

And they call that Enlightenment!

Contributions to the Defense of the Christian Religion against the Most Common Objections of the Scoffers and Blasphemers of Our Day — C. F. W. Walther, *Der Lutheraner* I.5 + I.8 (1844)^[1]

Briefly:

- Scoffers claim that trusting Scripture means rejecting reason, and they call that “Enlightenment.”
- Reason alone gives no sure or consistent answers about God, life’s purpose, or what follows death.
- Reason is still a valuable gift for ordinary life, learning, and every subject within its proper limits.
- The mysteries revealed in Scripture are above bounded reason, not contradictions against it.
- Making reason the judge of revelation is setting the sun by the clocks—and they call that enlightenment.

1. Anyone familiar with the history of the Christian church has surely noticed that today’s enemies of Christianity offer no objection that has not been made a thousand times before—often more skillfully and persuasively—and repeatedly answered by faithful servants of Christ. It may therefore seem pointless to fight enemies who have already been defeated. Some may think it enough simply to reprint the old defenses of Christianity and put modern unbelief to shame. But that will not do. Today’s opponents of divine revelation may only be picking up the broken arrows of their predecessors for a new campaign against Christ, the King of truth. Yet they have polished those old weapons until many people find them new and even frightening. They have also developed new tactics that confuse and alarm inexperienced defenders. Even when they merely serve the same stale ideas again and again, they know how to season them for a new audience.

2. Unbelief is raising its head more freely and boldly in this new homeland of ours than ever before. As editors of a Christian paper, we therefore believe it is our duty to expose the emptiness of the arguments being used here to tear faith in God and his holy Word from the hearts of the people. This subject will have an important place in our paper. After all, when we defend God’s Word, we are defending what we call Lutheran doctrine.

3. Several people have warned us not to speak publicly about subjects that are usually discussed here not to bring out the truth, but to stir up vulgar attacks on individuals and on entire organizations that this state has welcomed. But if those who still hold to the old, eternal truth remain silent, the unbelievers will only grow bolder. They will assume that Christians are grateful merely to be allowed to live quietly at their pleasure. Many people are also led astray when they see that no one dares answer those who mock the Almighty in heaven and blaspheme his saving gospel. Worse still, it dishonors God’s high and holy name when those who claim to know the true and living God show even the appearance of fearing a human being—a handful of sinful dust. For all these reasons, we cannot keep

from raising our weak voice against the enemies of our Lord, even if it earns us nothing but disgrace and abuse. Perhaps the merciful Savior will nevertheless use us to remove stumbling blocks, answer doubts, and strengthen faith. How gladly we would do this if it brought even one soul back from error or made that soul firm in the truth!

4. In this issue we begin examining the objections now being made against the divine authority and content of Holy Scripture and spread among the people. We should explain at once how we intend to proceed. Most present-day enemies of the Bible do not fight like civilized nations that respect the laws of war, follow established rules, and meet their opponents openly. They fight like the Indians among us and other peoples regarded as barbarians: they refuse to stand their ground, strike wherever they see an opening, prey especially on the defenseless, and plunder and burn when they can. A defender must adapt to such tactics. We must therefore proceed topic by topic, taking the objections as they come, examining them, and exposing the lies and deceit excused as means to a supposedly holy end. We will avoid crude jokes and vulgar abuse; we will not answer in kind. Even apart from our duty to God, we know that anyone forced to use such weapons merely reveals to a thoughtful reader how weak and indefensible his case is. He makes no one ridiculous but himself. —

5. The unbelievers of our day believe their strongest argument against the divine character of Holy Scripture and the Christian religion drawn from it is this: anyone who accepts the Bible as true must trample reason underfoot and believe contradictions. “What?” they exclaim. “Could God first have given humanity reason and then sent a revelation that turns reason, his first gift, into a lying voice? No. We cannot and must not believe anything that contradicts our reason. Away with the Bible! It asks us to be irrational. Away with the parsons! They preach nonsense as saving truth. Their only aim is to keep the world trapped in its old blindness and in the superstitions of a dark past. They want to make people ever more stupid so they can exploit those darkened souls for selfish and shameful purposes and turn them into slaves.”

