Wordy Dogmaticians and Endless Distinctions:
Early Modern Lutheran Christology

Carl Beckwith
Samford University
Beeson Divinity School
Birmingham, Alabama

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IT WAS FASHIONABLE IN FRANCIS PIEPER'S DAY TO criticize the Lutheran dogmaticians, the Formula of Concord, and even our dear Martin Luther himself, for writing and saying too much about the two natures of Christ, the personal union, the communication of attributes, and so on. Not only did they say too much but they offered too many subtle distinctions. Pieper regards this criticism as misguided and thinks it better directed at the false teachers confronted by our Lutheran fathers. And yet even he admits that some of our Lutheran fathers "may have occasionally used more words than were needed.… "[1] We rarely hear such criticism of the dogmaticians today because few people read or talk about them. While we can certainly excuse non-Lutherans from reading the dogmaticians, should we do the same for Lutherans, especially those preparing for ministry or serving in ministry? Should we still read those wordy dogmaticians who talked too much about Jesus? I think we should and the reason we should is the very reason they were criticized. Their wordiness teaches us the importance of words, especially when talking about Jesus.

[1] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, three volumes (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 2:56. The criticism reported by Pieper is not just that the dogmaticians used too many words to discuss the doctrine of Christ but that they said more about the doctrine than needed. Pieper's response to this is fair. The clarification and defense of scripture by the dogmaticians against their opponents required them to say more about these issues than they would have apart from controversy. The doctrinal debates throughout the history of the church show this to always be the case.

Words matter. We need words and often many words to confess, clarify, and defend the scriptures in our preaching and teaching. When I think of early modern Lutheran Christology, I think of brilliant and faithful pastors and professors who used lots of words to explain scripture, distinguishing those words, when necessary, from their common or philosophical use, and offering along the way numerous theological distinctions, often subtle, sometimes obscure, but always for the purpose of faithfully confessing, clarifying, and defending the testimonies of scripture.[2]

Words facilitate knowledge and enable confession and conversation. Misunderstanding arises when others assign the wrong meaning to the words we use. For example, what does the word "bark" mean? Some of you may be thinking of the sound a dog makes; others may be thinking of that which covers the outside of a tree. Lovers of the TLH are thinking of Paul Gerhardt's words from *A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth*: "Thou art my Anchor when by woe / my bark is driven to and fro / on trouble's surging billows" (TLH 142:5). The word "bark" refers to three different things and only context determines that meaning for us. The stakes are considerably higher, of course, when talking about the doctrine of Christ. What does it mean to say that Jesus is true God and true man? Can we really say, as scripture does, that they crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Cor 2:8)? What does it mean to say that God purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28) or that the blood of the Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7)? Scripture says the Word became flesh (John 1:14). Scripture also says that Christ became a

[2] The church fathers and our Lutheran reformers recognized that exhortation and refutation required different words. Scriptural words suffice when teaching or proclaiming the faith in peace; non-scriptural words are necessary when defending the faith and exposing the errors of false teachers. Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Faith*, trans. Jacob N. Van Sickle in *St. Basil the Great: On Christian Ethics* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014), 73–75: "the one who exhorts in sound doctrine and the one who refutes those who speak against it do not say the same things. There is one form of discourse for refutation and another for exhortation. The simplicity of those who confess piety in peace is one thing; the struggles of those who stand against 'the oppositions of knowledge falsely so called' are another. And so in this way, apportioning our words with discretion, we ought everywhere to employ them fittingly for defending or for building up the faith, at one time resisting more contentiously those who diabolically try to undo it and, at another, explaining it more simply and more properly to those who wish to be edified in it, all the while doing nothing else but what was said by the Apostle: 'To know how you must answer each one' (Col 4:6)." A little earlier in this treatise, Basil explains that the use of non-scriptural words to explain scriptural mysteries follows the lead of Paul himself who sometimes made use of "pagan expressions" to make his point (71; cf. Acts 17:28).

curse for us (Gal 3:13). Does "becoming flesh" mean the same thing as "becoming a curse" or is there a distinction between the two?

These are hard questions, but we can ask even harder ones. Christ cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What does it mean for Christ, for the very Son of God, to be forsaken or abandoned by God? How do we confess the indivisible unity and inseparability of Father and Son and the forsakenness of the Son on the cross? Those are really hard questions but there are yet harder ones. Jesus promises the disciples and by extension you and me that "he," Jesus, will be with us always to the end of the age (Matt 28:20). He also tells the disciples that he, the Son of Man, will be seated at the right hand of God (Matt 26:64). St. Paul emphasizes this point: Christ Jesus, the one who died and rose again, he is at the right hand of God interceding for us (Rom 8:34). If the right hand of God is both everywhere and nowhere, which is to say omnipresent, can we say the same about Jesus, the Son of Man? Can we say that Jesus is omnipresent? What would those words even mean?

These questions, raised by scripture, contested throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and indeed still today, require words, lots of words, and careful and subtle theological distinctions to clarify and defend the teaching of scripture. If you care about scripture and faithfully teaching it, then you care about words and the right use of those words to confess who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he continues to do for you and for me. And if you care about these things, I have good news for you, our fathers in the faith, those wordy dogmaticians, have lots of helpful things to say on these very topics. In what follows, I will focus on the hard questions above, on Christ's cry of dereliction and the omnipresence of Christ's human nature, to show this.

