

THE NARROW LUTHERAN MIDDLE

Following the Scriptural Road

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NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2008935156
Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
www.nph.net
© 2011 by Northwestern Publishing House
Published 2011
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 978-0-8100-2344-4

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PREFACE

Some people say that the Bible is too hard for anyone to understand. They are both right and wrong. They are right if they expect to grasp and fathom with fallen reason everything that God has to say in his Word. Indeed, such an expectation should appear to us as foolish and irrational on the face of it. For what do we have in the Bible? Nothing less than God's revelation of his own mind and heart and will. If mere mortals could plumb the depths of the mind of God and fully comprehend it, they would be God's equals; they would in fact have achieved what Eve hoped to get when she imagined that with sin she could acquire the very essence of God and his wisdom. And we all know how that turned out!

So, yes, in one sense the Bible is indeed difficult to understand, since in it God shows us his own unfathomable being and wisdom. We will never fully grasp those things, even to the limited extent that God has revealed them in his Word. St. Paul admitted that too. He reminds us that while we are here on earth we know God, ourselves, and all truth only in part; we wait for heaven for our knowledge to become complete (1 Corinthians 13:12). But unlike the lazy person or the scoffer who dismisses the Bible because he cannot completely comprehend the mind of God revealed in it, St. Paul rejoices in what God reveals there. He can never get enough of it. He worships a God who is bigger than we are and wiser than we can comprehend (Romans 11:33-36). Could it be that even in heaven we will know and understand only as much as a creature can ever know or understand? Could it be that even in heaven the peak of our knowledge and understanding will consist chiefly in this, that in heaven we will be more fully in awe of the wisdom and knowledge of God?

God himself tells us that we should not expect to fully fathom his divine mind and way of thinking. He tells us through the

prophet Isaiah: “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8,9). The really beautiful thing about this passage is that God speaks these words with special reference to the heart and core of the gospel: the almighty and the holy God calls pitiful, weak, sinful man to repentance; and he *wants* to forgive and receive mere mortals into his fellowship and blest communion—that is not the way *our* reasoning would go. But God’s divine mind, his perfect and holy reasoning, most happily for us goes way beyond what we would ever reason! Most blessedly for us, his reasoning is as far away from ours as heaven from earth! God be forever praised and adored that it is so! So, yes, in a sense those people are right who say that the Bible is hard to understand.

But in another sense, those who say that the Bible is hard, too hard, to understand are as wrong as they could be. At the very beginning of Isaiah’s book, God puts the heart and core of the Bible’s message so simply, and he does so with an expression of his own divine reasoning: “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’” (Isaiah 1:18). What could be more simple? It is as simple as John 3:16, as 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, as 1 John 2:1,2: God forgives sin because his own Son paid its dread penalty; God welcomes and embraces the penitent; God gives eternal life to those who believe that saving message.

There is nothing difficult or complicated about those sentences. They are within the grasp of the most simple among us, yes, of even an infant newly baptized. And at the same time, they are so profound that only the miracle of the Holy Spirit working through those very simple words could bring us to believe them. That is the way it is with the gospel that is the heart and core of the Bible, of the very mind and heart of God. It is, as one ancient church father said, a water so simple that a child can swim in it and, at the same time, so deep that an elephant could drown in it.

Others say that the Bible contradicts itself. Such people then dismiss the Bible altogether as the work of men with varying and inconsistent opinions, a book therefore worthy of no more respect

than any other book. Or they try with their fallen reason to reconcile what they consider its contradictions and end up denying some truths and overemphasizing others to the point of turning even those into errors. Whichever path those go who contend that the Bible contradicts itself, they share in one common error: They begin with the conviction that the Bible is not the verbally inspired and therefore inerrant Word of God himself. Only with such a denial of the divine source of the Scriptures could they dare to declare that God doesn't quite know what he is talking about or that he contradicts himself and needs our help in straightening out the tangled web of his Word.