6. This is the great sword of Goliath that today’s scoffers wield against the Lord of hosts. They dress up the argument with absurd portrayals and distortions of the mysteries revealed in the Bible, then begin singing victory songs before the contest has even started. A whole crowd of readers joins them—people neither accustomed nor willing nor able to think seriously about religion and judge it carefully. They accept the scoffers’ claims with blind, unquestioning faith, solemnly agree with everything they are told, and imagine that anyone who can repeat “O divine reason!” must belong to the enlightened, mature people of the nineteenth century who have finally thrown off the parsons’ shameful chains.

7. Our first question for these heroes of reason is simple: Are the judgments of your reason really as reliable as you claim? — We are not talking about practical, earthly matters: cultivating crops, building houses, governing states, waging wars, discovering mathematical relations, tracing and measuring the paths and distances of heavenly bodies, or investigating the forces of nature. In such fields reason can

often proceed securely because it rests on experience. We are asking about very different matters. Which judgments of reason are infallible when they concern the being and will of God, the origin of the world, the purpose of human life, and our fate after death? Your constant cry of “Reason! Reason! O heavenly light!” is not an answer. Such empty exclamations may satisfy people who accept your gospel because they wish it were true, but they do not satisfy us. You mean to take away the Bible, so we have the right to ask what you can offer in its place. We demand reasons and a plain answer. What certain, secure, unshakable, irrefutable basis for conviction—one that holds firm in suffering and death—does reason give us concerning the highest questions the human mind can ask, the questions on which it longs for truth and clarity? You unbelievers are always promising to dispel darkness and spread light. Does your light consist of undeniable truths? Or does it consist of doubts and questions still waiting to be investigated? If it is the latter, stop calling it light. You are bringing darkness.

8. But, dear readers, we need not wait for today’s unbelievers to answer. The history of philosophy answered these questions long ago. What conclusions have the greatest and most celebrated philosophers reached by using reason to investigate humanity’s most important questions?

9. Pythagoras teaches that we become beasts; Socrates, that he knows nothing; Plato, that we have no continuing personal existence; Aristotle, that the material world is eternal; Spinoza, that he knows almost nothing about God; Kant, that we can know nothing at all about God. Atheists teach that there is no God and that everything which exists exists necessarily; materialists, that a human being is merely a machine; idealists, that God has no existence (being) at all [Fichte]; pantheists, that everything which exists is God [Hegel].

10. Lest anyone think we are hiding reason’s more fully developed conclusions, we will also give every proposition at which the notorious materialist Julien Offrey de la Mettrie finally arrived by reason alone. His well-known short works say: “There is no God; the world, however, is eternal. ‘Soul’ and ‘spirit’ are sounds to which no concept can be attached. What people call the soul is brain matter that arose from dung and filth. A human being is only a wound-up physical machine that eventually stops, or else a plant. All human happiness depends solely on a healthy, strong body and consists in pleasant moral sensations. Everyone should pursue these and let nothing interfere. Whatever course the bodily machine takes is permissible, since it is a means to happiness. Anyone who seeks happiness and pleasure in love, lust, or anything else suited to the constitution of his body has the right, for his own sake, to regard it all as permissible and indulge himself, even if it causes the greatest harm to others. Reason and science cause misery and put too many obstacles in the way of pleasure. Conscience, virtue, and justice are inventions that keep us from enjoying pleasure for long; one need only maintain their appearance for the sake of the common people.”

11. So this is the light that reason has brought humanity, the light you unbelievers offer us in place of divine biblical revelation. What does it amount to? — Partly sheer nonsense and partly an open

admission that reason knows nothing and can give no certain answer to the human heart's most important questions. What do you think, Christians? On the road to truth, do you want to trust a guide that has brought the world to this destination? Would you exchange the teaching of Jesus Christ and his holy apostles and prophets for the ideas that the supposedly greatest philosophers—admired by everyone eager to seem important—have hatched under their sun of reason? Should your much-ridiculed faith in Christ, who calls himself the way, the truth, and the life, be shaken when you hear what the world's keenest minds have dug out of themselves by reason alone? You should not be surprised that today's scoffers use all their wit to turn biblical revelation into comedy and farce for the amusement of a thoughtless public. They have to proceed that way. They know that they would lose if their arguments were weighed seriously and the wisdom of reason were compared fairly with divine revelation. Their counterfeit wit distracts readers and hearers from examining their false conclusions, just as a stage magician uses clowning to draw attention away from the trick.

