

ASPECTS OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

CONFESSIONAL PRINCIPLES
AND
PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Aspects of
Biblical Hermeneutics:
Confessional Principles and
Practical Applications

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An Introduction

This supplement to the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY contains four essays delivered to the Council of Presidents and the joint theological faculties of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod meeting in St. Louis Nov. 29—30, 1965. At the suggestion of this group the essays are being mailed to the clergy and called male teachers of the Synod.

The topics were assigned to the essayists by the program committee and were designed to dovetail. This is particularly true of the papers by Bouman and Bohlmann, which should be read and studied as a unit.

The papers stimulated considerable discussion when they were first presented, although none of the participants in the conference feel that there was enough time to discuss them adequately. They have undergone no substantive editing.

Careful study of these papers will make a decided contribution toward resolving some of the theological arguments which bother us. Many of us who heard them originally feel that we want to read them a second and a third time before we reach a final decision concerning some of the opinions stated in the papers.

The four essayists were in agreement that the Holy Scriptures are the final norm for Lutheran theology, and that a Lutheran theologian, by definition, bows cheerfully to this norm. There were two questions put in sharp form by each essayist: What is the nature of Scripture? How does one arrive at a sure grasp of its meaning?

Regardless of the form each question may take (and the questions are posed by theologians in a bewildering variety of forms), the questions themselves finally are reduced to these bedrock pastoral concerns. The answer to these questions leads one directly to the heart of the Christian faith, salvation through faith in the incarnate Son of God. Or does faith in the incarnate Son of God lead directly to the answer to these two questions?

HERBERT T. MAYER

Some Thoughts on the Theological Presuppositions for a Lutheran Approach to the Scriptures

HERBERT J. A. BOUMAN

PROLEGOMENA

It is possible to speak of a presuppositionless approach to the Bible. We could imagine some pagan or Muslim from some remote corner of the globe coming into a bookstore and there discovering a book he had never heard of before, called Bible, or Scripture, or whatever the translation into his native tongue named it. With respect to this book he could be perfectly neutral, at the beginning at least, because he was totally ignorant of its content or its message.

Our title suggests that such a hypothetical case is not under consideration. It frankly admits that there are certain presuppositions that appear to be self-evident to those who maintain them and may be accepted as a matter of course. Not all presuppositions are valid, of course. Though they may seem so to the persons holding them, they are far from self-evident to others. There may be and often is a high degree of subjectivity in presuppositions.

Our theme suggests, furthermore, that we are not about to speak of presuppositions in general, such as may be common to all areas of human thought and inquiry, but *theological* presuppositions. This raises

issues about God and the Word concerning Him, about God in communication with man. Our concern is lifted out of the realm of the secular disciplines and concentrates on an approach to the Scriptures by men whose life has been formed, informed, and transformed by God, men whose thoughts have been taken captive to the obedience of Christ, whose epistemology and methodology are controlled by faith and the illumination of the Spirit of God, who once spake by the prophets and led the apostles into all truth and glorified Christ in them and now speaks again through the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures to perform the same function for the interpreter and the hearer.

Another word in our theme is "Lutheran." In the history of the church there has been a variety of approaches to the Bible with great divergence in the results. These results have usually reflected certain philosophic or theological preconceptions about God and His nature, His attitudes and acts, His abilities or desires to establish communication and communion with man. A one-sided stress on the transcendence of God tended to depersonalize God and make Him distant, cold, unapproachable, serenely indifferent to and unaffected by mundane affairs. Such a view of God could easily reduce the question of an approach to Him or His Word to an acutely academic and irretrievably irrelevant matter. Conversely, a preconception of God

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as already present within the creature would tend to obviate the necessity of any further concern with how one ought to approach that which we call God's Word to man. The subjective reflection of the man in whom God is alleged to be immanent becomes the criterion of theology. If the sovereign God needs no vehicle to ride into men's hearts and lives, he probably disdains to use one, and a concern about the vehicle can again become academic and irrelevant. Or if He has simply handed down a comprehensive collection of timeless laws or ordinances all on the same level, I need but take this catalog, start on page 1, and work my way through to the last page, making sure only that I have all the vocables, the grammar, and the syntax straight.

Again, if I approach the Bible with certain preconceptions about myself and my fellowmen, with an optimistic view of human powers and capabilities unimpaired or not critically impaired, God's address to man will take on a character and function commensurate with such an anthropology (more about this later).

Another point to be considered: Any approach to Scripture, certainly within Christendom, already represents a return, a response to its message, whether that content has been transmitted by means of the church's creedal summaries or oral kerygma or through hearing or reading its very words. In the circle of the church's use of Scripture it is always both a *Herauskommen* and a *Hinzukommen*. Hence there exists a reciprocal, even cyclical, relationship, a circle perfectly natural and proper for those within the circle but stultifying nonsense to the unregenerate logician.

This state of affairs certainly complicates the problem before us. If the approach to Scripture on the part of men within the church is conditioned by what is in Scripture, which is a constant (apart from relatively unimportant variations in the extent of the canon), then we may ask why the results should be so much at variance. Why should Origen and Tertullian, or Arius and Marcellus, or Marcion and Irenaeus, or Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria, or Theodore of Mopsuestia and Eutyches, or Pelagius and Augustine, or Aquinas and Occam, or Luther and Erasmus and Zwingli, or Wesley and Calvin, or Pieper and Fosdick arrive at such massively discordant conclusions? The answer lies, of course, largely in the fact that the same Scriptures were read and interpreted in the context of specific theological and anthropological perspectives which in many instances allowed themselves to be influenced and even controlled by certain extra-Biblical philosophical, cosmological, anthropological, nomistic, etc., assumptions that resulted in major or minor distortions of the Biblical message.

Some of this distortion was occasioned and abetted by a principal of selection of Biblical materials which were first of all interpreted in the light of a certain *Tendenz*, preconceived and imported into the text, and then these materials in turn became the criterion for the understanding and application of the rest of Scripture. The very vocabulary of Scripture, including such key words as spirit, flesh, righteousness, sin, knowledge, grace, faith, merit, reward, love, Law, Gospel, etc., took on a distinctive coloring in accordance with the respective *Tendenz* in the service of which they were employed.

It is well known that Luther himself, as a child of his time and an heir of previous ages or exegetical principle and method, was long held captive to this legacy. His earlier works teem with instances of rather fanciful allegorical exegesis, and traces persist even in his mature writings. His spiritual agonizing was prolonged for years by principles of interpretation that were in the thralls of a nomistic scholasticism. Meanwhile the radical left wing of the non-Lutheran Reformation and the more moderate right wing with their spiritualism, symbolism, rationalism, and Biblicism represented the proliferation or revival of other *Tendenzen* that had been present in the church in ages past.

Without attempting to absolutize or oversimplify the denominational problem, it can, I think, be said that the various theological systems owe their existence in a measure to divergent hermeneutics and that the Lutheran Reformation was nothing less than a hermeneutical revolution. Luther's theological breakthrough meant the repudiation of one set of interpretive principles and the adoption of another. This revolution first transformed Luther himself and subsequently his co-workers and ultimately many thousands of others, to the degree that Luther's new insights, gained through a complex of causes, not the least of which was his years of intensive preoccupation with the Scriptures themselves, became normative for them.

But if it is true that differing hermeneutics produced divergent theological and ecclesiastical alignments, it is also true that to a significant degree the extent of the interdenominational cleavages, their intensification, and their perpetuation were too often the result of semantic difficulties, as

friendly Roman Catholic critics are sometimes at pains to point out. Much of the material in the Lutheran Symbols, particularly in the Apology but also in the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Tractate, and the Formula of Concord, is presented in the form of an *Auseinandersetzung* with other hermeneutical principles and exegetical practices, as understood by the Lutherans from their own perspective, a perspective which quite evidently gives direction to their *damnamus*. Not only is there a roster of men and movements whose theologies are repudiated by name, e.g., the Manichaeans, Gnostics, Arians, Mohammedans, Samosatenes, Pelagians, Donatists, Novatians, Anabaptists, etc., but there are also frequent rejections of "the opponents" or "others" or "all others who hold contrary views" or those who hold views "contrary to the Gospel."

Certain theological presuppositions of the Roman Catholic scholastics as well as of the Enthusiasts are repeatedly repudiated as doing violence to the Scriptures and as vitiating their intended message. This is done both in blanket condemnations and in specific rejections. "One should not obey even regularly elected bishops if they err or if they teach or command something contrary to the divine Holy Scriptures" (AC XXVIII 28).¹ "It is patently contrary to God's command and Word to make laws out of opinions or to require that they be observed in order to make satisfaction for sins and obtain grace, for the glory of Christ's merit is blasphemed when we presume to earn grace by such ordinances" (35). It is contrary

¹ Citations are from *The Book of Concord*, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

to God's command to "burden Christendom with the bondage of the law, as if in order to earn God's grace there had to be a service of God among Christians like the Levitical service . . ." (39). It is a "false and erroneous opinion that in Christendom one must have services of God like the Levitical or Jewish services . . ." (61). The profound and extremely significant observation is made: "Such errors were introduced into Christendom when the righteousness of faith was no longer taught and preached with clarity and purity." (62)

In his Preface to the Apology Melancthon states that "we have undoubtedly brought into view many articles of Christian doctrine that the church sorely needs. We need not describe here how they lay hidden under all sorts of dangerous opinions in the writings of the monks, canonists, and scholastic theologians" (17). Of these writers he says further that "since they understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor faith nor grace nor righteousness, our opponents confuse this doctrine miserably . . ." (Ap IV 3)

What led the scholastics to their false interpretation of the righteousness of God, the Gospel, and man's salvation was, according to the Lutherans, the result of a Semi-Pelagian, Pelagian, or unwarrantedly optimistic anthropology. The scholastics "minimize original sin."

Thus when they talk about original sin, they do not mention the more serious faults of human nature, namely, ignoring God, despising him, lacking fear and trust in him, hating his judgment and fleeing it, being angry at him, despairing of his grace, trusting in temporal things, etc. These evils, which are most contrary to the law of God, the scholastics do not even mention. They even attribute to hu-

man nature unimpaired power to love God above all things and to obey his commandments "according to the substance of the act." And they do not see the contradiction. (Ap II 8)

As a result the opponents are said to approach God on the basis of their own righteousness, the righteousness of the works dictated by the law. The "opponents select the law and by it they seek forgiveness of sins and justification" (Ap IV 7). They scale down the lofty and unattainable level of the requirements of God's law by concentrating on external uprightness.

Our opponents concentrate on the commandments of the second table, which contain the civil righteousness that reason understands. Content with this, they think they satisfy the law of God. Meanwhile they do not see the first table . . . (Ap IV 34)

At the same time they raise the level of man's potential abilities and innate resources, as noted above. The gap that still remains between God's demands and man's ability no longer seems quite so impassable. The problem of man's relationship with God accordingly does not appear to be too serious or difficult for upright and reasonable men to handle. One could almost adopt a spectator attitude and indulge in philosophical and ethical speculations.

But this whole business [says Melancthon] is the invention of idle men who do not know how the forgiveness of sins takes place, or how the judgment of God and the terrors of conscience drive out our trust in works. (Ap IV 20)

It is easy enough for idle men to make up these dreams that a man guilty of mortal sin can love God above all things, since they themselves do not feel the wrath or judgment of God. (37; see 99, 115, 304;

see FC Ep II 9—12 for further condemnatory statements)

But if man is himself in a position to cover much of the distance between himself and God, the radical and exclusive character of God's saving activity is greatly minimized. There does not seem to be quite so much urgency about the work of Jesus Christ. Instead of the complete and only Mediator and Propitiator, He is made to appear as a moralist and teacher whose chief function is to provide man with the skills he needs to save himself.

We see that there are books in existence which compare certain teachings of Christ with the teachings of Socrates, Zeno, and others, as though Christ had come to give some sort of laws by which we could merit the forgiveness of sins. . . . Ap IV 15)

What need is there for the grace of Christ if we can become righteous by our own righteousness? (Ap II 10; see IV 3, 17, 21)

As the Lutherans evaluated the theology of their scholastic opponents, they most frequently indicted it for the twin errors of rationalism and legalism.

So if we accept this teaching of the opponents . . . there will be no difference between philosophical or Pharisaic righteousness and Christian righteousness. (Ap IV 16)

Thus our opponents teach nothing but the righteousness of reason or of law. . . .

The opponents' whole system is derived either from human reason or from the teaching of the law rather than the Gospel. They teach two modes of justification, one based upon reason, the other based upon the law . . . (287)

This is what we condemn in our opponents' position, that by interpreting such passages of the Scriptures in either a philo-

sophical or a Jewish manner they eliminate from them the righteousness of faith and Christ, the mediator. (376; see LC I 22)

Such presuppositions had disastrous consequences for exegesis. Language was made to conform to the exegete's own dogmatic preconceptions.

It is surely amazing that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith and specifically deny it to works. . . . But they have thought up a piece of sophistry to evade them. They should be interpreted, so they say, as referring to "faith fashioned by love" . . . (Ap IV 107, 109)

Whoever fails to teach about this faith we are discussing completely destroys the Gospel. (120)

Our opponents twist many texts because they read their own opinions into them instead of deriving the meaning from the texts themselves. (224)

After pointing out that Paul (in 1 Cor. 13:2, which was used by the confutators to prove that love justifies) was "writing to people who, upon being justified, needed urging to bear good fruits lest they lose the Holy Spirit," Melancthon continues,

Our opponents proceed in reverse order. They quote this one text in which Paul teaches about the fruits, and they omit the many other texts in which he systematically discusses the mode of justification. Besides, to other texts that speak of faith they always add the correction that they should be understood in reference to "faith formed by love." (Ap IV 221)

The author has harsh words to say about those who reject Christ, destroy the Gospel, and maliciously twist the Scriptures to suit the man-made theory that by our works we purchase the forgiveness of sins. (260)

Cursed be our opponents, those Pharisees, who interpret the law in such a way that they attribute Christ's glory to works. . . . (269; see 253, 255, 337, 367; XII 106)

As is clear from these excerpts, an exegesis that operates with such presuppositions becomes eclectic, fragmented, and therefore sectarian, and it distorts the content and purpose of the Holy Scriptures. "They quote passages about law and works but omit passages about the promises" (Ap IV 183). This is concretely demonstrated by the actual selection of texts by which the architects of the Confutation attempted to refute and invalidate the Augsburg Confession and which Melancthon reviews in some detail (Ap IV 183 to 286). The choice of prooftexts (remember we are in the area of justification) is instructive: 1 Cor. 13:2,13; Col. 3:14; 1 Pet. 4:8; Luke 6:37; Is. 58:7,9; Dan. 4:27; Matt. 5:3,7; Prov. 10:12; James 2:24; Matt. 19:17; Luke 11:41. See also Ap XII 122 ff.; XX, 12 f.

This kind of approach to the Word of God is not at all difficult. It is in fact inherent in man's nature "because men naturally trust their own righteousness" (Ap IV 20). "It is inherent in man to despise God and to doubt His Word with its threats and promises" (35). "This legalistic opinion clings by nature to the minds of men, and it cannot be driven out unless we are divinely taught." (265)

In sum, the Lutherans found the theology of their scholastic opponents resting on humanistic, philosophical, nomistic principles which resulted in not taking seriously God in His judgment and mercy, in not taking seriously man and the depths of his predicament, in not taking seriously Christ and His work of redemption. In

consequence their Biblical exegesis was a tour de force that produced a theology that failed man in his greatest need.

Such is our opponents' doctrine—a doctrine of the law, an abrogation of the Gospel, a doctrine of despair. (Ap XII 89) They obscure the glory and the blessings of Christ, and they rob pious consciences of the consolation offered them in Christ. (Ap IV 3)

In the agony of conscience and in conflict, the conscience experiences how vain these philosophical speculations are. (37)

We are therefore obliged to disagree with our opponents on justification. The Gospel shows another way. (291)

In addition to the presuppositions of medieval scholastic theology the Lutherans were confronted by a theological perspective that received the umbrella label of Enthusiasm, or *Schwärmerei*. Prime representatives of this view were the Anabaptists and "spiritualists," like Münzer and Carlstadt, and the radical left wing of the Reformation generally.

The term "enthusiast," at least in Luther's judgment, came ultimately to include all who in any way attempted to by-pass the Word of God in their dealings with God. If the philosophical approach tended to make God remote and transcendent and an object to speculate about, the enthusiast approach resulted in a divine immanentism which reached full flower in George Fox and Quakerism. Since this perspective conceived of God as already present or as making His approaches to man immediately, it led naturally to a downgrading and disparagement of the written Word. It is easy to see that such a refusal to take the written Word seriously would have far-reaching implications for exegesis. The

enthusiasts are people "who dream that the Holy Spirit does not come through the Word but because of their own preparations." (Ap XIII 13)

Luther is particularly outspoken in his condemnation of this attitude. His treatment of Confession in the Smalcald Articles is the *locus classicus*. For Luther enthusiasm is exemplified also by the papacy because of its claims of authority apart from the Scriptures.

In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure. Münzer did this, and many still do it in our day who wish to distinguish sharply between the letter and the spirit without knowing what they say or teach. The papacy, too, is nothing but enthusiasm, for the pope boasts that "all laws are in the shrine of his heart," and he claims that whatever he decides and commands in his churches is spirit and law, even when it is above and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word. All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words. Even so, the enthusiasts of our day condemn the external Word, yet they do not remain silent but fill the world with their chattering and scribbling, as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the spoken word of the apostles but must come through

their own writings and words. Why do they not stop preaching and writing until the Spirit himself comes to the people without and before their writings since they boast that the Spirit came upon them without the testimony of the Scriptures? (SA-III VIII 3—6; see FC Ep II 13; FC SD II 80; LC IV 15: "our new spirits"; 28: "our know-it-alls, the new spirits")

Like the scholastics with their *opinio legis*, the enthusiasts too are doing what comes naturally.

