THE VIEW OF THE BIBLE HELD BY THE CHURCH THROUGH THE AGES

I

That the Bible is the Word of God, inerrant and of supreme divine authority is a conviction held by all Christians and Christian teachers through the first 1700 years of church history. Except in the case of certain free thinking scholastics such as Abelard and the case of Luther this fact has not really been contested by many scholars. Of course, many of the early church fathers and an even greater proportion of the Medieval theologians did not directly address themselves to the subject of Biblical authority. In the case of the former the doctrine of Biblical authority was simply assumed on the basis of an understanding of Scripture shared by both the Tannaite Judaism and the early Christians. In the case of the latter there developed a notable lack of interest in Biblical studies and in seeking answers directly from Scripture for questions and concerns of the day. In any case the view of Scripture as inspired by the Spirit of God and therefore possessing divine authority and inerrancy was not a creation of early Judaism or of early Christian thought but an inheritance of an obvious truth taught in the Scriptures. Not until the divine origin or authority or veracity of Scripture were somehow undermined or threatened do these issues receive direct attention from Christian theologians.

But just as we can establish Scripture's teaching of its own divine origin and authority on the basis of what is assumed rather than explicitly articulated there, in similar manner we can clearly delineate the doctrine concerning Scripture held by the Christian church and its theological leaders from the post-apostolic times through the Reformation era. In fact, this has

already been done repeatedly and by eminent scholars during the past century,[1] and except for the case of Luther the conclusions have all been that a remarkable unity persists through this long period. On no other point do we notice such unanimity, except perhaps on the issues of dichotomy and the forbidden degrees of marriage,[2] inherited positions that were never seriously questioned and therefore simply assumed to be true.

---

[1]The entire history of the development of the doctrine concerning Scripture was treated by two nineteenth century theologians, W. Rohnert, Die Inspiration der heiligen Schrift und ihre Bestreiter (Leipzig: Verlag von Georg Böhme, 1889), and Wilhelm Koelling, Die Lehre von der Theopneustie (Breslau: Verlag von Carl Dülfer, 1891). Similar studies have been carried out by Roman Catholic theologians who write more briefly on the subject, but offer massive evidence. I refer to Sebastianus Tromp, De Sacrae Scripturae Inspiratione (Rome: Apud Aedes Universitatis Gregorianae, 1953) and Cardinal Autustinus Bea, De Inspiratione et Inerrantia Sacrae Scripturae (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1954); De Scripturae Inspiratione. Quaestiones Historicae et Dogmaticae (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1935). Although none of these studies is particularly penetrating but each is meant only to be an overview of the doctrine through the history of the Church, nevertheless each offers vast data to support a unity of belief concerning Biblical inspiration and authority extending from apostolic times through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Excellent monographs have also been written on the bibliology of specific church fathers and theologians. On Augustine A. D. R. Polman's The Word of God according to St. Augustine, Tr. by A. J. Pomerans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961) is perhaps the best study, clearing up many previous misunderstandings. See also Charles Joseph Costello, St. Augustine's Doctrine on the Inspiration and Canonicity of Scripture (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1930). The bibliology of the Patristic period is touched on by several good Patrologies: Bertold Altaner, Patrology, Tr. by Hilda C. Graef (New York: Herder and Herder, 1959); Adolf Harnack, History of Dogma, Tr. by Niel Buchanan (London: Williams and Norgate, 1896); Johanes Quasten, Patrology (Utrecht: Spectrum, no date); F. Cayré, Manuel of Patrology (Paris: Descleé, 1940). For the Medieval period see Martin Grabmann, Mitelalterliches Geistesleben (Munich: M. Hueber, 1926); Frederik Copelston, A History of Philosophy (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1953-). The two best books on Luther are, in German Wilhelm Walther, Das Erbe der Reformation (Leipzig: A. Duchert, 1918), and, in English Michael Reu, Luther and the Scriptures (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1944). Reu borrows heavily from Walther. A recent work on Luther's hermeneutics is also most valuable, and, like Reu and Walther, a corrective of many nineteenth and early twentieth century caricatures of Luther's position: E. Thestrup Pedersen, Luther som Skriftfortolker (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959). Copious bibliographies and references to further secondary sources are found in many of the above works.

[2]See John Gerhard, Loci Theologici (Tuebingen, 1787, Cotta Ed.), XVII, 80ff; XV, 253ff.

It is significant that the church and synagog in the post apostolic age held essentially the same view of Scripture. Normative Tanaite Judaism professed to teach nothing but what was taught explicitly or implicitly in the Old Testament Scriptures. Although their hermeneutical principles and interpretation were different from that of the New Testament writers and the early church fathers, their understanding of the nature of Biblical authority seems to be the same. Both parties believed that the contents of the Scriptures were consentaneous and homogeneous. There were no contradictions in Scripture. Scripture was considered to be the word of God in the sense of representing a verbal, cognitive revelation. The idea of progressive revelation was impossible, if by such a notion it was thought that a complete and saving revelation was not given to Moses.[3] For early Judaism there was a complete correspondence and agreement between Moses and the prophetic books and Hagiographa which explain the Pentateuch; for the early Christians the New Testament explains the Old. Except for this latter difference Christ and the New Testament writers regard the Old Testament in much the same way, although interpreting it always Christologically, as did the early church after the time of the apostles.

As a matter of fact the early Christian Fathers, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Apologists, always accepted the Old Testament as divinely inspired and authoritative, long before the entire New Testament canon was accepted; and, like the apostles in the book of Acts, they consistently cited the Old Testament as divinely authoritative for their proclamation of the Christian Gospel. In

---

[3]For a thorough treatment of early normative Judaism's doctrine of Scripture and revelation see George Foot Moore, Judaism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), I, 235-262, still considered to be the most complete and scholarly treatment of the subject. Moore also points out how early Judaism and early Christian thought differ in their interpretation of Scripture. Cf. also H. Strack and B. Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (Muenchen: Beck, 1928), IV, 415-451: "Excurs: Der Kanon des Alten Testaments und seine Inspiration".

fact, the Old Testament was a specifically Christian book, belonging to the church, not the synagog, for it witnessed to Christ and His glory (1 Pet. 1:10-12).[4] The apologists were in fact brought to faith in Christ through their reading of the Old Testament Scriptures, although it is usually safe to assume that they were persuaded by the Apostolic witness and understanding of the Old Testament. Ultimately Christ, the risen Lord, was the final interpreter of the Old Testament and His word was found in the apostolic tradition and the New Testament writings.[5]

Only after the time of the Apologists were the New Testament writings accepted along with Old Testament Scriptures. This shift took place as a result of the gradual acceptance of the New Testament canon. The New Testament was therefore considered to be completely authoritative along with the Old, and all Scripture was now seen as one unit. The New Testament was regarded as the divinely authoritative commentary on the Old.

Meanwhile another position was beginning to take shape and become articulate. Along with a total commitment to the Scriptures as the norm of all doctrine, a new and clear conviction concerning the authority of oral tradition began to develop. This oral tradition, handed down from generation to generation and going back through the apostles directly to Christ, in no way conflicted with the Scriptures. But it did aid the church in interpreting the Scriptures and particularly in summarizing the Christian faith and thus protecting Christians against the aberrations of Gnostics and other heretics. To Tertullian and Irenaeus, who developed this position, such apostolic tradition which faithfully transmitted Christ's teaching was infallible, like Scripture.[6] Thus, for all

---

[4]Justin, 1 apol. 32, 2; dial. 29, 2.

[5]Justin, 1 apol. 42, 4; 67, 7; dial. 53, 1.

[6]Tertullian, de praescript. 21; Irenaeus, haer. 4, 26, 2. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958), pp. 35-41 passim.

practical purposes we have at the turn of the third century a kind of two source doctrine of authority in the church with both the New Testament and rule of faith thought to be eminently apostolic.[7] It is probably true that neither Tertullian nor Irenaeus meant to subordinate Scripture to unwritten tradition. In fact, only the Scripture could ultimately authenticate the tradition. But at the same time the on-going tradition was necessary to counteract heretical distortions and interpretations of Scripture. Thus, the two revelatory authorities, identical in content, complemented and authenticated each other. This position was held in a variety of forms from the third century until the time of the Reformation and after that time in the Roman Catholic Church. The position ultimately led to the teaching of the Council of Trent that Scripture and unwritten tradition--and this in effect often meant the church--were coordinate authorities for doctrine in the church.[8] We must say, however, that in practice both the Eastern and Western fathers as a rule gave much more deference to Scripture than to any rule of faith. Creeds were written on the basis of Scripture and in a most Biblical terminology; and commentaries and treatises of all sorts were based on Scripture as the source of doctrine. Irenaeus himself in his Adversus Haereses cites Scripture no less than 1,200 times. And as a matter of principle he states,

---

[7]Harry Wolfson in The Philosophy of the Church Fathers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956) distinguishes between a "single faith theory" of Tertullian and Origen and a "double faith theory" taught by Clement of Alexandria and others. The latter theory places philosophy and theology on a kind of par as the basis of faith.

