bible. This is our most important task. But we will also stress how the content of these theses has often been explicitly detailed in the writings of Confessional Lutheran dogmaticians. Another objective is to give us a shared

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly, I do *not* think this will be an exhaustive list of theses we might create for the subject at hand. But we are clearly in a time when we need a doctrinal foundation for it, and God-willing this is a good start.

vocabulary for talking about apologetics rightly. Teachings somewhat unique to (or with a unique place of primacy in) Confessional Lutheran theology provide us with a distinct way of approaching apologetics. We will begin with the priority of the *hiddenness of God*, and then demonstrate how God discloses himself and yet remains hidden behind *masks* (nature, conscience, and special revelation). The mask of principal importance will be the incarnation. We end then with the Lutheran understanding of the role of ministerial reason in apologetics and evangelism.

### **Thesis 1: The biblical God is a hidden God.**

Today most theologians and philosophers consider the hiddenness of God a problem. By “problem,” we mean an argument against the existence of God, or evidence against theism. During the late twentieth century, atheist philosophers began creating elegant arguments from God’s hiddenness.<sup>5</sup> Since then, this has grown into a major area of research in philosophy and theology, with several books and dozens of articles in leading journals exploring the argument’s implications.<sup>6</sup> Philosopher of religion Robert Oakes summarizes the topic:

Many philosophers have contended that (traditional) theism or supernaturalism suffers from what can properly be called the *Problem of Divine Hiddenness*... Specifically, at the heart of this ostensible difficulty for theism is that Divine “Hiddenness”...is precisely the opposite of what one would *expect* if there existed a (maximally great) supernatural person.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See J. L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument* (Oxford University Press, 2015) for both a history of the problem of hiddenness (23–34) and its relationship to the history of the problem of evil (28–31).

<sup>6</sup> The first prominent works both defending and critiquing the problem of the hiddenness of God include Samuel L. Terrian, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978); Samuel Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Thomas Morris, “The Hidden God,” *Philosophical Topics*, 1988, 16:5-21; G. Tom Milazzo, *The Protest and the Silence: Suffering, Death, and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991); and J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). In my mind, the best example of a contemporary work critiquing the argument is Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Oakes. “Life, Death, and the Hiddenness of God,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008): 155. As an illustration of how dramatic the popularity of the topic is within philosophy of religion, note

But in Scripture, there is no “problem” of divine hiddenness. Those who cry out to God, “Where are you?”, who declare his hiddenness and inactivity, are rarely making a case for God’s non-existence. When Job declares, “When he passes me, I cannot see (הִאֵרָ) him” (Job 9:11), he is not gathering evidence of God’s non-existence. From a position of deep conviction in God’s existence, he is crying out in anguish, desiring that the very real God of the universe answer him. In the midst of prayer, he declares God’s hiddenness and his own personal frustration with it. Yet, he knows his God will not remain hidden from him. Out of the same lips, we find one of the great gospel gems of the Old Testament, “I know that my Redeemer lives...I will see (הִיֵּרָ) God, I myself will see (הִאֵרָ) him with my own eyes.” For Job, the hiddenness of God is a reality of life this side of “the end” (Job 19:25). But he knows it is temporary.

Likewise, for Confessional Lutheran theologians the hiddenness of God is not an argument against God, but a foundational principle in theology. Rather than a problem, for us it is a lodestone, an important concept that helps orient our understanding of the God of both justice and mercy, of both law and gospel. It is what we might call a theological first principle. We discover God’s hiddenness *a priori* from studying the nature of God and his transcendence. And we discover God’s hiddenness *a posteriori* from God revealing his mercy through revelation, dealing with humanity in her sin.<sup>8</sup> These are the first truths we will explore.

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the following extended dialogue that takes place among Oakes and other philosophers: James A. Keller, “The Hiddenness of God and the Problem of Evil,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995): 13–24; Robert McKim, “The Hiddenness of God,” *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 141–161; Robert Mesle, “Does God Hide from Us?: John Hick and Process Theology on Faith, Freedom and Theodicy,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 24 (1988): 93–111; Michael J. Murray, “Coercion and the Hiddenness of God,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993): 27–38; and J. L. Schellenberg, “The Hiddenness Argument Revisited (I),” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 201–215. See also Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> By *a priori* we mean we can discover this truth apart from experience. By *a posteriori* we mean we can only discover this truth through experience.

## 1.1 That God is hidden is a consequence of intrinsic attributes of God.

We believe “the transcendence of God is clearly taught.”<sup>9</sup> When God says through Isaiah, “Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?” God is communicating that he, the Creator, simply does not relate to time and space as created things do (Isa 66:1). He transcends space and time. In fact, to speak of God is to speak of something transcendent. It is an *a priori* quality of the concept of God, that is, of the concept of a being who created the universe, and is unbound by everything which applies to the universe.<sup>10</sup>

As Creator of this world, he is not something *of* this world, and so is not comprehensible within this world (1 Kgs 8:27; Job 36:36; Rom 11:33; Judg 13:18).<sup>11</sup> Even to call God *holy* (that is, *set apart*) is sometimes meant to emphasize the idea of transcendence, especially when the context speaks of God exalted on his throne (Isa 6:3; 57:13; Psalm 22:3).<sup>12</sup>

The Lutheran dogmaticians assume the transcendence of God when they speak of a God who we cannot truly grasp, and so when we define him, it is necessary at times to define God in

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 1:443.

<sup>10</sup> We call this *a priori* because we can reach this conclusion simply by reflection, without reference to experience. The very definition of God requires that he be transcendent. To speak of God in the Western sense is to speak of someone transcending our world in some way, unbounded by time, space, and causality.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Pieper describes it this way: “God is the Creator of time without becoming temporal. He accompanies time without becoming subject to time or its laws. God’s relation to time is the same as His relation to space. For though God created space and place and is present everywhere, He does not become local, but remains exalted above space and place” (*Christian Dogmatics*, 1: 446). We might describe transcendence is a *transitive* quality of God, that is, a statement on his relationship to things he has created (or at least, the transitive attributes flow from his transcendence).

<sup>12</sup> In the Old Testament, the root idea of *holiness* is “set-aparthood,” which can at times emphasize either God’s transcendence (e.g., see Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:456) or the supreme ethical quality of God “according to which he loves what is morally good and hates what is morally evil.” Cf. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. Richard Krause and James Langebartels, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009) 2:33. See also August Pieper, “The Glory of the Lord,” trans. Carl Lawrenz and John Schaadt, in Curtis A. Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 2:417-497.

very specific ways, such as according to negative attributes (according to what he is *not*<sup>13</sup>) or according to aspects of his disclosed will (as opposed to that which God wills, but does not disclose).<sup>14</sup> Further, they write, because of God's transcendence, we ought not to confuse God's telling us about his attributes with our fully understanding those attributes.<sup>15</sup>

As such, it follows from his transcendence that God is incomprehensible to human reason. Adolf Hoenecke writes, "What God really is cannot be expressed in human words or grasped by the human mind."<sup>16</sup> We simply cannot wrap our heads around God.

## **1.2 Because God is transcendent, we cannot comprehend him.**

This has been an important discussion point especially in twentieth-century Christian theology. The Reformed theologian Karl Barth writes,

[T]he hiddenness of God is the inconceivability of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; of the one true God, our Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, who as such is known only to Himself and is therefore viewable and conceivable only to Himself and alone capable of speaking of Himself aright.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:437-447.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, ed. Jacob A. O. Preus, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 41.

<sup>15</sup> "Thus the things which are predicated of God, such as truthfulness, goodness, justice, chastity, mercy, etc., are not present in Him in the way that such powers are present in angels or men. Thus when someone speaks of the love of God, this is not understood as being the kind of love which exists in creatures (which is an accident), changeable and capable of being lost, but this has reference to His essence, which loves us sincerely and ardently." Chemnitz, *Loci*, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 2:55-56. See 1 Cor 13:12; 1 Tim 6:16; Rom 11:33; and 1 John 3:2. Also Hoenecke: "[W]e human beings cannot grasp with a handful of our spirit, so to speak, the simple and infinite essence of God in all its fullness and perfection, and God himself cannot make us perceive or understand his essence in a way that is truly adequate to his essence" (2:72).

<sup>17</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 2, Part 1: The Doctrine of God*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker and J. L. M. Haire (London: T&T Clark, 1957), 197.

Barth agrees that divine hiddenness is an intrinsic attribute of God. It is part of what makes up the concept of God. Barth, though, believes this makes natural theology impossible: the *only* knowledge of God we have must be supernatural.

Confessional Lutheran theology also believes we cannot comprehend God. As Quenstedt says poetically, “The divine essence, like the ocean, is incomprehensible in all its infinite perfections, and the human mind cannot drain it out in a one single thought; therefore with various thoughts we sip, as it were, something from that infinity.”<sup>18</sup> But whereas Barth limits sips of that infinite as being available from special revelation alone, Confessional Lutheran theology teaches that we may sip from other sources as well. We reject Barth and the fideistic<sup>19</sup> theology that can flow from this thinking.<sup>20</sup> We look to both special revelation *and* natural theology to disclose knowledge of God.