In short, enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy, including that of the papacy and Mohammedanism. (SA-III VIII 9)

Such were the theological ideologies with which the Lutheran Reformation had to come to grips. In reality the Lutherans were inclined to lump their opponents together and to regard their respective approaches to Scripture as different aspects of the same perspective. We have already heard Luther putting the papists and enthusiasts into the same category. Melancthon does likewise (Ap IV 66). And the Solid Declaration says of the Anabaptists: "The entire sect, however, can be characterized as basically nothing else than a new kind of monkery" (FC SD XII 27). That is to say, they all have this in common, that they do not take Scripture on Scripture's terms but interpret it on the basis of presuppositions that are at variance with the content and purpose of the Word of God. They will not let God be God and hear Him out but presume to dictate to God what He should be saying. They presume, in fact, "to wrest heaven from God." (LC I 22)

THE LUTHERAN APPROACH

Thus the Lutheran Reformation represented an antithesis to these criteria of interpretation and was in very truth a hermeneutical revolution. In the Augsburg Confession, so they maintained, they had "covered almost the sum total of all Christian doctrine" (Ap XII 124), and this basic Lutheran Creed, "this Christian and thoroughly scriptural Augsburg Confession," is considered to be "a genuinely Christian symbol which all true Christians ought to accept next to the Word of God, just as in ancient times Christian symbols and confessions were formulated in the church of God . . ." (FC SD, Preface, 4). Its doctrinal content is "*drawn from and conformed to the Word of God*" and this symbol "distinguishes our reformed churches from the papacy and from other condemned sects and heresies" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 5; italics added). It becomes the touchstone for all other Lutheran Symbols, which are accepted because of their agreement with Scripture and their conformity to the Augsburg Confession. This symbol is normative for all Lutheran exegesis. If

other good, useful, and pure books, such as interpretations of the Holy Scriptures . . . are in accord with the aforementioned pattern of doctrine they are to be accepted and used as helpful expositions and explanations. Our intention was only to have a single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe and *from which and according to which*, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated. (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 10; italics added)

There is here the claim of a truly ecumenical, catholic, unsectarian, unfragmented, undistorted, whole approach to Scripture and Christian theology. We Lutherans should be eternally grateful for this and take it seriously. As Lutherans we are expected to do our theological work, in whatever discipline, in the service of proclamation, and we are expected to "preach the Gospel according to the Augsburg Confession" (FC SD XII 16). It is Melancthon's purpose in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession "to testify to all nations that we hold to the Gospel of Christ correctly and faithfully." (Preface, 15)

This claim involves an understanding of the Gospel's essence, content, and purpose, as well as its place in God's total revelation and the proper perspective from which the Scriptures are interpreted and applied. When the Lutherans think of the "divine, prophetic, and apostolic Scriptures," they think of them in terms of God's "holy Gospel and of the Word that alone brings salvation" (Preface, Book of Concord, p. 3; see p. 5). The Bible has to do with what "a Christian must know for his salvation" (FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 5). Salvation, or justification, is at the center of Lutheran theology.

The soteriological, eschatological, and pastoral concerns of the Lutheran Reformation are unfolded throughout the Book of Concord in a richness and variety that defies adequate consideration. This presentation desires only to call attention to some of this theological wealth in the hope that you will be stimulated to immerse yourself in this glorious heritage and make relevant and dynamic use of it in your sacred ministry. Such a course of action will be of incalculable benefit and

will go a long way toward the restoration of genuine Lutheranism in our midst and toward combating the many un-Lutheran and sectarian accents abroad in our circles today.

Central in genuine Lutheran theology as enunciated in the Lutheran Symbols is the doctrine of justification. Luther calls it "the first and chief doctrine" (SA-II I 1), while Melancthon refers to it as "the chief article of the Gospel," or "the chief article of Christian doctrine" (AC XXVIII 52, 66), or "the main doctrine of Christianity" (Ap IV 2). Of the nearly 190 pages of the Apology, the explicit treatment of Justification takes up over 60 pages, or almost exactly one third of the total, not to speak of the many other articles in which justification provides the constant background and context. This is true also of the Augsburg Confession (e. g., III, IV, V, VI, VII, IX, XI, XII, XV, XVII, XVIII, XX, XXI, XXIV).

Justification, as presented in the Confessions, is indeed a many-splendored thing, just like the Biblical witness to God's gracious attitudes and acts on behalf of His creatures. The subject is exceedingly grand and comprehensive. It thwarts all human attempts at neat and definitive systematization. It is too large to be poured into any mold of man's devising. A serious student of the symbols is overwhelmed by the subject. On nearly every page he meets the *cantus firmus* of justification as the ever-recurring theme which, though developed in a hundred fascinating variations, always remains plainly recognizable as the same theme.

In what follows I shall for the most part let the Symbols speak for themselves. An occasional comment may give direction.

A

Basic Definitions

The primary statement of justification on which all subsequent discussions are built is Art. IV of the Augsburg Confession. It follows upon a confession of the triune God, the Creator and Author of all blessings, a description of man the creature's desperate plight, and a summary of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the theanthropic Savior. Imbedded in the statement is the classic Lutheran formula "by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith." All human cooperation is categorically denied, and the divine monergism is affirmed, as is the Christological basis. The necessity of faith on man's part to receive God's complete gift is emphasized. The forensic character of justification is expressed in such terms as "forgiveness," "reckon," and "impute." In the German form the phrases "forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God" and "eternal life is given us" already adumbrate the almost bewildering variety of equations that we find in Apology IV. In a number of places the term "justify" or the nature of justification itself are defined:

... "to be justified" means to make unrighteous men righteous or to regenerate them, as well as to be pronounced or accounted righteous. (Ap IV 72)

Therefore we are justified by faith alone, justification being understood as making unrighteous man righteous or affecting his regeneration. (78)

"To be justified" here does not mean that a wicked man is made righteous but that he is pronounced righteous in a forensic way. . . . (252)

... God will and does account us alto-

gether righteous and holy for the sake of Christ, our mediator. (SA-III XIII 1)

In this passage [Rom. 5:1] "justify" is used in a judicial way to mean "to absolve a guilty man and pronounce him righteous," and to do so on account of someone else's righteousness, namely, Christ's, which is communicated to us through faith. (Ap IV 305)

Because the righteousness of Christ is given to us through faith, therefore faith is righteousness in us by imputation. That is, by it we are made acceptable to God because of God's imputation and ordinances, as Paul says (Rom. 4:5), "Faith is reckoned as righteousness." (307)

... according to the usage of Scripture the word "justify" means in this article "absolve," that is, pronounce free from sin. (FC Ep III 7)

If one pays a debt for one's friend, the debtor is freed by the merit of another as though it were his own. Thus the merits of Christ are bestowed on us so that when we believe in him we are accounted righteous by our trust in Christ's merits as though we had merits of our own. (Ap XXI 19)

B

Justification and Synonyms

1. Righteousness

... righteousness before God. ... (AC IV 1)

Therefore the righteousness which by grace is reckoned to faith or to the believers is the obedience, the passion, and the resurrection of Christ. ... (FC SD III 14)

... in this passage [Rom. 5:1] our righteousness is the imputation of some one else's righteousness. ... (Ap IV 306)

... the free forgiveness of sins and ... the righteousness of Christ. (Ap IV 121)

... the righteousness of faith and Christ, the mediator. (376)

The whole man ... shall be accounted and shall be righteous and holy. ... (SA-III XIII 2)

... Scripture teaches that the righteousness of faith before God consists solely in a gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins. ... (FC SD III 30)

2. Forgiveness of Sins

... forgiveness of sins is the same as justification. ... (Ap IV 76)

... men ... are freely justified ... when they believe that ... their sins are forgiven on account of Christ. ... (AC IV 2, Latin)

By freely accepting the forgiveness of sins, faith sets against God's wrath not our merits of love, but Christ the mediator and propitiator. (46)

It will be easy to determine what faith is if we pay attention to the article of the Creed on the forgiveness of sins. (51)

3. Reconciliation

... to us, oppressed by sin and death, the promise freely offers reconciliation for Christ's sake, which we do not accept by works but by faith alone. (Ap IV 44)

... God is reconciled and favorably disposed to him because of Christ. ... (45)
Justification is reconciliation for Christ's sake. (158)

4. A Gracious God, God's Approval, Christ's Kingdom, Children of God

... believe that we have a gracious God because of Christ. (Ap IV 345)

... justification is not the approval of a particular act but of the total person. (222)

... the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit. ... (Ap VII 13)

[The kingdom of God is] Simply what

we learned in the Creed, namely, that God sent His Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation. . . . (LC III 51)

God's name was given to us when we became Christians at Baptism, and so we are called children of God. . . . (37)

C

Justification and Christ

. . . Christ, true God and true man . . . was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath (AC III 2, 3)

We know that the merits of Christ are our only propitiation. Because of them we are accounted righteous. . . . (Ap XXI 31)

Christ takes Moses' place, not by forgiving sins on account of our work but by setting his merits and his propitiation against the wrath of God for us so that we might be freely forgiven. (Ap XXVII 17)

There was no counsel, no help, no comfort for us until this only and eternal Son of God, in his unfathomable goodness, had mercy on our misery and wretchedness and came from heaven to help us. (LC II 29)
"Lord" simply means the same as Redeemer, that is, he who has brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness. . . . (31)

D

Justification and Faith

. . . freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor. . . . (AC IV 1, 2, Latin)

. . . a man is justified when, with his conscience terrified by the preaching of penitence, he takes heart and believes that he has a gracious God for Christ's sake. (Ap IV 292)

. . . we are talking about . . . a faith that truly and wholeheartedly accepts the promise of grace. This does not come without a great battle in the human heart. . . . A faith which believes that God cares for us, forgives us, and hears us is a supernatural thing, for of itself the human mind believes no such thing about God. (303)

. . . faith is not merely knowledge in the intellect but also trust in the will, that is, to desire and to accept what the promise offers—reconciliation and forgiveness of sins. (304)

It is surely amazing that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith and specifically deny it to works. (107)

. . . faith is truly righteousness because it is obedience to the Gospel. (308)

. . . our opponents are deceived with regard to the term "faith." . . . We are not talking about a knowledge of history, however, but about trust in God's promise and in his mercy. (337)

. . . we appropriate God with all his treasures. (LC III 60)

. . . this personal faith obtains the forgiveness of sins and justifies us. (Ap IV 45)

Such a faith is not an easy thing . . . nor is it a human power, but a divine power that makes us alive and enables us to overcome death and the devil. (250)

E

Justification and the Holy Spirit

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the

Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. (AC V 1, 2)

... faith is ... a work of the Holy Spirit that frees us from death, comforting and quickening terrified minds. (Ap IV 115)

But Christ was given so that for his sake we might receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit, to bring forth in us eternal righteousness and a new and eternal life. (132)

... when we are consoled by faith through hearing the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, we receive the Holy Spirit, so that we can think rightly about God, fear him, and believe in him. (135)

... the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit. ... (Ap VII 13)

... the kingdom of God comes ... to us ... when the heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word. ... (SC III 7, 8)

But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith. ... (SC II 6)

F

Justification and Regeneration

... "to be justified" means to make unrighteous men righteous or to regenerate them, as well as to be pronounced or accounted righteous. (Ap IV 72)

... by faith alone we ... are justified, that is, out of unrighteous we are made righteous and regenerated men. (117)

... by faith (as St. Peter says) we get a new and clean heart and ... God will and does account us altogether righteous

and holy for the sake of Christ, our mediator. (SA-III XIII 1)

G

Justification and Gospel

... the chief article of the Gospel must be maintained, namely, that we obtain the grace of God through faith in Christ without our merits. ... (AC XXVIII 52)

The Gospel is, strictly speaking, the promise of forgiveness of sins and justification because of Christ. (Ap IV 43)

... one cannot deal with God or grasp him except through the Word. Therefore justification takes place through the Word. ... (67)

... there must needs be a proclamation in the church from which the faithful may receive the sure hope of salvation. (119)

This is the essential proclamation of the Gospel, that we obtain forgiveness of sins by faith because of Christ and not because of our works. (274)

Properly speaking, the Gospel is the command to believe that we have a gracious God because of Christ. (345)

... the Gospel offers consolation and forgiveness in more ways than one, for with God there is plenteous redemption ... from the dreadful captivity to sin, and this comes to us through the Word, the sacraments, and the like. ... (SA-III III 8)

... the Gospel ... offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar office of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. (SA-III IV)

It [Baptism] effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare. (SC IV 6)

... it [Baptism] is so full of comfort and grace that heaven and earth cannot comprehend it. (LC IV 39)

Now, the whole Gospel and the article of the Creed, "I believe in the holy Christian church, the forgiveness of sins," are embodied in this sacrament [of the Altar]. ... (LC V 32)

In this sacrament [of the Altar] he offers us all the treasure he brought from heaven for us. ... (66)

Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. (LC II 54)

The Word of God ... leads us to Christ, who is "the book of life." ... (FC Ep XI 7; see SD II 50)

H

Justification and Theology

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory. (SA-II I 5)

The Mass ... runs into direct and violent conflict with this fundamental article. (SA-II II 1)

... purgatory, too, is contrary to the fundamental article that Christ alone, and not the work of man, can help souls. (12)
[Fraternities are] contrary to the first article, concerning redemption. (21)

[Indulgences] are also contrary to the first article, for the merits of Christ are ob-

tained by grace, through faith, without our work or pennies. (24)

[The invocation of saints] is in conflict with the first, chief article and undermines knowledge of Christ. (25)

The chapters and monasteries. ... All this, too, is in conflict with the first, fundamental article concerning redemption in Jesus Christ. (SA-II III 1, 2)

... all the things that the pope has undertaken and done ... come into conflict with the first, fundamental article which is concerned with redemption in Jesus Christ. (SA-II IV 3)

This is just about a summary of the doctrines that are preached and taught in our churches for proper Christian instruction, the consolation of consciences, and the amendment of believers. (AC, Concl., Part I, 1)

I

Justification and Interpretation of Scripture

We have now come to the goal of our investigation, the theological presuppositions for a Lutheran approach to the Scriptures.

The preceding collection of excerpts, long as it is, represents only a small fraction of what could have been produced so as mercifully "to avoid prolixity and undue length," to borrow Melancthon's phrase (AC Concl., 1). The citations are gleaned from all sections of the Book of Concord to show that, though Luther and Melancthon and the framers of the Formula of Concord express it in different ways, all are committed to the same theology, "the soteriological approach to Christian doctrine," as F. E. Mayer calls it.² From the

² F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, 3d ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 145.

confession of faith in the forgiveness of sins (Apostles' Creed) and the "for us men and for our salvation" (Nicene Creed) to the final statement of the body of the Formula of Concord, that speaks of "the divine truth of the holy Gospel" which is to "lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him for ever through the sole merit of Christ" (SD XI 96), the Lutheran Symbols are devoted to the doctrine of justification. Sober prose, rhetorical questions, impassioned pleas, *ad hominem* arguments, indignant denunciations, sarcasm, invective, exquisite prayers, eloquent apostrophes, poetic descriptions, sermons—all are put into the service of the Gospel in a way that makes these Symbols quite unique in the history of Christian creeds.

Sometimes the treatment becomes rather verbose and repetitious. The precision in formulations and definitions, in distinctions and minutely structured subdivisions that characterize so much of the work of the great Lutheran systematizers of the 17th century is still lacking for the most part. There are unresolved problems and some ambiguities, which moved the formulators of the Formula to suggest certain clarifications and provide certain safeguards against misunderstanding (e. g., SD III, *passim*). Yet the Lutheran confessors found the rediscovered and restored Gospel thoroughly exciting and inexhaustible for all areas of Christian theology, faith, and life.

They saw a very close connection between the intrusion of false sources and norms of authority in the church and the intrusion of heresies and abuses in the

church. They noted that a magisterial usurpation of authority on the part of human traditions, institutions, and epistemologies led to an adulteration of the Gospel of the grace of God. If the Gospel was to be purified and preserved unbridged, it had to be oriented exclusively to the prophetic and apostolic writings, the Word of God, the "clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit," and the subordinate, ancillary role of all else had to be recognized.

The first aspect of the relationship between justification and the Scriptures is therefore the assertion that justification is not a Lutheran sectarian peculiarity ("dieselbige selige Lehre, das liebe, heilige Evangelium, nennen sie Lutherisch" [Ap XV 42] but has its source entirely in the Scriptures. "How and in what manner, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, these things are preached, taught, communicated, and embraced" is what the Augsburg Confession is out to demonstrate (AC Preface, 8), and in the very last statement of this Symbol the Lutherans declare themselves "ready to present further information on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture" (Concl., 7). In one of the summaries of his discussion of justification in Apology IV Melancthon says: "What we have shown thus far, on the *basis* of the Scriptures and *arguments derived* from the Scriptures, was to make clear that by faith alone we receive the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, and by faith alone are justified. . . ." (Ap IV 117; italics added)

What concerns us here, in the second place and in particular, is the obverse side of the coin: justification as an *approach* to the Scriptures, as a theological perspective (derived from Scripture) from which to interpret Scripture. Any intelligent judg-

ment on what is a proper exegetical stance presupposes and requires a clear understanding of the content of Scripture and the purpose, which is inseparable from the content. Again, such a judgment is not quantitative but qualitative. It involves the ability to discern the core and thrust of God's Word to man in terms of what God has in mind for man, to see what is central and what is peripheral, to distinguish the message itself from its setting, to appreciate, in short, "*was Christum treibet*" and what is in the service of "*was Christum treibet*." (It should be self-evident that such judgments have nothing to do with disparaging or repudiating any part of the Biblical content).

In the context of these observations we can understand the theological insights expressed by Luther in the Large Catechism. Not only does he call the Catechism "a brief compend and summary of all the Holy Scriptures" (LC, Long Preface, 18), but he also affirms that in the first three parts of the Catechism "everything contained in Scripture is comprehended in short, plain, and simple terms" (Short Preface, 18), and he even claims that

anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures. In all affairs and circumstances he can counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. He is qualified to sit in judgment upon all doctrines. . . . (LC, Long Preface, 17)

We can also understand why the Confessions can say of justification, or the forgiveness of sins, that

it leads in a pre-eminent way to the clear and proper understanding of the entire Holy Scripture, it alone points the way

to the inexpressible treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and it alone opens the door into the whole Bible. (Ap IV 2, German)

Justification is the true key to the Scriptures. But this also means that the message of justification is the central and ultimate Word of God to man and that all other messages must be distinguished from it and made subservient to it. Thus the distinction between Law and Gospel, with the former in the service of the latter, exercises the extremely important hermeneutical and critical function of keeping the Biblical content in proper focus. "All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises." (Ap IV 5)

These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify and to justify and quicken the terrified. One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The other part is the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace granted in Christ. (Ap XII 53)

In what follows, the Law appears to be forgotten.