[8]See Henrici Denzinger, Enchiridion Symbolorum, ed. 31 (Rome: Herder, 1957), 783-786. The extent to which this position can distort a true understanding of Scripture according to the authority and norms of ecclesiastical exegesis (thought to be unwritten divinely revealed tradition) is seen in recent times in Vigilantiae, the apostolic letter of Leo XIII in 1903 which states, "As we were saying, the nature of the divine books is such that in order to dissipate the religious obscurity with which they are shrouded we must never count on the laws of hermeneutics, but must address ourselves to the Church, which has been given by God to mankind as a guide and teacher." See Rome and the Study of Scripture, ed. by Conrad Lewis, OSB (St. Meinrad, Ind.: Grail, 1958), p. 32.

"We must believe God, who has given us the right understanding, since the Holy Scriptures are perfect, because they are spoken by the Word of God and the Spirit of God."[9] And how else could Irenaeus and the other fathers have done their theology? They could scarcely have quoted from an unwritten tradition.

But whereas Irenaeus might have alluded often to a rule of faith, with the passing of the Gnostic influence the later Fathers were far less reticent to quote directly from the Scriptures. This is true of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Although their writings are far more directly Biblical, they still regarded the so-called rule of faith as having come directly from the apostles and as a rule for interpreting Scripture.[10] And both believed that such a source of doctrine was independent of the New Testament, although the content of both was the same.[11]

After Clement and Origen the vague idea of a canon of faith was gradually replaced by Creeds and the liturgy as the form of unwritten tradition which along with Scripture served as the basis of doctrine in the Church. But we must add that liturgy and especially the early creeds were developed and constructed on the basis of Scripture. And if anything in the creeds or liturgy was thought to be unscriptural, such as the homoousios in the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed, it was only with much difficulty accepted. We must note also that as time went on the great literary works of the Fathers were more and more expositions of the Scriptures; and their commentaries on the Creeds (such as that of Rufinus) were often intended to offer Biblical evidence for the credal statements. To quote J. N. D. Kelly, "Throughout the whole period Scripture and tradition ranked as complementary authorities, media different in form but coincident in content.

---

[9] haer. 2, 47. cf. 3, 1.

[10] Clement, Strom. 7, 16, 93.

[11] Origen, De princ. 3, 1, 1.

To inquire which counted as superior or more ultimate is to pose the question in misleading and anachronistic terms. If Scripture was abundantly sufficient in principle, tradition was recognized as the surest clue to its interpretation, for in tradition the Church retained, as a legacy from the apostles which was embedded in all the organs of her institutional life, an unerring grasp of the real purport and meaning of the revelation to which Scripture and tradition alike bore witness."[12]

The basis for Scripture's divine authority according to all the early Church Fathers is its divine origin and form. Scripture is the Word of God. This unanimous conviction of the early church that Scripture is God's Word was not borrowed from ancient Judaism, but from the New Testament which speaks of the God-breathed nature of Scripture (1 Tim. 3:16) and of the holy writers as instruments of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). The Fathers assumed that Scripture was the Word of God and treated it thus, just as the New Testament writers had done in the case of the Old Testament Scriptures. The Christian Fathers differed from the early Jews concerning the origin of the Torah. The Jews believed that the Torah was created by God thousands of years before the creation of the world, that in time it was given by God directly to Moses without the mediation of the Spirit. Thus Rabbinic theology distinguished the Torah from the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures, although all of Scripture was believed to have been inspired. The early Christians did not share this Rabbinic view of the Torah. Nor did they, for the most part, engage in the same kind of wooden and fanciful exegesis so common among the Jews, as seen in the Talmud. Their keen Christological understanding of the Old Testament, in any event, kept them from the almost total preoccupation with juristic exegesis so typical to the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel and also of later Tannaite Judaism.

---

[12] *op. cit.*, 47-48.

What then precisely did the early Christians mean when they called Scripture the Word of God? Put quite simply, they believed that God is the real author of the Scriptures.[13] The books of Scripture were commonly ascribed to the Holy Spirit as the one who wrote them.[14] The human writers were instruments of the Holy Spirit. Both Augustine and Ambrose explicitly called God the author of Scripture against the Manichaeans. By the term "author" they meant one who produces or effects something. This is precisely what God did in respect to Scripture; in this sense God authored all the Scriptures.[15] And in precisely this sense the Scriptures are unique, differing from all other writings and possessing qualities and attributes (authority, truthfulness) which are unique by virtue of the Scripture's origin and nature.

If Scripture is really and truly, not in some metaphorical or metonymical sense, the Word of God, what then is the function of the human authors of Scripture, according to the Fathers of the early Church? Or, to pose the question differently, what is the relation between the Holy Spirit and the holy writers as they wrote the Scriptures? Or, to pose the identical question in still a different form, what is the notion of inspiration taught by the church Fathers? Historically the term "inspiration" has been applied to both Scripture ("Scripture is inspired", the product of God's breath, Θεόπνευστος, 2 Tim. 3:16) and to the prophets and apostles ("the writers of Scripture were inspired", Φερόμενοι, moved by the Holy Spirit, 2 Pet. 1:21). Interestingly, Jerome translated both the Θεόπνευστος of 2 Tim. 3:16 and the Φερόμενοι of

---

[13]Enchiridion Biblicum, 23, 26, 27, 28, 32, 42, 62, 66, 110, 116. Ambrose, ep. 8, 10 (PL 16, 953); Augustine, cont. Faus. 15, 1 (PL 11, 295): cont. Adimantum, 16, 3 (PL 42, 157).

[14]Jerome, ep. 70, 7; Is. 29, 9ff. Origen, cont. Cels. 59ff; Tertullian, apol. 18; Augustine, adv. Marc. 4, 22. Cf. Rohnert, op. cit., 95.

[15]Cf. Bea, op. cit., 11-12. Cf. also Bea, "Deus auctor Sacrae Scripturae: Herkunft und Bedeutung der Formel", Angelicum 20 (1943), 16-31.

2 Pet. 1:21 with the same Latin term (inspirata, inspirati), thus causing a certain amount of confusion, unless one using Latin distinguished between the inspiration of the Scriptures and the inspiration (something quite different) of the holy writers. The question we are posing deals with the second meaning of the term.

Usually the Greek Fathers spoke of the relation of the Spirit to the writers of Scripture when they employed the term "inspire" and its synonyms.[16] The term was already in use in the Hellenistic world, along with similar terms such as θεόφορος, θεοφόρητος, θεοφορούμενος, θεήλατος, θεοδίδακτος θεοκίνητος and the like. The terms meant simply that a person entered a state in which by divine impulse he spoke clearly, truthfully, profoundly a divine message. But in the Hellenistic world the idea of inspiration went further in that such a state was ordinarily typified by a kind of μάντις or μανία, an ecstasy accompanied by all kinds of bizarre oddities such as foaming at the mouth, hair standing on end and the like. Such inspiration was often engendered by narcotics and usually resulted in a complete lost of memory. Nor did the experience have any cognitive content. The early Christians envisaged something quite different when they spoke of the inspiration of the holy writers of Scripture. Before the time of Tertullian and the Montanists the Apologists and others may have spoken in somewhat unguarded terms as they referred to the relation of the Holy Spirit to the human writers of Scripture. And they may well have uncritically borrowed phrases from Philo who drew deeply from Hellenistic religious thought as he likened the experience of Moses and other writers of Scripture to the psychological behavior common to the mystery religions of his day. They indeed, along with the later Greek and Latin Fathers, employed the idea of inspiration in a variety of contexts not suggested

---

[16]Bea, op. cit., 3ff. Cf. also G. W. H. Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961) under θεόπνευστος and related terms.

by Biblical terms and concepts. And they taught, as indeed both Old and New Testaments witness, that the gift of prophecy was at times bestowed to one while in an ecstatic condition. But there is no evidence to suggest that they, and particularly those who followed the Montanist enthusiastic heresy, sought to psychologize the inspired writers of Scripture.[17] And surely among the early Christian writers there was no simple apposition of philosophy and revelation, of prophecy and ecstatic enthusiasm, as in the case of Philo.