When we say, “Because God is transcendent, we cannot comprehend him,” do we mean to say there is nothing we can know of God? No. Because God is also *personal*, we can *apprehend* him.<sup>21</sup> Here it is helpful to distinguish between comprehension and apprehension. Anglican

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<sup>18</sup> J. A. Quenstedt, *Theologica Didactico-Polemica*, quoted in Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 2:72.

<sup>19</sup> Fideism is the theological and epistemological position that the facticity of the biblical events, and thus a belief in their reasonable historicity, has no role to play at all in faith, often to the extreme of embracing faith as irrational. Modern fideism flowed out of the Enlightenment, especially Lessing, Kant, and David Strauss. Confessional Lutherans are *not* fideists in this contemporary understanding. For a good summary, see Alvin J. Schmidt, “Christianity Needs More Lutheran Apologetes,” *Tough-Minded Christianity: Honoring the Legacy of John Warwick Montgomery*, ed. William Dembski and Thomas Schirrmacher (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 504–507.

<sup>20</sup> Much of liberal Lutheran theology in the twentieth century has also tended to emphasize the incomprehensibility of God. For example, Paul Tillich writes, “Natural knowledge about self and the world cannot lead to the revelation of the ground of being [i.e. God].” *Systematic Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1:119. For this reason, liberal Lutheran theology, broadly speaking, has not engaged in apologetics. This is due, at least in part, to their turn away from natural theology and their embrace of fideism. Confessional Lutherans, though, teach that knowledge of God is accessible from both natural and supernatural revelation. This makes apologetics possible.

<sup>21</sup> Pieper: “Since finite human reason cannot comprehend the infinite and absolute simplex, God condescends to our weakness and in His Word divides Himself, as it were, into a number of attributes which our faith can grasp and to which it can cling” (*Christian Dogmatics*, 1:428).

Archbishop Richard Chenevix Trench (1807-1886), in his *On the Study of Words*, famously provides a useful distinction between the two terms:

As involving in like manner a distinction which cannot safely be lost sight of, how important the difference, the existence of which is asserted by our possession of the two words, 'to apprehend' and 'to comprehend' with their substantives 'apprehension' and 'comprehension.' For indeed we 'apprehend' many truths, which we do not 'comprehend.' The great mysteries of our faith--the doctrine, for instance, of the Holy Trinity, we lay hold upon it, we hang on it, our souls live by it; but we do not 'comprehend' it, that is, we do not take it all in; for it is a necessary attribute of God that He is incomprehensible; if He were not so, either He would not be God, or the Being that comprehended Him would be God also (Matt, xi. 27). But it also belongs to the idea of God that He may be 'apprehended' though not 'comprehended' by his reasonable creatures; He has made them to know Him, though not to know Him all, to 'apprehend' though not to 'comprehend' Him.<sup>22</sup>

### **1.3 We can *apprehend* aspects of our transcendent God, but we cannot *comprehend* God.**

We “touch on” his nature when we describe him as one God yet three persons. But we cannot “take it all in.” Likewise, when we call God infinite, we apprehend this quality, we “touch upon it” since we know what it means to be finite. But we cannot get far if we try to imagine what it must mean to be infinite. We cannot even picture it. Our analogies of God as an omnipotent architect or artist result in us just picturing someone bigger or more skilled than a human architect or artist, and so just as limited by time and space. We cannot fully comprehend God, whether we are speaking of his essence or his will, but we apprehend what he has revealed to us.<sup>23</sup>

The times God makes himself known are always limited in some respect. When Jacob calls his rest stop *El Bethel*, declaring that God revealed himself to Jacob, we understand this to mean *apprehension*: Jacob’s limited knowledge of God (especially of God’s plan of salvation) was

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1851, 1887), 312.

<sup>23</sup> Note we do teach that we know considerably more about God’s will than his essence. Cf. John Schaller, “The Hidden God,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 71 (1998): 197. But we still do not comprehend either. We are limited in our knowledge of God’s essence and God’s entire will.

increased by this vision, but to nowhere near the level of comprehension (Gen 35:7). Paul writes that “God appeared in the flesh” (1 Tim 3:16), referring to the incarnation. When Jesus became man, he did not make possible *comprehensive* knowledge of God. Rather, Paul is emphasizing Jesus’s statement that when you look at Jesus, you are, in some *apprehensive* sense, looking at God (John 14:9). John Schaller says that “the revelation of God in Christ is also a limited one: in spite of all the grandeur of that revelation, we know only in part the fullness of the deity which dwells in Jesus Christ.”<sup>24</sup> Paul himself tells us, “Now I know in part” as in a “poor reflection in a mirror” (1 Cor 13:12).

And so, even despite the full corpus of revelation, both natural and supernatural, “this revealed God remains at the same time *a hidden God!*”<sup>25</sup> This ends our discussion of God’s hiddenness as a consequence of his transcendence. But Lutheran theologians view God’s hiding in a secondary way, in view of God’s mercy as a *personal* God.

#### **1.4 Because God is merciful to us, he remains hidden.**

God’s hiddenness is often interpreted as an act of cruelty on God’s part. In *The Protest and the Silence*, G. Tom Milazzo writes, “Either God is not there, and God’s hiddenness is really absence, or the God who is there is a cruel, angry, brutal God that seems to relish human suffering.”<sup>26</sup> The problem isn’t so much that God is hidden, but rather that, if there is a God, he is

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<sup>24</sup> Schaller, 186. Also, “Therefore although the regenerate understand the great truths of the gospel well enough to realize that by knowing God and Jesus Christ they have eternal life (Jn 17:3), yet their knowledge of God’s complete revelation remains imperfect and incomplete” (Schaller, 187). “In the Scripture we see a clear picture of God; there we have an abundant revelation of His essence and of His will; there He gives us satisfying information concerning many problems whose solution has evaded the best efforts of natural man. But in spite of this there is much that remains a riddle, much that remains dark; we can see only what God wants us to see—an image in a mirror!” (Schaller, 188).

<sup>25</sup> Schaller, 186.

<sup>26</sup> Milazzo, *The Protest and the Silence*, 44.

*actively* hiding. Far more than simply a statement on his nature, it is a statement on an active choice God has made to conceal himself, and how and where he hides.<sup>27</sup> How do we make sense of this?

On Mount Sinai, Moses discusses with God how God has personally *taught* Moses and the children of Israel; then he asks if God will personally *lead* Moses and the children of Israel with his Presence, and God agrees. Finally, pushing God to the limits of his revelation to the Israelites, Moses asks God to personally *reveal* himself to Moses: “Now show (הָאֵל) me your glory.” God’s response: “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see (הָאֵל) my face, for no one may see (הָאֵל) me and live” (Exod 33:19-20). And in a display of his *goodness*, as he proclaims his name, God must hide Moses in a cleft in the mountain. Note why God does not reveal himself to Moses: he wants Moses to live. He spares Moses by means of his hiddenness. Within the biblical context, that God is hidden is an act of his mercy. But why must God hide in order to spare us?

We mentioned earlier that at times to call God holy is to emphasize his transcendence. The core idea of the term *holy* (קָדוֹשׁ) is separateness and disassociation, and two sub-distinctions flow from this. On the one hand, he is separate because of his transcendent position relative to ours. We see this when speaking of his exaltedness (Isa 6:3, 57:13; Ps 22:3). On the other hand, *holiness* can emphasize God’s separateness because of his ethical distinctiveness. When the demons trembled before Jesus of Nazareth and cried out, “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the

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<sup>27</sup> See Steven D. Paulson, “Luther on the Hidden God,” *Word & World* 19 (1999), 363–371. “God hides so as not to be found where people seek him, and reveals himself where he is not sought” (364).

Holy One of God” (Mark 1:24), they were not referring to his transcendence, but his ethical perfection, and hence his intolerance of evil (and thus the demons). The purity regulations within the Mosaic Law pictured analogically the ethical separateness of God (Lev 11:44–45). Scripture teaches clearly that God is ethically perfect, desires only what is holy and ethically perfect, and therefore cannot tolerate ethical imperfection.<sup>28</sup>

Conversely, Scripture teaches the ethical *imperfection* of humanity after the fall. Joshua warned the children of Israel, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins” (Josh 24:19). This ethical imperfection goes all the way through us, affecting our entire beings and everything that flows from our beings (Eccl 7:20; Jer 17:9; Isa 64:6; Rom 3:10-12). To be ethically perfect is to be intolerant of ethical imperfection. (This is obviously tautological. To speak otherwise would be nonsense.) And so, God’s holiness *in some sense* cannot tolerate sinful humanity’s unholiness.