This promise is repeated continually throughout Scripture; first it was given to Adam, later to the patriarchs, then illumined by the prophets, and finally proclaimed and revealed by Christ among the Jews, and spread by the apostles throughout the world. (Ap XII 53)

Immediately preceding these lines it is said that Isaiah (28:21)

calls it God's alien work to terrify because God's own proper work is to quicken and console. But he terrifies, he says, to make room for consolation and quickening because hearts that do not feel God's wrath in their smugness spurn consolation. In

this way Scripture makes a practice of joining these two, terror and consolation. . . . (Ap XII 51, 52)

The distinction between law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly. We must therefore observe this distinction with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the Gospel into law. This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort which they would otherwise have in the holy Gospel when it is preached purely and without admixture, for by it Christians can support themselves in their greatest temptations against the terrors of the law. (FC SD V 1)

This is in no sense an antinomian repudiation of the Law. It is rather a most vigorous affirmation of the Law in its divinely assigned role.

. . . they quote passages about law and works but omit passages about the promises. To all their statements about the law we answer immediately that the law cannot be kept without Christ. . . . In commending works, therefore, we must add that faith is necessary, and that they are commended because of faith as its fruits or testimony. . . . The rule I have just stated interprets all the passages they quote on law and works. For we concede that in some places the Scripture presents the law, while in others it presents the Gospel, the free promise of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. . . . Therefore we call upon devout minds to consider the promises, and we teach them about the free forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation that comes through faith in Christ. Later we add the teaching of the law. And we must distinguish between these, as Paul

says (II Tim. 2:15). We must see what the Scriptures ascribe to the law and what they ascribe to the promises. (Ap IV 183 to 188)

The teaching of the law is certainly not intended to abolish the Gospel of Christ, the propitiator. (269; see 272, 371)

From this perspective Luther interprets the Ten Commandments when he makes their fulfillment dependent on the fear and love of God and trust in Him, something which is possible only as a result of the Gospel. ". . . no man can achieve so much as to keep one of the Ten Commandments as it ought to be kept. Both the Creed and the Lord's Prayer must help us . . ." (LC I 316; see LC II 1—3). All commandments of the Law are comprehended in the first, which in its full dimensions involves knowledge of the true God and of His relations with man, and this presupposes the Gospel.

This is exactly the meaning and right interpretation of the first and chief commandment, from which all others proceed. This word, "You shall have no other gods," means simply, "You shall fear, love, and trust me as your one true God." . . . Thus the entire Scriptures have proclaimed and presented this commandment everywhere, emphasizing these two things, fear of God and trust in God. (LC I 324, 325; see Ap II 9, 10)

This perspective also enables Luther to revise the Biblical text itself, and modern-day updaters of Luther's Catechism will be well advised to appreciate his profound theological concerns and keep their hands from switching back to the precise Old Testament form. Luther can change the text of several of the commandments by omission or substitution and adapt them to the New Testament situation, as, for

example, the Third Commandment, of which he says:

. . . according to its literal, outward sense, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other ordinances of the Old Testament connected with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ. (LC I 82; see 293)

Luther then proceeds to offer a "Christian interpretation." (83)

Thus the perspective of the Gospel of Christ has far-reaching implications for the interpretation of the Old Testament in general. Commenting on the opponents' insistence on the necessity of observing traditions to merit the forgiveness of sins, Melancthon says: "Here our opponents are openly Judaizing . . ." (Ap XV 4). "From this point of view there is no difference between our traditions and the ceremonies of Moses" (Ap XV 10). Acts 15:10 f.: "Here Peter forbids the burdening of consciences with additional outward ceremonies, whether of Moses or of another" (AC XXVI 28; see Ap XV 30; XVI 3; XXIII 41, 42; XXIV 27, 30, 36, 37). "The services of the Mass and the rest of the papal order are nothing but a misinterpretation of the Levitical order" (Ap XXIV 52), and such a practice "corrupts the teaching of both the Old and the New Testament. . . ." (57)

Yet in spite of the very real and very important differences between the two Testaments, from the perspective of the Gospel or of justification the essential theological unity of the Scriptures is recognized. This unity again involves the distinction between Law and Gospel, not in that the Law is assigned to the Old Tes-

tament and the Gospel to the New but that both permeate both Testaments.

Since the beginning of the world these two proclamations have continually been set forth side by side in the church of God with the proper distinction. The descendants of the holy patriarchs, like the patriarchs themselves, constantly reminded themselves not only how man in the beginning was created righteous and holy by God and through the deceit of the serpent transgressed God's laws, became a sinner, corrupted himself and all his descendants, and plunged them into death and eternal damnation, but also revived their courage and comforted themselves with the proclamation of the woman's seed, who would bruise the serpent's head; likewise, of the seed of Abraham, by whom all nations should be blessed; likewise, of David's son, who should restore the kingdom of Israel and be a light to the nations, "who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities and with whose stripes we are healed." (FC SD V 23)

A favorite passage of Melancthon's is Acts 10:43 ("To Him all the prophets bear witness"), and he uses it again and again. Peter, he says, "cites the consensus of all the prophets, which is really citing the authority of the church" (Ap IV 83; see Ap XII 66; XX 2). More fully: "Peter clearly cites the consensus of the prophets; the writings of the apostles attest that they believed the same thing . . ." (Ap XII 73). It is therefore from the Lutheran perspective a distortion of Scripture to interpret the Old Testament in isolation from and without constant reference to the New Testament ("as we discern the shadow in the Old Testament, so in the New we should look for what it represents" [Ap XXIV 37]). At the very least an exegesis

of the Old Testament as if there were no New Testament is one-sided and incomplete and therefore sectarian.

The kind of interpretations of the Scriptures of which the Confessions speak is impossible for an unregenerate man, though his mastery of the external skills may be outstanding. "... Scripture denies to the intellect, heart, and will of the natural man every capacity, aptitude, skill, and ability to think anything good or right in spiritual matters" (FC SD II 12). The proper approach to Scripture is a matter of faith, justifying faith, which means the gift of the Holy Spirit. True empathy with the "Scripture of the Holy Spirit" is possible only for one who has the Holy Spirit. God has given us the Holy Spirit in Baptism. As a result "we have been given the power to interpret the Scriptures and to know Christ, which is impossible without the Holy Spirit" (LC IV 49). Lutheran exegesis involves the exegete himself in the depths of his existence as a child of God who places himself under the Word of God and lets God judge and comfort him.

And that makes Lutheran exegesis intensely practical. It recognizes that

All Scripture, inspired by God, should minister not to security and impenitence but "to reproof, correction, and improvement" (II Tim. 3:16). Furthermore, everything in the Word of God is written down for us, not for the purpose of thereby driving us to despair but in order that "by steadfastness, by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). (FC SD XI 12)

Lutheran exegesis feels ineluctably concerned and responsible for the man "for whom Christ died" and is under compul-

sion to reach him with the holy Gospel for the consolation of his terrified conscience. The crowning glory of the theological presuppositions for a Lutheran approach to the Scriptures is its conviction that "any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent" (SD XI 92). What Lutheran hermeneutics and exegesis is all about is magnificently woven together in the following trinitarian and soteriological summary:

Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe, teach, and confess unanimously . . . that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit offers these treasures to us in the promise of the Gospel, and faith is the only means whereby we can apprehend, accept, apply them to ourselves, and make them our own. Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father, and are saved forever. (FC SD III 9—11)

This is where Lutherans stand, and it is this stance that gives their theology its truly catholic character. "We know that what we have said agrees with the pro-

phetic and apostolic Scriptures . . . and with the whole church of Christ. . . ." (Ap IV 389)

Lutheran exegesis has the same purposes as the Lutheran Symbols and Lutheran theology in general: "to do and to continue to do everything that is useful and profitable

- [1] to the increase and expansion of God's praise and glory,
- [2] to the propagation of that Word of his that alone brings salvation,
- [3] to the tranquility and peace of Christian schools and churches, and
- [4] to the needed consolation and instruction of poor, misguided consciences." (Preface to the Book of Concord, p. 13)

A BRIEF EPILOGUE

1. The Lutheran approach to the Scriptures is not humanistic, rationalistic, speculative, detached, academic, legalistic, fadistic, capricious, sectarian.
2. The Lutheran approach to the Scriptures is baptized, regenerated, trinitarian, Christ-centered, spiritual, soteriological, evangelical, eschatological, pastoral, responsible, unfragmented, catholic, doxological.
3. Although the Lutheran Confessions claim to present the total content of

the Scriptures in summary form, they are silent on many aspects of Biblical interpretation that are today agitating the minds of many in the church. Yet the commentaries of Luther and other Reformation writers show that many of these problems were not unknown in the 16th century (e.g., Luther's difficulties with James, Revelation, etc., his largely unsuccessful attempts at resolving discrepancies in parallel accounts in both Old and New Testaments, his generous concessions to other exegetes with whose interpretations he could not agree).

4. The Lutheran Confessions suggest that any new problems arising in the future concerning Christian theology, including the theology of the Word, be evaluated and resolved from the perspective that controls the enunciation of what Lutherans believe, teach, and confess (cf. AC, Concl., 1). This would mean that they would regard as valid and important those questions that have explicit or implicit relevance for the proclamation, promotion, and preservation of the holy Gospel, of the righteousness of faith, or the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake.

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Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions

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The Lutheran Confessions suggest the following *Vorverständnis*, or presuppositions, for the Lutheran interpreter of Holy Scripture:

1. He regards the Scriptures as the Word spoken by God Himself; he knows that *God* is addressing him in every word of the Bible.
2. He knows that God Himself must enlighten his understanding in order for him to believe what God is saying in Holy Scripture; he reads the Scriptures as one who has the Spirit and expects the Spirit.
3. He knows that in Holy Scripture God speaks a condemnatory word (Law) and a forgiving word (Gospel), the former for the sake of the latter; he therefore seeks to distinguish rightly between the two words of God lest the word of Gospel become a word of Law.
4. He reads the Scriptures as one who has been justified by God's grace for Christ's sake through faith; he knows that Jesus Christ is the center of all the Scripture.

But we are here involved in a circle! The above statements are not merely *presuppositions* for Biblical interpretation but

products of Biblical interpretation.¹ An awareness of the Confessional principles of Biblical interpretation, which we shall attempt to set forth in the first part of our article, becomes necessary both to evaluate the legitimacy of these presuppositions and to appreciate the exegesis of the Confessions, which was shaped by these presuppositions. In the second part of our presentation we shall ask whether some of the above presuppositions (Law-Gospel, justification) are in fact principles of interpretation and attempt to answer the question on the basis of samples of Confessional exegesis. We shall conclude with some implications of this study for the task of Biblical interpretation today.²

¹ Here we are taking seriously the Confessions' claim to be expositions of Scripture.

² In our investigation we are limiting ourselves to an examination of statements explicitly referring to Biblical interpretation and to examples of Biblical interpretation within the Confessions that illustrate hermeneutical principles. We are not examining the non-Confessional writings of the Confessional authors (although this should be done to get a complete picture of their hermeneutical principles). We are also not investigating pre-Reformation hermeneutical principles in detail (something that also should be done in order to note the continuity and discontinuity of Biblical hermeneutics in the Confessions). Nor are we attempting to pass judgment on the correctness of the exegesis of individual Bible passages in the Scriptures. Three studies on the Biblical exegesis of the Confessions are: Wilhelm C. Linss, "Biblical Interpretation in the Formula of Concord," in *The Symposium on Seventeenth Century Lutheranism*, I (St. Louis: The Symposium on Seventeenth Cen-

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I. THE HOLY SCRIPTURES AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

A. *The Nature of Holy Scripture*

The principles for interpreting any piece of literature are to a large extent determined by the nature of the literature. That this maxim applies also to the Holy Scriptures is clearly evidenced in the Lutheran Confessions. At the risk of repeating accents made in H. J. A. Bouman's paper, let us examine some of the basic Confessional attitudes toward the nature of Holy Scripture.

1. *The author of Holy Scripture is God Himself.* The absence of a specific article on the nature of Biblical inspiration in the Confessions should not be overemphasized.³ Whatever the reasons for such an omission may have been, it is obvious that from beginning to end the Confessions treat Holy Scripture as divinely authoritative. This divine authority is expressed in ex-

ture Lutheranism, 1962), 118—135; Edmund Schlunk, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. P. F. Koehnke and H. J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), pp. 297—317; and Jürgen Roloff, "The Interpretation of Scripture in Article IV of Melancthon's Apology of the Augsburg Confession," *Lutheran World*, VIII (1961), 47—63.

Within the Confessions we are limiting our study to the official texts of each document. Our citations are taken from *The Book of Concord*, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

³ For explanations, see Schlunk, pp. 1f., n. 1; Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), pp. 182ff.; and F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, 2d ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), pp. 142ff. It should be remembered that *all* parties involved in the controversies treated in the Confessions accepted the divine authority of Scripture.

plicit statements as well as in the copious use of Scripture throughout the Book of Concord. The divine authority of Scripture rests substantially on its divine authorship. Melancthon chides the Romanists for condemning "several articles in opposition to the clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit" (Ap, Preface, 9). Amazed that they are "unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith," he asks: "Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit un-awares?" (Ap IV 108).⁴ The article of Christian liberty is "an article which the Holy Spirit through the mouth of the holy apostle so seriously commanded the church to preserve" (FC SD X 15). The frequent designation of Holy Scripture as the "Word of God" adds additional evidence that the confessors clearly regarded God as the *auctor primarius* of Scripture.⁵

The divine authorship of Scripture is the basic reason for its absolute reliability. We know "that God does not lie" and that "God's Word cannot err" (LC IV 57). Therefore Luther advises: ". . . believe the Scriptures. They will not lie to you" (LC V 76). Our position is based "on the Word of God as the eternal truth" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 13). The Formula rejects an opinion as wrong because: "In this way it would be taught that God, who

⁴ See AC XXVIII 49: "If, then, bishops have the power to burden the churches with countless requirements and thus ensnare consciences, why does the divine Scripture so frequently forbid the making and keeping of human regulations? Why does it call them doctrines of the devil? Is it possible that the Holy Spirit warned against them for nothing?"

⁵ The Preface to the Book of Concord calls them the "Holy Scriptures of God" (p. 12), as does FC SD V, 3.

is the eternal Truth, contradicts himself" (SD XI 35). The Preface to the Book of Concord describes the Scriptures as the "pure, infallible, and unalterable Word of God" (p. 8). The divine authorship of all Scripture gives it a unity and infallibility not found in other writings.⁶

2. *Holy Scripture is Christocentric.* Its content from beginning to end deals with the justification of the sinner by God's grace for Christ's sake through faith. Scripture presents "the promise of Christ . . . either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for his sake, or when, in the New Testament, the Christ who came promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life" (Ap IV 5). The "promise [of grace in Christ] is repeated continually throughout Scripture; first it was given to Adam, later to the patriarchs, then illumined by the prophets, and finally proclaimed and revealed by Christ among the Jews, and spread by the apostles throughout the world." (XII 53)⁷

Because of the conviction that the entire Scripture testifies of Christ, it is not surprising that Christological interpretations are frequently given to Old Testament texts. Dan. 4:27 is thus explained: "Daniel

knew that the forgiveness of sins in the Christ was promised not only to the Israelites but to all nations. Otherwise he could not have promised the king forgiveness of sins" (Ap IV 262). That the death of Christ is a satisfaction not only for guilt but also for eternal death is proved from Hos. 13:14 (Ap XII 140). Passages from Is. 53 are used directly of Christ (XX 5; XXIV 23; SA-II I 2, 5). The burning of the lamb, the drink offering, and the offering of flour mentioned in Num. 28:4 ff. "depicted Christ and the whole worship of the New Testament" (Ap XXIV 36). The Levitical propitiatory sacrifices are symbols of Christ's future offering (Ap XXIV 24, 53). The Old Testament is used frequently for support throughout Melancthon's detailed treatment of justification in the fourth article of the Apology. Ps. 8:6; 93:1 and Zech. 9:10 are cited to show that the prophets foretell that Christ, the God-man, is everywhere present to rule (FC SD VIII 27). These and similar examples demonstrate that for the Confessions the unity of Scripture is grounded not only on the fact that it has but one Author but on the fact that it has but one basic message, Jesus Christ.⁸

3. *The Holy Scriptures, God's Word centering in Jesus Christ, speak directly to*

⁶ For an excellent treatment of the authority, use, and interpretation of the Bible in the Lutheran Confessions, see the recently published work of Holsten Fagerberg, *Die Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften von 1529 bis 1537*, trans. Gerhard Klose (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), pp. 14—44. Fagerberg writes: "Die BK betrachten Gottes Wort als eine in der Bibel geoffenbarte Wahrheit. Da nur sie eine sichere Kenntnis von Gottes Willen vermitteln kann, wird die Schrift, ein einzelnes Bibelwort oder andere bibelnahen Worte Gottes Wort genannt," p. 18 f.

⁷ See also Ap 24 55 and FC SD VI 23.

⁸ Confessional statements reflecting the Christological interpretation of the New Testament have not been cited because they are more obvious, and in order to conserve space. We have spoken of "Christocentricity" here to epitomize what is elsewhere more completely described as the Law-Gospel content of Scripture, or the centrality in Scripture of the doctrine of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith.

See H. J. A. Bouman, "Some Thoughts on the Theological Presuppositions for a Lutheran Approach to the Scriptures," pp. 2—20, for a more complete treatment of this point.

the reader. This is not to suggest that they are "suprahistorical" or that the original context and setting of the words of Scripture are unimportant. It is rather to affirm that they are "omnihistorical"; they speak to the reader and his age, whatever that may be. One is struck by the frequency with which the Confessions apply passages directly to contemporaneous situations without a discussion of the original purpose or context of the passage. A few examples will have to suffice.

