

Luther on the General Knowledge of God

Ad Romans 1:19, 21, 23 (LW, 25:157 ff.)

"That to all people, and especially to idolaters, clear knowledge of God was available, as he says here, so that they are without excuse and it can be proved that they had known the invisible things of God, His divinity, likewise His eternal being and power, becomes apparent from the following: All those who set up idols and worship them and call them 'gods,' or even 'God,' believing that God is immortal, that is, eternal, powerful, and able to render help, clearly indicate that they have a knowledge of divinity in their hearts. For with what reason could they call an image or any other created thing God, or how could they believe that it resembled Him if they did not know at all what God is and what pertains to Him? How could they attribute such qualities to a rock, or to Him whom they thought to be like a rock, if they did not believe that these qualities were really suitable for Him? When they now hold that divinity is invisible (a quality to be sure, which they have assigned to many gods) and that he who possesses it is invisible, immortal, powerful, wise, just, and gracious to those who call upon him, when they hold fast to this idea so that they confess it also by works, by calling upon him, worshiping and adoring him of whom they think that divinity resides in him, then it follows most surely that they had a knowledge or notion of divinity which undoubtedly came to them from God, as our text tells us. This was their error, that they did not worship this divinity untouched but changed and adjusted it to their desires and needs. Everyone wanted to see the divinity in the one who appealed to him, and so they changed the truth of God into a lie. Thus they knew that the nature of divinity, or of God, is that He is powerful, invisible, just, immortal, and good. They knew the invisible things of God, His eternal power and divinity. This major premise of the 'practical syllogism' [Footnote 41: In the 'practical' syllogism of the scholastics (in distinction to the 'speculative' one), the major premise was called *synteresis*. It was variously defined as 'a natural inclination,' 'an inextinguishable spark of reason,' 'an inborn habit,' 'a power tending naturally to the good.'], this theological 'insight of the conscience,' is in all men and cannot be obscured. But

in the minor premise they erred when they said and claimed: 'Now, this one,' that is, Jupiter or any other who is like this image, 'is of this type, etc.' This is where the error began and produced idolatry, for everyone wanted to subsume according to his own interests. If they had stayed with this feeling and had said: 'Look, we know this: Whoever this God, or this Divinity, may be whose nature is to be immortal and powerful and able to hear those who call upon Him, let us worship and adore Him, let us not call Him Jupiter and say that He is like this or that image, but let us simply worship Him, no matter who He is (for He must have being),' then without a doubt they would have been saved, even though they had not recognized Him as the Creator of heaven and earth or taken note of any other specific work of His hands. You see, this is the meaning of the words 'The things that are known of God are manifest in them.' But where and how? Answer: *The invisible things of God are clearly seen in the things that have been made.* One can see how one man helps another, one animal another, yes, how one thing helps and assists another, according as it has superior power and ability. At all times the higher and the more privileged one helps or suppresses the lower and less privileged one. Therefore, there must be that in the universe which is above all and helps all. People measure God by the blessings they receive. This is also why people in ancient times made gods of those who showed them benevolence. In this way, they wanted to thank them, as Pliny says.

"21. *For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, etc.* If they did not *honor* Him as God, or as if He were God, did they honor Him in a different way than as God? Apparently the apostle wants to say this, and the following passage agrees with this meaning.

"23. *And exchanged the glory, etc.* That means: They worshiped Him not as God but in the likeness of an image, and so they worshiped not God but a figment of their own imagination. I should be glad to agree with this interpretation, because even the Children of Israel were charged with having worshiped Baal and calves, even though it is clear that with these images and symbols they wanted to worship the true God, but this they were forbidden to do.

"But how many people are there even today who worship God not as God but as something that they have imagined in their own hearts! Just look at all our

strange, superstitious practices, products of utter vanity. Or is it not exchanging the glory of God into the likeness of an image and fanciful figure if you refuse to do the things which it is your duty to do and if you honor Him with a work which you have chosen yourselves and in so doing you imagine God is the kind who has regard for you and your ways, as if He were different from the way He has revealed Himself to you by giving you commandments? Thus even today many people are being given up to their own base mind, as we see and hear. "We can also simply say: 'They did not honor Him as God,' that is, they did not honor Him as it was fitting for them to render to Him honor and thanks. The word 'not' denies the act of honoring Him as it would have been fitting. But if 'not' negates the adverb 'as,' then according to the first interpretation the act of glorifying is admitted and the manner that would have been proper is denied. What follows can be applied conveniently to both interpretations" (*LW*, 25: Lectures on Romans: 157 ff.).