And so, if there is a God who has the attributes of divine holiness, and humans have, indeed, a sinful nature, God ought to turn his back on sinful humans. And he does this. “No one may see me and live” (Exod 33:20). Out of love for Moses, God does not appear to him.<sup>29</sup> Not only does God hide from humankind; humankind has also turned its back on God. In fact, the immediate reaction to humankind’s fall into sin was that *humanity hid from God* (Gen 3:8). Since the Fall,

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<sup>28</sup> Note the repetition in the Mosaic Covenant, “Be holy, because I am holy” (Lev 11:44,45; 19:2; 20:7,26). This is meant to emphasize God’s disassociation with sin and his desire for Israel to separate from sin as well, which would entail disassociating itself from other nations. In other words, the ethical character of God entails this *holiness*, or separateness, and so has ethical implications for the Israelites. This is not directly related to God’s transcendence. 1 Peter 1:13–15 makes it clear God’s desire for holiness pertained not only to the Israelites.

<sup>29</sup> Exod 33:20 helps us to interpret other times in which God “appears” before his people. E.g., “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw (הָאֵל) the God of Israel...” (Exod 24:9-10a). Whatever form God took to present himself to Moses and the elders, we know they did not see God in his full undisclosed glory (Compare this to John 14:9).

“the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Rom 8:7). Further, “[T]he god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers” (2 Cor 4:3). God not only hides; humanity is also blind.

For these and other reasons, Luther called God a Hidden God. In reply to Erasmus’s *Diatrobe*, Luther argues in his *Bondage of the Will* that the humanist builds his argument on a crucial confusion between God as he is and God as he is revealed in Scripture. He writes, “Diatrobe, however, deceives herself in her ignorance by not making any distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and God himself.”<sup>30</sup>

## **Thesis 2: The Hidden God discloses limited knowledge of himself from behind masks.**

Despite God’s Hiddenness, he chooses to make himself known to us. Melancthon in his *Loci* writes, “[F]rom the very beginning God is proceeding from His secret throne for the sake of our salvation and is always revealing Himself.”<sup>31</sup> One way Lutheran theologians have described the Hidden God revealing himself is to speak of *knowledges* of God. Another, which conceptually overlaps, is to speak of *masks* of God.<sup>32</sup> Within Lutheran theology, in which we simultaneously

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, “Bondage of the Will,” *LW* 33:140. For one of Luther’s earlier statements regarding a “hidden God,” see also “Heidelberg Disputation,” *LW* 31:52–54, 225.

<sup>31</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Throughout Luther’s ministry, the analogy of *masks* would at times surface as a favourite in his writings. Luther probably did not reserve the term for a specific doctrinal concept, but instead used the mask freely as a metaphor in many different contexts. In his commentary on Galatians, for example, we see *mask* being applied widely, from God hiding behind nature, vocations, and evangelists, to the physical life of the Christian as a mask hiding his true life through faith. To illustrate this point, although in this paper we are focusing on the ways God uses other things as masks, Luther writes that even *this* gets inverted. In his exposition of Gal 3:13, of Christ becoming a curse for us, he describes justification as Christ wearing *us* as a mask (and taking our penalty upon himself) only to have us wear *Christ* as a mask (and taking his righteousness, life, and eternal blessing). See “Lectures on Galatians,” *LW* 26. Instead of a systematic doctrine of masks, for Luther we might speak more of a theological penchant for revealing the diametric nature of much of biblical theology. Theologians after Luther have teased out these concepts in far more detail than Luther ever had the time to do in the midst of the Reformation. All this to say that it is difficult to build a systematic theological idea from how Luther uses the word *mask*. But after five hundred years of Lutheran thinking, we have

recognize God's hiddenness and his desire to be known, I find the language of masks particularly helpful. It sets us apart from Evangelical rationalism and liberal Lutheran fideism. It also emphasizes *God's* activity (rather than humankind's) in both conversion *and* his remaining hidden. Therefore, we will describe the modes in which God discloses knowledge of himself while remaining hidden as God's masks.

The word "mask" is carefully chosen. We will be speaking of how God *discloses* himself, yet masks are for *hiding*, not revealing. We feel the inherent tension when our theologians, such as Siegbert Becker, write that these are "masks behind which we see God at once hidden and revealed."<sup>33</sup> And we should rightly feel this tension, because this is the tension our God presents himself through. On the one hand, as we have established, he hides. On the other hand, we will see that he makes himself known through a wide variety of means. Yet, to say "God discloses himself from behind masks" is most certainly contradictory, as contradictory as saying God both loves and hates the sinner, and God predestines some to heaven but none to hell. This is the tension of striving to know a God outside our ability to comprehend.<sup>34</sup>

Practically, to ask whether God uses modes of revelation to hide or disclose is similar to asking whether Jesus used parables to hide or disclose.<sup>35</sup> Those whom he has called will find God behind the mask. To those who reject him, God will actively remain hidden. And so as we examine each mask, we will see that, despite God using the mask to disclose knowledge of himself, we will

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settled into a handful of teachings in which we apply the term *God's masks*. **A full analysis of the history of the term *masks of God (larvae Dei)* would be an excellent senior thesis topic.**

<sup>33</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1982), 20.

<sup>34</sup> We cannot rationalize how a timeless and space-less God *ought* to make himself known in time and space, let alone a holy (set-apart) and perfect God ought to make himself known to sinful humans with wills bent towards disavowing him.

<sup>35</sup> I'm indebted to Rev. Keegan Dowling for this analogy.

see strong biblical examples of the sinful heart's resistance to God, as well as some cases in which God actively hides and frustrates the unbeliever.

## **Natural and supernatural knowledge of God**

One important way to categorize and define how God reveals himself from behind masks is to speak of the masks of *natural* revelation compared to *supernatural* revelation.<sup>36</sup> Gerhard notes that this distinction is evident as early as Tertullian (c. 155 –c. 240 AD) and Augustine (354–430 AD). He quotes Tertullian in his *Against Marcion*, “We must first become acquainted with God by nature and then become reacquainted with Him through doctrine: by nature from His works, and through doctrine from His words.” And Augustine writes, on Psalm 34, “There are two things that lead to the knowledge of God: creation and Scripture.”<sup>37</sup> This distinction is formally outlined by Chemnitz.<sup>38</sup>

### **2.1 The limited knowledge of God which is disclosed from God's masks of nature and conscience we call the *natural knowledge of God*.**

This teaching is firmly established by Lutheran dogmaticians. Chemnitz writes, “There is therefore some natural knowledge of God which is by nature grafted into the minds of all men and

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<sup>36</sup> The use of the terms *natural* and *supernatural* are unfortunately confusing for us twentieth- and twenty-first century Westerners. Since the Enlightenment, the terms *natural* refers more-or-less to things *free from* God's intervention (think philosophical naturalism), whereas *supernatural* refers to things involving God's intervention. This is not how the Bible or Christians before the 1500s thought of these terms. Instead, *natural*, in the theological sense, simply refers to the created order of God (from the Latin *natura*, “born” or “origin”), within which God is always immanent, upholding and sustaining and working his providence. *Supernatural* refers to God going above and beyond his typical immanence and interacting with humankind in a different way than he does in nature. (Translate *super-* as *in addition to*). For the Christian, there is no distinction between *natural* and *supernatural* in the Post-Enlightenment (former) sense. For the Christian, God is divinely present and active in both the natural and supernatural. In this paper, we are using the *Christian* senses of these terms, not the Post-Enlightenment sense.

<sup>37</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces. Exegesis II-III. On the Nature of God and on the Trinity*, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 59.

<sup>38</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci*, 51.

is gathered from the works of God in the creation and in the evidences of His deity which are seen in the whole nature of things.”<sup>39</sup> He cites Rom 1:19–20, 2:15; Acts 14:15–17, and Acts 17:23–28. As we read in our newest edition of the Enchiridion, “God’s creation and the conscience within each of us testify clearly that there is a God.”<sup>40</sup> The discipline of studying God through his creation, as apart from any supernatural revelation, we call *natural theology*.

Preus summarizes the scope of natural theology as able to provide *apprehension* of certain attributes of God, the moral law of God, that sin is transgressing that moral law, and the immortality of the soul.<sup>41</sup> These conclusions follow from Paul’s statements that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom 1:20) and that the Gentile unbelievers “do by nature things required by the law,” showing that “the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” (Rom 2:15). This natural knowledge results in humanity being “without excuse” (Rom 1:20). Paul’s goal is to demonstrate that on Judgment Day, no unbeliever will be able to claim they did not have access to evidence for God’s existence; the truth is that unbelievers *suppressed* the evidence. Our dogmaticians have concluded that God has provided the natural law “for the sake of the external discipline which God wants all men to observe, even the unregenerate.”<sup>42</sup> “The reason that the Father must hide behind ‘masks’ of creation, or the *larva Dei*, is that God refuses to abandon the world or its sinners.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci*, 52. See also *Loci*, vol. 1, Locus 1, Chapter 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Luther’s Catechism* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 27.

<sup>41</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 1:174.

<sup>42</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci*, 53.

<sup>43</sup> Paulson, “Luther on the Hidden God,” 367. See also Chemnitz, *Loci*, 53.