What then was the relation of the writers of Scripture to the Holy Spirit in the theology of the early church? The human writers were the instruments, the organs, of the Holy Spirit.[18] Augustine consistently used the ablative for the work of the Holy Spirit and the preposition "per" for that of the Biblical authors,[19] thus clearly bringing out the instrumental part played by the prophets and apostles in the writing of Scripture. God is the actual author of Scripture, the auctor primarius, and the Biblical writers His organs through whom He speaks. This is precisely the picture presented in the New Testament (Matt. 1:22; 2:5, 17; 3:3; 4:14; Acts 2:16; 4:25). And the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed echoes the same theme when

---

[17]One must take issue with Hermann Sasse at this point. See "Sacra Scriptura, Bemerkungen zur Inspirationslehre Augustins" in Festschrift Franz Dornseiff, ed. Horst Kusch (Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1953), pp. 262-273. Sasse contends that not only Athenagoras (Legatio pro Christianis 9) and Pseudo-Justin (Cohortatio ad Graecos 8, 37), with their unfortunate comparison of Biblical inspiration with the description of the Sibyl of Cumae in the sixth book of the Aeneid, but also Augustine copied Philo's doctrine of inspiration. Polman and Kelly deny this, and with more than ample evidence. The fact that Augustine for apologetic reasons compares (de consen. evang. 1, 19ff.) the inspiration of Sibyl with that of the prophets and apostles affects neither his doctrine of inspiration nor his exegesis of Scripture. Actually, Augustine's apologetics is formally quite like that of Elijah on Mt. Carmel (1 Ki. 18).

[18]Athenagoras, leg. pro Christ. 7 (PG 6, 386); Theophilus of Antioch, autolyc. 2, 9. 10 (PG 6, 1063); Jerome, Ep. 65, 7 (PL 22, 627); Gregory the Great, in Job, praef. 1 (PL 75, 515). Cf. Heb. 3:7; 10:15.

[19]Polman, op. cit., 51.

it describes the Holy Spirit as speaking through the prophets (διὰ τῶν προφητῶν). When the Fathers use certain metaphores to illustrate the instrumentality of the Biblical writers, metaphores such as flute, lyre, musical instrument, hand the the like,[20] their imagery must not be pushed beyond the point of comparison. They are not suggesting that all inspiration takes place in a state of ecstasy. They are not suggesting that the human authors of Scripture are unthinking, unwilling instruments, divested of their consciousness or personality or usus scribendi. On the contrary they at times affirm a συγκατάβασις (Chrysostom) of the Spirit whereby He condescends or accommodates Himself to styles and personalities of the Biblical writers.[21] Thus, they take into account the endowments, the thought forms, the genus loquendi of the different writers of Scripture. Augustine, for instance, in his De Consensu Evangelistarum makes this fact abundantly clear, and he notes often the very human motives and selectivity which prompted the evangelists to write as they did.[22] Origen repudiates any comparison between the inspiration of the Biblical writers and the ecstatic oracles of paganism.[23]

And so to the Fathers of the early church, with the possible exception of the pre-Montanist apologists, the total control of the Spirit over the penmen is perfectly compatible with the conscious and willing use by the holy writers of their unique endowments and style of writing. The flute, lyre, instrument terminology was employed only to stress the instrumentality of the human authors and the monergism of divine inspiration. One might say that

---

[20]Athanagoras, Legatio pro Christianis, 9; Pseudo-Justin, Cohortatio ad Graecos, 8; Chrysostom, in Joh. hom. 1, 1; Hippolitus, de Antichristo 2 (PG 6, 386). Jerome, Ep. 65, 7 (PL 22, 627); de Ps. 88.

[21]in Gen. 2:21 (PG 53, 121; 24, 135).

[22]See Polman, op. cit., 47-51.

[23]cont. Cels. 7, 3.

contributively the Biblical writers were passive--the Spirit alone supplied to them what they were to write, its very form and content; but subjectively or psychologically (if one might use such a loaded modern term) the Biblical writers were active, in full and conscious possession of their faculties. Nowhere do the Fathers try to bridge this paradox; nowhere do they seem to be troubled by it or even aware of it. They simply accept the mystery of divine inspiration.

Again it has been averred that the practice of Augustine and others in using the verb dictate to describe the Holy Spirit's activity in communicating the form and content of the sacred writings to the holy writers is tantamount to teaching a mechanical theory of inspiration, reminiscent of Montanism.[24] Actually Augustine uses such terms as inspirare, dictare, suggerere and gubernare all interchangeably and in a large variety of contexts. All verbs are used in a broader and narrower context; and in the narrower sense the verbs could all best be translated by give, charge, communicate, direct, incite.[25] The use of these various verbs was calculated to stress once again that in the writing of Scripture the initiative was God's alone, that He monergistically determined what was to be written in Scripture, and that the resultant Scriptures are His Word.

And so, whether the Fathers speak of the inspiration of the writers of Scripture or of the inspiration of the Bible itself, they are affirming one

---

[24]Sasse, ibid. 267. Sasse says that the term dictare reduces the inspired writer to a mere tool of the Holy Spirit like a typewriter, whereas suggerere includes human cooperation (of some kind). Hence there is an ambivalence in Augustine's doctrine.

[25]Polman, op. cit., 44-46, proves this point conclusively. Cf. my book, The Inspiration of Scripture (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957), 71-73, where exactly the same conclusion is drawn on the basis of the Latin works of Lutheran orthodoxy as the post-Reformation Lutherans employed the same terminology as Augustine and the Western Church Fathers.

fundamental truth, that Scripture is really and truly God's Word, all of it, even its minute details.[26] And therefore Scripture was divinely authoritative--and infallibly true.

Correlative to Scripture's divine origin and authority is its utter truthfulness and reliability. This was the universal conviction of the early church. Never was there any doubt concerning the inerrancy of Scripture. The notion of an errant Word of God was unthinkable in those days. True, the fanciful exegesis often employed, the allegorical method and the search for a sensus plenior indicate often no doubt the difficulty the Fathers had with the plain meaning of many Biblical assertions. Augustine in his De Consensu Evangelistarum struggled with the seeming discrepancies among the evangelists and with the New Testament's seeming preference for the sometimes errant Septuagint over the authentic Hebrew text of the Old Testament; and he came far from solving these problems. But never in those days was a difficulty encountered by the study of Scripture solved by charging Scripture with error or untruth. Never was the unity of Scripture and Scripture's agreement with itself questioned. In fact, the inerrancy of Scripture was not merely assumed,[27] but affirmed deliberately and dogmatically. Thus, we find Augustine saying that the Scriptures are unique in their inerrancy: "Only to those books which are called canonical have I learned to give honor so that I believe most firmly that no author in these books made any error in writing. . .I read other authors not with the thought that what they have taught and written is true just because they have manifested holiness and

---

[26]For the doctrine of plenary inspiration in the Fathers see Kelly, ibid. 61.

[27]Clement of Rome, 1 Cor. 45, 2 (PG 1, 30); Chrysostom, in. Ps. 4, 11 (PG 55, 57). See Tromp, op. cit., 125-6.

learning."[28] And Jerome utters many similar assertions.[29] When Augustine and Jerome speak of the truthfulness of Scripture they include both the formal inerrancy of Scripture (that Scripture does not contradict itself) and the material truthfulness of Scripture (that all the assertions of Scripture correspond to what obtains).[30] According to the Fathers Scripture is a priori true, irrefragably so. Scriptures need no verification of any kind from some outside authority. Hence we find Jerome stating with certainty, "When you are really instructed in the Divine Scriptures, and have realized that its laws and testimonies are the bonds of truth, then you can contend with adversaries; then you will fetter them and lead them bound into captivity; then of the foes you have made captive you will make freemen of God."[31]

II.

The decline and fall of the Roman empire, first in the West and then East, was accompanied by a virtual cessation of any theological output of substance. The development of dogma was permanently frozen in the East with the classic De Fide Orthodoxa of John of Damascus. In the West serious and constructive theological production was arrested from the sixth century until the rise of scholastic theology. And it was the discovery of Aristotle and the desire to coordinate theology with all human knowledge which originally

---

[28] Epist. 82, 1, 3; Cf. Epist. 8 (ad Hieronymum), 3, 3.

