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**TWO KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOD:
LUTHER'S CHRISTIAN EPISTEMOLOGY IN HIS SERMONS ON THE
GOSPEL OF JOHN**

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TWO KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOD:
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SERMONS ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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若在十年前，問我是否會以研究路德神學來撰寫學位論文，我一定會覺得怎會有如此異想天開的想法。當時即將念完道碩的我，雖然努力尋找未來的研究方向，身邊也不乏以路德為研究主題在攻讀教會史學位的朋友，但我從未想過這會成為我的選擇。

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If someone had asked me ten years ago whether I would write a thesis on Luther's theology, I would have thought it was a whimsical idea. At that time, I was about to graduate with my Master of Divinity. Although I was actively seeking my future research direction and had some friends pursuing advanced research degrees in church history with Luther as their subject, I never imagined it would become my choice.

However, God's guidance often surpasses our imagination. From working at China Lutheran Seminary to encountering Luther's works, and finally studying Luther as a Master of Theology student, every turning point in this journey has amazed me. Now, a decade later, I have completed a thesis on Luther's theology.

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Abstract

How can one know God? This question has persisted throughout history, as knowing God is not only a lifelong pursuit for all Christians, but, according to Romans 1:19-20, a question that all people are inherently asking. Consequently, this inherent inquiry, as Luther suggested in his sermons on the Gospel of John, inevitably gives rise to controversies and disputes.¹

Nevertheless, in these sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther notably posits that the precondition of knowing God is God's promise that Christians can indeed come to know Him.² Since this knowledge is a promise God gave to Christians, the core issue revolves around understanding God's appointed means for this knowledge and how Christians may come to know Him through it. Therefore, this thesis will delve into Luther's sermons on the Gospel of John, aiming to elucidate his perspective on how one can know God.

In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther uses the distinction between the Law and the Gospel to distinguish the knowledge of God possessed by Christians from that of non-Christians. This difference in knowledge not only highlights the uniqueness of Christian epistemology but also affirms that knowing the true God is entirely a result of divine salvation. By examining the nature of these two kinds of knowledge, the different means by which they are obtained, the process through which one comes to know God, and the transformative impact on the lives of Christians, this article seeks to demonstrate how Luther applied the distinction between the Law and the Gospel to epistemology, thus constructing a framework for Christian knowledge.

Key Words: Epistemology, Two Kinds of Knowledge of God, Law and Gospel, Luther

¹ LW 22:150.

² LW 22:120.

中文摘要

人要如何認識上帝？這個問題從古到今一直存在。因為認識上帝不僅是所有基督徒一生所追求的目標；根據羅馬書一章19-20節，這甚至是所有人生來就會詢問的問題。也正因为如此，如同路德於約翰福音講章中所言，這個問題所造成的困難和紛爭也是無可避免的。³

值得注意的是，在路德的約翰福音講章中，他認為人能夠認識上帝的前提，在於上帝應許基督徒能夠真正認識祂。⁴既然認識上帝是祂給基督徒的應許，那麼問題的核心便在於：何為上帝應許的認識方式，以及基督徒如何以這樣的方式來認識上帝。因此，本文將透過路德的約翰福音講章，試圖討論在路德的觀點中，人究竟如何得以認識上帝。

在約翰福音講章當中，路德運用律法與福音的區分，劃分基督徒和非基督徒所擁有的關於上帝的知識。這兩種知識的不同，不僅顯示出基督徒認識論的獨特性，更進而顯示出人能夠認識上帝，完全出於上帝的救恩。本文將藉由探討兩種知識的內容、獲得方式上的差異，以及人如何以這樣的方式認識上帝，進而對基督徒的生活帶來什麼影響，以呈現路德如何將律法和福音的區分運用在認識論上，並以此建構基督徒的認識論。

關鍵字：認識論、兩種有關上帝的知識、律法與福音、路德

³ LW 22:150.

⁴ LW 22:120.

Abbreviations

- WA Luther, Martin. *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. 73 vols. Weimar: Herman Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883-2009.
- LW *Luther's Works (American Edition)*. 82 vols. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1955–.
- BC *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

1. Introduction

Luther posits that the knowledge of God, accessible to humankind, can be categorized into two distinct kinds, because God gave the Law and the Gospel so that He could be known.⁵ In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther distinguishes the content and nature of these two kinds of knowledge, aiming to address how humans can come to know God. By revisiting earlier discussions regarding the distinction between Law and Gospel and then examining how Luther applies it to his epistemology in his sermons on the Gospel of John, this thesis seeks to elucidate and demonstrate that this distinction provides the grammar for Luther's epistemology.

1.1 Research Background

According to Hans-Martin Barth, "the distinction between Law and Gospel was not regarded throughout Christian history as constitutive of a serious theology. It came to the fore whenever faith appeared to be threatened either by lax or libertine practices or, on the other hand, by legalism."⁶ This tension was evident in the Pauline Epistles and the Epistle of James within Scripture, re-emerging in the conflict between Augustine and Pelagius. Later, as Luther confronted the medieval piety dominated by semi-Pelagianism, he formulated his theology by distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel.⁷ Most scholars agree that this distinction arose from Luther's doctrine of justification, as "[this] doctrine can be developed only on the basis of that distinction."⁸ In Lohse's view, though Luther "developed his new doctrine of justification prior to his distinction between law and gospel,...some initial forms of that distinction appear as early as in the lecture

⁵ LW 22:150.

⁶ Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther : A Critical Assessment*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Lanham: Fortress Press, 2012), 137.

⁷ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 137.

⁸ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, ed. and trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 267.

after 1513.”⁹ Later, this distinction between Law and Gospel became a crucial factor in his theology for “this pairing contains a summary of all Christian doctrine.”¹⁰

From Luther’s perspective, “nearly all of Holy Scripture and all theological knowledge depends on a right understanding of the Law and the Gospel.”¹¹(LW 26:117) This distinction not only positions the salvific work of Christ as “the front and center of all theology”¹² but also “affords believers the abundant consolation that they need in the face of doubts and struggles about where they stand with God.”¹³ Therefore, as Barth suggests, “the expression ‘Law and Gospel’ is a basic formula in Lutheran theology that needs to be broken open and unlocked.”¹⁴ Moreover, it “has remained one of the most distinctive features of his theology, along with that of his followers, for the past five hundred years.”¹⁵

In previous research concerning this subject, the most common approach to distinguishing between Law and Gospel is to consider “both in terms of their grammar and content and in terms of their function or power, namely, what God accomplishes by means of them.”¹⁶ The distinction between the contents of the law and the gospel, as presented in numerous discussions, can vary based on different perspectives. Just as stated by Kolb, “the many extensive examinations of Luther’s distinction of law and gospel often tell more about their authors than the object of their

⁹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 267.

¹⁰ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 135.

¹¹ Barth according to LW 26:117. Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 137.

¹² Charles P. Arand, "Law and Gospel," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 92.

¹³ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 92.

¹⁴ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 135.

¹⁵ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 92.

¹⁶ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 94.

research, for this distinction is always an exercise in the practical application of the biblical text to contemporaries' lives."¹⁷

For instance, as Arand differentiates between law and gospel based on the mood (imperative and indicative), the content of the law becomes God's will for humans, and the gospel is God's salvation work in Christ.¹⁸ But when viewed as two kinds of words "uttered for proclamation to sinners,"¹⁹ the content of law to Paulson is a "revealing of human sin and God's wrath,"²⁰ whereas "the gospel is a proclamation that points to and gives nothing but forgiveness in Christ."²¹ Nevertheless, the functional distinctions between the two are more pronounced than their content differences, as Luther has defined the function of law in his *Smalcald Articles*. According to him, "as God's design for living, the law functions in two ways."²² First, the law functions to curb sin, "brings the blessing of social order through threat of punishment or promise of reward."²³ Second, and perhaps most importantly, the law reveals sin, illustrating humans' incapacity to meet its demands.²⁴ Conversely, "the gospel brings comfort and consolation"²⁵ to the sinners since Christ has fulfilled everything on their behalf. Ultimately, despite the diversity in defining the contents of law and gospel, the functions of the two are relatively consistent across different research.

¹⁷ Robert Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," in *The Oxford Handbook Of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel and L'Ubořmír Batka Robert Kolb (UK: Oxford university Press, 2014), 175.

¹⁸ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 94.

¹⁹ Steven D. Paulson, "Law and Gospel," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 414.

²⁰ Paulson, "Law and Gospel," 415.

²¹ Paulson, "Law and Gospel," 415.

²² Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 173.

²³ Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 173.

²⁴ Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 173.

²⁵ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 95.

However, as much as “Luther’s distinction of law and gospel has provoked a number of significant debates in the past two centuries,” Kolb observes that the discussions concerning this subject has mainly “focused on Luther’s views of ‘natural law’ and of the third use of the law” after Karl Barth’s rejection to the distinction between law and gospel.²⁶ If the gospel has resolved the problem of sin, is the law still effective, or ended? From Kolb’s viewpoint, “God’s expectations” for human beings remain after their salvation, whether it is “called ‘law’, ‘command’, or ‘gospel imperative’.”²⁷ In fact, while “without ever adopting Melancthon’s term ‘third use of the law’, Luther frequently used God’s commands for instructing his hearers in godly, upright living.”²⁸ Even from the natural law standpoint, Kolb argues that the law retains its validity for Christians in Luther’s understanding because it “agrees with the New Testament and natural law.”²⁹

Contrary to this view, in considering the dialect feature of Law and Gospel and the concept of Christian life as daily repentance, Arand states that it is almost impossible to find “any kind of positive use of the law such as that which later became known as the third use of the law.”³⁰ In his opinion, the core issue in resolving this controversy about the third use of the law arises from the law’s dual nature, encompassing both commands and threats.³¹ Hence, to address this dilemma, Paul Althaus proposed a different approach through categorizing the content of law into two kinds (Gesetz/Gebot). The law, as Gesetz, which combines the threats, is ended by the gospel as the humans are redeemed; but the law as Gebot “existed before the Fall and remains God’s will after

²⁶ Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 174.

²⁷ Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 175.

²⁸ Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 173.

²⁹ Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 175.

³⁰ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 97.

³¹ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 98.

the gospel has brought us to faith.”³² In this respect, as Arand suggests, “much of the debate about the third use of the law comes down to terminology. Both those who advocate for it and those who reject it advocate Christian instruction in ethics and Christian life.”³³

From a different perspective, Paulson posits that the debate surrounding the third use of the law ultimately reflects “an old debate between Jerome and Augustine,”³⁴ raising the question: “What kind of God would demand impossible law?”³⁵ This indicates that in considering the law’s function in a state devoid of sin, the nature of law before Adam’s Fall must not be excluded. Consequently, the discussion regarding the third use of the law will also involve the knowledge of God and the existence of natural law, as suggested by Kolb.³⁶ In Haga’s opinion, though the term “natural theology” may “hardly have a role”³⁷ in Luther’s theology due to his critiques of Scholastic teaching that posit the human intellect as “more closely related to the divine than the body,” Luther used natural knowledge about God constructively.³⁸ As Kolb suggests,

*While he [Luther] could defend his ethical statements by applying to Scripture, later works continued to echo his position laid down in his *How Christians Should Regard Moses (1525)*: Moses was the intermediary who delivered the law written also in Gentiles’ heart to Israel; therefore, his expression of this law retains validity only insofar as it agrees with the New Testament and natural law.³⁹*

Luther agrees that “all humans are born with a fundamental knowledge of God.”⁴⁰ But unlike Thomists, he does not consider “spirit” and “flesh” as different human capacities, but rather

³² Arand, "Law and Gospel," 98.

³³ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 98.

³⁴ Paulson, "Law and Gospel," 416.

³⁵ Paulson, "Law and Gospel," 416.

³⁶ Kolb, "Luther’s Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 175.

³⁷ Joar Haga, "Natural Theology," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 534.

³⁸ Haga, "Natural Theology," 534-35.

³⁹ Kolb, "Luther’s Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 175.

⁴⁰ Haga, "Natural Theology," 534.

whether a person is God's Spirit-guided.⁴¹ From this perspective, as Althaus notes, "the general or natural knowledge of God so[...] remains within the limits of the law that the gospel is hidden from it and unknown to it."⁴² Haga further clarifies that "the problem with this natural knowledge is that it guarantees no certainty about one's relation to God, a problem that can be resolved only through proclamation that properly distinguishes law from gospel."⁴³ Thus, "in this perspective, natural knowledge about God is situated within the complex relationship between law and gospel."⁴⁴

In terms of the knowledge of God, Lohse highlights the uniqueness of Luther's thought in that he "distances himself from attempts at boarding the question of the knowledge of God on the basis of reason alone."⁴⁵ As Luther divides the clarity of Holy Scripture into external and internal to oppose Erasmus' claim "that scripture contains obscure parts," he separates the understanding that comes via human reason from the internal clarity that "would convince the human heart to trust in the message of the text."⁴⁶ From there, Grosshans concludes that "the main limit of reason for Luther was that reason cannot call forth trust and that questions of the heart cannot be clarified and decided by reason."⁴⁷ Natural theology and philosophy of religion lack the capacity to reveal "the specific relationship of God to the world and to every single human being."⁴⁸ This feature of Luther's theology is evident in his sermons on the Gospel of John, where he applies the distinction between Law and Gospel to explore two different kinds of knowledge of God arising from distinct epistemological processes.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Haga, "Natural Theology," 534-35.

⁴² Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. R. C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 18.

⁴³ Haga, "Natural Theology," 535.

⁴⁴ Haga, "Natural Theology," 535.

⁴⁵ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 41.

⁴⁶ Hans-Peter Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 233.

⁴⁷ Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy," 234.

⁴⁸ Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy," 234-35.

⁴⁹ LW 22:150.

1.2 Research Statement

As stated by Dragseth, “while many Luther scholars have addressed his appropriation of medieval resources for the articulation of doctrine, they have been less interested in how Luther came to make his claims to theological knowledge and even less so to his view of secular knowledge.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, despite “the nature of Luther’s view of natural law and the extent to which he held to such a view has occasioned discussion,”⁵¹ Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John are rarely considered in discussing the relation between Law and Gospel and Knowledge of God. In reviewing discussions of these subjects, most scholars focus primarily on Luther’s disputation works and his lectures on the Pauline Epistles. However, “although he is usually regarded as primarily an expositor of St. Paul’s epistles, Luther valued the Fourth Gospel most highly and devoted himself to the interpretation of it throughout his career.”⁵² As Ngien points out, John’s Gospel holds equal significance with Paul’s Epistles and 1 Peter in Luther’s view, particularly regarding its teachings on justification by faith.⁵³ Among the four Gospels, he expresses a preference for this one because he believes “John’s Gospel reports much more of Christ’s preaching and less of his deeds, whereas the other evangelists report more of Christ’s deeds and less of his words.”⁵⁴ For this reason, Luther asserts that when considering the accounts of the other three

⁵⁰ Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth, "Friendly Grace. The Augustinian Roots of Luther's Epistemology," in *The Medieval Luther*, ed. Christine Helmer, Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation / Studies in the Late Middle Ages, Humanism, and the Reformation 117. (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 143.

⁵¹ Kent J. Bureson, "Law and Gospel," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 175.

⁵² Jaroslav Pelikan, "Introduction to Volume 22," in *Sermons on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther's Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), ix.

⁵³ Dennis Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Christ in Luther's Sermons on John* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018), 9.

⁵⁴ Roy A. Harrisville, "Gospels," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 302.

evangelists, the Gospel of John must serve as “the floor” and “the background”.⁵⁵ In his opinion, John’s Gospel “most powerfully bore the chief article of faith and was thus the chief Gospel.”⁵⁶

According to Pelikan, the earliest sermon by Luther that “we possess” on John’s Gospel is “a Christmas sermon in Latin, preached to his fellow Augustinians in 1514.”⁵⁷ However, Luther composed the majority of his sermons on the Gospel of John between 1528 and 1540, when he occasionally substituted for Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558) in the pulpit at Wittenberg.⁵⁸ Therefore, Luther’s mature theology presented in these sermons. Considering the knowledge of God, Luther, in this series of sermons, accentuates that

*to know the Father means not only to know him as the Creator of heaven and earth but as the One who sent the Son into the world for our redemption. [For this reason,] the sum of Christianity consists in learning to know the Father; the true name of God, whom Christ reveals and continues to make known to the world through faith and confession, the action of the Holy Spirit.*⁵⁹

This implies that, in Luther’s mind, the epistemological process of Christians is not merely a reorientation of human cognitive ability; rather, it is a journey of salvation and sanctification. As pointed out by Thompson and agreed by Ngien, “in the order of knowing, redemption precedes creation. Only when we are seized by Christ the redeemer do we apprehend God as our Creator.”⁶⁰

In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther positions Christ at the center of knowing God. To achieve this, he first applies the distinction between Law and Gospel to define the nature of the knowledge revealed by Christ and the natural knowledge of God. Building on this distinction between these two kinds of knowledge of God, he further identifies the core question all humanity faces: how to know who God really is. Consequently, in his sermons, this distinction is interwoven

⁵⁵ LW 23:108.

⁵⁶ Harrisville, "Gospels," 302.

⁵⁷ Pelikan, "Introduction to Volume 22," ix.

⁵⁸ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 2.

⁵⁹ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 13.

⁶⁰ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 71.

into various theological doctrines, including the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, and justification by faith. Moreover, this distinction sheds light on how these doctrines, as forms of knowledge, impact and are reflected in the Christian life. It creates a dialectical relationship between two kinds of experiences in Christians' lives, teaching them to trust God's Word over themselves. In essence, this distinction in his sermons on the Gospel of John not only discloses Luther's view of the definition of theology but also explains the dynamic of Christian epistemology. Therefore, by examining Luther's distinction between two kinds of knowledge of God in his sermons on the Gospel of John, the goal of this thesis is to demonstrate that this distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel in his sermons on the Gospel of John provides the grammar for the epistemology of Luther.

1.3 Research Method and Limitation

It is widely accepted that "Luther regarded the distinction between the Law and the Gospel as the key hermeneutical principle for reading the scripture. But it is critical to note what Luther meant by this."⁶¹ As Kolb states, "Luther did not know that he was devising hermeneutical principles for generations to come, so he was not always careful or consistent in his use of terminology that became critical for his practice of theology. He also admitted that 'law' and 'gospel' have various meanings in Scripture; his own usage of the terms reflects this variety."⁶² For this reason, in discussing how Luther applies the distinction between Law and Gospel to elucidate how humanity comes to know God, this thesis will develop its theory based on the definitions Luther applied in his sermons on the Gospel of John. Given the potential language barriers, the primary resources for this thesis will be the English translations of Luther's sermons found in volumes 22-24 and 69 of the Luther's Works Series, published by Concordia Publishing House in

⁶¹ Arand, "Law and Gospel," 92.

⁶² Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics Of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," 169.

Saint Louis. In addition to focusing on the *Sermons on the Gospel of John* as the primary material for discussion, this thesis will also reference Luther's other works to gain a deeper understanding of Luther's epistemology regarding the knowledge of God.

1.4 Key Terms Explanation

In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther applies the distinction between Law and Gospel to characterize the knowledge of God.⁶³ Though the distinction between Law and Gospel is often framed in terms of their respective impacts on humanity and the transformative changes they induce in individuals, in this context, Luther aims to highlight the difference between God as perceived by human reason and God as He is. Therefore, what he wants to distinguish here certainly includes, but is not limited to, what individuals can learn from the Law and the Gospel, or the changes individuals experience through them. Rather, he emphasizes two distinct kinds of knowledge that must be obtained differently, in order to show how finite people come to know God.⁶⁴ To maintain such contrast between them as two kinds of knowledge of God and to avoid confusion with the distinction between Law and Gospel presented in Luther's other writings, this thesis will adopt the terminology found in the American translation, referring to them as **the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel** when examining how Luther constructs his epistemology based on the Gospel of John. The knowledge of the Law refers to the knowledge of God that human natural reason can derive from the Law, including the Law of Moses and natural law. Conversely, the knowledge of the Gospel represents the knowledge of God that human reason cannot acquire. Its core lies in knowing Christ, thus encompassing all the work He accomplished through His incarnation on earth.

Moreover, although Luther did not use the term "epistemology" in his works, this thesis will utilize it to conduct the discussion. **Epistemology**, by definition, is the theory that explains how

⁶³ LW 22:151 note 117.

⁶⁴ LW 22:153-154.

human beings acquire knowledge. It “concerns what counts as knowledge and how we acquire it.”⁶⁵ In terms of religious knowledge, since Christian theology is “an effort to give a methodologically controlled account of Christian faith, ...[which] offers a description and critical analysis of Christian talk about God and the possibility of knowledge of God that comes to expression in it,”⁶⁶ the term “epistemology” is also applicable in theological discussions regarding the knowledge of God. Given the purpose of this thesis is to explore Luther’s view on how humans come to know the God acknowledged in Christian faith, to maintain and emphasize such a focus in discussion, the term **Christian epistemology** will be employed here to describe the process through which individuals obtain knowledge of God.

⁶⁵ Robert F. Brown, Werner Schwartz, and Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Epistemology," in *The encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans. Brill, 1998), 112.

⁶⁶ Brown, Schwartz, and Reichenbach, "Epistemology," 113.

2. Two Kinds of Knowledge of God

The distinction between the Law and the Gospel holds a significant place in Luther's theology and is addressed in many of his works. However, this thesis will focus particularly on his views regarding the knowledge of God presented in his *Sermons on the Gospel of John*. In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther employs the distinction between Law and Gospel especially to illustrate the difference presented in humans' understanding of God. By distinguishing two kinds of knowledge of God based on the limits of human reason, he characterizes the knowledge of the Law as the knowledge of God attainable through human reason, in contrast to the knowledge of the Gospel, which is beyond human capacity. Following that, he further defines the content and function of these two kinds of knowledge of God. To clarify their nature, this chapter will comb through Luther's sermons on the Gospel of John, organizing his ideas about these two kinds of knowledge of God as the foundation for the core chapters of the thesis.

2.1 The Knowledge of the Existence of God

Concerning the knowledge of God, in Luther's sermon on John 1:17-18, he first explains "the Law was given by Moses, but that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ"⁶⁷ stated in John 1:17, and then goes on to use this distinction to construct his epistemological theory to explain John 1:18. Based on the phrase "no one has ever seen God except the Son"(John 1:18), Luther raises a question: If "St. John informed us earlier that Law was given by Moses, and he also defined the truth which emanated from Christ,"⁶⁸ then "since no one has ever seen God, is it possible for one to know God or to arrive at a certainty for the existence of God with one's own innate powers?"⁶⁹ The

⁶⁷ LW 22:148.

⁶⁸ LW 22:149.

⁶⁹ LW 22:149.

answer provided by Luther to this question is affirmative because St. Paul's words in Rom. 1:19-20 present such a fact to us that human beings indeed have this kind of ability "to know God."⁷⁰

2.1.1 "What can be known about God is plain to them." (Rom. 1:19)

According to Luther's interpretation of Rom. 1:19, "the existence of a God is evident to the Gentiles, perceived by them from the works of the creation."⁷¹ He believes this passage implies that all human beings are born with a sense of morality and the ability to study nature, and as a result, "they are all acquainted with the law of nature. The Gentiles are all aware that murder, adultery, theft, cursing, lying, deceit and blasphemy are wrong. They are not so stupid that they do not know very well that there is a God who punishes such vices. Furthermore, their reason tells them that the heavenly bodies cannot run their definite course without a ruler."⁷² In short, humans can recognize the existence of God through their conscience and their observation of the world.

Moreover, as Bayer points out, since in discussing the natural knowledge of God (or the knowledge of God in human nature), Luther is basically "one with Paul"⁷³ by building his theory based on Paul's passages in the Book of Romans, the existence of God for Luther is also not merely a kind of knowledge that humans have the ability to obtain. According to Bayer's observation from Luther's lectures on the Book of Jonah,

just as Paul makes use of Stoic thinking in his argumentation that this means that no human being can be excused, thus Luther also makes his argument—note carefully: not unsubstantiated, but by using the text from Paul—by using a type of evidence for God that is affirmed by common human consensus, as it is known to human from Ciceros' De natura deorum: by pointing to evidence for God that is held in agreement by all peoples.⁷⁴

In this sense, this awareness of God's existence, as pointed out by Althaus, actually proves that "men have this idea of god...from God himself. God has thus given men knowledge of himself.

⁷⁰ LW 22:149.

⁷¹ LW 22:149.

⁷² LW 22:149.

⁷³ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 128.

⁷⁴ Bayer according to LW 19:53. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 128.

And this knowledge cannot be eradicated from the human heart.”⁷⁵ It exists in every human being, and the apparent example, for Luther, is the prayer of the mariners in the Book of Jonah. In his opinion, “here you find St. Paul’s statement in Rom. 1:19 concerning the universal knowledge of God among all the heathen, that is, that the whole world talks about the Godhead and natural reason is aware that this Godhead is something superior to all other things.”⁷⁶ Every human being by nature knows the existence of God, and their prayers are the best proof of that.

Prayer, especially during times of crisis, not only reflects people’s awareness of God’s existence but also reveals what kind of God they believe in. As stated by Bayer, “prayer even from one who is not a Christian shows that ‘natural reason’ has some type of knowledge that some sort of god exists.”⁷⁷ According to Jonah 1:5, the mariners call out their gods in the storm. This action, in Luther’s mind, proves that all mankind not only acknowledge the existence of a God who is above all things, but also have some understanding of the nature of God. “These people[mariners] 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; for He who can save from every need and misfortune is also able to grant all that is good and that makes for happiness.”⁷⁸ The mariners are expecting salvation from Him because they not only know He exists but also know He is capable of rescuing them from the storm, which proves, as pointed out by Althaus, that “all men have been given a general knowledge not only of God’s metaphysical attributes, such as his omnipotence and omniscience, but also of his ethical attributes.”⁷⁹ They know they can bring such a request to God, for “this knowledge includes the awareness that God is the giver of all good, that he is kind and

⁷⁵ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 15.

⁷⁶ LW 19:53.

⁷⁷ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 129.

⁷⁸ LW 19:54.

⁷⁹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 15-16.

gracious, and that he is willing to help a man who calls on him in time of need.”⁸⁰ For Luther, everyone would not only know God’s existence but also seek His help in times of crisis.

This means that everyone must possess this kind of knowledge, even if they themselves do not acknowledge it. Throughout Luther’s argumentation, as pointed out by Bayer, “Luther certainly takes into account that the *consensus gentium* concerning the existence of God or concerning the existence of a variety of gods that are to be honored is not without its detractors.”⁸¹ Luther is aware there are people like Epicureans and Pliny “who deny this with their lips.”⁸² He describes them “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. For Paul is not lying when he asserts that they know something about God, ‘because God has shown it to them’(Rom. 1:19).”⁸³ This is also proved by the prayer of the mariners in the Book of Jonah. “When the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god”(Jonah 1:5), their genuine reaction in crisis presented that “such a light and such a perception is innate in the hearts of all men; and this light cannot be subdued or extinguished.”⁸⁴

Indeed, these mariners do not know the true God, but in certain aspects, “Luther maintains that such false faith does not know any differently about God than does the true faith.”⁸⁵ Besides the existence of the God who created heaven and earth and “makes life contingent on our observation of His commandments and prohibitions,”⁸⁶ as pointed out by Bayer, “Luther’s treatment of the first commandment in the Large Catechism also states that all human beings expect from God good

⁸⁰ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16.

⁸¹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 128.

⁸² LW 19:53-54.

⁸³ LW 19:54.

⁸⁴ LW 19:53.

⁸⁵ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 130.

⁸⁶ LW 22:153.

things, happiness, and at the same time deliverance from all misfortune, rescue when in need.”⁸⁷ This universal expectation is recognized by all human beings and thus presented in every religion. Therefore, in Luther’s point of view, concerning the knowledge of God, there is no need to ask “whether man, of himself, can discover that there is a God.”⁸⁸

2.1.2 “No one has ever seen God.” (John 1:18)

According to Romans 1:19-20, everyone is aware of God’s existence and expects goodness from Him. But “Luther, of course, recognizes that such cosmological and teleological syllogizing is sickly and weak,”⁸⁹ for it is based on the observation of human reason. As described by Luther, “men see that the heavens and the earth are so wisely governed and then, on the basis of this external government and the nature of creation, they draw the weak conclusion that there is one God....Such knowledge of God, which is based merely on the fact that the earth remains and the heaven does not fall down, is weak and superficial.”⁹⁰ In other words, this “superficial knowledge is gained when reason—on the basis of what it observes of the reality of the world, its continued existence, and the apparently wise way in which it is governed—deduces the existence of one God who rules the world with retributive righteousness.”⁹¹ People know that the existence of a God, who can punish evil and govern the workings of nature, is protecting this world, but having this kind of knowledge is not equivalent to knowing God.⁹² As much as human reason “is indeed a bright light,”⁹³ for Luther, the knowledge it produces about God has “two big defects.”⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Bayer according to LC I, 2-3, in *BC*, 386. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 129.

⁸⁸ LW 22:154.

⁸⁹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 18.

⁹⁰ WA 45,90 translation cited from Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 17.

⁹¹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 18.

⁹² LW 22:149.

⁹³ LW 19:54.

⁹⁴ LW 19:54.

“First, reason does admittedly believe that God is able and competent to help and to bestow; but reason does not know whether He is willing to do this also for us.”⁹⁵ In other words, what reason knows about God “cannot produce the certainty that God really wants to help me.”⁹⁶ This is also very apparent in Jonah 1:5-6. According to Luther, “these people[mariners] indeed call upon God and thereby acknowledge that He can help if He is thus inclined; they even believe that He may help others. But that is as far as they can go; they cannot transcend that.”⁹⁷ They pray, but they do not know whether their prayers will come true because their knowledge of God is based on their rational observation of their own experience, and “through deduction of this kind[,] however[,] one still does not know what God intends with men.”⁹⁸ Luther thus states that “reason believes in God’s might and is aware of it, but it is uncertain whether God is willing to employ this in our behalf, because in adversity it so often experiences the opposite to be true.”⁹⁹

Human reason cannot transcend human perception, and “that renders the position of reason unstable.”¹⁰⁰ People must change their beliefs according to their circumstances. For this reason, the mariners panic when the storm continues because their knowledge of God does not produce trust toward the god they know. Their salvation is not assured because “the experiences of life repeatedly speak against this possibility; and since the mere thought of God cannot assert itself against this experience, a man’s actual situation is always one of doubt. A man may really believe that God is ready to help others—but the same man does not dare to believe that God will help him.”¹⁰¹ As a

⁹⁵ LW 19:54.

⁹⁶ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16.

⁹⁷ LW 19:54.

⁹⁸ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 18.

⁹⁹ LW 19:54.

¹⁰⁰ LW 19:54.

¹⁰¹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16.

result, their knowledge and prayer cannot remove their fear, so “they exhaust every means at their command; they try their utmost.”¹⁰² Ultimately, they seek other gods to help them.

Secondly, as presented in the first defect of human reason, humans’ knowledge of God is constantly challenged, because “although reason has the idea of God, it lacks practical experience of him.”¹⁰³ The same point also proves that humans have no definite god for themselves, because human reason, based on their life experience, “always applies the idea of God to something that isn’t God at all.”¹⁰⁴ Hence, the second defect, in Luther’s view, is that human

*reason is unable to identify God properly; it cannot ascribe the Godhead to the One who is entitled to it exclusively. It knows that there is a God, but it does not know who or which is the true God. It shares the experience of the Jews during Christ’s sojourn on earth. When John the Baptist bore witness of His presence in their midst, they were aware that Christ was among them and that He was moving about among them; but they did not know which person it was. It was incredible to them that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ.*¹⁰⁵

Therefore, though by citing Rom. 1:19-20, Luther proves that everyone possesses a kind of knowledge of God in both his lectures on the Book of Jonah and sermons on the Gospel of John, he also highlights that Rom. 1:20 simultaneously suggests this kind of knowledge does not lead humans to recognize who God is. Similarly, in John 8:54-55, Christ disputes with the Jews, stating that though they were “concerned about and were seeking Him,”¹⁰⁶ they cannot know who God is. From this standpoint, Luther comes to state that “the words ‘no one has ever seen God’ [in John 1:18] actually excludes all those who seek God and try to find Him with their reason.”¹⁰⁷ For him, knowing that God exists and knowing who He is are two different kinds of knowledge.

¹⁰² LW 19:54.

¹⁰³ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ LW 19:54.

¹⁰⁶ LW 22:149.

¹⁰⁷ LW 22:150.

2.2 Different Kinds of Knowledge of God

In discussing the knowledge of God, what Paul presents proves that “God can be known to a certain extent even where the biblical revelation, the word, and faith are not known.”¹⁰⁸ According to Althaus, “for Luther, the witness of the Holy Spirit established this beyond all doubt. And his observation of the religions confirmed it. Luther also cited the religious views of classical authors, especially Cicero, in support of this view.”¹⁰⁹ But, in Luther’s mind, due to two major defectors, having this kind of knowledge is not identical with knowing who God is. Hence, he employs the difference between the Law and the Gospel to distinguish them, particularly in his sermons on the Gospel of John, to discuss the knowledge of God.

2.2.1 The Knowledge of the Law and the Knowledge of the Gospel

For Luther, humans indeed have the knowledge of God as presented by Paul, but they also do not know who God is. In his opinion, “to know the Father means not only to know that He has created heaven and earth, that He intends to help the righteous and punish the wicked, but that He has sent the Son into the world and given to us in order to take away sin and death, to gain and grant us the Father’s favor and grace.”¹¹⁰ From this perspective, in his sermons on the Gospel of John, in seeking the harmony between the passages of Paul (Rom. 1:19-20) and John (John 1:17-18), he concludes that the proper answer to the question about whether humans can know God with their innate ability is that “there are two kinds of knowledge of God: the one is the knowledge of the Law; the other is the knowledge of the Gospel. For God issued the Law and the Gospel that He might be known through them.”¹¹¹

In discussing two different kinds of knowledge of God, in correlation with Rom. 1:20 and 2:15, Luther begins by defining the knowledge of the Law based on the ability of human reason in

¹⁰⁸ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 15.

¹¹⁰ LW 69:118.

¹¹¹ LW 22:150.

his sermon on John 1:18.¹¹² He argues that “reason is familiar with the knowledge of God which is based on the Law,” because both Moses and the Book of Romans suggest human beings “have the content of the Law of God and the Ten Commandments written in their hearts by nature.”¹¹³ More specifically, he asserts that everyone knows God because, through human reason, humans can discern “the difference between right and wrong”¹¹⁴ as Paul testifies in Rom. 2:15. According to Luther, “all rational beings can of themselves determine that it is wrong to disobey father and mother and the government, to murder, commit adultery, steal, curse, and blaspheme.”¹¹⁵ The transgressors of these laws are punished in every country because all human beings can “recognize wrong both in themselves and in others.”¹¹⁶ This ability proves that both the natural law and the law of Moses are installed in the human heart and understood by human reason,¹¹⁷ whence they can distinguish right from wrong and conclude that everyone must be rewarded accordingly. For Luther, this implies “reason can arrive at a ‘legal knowledge’ of God,”¹¹⁸ and “one might speak of this as sniffing the existence of God without tasting it.”¹¹⁹ In his view, “the heathen, the philosophers, and all wise people have progressed to a point where they recognize God through Law.”¹²⁰

“The other sort of knowledge of God emerges from the Gospel.”¹²¹ Luther refers to it as the “evangelical knowledge” of God, for it is “the knowledge of grace and truth”¹²². Different from the knowledge of the Law, “this knowledge does not grow up in our garden, and nature knows

¹¹² LW 22:150-51.