The dogmaticians addressed these hard questions by carefully considering the words of scripture and by showing the necessity of theological distinctions to clarify and guard the witness of scripture. These theological distinctions, admittedly subtle at times, derive from the faithful patterns of speech used by the church fathers and medieval schoolmen. Our Lutheran fathers never read scripture apart from the history of the church but always as a part of that history.[3] They not only made use of the church's theological grammar of faith—the church's

[3] See my, "*Sola Scriptura*, the Fathers, and the Church: Arguments from the Lutheran Reformers," *Criswell Theological Review* 16.2 (2019): 49–66. Available online at https://www.beesondivinity.com/directory/Beckwith-Carl.

particular way of speaking, we might say—to teach and to defend the clear and certain testimonies of scripture but also insisted upon it. Philip Melanchthon, as he begins his locus on Christology, rehearsing what we may say and may not say about Christ, writes, "Care behooves the pious, for the sake of harmony, to speak in line with the church. And it was not without good reasons that the ancient church approved some ways of speaking and rejected others. Let us then avoid zeal for caviling and retain the forms received with weighty and true authority."[4] And so we will.

Christ's Cry of Dereliction

In the passion narratives of St. Matthew and St. Mark, Christ cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:46; Mk 15:34)? Jesus, the very Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, attributes God-forsakenness and abandonment to himself. What does it mean for God to abandon God? How may we affirm the indivisible unity of the Trinity and say that the Son and Father, in some sense, are divided from one another at the cross? How can we insist that the two natures of Christ remain inseparably united even here?

Our Lutheran fathers explained these difficult questions by using the insights and patterns of speech passed down by the church fathers and the medieval schoolmen. Cyril of Alexandria, much like our dear Martin Luther, revels in the provocative language of scripture that ascribes divine attributes to the man Jesus and human attributes to the divine Son. When considering all that scripture says about the Incarnate Son of God—that he becomes flesh, that he suffers and dies, that he fears, that he becomes sin and a curse for us—the reader of scripture, insists Cyril, must distinguish between what the Son becomes to *transform* and *heal* and what he becomes to *destroy* and *overcome*. The Son becomes flesh to transform it, to heal it, to render it imperishable and incorruptible; the Son becomes sin and curse to destroy it, to overcome it, to defeat that which separates us from God.[5] Christ truly assumed human nature and became flesh. Christ also truly became sin and a curse for us. He did not, however, become sin in the same way he

[4] Cf. Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, trans. J. A. O. Preus, 2d ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 28. Melanchthon also writes, "We shall omit all arguments about words and simply retain the meaning of the church and use those words which have been already used and accepted in the church without any ambiguity" (p. 16).

[5] Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 56–57, 115.

became flesh. Cyril uses this insight to explain Christ's cry of dereliction. The consequence of sin is separation from God and the cry of dereliction shows that Christ bears the full weight of this sin for us. Cyril's point is this. Christ becomes sin and curse to undo and overcome our sin and the curse of the law. Similarly, Christ takes upon himself our abandonment and overcomes it by his obedience and complete submission for us.[6] He utters these words from the cross "as one of us and on behalf of all our nature."[7] All of this indicates the Son's true humanity and true saving work for us. The faithful find comfort in Christ's cry of dereliction because it shows us that our sin, our abandonment of God, rests upon him, and because we also hear, "It is finished," our warfare is ended, our iniquity pardoned (Isa 40:2).

Although many modern theologians find Cyril's exegesis unsatisfying, it represents a broad patristic insight on the cry of dereliction. Cyril's argument appears already in Gregory of Nazianzus and passes to the Latin west by way of John of Damascus.[8] John distinguishes Cyril's point grammatically. The Son becomes flesh *essentially* but sin and curse *relatively*. John explains:

> [T]here are two appropriations: one that is natural and essential, and one that is personal and relative. The natural and essential one is that by which our Lord in His love for man took on Himself our nature and all our natural attributes, becoming in nature and truth man, and making trial of that which is natural: but the personal and relative appropriation is when any one assumes the person of another relatively, for instance, out of pity or love, and in his place utters words concerning him that have no connection with himself. And it was in this way that our Lord appropriated both our curse

[6] Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 105. See also Bruce Marshall, "The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, eds. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 246–98, particularly 255–56.

[7] Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, 105.

[8] See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 30.5–6, trans. Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 96–97. John's epitome of patristic theology, *On the Orthodox Faith* (*De orthodoxa fide*), served as the principal resource for Greek patristic trinitarian and Christological thought for the medieval schoolmen and the Protestant Reformers. John's influential work was translated into Latin during the 12th century and again at the beginning of the 16th century. Peter Lombard incorporated several quotes from John of Damascus into his discussion of the Trinity and Christology in the *Sentences*. See Irena Backus, "John of Damascus, De Fide Orthodoxa: Translations by Burgundio (1153/54), Grosseteste (1235/40) and Lefèvre d'Etaples (1507)," *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 49 (1986): 211–217.

> and our desertion, and such other things as are not natural: not that He Himself was or became such, but that He took upon Himself our "person" and ranked Himself as one of us.[9]

For John, Christ's cry of dereliction, like becoming sin and curse, belongs to him relatively and shows the truth of the incarnation and his saving work for us.

Although some Lutherans quickly move from John of Damascus to Martin Luther, from the end of the patristic period to the Reformation, ignoring all together the medieval schoolmen, such a move is unwise. You cannot fully appreciate Martin Luther, the Book of Concord, or our dogmaticians if you do this. As I have shown elsewhere, Luther and the dogmaticians inhabited the intellectual world of medieval scholasticism.[10] They eagerly read the schoolmen, most of the time appreciatively but sometimes critically; they knew the patterns of speech and theological distinctions used by them and incorporated them into their classroom teaching. This is especially true for the Trinity but also for Christology and Christ's cry of dereliction.