12. You unbelievers marvel at philosophical wisdom that a well-taught Christian child can laugh at. So we ask you: If reason is such a great light and such an infallible judge that every mortal—and even the immortal God—must submit to its rulings, why do its papal decrees contradict one another? Since you are such consistent thinkers, resolve our modest doubt. How can we rely absolutely on reason when modern philosophers disagree with the ancient ones and neither group agrees even among itself? You yourselves say that anyone who merely repeats what others have already said is a miserable parrot. You must therefore be delighted by the wonderful variety among the great philosophers. Your hearts must race with amazement at the depth and richness of the human mind when you see as many opinions as heads and as many conclusions as investigators. We do not envy you. But please explain why even the three German oracles of reason in America contradict one another, just as the oracles of Dodona, Claros, and Delphi once did in Greece. Each of you declares: “Thus speaks the infallible Popess Joan,^[2] the most holy Mother Reason. No one may contradict her unless he wishes to be publicly branded as perfectly stupid and covered with everlasting shame in our eyes and in the eyes of every great sage on earth.” The philosophers of the past spoke the same way. Terrified by this severe judgment, we ask you great minds to lead us out of our maze and tell us whom to believe. — We can already hear every answer: “Me! Me! Me!” That does not solve our problem. If we believe one of you, another will call us fools. What should we do? We see no choice but to postpone our decision until everyone who makes reason the judge in matters of faith has reached agreement. — Is that not fair? Is that not reasonable, gentlemen?

13. But joking aside. If someone asks what value we place on reason and how we use it, we can give no better or shorter answer than blessed Luther's words in his *Kirchenpostille* [church postil] (Halle ed. XI, 630): “I allow it: exalt and praise reason and the natural light as highly as you please. But I reserve one thing for myself—that I need not rely on it.” God's Word teaches us to value every gift of God and to use it faithfully and gratefully. Reason is one of those gifts. Though deeply corrupted by sin, it is still more precious to us than all the world's treasures. Reason raises humanity far above the

animals. It makes us aware of our humanity and individual personhood. It allows us to receive the idea that God exists and to consider other realities beyond the senses. It enables us to understand how things relate to one another and so to cultivate the arts and sciences. Christians gladly grant reason all of this. Modern scribblers show only gross ignorance and ridiculous arrogance when they accuse Christians of despising reason and call everyone who believes or has believed the Bible a fool. History thoroughly refutes such talk. It shows that art and science flourished alongside true Christianity, that education, civility, and kindness displaced ignorance and brutality, and that the bright light of the gospel drove out foolish superstition. History also shows that when a papal religion took the place of the Christian religion, learning disappeared along with Christianity. Learning returned when God restored the gospel to the world through the Reformation. History records countless humble, believing Christians whose insight, intellectual power, and breadth of knowledge equaled—and often far surpassed—that of the greatest philosophers. Every age admires them. Their names are permanently written in the historical record and in the hearts of noble people. They stand too high for the venom of some new, misshapen intellectual dwarf to disfigure them in educated eyes or disgrace them before the world. They no more need our defense against such petty spirits than the rising sun needs our hand to pull back the curtain of night. People who can never become great may try to gain fame by insulting great men in their graves. But their only immortality will be the lasting contempt of future generations. It will weigh more heavily on them than on Herostratus, who tried to make his name immortal by destroying the most beautiful work of architecture.