Emperor Charles V is implored not to "agree to the violent counsels of our opponents but to find other ways of establishing harmony" because God "honors kings with his own name and calls them gods (Ps. 82:6), 'I say, You are gods'" (Ap XXI 44). Matt. 23:2, "The Pharisees sit on Moses' seat," is used in support of the doctrine that "the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men" (AC VIII). John the Baptist's preaching of repentance is applied directly (SA-III III 30—32). Both Acts 5:29 and Gal. 1:8 are applied to the pontiffs "who defend godless forms of worship, idolatry, and doctrines which conflict with the Gospel" (Treatise, 38). "Beware of false prophets" (Matt. 7:15) and "Do not be mismated with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14) are used in support of the statement that all Christians ought to "abandon and execrate the pope and his adherents as the kingdom of the Antichrist" (Treatise 41). The words "for you" in the words of institution of the Lord's Supper "are not preached to wood or stone but to you and me" (LC V 65). Christ's words over Jerusalem in Matt. 23:37: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,

and you would not!" are used to show that no injustice is done when the Holy Spirit does not illuminate a man who despises the instruments of the Holy Spirit (FC SD II 58). Examples of this direct application of Scripture abound in the Book of Concord. They suggest that the Confessions' interest in Scripture is both existential and historical. The Confessional exegete asks not only, "What did God through the human author say to His audience then?" but also, "What is God saying to us now?" He is convinced that the answer to both questions is the same.⁹ In short, the Confessions approach the Scriptures under the conviction that "everything in Scripture, as St. Paul testifies, was written *for our instruction* that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (FC Ep XI 16, 16, italics added; see SD XI 12)¹⁰

4. *Holy Scripture, God's Word to us about Jesus Christ, is clear and understandable (allgemeinverständlich)*. The perspicuity of Scripture was one of the most important assertions of the Lutheran Reformation. For centuries the Scriptures had been regarded as a dark and mysterious book requiring the interpretation of the church and the utilization of allegorical exegesis to understand its mysteries. Through his understanding of the Christocentric and revelational nature of the Scriptures, as well as from Scripture's own claim to clarity, Luther came to emphasize the

⁹ This is not to suggest that the Confessions are unaware that the ordinances under the Old Covenant and certain other prescriptions do not bind the Christian today, e. g., Ap XXIII 41; XXIV 27, 37; XXVIII 16.

¹⁰ This reference to Rom. 15:4 includes the New Testament within the scope of "Scripture," as the context makes clear.

perspicuity and general understandability of the Bible. Luther maintained both the "external clarity" of the text and the "internal clarity" of the Christocentric subject matter of Scripture gained through the Holy Spirit.¹¹ This does not mean that there are no difficult or obscure passages in Scripture. But such passages can be interpreted through clearer passages or through philological and grammatical studies. If such passages still remain unclear after such investigation, Luther suggests that the reason lies not in the obscurity of the text but in the mind of the reader. The importance of this emphasis on the clarity of Scripture cannot be overestimated: it freed the Bible from the need for official interpretation by the church, helped place the Book of Life into the hands of anyone who could read, and stimulated exegetes to search the Scriptures.¹²

¹¹ See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), pp. 70—74, 123—134, et passim.

¹² For an excellent treatment of the *claritas Scripturae* and Luther's major hermeneutical rules in relationship to pre-Lutheran exegesis, see Gerhard Krause, *Studien zu Luthers Auslegung der Kleinen Propheten* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1962), pp. 171—281. Krause states: "Es ist nun sehr bezeichnend für Luthers Gesamtaufassung von der Bibelexegese, dass er sich nicht begnügt mit der dogmatischen Behauptung einer 'claritas scripturae' in Christus" (p. 268) but spoke "von der grundsätzlichen Klarheit der Schrift in sprachlicher Hinsicht und in der Glaubens-Summa ihrer Botschaft" (p. 281). The most complete study of Luther's concept of the clarity of Scripture is Rudolf Hermann, *Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1958).

Peter Fraenkel describes Melancthon's views on Scriptural clarity in a similar way: "Just as Melancthon had a high regard for the Scriptures as a text and connected this closely with their saving import and force, so also he thought that both the text as such and the entire matter

It is not surprising that the belief in the *claritas Scripturae* should permeate the Lutheran Confessions. To be sure, this truth is not set forth in a systematic way nor defined as carefully as we might like. But it is evident in several ways.

Perhaps the most obvious and compelling Confessional evidence for the clarity of Scripture is the manner in which Scripture is cited as the basis of Confessional doctrine. Again and again passages are simply quoted without any explanation. Of the more than 1,700 Scripture citations in the Confessions, the preponderant majority are simply direct quotations of the sacred text without explanation or extended commentary. At times several paragraphs in succession present the Confessional argument simply by quoting passage after passage almost without comment (e.g., FC SD II 10 ff.; XI 28 ff.; SA-II I 1 ff.). Melancthon almost tires of citing so much evidence: "... since it is obvious throughout the Scriptures" (Ap VII 37).

of the Christian faith are 'clear', in the sense that God has clearly revealed these mysteries for us and thus given them to us and has not left anything to our initiative to find out. . . . This is not affected by the fact that some passages are obscure and that we may have to resort to commentaries, dictionaries or gifted exegetes to find out what they mean. For hand in hand with the perspicuity of the document goes, as we saw, the perspicuity of its subject matter, the Law and Gospel of God, the salvation offered in Christ." In *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1961), pp. 209f.

With reference to the Confessional understanding of the clarity of Scripture, Fagerberg states: "Die hl. Schrift ist ihrem Inhalt nach grundsätzlich klar, so dass das, was sie sagen will, in begreifbare Sätze gefasst werden kann. Wenn Zweifel über den Gehalt einer Schriftstelle herrschen, dann haben die deutlichen Stellen die undeutlichen zu erklären," p. 41 f.

Again he states: "We would cite more passages if they were not obvious to every devout reader of Scripture, and we want to avoid being lengthy in order to make our case more easily understood" (XII 83). The use of Scripture in this unadorned way in documents that at least in part were intended for a nonclerical audience indicates the Confessional belief in the general understandability of Scripture.

There are explicit statements on the clarity of Scripture as well. The prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are described as "the pure and clear fountain of Israel" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3).¹³ This description of the Scriptures, the source of all doctrine, as *lauter*, or *limpidissimus*, is an affirmation of their clarity. In the Preface to the Apology (9) Melancthon says the authors of the Confutation "have condemned several articles in opposition to the clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit." In the matter of transferring the Lord's Supper to the dead *ex opere operato*, the Romanists could claim support from Gregory and later medieval theologians, but "we set against them the clearest and surest passages of Scripture (*nos opponimus clarissimas et certissimas scripturas*)" (Ap XXIV 94). A highly significant passage appears in the Formula's treatment of the Lord's Supper:

In the institution of his last will and

¹³ ". . . zu dem reinen, lautern Brunnen Israels . . ."; ". . . ut limpidissimos purissimosque Israelis fontes . . ." *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 5th rev. ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), p. 834. With reference to Scripture as the source of doctrine, Fraenkel states: "The 16th century, like its ancient models and ourselves, used *fons* as a technical term for literary origins or intellectual and spiritual presuppositions," p. 190, n. 83.

testament and of his abiding covenant and union, he uses no flowery language but the most appropriate, simple, indubitable, and clear words (*ganz eigentliche, einfältige, unzweifelhaftige und klare Wort gebraucht*), just as he does in all the articles of faith and in the institution of other covenant-signs and signs of grace or sacraments, such as circumcision, the many kinds of sacrifice in the Old Testament, and holy Baptism. (SD VII 50; italics added)

The Confessions maintain in article after article that their argument rests on "clear passages" of Scripture. The following are examples of teachings for which the Confessions claim clear Scripture: Communion in both kinds (AC XXII 2), the institution of marriage to avoid immorality (XXIII 3), no humanly established regulations merit God's grace (XXVIII 43), lust is sin (Ap II 40), justification through faith (IV 314), the distinction between human and spiritual righteousness (XVIII 10), the Eucharistic words of institution (LC V 45; FC Ep VII 15; SD VII 50), and that conversion is to be attributed to God alone. (SD II 87)

5. *The Holy Scriptures are literary documents.* This point is not stated as such in the Confessions but is assumed throughout. The Scriptures were written by God through human authors in particular languages and times. This fact, while obvious, has important implications for the interpretation of Scripture, as we shall see below.

B. Principles of Biblical Interpretation

The Holy Scriptures are God's clear literary Word to us about Jesus Christ. How do I get at the meaning of this Word? How do I hear what God is saying to me

in His Law and in His Gospel? The Confessions give basically one answer (with many aspects) to these questions: *through grammatical-historical exegesis*. To enthusiasts of every kind "who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure" (SA-III VIII 3), the Confessions assert that God's message does not lie behind or above or apart from the Word but *in* the Word.¹⁴

1. "*Derive the meaning from the text*" may thus be regarded as the basic Confessional principle of Biblical interpretation. This principle is especially evident in the Apology's criticism of the exegesis of the Roman Confutation. This criticism is of three kinds:

a. The Romanists are selective in their use of Scripture. They select "passages about law and works but omit passages about the promises." (IV 183; see also IV 107, 221, 284, 286; XII 34)

b. They twist and distort the Scriptures to suit their own non-Scriptural opinions. "Our opponents twist many texts because they read their own opinions into them instead of deriving the meaning from the texts themselves" (IV 224; see also IV 244, 253, 255, 260, 286; XII 123; XXIV, 14). While this "eisegesis" usually takes the form of imposing a false human opinion about justification on the text of Scripture, the Romanists also read later inventions, such as canonical satisfactions or monasticism, into the Scriptures. (XII 131; XXVII 29)

c. Their actual exegesis is careless, slovenly, illogical, and often dishonest. They add words to the text (IV 264) or omit a word and the central thought as well (IV 357). They quote passages in a garbled form (IV 286) or out of context (XXIV 15). They are guilty of bad grammar (by applying a universal particle to a single part [IV 283]), of neglecting grammar (XII 163), or even of despising grammar (XII 106). Their use of logic in understanding the text is sophistic or wrong (IV 222, 335, 360 f.). They "make the effect the cause" (XX 13). Melancthon laments: "Who ever taught these asses such logic? This is not logic or even sophistry, but sheer dishonesty" (XII 123). Such "exegesis" had indeed obscured "important teachings of the Scriptures and the Fathers." (II 32)

In short, the Romanists "do violence not only to Scripture but also to the very usage of the language" (IV 357; see also IV 286, where Melancthon summarizes the above criticisms of Roman exegesis). The criticisms of the Apology make it very clear that the Romanists held wrong presuppositions for their interpretation of Scripture. They were wrong in the first instance because they were not derived from the Scriptures through careful and objective literary exegesis. Implicit in the above criticisms is the contention that sober exegesis will lead not only to proper presuppositions but also to correct conclusions.

The actual exegesis in the Confessions makes it clear how seriously they took the principle of deriving the meaning from the text of Scripture. Statements like the following are frequent: "we shall simply present Paul's meaning" (Ap IV 231); "the text does not say this" (264); "as the

¹⁴ Note that Luther regards "enthusiasm" as "the source, strength, and power of all heresy" (SA-III VIII 9).

narrative in the text shows" (267); "what we have said is what Paul really and truly means" (XII 84); "Where does Scripture say this?" (138); "the prophet's own words give us his meaning" (XXIV 32). The appeal throughout is to what God is actually saying through His holy penmen.

The Confessions evidence a careful concern for many of the aspects of grammatical exegesis. They know the importance of word study and usage. We note how carefully the words "to be justified" and "justification" are explained (Ap IV 72; see FC Ep III 7: "according to the usage of Scripture," and SD III 17: "And this is the usual usage and meaning of the word in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments"). Particular attention is given to understanding "faith in the true sense, as the Scriptures use the word" (Ap IV 112; see IV 304). Similar attention is given to deriving the meaning of the word "Gospel" from the Biblical usage, and it is noted: "The word 'Gospel' is not used in a single sense in Holy Scripture" (FC Ep V 6; see SD V 3—6). The Biblical meaning of the word "necessity" is studied (SD IV 14, 17), and the Biblical usage of the word "repentance" is analyzed. (V 7—8)

Sometimes extra-Biblical data are helpful for the understanding of a word used in Scripture. Commenting on the meaning of "sin offering" in Is. 53:10 and Rom. 8:3, Melanchthon writes:

We can understand the meaning of the word more readily if we look at the customs which the heathen adopted from their misinterpretation of the patriarchal tradition. The Latins offered a sacrificial victim to placate the wrath of God when, amid great calamities, it seemed to be

unusually severe; this they called a trespass offering. Sometimes they offered up human sacrifices, perhaps because they had heard that a human victim was going to placate God for the whole human race. The Greeks called them either "refuse" or "offscouring." (Ap XXIV 23)

Later in the same article Melanchthon discusses the use of the word "liturgy" by the Greeks. He quotes Demosthenes, the re-script of Pertinax, and Ulpian, a commentator on Demosthenes, and concludes:

But further proofs are unnecessary since anyone who reads the Greek authors can find examples everywhere of their use of "liturgy" to mean public duties or ministrations. Because of the diphthong, philologists do not derive it from *lite*, which means prayers, but from *leita*, which means public goods; thus the verb means to care for or to administer public goods. (81—83)

Readers of the Large Catechism will also remember that Luther explains the Greek and Latin background of the word "Kirche." (II 48)¹⁵

Particular weight is often laid on one word in a passage. Melanchthon carefully explains the force of the word "judge" in 1 Cor. 11:31 (Ap XII 163). The word "bread" in 1 Cor. 11:28 and 10:16 is enough Biblical basis to oppose transubstantiation (SA-III VI 5). Much importance is attached to the exclusive particles ("alone," "freely," "not of works," "it is a gift") in passages dealing with justification (Ap IV 73; FC SD III 52). Melanchthon feels no compulsion to do so but of-

¹⁵ Luther's derivation of *Kirche* from the Greek is generally held to be correct, although his attempt to associate it with the Latin "curia" is probably faulty. See *Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 656, n. 7.

fers a distinction between the words "faith" and "hope" (Ap IV 312). The Greek text is appealed to for a deeper understanding of key words (e.g., LC III 113: "In the Greek this petition reads, 'Deliver or keep us from the Evil One, or the Wicked One'"; or FC SD II 12, which explains that the Greek expression "does not receive" in 1 Cor. 2:14 actually means "does not grasp, take hold of, or apprehend").

Grammar is of the utmost importance, as the general exegesis of the Confessions from beginning to end makes very clear. The Treatise, for example, can argue that the plural form of the word "you" in Matt. 16:15; 18:19; John 20:23 shows that "the keys were given equally to all the apostles and that all the apostles were sent out as equals." (Treatise, 23)

The literary context and historical setting must also be carefully considered. Luke 7:47 is interpreted on the basis of its context, especially verse 50 (Ap IV 152). 1 Peter 4:8 is explained on the basis of its closer context and its wider context, 2:4, 5, and 6 (238). James 2:24 is explained on the basis of its context, especially 1:18 (246 f.). Tobit 4:11 is interpreted by vv. 5, 19 (277–280). 1 Tim. 5:8, 9, 14 help us understand vv. 11, 12. That the word "Gospel" in Mark 1:1 is to be interpreted in the wider sense is based on Mark 1:4 (FC SD V 4). Not only the context of the words of institution but also the circumstances of the Last Supper help us to understand our Lord's words (VII 44, 48). The "purpose and context of St. Paul's entire discourse" in 1 Cor. 10 help us explain his words in v. 16 (VII 57). Such examples could be multiplied. Confessional

exegesis practices what Melancthon preaches:

It is necessary to consider passages in their context, because according to the common rule it is improper in an argument to judge or reply to a single passage without taking the whole law into account. When passages are considered in their own context, they often yield their own interpretation. (Ap IV 280)

2. "*Seek the native sense of the text*" may be posited as a second principle of Confessional hermeneutics, and it is closely related to the first. The insistence of the Lutheran Reformation that every passage of Holy Scripture has but one simple sense constituted a major breakthrough in the history of Biblical interpretation.¹⁶ In medieval times Scripture was expounded by means of the *Quadrige*, or fourfold rule, according to which Bible passages could have a literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical sense. The moral, or tropological, sense applied to the individual believer, the allegorical to the church, and the anagogical to the future. This type of exegesis made of the Scriptures a "waxen nose," a book filled with obscurity and mystery which only the church could interpret.¹⁷ It might be observed, however, that

¹⁶ For the prior history of this rule and its significance in Luther's thought, see F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961). See also Krause, pp. 174f., n. 6.

¹⁷ Farrar states: "He [Luther] saw as clearly as Melancthon that the pretense of a *multiplex intelligentia* destroyed the whole meaning of Scripture and deprived it of any *certain* sense at all, while it left room for the most extravagant perversions, and became a subtle method for transferring to human fallibility what belonged exclusively to the domain of revelation" (Pp. 327f.).

throughout the Middle Ages and into the period of the Reformation only the literal sense was valid in disputations and the exegete was not compelled to search for all four senses in every verse.¹⁸ Over against this view of Scripture, Luther asserted: "The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and Christian theology"; and again: "If we wish to handle Scripture aright, our sole effort will be to obtain the one, simple, seminal and certain sense."¹⁹ Or again: "The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense."²⁰

Once again this principle of Confessional hermeneutics can be seen most clearly in the consistent exegetical practice of setting forth the simple, literal, or native sense intended by the author as the meaning of passages. A few examples may serve to illustrate this fact. We note Melanchthon's disregard for allegories: "Our opponents will really achieve something if we let them defeat us with alle-

gories, but it is evident that allegory does not prove or establish anything" (Ap XXIV 35). Melanchthon ridicules such an example of Roman exegesis. Commenting on the Roman use of Prov. 27:23, "Know well the condition of your flocks," to justify a priest's investigating the sins of a penitent, Melanchthon observes:

By a marvelous transformation, our opponents make passages of Scripture mean whatever they want them to mean. According to their interpretation, "know" here means to hear confessions, "condition" means the secrets of conscience and not outward conduct, and "flocks" means men. The interpretation surely is a neat one, worthy of these men who despise grammar. (Ap XII 106)

Melanchthon counters by pointing out that Solomon is not talking about confession but merely giving a bit of domestic advice to the head of a household. He does not, however, rule out the possibility of applying this passage to a pastor "by analogy." Again, commenting on the Confutation's use of 1 Sam. 2:36 to justify distributing only the bread to the laity, Melanchthon comments: "Our opponents are obviously clowning when they apply the story of Eli's sons to the sacrament." (Ap XXII 10)

Nowhere is the Confessions' appeal to the native sense of the text more evident than in their interpretation of the Eucharistic words of institution. We remember Luther's words in the Large Catechism: "Here we shall take our stand and see who dares to instruct Christ and alter what he has spoken. . . . For as we have it from the lips of Christ, so it is; he cannot lie or deceive" (V 13 f.). Again: "Mark this and remember it well. For upon these words rest our whole argument, protec-

¹⁸ A. Skevington Wood, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London: The Tynedale Press, 1960), pp. 24 f. This 36-page booklet gives a clear and basically accurate overview of Luther's hermeneutics.