Thomas Aquinas incorporates the insights and distinctions made by Cyril and John into his consideration of the cross. Thomas emphasizes that Jesus speaks for us and in our person from the cross but further insists that Christ speaks for himself. It is this latter point that will be especially important to our Lutheran fathers. For Thomas, Christ "truly bears our griefs" (Isa 53:4) and endures on the cross a sorrow and suffering unlike any other.[11] When scripture says that Jesus is made a curse for us (Gal 3:13), it means that Christ, the very Son of God, redeemed us from the curse of *guilt* and the curse of *punishment*. He did this by enduring on the cross the punishment and death which came upon us from the curse of sin, making himself an offering for us.[12]

Does Christ's cry of dereliction mean the Father abandoned the Son or that the two natures of Christ are separated in any way? Thomas says no. He writes, "Such forsaking is not to be referred to the dissolving

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[9] John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 3.25. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, ST III.15.1 ad 1 and 2.

[10] Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series, vol. 3 (Fort Wayne, IN: Luther Academy, 2016), 289–309. See also my introduction to *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical Writings*, ed. Carl L. Beckwith (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), vii–xv.

[11] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.46.6c and ad 4.

[12] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Galatians*, 148–149 (Gal 3:13–14), trans. F. R. Larcher and M. L. Lamb (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 71–72.

of the personal union, but to this, that God the Father gave Him up to the Passion: hence 'to forsake' means simply not to protect from persecutors."[13] Thomas' comment brings together two further commitments from Cyril and John that our dogmaticians will repeat. The cry of dereliction does not dissolve the personal union or divide the Father and the Son but rather indicates a "divine permission" that allows and sustains Jesus to bear the sorrow and suffering of the cross.[14]

Martin Luther discusses what it means to say that Christ is a curse and sin for us in his classroom lectures on Galatians in 1531—arguably one of Luther's greatest works.[15] He does so with language indebted to the tradition of the church and reminiscent of both Cyril and John.[16] What does it mean for Paul to say that Christ became a curse for us? Luther writes:

> Paul guarded his words carefully and spoke precisely. And here again a distinction must be made; Paul's words clearly show this. For he does not say that Christ became a curse on His own account, but that He became a curse "for us." Thus the whole emphasis is on the phrase "for us." For Christ is innocent so far as His own Person is concerned; therefore He should not have been hanged from the tree. But because, according to the Law, every thief should have been hanged, therefore, according to the Law of Moses, Christ Himself should have been hanged; for He bore the person of a sinner and a thief—and not of one but of all sinners and thieves….[17]

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[13] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.50.2 ad 1, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 537.

[14] Cf. Cyril, *On the Unity of Christ*, 106: "B: Do you mean it would be foolish and in complete disagreement with the sacred scriptures to think or to say that the assumed man used these human expressions as one who was abandoned by the Word who had been conjoined to him? A: My friend, this would be blasphemy, and a proof of complete madness, but doubtless it would evidently suit those who do not know how to conceive of the matter properly."

[15] For a brief introduction on the significance of these lectures, see *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical Writings*, 198–99, cf. 147–48

[16] On Luther's use of Cyril and John, see Carl L. Beckwith, "Martin Luther's Christological Sources in the Church Fathers," *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Martin Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For a partial list of the library holdings at the University of Wittenberg during Luther's lifetime, see Sachiko Kusukawa, *A Wittenberg University Library Catalogue of 1536* (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1995).

[17] *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical Writings*, 245.

Luther's language closely follows Cyril and John. Christ becomes curse and sin for us, not on his own account, but in our person. Luther continues by emphasizing these two points:

> [A]ll the prophets saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. He is not acting in His own Person now. Now He is not the Son of God, born of the Virgin. But He is a sinner, who has and bears the sin of Paul, the former blasphemer, persecutor, and assaulter; of Peter, who denied Christ; of David, who was an adulterer and a murderer, and who caused the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of the Lord (Rom. 2:24). In short, He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood.[18]

No sooner does Luther say this than he anticipates objections. Some think it absurd to call the Son of God a sinner and a curse. For Luther it is no less absurd to say that the Son of God suffered, was crucified, and died for us. More to the point, this absurdity is our highest comfort. Luther continues:

> John the Baptist called Christ "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). He is, of course, innocent, because He is the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. But because He bears the sins of the world, His innocence is pressed down with the sins and the guilt of the entire world. Whatever sins I, you, and all of us have committed or may commit in the future, they are as much Christ's own as if He Himself had committed them. …And this is our highest comfort, to clothe and wrap Christ this way in my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world, and in this way to behold Him bearing all our sins.[19]

Luther distinguishes between Christ as sinner and curse *essentially* and *relatively*. In his own person, he is not a sinner but in his office as savior he has taken upon himself our sin. As Luther puts it, he bore "the person of all sinners and therefore was made guilty of the sins of the entire world."[20]

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[18] *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical Writings*, 246.
[19] *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical Writings*, 247.
[20] *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical Writings*, 247.