¹¹³ LW 22:150.

¹¹⁴ LW 22:150.

¹¹⁵ LW 22:150.

¹¹⁶ LW 22:150.

¹¹⁷ LW 22:151.

¹¹⁸ LW 22:151.

¹¹⁹ LW 22:152.

¹²⁰ LW 22:152.

¹²¹ LW 22:152.

¹²² LW 22:152.

nothing at all about it.”¹²³ According to him, the knowledge of the Gospel is to know “that all the world is by nature an abomination before God, subject to God’s wrath and the devils’ power, and is eternally damned. From this the world could not extricate itself except through God’s Son, who lies in the bosom of the Father. He became man, died, and rose again from the dead, extinguishing sin, death, and devil.”¹²⁴ In contrast to what Luther presents in his lectures on the Book of Jonah, this is the precise kind of knowledge that humans, by nature, do not have: the identification of God and His salvation for us. Hence, Luther believes that, ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin, God has given humans the knowledge of the Gospel through the promised Seed who would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15),¹²⁵ and “from the days of Adam, Christ has always revealed God to mankind. He never ceased proclaiming such knowledge of God: that through Him we derive grace and truth, that is, life eternal.”¹²⁶ In his opinion, only people who have the knowledge of the Gospel can know the true God and be saved.

However, as much as “this is the true and thorough knowledge and way of thinking about God,”¹²⁷ this is a kind of knowledge that human reason has no “inkling of ”¹²⁸. Either within their conscience or through observation of the creation, the knowledge of the Gospel is untraceable because “this knowledge must be proclaimed from above and take form in the heart; that is, one must learn that God confers grace through His beloved Son.”¹²⁹ In other words, to know the true God, humans “must come creeping to Christ and be found protected by the Son, attaining everything through His grace and truth.”¹³⁰ From Luther’s perspective, “this is God’s will and

¹²³ LW 22:152-53.

¹²⁴ LW 22:152.

¹²⁵ LW 22:154.

¹²⁶ LW 22:157.

¹²⁷ LW 22:152.

¹²⁸ LW 22:153.

¹²⁹ LW 22:154.

¹³⁰ LW 22:156.

intent. This is knowing God aright. Thus after the Fall Adam knew God through the Son, as did all the patriarchs and prophets.”¹³¹ But by distinguishing the knowledge of the Gospel from knowing God by any human intellectual ability, Luther also claims that “even today the papists and all the others are ignorant of it.”¹³² The knowledge of the Gospel can only be found in Christ, for Luther, indicating that “this knowledge is concealed from reason.”¹³³

In sum, concerning these two kinds of knowledge of God, “the first mode of knowing God is natural and universal and was reinforced by the Law of Moses. But the Law must not stand in isolation; grace and truth must accompany it. And the knowledge of God in His grace is the skill and the wisdom which the Son alone has revealed to us. All the saints since the beginning of time either had learned this, or they were lost.”¹³⁴ For Luther, the knowledge of the Law is what human reason can understand, for God has implanted the Law in human nature. But the knowledge of the Gospel, which identifies the true God and His salvation plan for us, is beyond the reach of human reason. Luther distinguishes these two kinds of knowledge of God on the basis of the limitations of human reason.

2.2.2 Not Contradicted but Different

As Barth points out, since the “voice of the law is heard in human consciences,”¹³⁵ the distinction between Law and Gospel also lies in “the distinction between general knowledge of God and revelation in Christ.”¹³⁶ The distinction between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel, in Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John, also implies two different ways to know God. In his sermon on John 1:17-18, as he considers the knowledge of the Law as a kind of knowledge of God

¹³¹ LW 22:156.

¹³² LW 22:156.

¹³³ LW 22:156.

¹³⁴ LW 22:154.

¹³⁵ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 139.

¹³⁶ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 139.

based on the ability of human reason to distinguish right and wrong, he is also suggesting that the God to whom human reason can understand is a God who punishes the evil and rewards the good. In terms of human nature in the moral aspect, as long as the conscience exists, humans would be able to develop or deduce such attributes about God with their reason. In this respect, Luther also agrees that the idea “one should do good and shun evil” indeed “reflect[s] at least a degree of understanding.”¹³⁷ However, he does not consider this idea to be “the true knowledge of Him.”¹³⁸

As stated by Barth,

*people do have a feeling that they are responsible to not only to one another but to an ultimate authority. But they do not know how they should imagine that ultimate authority. Therefore they compose for themselves—to speak within the horizon of the sixteenth century—a God who from the outset is gentle and can be pleased by good works, or else a wrathful God to whom no one can bring enough sacrifices.*¹³⁹

Regardless of whether they envision a gentle or a wrathful God, they are not finding a God in grace but a god whose actions depend entirely on human performance. According to Althaus,

*This means then that the general or natural knowledge of God so remains with the limits of the law that the gospel is hidden from it and unknown to it. Even a legalistic piety can speak of God’s goodness, but that is not the same as knowing that God is merciful and accepts sinners. “The heathen can only reach the point saying: God will hear the good, but not the godless—they cannot go beyond this.”*¹⁴⁰

Thus, Luther argues that “if the glory and knowledge of God could have been revealed through the Law, then Christ would not have had to come, preach, suffer, and die in order to glorify the Father.”¹⁴¹ For Luther, human reason can conclude some attributes about God based on the moral sense, but “to glorify the Father is nothing else than that we acknowledge Him and know who He is, what His intentions are, and how we stand with Him. No man can arrive at such knowledge except through Christ. For He has willed to reveal Himself and to make His heart and will visible

¹³⁷ LW 22:151.

¹³⁸ LW 22:151.

¹³⁹ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 139-40.

¹⁴⁰ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 18-19.

¹⁴¹ LW 69:25.

nowhere else, but only in and through Him.”¹⁴² This distinction between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel in the sermons on the Gospel of John hence proves that, in terms of the knowledge of God, “for Luther, *ratio* always remains within the confines of the law and can never make its way to the gospel on its own,”¹⁴³ whether it has its sources from human senses or their inner conscience. For this reason, Luther’s epistemology is neither simply empirical nor rational-based but built upon the limitations of human beings and God’s revealed mercy through Christ.

But, as pointed out by Bayer, “it is only in this respect—in soteriological realm, in regard to salvation—that Luther denies that reason and philosophy are competent.”¹⁴⁴ According to Lohse,

*No doubt, he could speak very harshly of the arbitrariness of human reason over against revelation. He often spoke in ‘opposed totalities.’ Nevertheless, all his theological work reflects an established as well as extensively developed view of reason and its application, so that it will not do simply to emphasize the contrast between reason and revelation. Further, on the basis of Luther’s statement, it is necessary to distinguish reason’s tasks within the scientific sphere and the sphere of temporal authority, and reason in view of the relation to God.*¹⁴⁵

The knowledge of God that Luther presents in the setting of the Law and the Gospel in his sermons on the Gospel of John should not be considered in a contradictory or opposite position. For Luther, both the knowledge of the Gospel and the knowledge of the Law are the knowledge of God accessible to human beings. However, it is crucial to distinguish the two, because, as Bayer points out, the knowledge that human reason can grasp is entirely different from that which can be obtained only through faith.¹⁴⁶ For Luther, “reason recognizes God from the Law of Moses, as we find stated in Rom. 1:19, 32. But in the sense of the Gospel reason knows nothing of God.”¹⁴⁷ Hence, though both kinds are the knowledge of God, their contents and functions must be different.

¹⁴² LW 69:27.

¹⁴³ Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 161.

¹⁴⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 161.

¹⁴⁵ Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 196.

¹⁴⁶ Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 132-33.

¹⁴⁷ LW 22:155-56.

2.3 The Use of Two Kinds of Knowledge of God

According to Lohse, for Luther, the distinction between Law and Gospel is not confined to specific biblical passages, as many passages can be interpreted in relation to either concept.¹⁴⁸ In his view, “Luther’s distinction is clearly related to the context of proclamation,” but in the meantime, “theology has the task of maintaining the distinction between law and gospel.”¹⁴⁹ Hence, the proper way to differentiate them lies in their theological definitions, which indicates that an examination of their functions and purposes is necessary. As presented in Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John, indeed, both Law and Gospel can enlighten people about things concerning God. But, in considering Law as the first light (moon) and the Gospel of Christ as the second light (sun), Luther is also seeking to emphasize the difference between what is taught by Law and Gospel.¹⁵⁰ He says: “To be sure, the moon shines at night, but still it does not turn night into day. Christ, however, is the true Sun. He ushers in the morning and the day.”¹⁵¹ Thus, by correctly distinguishing between these two lights with the limitations of human reason, Luther further clarifies the uses of these two kinds of knowledge.

2.3.1 Temporal Life and Eternal Life

In Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John, from an epistemological perspective, “reason and Moses are teachers instructing us in matters serving the interests of our temporal life,”¹⁵² for God gave such knowledge “to enable mankind to live in peace on earth.”¹⁵³ According to Bayer, the secular realm, as “Luther speaks of in the Small Catechism in his explanation of the petition for

¹⁴⁸ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 269.

¹⁴⁹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 269.

¹⁵⁰ LW 23:324.

¹⁵¹ LW 23:324.

¹⁵² LW 22:155.

¹⁵³ LW 22:155.

bread in the Lord's Prayer,"¹⁵⁴ belongs to "the domain of theological ethics."¹⁵⁵ With this definition, "philosophy and science, and that includes theology as a scholarly pursuit and an academic discipline, belong to this life-preserving realm of the law, this secular realm that God preserves through the gift of reason which he gives all people."¹⁵⁶ Luther believes that, based on the Law implanted by God, human reason can generate knowledge regarding the temporal and physical life because, from the very beginning, human beings are created by God to rule the physical world with their innate ability.¹⁵⁷ From this perspective, by employing our intellectual ability, our understanding of God based on the Law is connected to our temporal life. In other words, the knowledge of the Law is related to the preservation of the order of our temporal life.

In contrast, Luther states that Christ's teaching does not concern the secular realm, which "must end with this life."¹⁵⁸ According to Luther,

It is not necessary for Christ to give instructions about this[physical or worldly life], for it was implanted in nature and written in their hearts. Furthermore, all books, with the exception of holy writ, are derived from that source and spring. Therefore, Christ's words and doctrine must not be interpreted as though He had wanted to teach and ordain anything in addition to this or to institute anything better.¹⁵⁹

What Christ reveals has "nothing in common with transitory matters but assure[s] us that everlasting life and resurrection from the dead are ours after this temporal life."¹⁶⁰ For Luther, the passage in John 1:17 "draw[s] a line of demarcation between Christ and Moses" based on their works.¹⁶¹ In accordance with this view, the fact that "the grace and truth comes through Jesus Christ"(John 1:17) presents to us not only God's mercy but also His plan for us. The coming of

¹⁵⁴ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, Mich. ; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2007), 210.

¹⁵⁵ Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 210.

¹⁵⁶ Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 210.

¹⁵⁷ LW 24:228.

¹⁵⁸ LW 24:229.

¹⁵⁹ LW 24:228.

¹⁶⁰ LW 22:479.

¹⁶¹ LW 22:140.

Christ, according to John 1:17, indicates that human life is meant for something much more precious than an earthly life.¹⁶² In addition, as Luther notes in his *Lectures on Genesis*, this awareness and longing for eternal things are also implanted in the human heart, which makes human beings different from other creatures.

*A pig, a cow, and a dog are unable to measure the water they drink; but man measures the heaven and all the heavenly bodies. And so here there gleams a spark of eternal life, in that the human being busies himself by nature with this knowledge of nature. This concern indicates that men were not created to live permanently in this lowest part of the universe but to take possession of heaven, because in this life they admire, and busy themselves with, the study of, and the concern about, heavenly things.*¹⁶³

From Luther's perspective, the coming of Christ confirms that this awareness indeed is God's will for us. He suggests that Christ, in John 6:27, also aims to teach Jews "that the possession of physical food is not enough. They are to direct their thought also to another food, the spiritual food which is the teaching of the holy Gospel of Christ."¹⁶⁴ They should not only be "interested in this life but also to be concerned about life eternal, for which He promised His help and the proper food."¹⁶⁵ According to Luther, "for since He Himself is sent by God, it cannot be an insignificant, useless thing, but it is accompanied by such as significant mandate and task, so necessary and great, that no angel or saint was able to carry it out, but solely the only Son."¹⁶⁶ The phrase "whom You have sent" in John 17:3 in Luther's sermon not only identifies Christ as the true God but also reveals the knowledge from which alone can eternal life be found.¹⁶⁷

However, this kind of knowledge, in Luther's mind, is not the knowledge that human reason can acquire.¹⁶⁸ As pointed out by Bayer, "though Luther is willing to give pride of place to

¹⁶² LW 22:139.

¹⁶³ LW 1:45-46.

¹⁶⁴ LW 23:19.

¹⁶⁵ LW 23:19.

¹⁶⁶ LW 69:37.

¹⁶⁷ LW 69:37-38.

¹⁶⁸ LW 69:36.

reason in ‘this life,’ and though he praises it in this regard as ‘almost something divine,’ he is ruthless in his sharp critique of the capacity of reason to comprehend ‘eternal’ life and thus to arrive at knowledge of God and the self. His judgment in this regard is absolutely negative.”¹⁶⁹ The knowledge that brings us eternal life must be isolated from knowledge that can be found and sought by human reason, for doctrines acquired by human reason “have worked their way up no higher and have taught nothing more than that you are to live in such a way and be pious in order to obtain eternal life. Thus they caused us to rely on our own efforts and works, whereby we have completely lost Christ and missed the way to eternal life.”¹⁷⁰ In Luther’s view, while humans in nature will be seeking eternal things, human reason can deal with things relevant only to this temporal life, which “is perishable and transitory.”¹⁷¹

For this reason, in his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther, with the limitations of human reason, distinguishes worldly affairs from the salvation work that brings eternal life as two different kinds of knowledge of God. According to him, alone the knowledge of the Gospel brought by Christ is “the spiritual and Christian knowledge of God. The other is carnal and earthly and issues from reason, for it is written in our hearts.”¹⁷² Yet, such a distinction does not imply that the knowledge of the Gospel as God’s salvific plan for us is unknowable to us. Based on Luther’s explanation of John 15:15, this passage indicates that the information about salvation—God’s will and His plan—has been revealed to us. According to him, “Christ is not saying here that we are to have an answer to every question—for instance, how many pebbles there are in the ocean or how many stars here are in the heavens—but that we are to be informed with regard to God’s whole plan

¹⁶⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 33.

¹⁷⁰ LW 69:36.

¹⁷¹ LW 22:478.

¹⁷² LW 22:154.

and counsel for us.”¹⁷³ As much as the knowledge of the Gospel brought by Christ cannot be known by human reason, “whoever believes in Him shall live eternally.”¹⁷⁴

Nevertheless, for Luther, the knowledge of the Gospel is also crucial to our temporary life. With such significance that he keeps emphasizing that, one should not misinterpret John 17:3 in considering “the eternal life” as “the next life,” “the life to come,” or “the future life”.¹⁷⁵ According to Luther, “this passage does not speak of the life to come, since to know Christ as the one sent by the Father means nothing else than to believe and know how He came to earth, died for our sins, rose from the dead, won and granted us the forgiveness of sins.”¹⁷⁶ The knowledge of the Gospel to him is not merely an instruction related to life after death, because this is the knowledge that can “awaken and strengthen faith.”¹⁷⁷ If we “set it aside or lay it under the bench for a time,”¹⁷⁸ we cannot have faith in Christ. For this reason, the knowledge of the Gospel is not only “the knowledge wherein eternal life consists,” but also the knowledge that “pertain[s] to us here on earth.”¹⁷⁹ Luther asserts that, “we ought to keep it with us [down] here below...[, f]or truly everything that we shall there inherit and possess must begin and be recognized and comprehended here by faith.”¹⁸⁰ Moreover, this is also the knowledge that enables believers to face all the challenges in this earthly life.¹⁸¹ As Luther states, “This is truly where all our salvation and consolation in every need is to be found, so that we may know that there is no other help in heaven or on earth against sin and every temptation than this knowledge of faith.”¹⁸² From this perspective, the difference between the

¹⁷³ LW 24:257.

¹⁷⁴ LW 22:466.

¹⁷⁵ LW 69:36.

¹⁷⁶ LW 69:37.

¹⁷⁷ LW 69:37.

¹⁷⁸ LW 69:37.

¹⁷⁹ LW 69:34.

¹⁸⁰ LW 69:34-35.

¹⁸¹ LW 69:37.

¹⁸² LW 69:37.

knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel also denotes the differences in their functions in our earthly lives.

2.3.2 Direct Life and Give Life

Based on Luther's sermon on John 6:38-39, Law and Gospel represent different wills of God and "each has its own province and place in a discussion."¹⁸³ Epistemologically, the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel also functions differently in human life. In his sermon on John 1:17-18, Luther suggests that, since human reason can grasp the Law, everyone can base their lives on knowing a God who punishes evil and rewards the good. However, the knowledge of the Gospel informs us "that the entire human race is so deeply steeped in sin that no one can or will keep God's commandments, and that we would have had to condemn ourselves before the judgment seat of God if the Son of God had not come" to save us.¹⁸⁴ Hence, the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel must function differently in human life.

Here, in defining the knowledge of the Law, Luther, as suggested by Lohse, first sharply distinguishes the Law that every human being is required to obey and the laws that "do not apply not only to Christians but not even to Gentiles in the Old Covenant period."¹⁸⁵ According to Lohse, "even the Decalogue is binding only as a summary of natural laws which in essence consists of the two commandments to worship God and to care for one's fellow human beings in terms of love for neighbor. Whatever in Moses exceeds this natural law applies only to Jews, not to Christians."¹⁸⁶ From this perspective, the knowledge of the Law in Luther's sermons on the Gospel of John, as defined as what human natural ability can comprehend, excludes all the ceremonial law of the Jews and the pope.¹⁸⁷ In fact, Luther frequently criticizes the ritual laws of monks and the pope for

¹⁸³ LW 23:62.

¹⁸⁴ LW 22:153.

¹⁸⁵ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 274.

¹⁸⁶ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 274.

¹⁸⁷ LW 22:148.

adding unnecessary requirements to God's Law.¹⁸⁸ He asserts, "Moses and his Commandments are better and older than the cushion of wearing a friar's cowl. But in spite of this, monasticism was drubbed and drummed into the people; and they insisted on calling a monastic order holy. This, however, did not reflect a knowledge of God; it is blindness."¹⁸⁹ In terms of the knowledge of the Law, Luther focuses solely on the Law that is universally acknowledged because "Moses and our reason are better informed"¹⁹⁰ than those ritual laws created by human beings.

Furthermore, even though "God gave the Decalogue through Moses" to be "an official office for teaching the law,"¹⁹¹ in Luther's opinion, Moses' mission is not to teach us how to keep the Law, "but to instruct me[us] in the correct comprehension of the Law and of its demands upon me[us]."¹⁹² According to Luther, "it is proper that the Law and God's Commandments provide me[us] with the correct directives for life; they supply me[us] with abundant information about righteousness and eternal life."¹⁹³ However, since life can only be possessed by fulfilling the requirements of the Law, the Law, as sermons, can only inform us of God's will for life, but not to give such life to humans.¹⁹⁴ Hence, "the Law serves to indicate the will of God, and it leads us to a realization that we cannot keep it. It also acquaints us with the nature of man, with his capabilities and with his limitations."¹⁹⁵

For Luther, while humans can avoid outward sin in the world, attempting to eliminate sin before God through the Law is ultimately futile.¹⁹⁶ By presenting God's will for a perfect life, the

¹⁸⁸ LW 22:152, 155.

¹⁸⁹ LW 22:155.

¹⁹⁰ LW 22:155.

¹⁹¹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 274.

¹⁹² LW 22:148.

¹⁹³ LW 22:143.

¹⁹⁴ LW 22:143.

¹⁹⁵ LW 22:143.

¹⁹⁶ LW 22:167.

Law of Moses discloses the sinful nature of humans and burdens them with their sins, so that they would seek salvation.¹⁹⁷ However, due to sin, human reason has become incapable of recognizing the true purpose of God's Law, which leads people to create various laws in an attempt to establish a relationship with God. In this context, as the knowledge of the Law enables individuals to strive for a better earthly life by recognizing the existence of God, it actually serves as evidence that humanity, in fact, does not have the knowledge of the Gospel.¹⁹⁸

As pointed out by Ngien, "the knowledge of sin is a predicate of God's revelation, not human reason."¹⁹⁹ Compared to the knowledge of the Law, Luther believes the incapability of human beings to meet the requirements of the Law is elaborated even more clearly in the knowledge of the Gospel. For Luther, the word "truth" in John 1:17 indicates perfectly "righteous and in order," which only Christ can accomplish.²⁰⁰ "The ideas expressed in the terms 'ability to do' and 'perfectly,' therefore, pertain solely to Christ and not to Moses or to us and to our strength."²⁰¹ From this perspective, the knowledge of the Gospel rightly declares that the entire world is sinful in God's eyes and needs the salvation of Christ. By proving the incapability of human beings, the fatherly will of God is thus also present.²⁰²

For Luther, "God is truly known not when we are aware of his power or his wisdom which are terrible, but only when we know his goodness and his love."²⁰³ This concept, as presented in his sermon on John 17:3, explains the coming of Christ. In his words, "if I know that Christ was sent by the Father for my sake and given to me, then I may freely and joyfully conclude that He is my gracious and kind Father, who has put His wrath entirely out of mind. For by this work—sending

¹⁹⁷ LW 22:165-66.

¹⁹⁸ LW 22:155.

¹⁹⁹ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 15-16.

²⁰⁰ LW 22:148.

²⁰¹ LW 22:148.

²⁰² LW 23:62.

²⁰³ WA 2,141 cited from Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 191.

His Son—He has opened up all His heart and will, so that nothing is seen but boundless, inexhaustible love and mercy.”²⁰⁴ For this reason, as much as both Moses and Christ are ways God speaks to humans,²⁰⁵ Luther believes that with the passage of John 8:12, “Christ abolished all other doctrines.”²⁰⁶ In his view, “there are many doctrines in this world. The most exalted among them, when properly taught, is Moses’s Law, the Ten Commandments. Yet these do not lead man from darkness into light. The Law does not inform man how to live eternally and how to be saved.”²⁰⁷ In contrast, “following Christ,” for Luther, means “to see a light that gives life” because “by means of this light we shall live; it will not let us die; through it we shall live forever.”²⁰⁸ In other words, the knowledge of the Gospel gives us life by knowing the true God.

From this perspective, the knowledge of the Gospel, though solely revealed in the Son of God, is not confined to the New Testament. Even Adam, along with all the patriarchs and prophets, knew God by hoping and believing in the coming Messiah. They believed that they would receive grace from God through this Savior.²⁰⁹ Hence, “they did not linger with the Law, but through faith they looked to Christ.”²¹⁰ This also implies the core of the knowledge of the Gospel, for Luther, is not concerning other doctrinal details but the true identity of Christ and His work, because

*although the people in the Old Testament neither knew nor understood what the Messiah would proclaim—for instance, they knew nothing of Baptism, of the Lord’s Supper, of the Office of the Keys, or of absolution—they nevertheless believed in the Christ who was to come; and they expected that the Messiah would come and teach them everything. They took hold of Him in faith[,] even though they did not yet see Him. Similarly, we take hold of eternal life by faith today, although we do not really understand what it is. We believe that one day we shall partake of it.*²¹¹

²⁰⁴ LW 69:37.

²⁰⁵ LW 22:504.

²⁰⁶ LW 23:324.

²⁰⁷ LW 23:324.

²⁰⁸ LW 23:326.

²⁰⁹ LW 22:156.

²¹⁰ LW 22:156.

²¹¹ LW 22:285.

In Luther's view, without Christ, no one will be saved, because "only he who remains in Him knows God."²¹² Hence, he asserts the knowledge of the Gospel is "the sum total of the entire Christian faith and doctrine,"²¹³ for no one can live without knowing the true God.

2.4 How Can Humans Know the True God?

"Certainty assumes clarity,"²¹⁴ as stated by Bayer, which emphasizes the importance of clearly distinguishing between Law and Gospel.²¹⁵ In terms of the knowledge of God, for Luther, "to know God from the Law [is] with His back turned to us."²¹⁶ But "through the only-begotten Son and through the Gospel one learns to look directly into God's face."²¹⁷ Luther makes this distinction because, while both the knowledge of the Gospel and the knowledge of the Law are the knowledge of God, without being correctly distinguished, one cannot know the true God.

2.4.1 The Limitations of Human Beings

As much as Luther distinguishes two kinds of knowledge of God based on the limitations of human reason, it is necessary, as pointed out by Lohse, to know that "a peculiar accent attaches to Luther's language about God. The traditional doctrine of the divine attributes, recognizable partly through natural reason and partly through revelation, did not appear in him in such form."²¹⁸ According to Bayer, "what he[Luther] thinks can be learned from nature and reason is to be found in the Scripture."²¹⁹ In essence, Luther builds his epistemology by using the Scripture to limit human reason's ability to find the true God. For this reason, as Lohse suggests, in discussing the

²¹² LW 22:158.

²¹³ LW 22:158.

²¹⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 58.

²¹⁵ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 58.

²¹⁶ LW 22:157.

²¹⁷ LW 22:157.

²¹⁸ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 210-11.

²¹⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 128-29.

knowledge of God, Luther diverges from the traditional approach that takes discerning God's various attributes as the main task of this subject. Instead, he focuses more on "the divine omnipotence", "the will of God", and "freedom"²²⁰ because God's attributes, for Luther, are not something added to God.²²¹ For example, "God is the Creator. According to Luther this does not mean that God is in addition the Creator. To be God and to be Creator are ultimately one and the same. God is God."²²² Therefore, though the knowledge of the Gospel and the knowledge of the Law differ in function and content, they are not distinguished to discuss different attributes of God as if the two could be combined to denote the one true God.

Concerning the knowledge of God, in Luther's opinion, "reason is confined to the first type of knowledge, which proceeds from the Law; and it speaks a vague language."²²³ Human reason is subject to the Law, which indicates that the way humans understand things lies in grasping the causal relationships between all things.²²⁴ Consequently, from the knowledge of the Law, human reason would come to only two conclusions about God. One is from the people who do not obey the Law. They do not follow the Law because they see that the real world does not necessarily work according to the Law, "especially when they observe that the greater the rogue, the greater his fortune. They infer that there is no God who punishes sin,"²²⁵ because a conflict exists in their observation of earthly life. Through their observation of God's creation and the natural law installed in their heart, they expect a God who will judge the wrongdoers during their earthly life. But their experience in this temporary life often contradicts this understanding because people who do evil may prosper, thereby they overture their notion about God and saying that there is no such God in

²²⁰ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 211.

²²¹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 211-12.

²²² Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 212.

²²³ LW 22:153.

²²⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 211.

²²⁵ LW 22:152.

this world. In Luther's words, "as you can see, God so orders this corporal world in its external affairs that if you respect and follow the judgment of human reason, you are bound to say either that there is no God or that God is unjust."²²⁶ The other is from people who believe that they can achieve salvation by strictly adhering to the Law. From this viewpoint,

the Jews tried to keep it by a meticulous observation of an abundance of prescriptions. The 'papists' thought they had to augment God's commandments with recommendations for how one could respond to the will of God through special ascetic achievements. For Luther both are examples of the fact that the law is simply in close affinity with human reason, which 'does not know anything except the law'. The natural human being tries, if possible, to 'do everything right' and expects to be rewarded for it.²²⁷

But this kind of people is "not nearly as good as the aforementioned" because what they do is no better than worshipping "oxen and calves".²²⁸ For Luther, "even the heathen are superior to this group" in understanding God's commandments and demands.²²⁹

Ultimately, whether humanity forms its conception of God from its own experience or adheres to its own idea of God, human reason cannot find the true God. The fundamental issue of their epistemological process, as presented by Barth, is that

it[reason] adjusts God to its own ideas—as the God who rewards good with good and evil with evil and therefore is to be feared. Human anxiety about the self then shapes what reason says about God. But reason can also inflate itself to the point of saying that there is no God; then the presumptuousness of fallen humankind takes full control. Whatever the outcome, reason must be content with speculari and hence deserves no trust; one cannot rely on it.²³⁰

Neither of them can uphold their conclusions about God when confronted with adversity, because they based them solely on the knowledge of the Law. As Luther explains in his lectures on the Book of Jonah, the action of the mariners in facing the storm indicates

the people in the ship all know of God, but they have no definite God. For Jonah relates that each one calls on his own god, that is, his concept of God, whatever he conceives of

²²⁶ LW 33:291.

²²⁷ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 141.

²²⁸ LW 22:152.

²²⁹ LW 22:152.

²³⁰ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 405.

*God in his mind. And in that way they all fail to encounter the one true God and have nothing but idols whom they call God and honor as God. Therefore their faith, too, was false; it was superstition and idolatry and of no avail. For their god lets them down in the hour of need; he lets them call in vain, so that they despair and find themselves at a loss to know where to find a god who might help them. They run down to Jonah, arouse him, and command him to call on his God. They are curious to see whether there might be another god beside their own to aid them. There you can see that a false faith will not stand the test of adversity, but that both god and faith, idol and superstition, become engulfed and vanish, and that nothing but despair remains.*²³¹

Luther thus concludes that “the knowledge of God derived from the Law is not true knowledge of Him, whether it be the Law of Moses or the Law instilled into our hearts.”²³² Eventually, with only the knowledge of the Law, human reason would have no choice but to keep missing the true God and continue in changing their gods.

From this perspective, in Luther’s view,

*reason also plays blindman’s buff with God; it consistently gropes in the dark and misses the mark. It calls that God which is not God and fails to call Him God who really is God. Reason would do neither the one nor the other if it were not conscious of the existence of God or if it really knew who and what God is. Therefore it rushes in clumsily and assigns the name God and ascribes divine honor to its own idea of God. Thus reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil. So there is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing who or what God is. Nature knows the former—it is inscribed in everybody’s heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit.*²³³

The knowledge of the Gospel and the knowledge of the Law thus must be separated in Luther’s mind. Without the knowledge of the Gospel, human beings would never know the true God. In this respect, it shows that they are incapable of finding the true God on their own, and for Luther, such acknowledgement is essential to his epistemology.

2.4.2 The Distance Between God and Humans

In considering God, “Luther, like Augustine before him, accepts Paul’s rejection of man’s murmuring against God (Rom. 9:20).”²³⁴ In Luther’s view, the sermons of the Lord Christ is “a

²³¹ LW 19:56-57.

²³² LW 22:151.

²³³ LW 19:55.

²³⁴ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 282.

message not comprehended by reason. But the reason must give ear and be informed.”²³⁵ In this respect, as pointed out by Althaus, “Luther reminds us that we may not judge God’s activity by the law and the human standards that determine what is right for us. We must consider the distance between God and man.”²³⁶ God, in His nature, should not be grasped by human reason, and this is the reality that people should acknowledge when seeking to know Him. In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther firmly opposed people making their own judgment concerning God’s word. He states, “there you must hold your reason in check and say: I do not know; I will not try to figure it out or measure it with my understanding. But I will keep still and listen; for this is immeasurable and incomprehensible to reason.”²³⁷ To know the true God, the role and the limitations of human reason must first be acknowledged.

Epistemologically, Luther insists reason must be the judge of external and worldly matters, for that is its intended purpose. However, “in heavenly matters and in matters of faith, when a question of salvation is involved, bid reason observe silence and hold still,”²³⁸ because “if this had fallen within the range of our comprehension, it would have been unnecessary for Christ to come down from heaven with His revelation to us.”²³⁹ For Luther, Christ’s coming includes teaching humans the knowledge of the Gospel, because “reason is blind”²⁴⁰ concerning these matters. In his opinion, “man must hold his ears to Christ’s mouth and listen to His Word. And what will Christ preach? He will tell us how to believe. Thus He who is above all does nothing but bear witness.”²⁴¹ In short, Christ, as the Lord, would not only reveal the true God but also inform us how to possess this knowledge. The knowledge of the Gospel indeed transcends human comprehension and cannot

²³⁵ LW 22:467.

²³⁶ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 282.

²³⁷ LW 23:84.

²³⁸ LW 23:84.

²³⁹ LW 22:467.

²⁴⁰ LW 22:467.

²⁴¹ LW 22:467.

be reached by human ability, but we, as human beings, can have this knowledge through Christ. Therefore, the distinction between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel, in Luther's sermons on the Gospel of John, suggests

*his interest is not in proclaiming ontological theses about the hidden God; it is, rather, to draw attention away from God's mystery and impenetrability and steer it to Jesus Christ, in whom is shown God's true face, the one that is obligatory for us. Luther's tortured statements about the hidden God are made in service of his message about the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and who is enflamed with love for sinful human beings.*²⁴²

The knowledge of the Gospel differs from the knowledge of the Law because, to receive it, human beings must hold their reason and admit that God is beyond their ability to understand. According to Luther, "after all, you will have to let God be God and grant that he knows more about you than you do yourself. So then, gaze at the heavenly picture of Christ."²⁴³ However, as Luther also argues in his sermons on the Gospel of John, human beings, by nature, are unable to do that.²⁴⁴ In his words, "the world has always insisted on rationalizing and understanding everyone."²⁴⁵

In terms of the knowledge of God, in Luther's opinion, the First Article of the Christian Creed concerning creation is accepted by Jew, Turk, and Tartar. But when it comes to the Second Article concerning Christ, only Christian who believes that God is true (John 3:33) receive this article.²⁴⁶ As Ps. 51:4 and Rom. 3:4 suggest, there is no difficulty for human beings to know God's majesty; "God is judged and convicted" only through Christ's words and messages.²⁴⁷ To elaborate, "the world does not condemn His majesty; but it condemns the message that flows from Christ's lips. It regards the Gospel as a lie and as heresy."²⁴⁸ For this reason, "St. John always places the eternal omnipotence of Christ in juxtaposition with His immense frailty. Faith in Christ, the Son of

²⁴² Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 110.

²⁴³ LW 42:105.

²⁴⁴ LW 22:467.

²⁴⁵ LW 22:467.

²⁴⁶ LW 22:468.

²⁴⁷ LW 22:468-69.

²⁴⁸ LW 22:469.

God, saves; and yet it is true, as we read here, that this same Lord Christ flees. Our Christian Creed professes this. Now it is a matter of ‘take it or leave it’ for us, of ‘believe it or do not believe it’. Human reason would prefer to have it otherwise.”²⁴⁹ According to Luther, “this has been the trouble since the world’s beginning and will remain so until the end of time: that the world will not concede that God is true.”²⁵⁰

Christ cannot be recognized by human reason because, as Ngien points out, Christ “came in lowliness, bearing witness solely of things not seen and heard in law books or anywhere else on earth.”²⁵¹ Additionally, as Luther suggests in his sermon on John 7:24, humans judge everything according to their “reason, discretion and opinion, which is like looking through a painted glass that loses the color.”²⁵² Consequently, “Christ is proclaiming the truth and glorifying the Gospel, but in the eyes of the world this is viewed as heresy.”²⁵³ In Luther’s perspective, “if Christ the Lord were to appear with only half of an angel’s wing, pope, Turk and everybody would fall prostrate at His feet. But since He lets it be known that He was born of a virgin and that He is God and man, people sneer: ‘Why should pope and Turk humble themselves before such a Person?’”²⁵⁴ In human rational judgment, Christ’s appearance does not match the message He conveys. As Ngien explains, “reason cannot understand how a poor person, like Jesus, could impart eternal life. The logic of Scripture is not reason, which often leads us astray, but witness, which we must hear if we wish to be justified before God. Thus the sermon of the Lord Christ is called ‘a testimony,’ a message to be believed, not rationalized.”²⁵⁵ The knowledge of the Gospel offends human reason,²⁵⁶ so it becomes, as

²⁴⁹ LW 22:503.