***2.1.1 God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind evidence found in the created world around us.***

Siegbert Becker writes, “Luther saw the natural world also as one of the masks of God. Just as God hides himself in the means of grace, so he hides his invisible attributes in the whole of nature. All the works of God are such masks behind which we see God at once hidden and revealed.”<sup>44</sup> One of Walther’s theological axioms states, “The universe is its Creator’s mask.”<sup>45</sup>

The Psalmist says, “The heavens declare the glory of God... There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Ps 19:1,3). This mode of revelation seems accessible to all people throughout all time. Some 2300 years ago Aristotle wrote, “We say, indeed, that the god is a living being who is eternal and best, so that living and a continuous and everlasting eternity belong to the god, since this is the god.”<sup>46</sup> More recently, physicist Paul Davies began his book, *The Mind of God*:

I belong to the group of scientists who do not subscribe to a conventional religion but nevertheless deny that the universe is a purposeless accident. Through my scientific work I have come to believe more and more strongly that the physical universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it merely as a brute fact. There must, it seems to me, be a deeper level of explanation. Whether one wishes to call that deeper level ‘God’ is a matter of taste and definition.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 20.

<sup>45</sup> C.F.W. Walther, “Theological Axioms I,” trans. Christopher S. Doerr, *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/WaltherTheologicalAxiomsI.pdf>, 21. This mirrors Luther: “Now the whole creation is a face or mask of God” Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians,” Gal 2:6, *LW* 26: 95.

<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company: 2016), 206. (12.7; 1072b).

<sup>47</sup> Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1992, 2005), 16.

Luther writes, “Such a light and such a perception is innate in the hearts of all men; and this light cannot be subdued or extinguished.”<sup>48</sup> All people are forced on some level to struggle with what and who they find operating in the world around them. And so, this truth is part of our church body’s confession.<sup>49</sup>

This truth is also used as the theological justification for apologetic research regarding the cosmological and teleological arguments for God’s existence. Cosmological and teleological arguments are based on the evidence of certain features in the observable world which, it is argued, make highly likely an intelligent, powerful mind or designer behind them. We would list the contemporary work in cosmology (particularly popularized by William Lane Craig<sup>50</sup>), intelligent design (popularized by Michael Behe, Stephen C. Meyer, and William Dembski<sup>51</sup>), and fine-tuning arguments (popularized by Jay Richards and Guillermo Gonzalez<sup>52</sup>). Although an analysis of the employment of such arguments is needed (especially the contemporary arguments found in the

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<sup>48</sup> “Lectures on Jonah” (1526) 1:5, *LW* 19:53.

<sup>49</sup> Our newest catechism: “By now you know that many people deny there is a god. They don’t want to admit that there is a being who has power over them or to whom they owe obedience. In reality, it should be obvious to everyone that there is a God. (Hebrews 3:4; Psalm 19:1,2) The magnificent creation gives us hints about the God who created all things. What can we learn about God from the things he created? (Romans 1:20; Psalm 104).” *Luther’s Catechism* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 26. The “Blue” Catechism: “How do we know there is a God?... We know there is a God from the things he created. What do we know about God from the things he created?... From the things God created we know that he is kind, wise, eternal, powerful, and divine.” *Luther’s Catechism*, ed. David P. Kuske (Milwaukee, WI: WELS Board for Parish Services, 1982), 26. From *This We Believe*: “We believe that God has revealed himself in nature. (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20) So there is no excuse for atheists. Since the requirements of the law are written on people’s hearts, the consciences of people also bear witness that there is a God to whom they are accountable. (Romans 2:15) However, nature and conscience present only a partial revelation of God and one that is not able to show the way to heaven.” *This We Believe* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1967, 1999), 3.

<sup>50</sup> William Lane Craig popularized a contemporary form of the cosmological argument which brings into play current science, such as the expansion of the universe. First published in *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), many of his later works summarize this argument.

<sup>51</sup> Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 1996); Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); William Dembski, *The Design Inference* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, *The Privileged Planet* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2004).

works of those listed above), the Lutheran fathers did see value in the pursuit of arguments for God's existence based on natural knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

### ***2.1.2 God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind evidence found in the law and conscience within us.***

Whereas cosmological and teleological arguments look to the evidence outside of man, moral arguments are based on the evidence of certain features found within man. These deal with features God has placed within all men, mainly the conscience and the law, features that cry out for the existence of a lawgiver. Paul writes that Gentiles, who did not have special revelation, somehow still know God's law. "[T]he requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them" (Rom 2:15). Luther comments on this subject:

The knowledge of the law is known to reason, and reason has almost touched and smelled God. For they saw out of the law what was right and wrong, and the law is written in our hearts, as St. Paul testifies to the Romans. Although it is more clearly revealed through Moses, it is nevertheless also true that by nature all rational men can come this far that they know that to disobey father and mother or the government is wrong--likewise murder, adultery, theft, cursing, and blasphemy.... So far reason can go in knowing God that it has a law knowledge. It knows God's command and what is right and wrong. The philosophers also had this knowledge of God.<sup>54</sup>

This is also part of our church body's confession,<sup>55</sup> and the Christian world-at-large has a rich history of exploring the implications of the law within. C.S. Lewis was particularly interested in this topic when he wrote *The Abolition of Man*. Conscience and the law within are fundamental

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<sup>53</sup> See Becker, *Foolishness of God*, 33–36; Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2:19-30.

<sup>54</sup> "Sermons on John," 1:18, WA 46:667, trans. S. Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 35.

<sup>55</sup> Our new catechism: "The voice of our conscience proves that God exists." (Romans 2:14,15; Romans 1:32) (26). "Blue" Catechism: "What do we know about God from our consciences? From our consciences we know that God will punish us for our sins" (26-28).

for Thomas Aquinas's natural law theory, and contemporary Natural Law ethicists such as J. Budziszewski<sup>56</sup> also spend considerable time on the importance of the conscience in philosophical inquiry and Christian apologetics.

### **The encouragement of Lutheran dogmaticians to use the natural knowledge of God**

The Lutheran Fathers encouraged Christians to engage in what we today call natural knowledge apologetics. Chemnitz writes, "You ask, does God will that we seek and consider these marks of His divinity in our own minds and in the entire nature of things? The answer is yes.... I wish that we would open wide the full book of nature."<sup>57</sup> This includes exploring arguments for God's existence. Hoenecke comments, "Our dogmaticians acknowledge a certain use of these proofs." He then quotes Baier, who encourages his readers to make use of these arguments, because "we must earnestly contend not only with atheists but also at times with the doubts of our own minds on account of the corruption of nature, those things that prove the existence of God ought not be neglected."<sup>58</sup> Luther also reserved a special place in his theology for apologetic discourse regarding the natural knowledge of God. Becker writes:

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<sup>56</sup> Budziszewski is probably the most well-known natural law ethicist engaged in contemporary apologetics. See his *Written on the Heart: The Case for Natural Law* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci*, 53–54.

<sup>58</sup> Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 2:33-34. Hoenecke quotes Gerhard: "In grave and serious temptations, Chemnitz says we are all either Epicureans or Stoics. Therefore, the heart must be strengthened by a consideration of the things that are said [by philosophers], which testifies that there is a God and that he carefully administers human affairs... [God must be proved] to perfect the natural knowledge of God." There is considerable potential for exploring Gerhard's idea of perfecting the natural knowledge of God. What ought to be admitted is that the study of natural theology is largely a *natural* science (science used in the dogmaticians' sense, as an intellectual discipline dealing with data), not theology. We use theology to create our borders and limitations for what can and cannot be said, but the activity is a human one moving towards perfecting our natural knowledge. We ought to treat these topics as a natural science, and just as in other sciences, a complete study involves assessing current research, not just past. If this is the case, Hoenecke's dogmatics (and other Lutheran dogmatic texts of the past) is not a good place to study apologetic arguments, and he would be the first to say this. His assessments are outdated, and he is a theologian, not an apologist. There have been considerable assessments and advancements made in the fields of apologetics beyond Hoenecke's assessment. For example, Hoenecke's assessment of the moral proof, which he finds "completely without merit" (1:43) shows little resemblance to the argument as it is put forward by apologists today.

There was an area of theology where Luther was willing to debate with the adversaries. He warns against the use of reason in the doctrine of justification, in matters of conscience and in regard to satisfaction, remission, reconciliation, and salvation, but outside these areas, in regard to the wisdom, power, and other attributes of God, for example, he was willing that we should be as subtle and as sharp in debate as we possibly can be.<sup>59</sup>

We learn about this natural knowledge of God from non-theological disciplines, such as science and philosophy. Preus reviews much of this in his *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. He documents how Calov and other Lutheran theologians repeatedly pointed out that the disciplines which arrive at the natural knowledge are “often praised in the Scriptures.”<sup>60</sup> Regarding arguments for God’s existence, Preus concludes, “There is nothing in these arguments of Calov’s that is not already incipient in Gerhard. These arguments become common stock of all the later Lutherans.”<sup>61</sup> And Gerhard chronicles the study of the natural knowledge of God by both Christian and non-Christian authors, such as Plato, Pliny, Lactantius, Augustine, Boethius, and Erasmus.<sup>62</sup> Calov goes so far as to say, “We are not to misuse or conceal this knowledge, but in the proper way we are to add the book of Scripture to the book of nature.”<sup>63</sup> The Lutheran dogmaticians taught clearly we can deepen our understanding of the God revealed in Scripture

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Hoenecke’s assessment is one of Kant, Fichte, and other German philosophers, who used this argument to support antichristian projects.