We, however, have the Spirit-worked conviction that the Spirit has worked through the Word itself, that the Bible is the very Word of God. The Holy Spirit through his Word has brought us to accept in childlike faith the truth that God has breathed the words of that holy, that unique Book. It is therefore, in everything that it says, profitable for doctrine, for faith, for life, and for life eternal (2 Timothy 3:15,16).

It is in that conviction that the following chapters and pages have been written. We want to examine some of those teachings of the Bible that so many have found either too difficult or have declared to be contradictory. We want to examine them in the light of all that God's Word says about those teachings. It will not be our purpose to resolve every difficulty to the satisfaction of fallen reason. It will not be our purpose to dismiss some things that the Bible says in favor of other things that seem more reasonable to us. Rather, this is our intent: We want to see how God himself in his Word balances truths and does that invariably to our advantage. We want to consider how one truth is made the more clear and blessed for us by another truth that at first glance may seem to be at variance with the first truth. We will do that in the confidence that God does not lie to us or deceive us in his Word. We will do it in the certainty that whatever God teaches us in his Word is in perfect harmony with who he is, what we are, and what we so desperately need for life and for life eternal. Like Mary, we wish only to sit at Jesus' feet and receive from him in his Word grace heaped upon grace (Luke 10:38-42; John 1:16). If this book accomplishes that purpose for you, then you will join its author in still more gladly singing with the church over the centuries:

How precious is the Book divine,
By inspiration giv'n!
Bright as a lamp its doctrines shine
To guide our souls to heav'n.

Its light, descending from above
Our gloomy world to cheer,
Displays a Savior's boundless love
And brings his glories near.

It shows to us our wand'ring ways
And where our feet have trod
But brings to view the matchless grace
Of a forgiving God.

This lamp through all the dreary night
Of life shall guide our way
Till we behold the clearer light
Of an eternal day. (CW 284)

1

So What's the Problem?

Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.) said in one of the most important and influential books ever written, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, that the goal of life is happiness. He defined *happiness* as the virtuous soul engaged in virtuous actions. But what is virtue? There are many virtues, said Aristotle, and most of them are in the middle between two opposite vices. The trick is to find and hold the middle between the two vices. The vices, he said, are often an overdoing or an overemphasis on some particular aspect of a virtue. Thus, for example, liberality or generosity is a virtue in the middle between stinginess on one side and wasteful prodigality on the other side. Find and practice the golden mean in the middle and, with respect to money, you will be happy—or at least that's what Aristotle thought.

In religion and theology there is something of a parallel to Aristotle's search for the middle between two false alternatives, between an overemphasis on some aspect of a truth at the

expense of the rest of the truth. Any number of false doctrines are the result of falls off the narrow middle road into ditches on either side of the truth in the middle. See how clever the devil is: Often he does not make a frontal assault on the truths of God's Word. Rather, he prefers to take a bit of truth and distort it until it becomes a lie; he does that by emphasizing only one aspect of the truth at the expense of the whole truth. With the grain of truth that he has corrupted, a grain that he uses to make his lie believable, he seduces unguarded souls into error and even unbelief; he pushes them from the narrow middle into the ditches on either side of the truth.

He even tried that ploy with Jesus. In the temptation of Jesus recorded in Matthew 4:5-7, the devil quoted the Bible, from Psalm 91:11,12. The devil held before Jesus the truth that God promises to protect his children. He urged Jesus to put God's promise to the test by throwing himself down from the peak of the temple; if God was faithful to his promise, then no harm should come to Jesus. There was a grain of truth in what the devil said. But Jesus saw the perversion of truth that was at the heart of Satan's temptation. In the first place, Satan left out an important part of the passage that he quoted. God's promise in Psalm 91 is that he will guard you *in all your ways*. The assumption of the psalm is that our ways will be in accord with God's Word. God does not promise his help and protection for us when our ways are no longer his ways. He does not promise his protection so that we can sin boldly and successfully.