What about the Son's cry of dereliction and the forsakenness of the cross? Luther handles this text more literally than either Cyril or John. Luther, like Thomas Aquinas, wants to affirm the genuineness of this cry from the Son. Luther construes Christ's cry from the cross with Isaiah 54:7–8: "'For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger, for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,' says the Lord, your Redeemer." Luther first reflects on these texts in his early lectures on Hebrews during the 1517–1518 academic year. He understands the cry of dereliction as the temporary withdrawal of the Son's divinity from his humanity. Luther does not explain this; he simply states it and sees the agony and suffering of Jesus in bearing our sins in this moment.[21] Twenty years later, he returns to these texts in a sermon. What Luther taught in the classroom he now preaches to the faithful in Wittenberg. Luther declares:

> There is no doubt that in the spirit David is here looking at Christ as He struggles with death in the garden and cries out on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46.) For that is His real, sublime, spiritual suffering, which no man can imagine or understand. In the garden He Himself says, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death" (Matt. 26:38). This is what He wants to say: "I have such sorrow and anguish that I could die of sorrow and anguish." He withdraws from His disciples about a stone's throw (Luke 22:41), kneels down, and prays. In the prayer He begins to struggle with death, and He prays more fervently. His sweat becomes like drops of blood that fall on the ground. David is talking here about this sublime, spiritual suffering, when Christ fought with death and felt nothing in His heart but that He was forsaken of God. And in fact, He was forsaken by God. This does not mean that the deity was separated from the humanity—for in this person who is Christ, the Son of God and of Mary, deity and humanity are so united that they can never be separated or divided—but that the deity withdrew and hid so that it seemed, and anyone who saw it might say, "This is not God, but a mere man, and a troubled and desperate man at that." The humanity was left alone, the devil had free access to Christ, and the deity withdrew its power and let the humanity fight alone.[22]

[21] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Hebrews*, 1517–18 (LW 29:127–28).
[22] Martin Luther, *Psalm 8*, 1537 (LW 12:126–27).

Luther's language struggles to convey the mystery of the Son's sorrow and anguish, his abandonment and forsakenness. Here faith speaks. Something profound, something sublime, occurs. Luther affirms the reality of what he knows—the true union of two natures in the person of the Son, the true struggle and abandonment of Christ for you and for me.

Melanchthon and the dogmaticians bring together Luther's insights and the broader tradition of the church. Melanchthon glosses "forsakenness" as divine permission and appeals to Irenaeus' language of the Logos "resting", which is to say, not exerting the divine power to reject the suffering and death.[23] Martin Chemnitz and John Gerhard repeat these explanations from Luther and Melanchthon and show at length how this is the teaching of the Fathers, citing especially texts from Cyril and John.[24] The dogmaticians use the language of "resting" and divine permission to explain the cry of dereliction but also to emphasize the unity of Christ's natures in the work of the cross. Martin Chemnitz explains this at length. Both the divine and human natures were active and at work, so to say, for us on the cross. Chemnitz writes:

> It is one thing to speak of the suffering and death of Christ as a property of the human nature, and it is another thing that through this suffering and death the wrath of God is placated, the head of the serpent crushed, death destroyed, life restored, and captives liberated. For these are all activities of the divine power, and they are not accomplished apart from the flesh.[25]

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[23] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.19.3 (PG 7, 941A).

[24] Martin Chemnitz, *On the Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 223–24; Johann Gerhard, *On Christ: Theological Commonplaces, Exegesis IV*, trans., Richard Dinda (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 196. See also Cyril, *Dialogus* VI.605–607 (SC 246, 66–68); John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 3.14, 3.19, 3.20.

[25] Martin Chemnitz, *On the Two Natures in Christ*, 222 (translation altered). Chemnitz clarifies his understanding of Christ's cry of dereliction by using a quote from Irenaeus. According to Irenaeus, the Logos remained quiet (ἡσυχάζειν) so that the human nature could be crucified and die. This does not mean, explains Chemnitz, that the Logos was in any way absent. Rather the Logos was "present with the suffering nature, and by His power and activity He caused it to be able to bear the wrath of God which was poured out upon the person, and through the suffering to conquer sin, the devil, death, and the wrath and curse of God, with the result that there was a kind of alliance (συμμαχία) between the divine and human natures in the work of our redemption" (224).

The cross and all that it entails is the work of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the very Son of God, begotten of the Father in eternity, born of the Virgin Mary in time. Although a profound mystery, the cross reveals not a separation or division of Christ's two natures, not a breach of divine unity between Father and Son, but in a sublime way both the common and inseparable work of the Trinity and the proper work of the Son for us and our salvation.

Omnipresence and Christ's Human Nature

It is sometimes said that there were more theological works written on the Lord's Supper during the sixteenth century than any other topic. This is true but misleading. The real point of contention, the issue that divided the reformers more than any other, was Christology. If you want to understand why the various groups disagreed on the Lord's Supper, you need to look to their Christology. A church's liturgical celebration of the Lord's Supper—what you say, what you do, and how often you do it—enacts or practices your Christology, it is the fruit or expression of your Christological commitments. The chief disagreement on Christology, as seen especially with the Lord's Supper, had to do with Jesus and where he is. What does Jesus mean when he says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20); or "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20); or "I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power" (Matt 26:64). To answer those questions, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, required you to say something about the omnipresence of the man Jesus. To state the matter simply, on Ascension Day the Reformed "retired" the man Jesus to heaven but the Lutherans put him to work. For the Reformed, the Son of Man rests in heaven while the Son of God governs and rules creation at the right hand of God. The Lutherans strongly rejected this idea as contrary to scripture and the church's faith that the two natures of Christ, as expressed at Chalcedon, are without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation. For the Lutherans, wherever the Word is, the flesh is, and therefore whatever the Word does, the man Jesus does.