<sup>59</sup> Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 40.

<sup>60</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:132.

<sup>61</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:133.

<sup>62</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces. IX. On Providence*, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 47-49.

<sup>63</sup> Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:179. “Finally, we are to be strengthened and encouraged by the doctrine and example of those who are learned and who study the truth” (179). Preus extrapolates: “It is important that we understand the meaning of this statement. In the last sentence Calov is referring to learned philosophers and scholars who study only the book of nature and do not have the book of Scripture. We can learn from these people, and can sometimes be confirmed in the truth by their studies, for they can teach nothing against the truth” (180).

through non-theological disciplines which God uses to reveal himself through the natural knowledge of God. This knowledge can be used either to grow a Christian's appreciation and awe for God, or to aid a Christian in speaking about God to the unbeliever in apologetic discourse.

The Lutheran dogmaticians often differentiate between an innate knowledge of God and an acquired knowledge. All people are born with an innate knowledge. Gerhard summarizes this inherent natural knowledge of God as "obscure fragments of the lost divine image and traces of the lost light that used to shine in the mind of man before the fall, tiny sparks through which the common and preconceived knowledge that God does exist is branded naturally on the minds of all people."<sup>64</sup> We can make a distinction, then, between the inborn *a priori* knowledge of God, which exists in all humans (Rom 2:15), and an *a posteriori* knowledge of God, which is acquired through experience (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:20).

### ***2.1.3 In light of both the innate and acquired natural knowledge of God, there is no excuse for atheists.***

Many certainly claim that, after a close study of nature, they find no evidence of God. "There are, to be sure, some people, for instance, the Epicureans, Pliny, and the like, who deny this with their lips. But they do it by force and want to quench this light in their hearts. They are like people who purposely stop their ears or pinch their eyes shut to close out sound and sight. However, they do not succeed in this; their conscience tells them otherwise."<sup>65</sup> Those that look at nature and conclude there is no God are in fact working *against* the evidence. They are forcibly misinterpreting the data. And this is not speculation. Luther continues:

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<sup>64</sup> Gerhard, *Nature of God*, 59.

<sup>65</sup> "Lectures on Jonah," *LW* 19:53-54.

For Paul is not lying when he asserts that they [unbelievers] know something about God, “because God has shown it to them” (Rom. 1:19). Let us here also learn from nature and from reason what can be known of God. These people regard God as a being who is able to deliver from every evil. It follows from this that natural reason must concede that all that is good comes from God.... That is as far as the natural light of reason sheds its rays—it regards God as kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And that is indeed a bright light.<sup>66</sup>

Note what Luther is saying here about reason: she is a *light*, and those who come to the conclusion that God does not exist based on the evidence of nature are ignoring what that light has revealed. Luther believes reason provides a way to touch at a great distance the reality of God, that he is kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. Elsewhere Luther writes, “We are *forced* to ascribe to God omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness.”<sup>67</sup> This truth is part of our confession. *This We Believe*: “We believe that God has revealed himself in nature (Psalm 19:1, Romans 1:20). So there is no excuse for atheists. Since the requirements of the law are written on people’s hearts, the consciences of people also bear witness that there is a God to whom they are accountable (Romans 2:15).”<sup>68</sup>

Note we are speaking *theologically* here. The actual experience of some unbelievers may be quite different. They may honestly feel as though the evidence points against God’s existence, and this must be received by the Christian evangelist with tact, patience, and love. Like those imprisoned in Plato’s cave, those imprisoned in unbelief may often *feel most certain* about being free. The Christian, though, has escaped and knows the actual state of affairs.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “Lectures on Jonah,” *LW* 19:54.

<sup>67</sup> WA 40.3: 332, trans. Becker, *Foolishness of God*, 33.

<sup>68</sup> *This We Believe*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> The Lutheran Fathers have gone so far as to say atheism does not exist. Preus writes, “[Melancthon] is denying the possibility of theoretical atheism. This inference may also be drawn from the arguments of Lutherans in Gerhard’s and Calov’s day in their discussions of natural theology. They state that natural theology tells us that there is a God.... [A]lthough the heathen are ignorant of who God is, their ignorance is not a complete negation of knowledge (cf. 1 Thess. 4:5 and the ἄθεοι in Eph. 2:12). Therefore Quendstedt says: ‘Even though there are those who deny that God is, they are not ignorant that God is.’ This would mean that the fool who says there is no God does so

#### ***2.1.4 Natural theology teaches nothing of saving grace.***

There is at least one important limitation to the natural knowledge of God: It cannot teach anything of saving grace. In his *City of God*, Augustine begins working out the implications of Rom 1:20, the *sedes* for the natural knowledge of God. After sketching out how non-Christian philosophers and thinkers have arrived at knowledge of God through their study of nature, he makes it clear that natural revelation is limited compared to the knowledge Jesus Christ himself desired to directly reveal to us.

This Mediator, first through the Prophets, then by His own lips, afterwards through the Apostles, revealed whatever He considered necessary. He also inspired the Scripture, which is regarded as canonical and of supreme authority and to which we give credence concerning all those truths we ought to know and yet, of ourselves, are unable to learn.<sup>70</sup>

Augustine's point is that from Scripture we supernaturally learn that which we are not able to naturally learn on our own. Paul writes that "what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit (1 Cor 2:9-10). What has no ear heard, despite creation's voice going out into all the earth, despite the law of God written on the hearts of all humanity? What can we not learn from nature or conscience? "We declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began" (1 Cor 2:7). That wisdom is, of course, the foolishness of God, Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:21-23). The gospel is

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against his conscience and against better knowledge... Atheism therefore is not due to any evidence from observation (*ex animi sensu*), it is not due to nature nor to an inability to find God... The fault is with man, with his willful rebellion against God" (Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:175-176).

<sup>70</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.3, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan, in *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954, 2008), 14:190.

a prophetic message (2 Pet 1:19), one which cannot be discovered through natural revelation but only through the sharing of that message (Rom 10:14).<sup>71</sup>

Further, because of sin, humanity is “darkened in their understanding” (Eph 4:18) and “the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God” (Rom 8:7). So, at times, this mind works *against* the evidence of natural theology. In fact, the depravity of humankind runs so deep, has the ability to mangle the evidence and our intellect so badly, and can corrupt every good thought so thoroughly, that we are able to convince ourselves of just about anything apart from the truth. Claiming to be wise, we become fools (Rom 1:22).<sup>72</sup> Paul, speaking of those who should have apprehended God’s divine power, says that “their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” (Rom 1:21). “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25).

Our point is simply that, no matter how developed one’s acquired natural knowledge of God may become, no matter how persuasive the speech of the heavens, the unbeliever remains hostile to God; the human being, totally depraved. There are limits to what the natural knowledge of God can accomplish compared to the supernatural certainty to which the Holy Spirit leads Christians through the supernatural knowledge of God.

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<sup>71</sup> “Thesis 2: Neither the inborn nor the developed natural knowledge of God is sufficient to attain eternal salvation” (Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 2:11). See also Chemnitz, *Loci*, 2:453–456.

<sup>72</sup> And note the aim of much of contemporary apologetics is building *probabilistic* arguments for God’s existence. Examples include the probability of God’s existence given the amount of evil in the world; and the probability of the constants in arguments based on the fine-tuning of the universe. In other words, for many apologists, certainty is not the goal in appealing to the natural knowledge of God.

## **2.2. The limited knowledge of God which is disclosed from God's masks of supernatural intervention in history we call *special revelation*.**

Any special mode through which God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself apart from his natural means of his creation and conscience we bundle under the heading of special revelation. This will comprise not only God's supernatural revelation in Scripture, but also his miraculous interventions in history, including the incarnation.

### ***2.2.1 God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind his miraculous intervention in history.***

God “made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel” (Ps 103:7). When God sent Moses to speak his revelatory word to Pharaoh and the captive Israelites, Moses asked, “What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you?’” (Exod 4:1). What follows is one of the great events of human history, the miraculous deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. At a time when the prophet Elijah thought there were no more believers in the one true God, God made it clear through powerful miracles that there most certainly is a “god who answers by fire” (1 Kgs 18:24). Earlier, the non-Israelite widow declared to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth” (1 Kgs 17:24). The Old Testament is a record of an active God, one who not only speaks, but one who makes himself known through signs. In fact, just as John the Gospel writer spoke more often of miraculous *signs* (σημεῖα) than just miracles (τέρατα), the Old Testament writers often referred to these special events as signs (אֵימֹתַי) rather than simply miracles (מוֹפְתִים, Exod 4:8,9,17; 7:3; Deut 6:22; 7:19; Judg 6:17). Signs serve to *point*, and so these miraculous signs meant to point to the very real existence of God and his care for his chosen. These signs were visible not only to Israel and believers, but also to the unbelieving nations and peoples. The Bible records them as

real events within history, empirically verified by witnesses—evidence which persuaded those witnesses to believe in God’s existence and activity.