Jesus' answer to the devil was, of course, perfect. He declared the truth of God's Word in Deuteronomy 6:16. Jesus, on the basis of that Word of God, answered that we are not to test God's promises to see if God will be faithful; rather, we are to trust his Word as we go about doing *his will in accord with his Word*. Trust in the promise of God is the middle. Doubt, which holds only to part of the promise, is the ditch on one side of that middle. Presumption, which makes use of the promise in a sinful way, is the ditch on the other side. (We will consider this particular stretch on the narrow middle road in greater detail in the next chapter.)

Examples of temptations to overemphasize one aspect of the truth to the point that it becomes an error abound. Some, for example, so emphasize the grace and love of God that they deny

the existence of hell and teach that all will eventually end up in heaven. They make God's love into a license to sin boldly¹; it is as though God redeemed us by his blood so that we could continue comfortably in our sins without either repentance or any struggle against the flesh. For if we all end up in heaven anyway, why bother with the struggle against sin and temptation? Indeed, why bother with his Word and sacraments at all?

Others fall into still other ditches along the way. They overemphasize the justice and power of God to the point that they end up setting a limit on the grace of God. But if God's grace has a limit, how can I ever be sure that it extends even to me and covers all of *my* sin and guilt? Yes, and if God's grace does not extend to all, where can I look for some assurance that it extends to me? Despair of God's grace must be our lot when conscience accuses us; conscience should have no difficulty in convincing us that our faith and our works are never good enough to merit even the smallest particle of our salvation. The only alternative for those not satisfied with the Bible's teaching that salvation is altogether the gift of grace on account of Christ's merit is yet another ditch; if God's grace and Christ's merit are not sufficient to save me, then there must be something in me that must make up for whatever grace does not cover. I must add my works or my best efforts or my faith to Christ's work as causes of salvation. To put it another way, Christ has made my salvation possible; now I must finish the job. Both ditches are perilous indeed. Despair and self-righteousness alike are the opposites of faith.

So then, there is a narrow middle road between these two errors: the one which so emphasizes grace that it perverts it into a license to sin and the other which so emphasizes God's justice that it either places a limit on God's grace or requires me to do something to aid in my own salvation. (Despair and self-righteousness are, after all, two sides of the same coin.) Each of

¹ St. Bernard opines that this was the essence of Satan's fall: He did not doubt that God was almighty and could punish him for his pride; rather, he presumed that God was so gentle that he would not punish him, even though he could. Such presumption, Bernard says, is even worse than failing to love God; it repays God's love with hatred. (Cf. "On the Steps of Humility and Pride," in *Bernard of Clairvaux—Selected Works* [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], p. 127.)

those errors holds on to only part of a truth at the expense of the whole. Each error misses the middle and ends up turning truth into error to the great harm of both Christian faith and life. The truth in the middle is that there is no reason to despair since Christ has done it all; the truth in the middle is that our life is a grateful response to the gift of salvation, not an effort to complete it.

It is the narrow middle road that we will seek to find and travel in this book. We undertake such a search with the awareness that the task is urgent and that failure in our quest threatens our faith. Jesus bids us to enter on this task with his own warning of the danger to our souls if we fail to find and walk that narrow middle road. He warns against the ditches and points to the ease with which one can fall into them when he urges us to “enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13,14).

As we begin our search and our journey, it may be well to ask a few basic preliminary questions. Why is it, for example, that so many fall into the ditches? How come so few find that narrow middle road that leads to life and life eternal? And just as important, how can we know that we ourselves are not already in one of the ditches? Or how can we be sure that we will not fall off the narrow middle road at some time in the future?

Why do so many end up in the ditches?

The short answer to the question of why so many end up in the ditches is this: They listened to their reason and let reason take control where the Word of God should have been in control.

Reason, to be sure, is one of the greatest gifts that God has given to us. It is second after the gospel in Word and sacraments with its faith-creating message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ and his work for our salvation. God wants us to use the precious gift of reason in our daily lives. He wants us to use it when we decide how to vote, how to spend money, how to find a spouse, how to raise children, how to carry out the work we have to do in this life. Without the use of reason, life descends into a swamp of disorder, then into a sea of chaos, and finally into certain misery. How many people do you know who, as the saying

goes, “never use their heads”? They have no grasp of the concept of cause and effect, no ability to see any further than the moment. Abandoning the use of reason, their attention spans are fixed on the fleeting and their lives are devoted only to the moment. They have the attention span of a gerbil! The result is a plunge from one mess into another. Sadly, no matter how miserable they make their lives with their irrational lifestyles and choices, they often never change. Nor does it occur to them that they need to. That's life without a good use of God's gift of reason.