[29] For a listing and discussion of these statements see the encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XV commemorating the fifteenth centenary of the death of St. Jerome, entitled "Spiritus Paraclitus" and found in Lewis, op. cit., 43ff.

[30] Tromp, 125ff.

[31] ep. ad Fabiolam, 78, 30, cited in Lewis, p. 48. Cf. also ep. ad Theophilum, 82, 7, 2, cited in Lewis, p. 49: "The apostles are one thing, other writers another; the former always tell the truth, the latter--as being mere men--sometimes err."

incited the scholastics to engage in their monumental productions. Exegetical work was scarcely carried on. In the West neither of the Biblical languages was known.

It is understandable therefore that no original contribution or advance in the area of bibliology would take place. The scholastics inherited the position of their forerunners. But if a somewhat consistent bibliology is only adumbrated in the early church, it is scarcely discernible in the scholastic era. One may range through thousands of pages of scholastic theology to find any explicit or direct word concerning the divine origin, authority or truthfulness of Scripture. The doctrine concerning Scripture per se among the scholastics can only be extracted from their prolegomenous discussions where they center their attention primarily on questions of epistemology and discuss man's return to God, revelation, prophetic knowledge, and similar themes. Their discussion of inspiration as a supernatural charism is carried on out of epistemological and anthropological concerns.[32]

Although there is a real paucity of evidence to demonstrate a clear and explicit scholastic position concerning the locus de scriptura, the following resume of the greater of the Medieval scholastic theologians' views on this point will reveal a definite position concerning the Scriptures and illustrate that there is no considerable difference between the theology of the thirteenth century and the fifth century on this point.

Anselm.[33] No doctrine of bibliology or the Word is articulate in Anselm. Although in his three best known works (Proslogion, Monologion, Cur Deus Homo?)

---

[32]The best discussion of Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of inspiration is by Pierre Benoit in Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit, Prophecy and Inspiration (New York: Desclee Co., 1961). Benoit's main thesis is to demonstrate against J. B. Franzelin, Tractatus de divina traditione et Scriptura (Rome, 1870) that Thomas in fact taught a doctrine of verbal inspiration. Others who write concerning the scholastic doctrine concerning Scripture have very little to say (e.g. Bea, Rohnert, Koelling, et al.).

File
1211

he is speculating as a philosopher--for he is proving rationally those things which are already accepted on faith--still behind such dialectics lies an implicit reliance upon what we would call the Scripture principle. When he says at the beginning of his Proslogion that in believing we seek to understand (credo ut intelligam), his idea is simply this: it is proper for faith to seek to understand. We may never understand, Anselm grants; but if we do understand it will be because we have started with faith. And faith, of course, depends upon the divine revelation in Scripture. Here Anselm has distinguished himself as a faithful student of Augustine; and he is not consciously going beyond Augustine in any respect. The fact that he is conceding to his students in working out certain doctrines dialectically may deceive us into thinking that he is a rationalist, but this is not so. He is not trying to strip revelation of its mystery, but to penetrate the mysteries so far as can be done. With Anselm no clear distinction is made between theology and philosophy.

Alexander of Hales.[34] A little more articulate is Alexander. In his Summa Theologica he speaks somewhat of Scripture in his prolegomena. He insists that Scripture has a purpose greater than other histories (I,1). The history there recorded is not merely to point to individual actions of men, but to assess general actions and conditions which serves to inform men and enable them to contemplate divine mysteries. Thus he sees in Scripture a salutary diagnostic purpose and function. The examples Alexander uses to illustrate his point are perhaps not the most fortunate: the death of Abel signifies the innocent suffering of Christ and other just people, while the wickedness of Cain represents the perversity of the unrighteous.

---

[33]Anselm of Canterbury. Opera Omnia (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946) vol. 1 and 2.

[34]Alexander of Hales. Summa Theologica (Rome: ad claras aquas, 1924-48)

The mode (modus) of the art or science of Scripture--we might call this "theology"--is not according to the usual comprehension of the rational mind. Theology (modus Scripturae artis) obtains by means of the arrangement of divine wisdom which informs the soul in those things which pertain to salvation (per dispositionem divinae sapientiae ad informationem animae in iis quae pertinent ad salutem). If this seems to be pure intellectualism, we must remember that Alexander is speaking of theology as art or science (scientia), that is, as communicable. The Franciscans were not intellectualists, but voluntarists (I,1).

What he means by theology as information is made more clear (I,5) when he goes on to say that the knowledge which we gain through inspiration is more certain than what we gain through human rationalizing, and the knowledge we gain through the testimony of the Spirit more sure than what we gain by the witness of creatures. The former certainty is the certainty of the spiritual man as opposed to the carnal man. Modus theologiae est certior certitudine experientiae: "The method of theology is more certain than a certitude drawn from experience." The carnal man has no knowledge but experimento sensibilium; the spiritual man has a certainty which is due to his possessing the spirit of contemplating divine things. The conclusion is that only knowledge given in Scripture offers absolute, or we might say, divine, certainty. This emphasis of the Franciscan school that knowledge (cognitio) is not simply intellectual is shared by Luther and the Reformers.

Bonaventura.[35] Little data can be gathered from Bonaventura. He is in the Franciscan school and would follow Alexander. Like the earlier Franciscans he did not differentiate closely between theology and philosophy. He simply insisted that there is no philosophy which was not oriented in God. Philosophy

---

[35]Bonaventura. Opera Theologica Selecta (Florence: Luaracchi, 1934).

begins with the visible effects and argues to God, but it must always comport with revealed theology which is drawn from Scripture. Thus there was only a methodological distinction between the two sciences. The conclusions of both were the same. Hence the philosopher will, for instance, work out proofs for the existence of God, but only with the presupposition that he already believes in God. He does not make himself temporarily an atheist. In all this philosophy was the handmaid of theology, and all theology was drawn from Scripture.

Thomas Aquinas.[36] Thomas is more explicit in his views of Scripture and its place in the theology of the church than any of the previously mentioned theologians. Again his views on Scripture are found in his prolegomena on the nature of sacra doctrina. He begins with a discussion of the necessity of revelation.

> It was necessary for man's salvation that there be a certain doctrine according to divine revelation, truths which exceed human reason. Even regarding those truths which human reason can investigate it was necessary that man be taught by divine revelation. For the truth about God which is learned through reason would be known only by a few after a long time and with an admixture of errors; but the salvation of man depends upon his knowledge of this truth which is in God. Therefore, in order that salvation might the easier be brought to man and be more certain it was necessary that men be instructed concerning divine matters through divine revelation.

This theology which is learned through revelation is different in kind (secundum genus) from the theology which philosophy deals with. Thomas next asks whether theology (sacra doctrina) is a science and whether it is a practical science. It is a science which proceeds from principles which proceed from a higher science; namely, the science of God. Because this science deals with God, it is a speculative science more than a practical science. The place of Scripture in theology is made quite plain by Thomas when he asks whether sacred doctrine is argumentative. All sciences argue from principles and do

---

[36]Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologica (Rome: Marietti, 1948).

not try to prove their principles. Thus it is also with theology whose principles (principia) are the articles of faith. In philosophy the lower sciences cannot dispute or prove the principles of a higher science. Sacred Scripture offers the highest science, a science sui generis. If a heretic or outsider admits any of the principles of Scripture one may argue with him with hope. In all such discussion faith in Scripture rests on infallible truth, and it is impossible to demonstrate any argument against such faith. Theology makes use of human reason, but only for the sake of clarification.

> Therefore, sacred doctrine also makes use of human reason: not, however, to prove faith, for in such an event the very merit of faith would be vitiated, but to clarify (ad manifestandum) other things which are set forth in this doctrine.

Thus theology will make use of philosophers in those matters which can be known by human reason, e.g., Paul quotes Aratus (Acts 17:28). Thomas then concludes the section,

> However, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities (philosophers) only as extraneous and probable arguments. Properly theology uses the authorities of the canonical scripture as the necessary argumentation (ex necessitate argumentando). The authority of the doctors of the church is properly employed, but as merely probable (probabiliter). For our faith rests upon the revelation given to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on revelation (if there be such a thing) made to other teachers. Whence Augustine says in his letter to Jerome (82): "Only to those books which are called canonical have I learned to give honor so that I believe most firmly that no author in these books made any error in writing. I read other authors not with the thought that what they have thought and written is true just because they have manifested holiness and learning!"