God’s performing miracles reveals real, apprehensible knowledge about God. “[T]he mind is moved by those testimonies and miracles.”<sup>73</sup> But despite God’s supernatural intervention in history, “Our fathers refused to obey him. Instead they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt” (Acts 7:39–40). The sinful nature rejects even empirical evidence as direct as the ten plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna and quail, the water from rock.<sup>74</sup> Despite how much God shows of himself, he still remains hidden, that is, not fully disclosed or comprehensible. He only makes aspects of himself apprehensible. The sinful nature is able still to dismiss God’s presence behind these actions. Ultimately, in and of themselves, these miracles do not save, but must be paired with the saving gospel message.

### ***2.2.2 God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind his incarnation.***

There is one particular subset of God’s miraculous intervention worth noting: “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4:4). The incarnation is a historical event, with an empirical dimension, and is treated by Scripture as an observable event. We confess that both the miraculous and non-miraculous events in the life of Jesus testify, that is, provide evidence, for the fact that Jesus is God.<sup>75</sup> Confessional Lutheran writer

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<sup>73</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci*, 35.

<sup>74</sup> “But what would be the benefit of such miracles and promises to those who do not believe?” Ap XIII 20. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 222.

<sup>75</sup> I am referring to our customary way in teaching the catechism of knowing how Jesus was true God (via noting his divine names and characteristics) and true man (via noting his human characteristics), which amounts to

Allen Quist, in his *Many Convincing Proofs*, takes note of how the Gospel writers viewed the events of Jesus as historical evidence for the Christian faith:

While describing the activities of these evangelists, Luke managed to include nine of their missionary sermons.... When we evaluate these sermons, we find that there are four lines of verification which are common to them generally. These four lines of argument and evidence are: (1) Jesus' resurrection from the dead proves that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. (2) The many eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus confirm the fact of the resurrection. (3) Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. (4) Jesus' many miracles, and those done by the apostles in his name, demonstrate that he is the Messiah.<sup>76</sup>

Since the Gospels are testimony regarding the events of the incarnation, we might note that this is only one form of testimony (albeit certainly the best, and the only sure, testimony the Christian knows). Luke speaks of other witnesses and accounts, and we find a limited amount of extra-biblical evidence for Jesus' ministry.<sup>77</sup> But from the historian's point of view, the New Testament documents remain the best, earliest, and most widespread evidence. And so much of Christian apologetics today focuses on either (1) examining the uniqueness of the New Testament

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referring to the testimony of the apostles. Those who witnessed Jesus doing miracles had rational grounds for concluding he was God or sent by God.

<sup>76</sup> Allen Quist, *Many Convincing Proofs A Biblical Approach to Christian Apologetics*, ed. Paul Wold (Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2008), 6. Former Bethany Lutheran College professor Allen Quist's work is a useful analysis of the apologetic nature of Scripture, demonstrating how the Gospel writers understood their writings as the conveying of historical facts proving the incarnation, as well as demonstrating how the epistles' authors understood their writings as developing a gospel theology built on those historical facts.

<sup>77</sup> Besides the writings of the Early Church, see the non-Christian sources of Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.64; Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44; Lucian of Samosata, *The Death of Peregrine* 11-13; the letter by Mara Bar-Serapion (British Museum, Syriac Manuscript, Additional 14,658); and the Talmud (b. Sanh. 43a). The usefulness of these extra-biblical sources is extremely limited. The Talmud, for example, says that Jesus's corpse was hung up on Passover Eve after he was executed by stoning for the crimes of sorcery and incitement to idol worship; also, that Jesus had five disciples who were also executed. Further, the manuscript copies of the other sources mentioned often came from Christian monastic *scriptoria*, where the copies may have been (and in some cases almost certainly were) edited.

documents as historical testimony,<sup>78</sup> or (2) examining a limited number of reported events in the New Testament documents and what conclusions historians must come to.<sup>79</sup>

The incarnation is a very special mask of God. “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Jesus declared, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). When those disciples looked upon Christ, they looked upon God’s “glory, the glory of the One and Only” (John 1:14). “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18). Here was a form of God whom you could not only look at, but also touch and feel; with whom you could become friends and pray. Christ’s transfiguration reminds us, though, that the incarnation is still a mask, in the sense that the incarnate Jesus was not the fullness of God disclosed.

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<sup>78</sup> John W. Montgomery pioneered this approach that was widely popular among evangelical apologists in the second half of the twentieth century. Often designated as *evidential* apologists, these scholars rested heavily on the works of evangelical textual scholars. Consider Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). As a summary of this position, Craig Parton, a student of Montgomery and proponent of evidential apologetics, writes, “In short, from a lawyer's viewpoint these documents are in solid shape and would surely, as Simon Greenleaf argued, be admissible under the so-called ‘ancient documents’ exception to the hearsay rule. They give no evidence of tampering, are well-attested as coming from a strong tradition of manuscript evidence, arise almost on top of the events they record, and have no peer among all works of antiquity based on the sheer number of excellent and early manuscript copies. The documents are reliable historically, applying the commonly accepted canons of historical scholarship used to determine if any work that predates the printing press has reached us in substantially the same shape in which it was authored.” Craig A. Parton, *The Defense Never Rests: A Lawyer’s Quest for the Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 77.

<sup>79</sup> Evidential apologetics is at times contrasted with *minimal facts* apologetics, pioneered by the work of Gary Habermas. In Habermas and Licona’s *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, written as a popular guide to their apologetic approach, they describe this apologetic in action: “Using this approach, we may start off by saying, ‘I believe there’s some pretty good evidence for Jesus’ resurrection.’ When asked to provide that evidence, we respond by saying, ‘Because not everyone believes the Bible in its entirety, how about if I use only facts that are so strongly evidenced historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject, even the rather skeptical ones?’ This usually solicits the skeptical friend’s attention. We can then follow up by providing something like the following argument: [a] The disciples sincerely believed that Jesus rose from the dead and had appeared to them. [b] A number of outside evidences support the truth of their beliefs in his resurrection. [c] Since no opposing theories can adequately account for all the historical evidence, therefore, Jesus’ resurrection is the only plausible explanation.” Gary R. Habermas, and Michael Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 207. See also Habermas, Gary R. *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). For an example of a current development, Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

Yet “though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10,11). To most in Israel, God somehow remained hidden in plain sight. Even when Jesus “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3), his sheep wrestle mightily with doubts and confusion. Despite Jesus’s clear predictions regarding his crucifixion and resurrection (Matt 16:21-28; 17:22-23; 20:17-19), some disciples *still* doubted after the fact (Matt 28:16-17).<sup>80</sup> Through Christ’s miracles, it may be possible to speak of the incarnation disclosing knowledge of Christ’s divinity, but the miracles in and of themselves do not disclose knowledge which saves.<sup>81</sup> And so for these reasons, we find yet again God disclosing himself, yet remaining hidden.

### ***2.2.3 God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind the empirical facts and unempirical truths recorded in the Word.***

We can clearly distinguish, then, between, on the one hand, what we might call the empirical facts recorded in Scripture, and, on the other hand, what we might call the unempirical truths declared in the Bible. Consider the first phrases of Paul’s famous resurrection creed: “For what I received I passed on to you of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). Paul recites that Jesus “was crucified.” This is an empirical fact, one he declared to Festus as “true and reasonable” to believe in (Acts 26:25). There were witnesses present. You could see Jesus dying, hear his words from the cross, talk about it with the person standing next to you. If the crucifixion would have happened in our times, you could have video-

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<sup>80</sup> What Gustaf Wingren wrote regarding the mask of vocation might also apply here to the mask of the incarnation: “One who does not have the gospel cannot differentiate between God and his mask.” *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957), 140.

<sup>81</sup> Compare to Paul and Barnabas in Lystra. The healing of a lame man led the people to call idolize the missionaries as Hermes and Zeus. And once the gospel was preached and rejected, they were driven out of town (Acts 14:18–20).

recorded it. But what you couldn't see with your eyes, what you could not empirically experience, was what Paul added: "Christ died *for our sins*." The action of God "reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19) could not be empirically verified. The unempirical truth which faith takes hold of cannot be seen, heard, touched.

This is an important distinction, because Scripture stresses two seemingly contradictory truths: first, that God provides ample evidence of himself, a plethora of modes behind which God chooses to interact in very real ways with the world. Through natural revelation, God has provided powerful evidence for his existence. Through the incarnation and Scripture, God has entered into this world in a special way for the express purpose of giving evidence of his love and redemptive plan, and the crucifixion was a real event in history with both believers and nonbelievers in witness. The Christian God is a God who comes into his creation in direct ways. The Christian God is a God that is part of our history. As such, our religion is a religion of empirical facts.