In our religious life and in theology too there is a proper use for reason. We need it when we study the Scriptures. We use it, for example, to compare passages with other passages in order to see all that God has to say on a given subject. We use it to study the languages of the Bible. We use it to apply the truths of the Word to concrete situations in life. Indeed, many of the greatest of the church fathers made excellent and noble use of God's gift of reason. Among the most brilliant theologians who often (sadly, not always) knew how to use reason properly in theology we could mention St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. Augustine of Hippo, and St. Anselm of Canterbury. Among the best and greatest Lutheran theologians who had a deep respect for the proper use of reason in theology we would put Martin Chemnitz and the other authors of the Formula of Concord at the top of the list.

What then is the problem with reason, that as great and good and useful a gift of God as it is, it nevertheless gets misused to the ruin of many? How is it that reason, so necessary in our daily life and in our religion, ends up singing a siren song that lures so many into a ditch that leads to destruction? The answer is as simple and as complicated as this: *In the temple of God, reason is the servant and the scullery maid; the Bible is queen!* As beautiful as the maid may be and as useful, even as necessary, as she may be, she must never be allowed to usurp the role of the queen.

Our reason however has been terribly corrupted by the fall into sin. Though reason still has vital uses, now, because of that corruption, she is never satisfied with her position as maid. While trying to hide the warts that cover her because of sin's corruption, she struggles with might and main to paint over the warts and then to steal royal robes for herself. If not controlled by the Christian's converted will, if not governed by the Word of

God, she will dethrone the queen and take control of both the secular and the sacred.

We see that already in the Garden of Eden. Eve allowed reason to rule over God's Word. After all, what could be more reasonable and on the surface more desirable and pious than to get what Satan promised? He promised wisdom equal to the wisdom of God himself! Wouldn't that be a good thing, to be even more godlike than she was at her creation? Eve's reason was seduced. In this instance there was but one ditch. And deep it was indeed. And Eve fell headlong into it by choosing to follow Satan's word instead of God's Word. She fell into sin when she enthroned reason and threw away faith in the plain and clear Word of God. But reason enthroned and the Word of God dethroned equals unbelief and its dread consequence of spiritual death.

Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden, little has changed. Satan still seduces us by urging us to enthrone a fallen and rebellious reason over of the clear Word of God. Few heresies and few sins are there that do not have a misuse of reason somewhere prominent in the evil.

No one can surpass St. Paul in the appreciation of this fundamental truth: The devil likes nothing better than to push our reason from the backseat into the driver's seat, from the broom closet into the throne room, when matters of faith and morals are at issue. Paul saw the conflict between fallen reason and the Word of God at its sharpest in the truth that our salvation is altogether the work of Christ on the cross—as is revealed in God's Word. The devil hates no truth of God's Word more than that one. Indeed, all of his attacks on the rest of God's Word have as their goal the destruction of this central truth of our salvation. Paul saw that and declared:

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was

pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:18-21)

In the rest of the chapter, the apostle pursues the theme that the gospel is nonsense to fallen reason and to those who give their reason the throne and the deciding voice in spiritual matters.

But that doesn't mean that Paul had no appreciation for a proper use of the gift of reason, even in expressing the truths of the Scriptures. He demonstrates that best in the whole organization of the epistle to the Romans. He arranges the truths of God's Word—by the direction and the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit himself—in a perfectly logical order, and he argues them in a reasonable manner. But then, when reason wants to get in the way and raise an objection to God's reasoning, Paul puts reason in its place. (Consider, for example, Romans 3:5-8; it is interesting to note that even in this passage Paul uses reason to put reason in its place.) He knew where the narrow middle road is between contempt for God's gift of reason on the one hand and the enthronement of reason over God's Word on the other hand. Since the epistle is itself the verbally inspired Word of God, it is God himself who is giving us an example in this epistle of the proper use of reason.