²⁵⁰ LW 22:468.

²⁵¹ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 60.

²⁵² LW 23:240.

²⁵³ LW 23:326.

²⁵⁴ LW 22:505.

²⁵⁵ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 60.

²⁵⁶ LW 22:466.

Luther describes, “a stumbling block to the world.”²⁵⁷ Christ’s message becomes the reason people reject Him.

The knowledge of the Gospel is so hard for people to accept that “everyone seizes instead upon something that reason is able to comprehend and achieve. For it always remains something strange and hidden to reason, so that reason is unable to regard it as important, hold it to be true, or simply trust in it, since reason cannot feel or touch it, always wanting to possess a foundation that it can find within itself or can claim for its own.”²⁵⁸ Instead of accepting the knowledge of the Gospel, people would rather trust their own reason in searching for God. Consequently, “they go awry with their illusion. They miss the true God, and nothing remains but their own false notion. That is their god. To him they assign the name and honor of God.”²⁵⁹ Hence, the fundamental problem of human reason in understanding God also denotes the critical issue of human salvation. According to Luther, “here you see where all idolatry comes from and why it is rightly called idol (Abgott) and superstition (Abglaube) and idolatry (Abgötterei); undoubtedly because such delusion draws us away from God (Ab-Gott) and alienates us from the true worship of God. Indeed, this is an idol and a superstition that directs us away from God and directs us to the devil in hell.”²⁶⁰ It is apparent to Luther that

*no one but the devil can be behind this delusion, for he inspires and governs these thoughts. Thus their delusion is their idol; it is the image of the devil they hold in their hearts. For the real and the true God is He who is properly served not with works but with the true faith and with sincerity of heart, who gives and bestows mercy and benefactions entirely gratis and without our works and merits. That they do not believe, and therefore they do not know God but are bound to blunder and to miss the mark.*²⁶¹

The knowledge of the Law indicates that people are aware of God’s existence and understand some of God’s attributes. However, with only the knowledge of the Law inherent in

²⁵⁷ LW 69:42.

²⁵⁸ LW 69:42-43.

²⁵⁹ LW 19:55.

²⁶⁰ LW 19:56.

²⁶¹ LW 19:55-56.

their nature, they are bound to find a false god, which then becomes an idol to them.²⁶² Moreover, they reject the knowledge of the Gospel revealed by Christ because it does not agree with their understanding of the knowledge of the Law. The distinction between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel thus reveals the fundamental situation in human epistemology: they will always try to rely on their ability to find and define God. For this reason, Luther firmly reminds: “Let the world drift toward the pit of hell; but as we read of His preaching and of His miracles in the Gospel, we should remember that He is a Lord invested with divine majesty.”²⁶³ In other words, to know the true God, one must recognize the distance between God and man.

2.4.3 What is the Right Question?

Since Luther develops his epistemological theory based on the impossibility of human beings in reaching God, as stated by Lohse, “the knowledge of God through reason as well as through revelation cannot be linked in merely [a] supplementary fashion. Between the two there is the question of the true God. In Luther’s terms, we must say that reason knows something of God as well as that it knows nothing of God. It possesses no ‘neutral’ knowledge of God.”²⁶⁴ In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther argues that human reason could only possess “a left-handed and a partial knowledge of God, based on the law of nature and of Moses; for the law is inscribed in our hearts.”²⁶⁵ But, “the proper way to acquire a knowledge of God is the right-handed one, to know for sure what the thoughts and the will of God are.”²⁶⁶ The distinction between them, thus, is about the search for the only proper way for humans to know the true God. More specifically, they are separated in Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John to propose an epistemology about how human beings, as human beings, know God as God.

²⁶² Michael A. Lockwood, *The unholy trinity : Martin Luther against the idol of me, myself, and I* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 186.

²⁶³ LW 22:505.

²⁶⁴ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 211.

²⁶⁵ LW 22:153.

²⁶⁶ LW 22:153.

In terms of knowing God, Althaus believes that, “for Luther, there is a contrast between man’s attempt to find and know God on his own and the knowledge and encounter which God gives through His word, and this contrast is of decisive importance. This theme runs through Luther’s entire theology, in all phases of its development, and Luther repeatedly discusses it.”²⁶⁷ As he distinguishes the knowledge of the Law from the knowledge of the Gospel in his sermons on the Gospel of John, this contrast in his epistemology also becomes apparent. For instance, in his sermon on John 17:3, he asserts, “there is not a human being on earth who has been able to reach or grasp any true conception and certain knowledge of God apart from God’s Word.”²⁶⁸ Even Gentiles like the learned poet Simondies had to admit “What am I to say?” because “human reason, the more it presumes to explore and fathom God’s essence, works, and ways, goes farther and farther astray and finally comes to consider God as nothing and to believe nothing at all.”²⁶⁹ From this perspective, Luther’s distinction between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel actually aims to disclose the impossibility of human beings knowing the true God on their own.

According to Lohse, “in the course of the years Luther expressed himself more and more critically regarding a natural knowledge of God or regarding humans’ knowledge of God. In the Promotion Disputation of Petrus Hegemon of 1545, he rejected the view that the Gentiles know of God’s creation of the world. He only admitted that they know something of the world’s being ruled, but not of its creation.”²⁷⁰ Before that, in his sermons on John, Luther already asserts that human reason can only lead people to recognize God’s existence; it cannot enable them to find the true God. Even more, humans are not aware that they are actually worshiping their own notions. Consequently, he believes “this is what St. John emphasizes in nearly every word of his Gospel: that one should abandon the sublime, beautiful thoughts with which reason and clever people occupy

²⁶⁷ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 20.

²⁶⁸ LW 69:31.

²⁶⁹ LW 69:31.

²⁷⁰ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 198-99.

themselves, seeking God in the divine Majesty apart from Christ.”²⁷¹ To know the true God, in Luther’s epistemology, the limitations of human reason are the core issue that needs to be resolved; thus, he distinguishes the knowledge of God based on the limitations of human reason.

In Barth’s opinion, the theses Luther presented in 1539 on John 1:14 suggest that, for Luther, “even in earthly things the appropriate categories of thought must be applied.”²⁷² From this perspective, Luther does not consider theology necessarily contradictory to philosophy, but “simply transcends human ability to understand.”²⁷³ In *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, he uses the limitations of human reason to define two kinds of knowledge of God. Human reason can grasp only the knowledge of the Law, which is implanted in human beings at creation. Conversely, the knowledge of the Gospel, though revealed by Christ, is beyond the reach of human reason. However, Luther’s intent in the sermons on the Gospel of John goes beyond merely contrasting the knowledge of the Law with the knowledge of the Gospel. The restriction of human reason regarding the knowledge of God, as delineated in the sermons on the Gospel of John, is not set to address the difference between the revealed God and the mystery of God. Instead, both the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel are knowable, but we must perceive them in different ways.

Therefore, this separation actually aims to expose the crucial question in Luther’s epistemology: in what way can humans perceive the knowledge beyond human reason? In this respect, for Luther, the knowledge of the Law presents the need of every human being, and the knowledge of the Gospel provides the exact satisfaction that everyone needs. Every human being, as pointed out by the knowledge of the Law, needs to know the true God. But how? To find the correct answer, from Luther’s point of view, with the distinction between the knowledge of the Law

²⁷¹ LW 69:67.

²⁷² Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 403.

²⁷³ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 403.

and of the Gospel, we must rephrase the question. According to him, “the question should not be ‘how can God be known from the Law?’ but ‘How can He be known from grace and truth?’”²⁷⁴

²⁷⁴ LW 22:154.

3. How God to Be Known from Grace and Truth?

As we have already seen, Luther defines the distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel based on their accessibility to human reason. Due to the Law implanted in human nature, human reason can perceive the existence of God through their observation of creation and their moral sense. Consequently,

every man on earth has the innate tendency, when he hears of God, to invent his own image and idea of Him in order to obtain a form and color for God: who He is, what He thinks and intends, how He should be served. And yet reason, even at its best, cannot rise any higher than to conclude that it must serve Him with works and do enough that He will be pleased and give them in return what they desire. This is the source of all idolatry in the world.²⁷⁵

In his opinion, John 1:18 rightly points out the fact that “no one has ever seen God; for it is true that no one, of himself, can know God in the evangelical sense.”²⁷⁶ The knowledge of the Gospel is not accessible by human reason. Hence, the question becomes: how can this God be known?

3.1 Who is the Creator?

The distinction between the knowledge of the Gospel and the knowledge of the Law reveals that, for Luther, while human reason can know God’s existence through creation, it cannot know who the Creator is. Thus, for humans to know this Creator, other means are needed. In Luther’s sermon on John 1:1-18, in correlation to his interpretation of Genesis 1, he explains how this Creator reveals Himself through the distinct roles of the Triune God, namely, how the knowledge of the Gospel is delivered to humanity.

3.1.1 The Creator as the Triune God

Besides distinguishing the knowledge of the Law from the knowledge of the Gospel in *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, according to Althaus, “Luther also describes this difference

²⁷⁵ LW 69:49.

²⁷⁶ LW 22:154.

between the knowledge which is given to all men and that knowledge which is first disclosed through the word of God and the Holy Spirit as the difference between ‘superficial’ and ‘inside’ knowledge of God.”²⁷⁷ In this distinction, the “superficial” knowledge refers to recognizing the existence of God, while the “inside” knowledge of God is to know God’s intention toward humans and His Triune nature.²⁷⁸ Corresponding to this distinction, it is clear that, for Luther, the knowledge of the Gospel includes knowing the Triune nature of God, because, different from merely recognizing the existence of God, the knowledge of the Gospel discloses who this Creator is.

God is a triune God, and, as Luther illustrates in his *Lectures on Genesis*, He reveals Himself in this way when He creates the world. In Genesis 1, according to Luther, “here both appear: ‘Let Us make’ and ‘He made’, in the plural and in the singular; thereby Moses clearly and forcibly shows us that within and in the very Godhead and the Creating Essence there is one inseparable and eternal plurality.”²⁷⁹ In his lecture, Luther refutes the Jewish interpretation of these passages as “following the custom of princes, who, to indicate respect, speak of themselves in the plural number.”²⁸⁰ He insists that “the Holy Spirit is not imitating this court mannerism (to give it this name); nor does Holy Scripture sanction this manner of speech.”²⁸¹ Hence, Genesis 1 for Luther is “a sure indication of the Trinity, that in one divine essence there are three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”²⁸²

However, this does not indicate that God operates separately. In Luther’s view, all three Persons are in a cooperative relation.²⁸³ “The Father does not make one man and the Son another, nor the Son one man and the Holy Spirit another; but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one

²⁷⁷ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 17.

²⁷⁸ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 18.

²⁷⁹ LW 1:58.

²⁸⁰ LW 1:58.

²⁸¹ LW 1:58.

²⁸² LW 1:58.

²⁸³ LW 1:58.

and the same God, is the Author and Creator of the same work.”²⁸⁴ Hence, epistemologically, the Creator cannot be known separately. In this respect, Luther asserts “the Father is not known except in the Son and through the Holy Spirit.”²⁸⁵ For this reason, he believes this identity of the Creator is taught better in the Gospel of John, where the coming Christ, as “the future teacher,” makes it much clearer.²⁸⁶ Luther sees a strong connection between the Book of Genesis and the Gospel of John concerning the Trinity; through this connection, he seeks to demonstrate how the Creator reveals Himself to humanity as a Triune God.

3.1.2 The Conversation Analogy

Compared to the Book of Genesis, the expression of John 1:1, for Luther, is “far more succinct and vivid”²⁸⁷ in revealing who the Creator of heaven and earth is. Since human reason cannot discover who the Creator is, according to the definition of the knowledge of the Gospels, this identity must necessarily be revealed by God. In his sermons, to explain “God is the Word,” Luther presents an “inner-Trinitarian self-conversation”²⁸⁸ based on Genesis 1 and John 1.

The Word

Regarding the way to introduce the identity of Christ, Luther believes that “St. John got the ideas from Moses.”²⁸⁹ Hence, “in the[Luther’s] sermon, a self-conversation is observed to be exegetically linked to Genesis 1 and John’s prologue.”²⁹⁰ Based on his interpretation, he proposes

²⁸⁴ LW 1:58.

²⁸⁵ LW 1:59.

²⁸⁶ LW 1:59.

²⁸⁷ LW 22:7.

²⁸⁸ Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, Revised edition. ed., Studies In Historical And Systematic Theology Series, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 281.

²⁸⁹ LW 22:7.

²⁹⁰ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 294.

that, just as humans would have a “word of the heart”²⁹¹ as presented in 1 Corinthians 2:11, analogically, God would also have a conversation within Himself. For Luther, “a word is not merely the utterance of the mouth; rather it is the thought of the heart.”²⁹² This word could be one with that person, because “when a man has a thought, a word, or a conversation within himself, he speaks to himself incessantly and is full of words that suggest counsel as to what to do or not to do. He continually converses and deliberates on this within himself,”²⁹³ to a point that he is unable to think or feel other things. This thought then becomes this person because he is “insensible of himself”²⁹⁴.

According to Luther,

This same picture may be applied to God. God, too, in His majesty and nature, is pregnant with a Word or a conversation in which He engages with Himself in His divine essence and which reflects the thoughts of His heart. This is as complete and excellent and perfect as God Himself. No one but God alone sees, hears, or comprehends this conversation. It is an invisible and incomprehensible conversation. His Word existed before all angels and all creatures existed, for subsequently He brought all creatures into being by means of this Word and conversation. God is so absorbed in this Word, thought, or conversation that He pays no attention to anything else.²⁹⁵

This kind of thought is like the deepest secret in a human heart, which is unknowable to others unless it is spoken.²⁹⁶

Thus God, too, from all eternity has a Word, a speech, a thought, or a conversation with Himself in His divine heart, unknown to angels and men. This is called His Word. From eternity He was within God’s paternal heart, and through Him God resolved to create heaven and earth. But no man was aware of such a resolve until the Word became flesh and proclaimed this to us.²⁹⁷

²⁹¹ LW 22:8. According to the footnote 4 in LW 22:8, “Here Luther seems to be referring to a distinction which originated in Stoic thought and which appeared in Philo between the λόγος ἐνδιάθετος (the Logos as He was in God) and the λόγος προφοικικός (the Logos as He emanated from God). The first church father to employ the distinction appears to have been Theophilus, *To Autolytus*, II, ch. 10; I, ch. 22.”

²⁹² LW 22:9.

²⁹³ LW 22:9.

²⁹⁴ LW 22:10.

²⁹⁵ LW 22:10.

²⁹⁶ LW 22:10.

²⁹⁷ LW 22:9.

Indeed, even human language cannot fully express the human heart. Luther also acknowledges “the thoughts of the heart, in their full meaning, significance, and extent are not accessible to the senses. One cannot fully and completely pour out one’s heart.”²⁹⁸ Nevertheless, “a man often does express his thoughts, bare his heart, and reveal its content to others”²⁹⁹ because if we are to be known, “our word [must be] heard and understood by others.”³⁰⁰ Likewise, through the Word, God wants us to know Him, even though “this Word in God is entirely different from my word or yours.”³⁰¹ As Ngien explains, “the Word spoken by the Father is unlike a physical, natural word spoken by a human being, whose voice or breath does not remain in him but proceeds from him and remains outside him.”³⁰² From this standpoint, in his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther identifies the Son as a “‘Word’(John 1:1) which the Father speaks with and in Himself. Thus this Word has a true, divine nature from the Father..., [and] this Word remains in the Father forever.”³⁰³ When people come to know God’s Word, they come to know God Himself.

The Listener

In associating the divine nature of the Son as the Word of God in John 1:1, Luther, in his sermon on John 16:13, describes the Holy Spirit as “the One who hears both the Speaker and the spoken Word.”³⁰⁴ He believes in this passage, “Christ [also] refers to a conversation carried on in the Godhead, a conversation in which no creatures participate.”³⁰⁵ According to his interpretation, “He[Christ] sets up a pulpit both for the speaker and for the listener. He makes the Father the

²⁹⁸ LW 22:12.

²⁹⁹ LW 22:12.

³⁰⁰ LW 22:8-9.

³⁰¹ LW 22:8.

³⁰² Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 191.

³⁰³ LW 24:364.

³⁰⁴ LW 24:364.

³⁰⁵ LW 24:364.

Preacher and the Holy Spirit the Listener,”³⁰⁶ which, for Luther, demonstrates the particular office and essence of the Holy Spirit.

In stating that “preaching, speaking, and listening [are] inherent in the essence of the Godhead,”³⁰⁷ this analogy aims to prevent the misconception “that the Listener is something outside God, or that there was a time when He began to be a Listener.”³⁰⁸ It indicates the Holy Spirit “exist[s] prior to all created beings”³⁰⁹ as evidenced in Gen. 1:2. “Just as the Father is a Speaker from eternity, and just as the Son is spoken from eternity, so the Holy Spirit is the Listener from eternity.”³¹⁰ Moreover, since “all this speaking, being spoken, and listening takes place within the divine nature and also remains there, where no creature is or can be,”³¹¹ for Luther, from an epistemological perspective, the Word the Holy Spirit enables people to accept and understand must be identical to God’s Word. According to his interpretation, this explains why “Christ defines the Holy Spirit’s office and points out what and about what He is to teach” as “whatever He hears He will speak” in John 16:13.³¹²

The Holy Spirit, as the Listener within the Trinity, serves as “a Preacher”³¹³ to humanity, ensuring that the Word is neither misused nor neglected. This understanding of the Holy Spirit’s office was articulated more clearly in Luther’s *1543 treatise on 2 Samuel 23:1-7, On the Last Words*

³⁰⁶ LW 24:364.

³⁰⁷ LW 24:364.

³⁰⁸ LW 24:365.

³⁰⁹ LW 52:44-45. In Luther’s *The Gospel For The Main Christmas Service, John 2:1-14*, he says: “Concerning the Holy Spirit, however, there are other statements, again in the writings of this same Moses. When, for instance, he says: “The Spirit of God hovers over the waters” [Gen. 1:2], then the Spirit of God must also be something different from him who breathes him into existence, and yet he must exist prior to all created beings. Similarly, when he states that God blessed the creatures, that he regarded them and had pleasure in them, this blessing and kindly regard indicates the Holy Spirit; for this reason the Bible assigns to him life and kindness. However, these statements have as yet not been developed as well as those which refer to the Son, and for this reason they do not as yet shine brightly. The precious metal still lies half buried in the mire. The passage can be easily believed, if human reason is captured so that it believes in the existence of two persons. But if someone had the time and compared the New Testament statements concerning the Holy Spirit and this Mosaic text, he would discover light, satisfaction, and joy.”

³¹⁰ LW 24:365.

³¹¹ LW 24:364-365.

³¹² LW 24:362.

³¹³ LW 24:362.

of *David*. According to Helmer, in this article, “he[Luther] firmly grounded the divinity of the Spirit in the Spirit’s role as hearer of the inner-Trinitarian conversation and, in the outer Trinity, the Spirit speaks through the prophets what is heard in the inner Trinity.”³¹⁴ In other words, “the Spirit reveals on the outside, the inner thoughts of God nor accessible by sight or touch.”³¹⁵ This aligns with Luther’s sermons on John 16:13-14, where he suggests “Christ defines the Holy Spirit’s office” as enabling people to accept Jesus’ message rather than relying on their own ideas to find God.³¹⁶ As a Preacher, “the Holy Spirit works in the preaching of the Word,”³¹⁷ meaning He is the one “who teaches and proclaims His Word.”³¹⁸ As the Listener and the Preacher, He communicates the Word of the Godhead to believers.

The Limitation of the Conversation Analogy

According to Helmer, this speech structure among Trinity is what “Luther uses to develop his own Trinitarian hermeneutic. Luther understands the concept of ‘person’ in relation to an exegetical principle found on this type of Trinitarian revelation.”³¹⁹ But Luther was also aware of its limitations, hence he repeatedly stressed that this analogy “is very inadequate and vague”³²⁰ due to the distance between the Creator and the creatures.³²¹ In his view, “God is not created or made as we human beings are; He is from all eternity. No one has given Him His speech, His Word, or His conversation. What He is, He is of Himself from eternity. But whatever we are, we received from

³¹⁴ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 192.

³¹⁵ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 207. Footnote 56.

³¹⁶ LW 24:362, 371.

³¹⁷ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 119.

³¹⁸ LW 24:174.

³¹⁹ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 265.

³²⁰ LW 22:9.

³²¹ In LW 22:9, according to Luther, “But just as God, the Lord and Creator of all creatures, is immeasurably superior to poor, miserable man, who is earth and dust, so there is no analogy between the word of mortal man and the Word of the eternal and almighty God. There is a wide gulf between the thoughts, discussions, and words of the human heart and those of God.”

Him and not from ourselves. He alone has everything from Himself.”³²² As much as Luther employs this conversation analogy to explain the triune nature of God, he acknowledges that “this comparison, admittedly[,] has its limitation[s].”³²³

Nevertheless, despite the Word of God and human words differ in nature, Luther does believe this conversation analogy “affords us a faint idea.”³²⁴ In *The Gospel For The Main Christmas Service, John 2:1-14*, he mentions that although “the human word does not carry with itself the essence or the nature of the heart” as God’s Word does, but merely a “sign,” it is “through it the heart of man can be known.”³²⁵ From this standpoint, Luther asserts, “that is exactly as it is with God. His Word is so much like himself,[...] that the godhead is wholly in it, and he who has the Word has the whole godhead.”³²⁶ Only through the Word can humans know the triune God. But, unlike human word, the Word is God Himself, so whoever knows the Word indeed knows God.

3.1.3 Only One God to Be Known: From Inner to Outer

According to Bayer, Luther’s conversation analogy suggests that “the entire being of the triune God is a unique communication to me and to all creatures.”³²⁷ This oneness is essential as the Word is delivered “out” to human beings, for, as demonstrated by the conversation analogy, it is through the spoken word that the hearer knows the speaker. By connecting the creation work of God to this conversation analogy, Luther’s exegetical work on the Book of Genesis and the Gospel of John aims to ensure that the identity of the one Creator is adequately known rather than to create three Deities. In Luther’s words, “all three—Speaker, Word, and Listener—must be God Himself; all three must be coeternal and in a single undivided majesty.”³²⁸ He does not explore the doctrine

³²² LW 22:9.

³²³ LW 52:46.

³²⁴ LW 22:9-10.

³²⁵ LW 52:45-46.

³²⁶ LW 52:46.

³²⁷ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 341.

³²⁸ LW 24:365.

of the Trinity to establish three different approaches to recognizing who God is. Instead, as pointed out by Helmer,

By locating the Trinitarian relations on the inner side, Luther can resist the modalism attached to viewing the Trinity as three ways in which the Creator encounters creation. Luther continues to privilege the inner Trinity as the starting point for any movement towards its outer side. When the Creator encounters creation through the unity of essence, the revelation of the inner side becomes significant as the only way by which the Creator is known to be constituted by three persons.³²⁹

There is only one way to know this Creator, because the inner relationship of the three Persons assures that only one Word is conveyed to humans, thereby only one true God is known to them. According to Mattox,

This twofold knowledge of the 'outer' and 'inner' God in turn makes possible the right praise of God. While for Luther the knowledge of God is not to be understood in such a strongly ontic sense as to make it dependent on a prior philosophy of being, it is nevertheless knowledge of God as God 'inwardly' is. And this knowledge of God introduces one into a never-ending cycle that moves from the gracious actions of God to a graced humanity and back to God again. Having received the grace and gifts and right knowledge of God, the Christian returns thanks and praise to God. Thus, the knowledge of God on Luther's account is properly doxological.³³⁰

For Luther, this oneness of the inner Trinity excludes all false notions that might be misconceived as God's Self-revelation, thereby ensuring the true God is outwardly known by humans. Therefore, from the epistemological perspective, "it is also important not to separate the three Persons of the Divine Majesty but to know that when one hears one Person, one is listening to the entire Deity."³³¹

However, Luther also posits this profound truth Moses and St. John articulated in the first chapter of Genesis and the Gospel of John is beyond human reason to understand.³³² In his view, "many and various heretics have stormed against this article and have attempted to fathom, comprehend, and master it with their reason; but they have perished in the attempt. The Holy Spirit

³²⁹ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 297.

³³⁰ Mickey Mattox, "From Faith to the Text and Back Again: Martin Luther on the Trinity in the Old Testament," *Pro Ecclesia* 15, 3, no. Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology (2006): 288.

³³¹ LW 24:166.

³³² LW 22:12.

has defended this article against them all, as God's Word continues to stand its ground against the very gates of hell (Matt. 16:18)."³³³ In this respect, as pointed out by Helmer, "his[Luther's] focus reflects what his theological predecessors had already acknowledged. For Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and Biel, the Trinity is not accessible by natural reason; it is the subject matter of revelation."³³⁴ It is unachievable by human effort, and for that reason, Bayer suggests, "the triune nature of God is nothing other than the God who reveals himself to us in the Gospel."³³⁵ It is God who makes people know Him.

This implies that the knowledge of the Gospel is solely the work of the triune God, without any involvement from creatures, and solely through this work, humans can know who the Creator is, rather than merely being aware of His existence. It also indicates, according to Luther,

*we should not consider God only from the outside, in his works; to the contrary, he also wants to be known as he is inwardly; internally he is one essence and three Persons, the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and not three gods; thus we pray only to one God. How can that be? It is ineffable; in their joy the beloved angels themselves cannot sufficiently rejoice at this; to us however it is grasped and proclaimed in the Word.*³³⁶

Using his conversation analogy, Luther argues that St. John "affirmed clearly and distinctly that God is a Word and that this Word is with God,[and] yes, is God Himself."³³⁷ No one knows who God is "unless the Son, who is acquainted with the Father's innermost thoughts, reveals it to him."³³⁸ Christ, as the Son of God, must disclose this knowledge to us as the incarnate Word. In fact, He was sent for this very purpose, as indicated in John 1:18.³³⁹

³³³ LW 22:11.

³³⁴ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 294.

³³⁵ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 336.

³³⁶ WA 49, 238-39, cited from Mattox, "From Faith to the Text and Back Again: Martin Luther on the Trinity in the Old Testament," 288.

³³⁷ LW 22:7.

³³⁸ LW 22:158.

³³⁹ LW 22:7.

3.2 Christ Opens the Heaven for Us

How can humans know who God is? According to Althaus, it is through the Son of God “who stands on the earth—and it is here on earth,” we may have “the knowledge of God himself.”³⁴⁰ The coming of Christ is always God’s plan, as prophesied in the Old Testament and testified by John the Baptist in the New Testament. Christ’s incarnation serves not only to atone for humanity but also to reveal God to us as the Word of God.³⁴¹ Without Christ being sent to us, we do not know the true God.

3.2.1 The Word of God is Sent from Heaven

Based on John 1:51, Luther declares, “When Christ became man and entered upon His preaching ministry, then heaven was opened.”³⁴² However, ever since then, His identity, as presented in the Gospel of John, has been a question constantly raised, not only among the Jews and Gentiles but even by His own disciples. “‘Whence does Christ come?’ This is the question debated and disputed by the whole world,”³⁴³ and it undoubtedly needs to be asked. In his sermon on John 7:27-28, Luther emphasizes this necessity by interpreting this passage as Christ saying: “You do not know at all where I come from, but it is altogether essential for you to know Him who sent Me and to know who I am.”³⁴⁴ The answer to this question is vital for people to know the true God, and Luther believes, “this knowledge is now imparted to the people, as Christ declares: I have not come of My own accord.”³⁴⁵

For Luther, it is imperative to identify the messenger to validate the message they deliver; thus, he states, “I must know where Christ came from.”³⁴⁶ He posits, “You must learn to know him

³⁴⁰ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 186.

³⁴¹ LW 22:157-158.

³⁴² LW 22:201.

³⁴³ LW 22:476.

³⁴⁴ LW 23:245.

³⁴⁵ LW 23:245-246.

³⁴⁶ LW 23:246.

who sends a message and also him who is delegated to convey it. After you have learned this, then accept the message.”³⁴⁷ Following this perspective, he interprets the passage of John 7:28-29 as Christ is declaring: “Whoever fails to acknowledge that God sent Me and that I came from God will also not acknowledge Me as a Preacher. But with him who knows this I can deal and converse, for he will view Me with different eyes. He will accept Me and not regard Me as an ordinary Nazarene.”³⁴⁸ Therefore, in Luther’s view, the message Christ brings is closely tied to His identity.

In Luther’s opinion, “the expression ‘to send’ has the very same connotation that the expression ‘to proceed from’ has”³⁴⁹ relation to the Trinity. Hence, he interprets Christ’s statement, “I know Him because I am from Him and He sent me”(John 7:29), as Christ identifying Himself by stating: “I am of His essence from eternity, as the prophet Micah records (Micah 5:2). I am His only-begotten Son, born of Him from eternity. He also sent Me into the flesh to become incarnate of the Virgin Mary. He delegated Me to be a Preacher and to administer this office.”³⁵⁰ This declaration connects the identity of the messenger to his sender, suggesting that the fact that Christ “is sent by the Father” is the precondition for the validity of God’s revelation in Christ. Thus, from an epistemological point of view, the identity of Christ in the Trinity must be fully recognized, for it is His identity as the Son of God that underpins the entire knowledge He brings.

For this reason, the role of John the Baptist in the Gospel of John is significant in a way distinct from the accounts of the other three evangelists. He not only “proclaimed that another would succeed him, the thongs of whose sandal he was not worth to untie (Mark 1:7),”³⁵¹ but also

³⁴⁷ LW 23:246.

³⁴⁸ LW 23:246.

³⁴⁹ LW 24:365.

³⁵⁰ LW 23:251.

³⁵¹ LW 22:475.

declared that “God becomes true on earth”³⁵² by stating “For He whom God has sent utters the Word of God.” (John 3:34) According to Luther,

*John [the Baptist] continually repeats that the Father sent Him[Christ], yes, sent Him. He emphasizes that Christ was the One truly sent, that no other has been sent in this way, and that His Word is to be accounted valid. Our belief, our trust, our hope must conform to His teaching. John [the Baptist] plays the role of a faithful forerunner; he warns and admonishes that no Word but His and no Ambassador but Him are to be recognized.*³⁵³

For Luther, “it is essential that he who would be a Christian be aware that Christ came from the Father,”³⁵⁴ for, as described by Ngien, it is God’s will that “we are to encounter Him where He wills to be grasped, not in His naked majesty but in the incarnated Christ.”³⁵⁵ The witness of John the Baptist is crucial, for by declaring that “whom God wanted to send and now has sent,”³⁵⁶ he affirms Christ’s identity as the one all the prophets foretold would come.

3.2.2 “The Word became human flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14)

According to Luther, while many people were sent by God as messengers, none are like Jesus Christ.³⁵⁷ In his sermon on John 1:14, in correlation to the phrases “as of the Only-begotten of the Father” and “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,”³⁵⁸ Luther believes it is St. John’s purpose to “set Christ apart from, and exalts Him above, all the patriarchs and prophets.”³⁵⁹ In Luther’s opinion, St. John distinguishes “the only begotten Son of God”³⁶⁰ because “He is not a son of God in the sense in which Abraham and David are sons of God”³⁶¹ and “His death was not like

³⁵² LW 22:475.

³⁵³ LW 22:486.

³⁵⁴ LW 22:246.

³⁵⁵ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 37-38.

³⁵⁶ LW 22:485.

³⁵⁷ LW 22:484.

³⁵⁸ LW 22:115-16.

³⁵⁹ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 25.

³⁶⁰ LW 22:117.

³⁶¹ LW 22:117.

that of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Moses, or others [as well].”³⁶² Unlike other messengers, He is the Word that “is called the Son.”³⁶³ In Luther’s words, “He alone is that, and no one else.”³⁶⁴ For this reason, His message is also different. As Nigen suggests, “intrinsic to the power of witness is a correspondence between identity and office. The identity, that Christ is God’s Son, knows the depth of God’s will and wisdom and of the Father’s counsel, constituting the basis of his testimony.”³⁶⁵ His identity signifies that His coming aims to deliver a kind of knowledge that He alone can bring.

In Luther’s opinion, “this is a new message. From it we gather the Father’s will and learn how to do the will of God.”³⁶⁶ Although the Law, as “outward order is admittedly also the will of God,”³⁶⁷ Christ does not come to deliver the knowledge of the Law. Rather, “His [message] is a sermon that bears witness solely of things not seen and heard in law books or anywhere else in the world. It testifies of something that no one has seen.”³⁶⁸ According to Luther’s sermon on John 6:38-39,

Here Christ is heard to say that He has come. Why? For the sake of works and the Law of Moses? That you might be obedient to parents and to government? Were you not familiar with this before? Even the heathen know this. No, Christ did not come into the world for that purpose; He came for the sake of something far more exalted than good works. Even before the advent of Christ good works and laws had been abundantly defined and commanded by Moses, and it was entirely superfluous for Christ to become incarnate in order to preach on this subject. The heathen, too, wrote books on the doctrine of good works. Therefore Christ refers here to a different will of God the Father; a will that treats extensively of different matters. It is a will of God other than obedience to the Ten Commandments and the preaching of the Law.³⁶⁹

³⁶² LW 22:486.

³⁶³ LW 22:115.

³⁶⁴ LW 22:115.

³⁶⁵ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 59.

³⁶⁶ LW 23:62.

³⁶⁷ LW 23:62.

³⁶⁸ LW 22:466.

³⁶⁹ LW 23:62.

As Luther illustrates in his sermon on John 3:32, “His sermon is to be a testimony of the Father’s attitude, of His plan for mankind’s salvation and redemption from sin, death, and the power of the devil. To this He bears witness. He submits to becoming man and to dying. He rises again from the dead and says: ‘My words bear witness to this. If you believe this testimony and these works, then you believe the witness of God.’”³⁷⁰ Christ’s coming is to give us the knowledge of the Gospel.

From an epistemological perspective, Christ’s incarnation demonstrates God’s intention for humanity. As pointed out by Althaus, “when Luther leads us to look at the man Jesus, he is not concerned with showing us that Jesus is God but with showing us what He is, that is, with giving us certainty about the character and the heart of God.”³⁷¹ The knowledge of the Law does not contain this because “God opens his personal being to us only in the man person of Jesus.”³⁷² In Luther’s opinion, without Christ, human reason would only “hear God’s fearful threats and the terrible sentence He pronounces on sinners.”³⁷³ They cannot “conclude that He will be gracious to me” because humans judge solely based on their “own notions and feeling, which also have their basis in the Law.”³⁷⁴ As a result, they can only regard “Him as an angry Judge and flee from Him.”³⁷⁵ However, as Lohse states, “in the earthly Jesus the believing observer should clearly see how God acts. Only in Jesus is this manner of the divine activity knowable. In him, in his person work, God reveals his whole fatherly heart.”³⁷⁶ God does not intend “to destroy and reject”³⁷⁷ humanity; if so,

³⁷⁰ LW 22:466.

³⁷¹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 185.

³⁷² Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 191.

³⁷³ LW 24:61.

³⁷⁴ LW 24:61.

³⁷⁵ LW 24:61.

³⁷⁶ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 224-25.