It is safe to say that no issue created more polemical heat than the Lutheran insistence that Christ's human nature received divine majesty, power, and wisdom through the personal union. Although this communication of majesty, termed the *genus maiestaticum* by Johann Quenstedt, occurred immediately at conception, as the whole fullness of

the Godhead dwelt bodily in the baby Jesus (Col 2:9), the full or plenary use of this majesty by Christ occurs only in his state of exaltation to the right hand of God.[26] Our Lutheran fathers, armed with scripture and an unwavering insistence on the personal or hypostatic union, never hesitated to attribute omnipresence to the man Jesus in both his state of humiliation and state of exaltation. The issue of Jesus' omnipresence, the source of bitter arguments on all sides, demanded a careful presentation of words and distinctions to clarify the witness of scripture and to confess rightly one of the greatest mysteries of our faith, the Word made flesh.[27]

After completing thirty-four volumes of his *Theological Commonplaces*, John Gerhard discovered he still had more to say. He returned to the first four topics—scripture, the nature of God, the Trinity, and the person and work of Christ—and offered a more extensive and detailed consideration of these topics. These so-called *Exegesis* volumes were published in 1625 as the final installments of Gerhard's *Theological Commonplaces*. Gerhard addresses omnipresence briefly in the volume on God and at length in the volume on Christ. In both volumes, his argument is polemical and aimed at refuting the false characterization of the Lutherans by the Jesuits and the Calvinists. They charge the Lutherans, the Ubiquitarians, as they call them, with attributing omnipresence and therefore infinity and immensity to Christ's human nature. The notion that a finite human nature could possess omnipresence, infinity, and immensity seemed monstrous and absurd to them. And indeed, it is monstrous and utter nonsense if we assert what the Jesuits and Calvinists say. But words have meaning, context matters, and saying something does not make it true.

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[26] FC VIII.26 (Tappert, 596): "He had this majesty immediately at his conception even in his mother's womb, but, as the apostle testifies (Phil 2:7), he laid it aside, and as Dr. Luther explains it, he kept it hidden during the state of his humiliation and did not use it at all times, but only when he wanted to."

[27] FC VIII.33 (Tappert, 597): "Next to the article of the holy Trinity, the greatest mystery in heaven and on earth is the personal union, as Paul says, 'Great indeed is the mystery of our religion: God was manifested in the flesh' (1 Tim 3:16)." Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 8.18, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 47: "Heaven, earth, the greatness of the seas, the creatures that live in the waters and the animals on dry land, plants, stars, air, time, and the diverse and ordered regulation of the whole cosmos—all this does not show an abundance of strength as much as the infinite God being able to join himself to death through the flesh without suffering, in order by his own suffering to give us freedom from suffering."

Gerhard responds with several important distinctions—some of which will now sound familiar to you. He begins by noting that omnipresence may be taken as either an *essential* or *relative* attribute. If taken essentially, omnipresence refers to God as he is in himself and may be used interchangeably with other essential attributes like infinity or immensity. If taken relatively, the word expresses God's *presence* in relation to all things in heaven and on earth, preserving and governing them by his power (Josh 2:11; Ps 139:7–10; Jer 23:24; Amos 9:2–3). Whether God created or not, we might say, he would still be without limit and measure, or infinite and immense. Omnipresence, on the other hand, chiefly refers to relation for Gerhard, to God's presence with all things in all places and that assumes creation.[28] Gerhard labors this point precisely because the Jesuits and Calvinists insist that the *cause* of omnipresence is immensity and infinity, such that anything said to be omnipresent must also be immense and infinite. Therefore, for them, to attribute omnipresence to Christ's human nature requires you to say further that his humanity is also without limit and measure. Gerhard disagrees.

The charge brought by the Jesuits and Calvinists relies on a philosophical assumption that Gerhard rejects. The church fathers, particularly the Cappadocians, Martin Luther, and our beloved dogmaticians insist that theology and philosophy work differently and arrive at their respective truths differently.[29] For this reason, the theologian must distinguish how words work in ordinary speech and how they work in scripture. As Luther insists in his disputation on the divinity and humanity of Christ, theology has its own rules.[30] Words receive new signification in Christ by the Holy Spirit and therefore the theologian

[28] Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, *Theological Commonplaces: Exegesis II*, trans. Richard Dinda (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), §181, pp. 175–76; Gerhard, *On Christ*, §218, p. 228: "omnipresence…is a relative attribute."

[29] See Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius*, 1.6 and 2.8 (contrast between common uses of words and scriptural use of words) and 1.9 (contrast of Aristotle and scripture). George of Trebizond translated Basil of Caesarea's *Contra Eunomium* into Latin in 1442 and revised the translation in 1467/68. The humanist circle around Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples published in Paris in 1520 a revised edition of *Contra Eunomium*, along with Basil's *Hexaemeron*, Gregory of Nazianzus' funeral oration for Basil, several sermons and letters by Basil, and Rufinus' adaptation and collation of Basil's rules. The use of the Cappadocians by Luther and the dogmaticians deserves more attention than it has been given. For a recent exploration of this topic, see H. Ashely Hall, *Philip Melanchthon and the Cappadocians: A Reception of Greek Patristic Sources in the Sixteenth Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

[30] Martin Luther, *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (1540), WA 39/2, 111.7. For a translation of the disputation, see Mitchell Tolpingrud, "Luthers

will at times speak differently and indeed more properly than the philosopher (cf. 1 Cor 2:12–13).[31] This means that what is true in philosophy is not necessarily true in theology. This explains, in large measure, the difference between Gerhard and his opponents on the topic at hand.