Luther too appreciated reason for the great gift of God that it is in secular and temporal matters. But like St. Paul, he saw all around him the damage done to the church, to souls, and yes, to civil society as well when reason took control in spiritual matters. So great was the damage done by reason enthroned over the Word of God that Luther called reason the devil's own harlot.²

The sad fact that Luther experienced before the Reformation was that pastors and theologians knew Aristotle better than they knew Paul. Aristotle, of course, knew nothing of the revealed Word of God. For Aristotle, reason was queen, yes, even a god. In Luther's day, Aristotle's very reasonable-sounding philosophy was imposed on the Bible so that whatever the Bible said was

² Cf. Luther's treatise "Against the Heavenly Prophets," *Luther's Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American Edition, Vol. 40 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), pp. 73-223 and his sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, Vol. 51, pp. 369-380.

forced to fit into one of Aristotle's categories. The result was that church teaching often appealed to fallen reason but contradicted the apostles and prophets. As brilliant as Aristotle was—and arguably no one outside of the household of faith ever used reason more brilliantly than he—his philosophy has no place as queen in the temple of God. While Aristotle's use of reason in the formation of logical categories can be helpful in organizing the truths of the Scriptures, his philosophy is no substitute for the light of the gospel. Reason is not light but darkness when it rules as queen over the revealed Word of God.

Much of Luther's work was devoted to attacking the rule of reason both in the papacy and in the work of other reformers who wanted to get rid of the pope but not the rule of reason. Luther worked long and hard, for example, to purge the University of Wittenberg's curriculum for training pastors, to clean out Aristotle and replace his influence with the simple and clear Word of God. Luther recognized that as long as courses in logic and philosophy took precedence over the study of God's Word, pastors and their people would continue to fall into the ditches of faith-killing error. He made the study of logic and the rules of reason always subject to the authority of the Word. When God speaks in his Word, reason must say *Amen*, whether she wants to or not. If she objects, we must take the whip to her and drive the maid back behind the mop where she belongs! Again, many are the ditches that make up the broad roads leading to destruction; they are found on both sides of the narrow road that leads to life. Few there are who find and remain on that narrow middle road.

In the chapters to come we will consider a number of truths that turn into errors when reason takes hold of them and sits as judge over the Word of God. Most of the ditches we will be examining are subtle; Satan has hidden some of the ditches so cleverly that it is easy for us to miss them. Other ditches are not hidden at all; Satan has made these so attractive and appealing that the uncautious are tricked by their apparent attractiveness and run into them, totally unaware of the danger. Satan has made still other ditches so crude and obvious that it is difficult to understand why so many fail to recognize them and plunge headlong into them to their own destruction.

Since in the following chapters we will not be dealing with the most obvious and blatant attacks of the devil on the Word of God, we will spend a few moments now briefly noting some of them. These ditches Satan digs right out in the open, after people have already enthroned Dame Reason and consigned the Word to the broom closet; once that happens, there is no end to the follies contrary to the Word of God that people will embrace. These errors have no grain of truth in them at all; they are not on either side of a truth but are error and delusion from beginning to end.

Think of some of the more obvious and blatant examples of the perverse use of reason that people use who live in the ditch far from any narrow middle road. The thief reasons that he needs what he steals more than the one from whom he steals it. The murderer reasons that his own life and well-being are somehow threatened by the continued life of his enemy; therefore, it makes perfect sense to him that his enemy should die. The two people "living in sin" and the adulterer each in turn use reason as a see-through cloak to cover shame; with that cloak, each declares without shame, "But we love each other; how can that be wrong?"