³⁷⁷ LW 23:62.

there is no need to send the Son as the incarnate Word to provide them salvation and accurate knowledge of Himself.³⁷⁸

Furthermore, this implies the message Christ conveys is closely tied not only to His identity but also to the work He accomplished on earth. According to Luther, knowing who God is means to know that

*He is not at all inclined to enjoy anger and condemnation; nor does it please Him if we flee from Him. He did not institute the Law—though it is intended to work knowledge of sin and to terrify the impenitent—to perpetuate the fear of those who recognize their sins and are frightened. No, His real purpose and will is that you be rescued from all this misery, from sin, death, and damnation. For this purpose He sent you His Son Christ. He permits Him to be crucified and to shed His blood, in order to proclaim and to reveal to you that though you are a sinner and unworthy, you are not to be condemned on this account. He will erase all anger and threats from His memory for Christ’s sake and, instead, grant a full measure of mercy. He does not demand any more from you than that you recognize and believe this.*³⁷⁹

Christ’s crucifixion as the incarnate Son of God indicates that He is not only the messenger but also the very message itself. As noted by Althaus,

*Because Jesus Christ is the Son of the Father, his activities in relationship to men are nothing else than what the Father himself wills and does. Therefore his activity is the basis on which we know the will of the Father. Since this certainty about the Father’s will is so decisive for Luther’s understanding of salvation, everything ultimately rests on the will and the attitude toward men that is made known through Jesus’ coming and activity.*³⁸⁰

Christ’s identity and His actions on earth are the core of the message He delivers. For this reason, Luther asserts, “He[God] does not want us to look to Moses or John the Baptist or to others who, indeed, were also sent, who had great commissions and did and accomplished much. But none of them was sent to bring and give eternal life by the knowledge of himself. Only Christ did this.”³⁸¹ It is only when people recognize the identity of Christ that they can acknowledge the salvation He brings for us.

³⁷⁸ LW 23:62.

³⁷⁹ LW 24:61.

³⁸⁰ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 184.

³⁸¹ LW 69:41.

In this perspective, “According to Luther, this also means that the knowledge of God’s metaphysical attributes is not ultimately decisive for a man who is seeking salvation; the ultimate decisive factor is knowledge of God’s personal nature and activity.”³⁸² Salvation lies in knowing who God is as revealed through the work of Christ. As suggested by Barth, “God, as becomes evident in Christ, is not the severe judge and executioner who must be presumed by the conscience oppressed by the Law, but the Father who himself creates reconciliation.”³⁸³ The work of Christ “pictures God as kindly disposed to us and banishes all lightning, thunder, hail, yes[...], all wrath and disfavor of God. It reveals God’s gracious resolve that all who see the Son and believe in Him shall be preserved, saved, and well supplied.”³⁸⁴ This is the assurance the mariners in the Book of Jonah sought in the storm but ultimately lacked, for this kind of knowledge can only be found in the Son of God, who is the incarnate Word.

For Luther, Christ’s work on earth is the reality of God’s salvation plan to us. For this reason, “whoever is drawn into the realm of God’s Son is also drawn into the proximity the Son has with the Father, and therefore really knows God in an evangelical sense.”³⁸⁵ According to Luther,

*Behold, the fruit of the Word is that wherever it is received and kept, one gains a knowledge of all the grace and blessings that the heavenly Father has given us through Christ and is able to delight in and rely on them—a knowledge that neither human reason nor wisdom, nay, not even the preaching of the Law, is able to grant. This is the true bright light and glory, when God is seen before our very eyes, with unveiled face, without any covering or veil, as St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3 [:18].*³⁸⁶

Different from the knowledge of the Law, Christ, as the incarnate Son of God, allows people to know who God is. Thus, Christ, as the messenger and the message of the Father, must be known; otherwise, the true God is lost. In summary, to have the knowledge of the Gospel is to know Christ.

³⁸² Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 191.

³⁸³ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 115.

³⁸⁴ LW 23:63.

³⁸⁵ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 35.

³⁸⁶ LW 69:59.

3.2.3 The Son and the Father Cannot Be Separated

Luther posits that “God is seen properly only in Christ.”³⁸⁷ This indicates that, beyond merely acknowledging God’s existence and His capacity to save you from the storm, you can know God’s intention toward you and be sure of His salvation. Unlike the mariners in the Book of Jonah, you have a definite God. According to Luther,

*All this is accomplished by the Word, wherever it is received, so that people know that Christ has come from God and was sent by Him, that is, that everything He says is God’s Word and will, and whatever He does and accomplishes is the Father’s work and command—and all of this is for our benefit. For this is the knowledge in which (as He said above) [on John 17:3] eternal life consists. But it is a treasure hidden to the whole world, so that it can never attain it, and a knowledge that no earthly reason or wisdom can obtain, which indeed cannot be attained by any means save through the Word of Christ.*³⁸⁸

For this reason, Luther believes “if you want to be certain what God in heaven thinks of you, ...give ear solely to the words of this Christ; for everything is revealed in Him.”³⁸⁹ From the epistemological perspective, “God does not want to be recognized through reason but solely through His Word.”³⁹⁰ Hence, we dare “not to know anything of God or to recognize Him without first hearing this Man and accepting His message.”³⁹¹ Knowing Christ is the only way to know who God is.

According to Luther’s interpretation, this theme is distinctive in the Gospel of John and appears to be the evangelist’s goal to disclose this truth. In not disputing the significance of the incarnation as the atonement for sin in the thought of St. John,³⁹² Luther nevertheless believes the fact that St. John expresses much less about Mary, Christ’s mother, than other Gospels books is an

³⁸⁷ LW 22:157.

³⁸⁸ LW 69:60-61.

³⁸⁹ LW 24:257.

³⁹⁰ LW 23:367.

³⁹¹ LW 23:368.

³⁹² As presented in LW 22:111, Luther believes in the phrase “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14), John purposely uses the word “flesh” instead of “man” to indicate “its weakness and its mortality.” He is using “flesh” to emphasize “this inexpressible humiliation” that the eternal Son becomes “mortal and subject to the terrible wrath and judgment of God because of the sins of the human race.”

indication that “the incarnation of the true Son of God” is his primary focus in addressing Christ’s nature as both truly man and truly God.³⁹³ In correlation to Paul’s very brief expression about Mary, Luther argues that St. John intends us to “fasten our gaze on the fruit, that is, the Son of God, who made and created all, who is the Light of the world, and who became true man.”³⁹⁴ The identity of Christ as the Son of God thus becomes the focus of discussion of Christ’s incarnation in Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John. In this respect, as Althaus states, “Luther is ultimately concerned not with the relationship of the divine and the human nature but with the relationship of the person of Jesus to the person of the Father. Luther thus takes the deity of Christ and his incarnation more seriously than anyone since the New Testament writers themselves.”³⁹⁵

Without suggesting “the fact of salvation”³⁹⁶ is not essential, Christ, as the incarnate Son of God, clearly serves an epistemological purpose in Luther’s view. For this reason, in this regard, Christ is inseparable from the Father. For Luther, it is clear that

*everywhere in the Gospel Christ Himself relates all His words and deeds to the Father’s will and counsel. He does so in order to bring about the realization and the belief that everything He said and did flowed from the Father’s command and from the Father Himself. Just as His divine essence is also from the Father from eternity, so He shows that He did not assume or devise His own office on His own authority, but that it resulted from the Father’s premeditated and firm counsel. And, as has been stated repeatedly. He does this for the purpose of drawing us to the Father, in order that we may seek, or think of, no other god than Christ or fear the Father as though the Father and Christ were not of one mind.*³⁹⁷

In his opinion, “Christ makes Himself equal with the Father in every respect and speaks as one who is also the same true God since (as we have said) He places eternal life in the knowledge of Himself and of the Father alike, and out of the two makes one and the same knowledge.”³⁹⁸

³⁹³ LW 22:109.

³⁹⁴ LW 22:109.

³⁹⁵ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 191.

³⁹⁶ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 184.

³⁹⁷ LW 24:403.

³⁹⁸ LW 69:33.

From this perspective, Luther considers the phrase “That they may know you, who alone are the true God” in John 17:3 as “one of the true and nobles chief passages of the New Testament,” because here Christ “firmly attaches the Father to Himself in opposition to all who imagine some other God or seek Him elsewhere than in the Lord Christ.”³⁹⁹ In this verse, “the word ‘alone’ is used not because He sets Himself apart from the Father with respect to the divine essence, but rather because He weaves both the Father and Himself together.”⁴⁰⁰ There is only one God to be known because Christ is the incarnate Word, who is called the Son; and because of who He is, the true God can be known. Luther believes “Christ in this passage (John 17:3) weaves and binds together the knowledge of Himself and of the Father, so that the Father is known solely through and in Christ.”⁴⁰¹ Therefore, in his sermon on John 8:19, Luther states, “If you cast it[this bond] to the winds and say with the Jews: ‘Where is Your Father?’ you can be assured that you do not know the Father.”⁴⁰² Once Christ and the Father are understood separately, the true God is lost.⁴⁰³

According to Luther, this explains why “the devil lends help and inspires us to draw a line right down the middle between God and Christ so that we think in two different ways, seeking Christ on the cross but God high above in heaven.”⁴⁰⁴ This division will compel humans to “worry, saying, ‘Who knows what He is thinking up there or what His intention is toward me?’”⁴⁰⁵ This question signifies a loss of the knowledge of the Gospel, because it is typically posed by those who possess only the knowledge of the Law. For this reason, Luther believes

the devil can still stand it when a man grasps only the man Jesus and does not go beyond this. Yes, he even permits the statement that Christ is truly God to be spoken and heard. He struggles, however, to print the chart from joining Christ and the Father so closely and

³⁹⁹ LW 69:34.

⁴⁰⁰ LW 69:34.

⁴⁰¹ LW 69:39.

⁴⁰² LW 23:352.

⁴⁰³ LW 23:352.

⁴⁰⁴ LW 69:52.

⁴⁰⁵ LW 69:52.

*solidly together that it certainly concludes that Christ's word and the Father's word are one and the same word, heart, and will. Hearts that do not understand think, 'Yes, I certainly hear the friendly and comforting words which Christ speaks to the troubled conscience; who knows, however, how I stand with God and in heaven?' This means that such a heart does not unite God and Christ but fabricates one kind of Christ and another kind of God for itself and thus misses the true God, who does not will to be found and grasped any place else than in this Christ.*⁴⁰⁶

As Althaus suggests, the devil would “allow two things to happen”: human beings’ love for “the man Jesus,” and that they are “convinced of the orthodox doctrine of Christ’s eternal deity.”⁴⁰⁷

*For as long as Jesus does not mean more than this to a man, he has not yet found the one true God—and that is what Satan wants to prevent. Christological orthodoxy is not yet true faith in Christ. The knowledge of Christ begins only when the heart sees Christ and the Father as completely one, when it takes them together and thus recognizes and grasps the presence of the Father with his word, heart, will, in the word, heart, will, of Jesus Christ. Such a man becomes completely certain of the heart of God through and for the sake of Jesus.*⁴⁰⁸

Thus, for Luther, the real danger in knowing God is separating the Father and the Son as different kinds of knowledge.

As Luther emphasizes in his sermon on John 17:3, humans who fail to recognize Christ as the One who is sent lose the knowledge of the One who sends Christ.⁴⁰⁹ He considers “separating the Father and Christ or splitting and dividing the man and the Son of God (that is, the one person)” to be “the most wicked trick of the devil.”⁴¹⁰ For this reason, he firmly opposes those people “who begin their teaching up in the heights of heaven and preach about God alone and apart from Christ.”⁴¹¹ He asserts, “whoever does not possess Christ must also lack the right and true God, even if he knows and believes that there is only one true God. For he does not believe in the one who sent

⁴⁰⁶ WA 21,467 cited from Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 189-90.

⁴⁰⁷ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 190.

⁴⁰⁸ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 190.

⁴⁰⁹ LW 69:34.

⁴¹⁰ LW 69:52.

⁴¹¹ LW 69:39.

Christ and through Him gives eternal life.”⁴¹² The Father and the Son cannot be separated, for to know Christ is to have the knowledge of the Gospel.

3.3 The Preservation of the Knowledge of the Gospel

For Luther, as presented by Barth, “What would have been the use of Christ’s coming if reason were wise enough in and of itself [in knowing God]?”⁴¹³ By nature, humans possess only the knowledge of the Law, requiring the Son of God to become flesh and enter the world to reveal the knowledge of the Gospel. However, humans cannot acquire this kind of knowledge on their own. Thus, the Holy Spirit must come.

3.3.1 Christ’s Promise: The Coming of the Holy Spirit

In comparison to the knowledge of the Law, “God is newly and utterly ‘defined’ in Christ; only in him can the true God be known.”⁴¹⁴ For this reason, Luther interprets “I go away” in John 8:21 as “fearful words of Christ.”⁴¹⁵ Alongside Christ’s announcement of His departure in John 7:33, Luther considers these passages as declarations of the punishment to the unbelievers,⁴¹⁶ because Christ’s leaving indicates the disappearance of “proper understanding and knowledge.”⁴¹⁷ More specifically, according to Luther, “We will not know what God is, or what life, righteousness, and salvation are, or how to be redeemed from sin and death. Everything is gone with Christ, and conditions deteriorate or remain as bad as they ever were.”⁴¹⁸ In short, humans will lose the knowledge of the Gospel and thus be unable to know the true God.

⁴¹² LW 69:33-34.

⁴¹³ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 104.

⁴¹⁴ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 115.

⁴¹⁵ LW 23:355.

⁴¹⁶ LW 22:261; 23:355.

⁴¹⁷ LW 22:261.

⁴¹⁸ LW 23:355.

In contrast, for the believers, as presented in John 16:5-7, Christ's return to His sender is for their advantage. In Luther's words, Christ's "death and resurrection will renew everything in heaven and on earth, and will establish a rule in which the Holy Spirit will reign everywhere through the Gospel and your [Christians'] ministry."⁴¹⁹ From this perspective, Christ's departure not only indicates the fulfillment of God's salvation but is also for "the Holy Spirit [to] be given,"⁴²⁰ who will sustain the salvation that Christ accomplished and the knowledge He revealed. Thus, although Christ will ascend to heaven, after His physical presence is gone, the Holy Spirit will be sent to the believers and "will glorify Me[Christ] in the world."⁴²¹ In other words, the knowledge of the Gospel will be preserved by the Holy Spirit for them.

However, this does not imply that the Holy Spirit "was not in heaven according to His nature"⁴²² before Christ's ascension; rather, it means "He had not revealed Himself and His work."⁴²³ In Luther's opinion, the Holy Spirit's being sent denotes that He must "be something."⁴²⁴ But "He surely is not the Father, since the Father does not come and is not sent. Nor is He the Son, who has already come and now returns to the Father, and of whom the Holy Spirit will preach and whom He will glorify."⁴²⁵ The Holy Spirit is sent into the world just like Christ, but the work He is to accomplish is distinct. Hence, Luther asserts,

*When Christ refers to the Holy Spirit and says: 'When the Comforter comes' (John 15:26), and 'Whatever He hears He will speak' (John 16:13), and 'He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine' (John 16:14), etc., He proves conclusively that the Holy Spirit is a true Being in the Godhead, that He is Himself a distinct Person who is neither the Father nor the Son.*⁴²⁶

⁴¹⁹ LW 24:334.

⁴²⁰ LW 24:334.

⁴²¹ LW 24:335.

⁴²² LW 23:277.

⁴²³ LW 23:277.

⁴²⁴ LW 24:364.

⁴²⁵ LW 24:364.

⁴²⁶ LW 24:364.

Furthermore, Luther interprets John 15:26 and 16:13 to state that “the Holy Spirit is sent not only by the Father but that He is also sent by, and proceeds from, the Son. Therefore this Listener must be called the Listener of both the Father and the Son, not of the Father alone or of the Son alone.”⁴²⁷ For Luther, this implies “the Holy Spirit has His divine essence not only from the Father but also from the Son,”⁴²⁸ which proves “that the Holy Spirit is not a mere spirit—a creature, for example, or something apart from God and yet given to man by Him, or merely the work of God which He performs in our hearts—but that He is a Spirit who Himself is God in essence.”⁴²⁹ The Holy Spirit is God Himself.

In Luther’s view, Christ’s teaching in the Gospel of John clearly suggests that “the Holy Spirit is true God together with Christ and the Father.”⁴³⁰ As Ngien explains, “Just as the Son comes from within, not outside, the Godhead, as from the Father, so also the Spirit proceeds from within, not outside, the Godhead, as from the Father through the Son’s intercession.”⁴³¹ Thus, Luther believes “the circle is completely closed” among the Trinity as Christ declares, “All that the Father has is Mine and the Holy Spirit will take what is Mine” in John 16:15.⁴³² This passage proves that the Holy Spirit cannot be “a fraction or a particle from the Godhead, for Godhead cannot be dismembered and divided.”⁴³³ Moreover, it indicates “where there is a part[Person], there God Himself is; there the whole Godhead is certainly present.”⁴³⁴

For this reason, regarding the outer work of the Holy Spirit, as Ngien suggests, “as it is with Christ, the same procedure applies to the Holy Spirit. Just as the Son’s operations are the

⁴²⁷ LW 24:365.

⁴²⁸ LW 24:365.

⁴²⁹ LW 24:297.

⁴³⁰ LW 24:372.

⁴³¹ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 190.

⁴³² LW 24:373.

⁴³³ LW 24:373.

⁴³⁴ LW 24:373.

ground of his being God, so also the Spirit's operation are the ground of his being God, neither an intermediary nor a creature."⁴³⁵ His work, as God, from the epistemological perspective, serves a singular purpose. According to Luther, "just as the Holy Spirit takes the divine and eternal essence that is inherent in Him from Christ, so His office and His message cannot but glorify Christ as the Father's eternal Son born of Him from eternity and sent into the world that we might come to the Father through Him and have eternal life."⁴³⁶ The Holy Spirit "will bear witness to Christ,"⁴³⁷ as Christ is the witness of the Father; namely, just as the Son is sent from heaven for us to know the Father, the Holy Spirit is sent from heaven for us to know Christ. In short, He will enable us to have the knowledge of the Gospel.

3.3.2 Teaching the Knowledge of the Gospel

According to Helmer, in Luther's understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, "Christ's *promissio* is matched with the Spirit's work by the way in which the latter is sent by the former to lead the community in the knowledge and truth of Christ."⁴³⁸ This suggests that the knowledge the Holy Spirit imparts is not the knowledge of the Law, but, as Helmer describes, "a mystery transcending creaturely comprehension."⁴³⁹ For Luther, the purpose of the Holy Spirit's coming, as emphasized in John 16:13, is to teach the truth spoken by Christ,⁴⁴⁰ "not of things which reason itself can understand, ordain and teach."⁴⁴¹ In Luther's view,

What knowledge or revelation from the Holy Spirit is necessary to prescribe that a cardinal must sit above a bishop, a bishop above a prince, etc.? Any heathen or non-Christian can do that. For God endowed man with reason with which to reign on earth; that is, it should be competent to establish laws and ordinances touching man's physical life, his eating, drinking, and clothing, and to maintain external discipline and respectable conduct. Such

⁴³⁵ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 190.

⁴³⁶ LW 24:372.

⁴³⁷ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 190.

⁴³⁸ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 190.

⁴³⁹ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 294.

⁴⁴⁰ LW 24:357.

⁴⁴¹ LW 24:362.

*Authority is not restricted to Christians, but it pertains most of all to the heathen and the Turks. For in our capacity as Christians we are not concerned with this, and the office of the Holy Spirit does not deal with it at all.*⁴⁴²

For this reason, in his sermons on the Gospel of John, the distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel is essential for discerning the work of the Holy Spirit. To him, the Holy Spirit need not be sent to teach the knowledge of the Law because it is the kind of knowledge “which reason itself can understand and find.”⁴⁴³

In contrast, as is presented in Luther’s interpretation of John 1:10-11, the world cannot recognize the identity of their Creator because it can only be known “by power from above.”⁴⁴⁴ In Luther’s opinion, the Holy Spirit is sent after Christ “for it is the Spirit’s peculiar function and office to reveal and glorify Christ, to preach Him, and to testify of Him.”⁴⁴⁵ Before the advent of the Holy Spirit, “the old message and the Law were still in effect.”⁴⁴⁶ Under this condition, the best humans could understand about salvation, according to him, is: “If you want to be pious and to be saved, keep the Law.”⁴⁴⁷ However, it remains unknown how humans can adhere to the Law or how those who fail to keep it can attain salvation without good works, because “the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, and Christ was not yet glorified.”⁴⁴⁸ Namely, the knowledge of the Gospel is not known. For Luther, this is why “one must distinguish between the Law and the Gospel,”⁴⁴⁹ as the office of the Holy Spirit is for the world to have the knowledge of the Gospel. In other words, for us to know who Christ is.

⁴⁴² LW 24:175.

⁴⁴³ LW 24:360.

⁴⁴⁴ LW 22:76.

⁴⁴⁵ LW 23:278.

⁴⁴⁶ LW 23:278.

⁴⁴⁷ LW 23:278.

⁴⁴⁸ LW 23:278.

⁴⁴⁹ LW 23:278.

The sole mission of the Holy Spirit is “to glorify Christ.”⁴⁵⁰ To fulfill this mission, it is assured that “his office and his message consist of nothing but glorification of Christ.”⁴⁵¹ According to Luther, “This will be the Holy Spirit’s identifying mark; all His sermons and revelations will show that they are taken from God; they will point to Christ, but they will not be introduced by Him Himself or derived from any other source. For if the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ. He must necessarily eclipse many other lights with His brilliancy.”⁴⁵² In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit is to ensure that people see only Christ. For this reason, Luther conceives “in Christ’s name” (John 14:25) as an indication that the Holy Spirit will be present “wherever Christ is understood, known, and believed.”⁴⁵³ In his words,

*When the dear sun rises in the heavens, all other fires, lights, and stars are obscured by its brightness, and we take no notice of them. Similarly, wherever Christ shines through the message of the Holy Spirit and it becomes known that we have God’s grace and eternal life through Him, then all subsidiary lights that try to point the way to salvation in our night and our darkness must go out of their own accord.*⁴⁵⁴

The Holy Spirit does not “teach us to do good according to the light and understanding of reason and to be saved in this way.”⁴⁵⁵ Instead, He teaches us Christ, so that we may be saved.

In this regard, as Ngien suggests, “the Holy Spirit acquaints us with Christ’s and his Father’s heart, which are one and the same.”⁴⁵⁶ We know we have a gracious God because the Holy Spirit does not reveal Christ and the Father separately, but to enable us to receive Christ’s message. In Luther’s opinion, the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit is to enlighten people to recognize “that the Father’s will is to be found in Christ, that He sent the Son to be heard.”⁴⁵⁷ Since it is the identity

⁴⁵⁰ LW 24:371.

⁴⁵¹ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 196.

⁴⁵² LW 24:371.

⁴⁵³ LW 24:175.

⁴⁵⁴ LW 24:371-72.

⁴⁵⁵ LW 24:372.

⁴⁵⁶ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 207.

⁴⁵⁷ LW 23:229.

of Christ that constitutes the message He delivers, the work of the Holy Spirit is to impart who Christ is. Therefore, Luther believes “the most important words[in John 14:25-26] are ‘in My name’ and ‘all that I have said to you.’”⁴⁵⁸ In these words, Christ fully “describes and circumscribes the office which the Holy Spirit is to administer.”⁴⁵⁹ According to Luther,

*Christ says that it is to be the Holy Spirit’s office to teach Christendom the Word of the Lord Christ and to bring it to mind.... It is not the Holy Spirit’s office to alter Baptism, the Gospel, and the Sacrament, or to institute new laws and ordinances. No, it is His office to deal solely with My[Christ’s] Word, ordinances, and commandments, to implant these in you and to teach you what I[Christ] have said.*⁴⁶⁰

The Holy Spirit enables people to know Christ by making them understand Christ’s Words. As stated in Luther’s sermon on John 16:13, the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of truth, is to “teach the disciples and show them that everything Christ told them is the truth,”⁴⁶¹ ensuring that they are not disturbed by other information. In this manner, “the Spirit works to teach Christians the right knowledge of the Father and of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶²

Based on these descriptions, Luther further states that “the Holy Spirit establishes a wide difference among teachers and gives the right rule by which the spirits are to be tested.”⁴⁶³ Unlike those teachers who “evolve their message from their own reasoning or religious zeal and judgment,” the Holy Spirit “will not speak on His own authority.”⁴⁶⁴ For this reason, “His message will not be a human dream and thought like that of the preachers who speak on their own authority of things which they have neither seen nor experienced,” as St. Paul says in 1 Tim. 1:7.⁴⁶⁵ As Luther suggests in his sermon on John 16:13, “Christ sets bounds for the message of the Holy Spirit

⁴⁵⁸ LW 24:173.

⁴⁵⁹ LW 24:172.

⁴⁶⁰ LW 24:173.

⁴⁶¹ LW 24:357.

⁴⁶² Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 155.

⁴⁶³ LW 24:363.

⁴⁶⁴ LW 24:363.

⁴⁶⁵ LW 24:363.

Himself. He is not to preach anything new or anything else than Christ and His Word. Thus, we have a sure guide and touchstone for judging the false spirits.”⁴⁶⁶ The Holy Spirit, acting as the Listener inside the Trinity and the “Preacher”⁴⁶⁷ outside of it, ensures that we encounter nothing but the true God.

3.3.3 The Spirit and the Word Cannot Be Separated

Luther insists, there is only one way to know the true God, and “it dare not be of the devil or one’s own invention.”⁴⁶⁸ He believes, to prevent humans from knowing the true God, “the devil also cites God’s glory as a pretext, but he does not seek it in one way.”⁴⁶⁹ The devil disrupts individuals through various means, which cause, as Bayer suggests, “one’s own mind and reason can lead only into error, seeking God in those places where He does not allow Himself to be comprehended, and missing the mark in those situations where He does allow Himself to be comprehended.”⁴⁷⁰ Therefore, Luther argues that, for us to know God, “it must be the work and inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the believers.”⁴⁷¹ In his sermons on the Gospel of John, this is the only way for humankind to obtain the knowledge of the Gospel.⁴⁷²

This implies that, different from the Law, Christ’s Word is not attainable by human ability. According to Luther’s sermon on John 7:17, “It is impossible for him[humans] who presumes to play the schoolmaster to understand God’s Word.”⁴⁷³ Without the work of the Holy Spirit, humans cannot have this kind of knowledge. For this reason, he opposes people who insist on relying their own human reason to “interpret Christ’s Word,” claiming that they “will also experience that the

⁴⁶⁶ LW 24:363.

⁴⁶⁷ LW 24:362.

⁴⁶⁸ LW 23:233.

⁴⁶⁹ LW 23:233.

⁴⁷⁰ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 33.

⁴⁷¹ LW 23:233.

⁴⁷² LW 24:174.

⁴⁷³ LW 23:229.

Holy Spirit and heaven are closed to them.”⁴⁷⁴ To know the true God, humans need not only the message of Christ, but also the Holy Spirit to understand it. In Luther’s view, once people attempt to understand His Word solely through their own reason, they will create gods that align with their own perspectives.

For this reason, Luther emphasizes in his sermons on the Gospel of John that, after Christ’s physical departure, the Holy Spirit must come as the Teacher to preserve the Word of Christ through teaching and reminding humanity of what Christ has said.⁴⁷⁵ As Ngien describes, “this is the Holy Spirit’s specific office, by which we can apprehend the content of Christ’s speech and discern all other doctrines.”⁴⁷⁶ The Holy Spirit enables humans to have the knowledge beyond their ability to understand, thereby preserving it from corruption by human works. According to Luther,

*The world has always been filled with lights which people ignite for themselves and by which they think they will go to heaven. But these are not lights; they are only will-o’-the-wisps and phantoms, which divert people from the right road and into perdition. And they will surely have to remain in such a dark night forever if the Holy Spirit does not come with His bright light, which dispels both the false lights and the night, and which brings on the dawn of a beautiful and clear day. Then we will no longer go astray and flit hither and thither because of delusions and doctrines of many kinds, but we will remain on the right and sure road. Then we will know on what terms we are with God and where we are to seek and find our salvation.*⁴⁷⁷

Without the work of the Holy Spirit, humans cannot accurately understand God’s Word, leading to the loss of the knowledge of God. Therefore, “if we are to hold to Christ’s Word,...the Holy Spirit Himself must be present with His revelation.”⁴⁷⁸ For Luther, this is the only way for humans to know the true God.

This also suggests that people cannot know God solely through the Holy Spirit. In Luther’s opinion, “He[Christ] constantly keeps in mind the false spirits and preachers who boastfully claim

⁴⁷⁴ LW 23:229-230.

⁴⁷⁵ LW 24:175.

⁴⁷⁶ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 194.

⁴⁷⁷ LW 24:372.

⁴⁷⁸ LW 24:371.

to have the Holy Spirit as well as others do and allege that what they say has emanated from the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷⁹ The office of the Holy Spirit is to teach, not to produce or become the Word. For this reason, Christ also “makes the Holy Spirit a Preacher” to “prevent one from gaping toward heaven in search of Him,..., and from divorcing Him from the oral Word or the ministry;” but “adhere solely to the Word and to regard it as the only truth.”⁴⁸⁰ Without the Word, humans can only be “wandering aimlessly about”⁴⁸¹ who God really is. As Luther testifies from his personal experience, whenever he strayed from the Scripture to follow his own thoughts, the devil “brings me[him] to the point of not knowing where God is or where I am[he is].”⁴⁸² Thus, he asserts, “Whenever you hear anyone boast that he has something by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and it has no basis in God’s Word, no matter what it may be, tell him that this is the work of the devil. Christ does not bind you to anything but His mouth and His Word.”⁴⁸³ The Holy Spirit would not “inspire” or “communicate” with humans directly without the Word.⁴⁸⁴

Instead, “His message will have substance; it will be the certain and absolute truth, for He will preach what He receives from the Father and from Me[Christ].”⁴⁸⁵ As recorded in John 16:13, “He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak.”⁴⁸⁶ For Luther, this passage suggests that “one should know and learn that He[Holy Spirit] will be in and with the Word, that it will guide us into all truth, in order that we may believe it, use it as a weapon, be preserved by it against all the lies and deception of the devil, and prevail in all trials and

⁴⁷⁹ LW 24:362.

⁴⁸⁰ LW 24:362.

⁴⁸¹ LW 23:173.

⁴⁸² LW 24:362.

⁴⁸³ LW 23:173.

⁴⁸⁴ LW 23:349.

⁴⁸⁵ LW 24:363.

⁴⁸⁶ LW 24:362.

temptations.”⁴⁸⁷ The knowledge of the Gospel can only be obtained through the oneness of God’s Word and Holy Spirit, thus Luther firmly insists that Christ “does not want to see the Holy Spirit divorced from His Word.”⁴⁸⁸

For Luther, this is also the reason that we “can observe and judge” the presence of the Holy Spirit according to “the presence or the absence of My[Christ’s] Word.”⁴⁸⁹ The Word of Christ is “the proper touchstone” to discern the true revelation of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹⁰ “We can declare that it surely does not indicate the presence of the Holy Spirit when a person proclaims his own thoughts and notions and begins to teach in Christendom something apart from or in addition to what Christ taught,”⁴⁹¹ because, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:11, Christ is the “foundation”⁴⁹² of Holy Spirit’s message. This also implies humans could only “obtain the Holy Spirit”⁴⁹³ by adhering to His Word. Only those who accept Christ’s Word and regard everything He said “as the truth”⁴⁹⁴ will experience the Holy Spirit “come through My[His] words”⁴⁹⁵ to them. Luther believes, wherever Christ’s Word is, “the Holy Spirit is surely inherent in it, and through it illumines the heart and keeps it in the right and certain understanding, with the result that can differentiate and judge all other doctrines clearly and definitely, and can resolutely preserve and defend them.”⁴⁹⁶ Therefore, this oneness is the identification of the knowledge of the Gospel.

⁴⁸⁷ LW 24:362.

⁴⁸⁸ LW 23:173.

⁴⁸⁹ LW 24:176.

⁴⁹⁰ LW 24:177.

⁴⁹¹ LW 24:363.

⁴⁹² LW 24:371.

⁴⁹³ LW 23:173.

⁴⁹⁴ LW 23:368.

⁴⁹⁵ LW 23:368.

⁴⁹⁶ LW 24:320.

3.4 Where is God?

The work of the Triune God ensures a singular pathway for humans to know the one true God. As is evident in Luther's distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel, "no one should approach and communicate with our Lord by means of mere thoughts."⁴⁹⁷ Those who seek God apart from the Word, exist in "sheer blindness and error, for they attempt to apprehend our Lord God with their phantasies and ideas."⁴⁹⁸ This observation reveals humanity's inherent inability to recognize the correct way to know God. Therefore, while the knowledge of the Gospel has been conveyed to the world, how people obtain it remains a question.

3.4.1 Philip's Question

In John 14:8, the apostle Philip made a request that, for Luther, highlights "the profound question which has always troubled the greatest and wisest men, which they pondered and explored painstakingly but no one had been able to answer, which, in fact, is impossible for human nature and reason to answer, namely: 'What is God? How can one know God? How can one find Him?'"⁴⁹⁹ Here, Luther posits, the Gospel of John provides an unusual answer through "an interacting expression."⁵⁰⁰ Instead of responding to Philip's "show us the Father"(John 14:8) request by presenting the Father directly, Christ "reverse the order and make it read: 'The Father points you to Me; He shows you Christ; He testifies of Me; You must heed Him and observe My words and My testimony.'"⁵⁰¹ Based on Luther's interpretation of John 14:8-9, this suggests that "The Father shows Christ to us"⁵⁰² represents the only epistemological way for humans to know the true God.

⁴⁹⁷ LW 23:367.

⁴⁹⁸ LW 23:368.

⁴⁹⁹ LW 24:56.

⁵⁰⁰ LW 23:54.

⁵⁰¹ LW 23:346.

⁵⁰² LW 23:346.

Luther contends that St. John's intention has always been for us to learn that "when we hear the words of this Man Christ, then we hear the Divine Majesty Itself."⁵⁰³ According to Luther,

This[The] sublime article of faith about the one divine essence and the three Persons in it is little known. That Christ is true God and true man, that two natures dwell in the Person of Christ, the human and the divine — this is too profound for reason to fathom. No doctor or worldly-wise person has ever been able to explain this, but all are offended by it. And those who have assailed this article of faith in an effort to dispossess Christ of His divinity have been made to look foolish because of it. But the evangelist John treats this subject differently. He does not place the Son upon the earth alone and leave the Father alone in heaven. No, he bakes the two persons, the Father and the Son, together as solidly as possible.⁵⁰⁴

For this reason, as Lohse points out, "If Christ is not God, then neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit is God, because our article reads that Christ is God."⁵⁰⁵ Since "the Trinity is comprehended in the Son,"⁵⁰⁶ the failure to recognize Him leads to an incorrect understanding of God. From this perspective, Philip's inquiry actually presents a critical human dilemma: despite Jesus being present among them the entire time, they still did not know who He is.

3.4.2 Beyond Human Ability to Know

For humans to know the triune God, as suggested by Helmer, "the symmetry between the inner and outer sides [of the Trinity] is established by the Christological center. At both locations, the Christological center assures that the God in eternity is the same God who works life through the death of Christ."⁵⁰⁷ Luther believes "if you take hold of Him, you have all; you have taken hold of the entire Godhead."⁵⁰⁸ Conversely, when people fail to know Christ, "they have lost a proper comprehension of all doctrines, which the result that they cannot teach anything about them that is right and can no longer preserve any doctrine as unquestionable."⁵⁰⁹ However, "acknowledging

⁵⁰³ LW 23:64.