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It's interesting to compare what P.S. Watson has to say in interpreting this passage:

Men should, no doubt, have recognized the true nature of God, even from their general knowledge, at least sufficiently to avoid idolatry—otherwise they could hardly be said to be 'without excuse.' Indeed, Luther can actually assert that the very heathen would have been saved, if only they had rested content with their bare general knowledge and had not 'changed and adapted it to their own wishes and desires.' They would, however, owe their salvation ultimately to Christ, for their knowledge would be by no means full and complete until it was perfected by 'the Christ who was to come.' . . . It is interesting that Luther can suggest a possibility of salvation for men who have never actually heard of Christ; and we may notice that he also ventures to hope that Cicero 'and men like him' may be saved. But on such matters he does not dogmatize; they are for God, not Luther, to decide. What is more important is that he cannot conceive of any saving knowledge of God, that is, representing a right relationship to God, except a knowledge which, explicitly or implicitly, may be said to contain Christ.

It is in this sense that we must understand his assertion that 'without Christ there is nothing else but mere idolatry, an idol and a false imagination of God.'

"The particular knowledge of God, we may therefore say, is not opposed to the general knowledge in itself, but to what men have falsely made of it; and it [the particular knowledge of God] furnishes the necessary principle for its [the general knowledge's] correct interpretation" (92 f.).

Elsewhere Watson says:

For Luther, . . . God is one who comes down, veiled in the *larvæ* of His creatures, and meets man precisely in the 'material substantial sphere' of the external world. In the stations, offices, and vocations He ordains, His divine will of love confronts men. It confronts them, of course, primarily as Law; but for those who have eyes to see, the Gospel is there as well. God gives and does so much good to us by means of His creatures, which remain good despite our sinful abuse of them, Luther maintains, that we should be able to recognize that He is a gracious God. Just as the *larvæ Dei* can be said, as it were, to contain Christ, so it can be said that 'God has placed forgiveness of sins in all His creatures'" (115 f.).

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Taking all of the above into account, I conclude that neither Luther nor Watson interpreting Luther can fairly claim to hold a stable, self-consistent position.

If we say, with Luther, that "the very heathen would have been saved" had they been content to go with no more than they had in the general knowledge that God had already manifested in them, then, clearly, not only may we also say, as Watson says, "that "the particular knowledge of God . . . is not opposed to the general knowledge in itself [i.e., as distinct from "what men have falsely made of it"]"; we must have the courage of our own statement and say, as I do, that the content of the particular knowledge of God adds nothing, *so far as*

salvation is concerned, that is not already contained in "the general knowledge in itself"—again, as distinct from what men may have falsely made of it.

Incidentally, I found it impossible to think about Luther's statement without thinking about Tillich's notion of "absolute faith" and of "the God above God," and the unforgettable message of his sermon, "You Are Accepted": "*Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*" Clearly, Tillich says no less and no more than Luther gives him the full right to say, provided Luther is taken at his word and not misinterpreted (not even by himself!).

As for Watson's totally unexpected and altogether unexplained qualifying phrase, "explicitly or implicitly," it is consistent and makes sense if, and only if, it applies to the distinction between the particular, or proper, knowledge of God, on the one hand, and the general knowledge of God, on the other, i.e., if the first is rightly said to be the explicit—and, for Christians, decisive—re-presentation of the second, just as the second is rightly said to have always already presented implicitly what the first re-presents explicitly—decisively.

Finally, if Luther's right both that knowledge of the Law is general and inobscurable and that the First Commandment is not only the fountain of all promises and the head of all religions and wisdom, but also contains within itself (implies?!) Christ and the Gospel, then it will hardly do to say that "the divine will of love" confronts women and men "primarily as Law." If Luther's right that the First Commandment, appropriately, doesn't command anything, but rather gives something—"I am the Lord your God!"—; and if he's further right that without the First Commandment, there wouldn't be any Law at all—natural, Mosaic, or evangelical—then truly, and without inconsistent hedgings and qualifications, Christ and the Gospel *are* contained in all the "masks of God" and God *has* placed forgiveness of sins in all of God's creatures.