14. Let us return before we wander too far from our purpose. We maintain that a friend of the Bible need not become an enemy of reason, because the Bible teaches nothing contrary to reason. If an unbeliever could refute this claim simply by declaring it false, we would have to concede defeat at once. Today's papers attacking biblical revelation are full of such declarations, and ignorant crowds obediently repeat them as the unquestionable words of their gods. But assertion and proof are as different as darkness and light. Anyone who does not want to become the intellectual slave of men who market the products of a diseased imagination as unshakable truths of reason should examine what they say. Do not be fooled by the glittering wit they offer in place of evidence. Above all, look in the Bible itself and ask whether it actually says what these self-appointed priests of the goddess Reason claim it says. One example will be enough. To prove that the Bible contradicts itself and can be believed only by irrational people, the scoffers commonly cry, "How can a reasonable person accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity?" They think no further discussion is needed. They appeal to the common sense of Christians, Jews, Turks, and heathen alike and ask, "Who can believe that three times one equals one?" And that settles it. With one mighty mathematical blow, they imagine they have demolished the whole structure of Christian teaching. Their brilliant thought has flooded with noon-day light the thousand-year night in which countless millions supposedly suffered. It has exposed the folly of every scholar who failed to discover this amazing insight and has finished the Christian church forever. Then come patriotic sighs that the dear land of liberty has not yet built insane asylums for the Christian rabble!! If

it had, we poor Christians would have been sent to one as soon as we arrived in this free state, whether we wished it or not, on the dutiful report of some champion of equal rights and enlightenment. What a charming prospect for Christian immigrants if such overseers of reason's new inquisitorial court should gain power!! — Should we laugh more at their foolishness or be angrier at their malice? These great philosophers clearly imagine the Holy Trinity only as crudely as a youngster might imagine it from the illustration found in a child's book. Readers should notice their usual method. First the scoffers invent an enemy, give it whatever shape they please, and bravely attack it. After a glorious victory they cry, "Look! The wretched Christians lie in the dust! This is how one fights and wins for light, freedom, and the happiness of nations, fearing no danger even to one's own life." Don Quixote comes vividly to mind.

15. Who has ever claimed that there are three Gods and yet only one? Where does any Bible say so? Where have unbelievers read it in a confession of the church? What Christian theologian has ever taught it? — This doctrine exists nowhere but in the scoffers' confused heads. — Thank God, Christians are intelligent enough to know that we cannot say "yes" and "no," or "black" and "white," about the same thing in the same respect without contradicting ourselves. Luther himself says: "Praise God, we are not such ducks, blocks, or stones as the senseless fools suppose. We know that one God and many gods cannot both be believed as true at the same time." (XX, 2506.) God's holy Word never asks us to believe that. It does not describe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a group of three infinite beings. The Bible teaches that God is one and three in different respects: one in divine essence and three in personal relations. A single thing can remain simple even when more than one feature is found in it under different aspects, just as understanding, will, and desire can all be found in one soul. Someone may object: "But you Christians claim from Scripture that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not mere powers or attributes. You say that three distinct persons share the divine essence. Who can understand that?" We answer: certainly no created being can fully understand it. But does something violate reason merely because it lies beyond reason's limits? Must we reject every mystery, and reject the Bible because it contains one? Anyone who denies that reason has limits and that its comprehension eventually fails is hardly being reasonable. Visible nature itself contains countless mysteries. Everyone accepts their existence because we perceive them with our senses, though reason cannot explain them. Why then object when teaching about the inner relations of God's being contains mysteries beyond our understanding? We would laugh at a child who criticized an intricate machine without understanding its inner workings or the necessity of a single screw or valve. Yet compared with God's understanding, ours is infinitely smaller than a child's understanding compared with that of a skilled mechanic. — A scoffer may be highly knowledgeable in one science but know little of mathematics, physics, or astronomy. Would he reject a book in one of those fields because much of it remained incomprehensible when he leafed through it? Certainly not. He would fear that the experts would laugh at him as an arrogant know-nothing. Yet are we to reject God's book because it contains mysteries beyond our shortsighted minds? In fact, we should be deeply suspicious of any book claiming to reveal God if it

contained nothing incomprehensible—nothing beyond what reason could know without revelation. A God without mystery, a God we can completely understand, is no God. His light is darkness to us and his day is night, because we lack the eye that can gaze into this sun of all spirits. What exists only on a creature's level is not the Creator. The divine begins where our comprehension ends. God no more dwells inside human thoughts than in temples made by human hands. An idol remains an idol whether a carpenter carves it from wood, a goldsmith casts it from metal, or a philosopher fashions it from hollow concepts.