¹⁹ Quoted by Farrar, p. 327.

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Dr. M. Luther's Answer to the Superchristian, Superspiritual, and Superlearned Book of Goat Emser of Leipzig, with a Glance at His Comrade Murner*, 1521, trans. A. Steimle, *Works of Martin Luther*, III (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1930), 350. This writing is particularly useful for understanding Luther's exegetical principles.

For Luther's distinction between *sententia generalis et specialis* and his understanding of the *scopus* of the text, see Krause, pp. 213—223, 241—260.

tion, and defense against all errors and deceptions that have ever arisen or may yet arise." (V 19)

The Formula of Concord deals with the interpretation of these words explicitly and in great detail. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, we shall cite the Formula in some detail. After setting forth the Sacramentarian position, the Formula quotes at length from earlier Lutheran confessions and the writings of Luther to indicate the true Lutheran position on the Real Presence. Commenting on the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, the Formula remarks:

Thereby they wished to indicate that, even though they also use these different formulas, "in the bread, under the bread, with the bread," they still accept the words of Christ in their strict sense and as they read (*eigentlich und wie sie lauten*), and they do not consider that in the proposition (that is, the words of Christ's testament), "This is my body," we have to do with a figurative predication, but with an unusual one (that is, it is not to be understood as a figurative, flowery formula or quibble about words). (SD VII 38)

The Formula asserts that the Lutheran position set forth above

rests on a unique, firm, immovable, and indubitable rock of truth in the words of institution recorded in the holy Word of God and so understood, taught, and transmitted by the holy evangelists and apostles, and by their disciples and hearers in turn. (42)

The article then turns to an interpretation of Christ's words, pointing out that Christ speaks not as a mere man or angel but as the one who is "himself the eternal truth and wisdom and the almighty God" (43). Noting the great care and deliberation with which our Lord chose His words "as

he was about to begin his bitter passion and death for our sin" (44), the Formula concludes:

We are therefore bound to interpret and explain these words of the eternal, truthful, and almighty Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord, Creator, and Redeemer, not as flowery, figurative, or metaphorical expressions, as they appear to our reason, but we must accept them in simple faith and due obedience in their strict and clear sense, just as they read (*wie sie lauten, in ihrem eigentlichen, klaren Verstand*). Nor dare we permit any objection or human contradiction, spun out of human reason, to turn us away from these words, no matter how appealing our reason may find it. (45)

The article cites the example of Abraham as one who did not ask for a "tolerable and loose interpretation" of God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac but "understood the words and command of God plainly and simply, as the words read" (46). Then it returns to the words of institution.

All circumstances of the institution of this Supper testify that these words of our Lord Jesus Christ, which in themselves are simple, clear, manifest, certain, and indubitable, can and should be understood only in their usual, strict, and commonly accepted meaning. (48)²¹

The next paragraphs show how the context of the Last Supper indicates that there can be no metaphor or metonymy (change in meaning) in Christ's words. We must

²¹ "Nun zeugen alle Umstände der Einsetzung dieses Abendmahls, dass diese Wort unsers Herrn und Heilands Jesu Christi, so an sich selbst einfältig, deutlich, klar, fest und unzweifelhaftig sein, anders nicht dann in ihrer gewöhnlichen, eigentlichen und gemeinen Deutung können und sollen verstanden werden." (*Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 987)

remain with the simple meaning of the words.

In the institution of his last will and testament and of his abiding covenant and union, he uses no flowery language but the most appropriate, simple, indubitable and clear words, just as he does in all the articles of faith and in the institution of other covenant-signs and signs of grace or sacraments, such as circumcision, the many kinds of sacrifice in the Old Testament, and holy Baptism. And so that no misunderstanding could creep in, he explained things more clearly by adding the words, "given for you, shed for you." He let his disciples keep this simple and strict understanding and commanded them to teach all nations to observe all that he had commanded them (that is, the apostles). (50 f.)

After a number of pages dealing with further explanations of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, the article returns to the matter of interpretation.

We shall not, can not, and should not permit any clever human opinions, no matter what appearance or prestige they may have, to lead us away from the simple, explicit, and clear understanding (*von dem einfältigen, deutlichen und klaren Verstand*) of Christ's word and testament to a strange meaning different from the way the letters read, but, as stated above, we shall understand and believe them in the simple sense. (92)

It is not surprising, then, that the Formula explicitly condemns those who hold that the words of institution "through tropes or a figurative interpretation are to be given a different, new, and strange sense." (113)

The native or proper sense of a passage, however, is the sense intended by the author, and the Biblical authors do not always speak in literalistic terms. This fact is also

evident in the Confessions. The Scriptures can employ figures of speech, e.g., synecdoche (Ap IV 152) or perhaps hyperbole (277). In the same article we have been quoting above, the Formula asserts that John 6:48-58 refers to a "spiritual" eating of the flesh of Christ (SD VII 61). In the following article the Formula adopts Luther's explanation that the right hand of God "is not a specific place in heaven, as the Sacramentarians maintain without proof from the Holy Scriptures. The right hand of God is precisely the almighty power of God which fills heaven and earth . . ." (VIII 28). Our Lord's statement in Matt. 16:18: "On this rock I will build my church," does not have reference to a literal rock but to the "ministry of the confession which Peter made when he declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God." (Treatise, 25)²²

Luther's interpretation of the Ten Commandments should be studied carefully in this connection. With regard to the Third Commandment he says:

Therefore, according to its literal, outward sense (*nach dem groben Verstand*), this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other ordinances of the Old Testament connected with particular customs, per-

²² Luther gives this advice for postulating figures of speech in Holy Scripture: "Rather let this be our conviction; that no 'implication' or 'figure' may be allowed to exist in any passage of Scripture unless such be required by some obvious feature of the words and the absurdity of their plain sense, as offending against an article of faith. Everywhere we should stick to just the simple, natural meaning of the words, as yielded by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech that God has created among men. . . . All 'figures' should rather be avoided, as being the quickest poison, when Scripture itself does not absolutely require them." (*Bondage of the Will*, pp. 191f.)

sons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ. (LC I 82)

Luther then proceeds to offer "ordinary people a Christian interpretation of what God requires in this commandment" (83). At first glance it would appear that Luther interprets the Third Commandment as having a double sense, the one "literal" and the other "Christian." But as Luther's context makes clear, the true and proper sense of the commandment is its "Christian" sense, and it was also this for the Old Testament Jews. Its proper sense, then and now, is "that we should sanctify the holy day or day of rest" (81). True: "As far as outward observance is concerned, the commandment was given to the Jews alone" (80), but this "outward observance" for Luther is not the real, proper meaning of the text. Much the same explanation should be given to Luther's remarks on the last two commandments: "These two commandments, taken literally, were given exclusively to the Jews; nevertheless, in part they also apply to us." (293)²³

A related problem greets us in Melancthon's comments on the Levitical sacrifices in Apology XXIV. All Levitical sacrifices can be classified under two heads, propitiatory or eucharistic (21). Yet there has really been only one propitiatory sacrifice in the world, the death of Christ (22). What, then, were the Levitical "propitiatory" sacrifices? They were so called only as "symbols of a future offering (*ad significandum futurum piaculum*)" (24). That is, they were "merely a picture (*imago*)

of the sacrifice of Christ which was to be the one propitiatory sacrifice" (53). However: "By analogy (*similitudine*) they were satisfactions since they gained the righteousness of the ceremonial law and prevented the exclusion of the sinner from the commonwealth" (24).²⁴ For the Apology it would appear that there is but one proper meaning of the Levitical "propitiatory" sacrifices: they are symbols of the coming sacrifice of Christ. The New Testament (in this case, Hebrews) has not added "another" meaning to their "original" meaning. In fact, it is only by way of "similitude" to what they signify that they are called "propitiatory" in terms of their civil function in the Israelite community.

3. "Let Scripture interpret itself" is a third major Confessional principle of Biblical interpretation. The classic formulation *Scriptura Sacra sui ipsius interpres* is evident in Luther's writings as early as 1519.²⁵ The same principle is sometimes expressed as "Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur," the "analogy of Scripture," or the

²⁴ See paragraph 56, where it is stated that "by analogy (*similitudine*)" Old Testament sacrifices can be said to have "merited civil reconciliation."

²⁵ Karl Holl, "Luthers Bedeutung für den Fortschritt der Auslegungskunst," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, I, Luther (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1927), 569. Holl explains: "Luther weist mit ihm zunächst den Anspruch ab, den die kirchliche Auktorität bezüglich des Rechts der Schrifterklärung für sich erhob. Aber wichtiger noch war das darin liegende Positive, die Hervorhebung des Eigenrechts der Urkunde. Nach dieser Seite hin war Luthers Satz ein Ereignis für die ganze Geisteswissenschaft. Und vielleicht konnte die Erkenntnis, dass jede Urkunde *aus sich selbst verstanden* werden muss, nur an einem religiösen Denkmal gewonnen werden." (Pp. 559f.)

²³ "Diese zwei Gepot sind fast den Jüden sonderlich gegeben wiewohl sie uns dennoch auch zum Teil betreffen." (*Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 633)

"analogy of faith."²⁶ Although the Lutheran Reformation gave this principle classic expression and meaning, it cannot be said to be a new discovery of Luther's.²⁷ In fact, the principle is in a general way applicable to any piece of literature. Because this principle presupposes the fundamental clarity of Scripture, it is not surprising that some observers regard Luther's emphasis on the clarity and self-interpreting nature of the Scriptures to have been motivated primarily by his desire to free Scripture from the need of ecclesiastical interpretation.²⁸ That these two factors are closely related to the *sola Scriptura* principle cannot be denied. However, that this principle was more a historical necessity than a theological deduction cannot be granted. For the principle follows not only from the revelatory nature of the Word but especially from its unity of authorship, content, and purpose. That the Scriptures were authored by God suggests that the principle *Scriptura Sacra sui ipsius interpret* is simply an extension of the general hermeneutical principle of grammatical interpretation that any passage must be con-

sidered and explained in terms of its context; thus the context of any Bible passage is ultimately the entire Scripture. That the "context" of Scripture can give a *true* explanation of any passage rests on the fact of its *divine* authorship, by virtue of which Scripture is held to be in agreement with itself.²⁹ Likewise the Christological content and soteriological purpose of the entire Scriptures can never be divorced from this principle.

In the practice of exegesis this principle means that passages dealing with the same matter (*parallelismus realis*) can be used to explain and corroborate each other. More importantly (and this has been its chief use in Lutheran circles), the principle means that the less clear or plain passages are to be considered in the light of the clearer passages. Ludwig Fuerbringer comments: "In accordance with this general rule, we must expound the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, the New Testament being the clearer portion of Holy Writ." And again: "In like manner figurative passages or metaphorical expressions touching upon a certain matter must be expounded in the light of such passages as speak of the same matter plainly and in proper terms."³⁰

²⁶ While some have understood the "analogy of faith" to refer to the creeds or other fixed summary formulations of belief, Lutherans have generally defined it as the clear passages of Holy Scripture. Wood says of Luther: "For him the rule of faith is the Scripture itself. No extraneous canon is invoked. He finds his sufficient criterion within the Word of God" (p. 22). The "analogy of faith" suggests, however, that the *whole* of Scripture should be kept in mind in the interpretation of any of its parts.

²⁷ See F. Kropatscheck, *Das Schriftprinzip der lutherischen Kirche*, I, *Die Vorgeschichte: Das Erbe des Mittelalters* (Leipzig: 1905), 448f., for the use of this principle by Luther's predecessors.

²⁸ This is suggested by Fr. Torm, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930), p. 229.

²⁹ Cf. FC SD Rule and Norm 13; FC SD XI 35; LC IV 57. Ludwig Fuerbringer wrote: "The complete agreement of Scripture with itself must be accepted *a priori* as a basis in its interpretation. This claim must under no circumstances be surrendered, because the divine origin of the Scriptures makes impossible any inconsistency of thought or speech, any contradiction, or even the smallest error." (*Theological Hermeneutics* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924], p. 14)

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16. To Fuerbringer's first point we might add that New Testament interpretations of the Old Testament are the Holy Spirit's and therefore authoritative.

This principle is consistently followed in the Confessions. It is in evidence in the many places where long lists of passages are cited as being in agreement with one another and therefore expressing the same truth. A few examples will illustrate this. Passages from Paul and John are used side by side (Ap IV 29—33), as are citations from Paul, John, Acts, Habbakuk, and Isaiah (88—99). 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Matthew, Acts, John, and Colossians are cited in the same paragraph (FC SD II 10). The host of citations in SD II 26 is taken from 15 different Biblical books, three of them from the Old Testament. Passages from Romans, Genesis, and Hebrews are cited together to explain how Abraham was justified before God through faith alone (III 33). These samples could be multiplied. The mutually explanatory nature of Scripture passages is further evidenced not only by the use of New Testament passages to explain Old Testament references (as we shall illustrate below) but correspondingly by using Old Testament passages with reference to New Testament Christians. For example, Old Testament references are used to describe the voluntary nature of the works done by "the people of the New Testament" (FC SD IV 17). A passage from Deut. 12 is used as the basis for the assertion that believers should not "set up a self-elected service of God without his Word and command." (VI 20).

Moreover, the hermeneutical principle that Scripture should interpret itself is stated rather explicitly in the Confessions. In his article on monastic vows Melancthon deals with the Romanists' interpretation of the vows of the Nazarites and Rechabites. He states:

Besides, examples ought to be interpreted according to the rule (*juxta regulam*), that is, according to sure and clear passages of Scripture, not against the rule or the passages. It is a sure thing that our observances do not merit the forgiveness of sins or justification. When the Rechabites are praised, therefore, we must note that they did not observe their way of life out of the belief that they would merit forgiveness of sins by it. . . . (Ap XXVII 60f.)³¹

It is to be noted that Melancthon's use of the doctrine of justification to clarify the nature of Rechabite vows is based on the rule that sure and clear Scripture passages interpret those that are unclear; he is not using justification by grace as an independent hermeneutical principle. Melancthon has much the same point in mind when he says with reference to Luke 11:41 ("Give alms; and behold, everything is clean for you"): "A study of the whole passage shows its agreement with the rest of Scripture." (Ap IV 281, 284)

Sometimes a passage is cited simply to corroborate the interpretation given to another passage. Thus the meaning of "remembrance" in 1 Cor. 11:24 is illustrated by the citation of Ps. 111:4-5 (Ap XXIV 72). That Matt. 26:27 indicates that *all* communicants should receive the wine is corroborated by the evidence of 1 Cor. 11:23-28 (AC XXII 2—3). 1 Cor. 10:16 is cited and discussed to show that the words of institution teach the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. (FC SD VII 54—60)

The principle that Scripture is to interpret itself is particularly helpful in finding

³¹ It seems likely that *regula* here is a reference to the *regula fidei* or *analogia fidei*, although this cannot be proved.

the meaning of a passage that is somewhat obscure or difficult to interpret. Of key significance for understanding the interpretation of the Law in Apology IV are the following statements:

In the preaching of the law there are two things we must always keep in mind. First, we cannot keep the law unless we have been reborn by faith in Christ, as Christ says (John 15:5), "Apart from me you can do nothing." Secondly, though men can at most do certain outward works, this universal statement must be permitted to interpret the entire law (Heb. 11:6), "Without faith it is impossible to please God." (256)

Whenever law and works are mentioned, we must know that Christ, the mediator, should not be excluded. He is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), and he himself says, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). By this rule, as we have said earlier, all passages on works can be interpreted. (372)

We should note that the Apology's "rule" here again consists of clear passages of Holy Scripture.