⁵⁰⁴ LW 23:54.

⁵⁰⁵ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 234.

⁵⁰⁶ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 76.

⁵⁰⁷ Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, 297.

⁵⁰⁸ LW 23:55-56.

⁵⁰⁹ LW 24:320.

Christ as the Son of God, and His message as the Word of God, is the real stumbling block.... Christ, the Son of Mary on earth, is not to be recognized as the One.”⁵¹⁰ Considering everything Jesus encountered on earth, it is apparent that people cannot recognize Christ’s identity merely by hearing His message.

Unlike the Law, the Gospel is not implanted in human beings. No human reason would conceive “that [the triune] God is Creator of heaven and earth; or that from eternity God begot His only Son; or, that the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Godhead, that God’s Son became man; or that the Christian Church believes in the forgiveness of sins. Therefore the proclamation of Christ’s Gospel had to convey this to us, and the apostles were commanded to proclaim it.”⁵¹¹ However, the sending of the Holy Spirit indicates that the absence of the knowledge of the Gospel is not merely a result of not hearing the Gospel; rather, this knowledge cannot be derived from human reasoning, unlike the knowledge of the Law. This implies that, to know God, human beings must obtain knowledge in an alternative epistemological way.

Human reason can acquire the knowledge of the Law based on the Law; however, with respect to the Gospel, according to Luther,

*Any attempt to fathom and comprehend such statements with human reason and understanding will avail nothing, for none of this has its source in the reason: that there was a Word in God before the world’s creation, and that this Word was God; that, as John says further on, this same Word, the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, rested in the Father’s bosom or heart and became flesh; and that no one else had ever seen or known God, because the Word, who is God’s only-begotten Son, rested in the bosom of the Father and revealed Him to us. Nothing but faith can comprehend this. Whoever refuses to accept it in faith, to believe it before he understands it, but insists on exploring it with his reason and his five senses, let him persist in this if he will.*⁵¹²

The knowledge of the Gospel cannot be obtained through human reason. In fact, those who attempt to acquire it with human reason will ultimately lose it. Hence, Luther states, “reason will never

⁵¹⁰ LW 22:476.

⁵¹¹ LW 22:478.

⁵¹² LW 22:8.

arrive at such a doctrine.”⁵¹³ Although Christ brings the knowledge of the Gospel into the world, human reason remains incapable of accepting it.

For the knowledge of the Gospel is not derived from human reason, it cannot be accepted by human reason as well. As stated by Barth, “Knowledge of the existence of God, and even of the unity of God—that is, monotheism—is rationally achievable, but not the recognition of the triune God who turns to humanity in Law and Gospel.”⁵¹⁴ Even more, according to Luther, human reason “adjudges it false”⁵¹⁵ for it does not consist with human understanding. The natural epistemological process of humans cannot accept the message Christ delivers as a preacher. Hence, for humans to have knowledge of the Gospel, the Triune God not only provides this knowledge to the world but also transforms their ways of knowing. The Holy Spirit, as a preacher, must work differently from Christ, because only those “who by the power of the Holy Spirit looks[look] to Christ will recognize that he is Father as well.”⁵¹⁶ This leads to another essential question: How can humans have this kind of knowledge?

⁵¹³ LW 23:98.

⁵¹⁴ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 104.

⁵¹⁵ LW 23:98.

⁵¹⁶ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 336.

4. The Way to Have the Knowledge of the Gospel

As we have seen, according to Luther's interpretation, the knowledge of the Gospel is conveyed to human beings solely through the work of the triune God. However, as evidenced by the experiences of Christ and John the Baptist, this knowledge exceeds human acceptance, leading to resistance and even execution of its bearers. Thus, in his view, "just as no one reveals this and causes it to be preached except Him, so no one is able to understand or accept this revelation except those who have been given to Him."⁵¹⁷ The knowledge of the Gospel must be perceived in a way different from the knowledge of the Law, but in what kind of way?

4.1 Two Different Ways to Know

The knowledge of the Gospel differs from the knowledge of the Law because the knowledge of the Gospel does not "come from human understanding and choice."⁵¹⁸ Therefore, as Luther distinguishes these two kinds of knowledge based on the limits of human reason, it also indicates that the ways to possess each of them are different.

4.1.1 The Role of Human Reason

In Luther's lectures on the book of Jonah, it may seem that human reason lacks only two major parts in its knowledge of God: God's identity and His intention toward us. But "such appearances are deceiving."⁵¹⁹ As pointed out by Bayer, "if one examines the matter more carefully, one can see that the issue is not that two extra aspects are needed, it is not about quantifiable modifications, but is rather about what is qualitatively different."⁵²⁰ This suggests the knowledge of the Gospel is not simply some information that people lack, but a distinct kind of knowledge. In his

⁵¹⁷ LW 69:50.

⁵¹⁸ LW 69:50.

⁵¹⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 131.

⁵²⁰ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 131.

sermon, Luther interprets John 8:24 as Christ asserting, “If you want to know who I am, then I tell you that, in the first place, I am the one who is now speaking to you. But in your own way you will not apprehend Me; I will not be captured.”⁵²¹ He believes Jesus clearly states here that He cannot be understood in the same way as other knowledge is acquired. According to Luther, “God’s doctrine is not one that can be fathomed by reason; it does not enter the human heart that way.”⁵²² This implies that knowing the true God requires a distinct epistemological process, thereby showing that Luther divides the knowledge of God according to how people possess it.

In certain respects, this division exposes Luther’s appreciation for the role of human reason, as he does not dismiss its contribution to human knowledge. In terms of epistemology, in Lohse’s opinion, “Luther did not develop a theory of cognition comparable to the various views of high or late scholasticism, nor, as at times has been maintained, did he dismiss reason from theology.”⁵²³ As Bayer also suggests, at the beginning of Luther’s *De homine of 1536*, “Luther makes use of the traditional definition of the human being as an animal rationale, which is constructed on a formal level on the basis of the principles of definition set forth by Aristotle.”⁵²⁴ According to this principle, “the human being is that form of life that is able to reason, that has reason,”⁵²⁵ which means the ability to generate and acquire knowledge is what constitutes the definition of humans. In other words, at certain levels, Luther also agrees that the capacity to know could be a criterion for distinguishing human beings from other animals. For him,

it is certainly true that reason is the most important and the highest rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possess in this life. By virtue of this fact it ought to be named the

⁵²¹ LW 23:367.

⁵²² LW 23:91.

⁵²³ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 196.

⁵²⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 174.

⁵²⁵ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 174.

*essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things. Holy Scripture also makes it lord over the earth.*⁵²⁶

Furthermore, as Lohse notes, in his discourse on the creation of man found in *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther considers the gift of *ratio* to be “the greatest and most important gift God has given to humankind.”⁵²⁷ It “gives humans their peculiar position between angels and beasts. In common with angels, humans have the capacity to reflect and understand, by virtue of which they can exist consciously and thus historically. Their *anima* is distinguished from the beasts by the fact that it is *rationalis*.”⁵²⁸ In short, Luther approves that humans are different because God created them to know through their reason.

Indeed, Luther acknowledges the role of human reason in acquiring knowledge. For Luther, the knowledge of the Law is the knowledge of God implanted in human beings as He created them, because human reason is a means God designed for human beings to understand the world. In fact, this is how humans exercise dominion over the world.⁵²⁹ However, ruling the world is not the fundamental purpose of human creation in Luther’s mind. As Bengard notes, “although the human being differs from animals in particular by their reason, it is not reason that constitutes the very essence of their existence.”⁵³⁰ Hence, human reason is not the core difference between God’s creation of humans and animals.

According to Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis*, what distinguishes humans is their capacity to understand God’s Word, which is also why they can receive God’s commands to steward the world in the first place. Other creatures in the world cannot understand God’s Word, namely, they do not

⁵²⁶ LW 34:137.

⁵²⁷ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 244.

⁵²⁸ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 197.

⁵²⁹ LW 34:137.

⁵³⁰ Beate Bengard, “*Imago Dei: God’s Grace and Distance*,” in *Theological Anthropology, 500 Years after Martin Luther: Orthodox and Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Christophe Chalamet et al., Studies in Systematic Theology (Leiden; Boston: BRILL, 2021), 21.

know their Creator and the purpose of their life as human beings do.⁵³¹ This difference, in Luther's mind, shows that humans are created with a specific purpose: to know and worship God.⁵³² However, this ability is not human rationality.⁵³³ In his opinion, human reason still exists and functions after the fall of Adam, but human beings no longer know who they are and their relationships with God.⁵³⁴ The best proof is that humans can still rule the world, but they manage everything "not by the dominion which Adam had but through industry and skill."⁵³⁵ On the one hand, this shift suggests that a kind of knowledge of God has indeed been lost as a result of Adam's fall, thereby altering how humans perceive things. On the other hand, it indicates that the knowledge humans can possess is not limited to knowledge acquired through reason.

Luther differentiates between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel, as he does not regard human reason as the exclusive means of acquiring understanding. Though human reason enables human beings to know, this kind of knowledge has its own scope and specific nature. In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther constantly emphasizes that the message Christ brings us is the knowledge that "takes more than reason and free will to be able to grasp and accept it."⁵³⁶ But he also stresses that the knowledge of the Gospel "is easy to comprehend, no one need[s to] go far afield for it, nor does it involve great effort and hard work. All that is necessary is to accept it in faith and to cling to it with all your heart."⁵³⁷ This suggests that Luther views human reason and faith as different pathways to different kinds of knowledge of God. The inability of human reason to comprehend the knowledge of the Gospel is not due to its complexity but to the fact that the way to acquire it is different from that of the knowledge of the Law.

⁵³¹ LW 1:66-67.

⁵³² LW 1:80.

⁵³³ LW 1:124.

⁵³⁴ LW 34:137-138.

⁵³⁵ LW 1:67.

⁵³⁶ LW 69:50.

⁵³⁷ LW 24:43.

4.1.2 The Position of Faith

The knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel differ in their nature and must be perceived in different ways. These two ways of knowing are described more clearly in Luther's *The Magnificat*. In this commentary, he presents two different divisions of human beings. According to him, "the nature of man consists of the three parts — spirit, soul and body;"⁵³⁸ and "each of these three, and the whole of man" can be categorized as "good or evil" based on its quality.⁵³⁹ Among the three parts of human nature, he regards "the first part, the spirit, is the highest, deepest, and noblest part of man. By it[,] he is enabled to lay hold on things incomprehensible, invisible, and eternal. It is, in brief, the dwelling place of faith and the Word of God."⁵⁴⁰ The second part, the soul, is where human reason exists.⁵⁴¹ He posits that "it is its nature to comprehend not incomprehensible things but such things as the reason can know and understand."⁵⁴² As for the body, "its work is only to carry out and apply that which the soul knows and the spirit believes."⁵⁴³

Luther also employs the tabernacle of Moses as a metaphor to elucidate the distinct functions of these three parts of human nature. In his words,

*In this tabernacle we have a figure of the Christian man. His spirit is the holy of holies, where God dwells in the darkness of faith, where no light is; for he believes that which he neither sees nor feels nor comprehends. His soul is the holy place, with its seven lamps, that is, all manner of reason, discrimination, knowledge, and understanding of visible and bodily things. His body is the forecourt, open to all, so that men may see his works and manner of life.*⁵⁴⁴

⁵³⁸ LW 21:303.

⁵³⁹ LW 21:303. According to Luther's interpretation on Luke 1:46, "Scripture divides man into three parts, as St. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: 'May the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.' There is yet another division of each of these three, and the whole of man, into two parts, which are called 'spirit' and 'flesh.' This is a division, not of the nature of

man but of his qualities. The nature of man consists of the three parts — spirit, soul and body; and all of these may be good or evil, that is, they may be spirit or flesh."

⁵⁴⁰ LW 21:303.

⁵⁴¹ LW 21:303.

⁵⁴² LW 21:303.

⁵⁴³ LW 21:303-304.

⁵⁴⁴ LW 21:304.

In Luther's view, spirit and soul are fundamentally similar in nature because both are concerned with what a person knows. However, the knowledge they possess is different.⁵⁴⁵ According to him, "indeed, reason is the light in this dwelling [of soul]; and unless the spirit, which is lighted with the brighter light of faith, controls this light of reason, it cannot but be in error. For it is too feeble to deal with things divine."⁵⁴⁶ Namely, human beings need to have faith in their spirit to understand what transcends human reason.

It also suggests that human beings cannot find the ultimate truth about God with their ability. For Luther, the knowledge the spirit possesses "consists in nothing else than in faith pure and simple, since the spirit has nothing to do with things comprehensible."⁵⁴⁷ As Lohse elaborates, "to some extent, reason and faith exist in humans at different levels."⁵⁴⁸ Human reason can generate knowledge that is understandable by its own ability; in contrast, as Luther characterizes in his *Lectures on the Romans*, faith is a knowledge "of the invisible things and the things which must be believed."⁵⁴⁹ According to him, "it is an understanding in concealment because it deals with those things which a man cannot know of himself."⁵⁵⁰ In this way, Luther distinguishes between the knowledge possessed by faith and that attained through human reason. Whether a person knows God does not depend on his rational ability, but on whether he has faith in his spirit, that is, whether he believes in God. Therefore, the knowledge of the Gospel is not achieved through perfected human reason but received by faith.

This indicates that humans are fundamentally distinct from other animals, not because of human reason but because they can worship God through having knowledge that exceeds their own

⁵⁴⁵ LW 21:303.

⁵⁴⁶ LW 21:303.

⁵⁴⁷ LW 21:304.

⁵⁴⁸ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 201.

⁵⁴⁹ LW 25:224.

⁵⁵⁰ LW 25:224.

understanding. This distinction illustrates how Luther's epistemology diverges from Aristotelian scholasticism. Since he does not regard human rationality as the foundational premise for defining humanity, the certainty of the knowledge of God for him does not rest on human cognitive ability. As Dragseth posits, Luther presents "an alternative path to Truth than what scholasticism, nominalism, or humanism offered. The possibility of real knowledge, for Luther, is founded on faith given by the inner teacher that is Christ, the Truth herself, the friendly, merciful, and relentless teacher."⁵⁵¹ Consequently, the knowledge of the Gospel does not involve human reason, for it is not its faculties. According to Luther,

We stated that he who desires to know anything for sure must begin by believing. In other sciences and arts it is true that a person acquires learning by hearing and observing much. But in theology and in godly wisdom neither hearing nor observing profits, neither exploring nor groping about. No, we must begin by believing the Word of God. Whoever fails to do so will miss the mark. He will accomplish nothing, nor will he preach correctly even though he had a mastery of all the world's wisdom. If you want to become learned in spiritual and divine matters, here is the beginning: Believe the Word of God.⁵⁵²

Luther's perspective on knowing God highlights a fundamental distinction between faith and human reason. He argues that if humans can know God through their reason, the Apostle "John should have said: 'God gives the Law, and truth proceeds from the fact that we keep it by our own strength.'"⁵⁵³ However, God sent His Son to convey a new message, and John 6:44 clearly suggests that, to receive salvation, humans cannot analyze His Word with human reason to "arrive at a judgment and say: 'This is surely correct; methinks this is right.'"⁵⁵⁴ The knowledge of the Gospel is not obtained through human reason. Therefore, it is essential to properly distinguish between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel. Once these two are conflated, the distinction between faith and reason becomes obscured, making it impossible for people to understand both God and themselves accurately.

⁵⁵¹ Dragseth, "Friendly Grace. The Augustinian Roots of Luther's Epistemology," 149-50.

⁵⁵² LW 23:233.

⁵⁵³ LW 22:145.

⁵⁵⁴ LW 23:84.

4.1.3 Two Different Pathways to the Knowledge of God

For Luther, a distinction must be made between knowledge accessible to human reason and knowledge that surpasses its capabilities, because God cannot be known in the same way humans know everything else. According to Lohse, in *The Bondage of the Will*, “Luther expanded the remark so as to distinguish God and humanity in relation to creation and nature. In the last analysis, even for humans before the fall, God is absolutely incomprehensible in omnipotence and righteousness.”⁵⁵⁵ God is different from humans, so even as Adam was perfectly flawless, he still needed faith to know God, that is, to understand God’s will through trusting God’s Word. As God’s prohibition regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil shows, humans inherently need divine instruction for appropriate worship and gratitude.⁵⁵⁶ Neither Adam nor Eve understood why God forbade them to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They could only believe in God’s Word and be content with it.⁵⁵⁷ In Luther’s eyes, such acceptance reflects a trust in God’s goodness, because it was not Adam’s reason that discovered anything wrong about the fruit of this tree, but simply because this prohibition was God’s Word.⁵⁵⁸ It suggests that, from the very beginning, the knowledge of God includes a kind of knowledge beyond human comprehension, which God must impart to humanity through His Word, and that man must accept it by faith.

Follow this perspective, Luther interprets John 6:43-44 to state that consulting our reason to discern what Christ has said “is not the correct way and method to follow in coming to Me[Him].”⁵⁵⁹ He asserts that, to know the true God,

one must rely solely on the testimony which Jesus Christ, God’s Son, brought down from heaven and believe it. This Christians do. They could, of course, make much of the revelation and visions of God. But they listen only to the testimony of this Man and believe

⁵⁵⁵ Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 197.

⁵⁵⁶ LW 1:154.

⁵⁵⁷ LW 1:157.

⁵⁵⁸ LW 1:154.

⁵⁵⁹ LW 23:84.

*Him. They accord Him the honor of declaring that it is all certainly true, even though it contradicts reason and sense. In God's name they wager everything on this testimony.*⁵⁶⁰

This is how Christians come to know God. They trust God's Word above all else, including their own opinions and thoughts. As Zachman describes, "faith trusts in the truth of the testimony of God even when it means that the testimony of the believer's own heart and conscience must be a lie."⁵⁶¹ Only when people value God's Word above their own judgment can they possess the knowledge of the Gospel.

It means that human reason must be bypassed for humans to receive the knowledge of the Gospel. According to Luther, people must accept what Christ says about Himself "with eyes closed," "for it is impossible for the human mind and reason to grasp even the least article of faith."⁵⁶² As much as Luther does not deny the knowledge of the Law and the cognitive ability of human reason, he asserts that human reason is unable to accept knowledge that is beyond its inherent capacity. In this respect, in Luther's view,

*reason errs by not adhering to the words [of Christ] but putting them out of sight and clearing them from consideration, meanwhile going over and around them. It refuses simply to believe that the words are true but wants also to fathom and comprehend how it all happens or is possible. And since it is unable to comprehend this, it falls away and forms its own thoughts and distorts and interprets the words in accordance with its own invention.*⁵⁶³

Consequently, human reason opposes the knowledge of the Gospel, for it cannot process this kind of knowledge, indicating that human reason is constrained by the knowledge of the Law in considering who God is.

According to Luther, "reason, even at its best cannot rise and higher than to conclude that it must serve Him with works and do enough that He will be pleased in the world."⁵⁶⁴ He argues

⁵⁶⁰ LW 22:322-323.

⁵⁶¹ Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 60-61.

⁵⁶² LW 69:31.

⁵⁶³ LW 69:32.

⁵⁶⁴ LW 69:49.

that “natural reason and human wisdom cannot transcend that viewpoint. According to their process of reasoning, we must rely on our own strength.”⁵⁶⁵ In this way, as Luther suggested in his sermon on John 17:3, based on the knowledge of the Law, human reason could only understand “proper righteousness of work,” but it cannot “make anyone a Christian.”⁵⁶⁶ Thus, Luther posits that, in this passage, Christ separates the knowledge acquired by human works from the knowledge that “we receive and take in.”⁵⁶⁷ For Luther, as he states,

*This is why I hold this passage (John 17:3) dear, because it so clearly and plainly excludes all works and leaves them here below by speaking of knowledge alone. For what kind of a work is knowing? It means neither tasting, vigils, mortifying the flesh, nor anything that can be done or differed with the body; but it is something entirely internal, lying in the deepest recesses of the heart. In sum, knowledge is not a work but precedes all works.*⁵⁶⁸

This suggests the knowledge of the Gospel is inherently independent of human endeavor. It does not come from human effort, nor can it be accepted through human effort.

Once people use their own reason to assess the knowledge of the Gospel, they will confuse it with the knowledge of the Law, leading them to find a God based on their own views. As Luther describes in his *Lectures on Romans*, those who seek God yet remain unteachable are comparable to those who have no interest in seeking God because they seek God “by their work and their word.”⁵⁶⁹ They cannot accept “the voice of God”⁵⁷⁰ because it “speaks contrary to their thinking (which seems to them to be righteous and wise and completely filled with God).”⁵⁷¹ They “picture Him to themselves in the way they want Him to be,” ultimately leading them to deny the existence of God as described in Psalm 14:1.⁵⁷² Therefore, how the knowledge of God is acquired needs to be

⁵⁶⁵ LW 22:145.

⁵⁶⁶ LW 69:38.

⁵⁶⁷ LW 69:39.

⁵⁶⁸ LW 69:38-39.

⁵⁶⁹ LW 25:225.

⁵⁷⁰ LW 25:225.

⁵⁷¹ LW 25:226.

⁵⁷² LW 25:225.

carefully defined, because the distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel also determines the way to acquire them.

By dividing the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel according to the limitations of human reason, Luther also draws a line between the ways to acquire them. Since reason and faith reside in different parts of human nature, an individual may possess the knowledge of the Gospel, but he can only be given this kind of knowledge. According to Althaus, “Luther asserts this in opposition not only to man’s speculation about God but also to all of man’s attempts to take the initiative in finding God. It is thus directed also against the other religions and, beyond that, against every attempt by Christians autonomously to construct a picture of God on the basis of their own thoughts.”⁵⁷³ For Luther, seeking to know God through human reason is a human work. Hence, in his lecture on Psalm 110:1, he states,

*Among Christians the rule is not to argue or investigate, not to be a smart aleck or a rationalistic know-it-all; but to hear, believe, and persevere in the Word of God, through which alone we obtain whatever knowledge we have of God and divine things. We are not to determine out of ourselves what we must believe about Him, but to hear and learn it from Him. No one but He Himself knows Him as He is; no one can speak as accurately and eloquently of Him as He does Himself. For this reason it is fitting that we honor Him by conceding the truth of what He tells us, and refrain from any attempt to have our speculative reason make corrections in Him and in His Word.*⁵⁷⁴

The knowledge of the Gospel differs from the knowledge of the Law, for it can only be received through faith, not understood by reason. In essence, it is God who allows humans to know Him, not humans who find God.

4.2 Trust in Yourself or Trust in God

The ways to acquire the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel are different, and Luther believes the two should not be confused. Humans cannot acquire the knowledge of the Gospel through their effort, because human reason and faith reside in different parts of human beings.

⁵⁷³ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 23.

⁵⁷⁴ LW 13:237.

Human reason is irrelevant to possessing faith. Thus, whether a person is guided by faith in God's Word or relies on their own reasoning becomes the key to knowing God. In other words, it depends on whether they trust in themselves or in God.

4.2.1 The Relation Between Knowing God and Good and Evil

From Luther's viewpoint on human nature, besides the knowledge gained through reason, human beings should also have the knowledge gained by faith in their spirit. Humans are designed to be guided by knowledge that transcends human reason, and whether this kind of knowledge resides in one's heart determines their state (quality). Luther posits, "[on the one hand], when this spirit that possesses the whole inheritance is preserved, both soul and body are able to remain without error and evil works. On the other hand, when the spirit is without faith, the soul together with the whole life cannot but fall into wickedness and error, however good an intention and opinion it may profess, and find in that its own devotion and satisfaction."⁵⁷⁵ For Luther, "Man is justified by faith."⁵⁷⁶ Thus, from an epistemological perspective, as stated by Dragseth, "both Augustine and Luther find Aristotle's epistemology highly problematic. According to Aristotle, the philosopher is on her own with only intellect to guide her as she seeks to understand the nature of things, which both Luther and Augustine regard as a wretched state."⁵⁷⁷

In Luther's sermon on John 6:45-46, he states: "To be sure, both the evil and the good hear the Word from Christ's lips; but the former do not learn it. If you regard it as God's Word and accept it, however, then you have learned it from God. The others rationalize; or, at best, they convert Baptism, faith, and the Lord's Supper into nothing but Law and commandment."⁵⁷⁸ Whether people rely on their own abilities or believe in God's Word to make judgments, for Luther, is the difference between good and evil. Because, as pointed out by Zachman, "faith gives glory to God by

⁵⁷⁵ LW 21:305.

⁵⁷⁶ LW 34:139.

⁵⁷⁷ Dragseth, "Friendly Grace. The Augustinian Roots of Luther's Epistemology," 140.

⁵⁷⁸ LW 23:99.

reckoning God to be true in the Word”⁵⁷⁹; and the righteous would give God the glory that is rightfully His.⁵⁸⁰ In Luther’s sermon on John 17, glorifying God is synonymous with believing what has been revealed through Christ’s Word, so that God is known and honored according to His will.⁵⁸¹ “Faith therefore persists God to be God’s own truthful witness concerning God’s will toward us and refuses to determine of itself what it should think about God.”⁵⁸² In Luther’s opinion, this is the original state of human epistemology before Adam’s fall.

Human beings are created to be guided by knowledge that transcends their ability to understand. As Luther explains in his sermon on John 6:41-42, just as servants may not understand the reasoning behind the master’s commands and plans, they should still follow his instruction, humans should also “give honor to Him” by acknowledging His speaking.⁵⁸³ However, in the Garden of Eden, people fell by insisting God to clarify the purpose of His doctrine.⁵⁸⁴ Luther views this as the original form of the sin committed by Adam and Eve. According to his *Lectures on Genesis*, before the fall, Adam understood everything with his reason guided by faith in God’s Word. The serpent, however, encouraged humans to assess God’s commands with their own reason rather than trusting in His Word.⁵⁸⁵ From Luther’s perspective, the prohibition regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can be accepted only by faith, because it transcends human understanding. Nevertheless, this is precisely why the serpent exploited this command to tempt humanity. Eve was tempted to wonder whether this command truly reflected God’s will, and

⁵⁷⁹ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 60.

⁵⁸⁰ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 60.

⁵⁸¹ LW 69:24,69.

⁵⁸² Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 60.

⁵⁸³ LW 23:80.

⁵⁸⁴ LW 23:80-81.

⁵⁸⁵ LW 1:154.

unbelief stems from her failure to submit her reason to God's Word. Therefore, Luther believes that humans' reliance on their own reason is the root of all temptations.⁵⁸⁶

The purpose of the serpent's temptation is to cause humans to determine what God's will should be based on their own reasoning rather than on God's Word. In Luther's opinion, this is a tactic that Satan continues to employ even today, for it is "the greatest and severest of all temptations."⁵⁸⁷ Once human beings stop trusting in God's Word, they are deciding what God should be like and how He should be worshipped. In doing so, they lose the true God. Although they can sense the existence of God, they cannot know Him because "they try to reason it out."⁵⁸⁸ Consequently, "in their madness each one seeks to find God in a different way. Today they hit upon this idea, tomorrow on that. But it is all useless."⁵⁸⁹ According to Bayer, the person who has his "faith rooted in reason"⁵⁹⁰ will not "arrive at the goal of his faith act."⁵⁹¹ He "certainly seeks what is right, but he gropes around instead and always misses the mark in his delusion."⁵⁹² In Bayer's view, "this missing of the mark" encapsulates Adam's sin. Namely, "one tries to be like God."⁵⁹³

For Luther, as suggested by Althaus, seeking God apart from the way God assigned is "human self-reliance and arbitrariness which insists on dealing with God on the basis of man's own ideas rather than obediently meeting him at the place which he has appointed."⁵⁹⁴ This is what Adam and Eve attempted to do—seeking God's will apart from His Word, resulting in humanity losing the knowledge of the one true God. Then, according to Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*, it is not

⁵⁸⁶ LW 1:154.

⁵⁸⁷ LW 1:146.

⁵⁸⁸ LW 22:322.

⁵⁸⁹ LW 22:322.

⁵⁹⁰ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 134.

⁵⁹¹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 135.

⁵⁹² Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 135.

⁵⁹³ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 135.

⁵⁹⁴ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 23.

surprising that humans commit various sins, because “unbelief is the source of all sins.”⁵⁹⁵ Losing faith in God’s Word means that humans have replaced God with themselves, leading to “the overthrow or the violation of the entire Decalog.”⁵⁹⁶ Thus, for Luther, it is proved that the consequence of Adam and Eve’s fall is the inability of human reason to obey God’s Word and will.⁵⁹⁷ The epistemological process has changed since Adam’s Fall; although people retain the knowledge of the Law, they no longer believe in God but in their own reason. In this way, “reason entices people away from listening to God’s word and thus betrays them.”⁵⁹⁸

As Luther describes in *The Magnificat*, the qualities of human nature depend on whether they have faith in God’s Word.⁵⁹⁹ Without such faith indicates that the whole person, “in their[his] thinking, willing, and acting” is “prejudiced and unfree.”⁶⁰⁰ In this state, “reason works as a seducer”⁶⁰¹ because the knowledge that does not lead one to Christ would lead him to look at himself.⁶⁰² This suggests that the way people perceive things determines the qualities of their nature. As Ludwig notes, “Luther did not build theology on an anthropology that regarded the intellect as more closely related to the divine than the body. Similar to Paul, he preferred a theological distinction between ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’. For Luther, ‘spirit’ meant human nature insofar as God’s Spirit led it, and ‘flesh’ meant human nature insofar as it lacked God’s Spirit and was thus curved in upon itself.”⁶⁰³ This self-reliance in their epistemological process indicates they are

⁵⁹⁵ LW 1:147.

⁵⁹⁶ LW 1:147.

⁵⁹⁷ LW 1:141.

⁵⁹⁸ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 405.

⁵⁹⁹ LW 21:304.

⁶⁰⁰ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 405.

⁶⁰¹ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 405.

⁶⁰² LW 24:62.

⁶⁰³ Frieder Ludwig, "Natural Theology," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 534-35.

actually replacing God with themselves, which means, since Adam sinned, humans no longer have a correct understanding of God and themselves.

4.2.2 The Consequence of Adam's Sin: False Self-assessment

The distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel, as seen in Luther's work on Genesis and the Gospel of John, suggests that the way humans acquire knowledge differed after Adam's fall, because humans no longer possess "knowledge about what God is, what grace is, what righteousness is, and finally what sin itself is."⁶⁰⁴ In Luther's sermon on the Gospel of John, there are only two outcomes when humans possess only the knowledge of the Law. They either believe that "they can keep it by their own power and strength," then "grow presumptuous and proud," or "set about attempting to fulfill the Law with their works," then despair for their inadequacies.⁶⁰⁵ However, both reactions point to the fundamental issue: human beings' self-reliance, as they define themselves solely by their own performance. In this way, the God they understand can only be an idol reliant on their efforts. Just as Luther describes in his *Lectures on Galatians*, humans without faith "will necessarily fall into an ignorance of God and an ignorance of the righteousness, wisdom, and proper worship of God. He will be an idolater, remaining under the Law, sin, death, and the rule of the devil; and everything he does will be lost and condemned."⁶⁰⁶ They will remain in the sin of Adam, which is self-reliance in thinking about God.

They are using their own abilities to determine what God requires and how to meet those requirements. As Bayer notes, "atheism is the high point among religions, which is most clearly seen in the religion of self-actualization, in which the human being seeks to make himself reliant simply on himself."⁶⁰⁷ In Luther's opinion, after Adam's fall, worshiping God without knowing God

⁶⁰⁴ LW 1:141.

⁶⁰⁵ LW 22:142.

⁶⁰⁶ LW 26:397.

⁶⁰⁷ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 137.

has become the typical situation of everyone who lacks the knowledge of the Gospel.⁶⁰⁸ They are aware of the existence of God, but “they claim to be so smart as to find the truth in themselves, and to discover the way to salvation, satisfaction for sins, and atonement with God through themselves. They will not hear or tolerate any other doctrine or any other teacher.”⁶⁰⁹ This occurs because “human beings define themselves falsely with the aid of reason—namely as self-sufficient and free in their thoughts, wills, and actions.”⁶¹⁰ In essence, humans are ignorant and unaware of the source of their sin.

The consequence of Adam’s fall is that humans can only understand sin based on the knowledge of the Law. As Luther states, “the world sees these outward manifestations of evil; yes[...], it wonders about them and laments such wickedness on the part of the people. But it does not know the source of the trouble. It sees the rivulet, but not the fountainhead that feeds it; the fruits and the leaves burgeoning forth everywhere from the evil tree, but not the root.”⁶¹¹ People are aware of the existence of sin in this world, but they do not see the true nature of evil. Consequently, they can only “rushes in to remedy the situation, to check the evil, and to make people pious by passing laws and imposing penalties.”⁶¹² In human reasoning, whether in business or in court, people must pay the price to be justified. While this perspective is not wrong, Luther argues, referencing John 3:31, that it merely represents “speaking of the earth.”⁶¹³ The person who has this opinion “fails to recognize his inability to pay what he owes.”⁶¹⁴ Moreover, it shows his “ignorance of the fact that help must come from above.”⁶¹⁵

⁶⁰⁸ LW 1:300-301.

⁶⁰⁹ LW 24:122-123.

⁶¹⁰ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 405.

⁶¹¹ LW 24:341.

⁶¹² LW 24:341.

⁶¹³ LW 22:457.

⁶¹⁴ LW 22:457.

⁶¹⁵ LW 22:457.

Erroneous self-understanding compels humans to adopt the wrong approach to their sins, for they believe they can change themselves. For this reason, “according to Luther[,] human beings have an invincible need to justify themselves, which only concentrates them still further on themselves. Or else they fall victim to despair, which ultimately resents an equally radical self-centeredness.”⁶¹⁶ They cannot free themselves from this self-focus, because their reason cannot see their true nature from the knowledge of the Law. In Luther’s opinion, “even if reason is able to recite the Ten Commandments and is aware that we should not have other gods, it is still not smart enough to detect how corrupt human nature has become through its birth from Adam. Much less does reason know how we might reconcile God.”⁶¹⁷

This implies that unless people recognize the root of their sin, they cannot truly understand the difference between humans and God. As Luther states in his sermon on John 16:3,

*how could they have this sublime knowledge, which, as St. Paul says, exceeds all other wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3), while they are in such blindness and darkness that they do not yet know what they themselves are? They do not realize and believe that by nature they are nothing but sinners—as are all men, beginning with Adam—born under the wrath of God and, if it were not for Christ, condemned to hell with all their deeds and ability.*⁶¹⁸

The knowledge of the Law cannot address the source of human sin, because the beginning of sin lies in Adam and Eve’s disbelief in God’s Word. In Luther’s view, sin had already occurred before Eve physically ate the fruit; the act of eating the fruit was merely an outcome of the prior disobedience.⁶¹⁹

For this reason, Christ does not come to deal with “man’s outward life and conduct, which the world can judge and condemn,” but to address “the stem and the root of all other sins; it is, in fact, the loathsome damage inherited from Adam in Paradise. If it were not for this sin, there would

⁶¹⁶ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 145.

⁶¹⁷ LW 22:456.

⁶¹⁸ LW 24:328.