16. Our scoffers think they have accomplished something great when they show how difficult the teachings of Scripture are to understand. But anyone can pile up difficulties; even a fool may have a talent for that. Christians feel as keenly as anyone that God's wisdom appears foolish to natural reason. Yet because we know we are human, we humbly believe God's revelation even when it rises infinitely beyond our comprehension. We know that the Bible is God's eternal Word, decisively confirmed by miracles and prophecies. We therefore trust one saying of Scripture more than wagonloads of books filled with millions of objections. Let the world laugh or rage—it makes no difference to us. One word from Christ, the apostles, or the prophets carries more weight than all the wisdom of this world's wisest people whenever their wisdom contradicts that divine voice. However splendidly it dresses itself, such wisdom is then nothing but foolishness to us.

17. Above, we maintained that the Bible teaches nothing contrary to reason. This was not a new claim. Luther, among others, writes: "Although natural reason cannot understand the light and works of God or reach them by itself, so that *in affirmativis* [in affirmative statements]—that is, when reason must say what a thing is—it judges very crudely and uncertainly, nevertheless *in negativis* [in negative statements]—that is, concerning what a thing is not—its judgment and understanding are certain. Reason does not grasp what God is, but it grasps with complete certainty what is not God. Though reason does not see what is right and good before God (namely, faith), it knows that unbelief, murder, adultery, and disobedience are evil. Whatever is contrary to reason is certainly still more contrary to God. For how could something opposed to reason and human truth not also be opposed to divine truth?"^[3]

18. This point is often misunderstood. Unbelievers usually answer: "If you admit that reason cannot contradict divine truth, then much in Holy Scripture must either be interpreted differently from its literal wording so that it agrees with reason, or the Bible must be denied all divine authority. Does it not contain countless teachings that directly contradict our reason? What about the creation of the world from nothing, the Holy Trinity, the incarnation of God, the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, the justification of a sinner before God by grace through faith, the resurrection of the body, and so forth? Are these doctrines not completely contrary to the laws of reason?"

19. To prevent misunderstanding, we must explain our claim more fully. The best way is to let one of the most experienced and devout Lutheran theologians, blessed Gerhard, speak for us. In his book on the chief articles of Christian doctrine, called *loci theologici* [theological topics], this recognized orthodox teacher writes as follows, in a translation as close to his words as possible:

20. “Divine revelation, not human reason, is the foundation of faith. We must not judge the articles of faith by the decrees of reason; otherwise they cease to be articles of faith and become conclusions of reason. Reason’s opinions and judgments must remain within the field of things subject to its judgment. They must not be extended to things beyond all its power to understand.

21. We must distinguish carefully, first, between human reason before the fall into sin and reason after the fall. Unfallen reason would never have opposed divine revelation, but fallen reason often does because it is corrupted. Second, we must distinguish between the reason of an unregenerate person and that of a regenerate person. The first regards the mysteries of faith as foolishness; the second does not fight against them. Reason is regenerate when, and as long as, it follows the light of the Word and judges the mysteries of faith by Holy Scripture rather than by its own principles. Third, we must distinguish between reason restored only in its beginnings in this life and reason completely restored in the life to come. In this life reason is not yet so fully renewed, enlightened, and corrected that it cannot oppose and dispute the articles of faith when it follows its own direction. Just as the conflict between spirit and flesh remains in the regenerate (Gal. 5, 17.) and tempts them to sin, so conflict between faith and reason remains wherever reason is not yet fully renewed. Perfectly renewed reason, however, removes every conflict between reason and faith. Fourth, we must distinguish between reason that is truly and properly called right and ‘right reason’ as our opponents—such as the Photinians (deniers of the Trinity) and Calvinists—define the term. True right reason stays within the limits of its own proper objects and does not presume to judge the mysteries of faith. Or it is reason enlightened by the Word and corrected by the Holy Spirit, so that in matters of faith it does not follow its own principles but judges by the light of the Word and the Holy Spirit. Such reason does not oppose faith. Our opponents, however, use ‘right reason’ to mean reason that judges the mysteries of faith by its own principles. Fifth and finally, we must distinguish between matters belonging solely to revelation and pure faith and matters subject to reason’s judgment. The light of reason has a role in the latter. But the former lie beyond the senses, reason, and every power of comprehension, so reason cannot settle them; they must be received by faith.” (Anyone who rejects this limit and insists on measuring matters of faith by reason’s yardstick acts as irrationally as someone who defends the rights of the nose, ears, and eyes by insisting that we should be able to smell moonlight, see with our ears, and hear with our eyes.)