In matters of doctrine as well, some errors are just ditches, without any element of truth at all. In these the devil dresses up Dame Reason so that her attempts to overthrow the Word of God will not seem as ugly as they are. He has Dame Reason pretend to be the helper of the queen, even though the queen is nowhere to be found. Reason subtly suggests that she only wants to make some doctrine more clear than it already is in the plain words of the Bible. For example, Jesus said in his institution of the Sacrament of the Altar, "This is my body, this is my blood given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." Dame Reason confronts the host of problems presented by those simple and clear words of Jesus and objects that he could not have meant what he said so plainly. He must have meant that the bread and wine in the Sacrament are symbols that represent his body and blood. And he could not really have intended, she declares, that the Sacrament would actually convey forgiveness of sins and the life and salvation that come with forgiveness.

The simple truth that Jesus meant exactly what he said Dame Reason dismisses as beyond belief. And so she pushes the truth of God's Word aside, flatly contradicts it, and assumes for

herself the role of queen in the church. In addition to shoving the Word off of its throne, she robs Christ of his glory as the giver of himself and of his grace and mercy in the Sacrament. And of course, whenever the Word is pushed aside and Christ is robbed of his proper glory, the sinner always ends up deprived of the comfort of the gospel that Jesus intends to give in his Word and sacraments.

At other times Dame Reason just ignores the Bible altogether and presents notions that seem to make sense but have no foundation at all in the Word of God. She says, for example, that it makes sense that there must be a place between heaven and hell. To such a place we (or at least some people we could mention!) should go after death to be purged of sins and made pure enough to enter heaven (the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory). Bold reason declares as well that it makes perfect sense that the mother of the Savior should be without sin. Why would the holy Son of God want to be enclosed in the womb of a sinner? Why not, the devil's reasoning continues, appeal to this supposedly sinless mother of God for help both now and even hereafter for rescue from the pain of the imagined purgatory? Would not her Son listen to the interceding prayers of his mother and be pleased as well when we seek his mother's help? And if he is pleased with our devotion to her, would he not also be pleased if we were likewise devoted to his friends in heaven: the saints and angels? Would he not listen to his friends in heaven if they interceded for us together with his mother? It all makes sense; it makes sense, that is, if the Word of God has been pushed aside.

But the Bible teaches us to rely on Christ alone for our salvation. It teaches us that all, even the greatest of saints, are in need of his saving work. The Bible has not one word about a purgatory; and in fact, the whole notion of purgatory flatly contradicts the gospel of salvation full and free. Additionally, the Bible contains neither a command nor a promise nor an example regarding prayers addressed to the saints. It tells us to address our prayers to God alone and reminds us as well that only God is present everywhere with power sufficient to hear and answer our prayers.

But none of that deters Dame Reason. All of these errors and all the others that spring from reason separated from the Word

of God share in these attributes: They are all contrary to the clear Word of God in the Bible; they all rob Christ of his glory as our perfect and only Savior; they all deprive the Christian of certain comfort precisely because they are without foundation in the Word and push Christ and his work to the sidelines. Nevertheless, into the ditch of these superstitions plunge all of those who place faith in reason instead of in the clear Word of God. For superstition is best described as a faith based on lies and errors.

Sometimes Dame Reason is just a bit more subtle. She pretends to defend one truth of God's Word in order to dismiss another truth. She pretends that she wants to save us from one ditch by leading us into the ditch on the other side, with little or no regard at all for any truth in the middle. Thus, for example, she convinced Calvin and his successors (old-style Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed) that they should defend the truth that God is almighty, just, and sovereign. In the interest of that truth, she convinced Calvin that the sovereign and almighty God has chosen some to be saved and that the rest he has chosen for damnation; that is the false doctrine called double or absolute predestination.

The Bible does indeed teach that those who are saved have only God to thank for it. It assures that God has chosen them from eternity and has so ruled over time and tide that they hear his Word, believe it, and die trusting in Jesus alone for their salvation. But the Bible likewise teaches that those who reject his Word and perish eternally have only themselves to blame for it. God neither asks nor expects us to blend those two truths; rather, through the power of his Word, he brings us to trust them both. Reason doesn't like that. And Calvin didn't like it either. Instead of simply bending his mind to receive what God had said and letting it go at that, he chose reason over the Word of God and came up with his false doctrine of double predestination.