This surely sounds like one who believes in the divine origin of Scripture and the sola scriptura principle. Later Thomas says that the author of Sacred Scripture is God. Whatever may be his practice later correct principles have been set down clearly in this prolegomena on the nature of theology. One aberration in Thomas' position might be noted here. Rather than calling Scripture the source (principium) of theology, Thomas calls the articles of

faith the principia (sources) of theology. From this point later Romanist theologians would go on to state that not all articles of faith are necessarily drawn from Scripture, although it is doubtful if Thomas would have supported such an inference from what he said. It may finally be said that if there is a confusion in Thomas between the realm of reason and the realm of tradition in theology it is not to be found in the prolegomena but in the way he carries out his theology; this is said in opposition to the rather severe judgment of Harnack.[37]

More than any other scholastic theologian Thomas came closer to affirming a principle of sola scriptura in his prolegomenon. But he was never able to carry out anything even approximating such a principle in practice. He consciously affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture as a fundamental assumption for the theological enterprize. For instance, he says, "It is heretical to say that any falsehood whatsoever is contained either in the gospels or in any canonical Scripture."[38]

Duns Scotus.[39] Duns in his prolegomena has much to say about revelation and Scripture. After going to great length in showing the necessity of revelation he considers a section on the sufficiency of holy Scripture. Against the heretics who would reject parts or the whole of Scripture he advanced eight arguments for the truth (veritas) of Scripture. 1. Prophecy and fulfillment. 2. The agreement of Scripture with itself. It is obvious, he says, that a greater mind than man's created the Scriptures. 3. The authority of the writers of Scripture. Duns points out that the writers of Scripture claim divine authority. Thus to credit their writings with anything less than absolute

---

[37]Harnack, History of Dogma, 6, 169.

[38]in Iob. 13, lect. 1.

[39]Duns Scotus. Opera omnia (Vatican City: typus polyglotis Vaticanis, 1901-1946).

authority is to charge them with deliberate lies. 4. The diligence which was exercised in receiving the canon. The church, he says, was always careful to receive only those books which were written by prophets who wrote by divine inspiration (scriptura recepta sit in Canone quam auctores, non sicut homines sed sicut prophetas, divina inspiratione scripserunt). 5. The reasonableness of the contents of Scripture. Duns claims that the things we believe from Scripture are not unreasonable, for they comport with divine perfection. 6. De irrationalibitate errorum. Here Duns lashes out against the insipid, asinine errors of Jews, Manichaeans and other heretics who twist Scriptures against Christ. This is due often to lack of knowledge of Scripture. For "not even one passage of Scripture can be opposed." 7. The stability of the Church which accepts Scripture. One can imagine where this one proof will lead Duns. 8. The clear proof of miracles. After listing these eight arguments Duns proceeds to affirm the sufficiency of Scripture for leading man on the way he ought to go. He seems to follow Origin and approach the later Lutherans who contended that the sufficiency of Scripture was not of such a nature that everything was in Scripture expressly, but everything (e.g., Trinity, etc.) was there virtualiter, sicut conclusiones in principiis.

Concerning theology as a science Duns begins by pointing out that science, strictly speaking, embraces four factors: 1. It is certain knowledge with no possibility of doubt or of being deceived (cognitio certa). 2. It is necessary knowledge and not contingent. 3. It is evident to the intellect (sit causata a causa evidente intellectui). 4. It can be demonstrated by reasoning and discursive argument. According to the first three factors theology is in itself a science, but not for us. In the sense that theology deals with God's external operations it is not a science because it is not necessary (4,1).

Theological science--Duns would prefer the word wisdom--does not depend upon any other science. Although metaphysics deals with God, still theology

does not derive any principia from metaphysics. The principles of theology are accepted on faith, on authority. Nor can theology be demonstrated by any principia entis. Here he differs from Thomas. And we see the cleavage between the two philosophers, or theologians. Duns is still basically a voluntarist. He will not give the same weight to reason and demonstration as Thomas. Thus more weight is given to faith and authority. Unfortunately, this ultimately becomes the authority of the Church. Thus we find Duns differing also with Thomas in teaching that theology is scientia practica, whereas Thomas said it was chiefly a scientia speculativa. Of all the scholastic theologians Duns says more about the intrinsic authority and inerrancy of Scripture than any other. And some of his points summarized above are actually taken over by Protestant theologians during the period of orthodoxy. But with all his insistence upon the authority, truthfulness and even sufficiency of Scripture, Duns was far from affirming a sola scriptura principle and even farther from putting anything approximating such a principle into action.

In Thomas and Duns we see how difficult it is to maintain the sola Scriptura against the encroachments of reason on the one hand and of Church authority on the other hand.

III

Our brief survey of the history of the doctrine Biblical inspiration from apostolic times to the Reformation must end with Luther, although we can only offer a cursory view of his position. He represents the end of era (the Middle Ages) and the beginning of another (the Reformation). There is no need to examine the position of other lesser Reformers such as Melanchthon, Flacius (who did a tremendous amount of pioneering work in Biblical studies) and others; for on no important point do they differ from Luther in his

attitude toward the Scriptures and his use of them.[40]

Although Luther inherited the unanimous high view of Scripture held by the early church and throughout the Middle Ages, he brought with him for a number of reasons a different approach to Scripture from that of his predecessors. Thus his convictions concerning the divine origin of Scripture, Biblical authority and inerrancy, convictions held by the Fathers and assumed, although at times submerged, by the scholastics, were informed by a new evangelical hermeneutic and approach to theology. The significance of this fact can scarcely be overemphasized.

What is so different and even revolutionary in Luther's approach to Scripture? Certainly one factor which sets him apart from the scholastic theology from which he had emerged was the humanistic influence of the day with its solid emphasis on philology and on theology as exegesis of Scripture, a scholarly emphasis which prompted Luther to learn the Biblical languages, lecture on books of the Bible, and ultimately to translate the Bible into German. But this factor alone does not explain the dynamics of Luther's doctrine of Scripture and the great theological influence of that doctrine.

---

[40]One need only compare the discussions of Melanchthon's doctrine of Scripture by Hans Engeland, Glauben und Handeln (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1931) and the discussions of Flacius' view of Scripture by Günter Moldaenke, Schriftverständnis und Schriftdeutung im Zeitalter der Reformation. 1. Matthias Flacius Illyricus (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936) with E. Thestrup Pedersen's discussion of Luther's doctrine of the Word, his hermeneutics and exegesis /Luther som Skriftfortolker (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959)/ to learn that there is no essential difference between the position of Luther and the other conservative Reformers on the doctrine of Scripture. Older historians such as Isaac Dorner, History of Protestant Theology, Tr. George Robson and Sophia Taylor (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871) and more significantly Otto Ritschl, Dogmengeschichte des Protestamtismus (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908-27) and their followers find only superficial differences which they sometimes make too much of and which have been corrected by the exhaustive studies of Wilhelm Walther and Michael Reu. I base much of the following discussion on their evidence and conclusions.

It has been conjectured that Luther's personal experience issuing from his discovery of the Gospel of justification by faith in Scripture is the key to understanding his doctrine of the Word.[41] But such a theory puts the cart before the horse and completely misunderstands Luther's own view of the subsidiary place of experience in relation to the power and authority of the divine Word.

No, Luther discovered a number of things about the form and content of Scripture which had previously been unappreciated, though taken for granted, and ignored.

First, he learned that theological science or wisdom is a habitus or charism not merely given by the Holy Spirit, as all the Medieval theologians had taught, but given by the Spirit through the Scriptures. Thus, to be a theologian one must first of all be scriptural, he must read and reread them,[42] grapple with them,[43] understand their intended sense without human gloss,[44] and yield to them.[45] In short, he must be a bonus textualis first and foremost.

---

[41]This view is advanced, for instance, by Rupert Davies, The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers (London: The Epworth Press, 1946). He says, "The almost immediate result of his /Luther's/ experience of justification by faith was the conviction that the Scriptures provide the whole and authoritative source of truth."

[42]The following keys to abbreviations are observed:
Er. Lat. Martin Luther, Opera Latina (Frankfort and Erlangen: Heyder and Simmer, 1865-73).
WA D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kirtische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883).
W^2 Martin Luther, Sämmtliche Schriften, herausgegeben von Dr. Joh. Georg Walch, 2. Auflage (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1881-1930).
See W^2 18, 732; 18, 332.

[43]W^2 6, 96. This implies using the analogy of Scripture, W^2 15, 1271; WA 46, 726.