22. “When reason remains within its proper field, it does not oppose Scripture. But when it leaves that field and tries to judge the highest mysteries of faith by its own principles, it comes incidentally into conflict with Scripture where Scripture teaches those mysteries. A bright light often reveals what a

dim light left hidden. In the same way, the light of grace kindled for us in the Word reveals what remains hidden under the light of nature. Someone misuses a dimmer light if he denies what can be seen by a brighter one simply because the dimmer light did not reveal it. In the same way, someone misuses reason and natural light if he denies and disputes mysteries revealed in the light of grace because they supposedly do not agree with reason and the light of nature. — In themselves, the articles of faith are not against reason but above it. They come incidentally to stand against reason when reason presumes to judge them by its own principles and, instead of following the light of the Word, denies and disputes them. The articles of faith are not against but only above reason as it existed uncorrupted before the fall” (that is, as God originally placed it in humanity, without the darkness that entered it with sin); “after the fall, however, those articles are not only above corrupted reason but also opposed to it, because corrupted reason cannot keep from judging them by its own principles.

23. No teaching of Holy Scripture conflicts with reason that stays within its limits, but every mystery of faith conflicts with reason that steps outside those limits. There is, for example, no inherent conflict between shoemaking and painting. But if, as the proverb says, the shoemaker refuses to stick to his last and presumes to judge every principle of painting, he will incidentally judge wrongly and contradict the art of painting.

24. Because the Bible’s statements do not in themselves conflict with reason that stays within its limits, it certainly does not follow that those statements may be twisted to fit reason’s standards and judgments. Just the opposite: the articles of faith must be judged by the proper foundation of faith, namely Holy Scripture. The different principles belonging to different branches of knowledge must not be mixed together.” (See *Exegesis s. uber. explic. art. de S. S.* [Exposition, or fuller explanation, of the article on Holy Scripture], § 474 et 75 [§§ 474 and 475]. Jena, 1625.) So what are people doing when they make their corrupted, darkened reason the judge over the mysteries of revelation? They are setting the sun by their clocks instead of setting their clocks by the sun. And they call that enlightenment!

Notes

1. **Editor model:** GPT-5.6 Sol (modern readability edition). **Date:** 2026-09-14. **Companion**

edition: D-editor-reviewed-text/beitraege-translation-Editor-GPT5.6Sol-2026-09-14.md .

Editorial policy: This is a looser, more readable companion to the strict D-stage translation named above. It preserves the original argument, claims, facts, quotations, citations, proper names, and twenty-four-paragraph structure, while freely recasting German sentence structure into clear modern English. Long periods are divided, archaic idioms are replaced where possible, and plain language is preferred without muting the article’s polemical force. ↵

2. **Pope Joan** (*Päbstin Johanna*): a legendary figure said to have disguised herself as a man, become pope, and been exposed when she gave birth. The story circulated widely in medieval and early modern Europe; Protestants often cited it to mock Roman claims of papal infallibility. Walther does not treat the legend as history. He uses “Popess Joan” satirically for **Reason**—each rationalist speaks as if his private reason were an infallible pope whose decrees no one may contradict (*So spricht die infallible Päbstin, Johanna, nemlich die hochheilige Mutter Vernunft*). ↵
3. Luther, *De votis monasticis iudicium* [*Judgment on Monastic Vows*] (1521), ch. 5. Walther’s citation *Hall. Ausg. XIX. 1940* is the Walch Halle ed., vol. 19, col. 1940. Standard reference: **WA** 8:629, 23–33. Luther holds that natural reason cannot grasp what God *is* (*in affirmativis*) but can judge reliably what God is *not* (*in negativis*); whatever contradicts reason contradicts God still more. Latin: *Quomodo enim coelesti veritati non pugnabit, quod terrenae veritati pugnat?* (“For how will it not fight against heavenly truth, if it fights against earthly truth?”) ↵