Arminius, who came after Calvin, thought it was a terrible thing to say, as Calvin did, that God had chosen some to go to hell. But Arminius was just as infatuated with Dame Reason as Calvin was. So, he followed reason out of Calvin's ditch into the ditch on the opposite side of the road and thus perverted the truth just as much as Calvin had. Arminius and his followers (e.g., Methodists, Baptists, and most other non-Lutheran Protes-

tants) believe that it's up to us to decide whether we go to heaven or to hell, up to us to decide whether we should believe or not. They deny what the Bible says about the results of original sin. They deny that by nature we are fallen, blind, dead, enemies of God and that as such we are incapable of any good in the eyes of God. Arminius and his followers teach instead that we are born either neutral or perhaps basically good, with the ability to contribute to our salvation by our own will and choice. They turn faith, at least in part, into man's work instead of God's gift through the gospel's power in Word and sacrament.

Dame Reason pretends in these examples to help our faith; but in fact she takes us on a road that, if followed to its reasonable end, leads to destruction. The follower of Calvin may cast about looking for some assurance that God has picked him for heaven and not for hell. Ultimately, he may trust that his good works prove that he is fit for heaven, even though that was the opposite of Calvin's intent. Or his temptations and his guilt may convince him that he must be one who has been predestined to hell. Thus, convicted by God's law and his own conscience, he may fall into despair. Both pride in one's own works as a cause of salvation and despair that salvation can never be mine are the opposites of saving faith.

The followers of Arminius, on the other hand, may become either proud that at least they made the right decision or else may doubt whether they really believe or believe enough to get into heaven. In either case, the Word is pushed aside, the glory of Christ the Savior is obscured, and faith is damaged or destroyed either by self-righteousness or by despair.

In contrast to Calvin and Arminius, Luther granted that many of the teachings of the Bible present fallen reason with problems. But Luther "reasoned": "When something in the Bible conflicts with my reason, I simply doff my doctor's cap and assume that the Holy Spirit (the ultimate author of the Scriptures) is a little smarter than Dr. Luther!" And so he took the narrow middle road laid out in the Bible. Only the narrow middle road of the truth so clearly taught in John 3:16; Romans 1-8; 2 Corinthians 5; Ephesians 2; and so many other places in the Bible will dispel both the self-righteousness and the despair that are the logical results of Calvinist and Arminian attempts to be

reasonable.³ Only the truth that Jesus alone is Savior and his Word alone creates the faith which trusts in him as Savior, only that will put us on and keep us on the narrow middle road that gives life and brings us at last to heaven. Only that teaching finds its source in the Word of God; only that teaching gives all glory to Christ; only that teaching gives all consolation to the penitent sinner.

Perhaps the previous but by-no-means-complete listing of examples of Dame Reason's more blatant and crude attempts at pushing us into ditches will suffice to encourage our further examination of the devil's more subtle attacks on the narrow middle road. In the chapters that follow, we will strive to find and stay on the narrow middle road while taking careful note of the ditches on either side of the road. We will do that by riveting our attention on the Word of God while we at the same time take note of the attempts of Dame Reason to lure us into one ditch or the other. If we do not watch out for those ditches, it will be all the easier for us to fall into them. Yes, it is the ditches and their dangers that should make us all the more attentive and devoted to the Word. That's Jesus' own methodology in teaching us. He warns against the ditches and then encourages and urges us on with his words: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. . . . If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:12,31,32).

³ We cannot help but note that all attempts to help God out by submitting his Word to the rule of reason end up in folly, in total "unreason": The false doctrines designed to be reasonable at the expense of God's Word are always themselves unreasonable in the end. And why is that? It is because the devil is incapable of sound reason; he lost the sound use of reason when he fell. Thus, all that he produces and suggests is ultimately irrational and leads to ruin. Consider, for example, the total irrationality of all that the devil says and inspires others to say in Mark 5:1-17.