Gerhard responds to his opponents by insisting that Lutherans do not attribute omnipresence to Christ's human nature; scripture does. Gerhard continues by clarifying what scripture attributes to Christ's human nature and by defending it against the philosophical arguments of the Calvinists and Jesuits. Although the philosopher might insist that where there is omnipresence there must be immensity and infinity, scripture does not. Similarly, the philosopher might argue that the finite is not capable of the infinite; such a notion appears utterly unreasonable. Faith knows otherwise and confesses that the infinite Word became finite flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14) or, as St. Paul puts it, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" in the man Jesus (Col 2:9).[32] Our dear Paul even says that the infinite Holy Spirit dwells within the finite faithful (Rom 8:9–11). Reason knows nothing about this, but faith does. Indeed, faith knows more than reason as the source of faith is greater than the source of reason.[33]

Disputation Concerning the Divinity and the Humanity of Christ," *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996): 151–78 and now LW 73:254–80.

[31] WA 39/2, 94.17–18, 96.38–39, 103.1–11. Martin Chemnitz notes that the church often uses words derived from the common language of people and not scripture. The church uses these common terms differently and assigns a meaning to them that reflects the meaning and intention of scripture. He writes, "The church for good and sufficient reasons from time to time must adopt certain terms and make changes in their meaning … [B]ecause the church speaks about things which are unknown to our reason, it uses these words in a somewhat different sense." Chemnitz has in mind the trinitarian terms "essence" and "person" but we could also say this about words like "peace" and "love" and "freedom." The world uses these words differently than scripture. Believers determine their proper meaning from scripture. Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 1:100; Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, 7–8, 20–21. See also note 2 above.

[32] Cf. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:206, "Divine omnipresence, as everyone must admit, is certainly not greater than is 'all the fullness of the Godhead.' Now, if 'all the fullness of the Godhead' dwells in the human nature as in its body (σωματικῶς), then most assuredly divine omnipresence, too, can find sufficient room in it."

[33] Cf. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, 23: "When faith and reason become separated both suffer; when faith no longer orders and directs reason, irrationality and anarchy follow. The separation of faith and reason belongs to modernity and especially to our day. For the fourth-century fathers, particularly Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus, and for our Lutheran reformers, we depend on faith to know God." Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, insists that faith must always lead reason because of the feebleness of reason. Only faith knows what surpasses reason (Oration 28.28) and therefore,

How does the distinction between an essential and relative attribute help Gerhard explain Christ's omnipresence? First, the distinction allows Gerhard to free omnipresence from infinity and immensity. Although it is true that God apart from creation is omnipresent, the word quickly loses its significance. Present to whom or to what, Gerhard wonders? Second, as John of Damascus and Martin Luther before him, Gerhard expresses essential attribute as natural and relative as personal. This language, the church's grammar of faith, as we might call it, allows him to clarify how scripture attributes omnipresence to the man Jesus. Gerhard explains:

> we do not say that Christ as man is omnipresent naturally and essentially nor through His own nature and essence, but personally, that is, insofar as His assumed human nature is raised up into the infinite hypostasis of the Word and is placed at the right hand of the heavenly Father in its exaltation.[34]

Gerhard's entire argument is here summarized—so long as we understand the meaning of the words he uses. Christ as man is omnipresent not essentially but personally. That's his argument. His proof follows: Christ as man is omnipresent because of the personal or hypostatic union with the Word *and* his exaltation to the right hand of the Father. Again, Gerhard writes:

> we by no means claim that Christ as man is *essentially* omnipresent. Instead, we claim that He is *personally* omnipresent, that is, not through and because of an immensity of His human essence but because of its utterly pure union with the Word and its exaltation to the right hand of God, which is contained by no inclusion of place.[35]

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as Gregory famously puts it, "faith gives fullness to reason" (Oration 29.21). Reason and faith coexist in such a way that it is only ever faith's reason or reason's faith.

[34] Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, §182, p. 176.

[35] Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, §182, p. 177. Chemnitz offers a helpful distinction on this point: "There is and remains a great generic difference between the divine and the human nature. For the divine nature of the Logos, essentially or in essence, in, according to, and through itself, by nature, in its very being (τῷ εἶναι), is life-giving, omnipotent, and omniscient, indeed it is life and omnipotence itself. But the assumed human nature in Christ is in no way life-giving or omnipotent, essentially, or in essence, in or through itself, by nature, formally, or in its very being (τῷ εἶναι) but only by possession (τῷ ἔχειν), that is, because it possesses the divine majesty and power of the Logos personally united to itself; and by virtue of the Logos which is wholly united with it, it makes all things alive, knows all, can do all, just as hot iron by virtue of its union with the fire can glow and give heat" (*On the Two Natures in Christ*, 293).

Here again we encounter all the main elements of Gerhard's argument: a distinction between essential and personal omnipresence and his two chief proofs, the personal or hypostatic union and the exaltation to the right hand of God. For some of you this sounds familiar. Gerhard's argument, as we would expect, closely follows Article 8 of the Formula of Concord. The difference lies in the theological distinctions used by Gerhard and derived from the history of the church to further clarify what the Formula confesses.

Gerhard continues with more distinctions. Just as the theologian needs to distinguish omnipresence as an essential or relative attribute, he must also distinguish the modes of God's presence. Gerhard, following the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, regards the personal and inseparable union of two natures in Christ as categorically unique. Gerhard appeals to Peter Lombard and his *Sentences* to explain this. God is present *generally* to all creatures, whom he preserves and governs (Jer 23:24; Acts 17:27); he is present *specially* by grace to his saints in this life and by glory in the life to come; and he is present *excellently* or *uniquely* by which "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" in the man Jesus (Col 2:9).[36] Gerhard insists that the personal union is categorically different from all other modes of divine presence described in scripture and, it goes without saying, known to philosophy. It is one-of-a-kind, singular, incomparable. We can point to nothing in ourselves or in creation that fully expresses this sort of presence. It exceeds our best insights and words. It is an article of faith. That does not mean we have nothing to say about this unique and excellent union, but it does mean we proceed with humility and faith.