But this first truth stands in direct opposition to the necessity of faith. For all the Gospels' evidence, if you stood before that cross, you would not *see* sins being paid for, Jesus being forsaken by his Father, or the reconciling of the world to God. As such our religion is a religion of unempirical truths that cannot be examined or verified.<sup>82</sup> To believe in the empirical facts, Paul tells us, is true and reasonable (Acts 26:25). To speak of these unempirical truths, Paul says, is foolishness (1 Cor 18-31).

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<sup>82</sup> We are not suggesting that fallen reason can accept the empirical facts, but cannot accept the unempirical truths. Rather, fallen human nature rebels against accepting *both* the empirical facts *and* the unempirical truths. The point of distinguishing between the empirical facts and unempirical truths is to clearly state that the Bible is not a collection of esoteric sayings unattached from reality, that you can retain the *truths* of Scripture without the *events*. Rather, the apostles claim to be witnesses of *events* with deep, spiritually profound implications. John: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name....This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true" (John 20:31; 22:24). Further, saving faith is a conjunction in both the *history* recorded *and* the truths. "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves" (John 14:11).

This interplay of God hiding himself by revealing himself in the person of Jesus is a particular favourite topic for Lutheran theologians to explore. Consider Hermann Sasse:

The God who is hidden, who is the invisible, eternal God, becomes for us the God revealed in Jesus Christ. But this revelation, this unveiling of God, is at the same time a veiling, a hiding. So Luther's twofold use of the expression 'God hidden' is to be understood. Luther can speak of the hidden God in the sense of God who has revealed himself by hiding himself in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Incarnation, then, is at one and the same time both an unveiling of God as well as a veiling or hiding of God in human nature.<sup>83</sup>

As we examine the crucifixion of Jesus, we may use Sasse's observation to speak of a physical hiding, where God reveals himself to the world in the incarnate Jesus while at the same time hiding himself behind his humanity.<sup>84</sup>

There is also an intellectual hiding taking place, especially when we speak of the crucifixion. Here we find our Christ the King texts of the pericope, which are really meditations on the theology of the cross, meditations on how everything that took place on Good Friday gave the impression that Jesus was anything but a king. John records how Pilate asks Jesus whether he is a king, and Jesus asks him whether that was Pilate's own idea, knowing that Pilate thought Jesus was anything but a king, anything but a political threat to him and Rome (John 18:33-37). Matthew recounts Jesus' abuse by the soldiers in the Praetorium (Matt 27:27-31). Luke presents us with two men hanging on crosses as condemned criminals, the scum of the earth, and we find one turning

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<sup>83</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," trans. Arnold J. Koelpin, *Briefe an lutherische Pastoren*, nr. 18, (October, 1951), *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, [www.wlssays.net/files/Luther's%20Theology%20of%20the%20Cross.pdf](http://www.wlssays.net/files/Luther's%20Theology%20of%20the%20Cross.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> Luther sees this as a continuation of God's hiding himself in the Old Testament. In his Heidelberg Disputation he comments on God's hiding all but his backside from Moses. Gerhard Forde sees Luther bridging the account of Moses being hidden from God's glory with God being hidden in Jesus: "God, that is, actually prevents Moses from seeing his glory. To be sure, that is on the one hand a gracious act since no one can look on God's face and live. But for a theologian of glory it is on the other hand a supreme put-down. God won't let even Moses see what every theologian of glory so desperately wants to see. God allows Moses to see only his back when he has passed by. In Luther's mind here it is the suffering, despised, and crucified Jesus that takes the place of God's backside." Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 78.

to the other and saying, “Today you will be with me in paradise,” a statement that must have sounded ludicrous to the onlookers (Luke 23:35-43). And yet Daniel and Ezekiel tell us Jesus indeed is King and Saviour, the greatest there ever was, is, or will be (Dan 7:13-14; Ezek 34). All evidence on that Good Friday shouted out the contrary. Jesus on the cross is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23).

Here God’s Word and his Word alone is the only source of truth regarding those events.<sup>85</sup> The historical event itself is useless to understand how the gospel unfolds. The fact that the event is historical and empirical is enormously important: your and my faith is built on a historical event. And just as any other historical event, no one has the ability to go back in time and change this event. And so no one has the ability to undo the fact that the price for our sins has already been paid. But the event is still the last thing we would expect as the highest and most epic moment in the history of the world, the moment of the salvation of all humankind and the supreme act of God in the world. God’s Word is needed to illuminate what was taking place so that faith might lay hold of God’s promises. The unempirical truths are necessary for understanding the empirical facts. Likewise, the empirical facts are needed to explain the unempirical truths and promises of Scripture. When we ask, “Do you understand what you are reading?” and our friends respond, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?”, God calls us to be right there with history in our hands to explain, “the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:30-35).

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<sup>85</sup> We should reiterate that this is, in fact, *truth*. The unempirical truth found in the gospel is as much truth as the empirical dimension of the events. “The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls things what they are” (LW 31:40).

### **Thesis 3. Apologetics involves the ministerial use of reason in evangelism to present masks<sup>86</sup> of the hidden God.**

We are now at a point where we can thread together clearly taught Confessional Lutheran doctrines into a coherent, unique understanding of how to practice Christian apologetics. God is a Hidden God. His very nature as transcendent and merciful means we will apprehend only aspects of him, never comprehending him fully. The modes he discloses himself to us with we have called masks of God, because God still remains hidden even as he discloses himself.

And so we find that tension of an incomprehensible God making himself apprehensible: Within nature, God reveals truth about himself, such as his divine power. But yet much of who he is remains hidden. Behind the mask of nature, there is no way to apprehend that this is not only a powerful God, but also a God actively involved in the welfare of his children. With conscience, God reveals truth about himself: he is an ethical God interested in human behaviour. But yet much of who he is remains hidden. Behind the mask of conscience, there is no way to apprehend that this God who judges also saves. With God's supernatural intervention in the Old Testament, God reveals truth about himself: he has chosen Israel as his special nation. Yet much remains hidden. Behind the mask of the actual events, there is no way to apprehend that this God is preserving

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<sup>86</sup> There is one more common use in Lutheran theology for the term *mask of God* which we will not have space to discuss in this paper: vocation. Martin Luther: “[All these activities] are our Lord God’s masks (*Larven*); beneath these He chooses to be hidden and to do everything. Had Gideon not co-operated and taken the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been defeated. Yet God was able to smite them without Gideon. No doubt He could create children without man and woman, but He does not intend to do so. Rather He joins man and woman to make it look as if man and woman do the procreating. Yet He, hidden under this mask, is the one who does it.” Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 3:1494-1495. For contemporary WELS writings connecting vocation with the language of God’s masks, see Kenneth Cherney, Jr., “Hidden in Plain Sight: Luther’s Doctrine of Vocation.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 98 (2001): 282; Mark A. Paustian, “Unleashing Our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations,” Symposium on Vocation; Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary; September 18-19, 2006, *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File*, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/PaustianVocation.pdf>. Jonathan E Schroeder. “Our Calling: Christian Vocation and The Ministry of the Gospel,” 60th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Assembled at Michigan Lutheran Seminary; July 27-31 2009, 6. Vocation as a mask of the hidden God is *not* independent from apologetics, but ought to be considered another disclosure of the hidden God. For an attempt to start this conversation, see my “An Apologetic of the Cross,” *WLS Essay File*, <https://essays.wls.wels.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/91/Thompson.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 32-36.

through Israel a messiah. When God *speaks* to Israel on Mount Sinai, flood gates of apprehension are opened. With the incarnation, God reveals truth about himself: The miracles reveal Jesus as divine, his spoken gospel reveals him as Saviour, and his resurrection proves he is Saviour. Yet much remains hidden. The mask of the incarnation is a tremendous self-limiting of God in his full glory. The mask of the cross is scandalous and revolting to fallen human wisdom. The testimony of his witnesses can be easily dismissed. All this is to say: Yes, God reveals apprehensible knowledge in many different ways. But remember, these are at the same time *masks*: they *limit* knowledge. And so, there is a tremendous limit to what we ought to expect from apologetics.

We further marked an important distinction between two aspects of his revealed Word. On the one hand, the Bible records empirical events, historically verifiable, of which there were witnesses (such as the Egyptians and Israelites in the OT, and apostles and first Christians in the NT). On the other hand, the Bible conveys unempirical truths, the deep significance of what was taking place behind or through those empirical events. The empirical events can, to a certain degree, be studied in disciplines outside of theology: history, archaeology, etc. And so, in one sense we say our faith is founded on fact.<sup>87</sup> The unempirical truths, though, cannot be studied; rather, “these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor 2:10). And so, when we sing “I know my faith is founded / on Jesus Christ, my God and Lord,” we also sing, “Man’s reason cannot fathom / the truth of God profound.”<sup>88</sup> In wrestling with the brute historicity of the Christian faith, and yet the clear teaching of Scripture that we are saved by faith alone, the Lutheran dogmaticians speak of the *ministerial* use of reason.

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<sup>87</sup> This is the slogan of the twentieth century’s most famous Confessional Lutheran apologist, John Warwick Montgomery. See his *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Irvine, CA: NPR Books, an imprint of “1517. The Legacy Project,” 1978, 2015).