Other examples of the use of this principle in the Confessions should be noted, first of all within the New Testament. That Paul in Rom. 3:28 is talking about the whole Law and not just Levitical ceremonies is proved not only from Rom. 7:7 and 4:1-6 but also from Eph. 2:8 (Ap IV 87). The scope of Matt. 23:3 ("Observe whatever they tell you") is limited by Acts 5:29 ("We must obey God rather than men") (XXVIII 21). The plural form of "you" in John 20:23 (as well as in two Matthean passages) indicates that in Matt. 16:15 Christ was addressing not only Peter but Peter as representative of the entire company of apostles (Treatise 23). Luke

24:46-47, a passage which does not contain the word "Gospel," is used to explain the word "Gospel" in Mark 16:15 (FC SD V 4). The reason that some of those who receive the Word with joy fall away again (Luke 8:13) is not that "God does not want to impart the grace of perseverance to those in whom he has 'begun the good work.' This would contradict St. Paul in Phil. 1:6" (XI 42). The Second Commandment, which enjoins the *proper* use of God's name, explains the question "that has tormented so many teachers: why swearing is forbidden in the Gospel [Matt. 5:33-37], and yet Christ, St. Paul [Matt. 26:63 f., Gal. 1:20, 2 Cor. 2:23], and other saints took oaths." (LC I 65)³²

Of particular interest is the Confessional use of New Testament passages to interpret Old Testament ones. Eph. 5:9 and Col. 3:10 are used to interpret "image of God" in Gen. 1:27 (Ap II 18, 20). Abraham's faith and Abel's sacrifice are explained on the basis of Rom. 4:9-22 and Hebrews 11:4 (IV 201-202). "Purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the Lord" (Is. 52:11) is interpreted by Titus 1:15: "To the pure all things are pure" (XXIII 64). The Levitical sacrifices are interpreted as symbolical of Christ's death on the basis of the Epistle to the Hebrews (XXIV 20, 22, 53). That the drink offering referred to in Num. 28:4 ff. has reference to the sanctifying of believers throughout the world with the blood of Christ is proved by 1 Peter 1:2 (36). In an extremely interesting use of Scripture

³² The Confessions use the principle of the self-interpreting Scripture also within the Old Testament. E. g., Ap XXIV 28-31, where several Old Testament texts are used side by side to show that also the Old Testament condemns *ex opere operato* worship.

the Formula cites Gen. 17:4-8, 19-21 against the Anabaptist denial of infant Baptism (SD XII 13; Ep XII 8). Paul's words in Rom. 8:7 and Gal. 5:17 explain Gen. 8:21; "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." (SD II 17)³³

An important aspect of the principle that Scripture interprets itself is the legitimacy of using deductions, inferences, or analogies *based on Scripture* (see FC SD XI 55, which cautions against making deductions on the basis of *our own speculations*). Faith is necessary to receive the benefits of the sacraments because the sacraments are signs of the promises, and a promise is useless unless faith accepts it, as Paul teaches in Rom. 4:16 (Ap XII 61). One of the chief Confessional arguments for infant Baptism is this: The promise of salvation also applies to little children; Christ regenerates through the means of grace administered by the church; therefore it is necessary to baptize children so that the promise of salvation might be applied to them (Ap IX 2; see SA-III

³³ In light of the many ways in which the Confessions apply the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, it would appear that my colleague Norman Habel has not accurately defined this principle and has limited the meaning of the clarity of Scripture. He writes: "In applying this principle [relate all of Scripture to its center, viz., *solus Christus*] the Lutheran exegete must follow the rule that 'Scripture interprets Scripture' (*Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*). Understood in its primary sense, this rule means that the clear passages of Scripture, namely those which display the teaching of justification by grace through faith in all its force and glory, must be used to interpret and evaluate those portions of Scripture where this truth is obscure. In short, the right distinction between Law and Gospel must be rigorously maintained in all biblical exegesis (Apology IV 5)." In *The Form and Meaning of the Fall Narrative, A Detailed Analysis of Genesis 3* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Print Shop, 1965), p. 1.

V 4). Over against the contention of Flacius that original sin is man's *substantia*, the Formula argues that a distinction must be made between our nature as it was created by God and original sin, which dwells in the nature. Why? "The chief articles of our Christian faith compel us to maintain such a distinction" (SD I 34). The article goes on to show how the articles of Creation, Redemption, Sanctification, and Resurrection are opposed to the Flacian position (34-47). That "articles of faith" in the above citation means nothing other than the teaching of Holy Scripture is evident (a) from the parallel statement: "According to the Holy Scriptures we must and can consider, discuss, and believe these two as distinct from each other" (33); and (b) from the explicit demonstration or claim of Scriptural basis apparent in each of the four articles.

Several Scriptural deductions are evident in Formula VII and VIII, dealing with the Lord's Supper and the person of Christ respectively. Because all four accounts of the words of institution use "the same words and syllables" in saying, "This is My body," and "apply them in one and the same manner . . . without any interpretation and change," there can be no doubt that the words of Paul and Luke: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood," have no other meaning than the words of Matthew and Mark: "This is My blood of the new covenant" (SD VII 52-53). Several non-Eucharistic passages of the New Testament (e. g., Matt. 11:28: "Come unto Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest") are used to illustrate that the Lord's Supper is intended also for those whose faith is weak (70-71); this inference is possible because of the Con-

fessional belief that the Lord's Supper is Gospel. The rule: "Nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ," which is used in discussing several aspects of the Supper, is "derived from the words of institution" (85). Article VIII accepts the Christological rule (inferred from the Scriptures) that whatever the Scriptures say that Christ received in time He received according to His human nature and not according to His divine nature (VIII 57). The personal union of the two natures in Christ is used as an analogy to help us understand the sacramental union of Christ's body and blood (VII 36f.). The doctrine of the exchange of properties in Christ (which was so crucial in the debate against the Sacramentarians) is derived from the personal union and the communion of natures (VIII 31). Furthermore, the Formula argues inferentially that since there is no variation with God (James 1:17), "nothing was added to or detracted from the essence and properties of the divine nature in Christ through the incarnation" (49). Finally let us note a deduction from Scripture that is also related to the interpretation of Scripture. Because everything in the Word of God is written that we might have hope, "it is beyond all doubt" that the true understanding of God's foreknowledge will not cause or support either impenitence or despair. (SD XI 12)

C. *The Testimony of the Fathers*

The *sola Scriptura* principle is sometimes taken to mean that Lutherans must have a total disregard for the tradition of the church. It could very easily have meant that for Luther and the Lutheran Confessions in the light of their circumstances.

But it did not. The *sola Scriptura* principle, with its closely related emphases on the clarity and self-interpreting nature of Scripture, means that "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 1). But the *sola Scriptura* principle does not rule out a respectful listening to the testimony of the fathers, and this has implication for the interpretation of Scripture.

The Lutheran Symbols reflect a high regard for the fathers of the church and the testimony of the church in general, for they are convinced that the church of the Augsburg Confession is in direct historical continuity with the true church of all ages. They did not see their movement as a revolution, but as a restoration and re-formation of the church. Melancthon claims: "They [our preachers] have not introduced any innovations, but have set forth the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of the holy Fathers" (Ap II 50). Again: "Let no one think that we are teaching anything new in this regard when the Church Fathers have so clearly handed down the doctrine that we need mercy even in our good works" (IV 325; see 389). The Conclusion of the Augsburg Confession maintains that we have "introduced nothing, either in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church." (5)

The Confessions cite a great many fathers in support of their exegesis. You need only check the 11-page "Verzeichnis der Zitate aus kirchlichen und Profanschriftstellern" in the back of the *Bekennnisschriften* to see the truth of this state-

ment. What the Apology says about the doctrine of justification ("We have proof for this position of ours not only in the Scriptures, but also in the Fathers" [IV 29]) is something they say often, not only about entire doctrines and confessions but about the interpretation of individual passages as well. For example, Melancthon claims that his interpretation of "on this rock" in Matt. 16:18 has the support of "most of the holy Fathers" (Treatise, 27 to 29). Or there is the claim that the doctrine of the real presence has been "the unanimous teaching of the leading Church Fathers." (FC Ep VII 15)

Neither the Confessions nor we are suggesting that the testimony of the fathers is a source or norm of doctrine or even a hermeneutical principle. We and they recognize: "It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy Fathers' words or works" (SA-II II 15). The principle is:

Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times. (FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 2)³⁴

The Confessional use of the testimony of the fathers has two things to say to us as expositors of the Scriptures today. One is the constant reminder that the exegesis of the fathers—whether they be fathers of the ancient church, the Reformation church, or The Lutheran Church—Mis-

souri Synod—cannot determine our doctrine; only Holy Scripture can do that. In a day when traditional interpretations are being questioned, we need to beware of a *real* "Romanizing tendency"—that of using tradition as a source and norm of doctrine.

The testimony of the fathers says something else. It suggests that we listen carefully and respectfully and humbly to the past interpretations of Scripture. It suggests that we think at least twice before advocating radically different interpretations from the traditional ones. It implies that the interpretations of Scripture which men under the Spirit have held to be true for hundreds of years may well be true today. In this process of appreciative, yet critical listening, the testimony of the fathers can serve as a hermeneutical guide.

II. SOTERIOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS AND HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

At this point we should raise the question: Do the Lutheran Confessions employ their soteriological presuppositions as hermeneutical principles? More precisely, can we say that the Law-Gospel distinction and the doctrine of justification by grace are actually used as principles for deriving the meaning from the text of Scripture?

Those who would answer these questions affirmatively often cite the following passages from the Confessions:

The distinction between Law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly (*eigentlich erklärt und verstanden*). (FC SD V 1)

³⁴ For an excellent study of the role of the testimony of the fathers in Melancthon's theology see Fraenkel.

[The article of justification] is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible. . . . (Ap IV 2 [German])

A few comments on each of these passages may be helpful.

The citation from the Formula quite obviously states a basic Lutheran perspective or presupposition for explaining and understanding the Scriptures. But what does it mean to distinguish Law and Gospel? The immediate context answers: that we do not "confuse the two doctrines and change the Gospel into Law." Confusing the doctrines of Law and Gospel means that "what belongs to one doctrine is ascribed to the other"; thus "the two doctrines would be tangled together and made into one doctrine" (SD V 27). In effect the Formula is saying: What is Law in Scripture must be explained and understood as Law, and what is Gospel in Scripture must be explained and understood as Gospel. If all Scripture is understood and explained as Law, there will be no instrument for the Spirit to create faith and as a result no comfort against the terrors of the Law. If all Scripture is explained and understood as Gospel, there will be no instrument for the Spirit to convict man of his sin and show him his need for a Savior, thereby weakening also the force of the Gospel. But the citation from the Formula does not answer these questions directly: How do I determine whether a passage in Scripture is Law or Gospel or both? When I have determined whether it is Law or Gospel, how do I derive the specific Law message or specific Gospel

message from the passage?³⁵ The Formula, judging from its own methodology, would answer: Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the practice of careful grammatical-historical exegesis. This passage does *not* suggest that the distinction between Law and Gospel is a hermeneutical *principle*.³⁶

The citation from Justus Jonas' unofficial and paraphrastic translation of the Apology likewise expresses a most important Lutheran presupposition for understanding the Scriptures. We might well ask, however, what it means to have a clear and correct "understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures." To understand the Scriptures correctly is to know and believe their message of salvation in Jesus Christ! To have the door opened "to the entire Bible" means to read the Bible as a believing Christian, knowing that in it and through

³⁵ The distinction between Law and Gospel is both quantitative and functional. In some passages God is clearly speaking Law ("Thou shalt not steal"); in others He is clearly speaking Gospel ("Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house"). Still others can be both Law and Gospel, depending on the emphasis; e. g.: "Christ died for our sins" is Law because it emphasizes the enormity of our sins, and Gospel because it shows the extent of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. See FC Ep V 9f.

³⁶ For an excellent discussion of the relationship of the Law-Gospel distinction to the interpretation of Scripture, see C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), pp. 60—67.

With regard to "die Regel von Gesetz und Evangelium," Fagerberg states: "Niemals wird diese Regel als ein übergreifendes, hermeneutisches Prinzip verwandt oder gar als höhere Instanz über die hl. Schrift gesetzt. Sie will dem Bibelleser vielmehr dazu verhelfen, sich in den Aussagen der hl. Schrift über die guten Werke zurecht zu finden und ihnen einen guten und eindeutigen Sinn zu geben," p. 38.

it God speaks to me about my Savior and through His Spirit makes me His son. In short, Jonas is here expressing the conviction of the Confessions that the Scriptures are Christocentric and that their central purpose is to make men wise unto salvation. The man who believes the doctrine of justification by grace will understand this; he will see that everything in the Bible is directly or indirectly related to this center. As one who knows himself to be justified by God's grace, he will expect and find nothing in the divine Scriptures to be contrary to this doctrine; he will have his eyes opened by the Spirit to the wonders of God's grace throughout the Scriptures. All of this Jonas is saying; but he is not advocating a hermeneutical *principle*.³⁷

But are there not passages in the Confessions where the doctrine of justification and the distinction between Law and Gospel are used as hermeneutical principles? Let us note some passages where this seems likely. Commenting on the work-righteous interpretation given by the Romanists to two passages, Melancthon comments:

... in the preaching of penitence the preaching of the law is not enough because the law works wrath and continually accuses. The preaching of the Gospel must be added, that is, that the forgiveness of sins is granted to us if we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. Otherwise what need would there be of Christ, what need of the Gospel? We must always keep this important teaching in view. In this way we can oppose those who reject Christ, destroy the Gospel, and maliciously twist the Scriptures to suit the

man-made theory that by our works we purchase the forgiveness of sins. (Ap IV 260)

With reference to the Confutation's suggestion that there are sacrifices in the New Testament besides the death of Christ which are valid for the sins of others, Melancthon states:

This notion completely negates the merit of Christ's suffering and the righteousness of faith, it corrupts the teaching of both the Old and the New Testament, and it replaces Christ as our mediator and propitiator with priests and sacrificers who daily peddle their wares in the churches. (Ap XXIV 57)

Similar references are found frequently in the Apology, e.g., IV 231, 277; XXVII 64—65. In the Smalcald Articles Luther argues similarly that the Mass as a means for meriting God's favor (II II 7), purgatory (12), indulgences (24), the invocation of saints (25) and monastic vows to achieve God's favor (III 2; III XIV) must all be opposed as contradictory to the fundamental article.

To be sure, the above references (and many others too) argue from the doctrine of justification. But two things should be noted: (1) all such arguments deal with passages or practices where the doctrine of justification itself is at stake; and (2) the doctrine of justification is derived from the Scriptures.³⁸ To argue from the doctrine of justification in such contexts is in reality to employ the principle *Scriptura Sacra sui ipsius interpres*. For this principle means not only that a single passage may shed light on another one but also

³⁷ "Hermeneutical principle" is used here in the sense of a rule applied by the interpreter to the text in order to discover its meaning.

³⁸ See, e.g., Ap IV 117, 89—101, 213. Note also that Luther's formulation of the "fundamental article" is made up almost entirely of Bible passages (SA-II I).

that an *article of faith*, derived as it is from Scripture, may be used to clarify individual passages.³⁹

Are the doctrine of justification and the distinction between Law and Gospel then used as hermeneutical principles by the Confessions? Yes, in the sense that Law-Gospel and justification as clearly enunciated Scriptural doctrines are used to interpret other passages where the Law-Gospel distinction or the doctrine of justification is at stake. *In such passages* (and there are many of them, for this is indeed the fundamental article of Scripture) the distinction between the Law and the Gospel and the doctrine of justification by grace function not only as hermeneutical presuppositions but as applications of the hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets itself.

The Lutheran Confessions never arbitrarily impose the doctrine of justification by grace on any passage where it is not in fact taught. This would violate the principle of deriving the meaning from the text itself through grammatical-historical exegesis. Let us look at an example of Confessional exegesis where the doctrine of justification is clearly the issue: the interpretation of James 2:24: "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone," in Ap IV 244–253. How does the Apology reach the conclusion that this passage does not violate the Pauline doctrine of justification by grace? Not by imposing Paul's teaching *on* the passage but by deriving it *from* the passage by care-

ful exegesis. The Apology is interested in "what James meant" (244). It carefully reads the text, noting that James "does not omit faith nor exalt love in preference to it" (245). It takes the context seriously by pointing out that in James 1:18⁴⁰ "regeneration takes place through the Gospel" (247). Thus "the context demonstrates that the works spoken of here are those that follow faith" (246). In short, "James says none of this, which our opponents shamelessly infer from his words" (253). Nowhere in the whole chain of argumentation is a Law-Gospel hermeneutical principle applied, nor is there any evidence that the Confessions considered this an "obscure" passage requiring interpretation by a clearer one. James *teaches*—he is not *made* to teach—justification by grace.

In interpreting passages where the doctrine of justification or the distinction between Law and Gospel is not the issue (and there *are* such instances), the Confessions likewise make it very evident that their exposition is based on the principles outlined above (I, B). For example, in the lengthy discussion of the meaning of "This is My body" in Formula VII,⁴¹ the appeal is consistently made to deriving the meaning from the text itself, using the context and setting of the Supper and noting parallel passages. Neither the doctrine of justification nor the Law-Gospel distinction was an issue in this controversy, both sides regarding the passage in question as Gospel. Does not this example suggest that it is rather pointless to regard the distinction between Law and Gospel and the doctrine

³⁹ Some would prefer to call this hermeneutical principle the "analogy of faith" because it employs an *article* rather than an individual passage. This is certainly legitimate, provided it is recognized that articles of faith, no less than individual passages, are derived from Scripture.

⁴⁰ "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures."

⁴¹ Cited at length above, pp. 37ff.

of justification by grace as independent hermeneutical principles of general applicability?

We have dealt with this point at some length because of the current tendency to confuse soteriological presuppositions with hermeneutical principles. May I cite two examples?

The recent essay "The Lutheran Confessions and *Sola Scriptura*" presents a "summary of the confessional views regarding the purpose, content, and interpretation of the Scriptures."⁴² The essay does an excellent job of setting forth the soteriological purpose and Christological content of the Scriptures on the basis of the Confessions. It likewise documents very well the Confessional commitment to the sole authority of Scripture. It offers the proper perspective for Biblical interpretation from the vantage point of the doctrine of justification by grace. There can be no question about the validity of these accents. But as a "summary of the confessional views regarding the . . . interpretation of Scripture" it is remarkably quiet about the principles outlined above (I, B). Granted the need for interpreting the Scriptures "in conformity with the purpose of God expressed in the Scriptures" (p. 17) — and I agree with this statement completely — can we really derive hermeneutical *principles* from this purpose alone, apart from the nature of Holy Scriptures as God's inspired Word? Is it correct to state: "The doctrine of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ is not only the *praecipuus locus doctrinae christianae* ("main doctrine

of Christianity"), but it also *determines the interpretation of all Scripture*" (p. 18; italics added)? Is "soteriological concern" enough of a basis to assert that exegesis will lead to basically the same application?⁴³ Is this statement accurately formulated: "All theology that receives its dimensions and contours from this guiding principle is pure and true" (p. 11)? As I understand the document (and *my understanding* may well be at fault), I would have to answer "No" to all of the above questions.⁴⁴

Another item that raises some similar questions is "A Response to Questions Raised by Memorial 331, Propositions 1 and 2," submitted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to the Detroit convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.⁴⁵ Both "A Response" and the synodical resolution (*Proceedings*, p. 101) recommend that the first two propositions of Memorial 331⁴⁶ be studied "in the light of the approach to the Scriptures that is enunciated in the Lutheran Con-

⁴³ "Where this soteriological concern is present, exegesis, whether it deals with a single article of faith or with Scripture as a whole, will lead to basically the same application" (*ibid.*, p. 18).

⁴⁴ These questions are asked in keeping with the spirit of the Preface, which states: "The first two of these study documents are herewith presented to members of the churches for study and discussion, with the suggestion that joint conferences be arranged at the local level for this purpose" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

⁴⁵ *Proceedings of the 46th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod*, Detroit, Michigan, June 16—26, 1965, pp. 296 to 298.