⁶¹⁹ LW 1:147.

never be any theft, murder, adultery, etc.”⁶²⁰ Our disbelief is not like things “of the earth,”⁶²¹ so Christ must come to deliver the knowledge of the Gospel. According to Luther’s interpretation of John 16:8-11, “only when this message [of Christ] is preached does the real sin manifest itself, the sin of which it is stated here that it makes all the difference.”⁶²² In his opinion, “this proclamation accomplishes two things. In the first place, it confronts all people with the fact that they are all under sin and God’s wrath, and are condemned by the Law; and it demands that we acknowledge this. In the second place, it shows how we can be delivered from this and can obtain mercy from God, namely, only by accepting Christ in faith.”⁶²³ The knowledge of the Gospel is delivered to illuminate the root of human sinfulness and outlines the path to its remediation. Thus, Luther states, “Moses’ voice is his teaching about how we are to do good works. But Christ teaches something higher, namely, how and by what means we are saved.”⁶²⁴ The knowledge of the Law delineates the necessity of being good to foster a relationship with God, but the essence of good and the means to achieve it are found exclusively within the knowledge of the Gospel. By distinguishing between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel, Luther separates human works from salvation and connects salvation with knowing the true God.

4.2.3 The Knowledge of the Gospel as God’s Salvation

The consequence of Adam’s fall is that, although people can still use human reason to discern right and wrong, they are unable to identify the source of sin. They can recognize their sinfulness based on their understanding of the Law, but they cannot perceive its true origin. Thus, a person who seeks God through his own reason can only encounter God’s majesty, which is

⁶²⁰ LW 24:341.

⁶²¹ LW 22:457.

⁶²² LW 24:343.

⁶²³ LW 24:342-343.

⁶²⁴ LW 69:215.

unbearable to sinful humans.⁶²⁵ They will despair because they still believe that they have to meet the requirements of the Law based on their work, indicating a lack of awareness regarding the distinction between themselves and God. In essence, the knowledge of the Law enables people to strive for goodness by making them aware of God's existence, but it does not illuminate the fact that their sinfulness can only be addressed by God. Thus, as suggested by Ngien, "the knowledge of who we are (that we are steeped in sin and eternally damned) and of who Christ is (that Christ, the Son of God, is the only source of grace and salvation) comes solely through Jesus Christ, and belongs to the domain of divine revelation, not reason."⁶²⁶ In other words, as the knowledge of the Gospel came to the world through the incarnate Christ, righteousness and evil were truly revealed.

In the secular world, according to human understanding of the Law, the sins committed by each person are diverse. However, for Luther, "the only sin reproved in the same way in everybody" is "the sin of being without Christ or without faith."⁶²⁷ In his sermon on John 17:3, by citing 2 Peter 3:18 and Isaiah 53:11, Luther not only connects knowing Christ with knowing the Father, but also considers knowing Christ as the means by which one is freed from sin and becomes righteous.⁶²⁸ The real sin, then, is the rejection of this message, which means the failure to believe in Christ. As he also states in his sermon on John 16:11,

*This unbelief toward Christ becomes a combination of all sins; it leads man into a damnation from which there is no rescue. As has been said, unbelief is certainly the principal sin of mankind. It was the first sin committed in Paradise; and, I suppose, it will also be the last of all sins. When Adam and Eve had God's Word, which they were obligated to believe and in which they also had God and life as long as they clung to it, they were tempted first of all, by unbelief toward this Word.*⁶²⁹

Here, Luther ties man's rejection of Christ with Adam's sin.

⁶²⁵ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 21.

⁶²⁶ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 33.

⁶²⁷ LW 24:340.

⁶²⁸ LW 69:35-36.

⁶²⁹ LW 24:343.

After Adam's fall, the knowledge of the Law still exists because it can be understood by human reason. However, the disbelief in the Word of God has been deeply rooted in humans' hearts since then, causing the loss of the knowledge of the one true God of all humankind. Hence, Luther argues that since Adam's fall, Christ, as the promised Seed, has been informing the world about who God is,⁶³⁰ and "he who will not have the Light will walk in darkness. In this sense Christ will also be the Judge of the wicked."⁶³¹ For Luther, the essence of true evil is the rejection of the knowledge of the Gospel, for it means that one believes one has a better way to have a relationship with God and refuses to accept help. Just as a child "becomes a rogue and a villain" by disobeying his parents, leading them to judge him, Jesus will also become a judge to the sinners who reject Him.⁶³²

*Therefore both are true: In the first place, Christ is a Teacher, that is, a Savior, who was ordained, not as a judge but as a Redeemer and Helper, ... If He does judge, it is because of those who reject Him, and then He must judge. But you must not transform Him personally into a judge, for He was sent to be the blessed Seed of the heathen. That He must be a judge is not because of His Person but because of others, who despise Him and force Him to judge.*⁶³³

Whether a person believes in the words of Christ is the condition for him to become righteous and thus the way to his salvation.

This means epistemology is the decisive factor in our salvation, because the true knowledge of God, in Luther's words, is not "is not an idle, empty thought or dream, as reason is able to think... [I]t is the true and living faith, which understands the words of Gospel and, in accordance with those words, knows Him and the Father's will and heart."⁶³⁴ The way in which humans acquire knowledge must be changed, for, as pointed out by Barth, "reason's scope is

⁶³⁰ LW 22:157.

⁶³¹ LW 23:340.

⁶³² LW 23:340.

⁶³³ LW 23:341.

⁶³⁴ LW 24:319.

limited. It belongs to the world of fallen creation, not to the order of salvation.”⁶³⁵ We must redirect our trust from our own reasoning to the Word of Christ because, as Zachman indicates, “we have access to the mercy of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ only by means of the testimony of Christ’s Word about his own work. Such testimony both contradicts and transcends what we can know about God of ourselves; thus faith has no other knowledge of the mercy of God than what it obtains from the gospel of Christ.”⁶³⁶ Only through faith in Christ’s Word can humans receive the knowledge of the Gospel, and thus be saved.

But according to Luther’s interpretation of John 17:25, “the world does not know You[Christ], nor does it want to know You[Christ], even though this is openly preached and presented so clearly that it hits the world right between the eyes, and they cannot deny it is the truth.”⁶³⁷ As described in his lecture on Rom. 3:12, they “become fools” because they are too proud to “receive the Word of God.”⁶³⁸ He asserts that this is the situation of “all the sons of men who have not yet been made the sons of God through faith ‘by water and the Holy Spirit’ (John 3:5).”⁶³⁹ Human beings cannot turn to believing in God’s Word through their reason, for it can only make the opposite judgments. Therefore, the correction of humans’ epistemological pathway—shifting from reliance on their own reasoning to trusting in the Word of God—is the core of salvation. In Luther’s view,

We are faced with the alternative either of gaining the victory over the devil and sin or of being their captives and lost forever. For we are opposed by an enemy who is not interested in the temporal trivia which we possess here....Such battles cannot be fought and such victories cannot be won without the Holy Spirit. Human trumpery and laws or regulations pertaining to things that pass away with this life do not avail.⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁵ Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 407.

⁶³⁶ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 61.

⁶³⁷ LW 69:117.

⁶³⁸ LW 25:225.

⁶³⁹ LW 25:225.

⁶⁴⁰ LW 24:360-361.

For Luther, the acquisition of the knowledge of Gospel is God's salvation, which can only be accomplished by Him.

4.3 The Work of the Holy Spirit

The incarnate Christ brings the knowledge of the Gospel that humans lack due to Adam's fall. However, this fall has also made humans self-reliant in their way of knowing, resulting in resistance to the knowledge of the Gospel. Hence, the entire process of salvation also involves an epistemological transformation, which only the Holy Spirit can do.

4.3.1 The Way to Salvation: To Receive the Knowledge of the Gospel

In Luther's sermons on the Gospel of John, the difference between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel reveals that true salvation lies in knowing the true God. Humans cannot attain salvation by having the knowledge of the Law, because recognizing their own shortcomings will not lead them to know God. According to Althaus,

Even when God gives his Spirit to the proclamation of the law, it does not necessarily lead a man to true repentance. Rather, two things can result. When the law convicts a man of his sin and reveals God's wrath, it leads him to despair. If a man has only the law, his despair cannot be healed. Despair leads him into the new sin of hating God. This situation can be changed only if a man not only has the law but also hears the word of the gospel. Then he recognizes that the law is not God's final word and that its threats, judgment, and condemnation are not the goal but the means in God's hand. Then man's despair becomes a salutary despair, that is, he does not despair of God's mercy but of himself and of his own capability so that he expects everything from Christ.⁶⁴¹

With only the knowledge of the Law, a person may see that he has not met the requirements of the Law. However, this understanding alone will not lead him to despair about himself. Consequently, they either keep trying to fulfill the requirements of the Law with their ability or deny the existence of God, because they do not know any other way.

⁶⁴¹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 258-59.

This indicates that true salvation involves not just identifying problems but also proposing solutions. Luther articulates this distinction clearly in his sermons on the Gospel of John by differentiating the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel. According to Luther,

*Reason is confined to the first type of knowledge of God, which proceeds from the Law; and it speaks a vague language. All Turks, Jews, papists, Tartars, and heathen concede the existence of a God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who, as they say, makes life contingent on our observation of His commandments and prohibitions. ... But the fact and the knowledge that all men are born in sin and are damned, that Christ, the Son of God, is the only source of grace, and that man is saved solely through Jesus Christ, who is the grace and truth—this is not Mosaic or legal knowledge but evangelical and Christian knowledge.*⁶⁴²

In Luther's description, a distinction emerges between understanding one's own failure to meet the Law and recognition that one cannot save oneself from sin. Those who are discouraged by their failures, based on the knowledge of the Law, are still focusing on their own abilities because they still believe they must reconcile with God through their work. However, what people need to understand is that they are inherently unable to meet the requirements of the Law, and that only Christ can fulfill them for them. Thus, the insufficiency recognized through the knowledge of the Law is different from the inability described by the knowledge of the Gospel.

In Luther's view, individuals do not come to know God merely by desponding over their inability to meet the demands of the Law. As pointed out by Gerrish, "the very concept of sin falls outside the province of reason, which is concerned only with the personal and social dimensions of immorality and injustice.... And since reason belongs to the flesh, it cannot possibly be the instrument of translating man into the realm of the spirit."⁶⁴³ A compelling illustration of this is in the story of the adulteress in John 8:6-11. In this incident, Christ's words first compel everyone present to realize that they all committed sin (John 6:7).⁶⁴⁴ In Luther's opinion, here Christ's "words

⁶⁴² LW 22:153.

⁶⁴³ B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason : A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 71-72.

⁶⁴⁴ LW 23:316.

make a deep impression as He speaks to their heart[s] and reveals their sins.”⁶⁴⁵ The Pharisees become so “alarmed and frightened” by their own transgressions that they “forget about this woman entirely” and have no “courage to look at the other.”⁶⁴⁶ According to Luther’s interpretation, the first part of Christ’s message reveals the reality that everyone has sinned before God.

However, the responses of the Pharisees and the woman to this message are markedly different. In Luther’s opinion, this discrepancy highlights the differing levels at which each party acknowledges their own sinfulness.⁶⁴⁷ The Pharisees, measuring their sinfulness through their own reasoning, “do not concede that their sins are great enough to require the help of God,”⁶⁴⁸ indicating that they are not “really struck down by a sense of guilt.”⁶⁴⁹ Luther posits that, “in their arrogance they hid their sin and would not await Christ’s second statement: ‘Neither do I condemn you.’”⁶⁵⁰ Recognizing one’s incapability and acknowledging one’s own failure to meet the requirements of the Law, as seen in Luther’s distinction between the knowledge of the Law and that of the Gospel in his sermons on the Gospel of John, are distinct. While individuals can understand that they fall short of the Law’s standards through reason, they cannot realize that they cannot rely on themselves to reach that standard. In the end, only the woman stayed to receive the resolution from Christ; she did not rely on herself to resolve herself but waited for Christ.⁶⁵¹ In contrast, the Pharisees “dispraised and slunk away,”⁶⁵² because they still trusted themselves more. Hence, Luther asserts, “only those

⁶⁴⁵ LW 23:314.

⁶⁴⁶ LW 23:314.

⁶⁴⁷ LW 23:316-317.

⁶⁴⁸ LW 23:316.

⁶⁴⁹ LW 23:317.

⁶⁵⁰ LW 23:318.

⁶⁵¹ LW 23:317-318.

⁶⁵² LW 23:318.

sinners belong in the kingdom of Christ who recognize their sin, feel it, and then catch hold of the Word of Christ spoken here: ‘I do not condemn you.’”⁶⁵³

This implies that it is not the human conscience that enables humans to know who Christ is. As pointed out by Althaus, “the proclamation of the law by itself is not able to lead a man to true repentance and to faith in the gospel. They do not feel the power of the law. Its threats and terrors do not move them.”⁶⁵⁴ Like these Pharisees, their awareness of their sin does not diminish their self-reliance and thus leads them away from God. This indicates that, as Zachman observes, “the testimony that renders the conscience—and hence the person—acquitted and justified before God cannot come from the conscience, but rather must be given to the conscience by the Word of Gospel.”⁶⁵⁵ Therefore, the adulteress’ reaction starkly contrasts with that of the Pharisees. According to Luther, “through the only-begotten Son and through the Gospel one learns to look directly into God’s face. And when this happens, then everything in man dies; man must then confess that he is a blind and ignorant sinner who must forthwith appeal to Christ.”⁶⁵⁶ The differing reactions of the Pharisee and the woman prove that those who believe in Christ’s Word have a different understanding of themselves and God.

The Pharisees’ leaving shows that, with only the knowledge of the Law, humans’ understanding of sin can only prevent them from believing in God’s mercy. Human reason cannot understand why a righteous God would treat a sinner with mercy.⁶⁵⁷ According to Luther, this notion resembles “thorns” within our hearts, which “the conscience cannot pluck out,” indicating that the conscience “cannot put the sinner before a gracious and forgiving God.”⁶⁵⁸ Then, how can

⁶⁵³ LW 23:318.

⁶⁵⁴ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 258.

⁶⁵⁵ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 2.

⁶⁵⁶ LW 22:157.

⁶⁵⁷ LW 12:324.

⁶⁵⁸ LW 12:324.

sinners come to trust in a merciful God? For Luther, “it is the Holy Spirit, and not the conscience, that allows us to acknowledge the truth of the gospel.”⁶⁵⁹ In Luther’s view, such recognition “is the gift of the Holy Spirit, not of our free will or strength. When men are without the Spirit of God, either their hearts are hardened in sin or they despair; but both are contrary to the will of God.”⁶⁶⁰ Luther asserts that no one can believe that Christ, as God, died for him, “unless his heart has been touched and opened by the Holy Spirit. It is as impossible of comprehension by reason as it is inaccessible to the touch of the hand.”⁶⁶¹ To possess the knowledge of the Gospel means to recognize oneself as a sinner who can only be saved by Christ, and only the Holy Spirit can convince one of this. In Luther’s words, “the Holy Spirit must make you his pupil and impress on your heart what reason fails to do.”⁶⁶²

4.3.2 To Know Ourselves

When individuals possess only the knowledge of the Law, they rely solely on their reasoning to judge and understand everything, rendering them unable to understand who they are as human beings and who God is. All humankind falls into this situation due to Adam’s fall. Therefore, Christ brings the knowledge of the Gospel. According to Luther, “this is a new revelation from heaven, which not only acquaints us with, and instructs us in, the Ten Commandments but also informs us that we mortals are all conceived in sin and are lost, and that no one keeps the Law, but that those who want to be saved will be saved solely through the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. Here is the depth of His nature; here is the will of God!”⁶⁶³ To know who God is entails recognizing who we are as mortals, yet this truth transcends human reason. In Luther’s sermon on John 16:8-11, it is the Holy Spirit who establishes the Kingdom of Christ by enabling humans to recognize their

⁶⁵⁹ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 61.

⁶⁶⁰ LW 12:324.

⁶⁶¹ LW 22:8.

⁶⁶² Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 58.

⁶⁶³ LW 22:156.

true selves. Rather than wielding a sword, the Holy Spirit employs the Word of God to attack the behavior of the world by enlightening them that everyone is a sinner who does not know God. Luther categorizes this rebuke, which human reason cannot understand, into three components: sin, righteousness, and judgment.⁶⁶⁴

First, the sin referred to here, in Luther's view, is not recognizable by human reason. According to him, "the sin for which all men are reproved by the Holy Spirit must be different from the sins that are public and are recognized by the world."⁶⁶⁵ Based on human understanding of the Law, many people in the world indeed live upright lives, and the sins each person commits are diverse. Some steal, some rob, and some envy, but not everyone is guilty of the same sin according to human reasoning. However, there exists a fundamental sin from which "no one can exclude himself or boast that he is better than another. All are alike before God, and all must admit that they are guilty and deserving of eternal death and damnation. In fact, all would have to remain in this state forever, without help from any creature, if God were to deal with us according to our deserts and His justice."⁶⁶⁶ In Luther's view, this is a sin that the world cannot recognize without the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶⁷

Though, as the knowledge of the Law suggests, humans can recognize the existence of God through the distinction between right and wrong in this world, the distinction, which human reason understands, differs from the knowledge of the Gospel. As Lohse notes, for Luther, "not even sin in its actual essence can be known by the so-called natural human, but can be recognized only through revelation, ... Here too the Spirit is at work."⁶⁶⁸ According to Luther,

No one knows the evil which is in him, unless he has been established in the good above the evil, from where he can judge and discern his evil, just as we do not recognize shadows

⁶⁶⁴ LW 24:336.

⁶⁶⁵ LW 24:340.

⁶⁶⁶ LW 24:342.

⁶⁶⁷ LW 24:339.

⁶⁶⁸ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 236.

*except by the light and we measure contrast by its opposite and judge the valueless by the precious. Thus if the[human] spirit were not in the light, it would not see or lament the evil which lies so close at hand, as is clearly evident in the case of the lost and the proud in this world.*⁶⁶⁹

Humans cannot attain a correct understanding of their sinful nature without the Holy Spirit, because human reason cannot acquire the knowledge of the Gospel.

Second, to reveal this sin to the world, the Holy Spirit's judgment is also not the same as the judgment of the world. Ever since Adam relied on his own reason to assess the prohibition regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, human reason has been unable to believe in the Word of God. "This sin continues to rest on the whole world, and this judgment is passed on the conduct and the deeds of all men as they are born of Adam, whether these be regarded by the world as bad or good, as right or wrong."⁶⁷⁰ Therefore, the Holy Spirit's judgment is to expose this disbelief in God as the root of sin for every human being. In Luther's view, "the Holy Spirit [also] pronounces this judgment through St. Paul at the beginning of his Epistle to the Romans, where he places both Jews and Gentiles under sin and says that the Gospel was revealed from heaven and that all the world must now plead guilty of sin (Rom. 1:18)."⁶⁷¹ The incarnate Christ proves that all are indeed sinful, because despite they all sense God's existence, they all "fall short the glory of God" by not knowing Him correctly.⁶⁷² Thus, Luther states, "upon all their deeds and conduct the Holy Spirit will pass the judgment that they are and must remain under God's wrath and under His sentence of damnation, and that they cannot be delivered from this unless they believe in Christ.... [T]his reproving embraces every one of them."⁶⁷³ Without the judgment of the Holy Spirit, no one can recognize their sinfulness stemming from not knowing the true God, for this is far beyond human understanding and imagination.

⁶⁶⁹ LW 25:334.

⁶⁷⁰ LW 24:342.

⁶⁷¹ LW 24:340.

⁶⁷² LW 24:340.

⁶⁷³ LW 24:340.

Third, since the world can only address sin superficially through human reason, the righteousness Christ defines in this passage is also not the righteousness the world can achieve, understand, or even feel. Luther asserts, “He is speaking here of a righteousness recognized by God, a righteousness far different from that acknowledged by the world. This righteousness He exalts far above all the works that can be done in this life and identifies it exclusively with Himself.”⁶⁷⁴ This righteousness can only be bestowed upon human beings through faith in Christ’s Word, “which tells us that He Himself is our Righteousness.”⁶⁷⁵ No one can stand before God without this righteousness, but this kind of righteousness cannot be understood by human reason. Hence, human reason is unable to instill this righteousness in individuals. Only through the work of the Holy Spirit can humans understand and actually have this kind of righteousness by believing in Christ’s Word.

In sum, the Holy Spirit must come, for the knowledge of the Gospel is beyond human reason to reach. In Luther’s sermon on John 16:13, he asserts

*as Christ says here, the Holy Spirit is to tell and teach the disciples later because they are not able to bear it now, it is not doctrine or a knowledge which reason itself can understand and find, as the perverters of this text would delude us into believing. For the Holy Spirit and the Christian Church are not concerned with anything that is subject to reason and that pertains to this temporal life and to secular government.*⁶⁷⁶

Only through the Holy Spirit can individuals recognize the root of their sinfulness, a knowledge that human reason and conscience cannot obtain. In essence, it is by the work of the Holy Spirit that humans can come to understand the truth about themselves in the knowledge of the Gospel.

4.3.3 To Know the Savior

The knowledge of the Gospel reveals a profound truth that transcends human understanding: every individual is equally sinful for the same fundamental sin. As Luther articulates, “the difference between Christ’s kingdom and the kingdom of the world is this, that

⁶⁷⁴ LW 24:346.

⁶⁷⁵ LW 24:347.

⁶⁷⁶ LW 24:360.

Christ reduces all men to sinners. Yet Christ does not stop there, for then He absolves them.”⁶⁷⁷ The problem is that the salvation brought by Christ requires no effort on our part, and thus it “will not penetrate my[our] reason.”⁶⁷⁸ According to Luther, it is “beyond comprehension and above judgment,”⁶⁷⁹ as “the world and all laws contradict this and say: He who has sinned must also bear the sin, pay and atone for it. But the world’s order is temporal and is confined to this earth. When this life ends and death is at hand, the rules of earthly justice also expire.”⁶⁸⁰ The salvation of God does not conform to this rule, because human beings are not created solely for this life. Hence, just as the sin that the Holy Spirit makes people know is incomprehensible to the world, the salvation that the Holy Spirit makes known is also different from what the world can understand.

The knowledge of the Gospel describes not only the condition of humanity but also what God has done for them, indicating that human beings cannot possess this knowledge without acknowledging that God alone can save them. As Lohse suggests, “knowledge of God and the self are to be gained only in mutual relation. It is not true that for Luther the knowledge of self, say, would first be necessary in order from it to arrive at the knowledge of God. Rather, knowledge of self is attained together with knowledge of God, just as true knowledge of self is at the same time knowledge of God.”⁶⁸¹ Therefore, unlike the knowledge of the Law, those who possess the knowledge of the Gospel understand themselves as sinners who can only be saved by Christ. For Luther, “a man should know himself, should know, feel, and experience that he is guilty of sin and subject to death; but he should also know the opposite, that God is the Justifier and Redeemer of a man who knows himself this way.”⁶⁸² As presented in the incident found in John 8:6-11, those who

⁶⁷⁷ LW 23:316.

⁶⁷⁸ LW 23:176.

⁶⁷⁹ LW 23:177.

⁶⁸⁰ LW 23:178.

⁶⁸¹ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 41.

⁶⁸² LW 12:311-12.

truly recognize who they are will see God as their Savior; in contrast, those who are still relying on themselves will fail to know God.⁶⁸³

Based on Luther's sermon on John 14:20, when a person knows Christ, he not only knows that Christ came from the Father but also that Christ is the only Savior.⁶⁸⁴ Luther's interpretation of John 6:45-46 highlights that, as the knowledge of the Gospel declared by Christ, "there are two classes of listeners."⁶⁸⁵ One group of people "merely hear the Word from Christ's lips. They perceive the sounds, but they do not believe that it is surely the Father who spoke the words." In contrast, the other group of people "is persuaded that he is hearing the Word of God the Father."⁶⁸⁶ It is apparent that the second group represents the righteous, and this division also proves the fact that the conviction of God's Word does not come from human judgment.

In Luther's opinion, "God must draw a person beyond the mere hearing of the Word. When a man hears the Word, God must put into his heart the conviction that this is surely the Father's Word."⁶⁸⁷ It is not human reason that persuades an individual to believe in Christ's words, for "between natural reason and faith is a deep crevice that cannot be negotiated by natural reason itself."⁶⁸⁸ Only when the Holy Spirit acts as the Preacher of this message and writes it in human hearts can people believe in Christ.⁶⁸⁹ For Luther, "only the Holy Spirit from heaven above can create listeners and pupils who accept this doctrine and believe that the Word is God, that God's Son is the Word, and that the Word became flesh, that He is also the Light who can illumine all men who come into the world, and that without this Light all is darkness."⁶⁹⁰ God's salvation to a human

⁶⁸³ LW 23:314-317.

⁶⁸⁴ LW 24:141.

⁶⁸⁵ LW 23:96.

⁶⁸⁶ LW 23:96.

⁶⁸⁷ LW 23:96.

⁶⁸⁸ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 133.

⁶⁸⁹ LW 22:286.

⁶⁹⁰ LW 22:8.

being must come from the work of the Holy Spirit, for the knowledge of the Gospel cannot be accepted without His work.

For Christians, God's salvation does not begin with outward behavior, as righteousness is not conferred by external actions. As Mattox suggests, believing in God, for Luther, means to be delivered from "faulty self-assessment that results from sin."⁶⁹¹ The sin Adam first committed was trusting his own reason over God's Word, which led him to replace God with himself. Thus, God's salvation encompasses an epistemological transformation that enables humans to believe in God's Word rather than their own reason. According to Luther's *Lecture on Romans*, "perfect knowledge of oneself is perfect humility."⁶⁹² When the Holy Spirit persuades a person to believe in Christ's words, He is essentially restoring his knowledge of God, that is, to know God is his Creator.

As Mattox suggests, "to know God as Creator means, conversely, to know the self as creature, as one whose limits have been determined by God."⁶⁹³ For Luther, knowing who God is essentially means returning sovereignty to God and regarding Him as one's Lord. As explained by Ngien,

*to glorify the Father, then, means nothing else than that we acknowledge him and know who he is, what his dispositions are and how we stand with him. And this knowledge is found nowhere else but only in and through Christ. There abides a proper order in which the Father cannot be glorified unless glorification happens to Christ first. Then the Holy Spirit must come and preach the gospel, without which no one knows the Father, who is revealed in the Son.*⁶⁹⁴

Through this delineation of God's work in redeeming humanity, Luther explores an epistemological cycle to restore humanity's original way of knowing.⁶⁹⁵ It is through the work of the triune God, humans can have the knowledge of the Gospel. "The believer is not responsible for coming to faith

⁶⁹¹ Mattox, "From Faith to the Text and Back Again: Martin Luther on the Trinity in the Old Testament," 290.

⁶⁹² LW 25:335.

⁶⁹³ Mattox, "From Faith to the Text and Back Again: Martin Luther on the Trinity in the Old Testament," 290.

⁶⁹⁴ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 226.

⁶⁹⁵ LW 69:24.

since God comes to the individual and inspires faith.”⁶⁹⁶ The entire process of salvation is initiated and completed solely by God.

To be saved means that, epistemologically, humans are turning from trusting themselves to trusting God, and thus becoming righteous. When the Holy Spirit enables people to believe in Christ, as described by Ngien, “the objective work Christ accomplishes on the cross becomes a subjective reality in us through the inward witness of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁹⁷ Consequently, instead of defining ourselves and God based on the knowledge of the Law, we Christians know the difference and the relationship between ourselves and God from the knowledge of the Gospel. In Luther’s mind, this is how Christ establishes His people. “Just as faith does nothing but to allow God to be God and to cling totally to the Word, so also it is faith that allows the truth of God to become alive in us.”⁶⁹⁸ Unlike the kingdoms of this world, His people will have a new way of understanding and knowledge through the Holy Spirit.⁶⁹⁹ However, this also implies that Christians are destined to experience and understand their lives in the world in a distinct way, as they possess both the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel. When these two kinds of knowledge collide, how should Christians navigate this tension within themselves?

⁶⁹⁶ Dragseth, "Friendly Grace. The Augustinian Roots of Luther’s Epistemology," 157.

⁶⁹⁷ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 197.

⁶⁹⁸ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 202.

⁶⁹⁹ LW 69:428.

5. How to Live in the World?

As the previous chapter illustrates, the knowledge of the Gospel must be obtained in a way different from the knowledge of the Law. In Luther's view, God's very essence is beyond human comprehension, so humans can only know God through faith in His Word. However, due to Adam's fall, epistemologically, human hearts rely on their own rational judgment above all else. Therefore, after Christ's physical departure, the Holy Spirit must come and "confirms the truth in one's heart and makes one sure of it."⁷⁰⁰ His work enables Christians to possess knowledge that exceeds human reason, but this knowledge also distinguishes them from the world. Then, how can Christians cope with the conflicts arising from the knowledge of the Gospel in their days on earth?

5.1 Christian Epistemology

According to Luther's sermon on John 1:18,

The knowledge of the Gospel is the face of God, the message that we have grace and truth through the death of Christ.... If we are without Him, we can fast ourselves to death, confess, observe vigils; but for all that we will never have a good and cheerful conscience. For this reason St. John here invites us never to lose sight of the mercy of God in Christ, for it all depends on Him....Life resides exclusively in the grace and truth of the dear Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. And only he who remains in Him knows God.⁷⁰¹

Through the knowledge of the Gospel brought by Christ, individuals can be saved by coming to know God. However, it also indicates that, from an epistemological perspective, Christians are distinct from the world. As stated by Luther, "We Christians believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We concede that it is a sublime article of faith beyond the grasp of reason, but we know that nothing is too sublime or impossible for faith. For faith relies on God's Word and is guided by it, not by reason."⁷⁰² Faith and reason are distinct ways of knowing because they arrive

⁷⁰⁰ LW 24:357.

⁷⁰¹ LW 22:158.

⁷⁰² LW 22:76.

at certainty in different ways. The knowledge of the Gospel thus implies that Christians have a different epistemological process from the world.

5.1.1 Different Certainties

According to Lohse, the rationality that distinguishes humans from other animals in Luther's *Lecture on Genesis* refers to "the human faculty for knowing."⁷⁰³ Through this faculty, humans can establish order in the world they inhabit.⁷⁰⁴ Human beings can rule the world because they can understand the world they perceive. This means that, from an epistemological perspective, when human reason constructs knowledge, human senses are also involved. Luther's *Disputatio de homine* also reflects this epistemological feature. As Dalferth notes, "Luther quotes the philosophical definition of the human being in the Aristotelian tradition, which places importance not just on human reason but also on human sensory perception and physical nature. Human reason is interwoven with the sensory and physical dimensions of the human animal and can only be correctly understood in its interaction with them."⁷⁰⁵ From this perspective, Luther asserts that human reason is limited to understanding the world as experienced in earthly life, because people must validate their knowledge through their natural experience.

Moreover, as Bayer points out, "whoever wants to understand the order of the world by using his natural reason, the light of nature, wants to identify and establish a clear relationship between action and consequence."⁷⁰⁶ For Luther, this is the core crisis of humankind in knowing God. Human reason can only perceive God as one who rewards good and punishes evil, thereby framing the relationship between oneself and God as one established through good works. However, the fact is that if we wish to stand before God, according to Luther, we ought "to be called righteous

⁷⁰³ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 244.

⁷⁰⁴ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 244.

⁷⁰⁵ Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Creatures of Possibility: The Theological Basis of Human Freedom*, trans. Jo Bennett (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 33.

⁷⁰⁶ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 211.

or to possess a righteousness which is really no work, no thought, in short, nothing whatever in us but is entirely outside us in Christ and yet becomes truly ours by reason of His grace and gift, and becomes our very own, as though we ourselves had achieved and earned it.”⁷⁰⁷ Essentially, “this is a peculiar righteousness.”⁷⁰⁸

This kind of righteousness is fundamentally distinct from what human reason can comprehend, not only because it is unachieved by good work, but also because “Christ placed this outside the sphere of our senses; we cannot see and feel it.”⁷⁰⁹ In Luther’s opinion,

*reason, of course, cannot comprehend this way of speaking, which says that our righteousness is something which involves nothing active or passive on our part, yes, something in which I do not participate with my thoughts, perception, and senses; that nothing at all in me makes me pleasing to God and saves me; but that I leave myself and all human thoughts and ability out of account and cling to Christ, who sits up there at the right hand of God and whom I do not even see.*⁷¹⁰

Human beings cannot verify the righteousness defined in the knowledge of the Gospel, and this holds even for Christians. According to Luther, “Like other people, they feel in both body and soul a resistance to both Tables of Moses, especially to the First Table: impatience with God and a questioning of His acts and judgments.”⁷¹¹ Christians are not immune to this feeling because of possessing the knowledge of the Gospel. In fact, “Christians experience this as much as anyone.”⁷¹² Therefore, Christians have no other certainty but to believe in Christ’s Word, “which tells us that He Himself is our Righteousness.”⁷¹³ Christians must trust God more than this feeling to know that they are righteous.

⁷⁰⁷ LW 24:347.

⁷⁰⁸ LW 24:347.

⁷⁰⁹ LW 24:347.

⁷¹⁰ LW 24:347.

⁷¹¹ LW 22:304.

⁷¹² LW 22:304.

⁷¹³ LW 24:347.

Besides righteousness, eternal life is also beyond human perception. Christians cannot be sure of obtaining eternal life because the path towards it transcends their natural experiences. According to Luther's interpretation of John 14:5-6, Christ as the only way to the Father indicates that, apart from the incarnated Christ, "no one has ever come down from heaven or ascended into heaven by means of his own works and life. Only one who himself experienced this is able to inform us how and by what means we may go to heaven."⁷¹⁴ For Luther, the knowledge of the Law is intrinsically linked to human life in the world, because it stems from human observation of the world. Therefore, what human reason understands based on the knowledge of the Law is the appropriate way of living in the world, "such as we lead before the world outwardly, a decent, virtuous, and moral course and conduct whereby we uphold temporal government, maintain peace, honor, and order, and promote the acquisition of goods and honor, etc."⁷¹⁵ Human reason can develop proper ways to live in this world, but "all these ways and means are confined to this temporal life and end with it."⁷¹⁶ The path to eternal life is unperceived in this temporal life.

As Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3, the knowledge of the Law cannot tell people how to enter God's kingdom, so He came to "proclaim a different doctrine, namely, how you[they] must be reborn to become good."⁷¹⁷ In Luther's opinion, when Nicodemus approached Jesus for guidance regarding God, he was thinking "about worldly affairs, about this life, and about other things that are directly contrary to the Ten Commandments."⁷¹⁸ Yet, the truth Jesus taught was that people must be born again before they can see the Kingdom of God, and this rebirth is to have the knowledge of the Gospel. According to Luther, "whoever believes in Christ, whoever believes that Christ was born, that He died for us, was buried for us, and was raised from the dead—is born anew or reborn.

⁷¹⁴ LW 24:39-40.

⁷¹⁵ LW 24:37.

⁷¹⁶ LW 24:37.

⁷¹⁷ LW 22:280.

⁷¹⁸ LW 22:306.

This rebirth makes a person a new man.”⁷¹⁹ However, “the new birth or the spiritual life cannot be perceived by the five senses. It is invisible.”⁷²⁰ Christians cannot confirm their rebirth through their senses, which means they cannot be sure about the way to eternal life, as they can to the ways that “pertain to this life.”⁷²¹

According to Luther, “these are the limits of God’s revelation of Himself, and we must not believe anything else. We must simply believe and be sure that what we are teaching truly happens. We cannot see and understand it, just as we cannot ascertain whence the wind comes. I cannot see or feel how I am delivered from death and sin.”⁷²² Humans cannot find the certainty of the knowledge of the Gospel through their senses, but only through believing it. This suggests that the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel must be confirmed in different ways because of the way they are acquired. The knowledge human reason acquires relates to the world we can experience through our physical senses, allowing for mutual verification. As Luther states in his sermon on John 6:28-29, “whatever else I may do in my body, I can feel and see, so that I can say: ‘There it lies; there it is.’ But Christ is not in me. I do not perceive Him with my physical senses as I do my fist and my mouth.”⁷²³ Therefore, though the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel both are the knowledge of God, as indicated in Grosshans’ opinion, “they are different kinds of knowledge.”⁷²⁴

As noted by Zachman, “human knowledge can only proceed on the basis of what we see and feel; yet faith demands that we ignore what we see and feel and cling only to the testimony of Christ. Faith is therefore not an ability of the person, but is rather the work and gift of the Holy

⁷¹⁹ LW 22:286.