[44]WA 10, 1, 1, 417: "Our faith must above all things be based on clear Scriptures, which are to be understood simply according to the sound and meaning of the words." cf. W^2 3, 21; 22, 577. And the intended sense is only one, W^2 18, 1447; 11, 313; 1, 950-952.

[45]W^2 13, 1898; WA 24, 19.

"The first concern of a theologian should be to be well acquainted with the text of Scripture (a bonus textualis, as they call it). He should adhere to this primary principle: In sacred matters there is no arguing or philosophizing; for if one were to operate with the rational and probable arguments in this area, it would be possible for me to twist all the articles of faith just as easily as Arius, the Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists did. But in theology we must only hear and believe and be convinced at heart that God is truthful, however absurd that which God says in His Word may appear to be to reason."[46] Luther never tires of stressing the point that the Holy Spirit makes one a theologian only by leading one to an understanding and acceptance of the words of Scripture. "This is our foundation: where the Holy Scripture establishes something that must be believed, there we must not deviate from the words, as they sound, neither from the order as it stands, unless an express article of faith (based on clear Scripture passages) compells us to interpret the words otherwise, or arrange them differently. Else, what would become of the Bible?"[47] Again Luther says, "You should meditate, that is, not in the heart alone, but also externally, work on and ply the oral speech and the lettered words in the Book, read them and reread them again and again, noting carefully and reflecting upon what the Holy Spirit means by these words. And have a care that you do not tire of it or think it enough if you have read, heard, said, it once or twice, and now profoundly understand it all; for in that manner a person will never become much of a theologian."[48] It is significant that the old accepted catholic assumptions regarding Scripture's divine origin and authority are assumed throughout these urgent admonitions of Luther's concerning

---

[46] W^2 5, 456.

[47] WA 18, 147.

[48] W^2 14, 435.

the making of a theologian.

It is Luther's utter adherence to the Scriptures as the source of all theology that led him to his discovery of the Gospel of justification in Rom. 1:16. This same regard for Scripture and yielding to it led to his insight, followed by Melanchthon and also the Reformed theologians, that Scripture ought to be divided into the themes of Law and Gospel and similar hermeneutical breakthroughs. Certainly it was also this confident biblicistic dependence upon the Scriptures which brought about his rejection of philosophy and philosophical principles in establishing theology (such as the principle of Aristotle and Aquinas: finitum non est capax infiniti). Luther says, "Paul takes them all together, himself, an angel from heaven, teachers upon the earth, and masters of all kinds, and subjects them to the Holy Scripture. Scripture must reign as queen, all must obey and be subject to her, not teachers, judges, or arbiters over her; but they must be simple witnesses, pupils and confessors of it, whether they be pope or Luther or Augustine or an angel from heaven."[49] As he rehearses what makes a Christian a theologian Luther has already articulated a clear position regarding Biblical authority, but in an eminently practical, not a theoretical, context.

Second, like the Church Fathers, Luther sees the Scriptures as Christo-centric in their entire sweep and soteriological in their purpose, but again in the practical context of consistent hermeneutical application which informs his entire theological activity. To Luther "Christ is the sum and truth of Scripture."[50] "The Scriptures from beginning to end do not reveal anyone besides the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come and through His sacrifice

---

[49]WA 40, 1, 120; cf. WA 10, 2, 256; WA 10, 1, 80: "There is no other evidence of Christian proof on earth but the Holy Scriptures." cf. also W^2 9, 1238; 19, 19ff; 9, 650; 16, 2212; 8, 1110.

[50]WA 3, 620.

carry and take away the sins of the world."[51] "The entire Scripture points only to Christ."[52] "Outside the book of the Holy Spirit, namely the holy Scriptures, one does not find Christ."[53] Such statements concerning the Christocentricity of the Old and New Testaments could be multiplied.[54] The principle of the Christocentricity of Scripture was not something Luther inherited from the early church and then imposed upon the Scriptures. No, he derived the principle from Scripture itself; he found Christ there inductively through sound and serious exegesis, as is made abundantly clear from his commentaries on Genesis, Isaiah, Psalms, and Deuteronomy. Luther's personal theological Christocentricity, while derived from Scripture, informs his exegesis of Scripture. It is not only possible for him, but incumbent upon him, to read the Old Testament in the light of the New just as he read the New in the light of the Old. Such a practice is in harmony with his belief--and the belief of the entire church catholic in the light of Luke 24:25-27, Rom. 15:4, 2 Tim. 3:15 and other passages--in the unity of Scripture and in the hermeneutical principle that Scripture is its own interpreter.[55] It was just his failure to find Christ and justification by faith in certain books of the Old and New Testaments (all antilegomena) which prompted Luther to depreciate the value of these books

---

[51] W^2 17, 1070.

[52] WA 2, 73.

[53] W^2 9, 1775.

[54] W^2 8, 191; 11, 526; 3, 1958-9; 1964; 8, 111; 9, 855, 1818; 9, 1774; WA 17, 2, 234; 52, 509. See Petersen, op. cit., 251-270 for a thorough discussion of Luther's exegesis on this point and many more similar citations from Luther.

[55] See Petersen, op. cit., pp. 93-106.

and question their canonicity.[56] In fact he at times appears to depreciate the Bible itself in comparison with the pearl of great price which is found therein. For instance, he says, "I beg and faithfully warn every pious Christian not to stumble at the simplicity of language and the stories that will often meet him there. He should not doubt that however simple they may seem, these are the very words, deeds, judgments and history of the high majesty and wisdom of God; for this is the Scripture which makes fools of all the wise and prudent and is open only to babes and fools, as Christ says, Matt. 11:25. Away with your overweening conceit! Think of Scripture as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest lode, which will never be mined out, so that you may find the divine wisdom which God places before you in such foolish and ordinary form. He does this in order to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, to which the angels directed the shepherds, Luke 2:12. Mean and poor are the swaddling clothes, but precious is the treasure, Christ, lying in them."[57] Far from belittling Scripture by this statement, Luther enhances it: that is

---

[56]His principle seems to be summarized in the following overstatement: "Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic, even though Judas, Anas, Pilate and Herod taught it." W^2 14, 129. For a definitive discussion of Luther's views on canonicity see Reu, op. cit., pp. 38-48. Reu demonstrates beyond question that Luther's views on canonicity affect in no way his doctrine of Biblical inspiration and authority.

[57]At times Luther opposes Christ to Scripture. "If our adversaries urge Scripture, we urge Christ against Scripture." Again: "One must not understand Scripture contrary to Christ, but in favor of him; therefore Scripture must be brought into relation to Christ or must not be regarded as Scripture." W^2 19, 1441. But here Luther is simply applying his hermeneutical principle of Christocentricity: Scripture simply cannot teach anything against the vicarious atonement of Christ (cf. WA 24, 549, 18; 42, 368, 35; 42, 377, 20) and the doctrine of justification. This is his intention also as he calls Christ the dominus et rex scripturae (WA 40, 1, 419ff). He means simply that law passages must not be allowed to mitigate against those Christological statements in Scripture which teach justification by faith.

his very purpose as he speaks in such a way. To him Scripture is of supreme value (and how often does he extol the value of Scripture[58]) not merely because of its form, because it is God's Word and revelation, but because of its content and message which is Christ, the crucified and risen Savior of the world.[58]

But there is another reason why Luther valued the Scriptures so highly, namely their power; power to comfort, to save, to regenerate, to lead the child of God to eternal life. In this sense and for this purpose God mightily speaks to us in the sacred Scriptures.[59] This is the very purpose of the Holy Spirit even as the Holy Spirit diligently describes the most shameful, adulterious history, the most despised, filthy and damnable things in Scripture: to teach, reprove, admonish, bless and save us.[60] Luther never tires of extolling the practical value of Scripture for the life of a believer. It makes us happy, trustful, confident Christians and puts us at peace with God.[61] It is our defense against the temptations of the devil, the world and our flesh.[62] It instructs us in the true worship and service of God[63] and in how to be a good theologian.[64] It sanctifies, reforms and comforts us.[65] But, most

---

[58] W^2 19, 1734: "A saying of Holy Scripture is worth more than all the books in the world." W^2 9, 831: "When the devil takes the word which brings eternal life; he has taken away everything." W^2 9, 654: "If the Word is falsified and God is denied and blasphemed then there can be no hope for salvation." (cf. W^2 9, 111, 655, 885, 1788, 1792, 1802). W^2 9, 1819: "God gave us Holy Scripture that we should not only read it, but also search, meditate, and ponder on it. In this way one will find eternal life in it." We note the soteriological purpose of Scripture implied in these and similar statements of Luther's.