<sup>88</sup> CW 403:1.

God uses our human reason in the process of apprehension. It is part of our confession to believe that reason is a valuable gift of God.<sup>89</sup> Luther wrote that reason was a “bright light.”<sup>90</sup> Although affected by sin, when rightly used human reason can apprehend God’s power and divinity from nature, and God’s ethical demands from conscience (Rom 1:20; 2:15). When it comes to God’s special intervention in history through his prophets, apostles, and incarnation, reason, too, has a role to play. The Bible uses the language of “evidence” (1 Sam 12:7; John 14:11), “testimony” (used over thirty times in the Gospels), and “witnesses” (used over thirty times in the Gospels and Acts). Paul calls believing in the testimony of these witnesses as “true and reasonable” (Acts 26:25). Further, reason is used to logically deduce implicit truths from explicit statements of Scripture.<sup>91</sup> This is what we call the *ministerial* use of reason, when reason serves.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> SC, Apostles’ Creed, Art. 1; LC II 1 13.

<sup>90</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Jonah,” Jonah 1:5, 54. Becker’s *Foolishness of God*, our definitive work on Luther’s understanding of reason, begins, “Reason is a big red murderess, the devil’s bride, a damned whore, a blind guide, the enemy of faith, the greatest and most invincible enemy of God. Reason is God’s greatest and most important gift to man, of inestimable beauty and excellence, a glorious light, a most useful servant in theology, something divine. In terms like these Martin Luther gave his estimate of human reason.” Becker, *Foolishness of God*, 1. When we try to recall Luther’s relationship to human reason, we tend to err on the side of remembering Luther’s warnings against reason, and we forget how he balanced this with gratitude to God for reason.

<sup>91</sup> Much of Christian dogmatics is the art of moving from premises explicitly stated in Scripture to a conclusion not explicitly stated in Scripture. Although the conclusion may be technically unknown to some before engaging in the deduction, the conclusion must have been always true. The deduction, then, is simply bringing to light a doctrine that is not explicitly stated but has always been implicitly God’s true word nevertheless. Consider Hoenecke: “When we say that Holy Scripture is the sole principle of theological knowledge, then it is to be noted that not only what is in Holy Scripture in syllables and words... is to be regarded as a theological truth, but also what must be derived from Holy Scripture through legitimate and necessary conclusions” (*Dogmatics*, 1:408-9). For example, “There is one God in three persons,” is not explicitly stated in Scripture (that statement does not appear verbatim in Scripture), yet it is an implicit truth derived from passages which speak of the existence of only one God, yet other passages which treat the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each as a separate person and yet God. The explicit and implicit statements both have the same status as revealed Scriptural truth.

<sup>92</sup> We distinguish this from the magisterial use of reason. Although a “gift to man of inestimable beauty and excellence,” reason was deeply affected by the Fall and is now used as a tool against God. Man in his sinfulness rejects God’s plan and the very idea of the gospel, and man uses his reason to convince himself all the more that he does not need God. And so we find Paul writing, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). Being spiritually dead, man cannot do anything good to reconcile himself with God. Being spiritually at war with God, man is constantly driving himself further from God. And throughout all this, man employs reason to solidify and justify his fallen state. And so, salvation can come only from God and only based on his mercy (Rom

The goal of the Lutheran engaged in apologetics is never to show how reasonable our faith is, but rather to point out that the unreasonable did, in fact, take place. There is nothing reasonable about Jesus dying and rising for my sins (the unempirical truths of justification and reconciliation), but that does not change the fact that it happened and was documented for my benefit (the empirical facts of the execution of Jesus of Nazareth and his bodily appearances).

**Thesis 4. God does not ask us to convince people of the truth, but only to present his masks faithfully.**

The apologist seeks to bring about an encounter between an unbeliever and the masks of God. Through an encounter with the natural knowledge of God, the apologist speaks of what might be apprehended of God from nature and conscience. Through an encounter with the supernatural knowledge of God (that is, through the proclamation of the law and the declaration of the empirical facts and the unempirical truths of the gospel), the Holy Spirit does the unimaginable: he brings the dead to life and turns the hostile heart. The Lutheran apologist uses reason ministerially to bring about this encounter, realizing that, although it appears that his meaningful discussion and persuasive presentation of the Christian narrative is what persuades, it is in fact the Holy Spirit at work doing all the work.

The Holy Spirit does his alien work of convicting the sinner of his guilt before this holy, divine, eternal and powerful God. The Holy Spirit does his proper work of taking these objective truths of the gospel shared by the Christian and making them subjective for the now-penitent sinner.<sup>93</sup> The evangelist presents the masks of God for the purpose of more than mere assent to

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9:16; 11:32). The means by which he has chosen to bring about that reconciliation is the proclamation of the gospel carried through word and sacrament (2 Cor 5:18-21; 1 Cor 1:21).

<sup>93</sup> The terms *alien* and *proper* for the work of the Holy Spirit come from the Formula of Concord: SD V 11-13.

historical facts, but desires that the Holy Spirit through law and gospel would create conviction in Jesus as Saviour. And so, in the end we find the work of the Holy Spirit hidden as well, underneath the work of the apologist and evangelist.

**Thesis 5. Practically, the goal of the apologist is to speak like the apostles.**

This paper may appear to be a rather technical treatment of apologetics. One way to make this all more applicable may be to say this: We are simply seeking to speak like the apostles, and we encourage evangelists and apologists to speak like the apostles.

The apostles did not treat the content of their faith as abstract, relative, or esoteric. When they presented their faith, they did not treat it as simply another unverifiable “option” in the global buffet of religions and philosophies. They spoke of the *truth* (John 19:35). They spoke of *testimony* (Acts 14:17). They spoke of *careful investigations* and *orderly accounts* (Luke 1:3-4). They spoke of a hope *confirmed* (Heb 2:3-4). They spoke of their good news as *reasonable* (Acts 26:24–27). John begins his First Epistle, “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” (1 John 1:1). In short, they presented a religion not floating in the space of relativity, mythology, and conjecture; instead, they presented a living hope rooted in the world of objectivity, history, and fact. Despite their deep conviction that this world was created by a transcendent, hidden God, they dedicated their lives to bringing people into contact with God’s masks of nature and conscience, and his miraculous intervention in history and incarnation.

At the same time, the apostles taught that their faith latched onto things unempirical, unverifiable, and in fact downright foolish to a spiritually dead humanity with its corrupted reason and penchant for idolatry. The apostles knew that the gospel message itself was God’s chosen

means to bring the dead to life. And so, they taught we are saved by *faith* alone, not by our own works of reasoning and investigation. This faith comes only through the word alone, creating an unswerving hope in Christ alone as our Saviour from our sins, including our sins aided by corrupted reason.

## **Conclusion**

We might end as we began, with Job, and with the promise that this hidden God, who now only approaches us with masks, will one day have no more need for masks. In the midst of his trials, Job acknowledged the transcendence, and so the hiddenness of God:

[God] performs wonders that cannot be fathomed,  
miracles that cannot be counted.  
When he passes me, I cannot see him;  
when he goes by, I cannot perceive him (Job 9:10-11).

Here in the midst of his trials, Job reminds me of Frodo and Sam on that mountain, in the midst of different trials, in a story where it seems impossible that it can end well. Yet, “in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing.”

I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.  
And after my skin has been destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I will see God;  
I myself will see him  
with my own eyes—I, and not another.  
How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:25-27)

Gloria Deo.

## Theses for Confessional Lutherans Engaging in Christian Apologetics

1. The biblical God is a hidden God.
  - 1.1. That God is hidden is a consequence of intrinsic attributes of God.
  - 1.2. Because God is transcendent, we cannot comprehend him.
  - 1.3. We can *apprehend* aspects of our transcendent God, but we cannot *comprehend* God.
  - 1.4. Because God is merciful to us, he remains hidden.
2. The hidden God discloses limited knowledge of himself from behind masks.
  - 2.1. The limited knowledge of God which is disclosed from God's masks of nature and conscience we call *the natural knowledge of God*. (Natural Theology)
    - 2.1.1. God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind evidence found in the created world around us.
    - 2.1.2. God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind evidence found in the law and conscience within us.
    - 2.1.3. In light of both the innate and acquired natural knowledge of God, there is no excuse for atheists.
    - 2.1.4. Natural theology teaches nothing of saving grace.
  - 2.2. The limited knowledge of God which is disclosed from God's masks of supernatural intervention in history we call *special revelation*.
    - 2.2.1. God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind his miraculous intervention in history.
    - 2.2.2. God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind his incarnation.
    - 2.2.3. God reveals apprehensible knowledge of himself, yet remains hidden, behind the empirical facts and unempirical truths recorded in the Word.
3. Apologetics involves the ministerial use of reason in evangelism to present masks of the hidden God.
4. God does not ask us to *convince* people of the truth, but only to present his masks faithfully.
5. Practically, the goal of the apologist is to speak like the apostles.