⁴⁶ The first proposition asks whether the six days of Creation described in Genesis and Exodus are ordinary, calendar days; the second proposition asks whether the Genesis account of the Creation and Fall is literal, factual history.

⁴² *Essays Adopted by the Commissioners of the American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod*, Nov. 22 and 23, 1964; April 19 and 20, 1965, p. 3.

fessions which we all subscribe" (p. 296). "A Response" then gives considerable emphasis to the doctrine of justification and the proper distinction between Law and Gospel as the proper perspectives from which to interpret the Scriptures. Furthermore, "A Response" speaks very relevantly and correctly in insisting that the interpreter is not "free to disregard *any* of the hard facts of the Scriptures" and that he can determine the form in which the Scriptures speak "by observing it in each case in its Biblical context as it presents itself to him" (p. 297). There can be no quarrel with these accents; they are Biblical and Confessional. My questions deal merely with the *emphasis and relevance of the document to the issues raised in Propositions 1 and 2*. In the final analysis, how does the doctrine of justification or the proper distinction between Law and Gospel help to determine the length of the days in Genesis 1 (Proposition 1) or whether the Genesis account of the Creation and Fall is literal, factual history (Proposition 2)? Is it not possible that the differences of opinion among us on these questions come from men who, on *both* sides of the argument, proceed from the doctrine of justification by grace and properly distinguish Law and Gospel in these accounts? Granted that:

To interpret the Scriptures in terms of Law and Gospel, as the Lutheran Confessions do, does not mean that the interpreter is free to disregard *any* of the hard facts of the Scripture, whether these are the creation and the fall or the cross and the resurrection (p. 297),

how does the doctrine of justification or the Law-Gospel distinction help us to determine which *are* the "hard facts" of

Scripture and which are not? Can this last question be answered in any other way than by clarifying the hermeneutical principles of grammatical-historical exegesis as it deals with literary forms (as "A Response" itself begins to do when it emphasizes the importance of the "Biblical context" for determining the form, p. 297)?

The doctrine of justification by grace and the proper distinction between Law and Gospel are indeed vital presuppositions for the proper interpretation of Holy Scripture. These presuppositions, moreover, are derived from the Scriptures themselves and epitomize the content of the entire Bible. As such they serve as controls over against interpretations of Scripture that weaken or destroy the doctrine of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith or confuse the condemning Law with the saving Gospel. But they are not principles for interpreting the message of Scripture; they *are* the message of Scripture.⁴⁷ What God is saying in His Law and in His Gospel can be heard only through the ears of a grammatical-historical exegesis that operates with principles of inter-

⁴⁷ Fagerberg states: "Die Rechtfertigung ist wichtig auf Grund ihrer biblischen Verwurzelung und sie gibt den Aussagen der hl. Schrift in bezug auf das Heil ihren guten Sinn. Ein genereller Schlüssel zur hl. Schrift ist sie jedoch nicht. . . . Statt das einzige Prinzip für die Deutung der hl. Schrift zu sein, ist sie die wichtigste Regel, die das Verständnis der hl. Schrift das Verhältnis von Glauben und guten Werken betreffend klarlegt," p. 36. Gerhard Gloege reaches a similar conclusion: "Das bedeutet nun nicht, dass die Rechtfertigungslehre in dem Sinne ein hermeneutisches 'Prinzip' wäre, dass mit ihrer Hilfe jedweder Text des AT oder NT von der Rechtfertigung zu reden hätte, bzw. auf die Rechtfertigung entfaltet oder angewendet werden müsste. Im Gegenteil!" "Die Rechtfertigungslehre als hermeneutische Kategorie," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 89 (1964), 163.

pretation consistent with the nature of the Scriptures. *Sola Scriptura* and *solus Christus* are inseparably joined together; let no man put them asunder!

III. SOME CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

1. The Confessions want to be understood and accepted as expositions and summaries of Holy Scripture, which remains "the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be judged and appraised" (FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 1).⁴⁸ Subscription to the Confessions is thus our affirmation that the doctrinal content of the Confessions is a correct explanation and summary of Holy Scripture, and our pledge to God and to one another that we will preach, teach, and administer the sacraments accordingly.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Helmut Echernacht puts it well: "Was ist Bekenntnis? Das Bekenntnis steht der Schrift gegenüber als die Antwort der Kirche auf die Rede Gottes. In ihm sagt die Kirche anbetend und gelobend ihrem Herrn das wieder, was Er ihr zuvor in der Bibel gesagt hat. Es ist damit Dialog und Liturgie" ("Schriftprinzip und Bekenntnis," *Evangelisch-lutherische Kirchenzeitung*, V [Feb. 15, 1951], 38).

⁴⁹ In view of the Confessions' self-understanding as expositions of Holy Scripture, it is not entirely accurate to say that confessional subscription does not "bind" us to the exegesis of the Confessions. C. F. W. Walther wrote:

"If, for instance, an exegete does not reach the specific sense of a Bible passage and yet interprets it in such a manner that his interpretation rests on other clear Bible passages, he is indeed mistaken in supposing that a certain teaching is contained in this specific Bible passage, but he is not erring in doctrine. In like manner, he who unconditionally subscribes to the Symbolical Books declares that the interpretations which are contained in the Symbols are 'according to the analogy of faith.'"

Walther summarized the meaning of Confessional subscription thus:

"A subscription to the confessions is the

2. In subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions we bind ourselves to the Confessional doctrine of the nature, content, and purpose of Holy Scripture (namely, that Holy Scripture is God's literary Word about Jesus Christ for man's salvation) and to all hermeneutical presuppositions and principles implicit in this doctrine. Agreement on proper hermeneutical principles cannot be expected without prior agreement on the nature of Holy Scripture as God's own Word.

3. The soteriological presuppositions of the Confessions give direction and purpose to the exegetical application of Confessional hermeneutical principles. As a result, the Lutheran interpreter will utilize grammatical-historical exegesis to explain the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments from the center of all Scripture, Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ In deriving the meaning from the text, seeking the native sense of the text, and permitting Scripture to interpret itself, the Lutheran interpreter

church's assurance that its teachers have recognized the interpretation and understanding of Scripture which is embodied in the Symbols as correct and will therefore interpret Scripture as the Church interprets it."

"Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," translated and condensed by Alex Wm. C. Guebert, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XVIII (April 1947), 242, 246.

⁵⁰ Nils Alstrup Dahl comments: "For the person who allows the church's confession to direct him to biblical exegesis, the elementary task of exegesis remains the most important and the most authentic one: the precise reading of what is written. . . . The actual goal of his work remains to arrive at an understanding of the gospel attested in the Scriptures in its significance for the total life of the church and the world." "The Lutheran Exegete and the Confessions of His Church," *Lutheran World*, VI [June 1959], 10)

of Scripture continues to hear God speaking Law and Gospel for the gracious justification of all men through faith in Jesus Christ. He hears this message throughout the Scriptures, not because he has manipulated the text or practiced eisegesis but because that is precisely what God is saying in the text of Scripture.

4. Because God is their author and Jesus Christ their chief content, the Scriptures are a literary and theological unit and must be interpreted as such. Because God's authorship was accomplished through human authors living and writing at various times as men of their times, the Scriptures must also be read as historical literary documents. Because of the theanthropic nature of every word of Scripture, the interpreter is obliged to utilize — and be judged by — the canons of both theological and historical interpretation, with the latter clearly in the service of the former.

5. Because of the interrelationship of the *sola Scriptura* and *solus Christus* principles, the church should be rightfully concerned with any interpretation or interpretive technique that is contrary to these principles or creates uncertainty about them. In employing nontraditional techniques or advancing nontraditional interpretations the Lutheran interpreter, out of love for the people he serves, should clearly demonstrate that he has not violated either the *sola Scriptura* or the *solus Christus* principle.⁵¹

⁵¹ Some of the "minor" problems confronting the church are not so minor as they appear at first glance. Many people are concerned about matters like the authorship of the Pentateuch, Isaiah, and Ps. 110 or the historicity of Jonah, not because of the intrinsic importance of these questions but because they feel that some current answers to these questions are contrary to what

6. The Confessional presuppositions and principles of Biblical interpretation are not a set of neatly formulated rules and guidelines, which, if followed consistently, will yield guaranteed and unanimous results in every exegetical detail. On the other hand they are prescriptive enough to measure the validity of every exegetical approach to the Scriptures. The Lutheran interpreter of Scripture who follows these principles carries out his task with the confidence that the Holy Spirit will open his eyes to behold "the things of the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 2:14)

And after God, through the Holy Spirit in Baptism, has kindled and wrought a beginning of true knowledge of God and faith, we ought to petition him incessantly that by the same Spirit and grace, through daily exercise in reading his Word and putting it into practice, he would preserve faith and his heavenly gifts in us and strengthen us daily until our end. Unless God himself is our teacher, we cannot study and learn anything pleasing to him and beneficial to us and others. (FC SD II, 16)

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they understand Christ and the New Testament to be saying. They are thus concerned for the *sola Scriptura* principle: Do these "new" interpretations suggest that the Bible is unreliable? If the Bible is unreliable in these points, may I trust it when it tells me about my Savior? These people are also concerned about the *solus Christus* principle: Do these "new" interpretations imply that Christ was wrong? And if Christ was wrong, then He was not omniscient; and if He was not omniscient, then He was not God; and if He wasn't God, how could He be my Savior? If I cannot trust Christ's words on such matters, can I trust them on *any* matter? Perhaps such people have an unclear understanding of what Christ and the New Testament are actually saying on such matters, but for their sake this needs to be demonstrated with all love and patience.

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The Introduction of the Historical-critical Method and Its Relationship to Lutheran Hermeneutics

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When this topic was assigned to this writer, it was suggested that he should concern himself particularly with Johann Salomo Semler and his part in the introduction of the historical-critical method in Lutheranism. It is true that Semler is probably the most influential person in connection with the development and introduction of the historical-critical method within Lutheranism. It is, however, also true that Semler had predecessors who prepared the way for him. In fact, proponents of the historical-critical method like to claim Luther and the Reformers as their forerunners in their opposition to what they consider the aberrations of Lutheran Orthodoxy.

In a study of this breadth it is not possible to work solely or even predominantly on the basis of primary sources. Many of the primary sources are not available in the libraries of our two seminaries, and it could hardly be expected that if they were, any member of the two faculties would have the time to work solely on the basis of these primary sources, which are very numerous, very voluminous, and, if we may trust the judgment of Emanuel Hirsch, written, at least so far as Semler is

concerned, in "*elendes stets undurchsichtiges umständliches Deutsch . . . wohl das schlechteste, das je ein Deutscher von geistigem Rang geschrieben hat.*"

This writer has therefore confined himself very largely to a number of apparently very excellent and thorough secondary sources. He would mention first of all Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments*.¹ The second source of our material is Gottfried Hornig, *Die Anfänge der historisch-kritischen Theologie: Johann Salomo Semlers Schriftverständnis und seine Stellung zu Luther*.² Another eminently scholarly though secondary work is Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie*, Vol. IV.³ A shorter but nevertheless very useful work is Wolfgang Schmittner, *Kritik und Apologetik in der Theologie J. S. Semlers*, in

¹ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart* (Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1956). All translations from German and Latin in this article are by this writer.

² Gottfried Hornig, *Die Anfänge der historisch-kritischen Theologie: Johann Salomo Semlers Schriftverständnis und seine Stellung zu Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961).

³ Emanuel Hirsch, "Joh. Salomo Semler," in *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie*, IV (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, [1952]), pp. 48—89).

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Theologische Existenz Heute.⁴ All these writers appear to have worked very extensively with the primary sources. While they do not at all times agree in all particulars in their judgments, there is nevertheless considerable unanimity both with respect to the facts and with respect to the evaluation of the facts as they concern the beginnings and the development of the historical-critical method and its relationship to Lutheran hermeneutics.

I

THE ATTITUDE OF LUTHER AND THE REFORMERS TOWARD THE SCRIPTURES

Kraus makes the demand that in presenting the history of the historical-critical theory we ask again and again, "What did the Reformers say?"⁵ It is neither germane to our topic, nor does it appear necessary that we dwell here on Luther's profound reverence for Holy Scripture as the inspired Word of God. We must, however, refer to Luther's hermeneutical principles and to any statements by Luther which might indicate that he had leanings toward literary and historical criticism of Scripture. It is a fact, as any student of Luther knows, that Luther turned against the fanciful allegorical interpretations of Scripture which had been customary in medieval Christendom and insisted on grammatical-historical exegesis. By studying the text of Scripture according to the meaning of the words and according to the grammar in the historical setting of the text Luther

sought to arrive at the *sensus literalis*, which must be understood as the intended sense of the writer. Concerning this there is no debate. The claim of the proponents of the historical and literary criticism of the Bible is that the doctrine of verbal inspiration as set forth in Lutheran Orthodoxy made a study and understanding of Scripture in the sense of Luther unlikely if not impossible. In speaking of Luther as one who was not hostile to literary and historical criticism Kraus says:

Luther realized that Isaiah and Jeremiah did not publish their books themselves. . . . Rather their speeches — according to Luther's understanding — were excerpted by scribes. The exact historical order could not be maintained. Also the Psalter was not arranged according to a careful plan when it was composed. Luther goes quite far when he even considers it possible that Moses could also have drawn from the tradition of other (heathen) peoples. But in any case the tradition of the fathers came to Moses to be fixed Scripturally. He then shapes it like a "Virgilian poet." Here problems arise concerning the composition of Biblical books and also questions about the tradition behind Bible stories. From Luther's *Table Talk* we receive the following information in this connection: "Thereafter Master Fortemius said that many assert that the πεντάτευχον was not written by Moses. The Reverend Doctor responded: What has that to do with the matter? Let be, that Moses did not write, nevertheless it is Moses' book. . . ."⁶

⁴ Wolfgang Schmittner, *Kritik und Apologetik in der Theologie J. S. Semlers*, Nr. 106 in *Theologische Existenz Heute* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1963).

⁵ Kraus, p. 21.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 13 f.; quotation from Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Tischreden*, 3, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1914), 23, Nr. 2844b. This edition will be cited as *WA*.

Kraus continues:

In any case critical insights are stated openly. They do not touch the unshakable certainty that God Himself speaks in Holy Scripture and that the Biblical witnesses worked and wrote from the Holy Spirit. The human form of Scripture which becomes visible in the problems of composition and tradition Luther did not take too seriously: "It does not matter much. If a dispute occurs with respect to Scripture and it is not possible to harmonize it, then one should let it go."⁷

We may refer here also to the sharp words which Luther spoke concerning the Book of Esther in his exegesis on Ex. 4: 24-26. Luther expresses his amazement that the Holy Ghost mixed "this crazy stuff into such great and important and high matters." Similarly Luther often noted apparent contradictions in the matter of historical facts and chronological difficulties.⁸

Not only Luther but also other Reformers are claimed as forerunners of the historical and literary criticism of the Bible. In Kraus, Karlstadt is given a special chapter because of his critical investigations with respect to the canon. On account of these studies Kraus says that Karlstadt is the first forerunner of the literary-critical study of the Old Testament within Protestant theology. Karlstadt first of all separated the so-called apocryphal books from those he considered canonical. He also devoted considerable attention to the Pentateuch. He does not doubt that Moses received the Law from God and transmitted it to the people, but with respect

to the Pentateuch he asks: "From whom is the speech of the five Books of Moses and the nature of the discourse?" He expresses his thoughts in the following words:

The discourses of the authors, achieved with so much labor, we judge more rightly to be by editors of the books. Indeed, filled with this kind of concern I began to doubt about the writer of the last two Books of Esdras . . . thinking also about the historian of the Books of Moses I was uncertain who might have written the five volumes of the Law, who might have been their writer. Moreover, so far as the happenings are concerned, I by no means doubted that they were performed by those to whom they are attributed, whether to Moses or to others, but so far as the writer of the history is concerned, I was moved by a by no means groundless persuasion to believe that it was another than Moses. — First of all I was shaken by this reason that, when Moses died, the story is woven together by the same phraseology and diction in which it had been begun to be written earlier, but it is clear that Moses, after he died, neither said nor wrote anything, wherefore the style of the history is given to a man other than Moses. Moreover, we see that many things belong to Deuteronomy which Moses did not publish; these and others, as one can see from the last chapter of Deuteronomy, throughout the speech of the historian are the words of the writer of the history of Deuteronomy. . . . From this it is demonstrated that the proposition that Moses was not the writer of the five books can be defended since, when Moses had been buried, we see the style of the speech the same; certainly it would be ridiculous to assume that the same Moses, the dead Moses, spoke these words: "Moses died at the command of God, and He buried him

⁷ Kraus, p. 14 (Kraus's italics); quotation from *WA*, 46, 727.

⁸ Kraus, p. 14.

in the land of Moab, and no man knows his grave." These things and others which follow no one except a manifest madman will attribute to Moses as author.⁹

Karlstadt was critical with respect to the authorship of other Old Testament books. He considers the author of the Books of Samuel unknown; he holds that the self-praise in the Book of Ezra (7: 6-25) makes it impossible to consider Ezra the author of this book. The Book of Daniel is critically examined. Karlstadt would like to delete the Greek additions.¹⁰

With all this literary and historical criticism Karlstadt has no inclination to deny the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*.¹¹

John Calvin

Calvinism is known for its early formulation of a doctrine concerning Holy Scripture and of a confessional fixing of the canon.¹² Yet also John Calvin has his doubts about the authorship of some Old Testament books. Comparing Calvin's way of operating in this area with that of Luther, Kraus says:

Calvin operates in a similar manner in his interpretation of the Old Testament — even though in his criticism of the content of the text he is more reserved than Luther. A notable example of the criticism that Calvin practiced is in the foreword of the exegesis of the Book of Joshua. The inherited tradition is given up, because it is impossible to think of

Joshua as the author. The total content of the book speaks against such an understanding. Calvin frankly declares that the assumption that Joshua must have written the book because the superscription bears his name rests on very weak grounds, for also the name "Samuel" is found in another book of the Holy Scripture which simply cannot have been written by Samuel. Calvin then carefully sets forth the assumption that it was probably the high priest Eleazar who gathered the reports concerning the events out of which the book was constructed later. This conception goes back to the supposition expressed by Calvin in another place that the manuscripts pertaining to the Law and the historical reports of the Old Testament were gathered in the Ark of the Covenant by whoever happened to be high priest at the time they were written. But then he says with the greatest caution: "We are ready to leave undecided what we cannot search out and what finally is not of the greatest importance. But this most important thing must be accepted, that the doctrines contained in this Book were inspired by the Spirit of God for our use."¹³

II

LUTHERAN ORTHODOXY AND ITS ATTITUDE TOWARD SCRIPTURE

Whereas proponents of the historical and literary criticism of the Bible believe that they find allies in the Reformers — Luther, Melancthon, Karlstadt, and Calvin — they have harsh words for the Lutheran dogmaticians and their doctrine of verbal inspiration. We must therefore ask what the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians in company with the Reformed dogmaticians of the same age taught concerning

⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² E.g., "The French Confession of Faith, A.D. 1559," Art. III; see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, III (New York: Harper & Bros., 1905), 360 f.