[59] W^2 9, 1800.

[60] W^2 2, 1200ff; cf. 1, 1344; WA 17, II, 39.

[61] W^2 4, 2098.

[62] W^2 6, 439, 3, 18; 2, 1385; 5, 274.

[63] W^2 4, 1424; 13, 573; 13, 2215-6.

[64] W^2 14, 435.

[65] W^2 23, 2085; 4, 1559.

important of all, we learn about God and His grace in Scripture, and so we gain eternal life.[66] Herein is the great power of the Scripture. For Scripture not only points us to Christ; it shares Christ with us and bestows him upon us. It brings us to faith, and through it the Holy Spirit comes to us with all His treasures and blessings.[67] Scripture does all this; it possesses the intrinsic power to do so because it is God's Word, because the Spirit of God is never separated from it,[68] and because its message is Christ. "All the works which Christ performed are recorded in the Word, and in the Word and through the Word He will give us everything, and without the Word He will give us nothing."[69] To be sure, the preached Gospel has all the power of the written word of Scripture; but the preached Word, all theology, is only to be drawn from the one divine foundation of Israel, Scripture.

Luther's deep and personal conviction concerning the power of the Scriptures is the third factor in Luther's new approach to Scripture.

And so Luther's doctrine of the divine origin of Scripture, its authority and inerrancy, must be viewed in the light of the aforementioned three aspects of his approach to Scripture: a) the Holy Spirit makes one a theologian through Scripture alone, b) Christ's atonement is the burden and "chief article" of all Scripture,[70] c) the Scriptures are powerful to work faith and make one wise unto salvation. Not that Luther's bibliology is based upon these three insights; on the contrary, his understanding on these issues is

---

[66] W^2 9, 1819; cf. 1788.

[67] W^2 5, 271; 3, 760; 5, 415; WA 11, 33.

[68] W^2 18, 1811; Erl. (German) 4, 307; 8, 288; 18, 215; 51, 377-88.

[69] W^2 13, 1556.

[70] See Smalcald Articles I, II, 1ff.

drawn from Scripture.[71] But the hermeneutical pre-understanding Luther brings with him to the study of Scripture results in a far more practical and evangelical view of Biblical authority than had previously been held.

What specifically, then, does Luther teach on the three issues under consideration: the divine origin of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, the inerrancy of Scripture? Formally his views were the identical to those of the early church and of the Middle Ages.

a. Inspiration. Although Luther, like his predecessors and immediate followers, rarely speaks of inspiration as such, he says in literally hundreds of cases that Scripture is the Word of God, that God speaks through Scripture, and that God is the author of Scripture.[72] There is no way in which one can anachronistically interpret Luther as advancing some sort of pre-Liberal notion that the Bible merely contains the Word of God or pre-Barthian notion that God in some way, where and when it pleases Him, makes the words of men (in Scripture) His Word.[73] Luther simply and ingenuously says, "You are so to deal with the Scriptures that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this."[74]

---

[71] And there is no reason to conclude with Otto Ritschl (op. cit., IV, 167-170) that the Lutheran teaching concerning the power of Scripture was derived from a peculiar doctrine of inspiration. After all, Reformed theologians shared Luther's view of the divine origin of Scripture, but never went as far as he in extolling the power of the Word.

[72] W^2 7, 2090; 9, 1811; 9, 1808: "In Scripture one reads not human, but the most high Word of God. God wants students who diligently regard Scripture and heed its words." 9, 1818: "Because we hold that the Holy Scriptures are God's Word which can save us, therefore we should read and study them so that we find Christ revealed and witnessed to in them." Here one discerns that the power of Scripture is dependent upon its divine origin. 1, 531; 22, 39, 25; 3, 1890: "So, then, the entire Scriptures are assigned to the Holy Ghost." cf. passim. 9, 1821, 1852; 7, 113; 3, 21; 3, 1895; 16, 2182; 14, 21; 3, 785; WA 401, 57; 17, II, 39.

[73] Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Tr. G. T. Thomson, G. W. Bromily, et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-9), I, 1, 123.

[74] W^2 3, 21.

We fear and tremble before the very words of Scripture because they are God's words, all of them, for "Whoever despises a single word of God does not regard any as important."[75] Matthew, Paul and Peter were indeed men, but should anyone believe that their words and doctrine were only the word of men and not of God, he is a hardened and blinded blasphemer who should be avoided.[76] "It is cursed unbelief and the odious flesh which will not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in Scripture and that it is God's Word, but tells us that it is the word merely of Isaiah, Paul, or some other mere man, who has not created heaven and earth."[77] That Scripture is the Word of God means for Luther that it is materially and formally so, word for word, His Word, verbally inspired. "The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, written and (I might say) lettered and formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God veiled in the human nature."[78] The very order of the words found in Scripture are intentionally arranged by the Holy Spirit.[79] Thus, not merely the phrases and expressions in Scripture are divine but the very words and their arrangement.[80] "The prophets do not set forth statements that they have spun up in their own mind. What they have heard from God Himself. . .they proclaim and set forth."[81] And if the holy evangelists arrange their Gospels

---

[75] WA 26, 449.

[76] Er. (German), 28, 342. Cf. ibid. 28, 343.

[77] W^2 9, 1800.

[78] W^2 9, 1770; WA 3, 347; 262.

[79] W^2 19, 1104. cf. WA 47, 193.

[80] W^2 4, 1960 (WA 40, III, 254): "Not only the words /vocabula/, but also the mode of expression /phrasis/, which the Holy Ghost and Scripture use, are divine."

[81] W^2 4, 1492. cf. W^2 3, 785; WA 17, II, 39.

differently from each other, this too has been determined by the Holy Spirit.[82]

b. Authority. To Luther Scripture derives its divine authority not from its content which is the Gospel and the Law, but from its form. It is authoritative because it is the Word of God.[83] That Scripture is authoritative means that it alone is the source and norm of doctrine. "No doctrine in the Church can come from anywhere but the Holy Scripture; it is our only source of doctrine."[84] And only Scripture is the authority, the source and norm of doctrine. "There is no other evidence of Christian proof on earth but the Holy Scripture."[85] Luther rejoices and revels in the certainty he has as one bound by the authority of Scripture. "One passage of Scripture has more authority than all the books of the world," he says.[86] And again he says, commenting on Gal. 1:8, "Paul takes them all together, himself, an angel from heaven, teachers upon the earth, the masters of all kinds, and subjects them to Holy Scripture. Scripture must reign as queen, all must obey and be subject to her, not to teachers, judges, or arbiters over her. No, all these must be simple witnesses, pupils and confessors of Scripture, whether they be pope or Luther or Augustine or an angel from heaven."[87] It is obvious that neither reason, nor philosophy, nor experience, nor pope nor church council can be regarded as an authority beside Scripture; but all must conform to Scripture. Nor may any of these be allowed to interpret Scripture so as to mitigate

---

[82] WA 8, 508.

[83] W^2 8, 38; 9, 839; 3, 325; 13, 1559; 5, 933; 22, 1661; 9, 1238; 9, 87.

[84] W^2 9, 87. cf. W^2 3, 503; 9, 86, 915; 1, 1290; 8, 1110; 13, 1911; 20, 213; 19, 1071; 20, 213; 19, 1071; 3, 325; 15, 1295; 22, 1661; 9, 87; 19, 19ff. 1238; 16, 2212; 8, 1110. WA 18, 147; 10, 1, 1, 417.

[85] WA 10, 1, 80.

[86] W^2 19, 1734.

[87] WA 40, 1, 120.

against its plain and clear meaning.[88] Otherwise, "What would become of the Bible?" Scripture would be relegated to the position of a waxen nose and lose its authority entirely. If Scripture is not the authority alone, it is not the authority at all.[89] Luther not only affirmed the sola scriptura principle; he practiced it.

c. Inerrancy. The divine origin, authority and inerrancy of Scripture all hang together for Luther. Each concept entails the other. In contexts where he defends the authority of Scripture Luther affirms or alludes to its divine origin. As he debates his case for the sola scriptura against Romanists or enthusiasts he maintains that the Holy Spirit caused the Biblical writers to write clearly, truthfully and without equivocation. The notion of an authoritative, errant Word of God would for Luther have been utter nonsense. No such idea could have been entertained prior to the rise of subjective idealism and existentialism. And so when Luther or any of the Reformers defended the authority of Scripture, which was his chief concern, he was eo ipso affirming also Scripture's divine nature and total veracity. In fact, it is very doubtful if Luther ever distinguished carefully between the three concepts.