⁷²⁰ LW 22:290.

⁷²¹ LW 24:37.

⁷²² LW 22:304.

⁷²³ LW 23:24.

⁷²⁴ Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy," 230.

Spirit.”⁷²⁵ Since the knowledge of the Gospel cannot be acquired by human abilities, it cannot be verified by human beings as well. Hence, Luther states: “A Christian can say that he derived his faith and message, not from the philosophers of Persia, Greece, or Rome but from the Word of God, which came from heaven.”⁷²⁶ Luther distinguishes between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel because the certainty of the knowledge of the Gospel lies not in human natural experience but only in the Word of God. When Christ declared “He is the way, the truth, and the life” in John 14:5-6, for Luther, it is an indication of “the foundational importance of faith, that is, the recognition of the invisible things that are to be believed.”⁷²⁷ In his opinion, Christians must “realize that this is a way walked and traversed with faith of the heart, which holds solely to Christ the Lord.”⁷²⁸

This suggests, from an epistemological perspective, that the difference between Christians and non-believers also lies in the way they judge. Most people assess truth and falsehood based on their perceptions, but Christians base their judgments on the Word of God.⁷²⁹ In Luther’s view,

*This marks the difference between Christians and heathen. A person who is ungodly and a heathen goes along like a cow; he sees, evaluates, and judges everything according to the old birth, according to what he sees or feels. A Christian, however, is not guided by what he sees or feels; he follows what he does not see or feel. He remains with the testimony of Christ; he listens to Christ’s words and follows Him into the darkness.... We stress this doctrine daily, that the Christian life is a life of faith.*⁷³⁰

This indicates that “believers must transcend the knowledge and understanding of the old birth in their thoughts and actions. In their case it is something else; it is different work—a matter of faith, not of reason. Therefore we must realize that the life of a Christian, or the new birth, does not

⁷²⁵ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 61.

⁷²⁶ LW 22:478-479.

⁷²⁷ Markus Piennisch, "Luther’s Relationship to Aristotle: From Logical Dualism to the Biblical-Semitic Approach of Understanding," *Stuttgart Theological Topics* Vol. 12 (2017): 143.

⁷²⁸ LW 24:37.

⁷²⁹ LW 22:306.

⁷³⁰ LW 22:306.

consist in external matters which we can comprehend but in faith and the Word of God.”⁷³¹ Epistemologically, Christians will have a new way of knowing, which does not align with the world they experience.

5.1.2 Inconsistency: the Suffering of Christians

In Luther’s view, the Christian life is incompatible with the world, because the knowledge of the Gospel Christians possess cannot be verified by themselves or by the world in which they live, which inevitably leads their lives to be a constant struggle with their own faith. According to Luther, becoming Christians “requires a lofty and rare understanding, and it is very difficult to keep such knowledge pure and to trust and hazard everything upon it.”⁷³² Throughout their lives, Christian’s faith will be challenged repeatedly because of the inconsistency between the knowledge of the Gospel and the world they live in. As Bayer notes, “since God’s love cannot be demonstrated, cannot be positioned safely beyond all doubt, whoever believes lives in the agonizing struggle.”⁷³³

Christians will suffer for their knowledge of the Gospel, because this kind of knowledge not only diverges from worldly standards of truth but also contradicts their natural experiences. As Luther suggests,

*Every Christian, when baptized and dedicated to Christ, may and must accept and expect encounters with terror and anxiety, which will make his heart afraid and dejected, whether these feelings arise from one or from many enemies and adversaries. For a Christian has an exceedingly large number of enemies if he wants to remain loyal to his Lord. The world and the devil daily lie in wait to deprive him of life and limb. Furthermore, his own flesh, reason, and conscience plague him constantly. As a result, his heart trembles with fear.*⁷³⁴

This fear stems from the fact that people cannot find the certainty of the knowledge of the Gospel within themselves or in the world. Consequently, Christians suffer even more than non-Christians.

As Luther said, the devil does not attack those who do not belong to Christ.⁷³⁵

⁷³¹ LW 22:311-312.

⁷³² LW 69:44.

⁷³³ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 212.

⁷³⁴ LW 24:11.

⁷³⁵ LW 24:15.

External Persecution

First, Christians will face persecution from the outside world for possessing the knowledge that the world cannot verify. According to Luther, “if the world, at the prompting of the devil, does not believe this and even regards this doctrine as a lie and as heresy, we must suffer this and see ourselves reviled and persecuted on this account.”⁷³⁶ This is “the behavior of the world, namely, that it will rave and rage against the truth in spite of its better knowledge and against its own conscience.”⁷³⁷ The best proof of this is Christ’s own experience on earth. Thus, Luther states, “whoever wants to live in the world must keep quiet about the truth and cheat, lie, and deceive. But if you want to bear witness to the truth, prepare yourself to be opposed by the devil with his angels, the world with its wisdom and lofty reason, yes, you will even be opposed by your parents, father, mother, and your best friends. There can be no other result.”⁷³⁸

Christians will be persecuted and judged by the world for their knowledge of the Gospel. In Luther’s words, “all the world condemns and persecutes you as heretics and as the devil’s own.”⁷³⁹ Much like Job, they will suffer to a point that they are “to blaspheme: ‘Why did He make me a Christian? Why do I not desert Him? Then I would at least have peace!’”⁷⁴⁰ They will even begin to question their knowledge of the Gospel because they cannot find answers to their own situations. In these moments, the knowledge of the Law seems to be a more reasonable explanation, “for the knowledge from the Law suggests itself automatically and very emphatically when one is terror-stricken or in the agony of death.”⁷⁴¹ Those in anguish are prone to reflect on whether they have sinned, and this tendency is common among Christians as well. It is very easy for them to

⁷³⁶ LW 24:43.

⁷³⁷ LW 24:290.

⁷³⁸ LW 69:216.

⁷³⁹ LW 24:289.

⁷⁴⁰ LW 24:289.

⁷⁴¹ LW 22:154.

associate their suffering with their sin, because they can clearly feel their own sins. In other words, they can feel the knowledge of the Law more than the knowledge of the Gospel.

Inner Torment

In the lives of Christians, alongside the external persecution they face, there exists another kind of suffering stemming from the awareness of sin inside their hearts. As suggested by Althaus, “only the Christian is completely awakened by God’s word to an awareness of his situation before God and thus to a full comprehension of his humanity. Only the Christian therefore is completely awakened to the fate of death as well as to God’s wrath and the law in general.”⁷⁴² Through recognizing the power of sin and its price, Christians gain a clearer insight into their own condition as human beings. Those who possess the knowledge of the Gospel are particularly sensitive to sin and acutely aware of their own inability to overcome it. As Luther notes, “Christians, who, by reason of tender hearts and consciences, are easily frightened.”⁷⁴³

They may doubt the effectiveness of the knowledge of the Gospel because “they know and feel their frailty and unworthiness,”⁷⁴⁴ but are unable to confirm their identity as Christians through what they sense and feel. In Luther’s view, this uncertainty about God’s grace outweighs physical suffering.⁷⁴⁵ Hence, he believes that throughout a Christian’s life, whether facing death or other difficulties, the devil’s true weapon against Christians is sin and the price of sin, which incites doubt about their salvation. They begin to worry that they have not done enough or believe that they will suffer terrible punishment, and these thoughts cause them to tremble.⁷⁴⁶ This fear of sin, for Luther, is the most severe challenge Christians face in this world. He believes that even after they have

⁷⁴² Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 407.

⁷⁴³ LW 24:17.

⁷⁴⁴ LW 24:17.

⁷⁴⁵ LW 42:127.

⁷⁴⁶ LW 24:291.

become Christians, this fear will continue to plague their hearts,⁷⁴⁷ “for the conscience is present, which feels and knows that God is the enemy of sinners and intends to damn them; and it cannot avoid or escape God’s wrath.”⁷⁴⁸

As suggested by Althaus, “since the Christian here on earth is both new and old man, righteous and sinner, he lives without the law as well as under the law, and the law has both lost its power over him and remains in force.”⁷⁴⁹ For Christians, their sin is apparent to them, yet the new life through the work of the Holy Spirit is invisible. Hence, Luther portrays the Christian life as a fight in which “flesh and spirit contend against each other.”⁷⁵⁰ In his words, “I would fain believe with all my heart and be filled with spirit, but I do not succeed. The flesh and that old Sir Adam, who dwells in my skin, come along and frighten the spirit.”⁷⁵¹ The knowledge of the Law could be used as a weapon against Christians due to its alignment with their natural experience. Consequently, “the objective certainty of faith” is the question that believers constantly ask.⁷⁵²

Faith Ask Questions

From an alternative perspective, Christians doubt the knowledge of the Gospel precisely because they possess it. It is the inconsistency between their lived experience and their beliefs that leads people to question God’s Word. According to Bayer,

*Believers never cease to question. In fact, it is only when people come to faith that they really begin to ask questions, radical questions. For the discrepancy between the promised life and all that contradicts it within and around us makes us cry out, complain, and ask: “Where are you, God? Why have you forsaken me? How long will you hide your face from us? ...” Questions of complaint such as these arise from the experience of feeling attacked and abandoned by the very God who promised us victory.*⁷⁵³

⁷⁴⁷ LW 24:291.

⁷⁴⁸ LW 69:55.

⁷⁴⁹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 268.

⁷⁵⁰ LW 23:175.

⁷⁵¹ LW 23:175.

⁷⁵² Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 209.

⁷⁵³ Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 209.

As presented in the Old Testament, in Luther's opinion, those "who did believe in God, had more temptation to regard Him as unjust—Jeremiah, for instance, and Job, David, Asaph, and others."⁷⁵⁴ Only Christians can raise such questions because only those who have the knowledge of the Gospel can experience the incompatibility of that knowledge with the world they inhabit and their inner feelings. As suggested by Althaus, "faith is continually attacked by the temptations arising from the contradiction between the reality it sees and the salvation that is present but hidden from the sight."⁷⁵⁵

Moreover, "this is true not only of the life of the individual Christian but equally of the situation of the church in the world and of the lordship of Christ in history."⁷⁵⁶ This fear and doubt that accompany faith represent a distinctly Christian experience. Only those who have the knowledge of the Gospel can be challenged in this way, and for Luther, such experience is essential for Christians to know God. He even believed that God deliberately allows Christians to have such experiences,⁷⁵⁷ because "no one knows what faith really is. It is a great art and doctrine, which no saint has learned and fathomed fully unless he has found himself in despair, in the anguish of death, or in extreme peril."⁷⁵⁸ In his opinion, "the power and effect of faith first become manifest in times of trial, as, for example, when faith must overcome sin, death, devil, and hell."⁷⁵⁹

This proves that in Luther's mind, "experience is necessary for, and even an integral part of, understanding theology itself."⁷⁶⁰ But since the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel cannot be acquired in the same way, neither can they be experienced in the same way. For

⁷⁵⁴ LW 33:291.

⁷⁵⁵ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 404.

⁷⁵⁶ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 404.

⁷⁵⁷ LW 22:375.

⁷⁵⁸ LW 23:73.

⁷⁵⁹ LW 23:73.

⁷⁶⁰ Elisabeth Parmentier, "The Paradoxical Way of Experiencing Faith through Spiritual Attack (*Anfechtung-Tentatio*)," in *Theological Anthropology, 500 Years after Martin Luther: Orthodox and Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Christophe Chalamet et al., Studies in Systematic Theology (Leiden; Boston: BRILL, 2021), 266.

Luther, only through the work of God can individuals experience what faith is in trials.⁷⁶¹ This kind of experience differs from the experiences people get through their physical senses. “Thus it is not an acquisition of knowledge, as we imagine it today when one easily opposes academic theology and religious life, personal faith experience and scientific theology. Rather, it is a journey through biblical confrontation and the resulting crisis.”⁷⁶² While humans cannot derive the knowledge of the Gospel from such experience, the knowledge of the Gospel is learned through such experience. More specifically, this kind of experience itself does not constitute the knowledge of the Gospel, but it is the necessary process by which Christians come to understand it.

5.2 The Holy Spirit as the Comforter

Based on John 16:33, Luther interprets Christ’s message as indicating that believers will inevitably face suffering, whether outwardly in their bodies or inwardly in their hearts.⁷⁶³ They are bound to experience anxiety in the world due to their differing opinions.⁷⁶⁴ Thus, Christians need to learn to understand God correctly in order to receive comfort from His Word.⁷⁶⁵ However, according to Luther, “there is surely no more difficult art in heaven and earth,”⁷⁶⁶ because humanity lacks the inherent ability to rely on this comfort. Therefore, Christ bringing the knowledge of the Gospel into this world is only the beginning; the Holy Spirit, as the Comforter, must be sent to enable Christians to continue to have this knowledge in their lives.

5.2.1 What You See Makes You Forget

Humans can only obtain the knowledge of the Gospel through faith, but faith is unattainable by human effort. Hence, no one is “able to boast so soon of having mastered this

⁷⁶¹ LW 23:73-74.

⁷⁶² Parmentier, "The Paradoxical Way of Experiencing Faith through Spiritual Attack (*Anfechtung-Tentatio*)," 266.

⁷⁶³ LW 24:419.

⁷⁶⁴ LW 24:420.

⁷⁶⁵ LW 24:12.

⁷⁶⁶ LW 69:119.

knowledge.”⁷⁶⁷ In his interpretation of John 8:12, Luther underscores the impossibility for humans to “see the light that gives life” through their own natural abilities.⁷⁶⁸ He argues that trusting in God is entirely contradictory to the fallen human nature. Due to Adam’s sin, the human heart is either too hardened, like the Egyptian Pharaoh, or too fearful to accept comfort from God’s words.⁷⁶⁹ According to Luther, this “is what wretched people we are: when we are amid our sins, no one can soften us. But if we are amid terrors, no one can restore us. If we are amid sins, we are like a dead corpse; preaching against such a sinner is like preaching against this stone pillar. But if, on the other hand, someone is terrified, then he is dead again.”⁷⁷⁰ People often fixate on their circumstances and make judgments based on their own feelings and thoughts. Consequently, they either rely on other humans in difficult times⁷⁷¹ or become “hardened beyond all description” once those troubles subside.⁷⁷² Humans tend to rely on their perceptions, which not only explains why the knowledge of the Law cannot transform people, but also why the knowledge of the Gospel cannot be grasped by human power.

Humans cannot retain the knowledge of the Gospel through their own ability, because they are accustomed to believing what is proved by their experience. As Luther describes in his sermon on John 16:13, “reason and the human heart could never persist in such faith and confession but would have to sink and perish under the trials that come internally from the devil and the heart and outwardly from the world, or would begin to blaspheme with the ungodly.”⁷⁷³ In his opinion, the apostles’ reaction to Christ’s crucifixion “demonstrated adequately,[...] how completely impossible

⁷⁶⁷ LW 24:404.

⁷⁶⁸ LW 23: 326.

⁷⁶⁹ LW 69:426.

⁷⁷⁰ LW 69:427.

⁷⁷¹ LW 44:31.

⁷⁷² LW 69:427.

⁷⁷³ LW 24:359.

—not only difficult—it is to retain faith in trials if one does not have the help of the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁷⁴ Their faith “was practically extinguished by the thoughts inspired by the devil,” so they “deserted Him ignominiously” and “denied Him.”⁷⁷⁵ It is inherent in the human mind to base certainty on experience, relying on feelings and senses to discern truth from falsehood. Christ’s crucifixion and ascension meant the apostles could no longer rely on their senses to trust in Him, which means their faith was bound to be challenged by what they experienced after His leaving. “As a good and faithful Lord, Christ anticipates such anxiety and fear. [Thus,] He comforts His disciples and urges them not to despair but to stand firm.”⁷⁷⁶ In Luther’s sermon on John 14:1, Christ foretold His crucifixion so that they could recall His words in times of fear and panic.

However, the apostles’ reactions after His arrest proved that “this comfort did not help at the moment, nor was it effective until the appearance of the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁷⁷ As Luther notes, “when Christ was gone, all was lost; they had no heart or courage, and not one of them could stand his ground against a frail maid. In that hour all Christ’s words and works fell by the wayside, and this comfort was entirely forgotten.”⁷⁷⁸ In this way, the knowledge of the Gospel will disappear, leaving people unable to know God.⁷⁷⁹ Therefore, God’s work of salvation does not end with Christ’s accomplishments on earth. According to Luther, “He came, labored, and ascended into heaven to banish sadness and fear from the heart and to bestow, instead, a cheerful heart, conscience, and mind. To this end He promises to send His disciples and the Christians the Holy Spirit, whom He calls the Comforter. Through Him Christ wants to fortify and keep His disciples after His physical

⁷⁷⁴ LW 24:359.

⁷⁷⁵ LW 24:359.

⁷⁷⁶ LW 24:10.

⁷⁷⁷ LW 24:10.

⁷⁷⁸ LW 24:10.

⁷⁷⁹ LW 23:261.

departure from them.”⁷⁸⁰ The incarnation of Christ brought the knowledge of the Gospel to us, but without the work of the Holy Spirit, we cannot retain the knowledge of the Gospel.

5.2.2 To Understand and Remember

According to Luther’s interpretation of John 14:25-26, although the apostles heard Jesus’ words with their own ears, those words quickly disappeared when they witnessed His crucifixion.⁷⁸¹ This suggests that the knowledge of the Gospel will be forgotten due to one’s experiences in the world. On the one hand, any Christian could forget the knowledge of the Gospel out of fear, whether they encounter external hostile evil forces, internal temptations of the flesh, or the accusations of conscience and reason. On the other hand, it is equally possible that in the absence of suffering, they may forget such fear and mistakenly believe they do not need the comfort of the knowledge of the Gospel.⁷⁸² As suggested by Luther, “they will not understand;[and] they have forgotten all His miracles and words. That is the horrible weakness of man after the fall.”⁷⁸³ Therefore, “the Holy Spirit must come to impress these words into your[their] heart and to instruct you[them] in the school of experience with regard to their significance, so that you[they] can receive and feel the consolation.”⁷⁸⁴

For Luther, people cannot understand and retain the knowledge of the Gospel because it cannot be verified through their natural experience. According to him, “we do not feel the comfort, strength, and savor that the words possess. Moreover, the glory of the matter is too great to enter our heart[s]. For it is too far beyond our senses and too high above human understanding that this poor, stinking sack of worms is to come to see such matchless, divine glory eternally and ever before its

⁷⁸⁰ LW 24:13.

⁷⁸¹ LW 24:167.

⁷⁸² LW 24:11.

⁷⁸³ LW 69:427.

⁷⁸⁴ LW 24:167-168.

eyes.”⁷⁸⁵ However, this also implies that without experiencing the knowledge of the Gospel, it is impossible for humans to truly understand it. Based on Luther’s sermon on John 14:25-26, this is why Christ defined the work of the Holy Spirit, as the Comforter, to be teaching and bringing to remembrance all that Christ has said.⁷⁸⁶ Through the Holy Spirit’s work, people can truly experience the knowledge of the Gospel by remembering it in their lives and thus truly understand this knowledge.

The way the Holy Spirit enables people to experience the knowledge of the Gospel is by making them remember Christ’s Word as they experience the world. According to Luther’s interpretation of John 14:1, when Christians live in this world, whether facing persecution from the outside world or disturbances from the devil within, only the knowledge of the Gospel can comfort them, because it shows them who God is. He interpretes this verse as Christ’s consolation to all the Christians in saying:

*To remain cheerful in the midst of all this, and to ward off defeat, remember only that I am the real Savior and God, and rely on Me; then you will encounter the true God and experience My omnipotent power and might. Let the world and the pseudo saints depend and rely on whom they will. Let them believe and do as they want. It is all vain and futile. Against all this you need no other weapon or armor than your adherence to Me.*⁷⁸⁷

The purpose of the Holy Spirit’s coming into the world as the Comforter is to enable people to experience the comfort of the knowledge of the Gospel by remembering who Christ is in all kinds of life experiences. Therefore, after Jesus ascended to heaven and before the apostles began their missionary work, “He gives them the true strong drink, the Holy Spirit, so that they are entirely drunken with the love of God and fear the world no longer.”⁷⁸⁸

Luther also notes that “it is not the wicked and hardened sinners who are to be comforted, but those who feel sin, death, and hell, so that they may have consolation. The apostles, too, were

⁷⁸⁵ LW 69:115.

⁷⁸⁶ LW 24:168.

⁷⁸⁷ LW 24:25.

⁷⁸⁸ LW 69:427.

soft and weak; the Lord Himself was not able to heal them in forty days until they received the Holy Spirit. That is the way the weak can be restored.”⁷⁸⁹ The experience of restoration through remembering Christ’s Word will enable Christians to realize that the knowledge of the Gospel indeed belongs to them, thereby making that knowledge effectual in them. The knowledge of the Gospel then becomes real to them. In opposition to that, “the false disciples never experience this. They do not know the meaning of the word ‘truth’. For truth does not consist merely in hearing Christ or in being able to blabber about Him at length but also in believing in your heart and in experiencing with your heart that Christ wants to set you free. This is what makes a true Christian.”⁷⁹⁰ The Holy Spirit enables them to be certain about what they believe by allowing them to experience the knowledge of the Gospel in their lives.

This is also why Christians can pray to God. From Luther’s point of view, without the knowledge of the Gospel, “no real prayer is possible.”⁷⁹¹ In interpreting John 16:25-26, by citing Joel 2:28 and Zach. 12:10, Luther believes the Holy Spirit, as “a spirit of compassion and supplication,” is given to all Christians.⁷⁹² The Spirit of compassion teaches the believers the knowledge of the Gospel, so that they may have the Spirit of supplication “to call upon God from the heart in my[Christ’s] name.”⁷⁹³ In Luther’s opinion, “no one can pray properly” unless the Holy Spirit “assures the heart that it has a merciful God in Christ and that it can joyfully call Him Father.”⁷⁹⁴ As described in Rom. 8:15-16, the Holy Spirit “is not a spirit which, by reason of the Law, strikes terror in the heart with sin and God’s wrath; it is a Spirit who, with the comfort and promise of eternal grace and compassion, cheers up those frightened hearts that feel their sin and

⁷⁸⁹ LW 69:427.

⁷⁹⁰ LW 23:401.

⁷⁹¹ LW 24:405.

⁷⁹² LW 24:405.

⁷⁹³ LW 24:405.

⁷⁹⁴ LW 24:405.

God's displeasure and therefore dare not and can not approach Him in supplication but only flee farther away from Him."⁷⁹⁵

Without the knowledge proclaimed by the Spirit of compassion, humans would be like the blind, unaware of the Father's will.⁷⁹⁶ The Holy Spirit enables people to be assured of the knowledge of the Gospel rather than their own understanding of God based on the knowledge of the Law, so that they can approach God with confidence that He will hear their prayers. As Luther states in his sermon on John 16:26, "you are not coming to God in your own name or on the strength of your own works or merit; you are coming to Him on the strength of the fact that God's will and command are proclaimed to you through the Holy Spirit—the will and the command which He has carried out through Christ, namely, His desire to be gracious to you and to be your dear Father."⁷⁹⁷ Through the Holy Spirit, Christians know God's gracious intention towards them, which allows them to come to God to seek His help. In essence, the Holy Spirit enables them to know God so that they solely rely on Him.

Besides that, through prayer, the Holy Spirit enables them to experience God's response to them. According to Luther's interpretation of John 16:33, in prayer, "there is a twofold conversation: the one which we carry on with God and the one which God carries on with us."⁷⁹⁸ Through the Holy Spirit, people not only pour out their troubles to God, but also hear answers from God. This twofold conversation defines the work of "the Spirit of compassion and supplication"⁷⁹⁹. God "lets us converse with Him through prayer, and He also speaks with us through the Spirit of grace, in order that we may hear Him."⁸⁰⁰ Only in this way can individuals receive the help they really

⁷⁹⁵ LW 24:405.

⁷⁹⁶ LW 24:406.

⁷⁹⁷ LW 24:405.

⁷⁹⁸ LW 24:419.

⁷⁹⁹ LW 24:419.

⁸⁰⁰ LW 24:419.

need, because “no other speech or power on earth, not even the world with all its skill, learning, and intelligence, can do this, not even Moses himself, who, although he speaks in behalf of God, does not put peace into the heart.”⁸⁰¹

The knowledge of the Law cannot comfort a person because he cannot see the love of God in it. “Only through Christ does the Holy Spirit let one see into the heart of God the Father. Only in this way will he be experienced as love.”⁸⁰² Thus, Luther asserts, “God has been gracious to us and has given us a Comforter to counteract this spirit of terror—a Comforter, who, as God Himself, is much stronger with His comfort than the devil is with his terror.”⁸⁰³ In Luther’s opinion, Christ brought the knowledge of the Gospel so that people could know that they should “be unafraid and look to Him for help, to come and rescue you[them].”⁸⁰⁴ But “when the devil also comes along with God’s Law,” it is the work of the Holy Spirit to “come and whisper consolingly to your[their] heart.”⁸⁰⁵ Through this experience of being comforted by the knowledge of the Gospel, individuals can truly comprehend it.

5.2.3 Experience of the Knowledge of the Gospel

According to Luther, the knowledge of the Gospel “is a treasure hidden to the whole world, so that it can never attain it, and a knowledge that no earthly reason or wisdom can obtain, which indeed cannot be attained by any means save through the Word of Christ. Whoever hears it obtains a knowledge that makes him certain and will not let him go astray.”⁸⁰⁶ The Holy Spirit’s work ensures that the Word of Christ is not forgotten by Christians and thus becomes empty, because He enables them to recall and understand His Word in their daily experiences. Thus, as Lohse suggests, for

⁸⁰¹ LW 24:419.

⁸⁰² Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 213.

⁸⁰³ LW 24:291.

⁸⁰⁴ LW 24:17.

⁸⁰⁵ LW 24:291.

⁸⁰⁶ LW 69:60-61.

Luther, “the Spirit is of fundamental significance for the Christian’s entire journey.”⁸⁰⁷ However, the experience brought by the Holy Spirit is beyond the reach of human senses.

According to his interpretation of John 3:8, “No one sees the Holy Spirit; no one touches Him. I[we] know not whence He comes and where He goes.”⁸⁰⁸ In his opinion, “it is nothing if you ask your five senses about it and consult with your reason and wisdom. You must put reason and senses aside and remember that what makes a Christian is something of which you hear no more than the breath and the sound.”⁸⁰⁹ Likewise, we cannot see Christ with our physical eyes “as a cow looks at a door,”⁸¹⁰ but through spiritual eyes we see our Father indeed in heaven, and thus we can pray to Him.⁸¹¹ Hence, for Luther, “there are two kinds of sight and of hearing.”⁸¹² With only the physical senses, people cannot recognize who Christ is; only through spiritual senses can they know who He is.⁸¹³ This suggests that although Christians’ understanding of God through the work of the Holy Spirit is experiential, it transcends mere physical or psychological sensation.

Since the knowledge of the Gospel can only be possessed by faith, in Luther’s words, “the world will never have and experience it.”⁸¹⁴ However, Christians can experience the reality of this knowledge through the work of the Holy Spirit. As pointed out by Althaus, “the same faith which must and does believe in opposition to experience feels that in believing it gains experience of that which it believes.”⁸¹⁵ In Luther’s view, people experience the knowledge of the Gospel by believing in it. According to his interpretation of John 14:23, Christ here is declaring: “He who wants to know

⁸⁰⁷ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 236.

⁸⁰⁸ LW 22:300.

⁸⁰⁹ LW 22:300.

⁸¹⁰ LW 22:203.

⁸¹¹ LW 22:203.

⁸¹² LW 24:33.

⁸¹³ LW 24:33-34.

⁸¹⁴ LW 24:138.

⁸¹⁵ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 61.

Me must love Me, hold to Me, and not be ashamed of Me. If they do this, they will experience that I will manifest Myself to them. Then they will notice in themselves that they have believed aright and have not been deceived.”⁸¹⁶ From this perspective, all the experiences Christians have in their lives are not meaningless, but are essential for them to come to know God. As Parmentier suggests, the Christian’s life is not simply about enduring suffering. “On the contrary, preaching and the proclamation of the Word of God show the other dimension of experience: the dimension which manifests how good the Lord is.”⁸¹⁷

When they recall Christ’s Word in their lives through the work of the Comforter, this experience of being comforted by His Word will strengthen their faith, so that the knowledge of the Gospel will not be lost because of their natural experiences but will instead be preserved throughout their earthly life. This experience of being comforted itself is not the knowledge of the Gospel, but only the knowledge of the Gospel can bring such an experience. In this respect, the work of the Holy Spirit is to enable us “to pay more regard to His Word than to anything else which may confront our eyes, ears, and other senses”⁸¹⁸ in our life experience, ultimately leading Christians to adopt a different way of judging than the world. The comfort that the Holy Spirit brings through the knowledge of the Gospel differs from worldly comfort because it is anchored not in human feeling but in faith in God’s Word.

For this reason, the certainty given by the Holy Spirit cannot be assessed through natural human experience. As Althaus suggests, “faith always struggles with the contradictions of natural experience. But faith and experience are not simply in absolute opposition to and conflict with each other. For there is such a thing as experience wrought by faith itself. It is different from the usual kind of empirical experience; it is experience in a new dimension.”⁸¹⁹ The certainty given by the

⁸¹⁶ LW 24:156.

⁸¹⁷ Parmentier, "The Paradoxical Way of Experiencing Faith through Spiritual Attack (*Anfechtung-Tentatio*)," 265.

⁸¹⁸ LW 24:12.

⁸¹⁹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 60.

Holy Spirit is entirely the work of God, which means that individuals cannot rely on their senses to determine that anything opposed to it is the work of the Holy Spirit. For Luther, Christ's words could also be terrifying (as seen in Matt 4:17 and Luke 13:15), because the soul must understand and fear God's punishment for sinners.⁸²⁰ He argues that Christ's "rebukes" and "threats" must be carefully distinguished because there are "two classes of people on earth."⁸²¹ One is the people who disdain God's Word. "They pay God's Word no heed and live as they see fit—smug, unabashed, and without fear."⁸²² The other is those who strive to live a pious life and thus become targets of the devil.⁸²³ Both types are in trouble, and the goal of the devil is to make the first type stubborn and the second type tremble with fear, so it will comfort the first type and frighten the second type.

In Luther's opinion, Christ's purpose in striking fear into people's hearts is to make them believe God's Word, whereas the devil's purpose is just the opposite.⁸²⁴ As Zachman observes "the devil tries to get us to believe the feeling of our own conscience instead of the Word of God, so that we might fall from trust in God's mercy."⁸²⁵ In the Garden of Eden, the devil's ultimate goal is not to make people feel afraid and terrified, but to make them trust their own judgment instead of God's Word. Therefore, in Luther's view, whether a person possesses the knowledge of the Gospel cannot be detected by whether he feels threatened or secure, because "the devil always plays a role directly opposed to that of Christ."⁸²⁶ According to him, "what the devil ruins and destroys, Christ must build up and restore; and what the devil establishes, Christ destroys, as we read in 1 John 3:8: 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.'"⁸²⁷ Being fearless is not an

⁸²⁰ LW 24:14.

⁸²¹ LW 24:14.

⁸²² LW 24:14.

⁸²³ LW 24:14.

⁸²⁴ LW 24:16.

⁸²⁵ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 63.

⁸²⁶ LW 24:15.

⁸²⁷ LW 24:15.

indication of possessing the knowledge of the Gospel, because the devil can also manipulate “all God’s Word” to make people ignorant of their own conditions.⁸²⁸ He notes, “the evil spirit can also puff people up and make them bold and brave, as is evidenced by his tyrants and schismatic spirits, who are far too rash and defiant, though not with the valor and the defiance approved by God.”⁸²⁹

For Luther, humanity may have false comfort by placing their “reliance only in the things it sees, in goods, reputation, and high honor. [However,w]hen what it boasts of comes to an end—as it all must come to an end—its courage also vanishes, and sheer despair remains.”⁸³⁰ In contrast, the comfort from the knowledge of the Gospel is “a genuine, true comfort”⁸³¹ because the faith produced by the Holy Spirit does not involve any human ability. As pointed out by Althaus, “true faith is characteristically distinguished from do-it-yourself faith by the fact that it is created by the Holy Spirit through the word.”⁸³² Only the Holy Spirit can provide such faith because only through this Comforter can humans experience the restoration of faith from the knowledge of the Gospel. This faith enables individuals to refrain from making judgments based solely on what they see and feel, and even “gives the lie to everything the world praises as pure truth.”⁸³³ Just as described by Zachman, “the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to acknowledge and trust in the truth of the Word, even though we neither see nor feel what the Word proclaims to us.”⁸³⁴ Hence, as Luther’s sermon on John 14:7 suggests, “the Holy Spirit is not only a Comforter, who makes Christians defiant and courageous in the face of all kinds of terror; He is also a Spirit of truth, that is, He is a true and

⁸²⁸ LW 24:16.

⁸²⁹ LW 24:118.

⁸³⁰ LW 24:118-119.

⁸³¹ LW 24:118.

⁸³² Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 60.

⁸³³ LW 24:121.

⁸³⁴ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 61-62.

reliable Spirit, who does not deceive you or fail you.”⁸³⁵ Christians differ from the world not because they are fearless but because their comfort comes from the knowledge of the Gospel.

From this perspective, Luther advises Christians to learn from their current experiences, even to think in reverse according to their own feelings.⁸³⁶ He advises them to “in the day of evils[,] remember the day of blessings,” and “in the day of good[,] be mindful of the evil.”⁸³⁷ But the purpose of that is not to have them make final judgments based on their natural experience, but to remind them to trust in the Word of God instead of themselves.⁸³⁸ This suggests that “the experience presented by the reformer does not meet the expectations of contemporaries in search of extraordinary spiritual experiences, because ultimately it is above all an experience with Scripture.”⁸³⁹ Through the Holy Spirit’s work, the experience Christians have in their daily life becomes an experience of relying on God’s Word above all else. Thus, Christians can retain the knowledge of the Gospel amid various circumstances.

5.3 Living in Knowing God

Since the knowledge of the Gospel is beyond human reason and senses to reach, the Holy Spirit not only enables people to have faith, but “also gives faith the ability to cling to the truth of the Word even when the world and the conscience oppose the Word.”⁸⁴⁰ In the life of a Christian, the experience they have through the Holy Spirit could be inconsistent with their personal thoughts and feelings. Therefore, people learn from this experience to trust in God rather than in themselves, which not only enables them to face challenges from the world and from within, but also to know God in truth.

⁸³⁵ LW 24:117.

⁸³⁶ LW 42:126.

⁸³⁷ LW 42:126.

⁸³⁸ LW 42:127.

⁸³⁹ Parmentier, "The Paradoxical Way of Experiencing Faith through Spiritual Attack (*Anfechtung-Tentatio*)," 264.

⁸⁴⁰ Zachman, *The Assurance Of Faith*, 62.