Gerhard describes, as best he can, the union of Word and flesh and how it relates to omnipresence. He starts with apophatic words—words that express truth by way of privation, by way of what we know from our own temporal and spatial existence, which allows us to say, God is not that. For Gerhard the unique and one-of-a-kind personal union is nonlocal and indissoluble. To say the personal union is nonlocal is to say, for Gerhard, that there is no place where the union fails: "the Word is not outside the flesh nor the flesh outside the Word."[37] It is

[36] Gerhard, *On the Nature of God*, §187, p. 181; cf. Martin Chemnitz, *On the Two Natures in Christ*, 425.

[37] Gerhard, *On Christ*, §218, p. 227: "nec ὁ λόγος est extra carnem, nec caro extra λόγον…" Cf. Martin Luther, *Confession concerning Christ's Supper*, 1528 (LW 37:218–19): "if you could show me one place where God is and not the man, then the person is already divided and I could at once say truthfully, 'Here is God who is not man and has never become man.' But no God like that for me! For it would follow from this

indissoluble, as Chalcedon insists, and therefore wherever you find the Word, you find the assumed humanity.

Although Gerhard's description of Christ's personal union sounds overly scholastic, it allows him to make a further distinction. This time with less technical language. Christ's omnipresence may be described inwardly or outwardly.[38] It is described inwardly when viewed from the perspective of the indissoluble union and the presence of the united natures to one another. Gerhard explains:

> The Word is never and nowhere absent from His flesh nor the flesh absent from the Word. Rather, wherever the Word is, there it is not without flesh but is incarnate, dwelling in His own flesh, which has been personally united to Himself.[39]

This understanding of omnipresence is a consequence of the personal union and may never be doubted. Gerhard acknowledges that most people do not think of omnipresence inwardly. They don't deny what is said about it but don't usually use the word in that way. Most people think of omnipresence outwardly, as viewed from the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God, preserving and governing all things in heaven and on earth.

What, then, does it mean for Christ to sit at the right hand of God? This is hard to explain, and Gerhard wisely stays close to the words of scripture. The right hand of God, according to scripture, is the right hand of power (Matt 26:64) and majesty (Heb 1:3). It is God's throne of glory (Matt 25:31; cf. Heb 8:1 and 12:2) from which he exercises his divine power, majesty, and dominion in heaven and on earth.[40] Here scripture refers not to a finite, circumscribed place, indeed, not to a place at all but rather all places at once. The one who sits in this place, which is both nowhere and everywhere at the same time, is the risen and exalted Christ, as he is, in the communion of his natures and the unity of his

that space and place had separated the two natures from one another and thus had divided the person, even though death and all the devils had been unable to separate and tear them apart. This would leave me a poor sort of Christ, if he were present only at one single place, as a divine and human person, and if at all other places he had to be nothing more than a mere isolated God and a divine person without the humanity. No, comrade, wherever you place God for me, you must also place the humanity for me." See also Martin Chemnitz, Timothy Kirchner, Nicolaus Selnecker, *Apology of the Book of Concord*, trans. James L. Langebartels (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 147–48.

[38] Gerhard, *On Christ*, §218, p. 228.

[39] Gerhard, *On Christ*, §219, p. 229.

[40] Gerhard, *On Christ*, §220, pp. 231–32.

person. Scripture makes this abundantly clear. According to St. Paul, the Father of glory "raised him [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:20–23). St. Peter, in fewer words, writes that "Jesus Christ" has ascended to heaven "and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him" (1 Pet 3:21–22). These two texts show that Christ, *as he is*, as God and man in one person, governs and reigns at the right hand of God, which is neither local nor circumscribed, exercising his divine power, majesty, and dominion, as Gerhard puts it, "in a heavenly way" and not an earthly way.[41]

Scripture, which never deceives, aligns these two seemingly incompatible things and insists that they be understood together. Reason has no footing here and must give way to faith. As the right hand of God is neither local nor circumscribed, just so is this sitting of the crucified and risen Christ; as the sitting of Christ is real and according to his humanity, just so he is at the right hand of God.[42] The human mind, of course, struggles to understand how Jesus sits at the right hand of God because we only know and experience local presence and local sitting. Christ certainly exercised this sort of presence. He was in the womb of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:42), born in the little town of Bethlehem (Matt 2:1), and worshipped by wise men from the east (Matt 2:11). He was held in the arms of Simeon (Luke 2:28) and himself held a small child (Mark 9:36). He sat by the well of Jacob in Samaria because he was tired and thirsty (John 4:5), and yet he is the one who quenches all thirst (John 7:37). Crowds pressed in to touch him (Luke 6:19) and he invited Thomas to touch and see his pierced hands (John 20:27), the very hands that had touched and healed a leper (Matt 8:3), hands that had held Jairus' daughter by hand and returned her to life (Mark 5:41). He walked on water (John 6:19) but he also walked to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32). And there the hands that had once scribbled messages in the dirt (John 8:6) and the feet that had walked so many miles with the disciples were nailed to a cross (John 20:25). These things happened, in definite places, at definite times.

[41] Gerhard, *On Christ*, §221, p. 233.

[42] Cf. FC Ep VII.12 (Tappert, 483): "God's right hand is everywhere. Christ, really and truly set at this right hand of God according to his human nature, rules presently and has in his hands and under his feet everything in heaven and on earth."