In his usual blunt and ingenuous way Luther affirms the absolute infallibility and truthfulness of Scripture. For Luther, as for those who went before him, this meant 1) that Scripture does not err or deceive in any way, and 2) that Scripture does not contradict itself.

Thus, we find him saying, relative to the first aspect of inerrancy, "Natural reason produces heresy and error. Faith teaches and adheres to the pure truth. He who adheres to the Scriptures will find that they do not lie

---

[88] WA 23, 119, 11ff; 147, 23ff.

[89] WA 40, III, 254; 37, 40. cf. Reu, p. 61 passim.

or deceive."[90] "Scripture cannot err."[91] "The Scriptures have never erred."[92] If Scripture seems to err, it is our fault for not understanding it properly or yielding to it. "The Holy Spirit has been blamed for not speaking correctly; He speaks like a drunkard or a fool, He so mixes up things, and uses wild, queer words and statements. But it is our fault, who have not understood the language nor known the matter of the prophets. For it cannot be otherwise; the Holy Ghost is wise and makes the prophets also wise. A wise man must be able to speak correctly; that holds true without fail."[93] This statement of Luther's indicates also that Scripture is infallibly true in all its assertions, irrefragable. We need not test it with reason, experience or any other authority. Its utterances can and ought to be accepted a priori.[94] This means taking our reason captive. For the simple words of Scripture often seem to be in opposition to science, evidence and experience. "As the Word says, so it must come to pass, although all the world, mind and understanding, and all things are against it."[95] And, of course, it is because Scripture is the Word of God that it is infallibly true.[96]

The second aspect of inerrancy, namely that Scripture cannot contradict itself, is affirmed by Luther with equal vigor. "Scripture agrees with itself

---

[90] W^2 11, 162.

[91] W^2 14, 1073.

[92] W^2 15, 1481; 9, 356.

[93] W^2 14, 1418.

[94] W^2 2, 1893; 19, 1309, 1442; 22, 1852; 3, 478; 13, 241; 9, 1839.

[95] W^2 8, 1105. cf. 13, 241: "We should not be offended by the Word of God, even though it really sounds amazing, incredible and impossible, but we should firmly take our stand on it. If God has spoken it, then it must surely be so."

[96] W^2 17, 1339; 20, 775; 13, 2478.

everywhere," is his position.[97] In fact, "It is certain that Scripture cannot disagree with itself."[98] Only a foolish, coarse, hardened hypocrite will find contradictions in holy Writ. "It is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites."[99] Luther's doctrine of inerrancy at this point agrees with his catholic commitment to the unity of Scripture and becomes a fundamental hermeneutical rule, along with the analogy of Scripture, for interpretation. If Scripture should contradict itself at any point, then all exegesis and theologizing end in chaos.

It was "all or nothing" for Luther as he carried out all his theological work and based all his teaching on the inerrant word of Scripture. To find even one error in Scripture was a blasphemy against God and against all of Scripture. "Whoever belies and blasphemes God in one Word, or speaks as if it were a trifling thing, he blasphemes God in everything, and regards all blasphemy of God unimportant."[100] This is Luther's "domino theory" vis à vis the veracity of Scripture. Speaking against the fanatics who tended often to make light of the external word of Scripture, Luther says, "They do not believe that they /the words of Scripture/ are God's words. For if they believed they were God's words they would not call them poor, miserable words but would regard such words and titles as greater than the whole world and would fear and tremble before them as before God Himself. For whoever despises a single word of God does not regard any as important."[101] Again Luther writes, "Whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a

---

[97] W^2 3, 18.

[98] W^2 20, 798.

[99] W^2 9, 356. cf. WA 40, I, 420.

[100] W^2 20, 775.

[101] WA 26, 49.

single word and does so willfully again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words. Therefore it is true, absolutely and without exception, that everything is believed or nothing is believed. The Holy Spirit does suffer Himself to be separated or divided so that He should teach and cause to be believed one doctrine rightly and another falsely."[102]

IV

What conclusions can we draw from this very cursory review of the view toward the Bible held by the church through the ages? We have found a remarkable essential agreement between the leading Church Fathers, the scholastics and the Reformers in their view toward the Bible, of its divine inspiration, authority and veracity. Only heretics ventured to reject the universal faith of the church on these issues. We have found that through the centuries from the apostles to the Reformation the belief that Scripture was really and truly God's Word always entailed belief also in the divine authority and inerrancy of Scripture. Scripture is divinely authoritative and infallible just because it is God's Word. Thus Biblical evidence or exegesis specifically supporting Biblical authority or inerrancy is rarely explicitly offered, for these divine properties were simply assumed to obtain

---

[102] WA 54, 158. cf. 56, 249; 32, 59; 50, 269. Michael Reu (op. cit., p. 56 passim has assembled these and many other passages from Luther to show that his position on this point was well thought out and consistent. To Luther theology and Scripture, according to Reu, were one unbroken golden chain. If one link is broken, the whole chain is broken and pulls apart. See Reu's notes on p. 150 passim.

Reu, following Wilhelm Walther, also shows with vast evidence that Luther believed in the inerrancy of Scripture also when it spoke of matters seemingly not directly pertaining to doctrine. The very few derogatory remarks Luther made concerning certain passages (either out of frustration because they seemed to conflict with other Biblical statements /cf. WA 28, 269; 32, 642/ or because of his propensity for hyperbole) are easily explained by Reu and are more than offset by the hundreds of statements of Luther's showing his utter commitment to the divine authority and inerrancy of Scripture.

in the case of a divine Scripture. Throughout all these centuries the authority of Scripture in theological work and in the life of the church was the prime concern. When Scripture speaks, God speaks. Not much speculation was advanced concerning the nature of inspiration, except to reject Platonic, Montanist and other exaggerated theories. It was always enough simply to affirm Scripture's divine origin and its nature as God's authoritative Word. Again the inerrancy of Scripture as such was never given a great deal of attention or defended at length. It was simply assumed by all that for a cognitive word to be authoritative in any meaningful sense it must be inerrant, inerrant in the sense that it always spoke the truth. A simple correspondence idea of truth lies behind every assertion concerning Scripture's reliability or truthfulness. No other idea could have occurred to the theologians and church leaders of this long era. And so the assertions of Scripture are true in the sense that they correspond to what has happened in history or will happen in the future or to what simply obtains in the case of God and all that is revealed in Scripture about Him and his dealings with men.

Such an idea of truth also underlay the approach to Scripture of those who employed the allegorical method of interpretation or sought a sensus plenior or a fourfold sense in Scripture; otherwise why would they resort to such a program as they attempted to find significance in verses that seemed trivial?

Although we find a remarkable unity concerning the divine nature of Scripture during this long period of history, we discover also that such unity is no safeguard against fanciful and wrong hermeneutics, poor exegesis, false doctrine and controversy. Although we learn from history that a high view of Scripture is essential for good exegesis, it does not guarantee good exegesis. Not until the time of Luther was the sufficiency of Scripture clearly ennunciated and practiced consistently, although the divine authority of

Scripture was always held. Not until the Reformation was the Christocentricity of Scripture more than a kind of shibboleth; it was rarely at least a working hermeneutical rule (drawn from Scripture) to get at the intended (literal) sense of Scripture. And a high view of Scripture does not necessarily lead to a love of the Scriptures, a desire to search them and live in them.

But if this unity we have traced concerning the nature and authority of the cognitive source of theology does not automatically lead to unity of doctrine in the church, it at least forms a basis of discussion. And during the first fifteen hundred years of church history a common belief concerning the divine source of Christian doctrine was certainly the greatest single factor in making doctrinal discussion possible between all Christians and also fruitful, and at times successful. For there was always the conviction within Christendom that pure doctrine was based upon the Scriptures, that it was a great blessing to the church, and that unity in the doctrine was possible. Today this is not the case. With the divine origin, authority and the infallibility of Scripture denied or subverted, pure doctrine in the church becomes an impossibility and the very desire for it as the highest honor of God and helpmeet for the proclamation of the Gospel is considered naive or even presumptious.

And so we have learned many things from our brief study of the view of the Bible held by the church through the ages, and perhaps unlearned a few things. But the most important is the lesson that the quality of theology in the church--and the church lives by its theology--although it may descend below the level of the view of Scripture held in the church, will rarely rise above it.