5.3.1 The Way to Face Suffering

In Luther's view, Christ's declaration in John 16:33 clearly suggests that Christians will experience no peace in the world. However, the phrase, "I have said this that you might have peace, not in the world but in Me" also implies that "there should be peace where actually anxiety and dissension prevail."⁸⁴¹ Hence, according to Luther's interpretation, "the first lesson Christ teaches here;[is] that a Christian must look to the words of Christ for peace and rest in his heart. His heart must cleave to them and be completely enveloped in them."⁸⁴² Because what a person trusts and takes comfort from will rule their heart.⁸⁴³

According to Luther, when people possess only the knowledge of the Law, they "run hither and thither and seek counsel, help, and comfort everywhere, except from God, from whom they are most urgently commanded to seek it"⁸⁴⁴ during their suffering. Without knowing God's will and the meaning of their suffering, they either resort to their own will or seek solace from humans, hoping that this will solve their predicament.⁸⁴⁵ Essentially, "they want to be their own saviors and redeemers and are unwilling to wait for God to relieve them of their cross."⁸⁴⁶ In contrast, Christians are courageous because the knowledge of the Gospel they possess is entirely God's work. They do not receive certainty through their senses, so their comfort is not based on their natural experience.⁸⁴⁷ More specifically, their peace, joy, and hope are not rooted in the world they live in, because the knowledge of the Gospel they received through faith grants them a transformative understanding and perception of the world they inhabit.

⁸⁴¹ LW 24:418.

⁸⁴² LW 24:418.

⁸⁴³ LW 24:19.

⁸⁴⁴ LW 44:31.

⁸⁴⁵ LW 42:50.

⁸⁴⁶ LW 42:50-51.

⁸⁴⁷ LW 24:120.

In Luther's opinion, people in the world base their happiness or sadness on what they sense, and in such a cognition, their feelings cannot adapt to any changes because they concentrate solely on what is present before them. In times of prosperity, they cheer and rejoice as suffering does not exist in the world; conversely, during difficult times, they lose their courage and despair, as if there is no hope at all.⁸⁴⁸ As Luther states, "The world supposes that times will never change and does not ponder how it would adapt itself to any such change."⁸⁴⁹ This way of cognition prevents them from seeing hope as suffering comes. "Moreover, when the weather changes, when sickness follows after days of health, war and misfortune after peace, famine after times of plenty, then there is no end to its lamentations, to its fear and despair. But that is not the Christian way."⁸⁵⁰ For Luther, the way of Christians is to "lift their thoughts far beyond" all the dangers that would happen in this life "in the knowledge that the battle has already been won."⁸⁵¹

In Luther's view, in facing suffering, "Christians must have other thoughts; they must have the vision which enables them to disregard the terrible spectacle and outward appearance."⁸⁵² This suggests Christians still genuinely experience everything in their lives, but having the knowledge of the Gospel gives them a certainty that transcends the temporal realm, allowing them to experience God's love amid their daily lives. As described by Luther in his *Lectures on Romans*, "just as joy is a certain freedom of the heart, even in tribulation, so distress represents a certain narrowing and constriction in tribulation."⁸⁵³ Without the knowledge of the Gospel, humans can only trust and rely on themselves; thus, their experiences lead them to different gods. In contrast, Christians will not be determined by their natural experiences.⁸⁵⁴ As Luther states, "as Christians you must not mourn and

⁸⁴⁸ LW 24:11.

⁸⁴⁹ LW 24:12.

⁸⁵⁰ LW 24:12.

⁸⁵¹ LW 24:415.

⁸⁵² LW 24:417.

⁸⁵³ LW 25:179.

⁸⁵⁴ LW 25:179.

tremble; you are different from those who lack comfort and confidence in affliction, misfortune, and adversity. They do not believe, nor do they know God's Word; but they place their trust in temporal things and attach their hearts only to what is present and visible. Whenever this vanishes, courage and trust vanish with it."⁸⁵⁵ The faith that Christians possess allows them to transcend their natural experiences, but it is not a faith that is disconnected from these experiences.

As Hoffman notes, "to meet God is to know increasingly that he knows and plans everything (even though he, in most intricate manner, has to make use of our circuitous ways so that he can guide us to the goal that he has set for us)."⁸⁵⁶ Christians are not pretending everything is fine. Rather, as Luther explains, "the righteous are wise and well aware of the purpose of the divine will, even though it involves all kinds of adversity."⁸⁵⁷ They still experience sadness and anxiety due to the challenges of daily life, but the true source of their joy persists because they possess the knowledge of the Gospel through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵⁸ In this way, their primary concern in daily life is not their present suffering, but living in the truth of Christ every day.⁸⁵⁹ Regardless of what a Christian encounters, according to Luther, "this should be their attitude: 'May it last as long as it pleases God! Today happy and cheerful; tomorrow sad. Today alive; tomorrow dead. Today good fortune and security; tomorrow every kind of distress. And do not keep snoring away as though no trouble were coming.'"⁸⁶⁰ Believers cannot predict the future or evade disasters. However, as Lockwood points out, "we should not be disturbed when the earthly things we need are lacking and God seems slow in answering our prayers, so that we have to cling to is his Word."⁸⁶¹

⁸⁵⁵ LW 24:17.

⁸⁵⁶ Bengt R. Hoffman, *Theology of the Heart: The Role of Mysticism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, ed. Pearl Willemsen Hoffman (Minneapolis, Minn: Kirk House, 1998), 195.

⁸⁵⁷ LW 42:51.

⁸⁵⁸ LW 24:12-13.

⁸⁵⁹ LW 42:149.

⁸⁶⁰ LW 24:11.

⁸⁶¹ Lockwood, *The unholy trinity : Martin Luther against the idol of me, myself, and I*, 48.

While we can certainly hope our current suffering will be resolved in this life, our true hope is rooted in the assurance God provides through Christ, not in our own circumstances.

This indicates that the most crucial aspect of a Christian's life is to trust firmly in Him, to "look to Him for all good, grace, and favor, whether in works or suffering, in life or death, in joy or sorrow."⁸⁶² In this way, sufferings will not make individuals forget the knowledge of the Gospel, but will enable them to learn to know God through trusting Him, so that they can have a proper understanding of everything that happens to them. Hence, as stated by Luther, "do not take it as a small comfort but as a sure and certain one that if you feel that you love Christ and His Word and with all your heart desire to abide steadfast in it, you are among the little flock that belongs to Christ and shall not be lost."⁸⁶³ Christians can be confident of God's grace toward them in the midst of their suffering by recognizing Him as God, which implies a different understanding of the knowledge of the Law.

5.3.2 Different Understanding of the Knowledge of the Law

For Luther, the complete denial of oneself and absolute trust in God are two facets of the same coin of faith.⁸⁶⁴ According to his *Treatise on Good Works*, absolute trust in God is no longer trying to obtain salvation for oneself. He states,

*This confidence and faith must be so high and strong that a man knows that all his life and works are nothing but damnable sins in the judgment of God, as it says in Psalm 143 [:2], "For no man living is found righteous before thee." He must despair entirely of his works, and believe that they cannot be good except through this faith which expects no judgment but only pure grace, favor, kindness, and mercy.*⁸⁶⁵

What a suffering soul needs is not to be reproached for its lack of faith, but to surrender its weakness confidently to God. For Luther, this surrender reflects the essence of the First

⁸⁶² LW 44:30.

⁸⁶³ LW 69:51.

⁸⁶⁴ LW 44:38.

⁸⁶⁵ LW 44:37.

Commandment.⁸⁶⁶ Thus, he believes that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christians “may begin to keep the Law through Christ.”⁸⁶⁷

According to Luther’s interpretation of John 15:7, as long as Christ’s Word abides in us, we abide in Christ.⁸⁶⁸ Even though we are still sinners, we are covered by God’s grace and forgiven by Him. Moreover, we can cry out to our heavenly Father for all our needs when we are weak and be confident that our prayers will be answered.⁸⁶⁹ In this way, the knowledge of the Gospel transforms a Christian’s perspective on the Law. As stated by Luther, “now I take delight in the command to trust God above all things.”⁸⁷⁰ We no longer need to fear falling short of the commandments, for when the Holy Spirit imparts the knowledge of the Gospel, it “engenders a spirit” within the person’s heart, enabling that person to find joy in God’s works and words even when struck or tempted by God.⁸⁷¹ We become like “a pious child loves its father dearly and obeys him; it knows that the father also loves it, though he may punish it.”⁸⁷²

Through the knowledge of the Gospel, Christians come to see the suffering they experience as discipline from their Father. Their trust in their Father’s love enables them to understand that everything He does is for their benefit. Previously, His Law only caused them pain, but now they find it precious and beneficial to their lives.⁸⁷³ In Luther’s view, all Christians “share that[this] experience.”⁸⁷⁴ Through “illumination by the Holy Spirit,” “regeneration by the Word of

⁸⁶⁶ LW 44:30.

⁸⁶⁷ LW 22:146.

⁸⁶⁸ LW 24:238.

⁸⁶⁹ LW 24:239.

⁸⁷⁰ LW 22:144.

⁸⁷¹ LW 22:144.

⁸⁷² LW 22:144.

⁸⁷³ LW 22:144.

⁸⁷⁴ LW 22:144.

God,” and “faith in Christ,” “a new spirit” is implanted in man, making “God’s Word and Law” delightful, as they realize they can fulfill its requirements.⁸⁷⁵ As Althaus articulates,

*the law’s content, although not the outward form which it has in relationship to sinners, shows what man was before the fall and what he shall be in the future; it has both proctological and eschatological meaning. Before the fall, man could fulfill it; and he did fulfill it joyfully and was totally committed to it. The law made him glad. This inner relationship to the law must now be restored to us by Christ through his Holy Spirit and will be fully restored in the life to come.*⁸⁷⁶

Having the knowledge of the Gospel, Christians begin to fulfill the commandment of loving God.⁸⁷⁷

Although Luther distinguishes between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel, he does not consider the two as unrelated. He believes that only those who possess the knowledge of the Gospel through the Holy Spirit can understand the knowledge of the Law properly. As pointed out by Althaus, “the law is to be interpreted through the gospel; and its intention is to be understood on the basis of the gospel.”⁸⁷⁸ When individuals recognize God as a benevolent God, what they see through the Law is not just their transgressions, but also the significance of the price Christ paid for them.⁸⁷⁹ With both the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel, God for them is a Heavenly Father who disciplines and forgives their transgressions. Therefore, based on John 15:5, Luther believes that upon conversion, the Holy Spirit will “implant a new understanding” and “awaken new thoughts and impulses,” thereby enabling individuals to begin obeying His Law with a true knowledge of God.⁸⁸⁰

In Luther’s view, “through Adam we have all become people who by nature no longer know God; our reason is blinded, and our will is alienated from God. But through Christ we are reborn and cleansed without the Law or any of our works; and now we are just as pure as Adam was

⁸⁷⁵ LW 22:144.

⁸⁷⁶ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 253.

⁸⁷⁷ LW 22:146.

⁸⁷⁸ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 259.

⁸⁷⁹ LW 22:146.

⁸⁸⁰ LW 24:286.

when he was originally created.”⁸⁸¹ Even before Adam sinned, humans did not gain “innocence” by obeying God’s commandments, but instead because they were created “sinless”.⁸⁸² Nevertheless, God gave commandments so that they could express their love and fear for God. This principle holds true for Christians as well.⁸⁸³ They are no longer under the Law, but according to Luther’s interpretation of John 15:14, having come to know God through Christ’s work, their obedience to His commandments is “an external sign and confession” of their relationship with God.⁸⁸⁴

In contrast to people who have only the knowledge of the Law, Christians do not obey the commandments to build a relationship with God. Instead, they obey the commandments based on their relationship with God. Having the knowledge of the Gospel, as Althaus describes, “the Christian becomes willing to fulfill it and is at least able to make a beginning in fulfilling it. He no longer stands under a demand but is joyfully moved toward God’s law by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ leads man out of his condition under the law back to that joyous obedience of the law, which men knew before the fall into sin.”⁸⁸⁵ With the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel together, they can understand God in truth and thus have a relationship with Him. They are returning to the original state of humanity before Adam sinned, with the entire process of redemption being solely the work of God.

5.3.3 Knowing Through Believing

For Luther, the knowledge of the Law expresses what God wants humans to be, while the knowledge of the Gospel reveals how God makes them become that.⁸⁸⁶ Together, they illuminate the nature of the relationship between humanity and God. Although humans can know the existence

⁸⁸¹ LW 24:255-256.

⁸⁸² LW 24:255.

⁸⁸³ LW 24:255.

⁸⁸⁴ LW 24:255.

⁸⁸⁵ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 267.

⁸⁸⁶ LW 22:140,145.

of God through their observations, the Creator they know is not the Creator known by Christians. However, this difference does not mean that the knowledge of the Law is not the knowledge of God. Instead, Luther views this divergence as a consequence of Adam's fall. He asserts that "we have been so abominably corrupted by sin that we not only know nothing about our first and natural knowledge of God any longer, but we have also defected from the righteousness of the Law and fallen into lies. With our own fabricated works we presumed to reconcile God."⁸⁸⁷ As humans replace God with themselves, they know God no more and thus use their own concepts to determine how to establish a relationship with God.

In this respect, as indicated by Mattox, "knowing the God and Father revealed and confessed in the creed therefore means much more than merely intellectually apprehending by means of the created order that there is a benevolent Creator."⁸⁸⁸ To view Christ's Word merely as a teaching about how to "live and conduct ourselves" and to regard Christ as "a good example to follow," would make Christ "nothing but a Moses, who confines himself to our works and conduct, thereby directing our attention to ourselves."⁸⁸⁹ Then the right knowledge is lost.⁸⁹⁰ Ultimately, it is not the knowledge of the Law itself that prevents people from knowing God. The real problem is that, because of the flesh, people cannot judge God's actions without using their own reason. As long as individuals place their trust in themselves instead of in God, they cannot truly know God, regardless of whether they are familiar with the words of Moses or Christ. This suggests that humans cannot possess the knowledge of the Gospel through their own effort, and without this knowledge, the words of God will only be a means to destroy rather than a means to lead.

For this reason, the salvation God brings lies in enabling people to know their Creator in truth through faith. Christians have different understandings of God because, as Mattox suggests, in

⁸⁸⁷ LW 22:155.

⁸⁸⁸ Mattox, "From Faith to the Text and Back Again: Martin Luther on the Trinity in the Old Testament," 291.

⁸⁸⁹ LW 24:40.

⁸⁹⁰ LW 24:40.

Christ, through the Holy Spirit, the Father not only reveals Himself to them but also enables them to experience His love. This “perception of the ‘fatherly heart’ of the Triune God returns Christians to God with praise and then sends them out into the world filled with love for the creation and a determination that it, too, should reflect honor, praise, and glory to its Maker.”⁸⁹¹ However, in his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther continually emphasizes that “such understanding is difficult to acquire.”⁸⁹² In fact, Luther believes that Christians would learn this knowledge throughout their lifetimes, because the devil relentlessly seeks to deprive them of it.⁸⁹³

In Luther’s sermon on John 3:1, he uses the example of climbing a tall tower and crossing a deep ravine to point out that just as a person must shield their eyes and trust in others for guidance to pass safely, Christians must also rely solely on God’s Word in facing the devil’s attack.⁸⁹⁴ As Stopa notes, “despite their freedom in Christ, Christians remain sinners in need of God’s forgiveness. As doubled-natured creatures of sin and righteousness, humans depend on ongoing dialogue with God in order to suppress sin, lead fruitful lives, and find comfort in tribulations.”⁸⁹⁵ This suggest that Christians will repeatedly experience both fear and comfort throughout their earthly lives. However, this makes their time on earth significant, “for this walking is nothing but a constant growth in faith and in an ever-stronger assurance of eternal life in Christ.”⁸⁹⁶ Christians can thus rejoice in their lives in this world, even without knowing what they will encounter along the way or when it will end.⁸⁹⁷

⁸⁹¹ Mattox, "From Faith to the Text and Back Again: Martin Luther on the Trinity in the Old Testament," 291.

⁸⁹² LW 24:144.

⁸⁹³ LW 24:144.

⁸⁹⁴ LW 22:304-305.

⁸⁹⁵ Sasja Emilie Mathiasen Stopa, "'Ich werdend spreche ich Du': Creative Dialogue in the Relational Anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 5.

⁸⁹⁶ LW 24:42.

⁸⁹⁷ LW 24:44.

From this standpoint, Luther believes the ultimate purpose of the devil's disturbance to humans is to make them unaware of where God is and where they are.⁸⁹⁸ In other words, to make them think about themselves and God in ways apart from the Word of God. In Luther's opinion, since God and His ways are beyond human understanding, we "should rely directly on the Word of God and not have reason or the old birth argue the question whether it is possible or not."⁸⁹⁹ As Ngien notes, Christians need a "definite place".⁹⁰⁰ Therefore, in his sermon on John 16:13, Luther asserts that the Holy Spirit's work as a Preacher is to enable "our hearts to be so firmly fixed [on Christ's Word] that reason and all one's own thoughts and feelings are relegated to the background. He wants us to adhere solely to the Word and to regard it as the only truth."⁹⁰¹ This is how Christians have a true faith, because "faith is response to the Word of God which itself comes to fruition in faith, and therefore everything that professes to be faith has to prove itself by the standard of the original testimony of faith."⁹⁰²

For Luther, this is how one can retain the knowledge of the Gospel, and also what Christians will experience throughout their lives. According to his interpretation of John 14:25-26, the Holy Spirit will "emphasize it[Christ's Word] and make it clearer from day to day," enabling believers to grow in their understanding of Christ and to experience how they "are delivered from sin and death."⁹⁰³ As Bayer notes, "the Holy Spirit does not do his work only when he brings one to faith, but also works by faith to make sure the believer continues in and remains in the faith; one might say that he does not work only deistically, by merely giving the initial spark; he guides and

⁸⁹⁸ LW 24:362.

⁸⁹⁹ LW 22:311.

⁹⁰⁰ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 238.

⁹⁰¹ LW 24:362.

⁹⁰² Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James Waterson Leitch, 1st English ed., Preacher's Library, (London: SCM Press, 1963), 119.

⁹⁰³ LW 24:175.

preserves the Christian life at every moment.”⁹⁰⁴ This indicates that the Holy Spirit is not high up in heaven, but has been with Christians since the moment He was given.⁹⁰⁵ As Lohse suggests, the Spirit is not only the “author of the preaching of the gospel” but “also the gift enclosed in the Word.”⁹⁰⁶ Therefore, according to Luther’s sermon on John 14:25-26, the Holy Spirit is “close association with the office and order of Christendom, the Word and the sacraments...; and that whoever receives them certainly receives also the Holy Spirit, who works through these means, enlightens the heart, creates the knowledge of Christ or faith, and in this way makes sinners pure and holy.”⁹⁰⁷ When the Holy Spirit preserves the knowledge of the Gospel in the lives of Christians, despite their sinful nature still existing in their “flesh and blood,” they “are accounted entirely pure and holy before God.”⁹⁰⁸

In this respect, as Kleinig suggests, “Christians therefore reside in two realms; they occupy two states of being. On the one hand, in the body they live common lives governed by God’s law together with all other sinners in the order of creation. On the other hand, they have a pure conscience and live holy lives by faith in Christ together with all the saints and angels in the Father’s presence.”⁹⁰⁹ Given this dual condition of Christians, Luther contends that it is impossible for them to fully comprehend the knowledge of the Gospel during this earthly existence. As long as we are still in the flesh, we will inevitably rely on ourselves to live our lives.⁹¹⁰ As Yeago further elaborates, “Sin and shame still cling to our flesh, against which faith must never cease to assert the

⁹⁰⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 241-42.

⁹⁰⁵ LW 24:171.

⁹⁰⁶ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 237.

⁹⁰⁷ LW 24:171.

⁹⁰⁸ LW 24:171.

⁹⁰⁹ John W Kleinig, "Luther on the Reception in God's Holiness," *PRO ECCLESIA* XVII, no. 1 (2008): 86, <https://gudribassakums.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/luther-on-holiness-by-john-w-kleinig.pdf>.

⁹¹⁰ LW 24:137.

superior reality of Christ, in repentance, self-denial, and trustful hope.”⁹¹¹ Nevertheless, from Luther’s perspective, this dynamic Christian experience in their lives, through the work of the Holy Spirit, will ultimately serve to enhance Christians’ faith in God.

As the Holy Spirit enables a person to “remain alive in the midst of death and may be able to keep a good conscience and God’s grace even though he is aware of his sin,”⁹¹² the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel will be deepened in his life. In Luther’s words, “Then we[he] can conclude with certainty: ‘Let the devil, death, and sin be against me! I am holy nevertheless. I believe in Christ and have learned to know Him; I understand and use the Word and the sacraments aright—all this I owe to the Holy Spirit, not to my own brains.’”⁹¹³ Hence, for Luther, Christian’s life on earth is ultimately a struggle not so much between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel as between reliance on self and reliance on God. He asserts that “the true Christians always have discovered and still do, that this truth, that is, faith which should hold firmly to the articles concerning Christ and His kingdom, cannot be retained by human reason or power, but that the Holy Spirit Himself must accomplish this.”⁹¹⁴ Throughout their lives, the Holy Spirit works to enable Christians to know the true God and the future they possess in Christ,⁹¹⁵ until the time comes when there are “no clouds and no darkness”; and then, they “shall see God differently.”⁹¹⁶

⁹¹¹ David S. Yeago, "Ecclesia Sancta, Ecclesia Peccatrix: The Holiness of the Church in Martin Luther's Theology," *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 3 (2000): 344, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/106385120000900305>.

⁹¹² LW 24:360.

⁹¹³ LW 24:168.

⁹¹⁴ LW 24:360.

⁹¹⁵ LW 24:365.

⁹¹⁶ LW 24:67.

6. Conclusion

For Luther, it is essential to accurately distinguish between Law and Gospel to achieve a correct understanding. Among all his works, his sermons on the Gospel of John stand out because he applies this distinction to the realm of epistemology. Through this distinction, he illustrates how humanity obtains knowledge beyond its own capacity to know God, highlighting the way in which God establishes a relationship with individuals for their salvation.

In his sermons on the Gospel of John, Luther identifies two distinct ways of knowing God by distinguishing two kinds of knowledge of God based on the limitations of human reason. He argues that while humans can acquire the knowledge of the Law through human reason from the Law given by God, this only enables them to know God's existence and His justice in rewarding good and punishing evil. Conversely, the knowledge of the Gospel identifies who God is. Only the Gospel is not inherently implanted in humans as the Law is, which indicates that the knowledge of the Gospel must be imparted to them—a task that can only be accomplished by God.

The best evidence of this is the Triune nature of God. Although God's work is demonstrated in creation, thus making His existence known to people, human reason cannot perceive the Triune God. In Luther's opinion, this underscores the significance of the Gospel of John, as it not only reveals the Triune God as the Creator but also articulates how this God makes Himself known. In this respect, by building upon his interpretations of Genesis and the Gospel of John, Luther employs a conversation analogy to demonstrate how the Triune God enables people to know the Creator in truth and grace. He argues that through the incarnation of the Son, the Word of the Father is conveyed to the world, allowing humans to come to know the Father. In essence, from an epistemological perspective, Christ's work on earth reveals God's true identity. Hence, when people come to know Christ, they come to know God. In other words, knowing Christ is to possess the knowledge of the Gospel.

However, Christ's earthly experience shows that people cannot recognize Him through human reason. Their reaction indicates that, even though Christ has brought the knowledge of the Gospel to the world, God's work must not cease. By distinguishing the work of the Triune God in his conversation analogy, Luther presented an epistemological circle to demonstrate how God enables people to know Him correctly. In Luther's opinion, just as Christ was sent by the Father to make people know the Father, the Holy Spirit was also sent by both the Father and the Son to make people know Christ. It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that individuals can accept God's Word, which means to possess the knowledge of the Gospel.

The coming of the Holy Spirit indicates that the distinction between the knowledge of the Gospel and the knowledge of the Law encompasses not only their content but also the means by which individuals acquire them. Humans can obtain the knowledge of the Law through human reason, but human reason cannot accept the knowledge of the Gospel. Based on Luther's anthropology, this is because the knowledge of the Gospel transcends human reason. In Luther's view, while human reason indeed sets humans apart from other animals by enabling them to comprehend the world, the meaning of human creation shows that human beings are truly unique in that they can receive God's Word, thereby knowing and worshiping Him. As the prohibition regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil indicates, humanity cannot understand God's Word through reason; rather, it must believe in it.

The distinction between the knowledge of the Law and of the Gospel shows that Luther does not oppose the function of human reason; rather, he contends that the knowledge possessed by faith and that acquired through human reason are fundamentally different. Human reason can derive the knowledge of the Law from the Law implanted in the human heart, but the knowledge of the Gospel can only be received through faith. Therefore, the key to whether individuals can know God lies in their reliance on their own reasoning as opposed to the Word of God. In essence, it comes down to whether they place their trust in themselves or in God.

In Luther's view, the devil's greatest temptation for humanity lies in making people believe that their own rational judgments are superior to God's Word. This conviction is why Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Believing one's own reason more than the Word of God is not only the beginning of sin but also the source of all evil, because it means that man has replaced God with himself. The consequence of this way of thinking is that humanity not only loses its knowledge of God but also the knowledge of itself. Even if human reason continues to serve its purpose in acquiring knowledge, it becomes the ground for rejecting the knowledge of the Gospel. In Luther's opinion, all humans fall into this epistemological state due to Adam's fall.

From this perspective, God's redemption of humanity encompasses a profound transformation in humans' way of knowing, a process conducted by the Holy Spirit. In Luther's view, when Jesus came into the world to atone for the sins of humankind, God's identity and grace towards humanity were thus revealed. This revelation is the content that the knowledge of the Law cannot encompass, because human reason cannot derive from the Law that the Savior came into the world for their own sake. Moreover, the rejection of these contents indicates that human reason cannot identify the root of sin as humans' self-reliance from the Law. Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit is to convince individuals to believe in Christ's word, recognizing that no one can stand before God except through Christ. In essence, His work is to engender faith in them so that they may possess the knowledge of the Gospel.

Since one must believe in God's Word beyond relying on one's own reason to possess the knowledge of the Gospel, Christians who possess this knowledge actually have an epistemology distinct from the world. Human reason is no longer the ultimate basis for their judgments, but rather God's Word. Consequently, they will inevitably find themselves at odds with the world they live in, leading their lives on earth to be marked by conflict. This is not only because this kind of knowledge stands apart from worldly standards of truth and falsehood, but also because Christians

are unable to attain certainty about it through their own perceptions. In Luther's view, in the Christian's earthly life, both external circumstances and internal feelings will repeatedly challenge this knowledge. Luther therefore believes that humans cannot retain this knowledge by their own ability. Yet, he also emphasized that it is precisely this experience of being repeatedly challenged that enables Christians to understand the knowledge of the Gospel, because the work of the Holy Spirit extends beyond merely persuading people to accept this knowledge.

Possessing the knowledge of the Gospel does not mean Christians have fully grasped it. For Luther, as long as they lived in this world, sin remained in their flesh. Christians are still struggling with sin, and this is the devil's most powerful weapon to make people lose faith in God. In these moments, if individuals depend on their own feelings to make judgments, they will lose the knowledge of the Gospel. Therefore, Luther emphasized that the Holy Spirit's work as a comforter is to remind Christians of God's Word during trials. This comfort is true and distinct from worldly solace because it leads individuals to believe in God's Word, rather than their own sensory feelings.

This indicates that this experience of being comforted by the Holy Spirit, while not itself constituting the knowledge of the Gospel, enhances one's faith in God's Word and deepens one's understanding of it. In this way, Christians retain this knowledge, and the knowledge of the Law they have also transformed. Life's sufferings are no longer viewed as divine punishment but rather as discipline from the Father. Even though they know they are still sinners, they know they are holy before God. This signifies that humanity's way of knowing is returning to the state before Adam's fall—no longer relying on one's own rational judgment but trusting God's Word above all else, and, indeed, this is the authentic way to know God.

How can humanity come to know God? For Luther, this question has been a subject of debate throughout history, as humanity holds the knowledge of the Law. However, if one possesses only the knowledge of the Law, they can only find idols that depend on themselves. Without possessing the knowledge of the Gospel, individuals cannot know the Lord who created them.

These two kinds of knowledge not only illustrate the necessity of transforming human epistemology but also demonstrate that such a change can be accomplished only by the Triune God. In his sermons on the Gospel of John, by applying the distinction between the Law and the Gospel to distinguish between these two different kinds of knowledge of God, Luther differentiates the epistemology of Christians and non-believers, thus disclosing that God's salvation also involves the transformation of human epistemology, which core lies in making people believe in God's Word above all else.

This suggests that, as much as human reason cannot be the foundation of human salvation, it is not left out of it in Luther's view. According to Grosshans, "in Luther we find on the one hand a high praise of reason and on the other hand a clear awareness about the limit of reason, which was the result of a theological evaluation of reason."⁹¹⁷ This awareness and theological evaluation of human reason, as presented in Luther's distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel, demonstrates that the core issue in human salvation is humans' mistrust of their own rational ability. For Luther, human "reason loses its way" because it is unaware of its own limits and, as a result, is no longer able to know God in truth.⁹¹⁸ Yet "in faith, reason is enlightened about its own role and limits and about its own competence and dignity."⁹¹⁹ Humans who believe in Christ rather than their own ability will thus possess a different kind of understanding about God and themselves, even different interpretations of the knowledge they acquire via their ability.

This proves that, from the epistemological aspect, "faith also connotes the reality which a person places his or her trust."⁹²⁰ Humanity, in Luther's view, requires a superior knowledge that

⁹¹⁷ Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy," 234.

⁹¹⁸ Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy," 232.

⁹¹⁹ Grosshans, "Reason and Philosophy," 232.

⁹²⁰ Ilmari Karimies, "Human Being," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. and Hinlicky Nelson, Paul R. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 661.

can only be obtained through faith in order to fulfill its intended purpose. According to Karimies, “already in the *Dictate*, he[Luther] associates the soul and reason with each other. The human being is *homo rationales* on account of his soul.”⁹²¹ Without faith in Christ, a person is blind in knowing reality, as human reason “has, through sin, also become desperate, forgetful, and oblivious to celestial things.”⁹²² Therefore, fallen individuals lead sinful lives not only due to their physical nature but also because they are no longer capable of recognizing the truth of God. As Slenczka illustrates, “‘Spirit’ and ‘flesh’ are thus[...] not primarily designations for parts or abilities of a human being but characterize ‘the entire person’—all his latitudes and capacities—in relationship to God.”⁹²³ This indicates that the epistemology present in Luther’s sermons on the Gospel of John is intricately linked to his distinctive understanding of anthropology and the concept of sin.

According to Slenczka, “the particulars of Luther’s anthropology are formed by his reshaping the traditional categories of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ as he wrote his great Reformational treatises(1520).”⁹²⁴ Human being, “in terms of ‘spirit’ or ‘the inner person,’” in Luther’s thought, is defined by “faith’s relationship with God.”⁹²⁵ Having faith in God “means that human beings base themselves and their entire life with all its aptitudes and capacities on God in utter trust in the gospels’ promise.”⁹²⁶ In contrast, people who refuse to trust God would “hand their heart on another factor that determines their humanity, making these factors into their own god.”⁹²⁷ From this perspective, “the real, central sin is unbelief in the sense of not trusting, for it is faith understood as trust which ascribes to God all positive predicates, in that it expects all things from him.”⁹²⁸ Thus,

⁹²¹ Karimies, "Human Being," 656.

⁹²² Karimies, "Human Being," 656.

⁹²³ Notger Slenczka, "Luther’s Anthropology," in *The Oxford Handbook Of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel Robert Kolb, L’Ubovár Batka (UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 216.

⁹²⁴ Slenczka, "Luther’s Anthropology," 215.

⁹²⁵ Slenczka, "Luther’s Anthropology," 216.

⁹²⁶ Slenczka, "Luther’s Anthropology," 216.

⁹²⁷ Slenczka, "Luther’s Anthropology," 216.

⁹²⁸ Slenczka, "Luther’s Anthropology," 216.

the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, as explored in this thesis, concerns not only their contents and functions, but also the only way to know God.

However, this transformation of epistemology is not fully realized when individuals come to faith in God. The influence of the flesh continues to affect Christians, giving rise to “the struggle between the spirit and the flesh” in their lives, and “this conflict concerns both the volitional and cognitive aspects of the person.”⁹²⁹ As Karimies describes, “the old man and the new man operate almost as two distinct anthropological systems within the same person. The spirit leads the believer to pursue things that the flesh does not grasp, and put its trust in things that the flesh does not understand. Therefore, the act of faith itself, as well as the things that the person wishes to do in accordance with the directives of the spirit, cause suffering for the flesh.”⁹³⁰ From an epistemological standpoint, because the presence of Christ in the Christian life is beyond human reason and sense to perceive, it is as if there are two realities at work in Christians’ lives: they can see and feel the appearance of things, but spiritually, they experience and understand them differently.⁹³¹

Luther vividly illustrates this struggle in his sermons on the Gospel of John, where he describes the Christian life as walking through a river.⁹³² However, the dialectical situation between Law and Gospel in his series of sermons on the Gospel of John suggests that Luther is not merely attempting to understand God “in his opposites.”⁹³³ By considering Christ as the Word of God to be the central theme of the Gospel of John, Luther underscores in his sermons that the foundation and certainty of Christian faith must lie in the Word, which exists outside human beings and transcends human ability to define. “Not inner religious experience nor the secret, immediate working of the

⁹²⁹ Karimies, "Human Being," 663.

⁹³⁰ Karimies, "Human Being," 663.

⁹³¹ Karimies, "Human Being," 663.

⁹³² LW 24:41.

⁹³³ Ngien, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 5.

Holy Spirit but the external Word, as written, read, and preached, was the true locus of spiritual power and the basis of Christian certainty.”⁹³⁴ Consequently, rather than attempting to ascertain what kind of experience and understanding should be the truth of God, the distinction between Law and Gospel, from the epistemological perspective, points out that the certainty of the knowledge of God does not simply stand in contrast to human reason or experience but is firmly rooted in the Word of Christ. In Luther’s opinion, to cross the river safely, Christians should trust the Word of Christ rather than themselves.⁹³⁵

From this perspective, this thesis discusses the distinction between the Law and the Gospel primarily in terms of the truth or falsehood of knowledge about God, rather than focusing on the ethical implications of the Law and its interplay with the Gospel. However, this does not imply that the epistemological differences lead Luther to deny the validity of the knowledge recognized by the secular realm. As Dragseth noted, “while Luther rejected the epistemology of the scholastics, he did not oppose academic study or natural science.”⁹³⁶ Although this thesis does not delve into the influence of Scholastic anthropology and epistemology on Luther or compare their differences, the distinction between the knowledge of the Law and the knowledge of the Gospel not only underscores the divergence between Luther and Scholasticism but also highlights their interconnection. The knowledge acquired through human reason holds significance for Luther to the extent that he even considers the knowledge of the Law as a kind of knowledge of God. Therefore, the interaction and connection between knowledge obtained by reason and by faith in Luther’s thought warrant further exploration in the future.

⁹³⁴ Christopher Boyd Brown, "Introduction to Volume 69," in *Sermons on the Gospel of John: Chapters 17-20*, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown, Luther’s Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), xvii.

⁹³⁵ LW 24:41.

⁹³⁶ Dragseth, "Friendly Grace. The Augustinian Roots of Luther’s Epistemology," 154.

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