Scripture, of course, has more to say about our Lord. The resurrected Jesus, who invited Thomas to touch his hands and side, to see his wounds, also walked through closed doors (John 20:19). On the road to Emmaus, as he walked with Cleopas and the other disciple, he opened the scriptures and interpreted to them all things about his suffering and resurrection from Moses and all the prophets. He sat at table with them and taking bread, he blessed it and broke it, and as he gave it to them, their eyes were opened and "he vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:31). Even before the resurrection Jesus did this sort of thing, vanishing from his enemies, and, as scripture puts it, "going through the midst of them" (John 8:59; Luke 4:30). These few examples demonstrate for Gerhard and our other dogmaticians that the personal union is categorically different from all other modes of presence known and experienced by us.

At times Jesus exhibits the sort of presence we know, the sort of presence we have. At other times he does not. We no more understand how Christ can pass through closed doors than we can his vanishing from the midst of his enemies. And yet both happened; both are true. Much less do we understand his even more exalted presence at the right hand of God or how he fills all things and yet scripture says its true and faith agrees. Here faith leads the way, ordering our reason, and resisting the philosopher's reasoned faith and doubts. As our dear Martin Luther colorfully puts it, "if you cannot think in higher and other terms than [what reason offers], then sit behind the stove and stew pears and apples and leave such subjects alone."[43]

Let me end by returning to the objection of the Jesuits and Calvinists. If we say that divine omnipresence is communicated to Jesus' human nature, don't we also have to say that all the divine attributes were communicated to Christ's human nature? Aren't the Jesuits and Calvinists right to insist that where we find omnipresence, we also find infinity and immensity and all the other attributes of the indivisible divine nature? That depends on what you mean. For starters, as I emphasized above, Lutherans do not attribute divine attributes to Christ's human nature; scripture does. A careful reading of scripture shows that Christ's human nature exercises, at times, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and the quickening powers of judgment and life. Lutherans confess what scripture teaches, as best we are able.

You are thinking, okay, that sounds pious but that doesn't answer the question. Does Christ receive only some attributes and not others?

[43] Martin Luther, *Confession concerning Christ's Supper*, 1528 (LW 37:220).

Does that not undermine our trinitarian commitment to the indivisible and simple essence of God? Do we sacrifice our confession of the Trinity for the sake of our Christology? No, we confess and teach what scripture reveals to us. When we consider the divine attributes absolutely or essentially, they are indivisible and inseparable. God is not one part wise, one part holy, one part righteous, but indivisibly and simply one. When scripture says the fullness of the deity dwells bodily in the man Jesus, it means all and not part of the divine essence. Since eternity, immensity, and infinity necessarily belong to the fullness of God, then they too are communicated personally, not essentially, to the human nature of Christ. And yet, scripture never directly attributes immensity, infinity, and eternity to the human nature of Christ. And here a theological distinction needs to be made to convey the truth of scripture. Johann Quenstedt, Gerhard's nephew, provides just such a tidy distinction for us. He writes: "It is properly said that *all* divine attributes are communicated to the human nature, likewise, *certain* ones, and *none*."[44] Quenstedt explains that we say *all* when talking about the fullness of the deity dwelling bodily in Christ; *certain* when confessing the attributes named by scripture; and *none* when talking about the essential attributes of Christ's human nature. Quenstedt's efficient distinction stays faithful to scripture, expressing what we confess and do not confess about the communication of divine attributes to the human nature of Christ.[45]

Conclusion

Words and theological distinctions matter. Because people often assign a false meaning to the salutary words of scripture, it falls to the faithful, especially to those who preach and teach, to be attentive to the

[44] Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica* or *Systema Theologicum*, II.3.2 q. 10 (Wittenberg: Johannis Ludolphi Quenstedii, 1701), 159: "Recte dicitur; *Omnia* attributa divina esse naturae humanae communicata, item, *Quaedam*, *Nulla*."

[45] Cf. Martin Chemnitz, Timothy Kirchner, Nicolaus Selnecker, *Apology of the Book of Concord*, 125: "The words 'the whole fullness of Deity' conclusively prove that all the properties of the Deity, as they are called, and not only some dwell in the assumed human nature. All of these dwell in the assumed human nature because of the personal union, as Paul writes. Nevertheless, Scripture nowhere says that eternity, infinity, and being a spirit are communicated to the assumed human nature in the same way it speaks about omnipotent power, making alive, conducting the final judgment, forgiving sins, cleansing from sins, being adored, etc. Therefore, we simply leave it there and go no further than Scripture enlightens us. …When we have God's Word for us saying that something was given, there we also say that this happened. God's Word cannot lie. But where it is silent, there we also are silent." Cf. Martin Chemnitz, *On the Two Natures in Christ*, 308.

pattern of sound or healthy doctrine given in scripture and guarded throughout the history of the church. As Martin Luther astutely observed, "error lies in meaning not words."[46] The theologian clarifies, as best he can, the meaning of the words of scripture with theological distinctions, often derived from the history of the church. Basil of Caesarea thought this task so important that he claimed it belonged to the calling of all believers. For Basil right knowledge of God comes through the scriptures and the faithful learn this through right teaching. He continues, "Speech, though, is the beginning of teaching, and the parts of speech are syllables and words. So, the investigation of syllables [and words] does not fall outside the goal [of our calling]."[47] It is safe to say that our wordy dogmaticians fully embraced Basil's wise words about their calling. May we too embrace this calling and hope to be accused by others of talking too much about Jesus. LSQ

[46] Martin Luther, *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi*, 1540 (WA 39/2:109.21–22).

[47] Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 1.2 (Hildebrand, 28).