¹³ Kraus, pp. 14 f.

the inspiration of Scripture and how this doctrine affected any efforts at historical and literary criticism of the Bible.

It is a fact, too well known among us to need demonstration here, that Luther's free criticism of certain books in the Old and New Testament canon was not shared by the dogmaticians of Lutheran Orthodoxy. While the Orthodox dogmaticians could not deny the doubts which had persisted in the church from ancient times with respect to the canonicity of certain books, they did their best to establish the canonicity of also these books, and the criticisms of Luther are for the most part silenced among Lutherans during the 17th century. Hornig gives the following characterization of the doctrine of verbal inspiration in the Lutheran dogmaticians:

Through the doctrine of verbal inspiration, which they sought to establish by means of 2 Tim. 3:16 and other passages of Scripture, the dogmaticians maintain that the writings of both the Old and the New Testament are divinely inspired in their very words and therefore to be looked upon as infallible. The concept of inspiration, or *Theopneustie*, has a very definite meaning in the framework of the orthodox doctrine of Scripture. It signifies the unique act through which God as the author of Holy Scripture communicated His Word to prophets and apostles and moved them at the same time to write it down. This revelation of God, which is given through inspiration, happens according to the orthodox understanding with the intention that the Word of God may be transmitted to coming generations in its original and authentic form uncorrupted and unchanged.¹⁴

Kraus expresses similar sentiments con-

cerning the doctrine of verbal inspiration in the Lutheran dogmaticians as follows:

Viewing matters as a whole we gather that the question about the historical origin of the canonical Holy Scriptures was asked only here and there. In the foreground there stands the very schematic and constructive conception of the manner in which the Word of God became Scripture as it was described in the following manner by John Gerhard: "Divine inspiration is such an action by which God in a supernatural manner communicated to the intellect of the writers not only the concepts of all things which were to be written, in conformity with the objects, but also the concepts of the words themselves and of all things by which these were to be expressed, and moved their will to the act of writing." The authors of the Bible are "God's helpers, Christ's hand, the writers and notaries of the Holy Spirit; they wrote not as men but as God's men." Therefore "no error even in little things, no lapse of memory, much less a lie can find a place in all Scripture."¹⁵

With respect to the Hebrew vowel points Kraus says:

A characteristic example for the rigid maintenance of the doctrine of inspiration may be seen in the *dispute concerning the Hebrew vowel points*. The problem was again raised through the writing of the Jew Elias Levita, *Massoreth hammasoreth* (1538). . . . Zwingli, Calvin, and Luther opposed the view of the originality of the vowel points in the original autographs. Luther rejects the "new human invention of the rabbis."¹⁶ On the other

¹⁵ Kraus, p. 30.

¹⁶ Discussing the contested passage Ps. 22:7 Luther says with reference to the vowel points: "Denn dass man die Punkte verändern, und kâ'ârî und kâ'ârû lesen könnte, das genügt nicht,

¹⁴ Hornig, pp. 41 f.

hand Matthius Flacius is an eager defender of the conviction that the vowel points possess a high antiquity. The incipient confirmation of the dogma of inspiration could not dispense with the acceptance of the archaic validity of the Hebrew vowel points. For if one should have declared himself for a later introduction of these signs, the text of the whole Scripture would have become uncertain. This dared not happen under any circumstance. Flacius in the ensuing debate even appeals to the Word of Jesus that not an iota [not an apostrophe] of the Law was to perish. Yes, if the Hebrew points were a late invention, then according to John Gerhard it would follow: "Scripture was not given by God through the prophets down to the separate words since without the vowel points the words could stand only in a naked manner, therefore the whole of Scripture would not be *the-*

da es hinlänglich bekannt ist, dass man den Punkten nicht glauben darf, da sie erst eine neue Erfindung sind." Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften*, 2d ed., ed. Joh. Georg Walch. IV (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House [1881], 1284. This edition will be cited as *St. L.*

In his rather violent writing *Vom Schem Hamphoras* Luther counsels Christian scholars of the Hebrew Old Testament that, if they could change the vowel points in the Hebrew and other grammatical details so that they would get away from the Jewish understanding so that it would agree with the New Testament, they should do this confidently and joyfully. He says in this connection:

"Mit dieser Weise könnte man der Juden Verstand in der Bibel fein schwächen, und ist das Vorthail da, dass Mose und die Propheten nicht haben mit Punkten geschrieben, welches ein neu Menschenfündlein, nach ihrer Zeit aufgebracht; darum nicht not ist, dieselben so steif zu halten, als die Juden gerne wollten, sonderlich wo sie dem Neuen Testament zuwider gebraucht werden. . . . Darum, wo sich die *aequivocatio* in einem vocabulo begibt, so nehme man die *significatio*, die mit dem Neuen Testament stimmt, so wird sie gewiss. . . ." *St. L.* XX, 2106 f.; see *WA* 53, 647 f.

opneuston." By means of this example one can see that strong supports are everywhere built into the orthodox doctrine of inspiration. The Scriptural principle of the Reformation is fortified in its untouchableness down to the very vowel points. Without a single gap this dogma surrounds the Holy Scripture like a protecting wall.¹⁷

According to Hornig this orthodox doctrine concerning Scripture experienced a development in later Lutheran Orthodoxy. He writes:

In the framework of the orthodox doctrine of Scripture a development can be noticed insofar as the doctrine of verbal inspiration is emphasized ever more strongly. With Calov, Quenstedt, Hollaz, and other dogmaticians of late Orthodoxy this doctrine is developed down to an exact explanation of the process of inspiration. By inspiration they understood the divinely worked *suggestio rerum*, *suggestio verborum*, and the *impulsus ad scribendum*. Therefore the Biblical writers did not act on their own impulse when they wrote down the books of the Old and of the New Testament but formulated them under the guidance of God and as a result of His direct command. Therefore God is the real originator (*causa principalis*) [sic] of Scripture while prophets and apostles are only tools (*causae instrumentales*) which God used in the composition of Scripture. In consequence of this thinking the Biblical writers are called *amanuenses*, and the process of inspiration is described as a dictation of the Holy Spirit, a *dictamen in calamus*.¹⁸

As representatives of the dictation theory Hornig names Calov, Quenstedt, and Hollaz and quotes from Hollaz the words:

¹⁷ Kraus, pp. 30 f. (Kraus's italics).

¹⁸ Hornig, p. 43.

*Omnia et singula verba, quae in sacro codice leguntur, a Spiritu Sancto Prophetis et Apostolis inspirata et in calamus dictata sunt.*¹⁹

Kraus accuses the Lutheran dogmaticians of seeking to establish the authority of Scripture by means of rationalistic principles. He says:

The authority of the Bible is established on rational grounds, and the whole of Scripture is represented as something given in a supernatural manner. One is amazed at the zeal with which the authority of the Bible is "proved" with an appeal to its venerable age, the dependability of the historical information, and the absence of contradictions in content. These rational postulates, which stood in the service of a demonstration of the supernatural character of Scripture, later on became factors which inflamed criticism in an especially violent manner.²⁰

The orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians, according to Hornig, considered the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration necessary to convince men that Holy Scripture is the codex of truths revealed by God Himself. As soon as these basic presuppositions were fulfilled, so they supposed, the assent to the remaining articles of faith in the dogmatic system would come of itself.²¹

If we may believe Hornig's characterization of the orthodox Lutheran use of the doctrine of verbal inspiration, it amounted to this:

A man had first of all to accept one doctrine of orthodox dogmatics before he

could believe any sentence in Holy Scripture. First he had to accept the verbal inspiration before it was possible for him to receive the forgiving grace of God in saving faith.²²

To the extent that this principle was actually carried out in Lutheran theology the Christian faith took on a very intellectualistic cast. It was as if a man were saved by the correctness and completeness of his conception of the Christian doctrine rather than by a commitment to his Lord and Savior in confidence in His atoning work. This situation within Lutheran Orthodoxy seemed like a challenge to men of critical temperament. On this point Kraus says:

Scriptural principle of the Reformation is the foundation of Protestant Biblical exegesis. For this reason it was necessary . . . to set forth this important point of departure. It will have become clear how serious the displacing of the theological accents during the age of orthodoxy was. *The dogma of inspiration with all its hermeneutical consequences is the deciding factor which challenges criticism.* The divinization (*Vergöttlichung*) of Scripture calls the humanistic reaction onto the field.²³

Hornig summarizes the results for dogmatical and exegetical theology that followed from the position of Orthodoxy as follows:

The verbally inspired Scripture is considered by Orthodoxy as the source of knowledge out of which all doctrines of faith are to be proved and derived. But as soon as the hermeneutical principles of orthodox exegesis are examined, the secret dominance of the already established dog-

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 41; quotation from D. Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acromaticum*, I (Rostock and Leipzig, 1718), 94 f.

²⁰ Kraus, p. 28.

²¹ Hornig, p. 49.

²² Ibid., p. 50.

²³ Kraus, p. 34 (Kraus's italics).

matical doctrines over the testimony of Scripture become clearly apparent. The deciding factor is not the intended sense of the words of the Biblical writers. The real hermeneutical principle is rather an exegesis according to the analogy of faith. The result is therefore a dogmatically bound exegesis, which can indeed furnish dogmatics with new *dicta probantia* but can hardly correct its own doctrines or even question them.²⁴

The following may stand as a representative criticism of the Orthodox Lutheran doctrine of verbal inspiration:

Insofar as one proceeds from the presupposition that the verbally inspired original texts have been transmitted essentially uncorrupted, it is necessary to declare on the basis of the doctrine of verbal inspiration that every form of textual criticism is illegitimate. Strictly speaking, however, also a study of the text from the standpoint of the history of thought or the history of religion of the content of the Biblical message is forbidden. For this content is not the result of a historical development but has as the Word of God a supernatural character. Laudable as the endeavor is to maintain the dependability of Holy Scripture as the only fountain of man's salvation, so serious are nevertheless the objections which the Orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration arouses. Through this doctrine the human-historical character of the Biblical message is negated. But this doctrine also gets into conflict with the self-testimony of the New Testament text at important points. For when the apostles demand faith for their message, this is not done with the claim that their words are divinely inspired but rather with a reference to the fact that they were eye

and ear witnesses of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ.²⁵

Kraus criticizes Orthodoxy particularly for being unable to study the Scripture *historically*. He says:

The basic orthodox idea of pure doctrine failed at one essential point to bring a suitable manner of regarding the Biblical facts: *It was not able to enter into the essence of the history.*²⁶

This, according to Kraus, entered Reformed theology only through Johannes Coccejus, and Lutheran theology through George Calixt.²⁷

The doctrine of verbal inspiration had far-reaching theoretical consequences in Lutheran Orthodoxy. Because it was held that Scripture contained neither errors nor lies nor lapses of memory nor oversights with respect either to the matters treated or to the words used, Orthodox theologians often drew conclusions from the Bible with respect to other sciences which were coming to the fore during the period of Orthodoxy, as for instance the sciences of history, geology, physics, and astronomy. The bitter disputes that grew out of this situation have come down into our own time and are with us today as we all well know.

III

HISTORICAL CRITICISM OF THE BIBLE DURING THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

If the 16th century was the age of the Reformation, during which the *sola Scriptura* was firmly established in Protestant

²⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁶ Kraus, p. 33 (Kraus's italics).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁴ Hornig, p. 51.

theology, and the 17th century was the era of Reformed and Lutheran Orthodoxy, these centuries were nevertheless not without voices which demanded literary and historical criticism of the Bible. In the following we shall consider a few of these.

Hugo Grotius

Hugo Grotius, a Dutch statesman and scholar, sought to read the Bible historically. First of all he practiced determined textual criticism, seeking out to the best of his ability the best readings. Furthermore, he placed the Old Testament and its statements against the background of secular history, seeking a purely historical explanation. Philology, textual criticism, and history—these are the viewpoints from which he practiced Biblical interpretation. Grotius wanted to read the Old Testament on its own terms apart from any dependence on the New Testament. Consequently Grotius missed Christ in the Old Testament, and the Ebed-Jahwe in Isaiah was never Christ but first Isaiah and later Jeremiah. The Psalms became exclusively expressions of individual piety. In his interpretation of Scripture Grotius was a good humanist but not a good Biblical exegete.²⁸

The Socinians

What Hugo Grotius did in his way the Socinians had done, if possible, even more radically before him. They interpreted Psalm 2 only of David, Psalm 22 of an unhappy Israelite, Psalm 45 of the wedding of Solomon. The prophecies of the Old Testament were not thought to be direct prophecies of Christ, but insofar as they actually transcended the immediate historical setting, they were to be looked upon

as dark oracles of something future. The truth of Scripture was considered the eternal truth of reason. The Socinians considered it their duty to free this eternal truth of reason from its historical entanglements. With these principles the Old Testament was practically superfluous. All this was an inheritance from humanism.²⁹

Historical Criticism Within Roman Catholicism

According to Kraus, Andreas Masius, a Roman Catholic scholar commenting on the Book of Joshua, expressed the opinion that the Book of Joshua had been written not by Joshua, as the Jewish commentators maintained, but by Ezra or some other man equal with Ezra. Masius then expanded his ideas to the Pentateuch and expressed not only the opinion that Moses had not written the Pentateuch but that most of the writings of the Old Testament are totally undependable as historical documents.

Masius had a learned pupil, Benedict Pereira. Pereira, a Spanish Jesuit, became the teacher of Richard Simon, a noted Catholic scholar, who had a strong historical-critical bent. Pereira wrote on the Pentateuch. While he sought to hold fast to the conviction that essentially the Pentateuch is the work of Moses, he expressed the opinion that many things in these writings "leave Moses behind."³⁰

The Role of the Philosophers in the Development of the Historical and Literary Criticism of the Bible

Influenced by the Dutch Hugo Grotius, the British Lord Herbert of Cherbury at-

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 46—49.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 37—39.

³⁰ Ibid.

tacked the Orthodox position with respect to divine revelation. Cherbury believed that all religions, also Judaism and Christianity, are the result of a falling away from an original natural religion. It is easy to see how the Biblical concept of revelation was relativized, not to say denied, by the position taken by Cherbury.

Perhaps more influential than Cherbury was the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes attacked the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and declared this whole complex of books to be post-Mosaic. He did, however, grant that anything of which the Pentateuch itself said that Moses had written was written by him.

The English Deists were very much interested in the study of the Old Testament. They believed that in the Old Testament they could uncover a natural religious connection of Christianity with the universal phenomena of belief in God and the manner in which this belief is manifested in people's lives.

The Jewish philosopher Spinoza (1632 to 1677), a younger contemporary of Hobbes, also tried to show that Moses could not have been the author of the Pentateuch.

Furthermore, Spinoza set forth certain hermeneutical rules which he considered necessary for a proper understanding of Scripture. Spinoza is considered the first to work out the principles of a historical-critical hermeneutics. He insisted that nature can be properly explained only when a natural history has been written on the basis of which the definition of objects of nature becomes possible. Similarly, he holds, Holy Scripture can be conscientiously explained only if previous to the ex-

planation a history of the Biblical literature has been worked out. Only on the basis of sure facts and principles can the meaning of the Biblical authors be grasped. In other words, we must know the literary history of the Pentateuch before we can profitably study and hope to understand the Pentateuch. He demanded that in the study of all texts the student must establish who the writer was, on what occasion he wrote, at what time, to whom, and finally in what language he wrote. It is obvious that such study could be conducted only where there was an exact knowledge of the language and, above all things, of the history of the language. For only where there is a history of a language and of its idioms can the history of the literature be known. The *sensus literalis* can therefore not be ascertained except on the basis of a knowledge of the language and the history of the literature.³¹

It would seem self-evident on the basis of such a hermeneutical demand that the Bible will be a closed book to all but the highly learned in language, history, and literature.

Spinoza assumed a certain accommodation of Scripture to vulgar opinion. He wanted to separate the divine doctrine of Scripture and the vulgar opinion to which the Scripture must accommodate itself. From here it was not far to the extremes that were to show themselves in the vulgar rationalism that was soon to prevail and to the position of Reimarus in the so-called *Wolfenbüttler Fragmente*, in which not only the disciples of our Lord but our Lord Himself were considered conscious cheats and deceivers.

³¹ Ibid., p. 57.

*The Immediate Theological Forerunners
of Johann Salomo Semler*

While these things were taking place in the philosophical world, the so-called *Aufklärung* was proceeding on all sides. Natural science, particularly in the area of astronomy, had been making steady strides since the time of Copernicus, a contemporary of the Reformers. The theologians were by no means unaware of these developments or unaffected by them. A new *Weltbild*, a new understanding of nature and of the universe, was knocking powerfully at the doors of the theological world. Sigismund Jacob Baumgarten (1706—57, professor at Halle) introduced current philosophical methods into theology while seeking at the same time to maintain an orthodox Lutheran dogmatical stance. He became the teacher of Semler, who was but 19 years his junior. Semler, who published many of Baumgarten's works and in part furnished them with introductions running as high as 160 pages, praised the theological method of Baumgarten. He saw in Baumgarten a theology which had begun to depart from the rigid formulas of the later Lutheran Orthodox dogmaticians.

Another theologian who tried to hold the positions of Orthodoxy yet felt deeply obligated to the so-called Enlightenment was Johann David Michaelis (1717—91). Michaelis, like others before him, concerned himself with the question of the authorship of the Pentateuch. He says that Moses is the author but assumes that Moses used sources that were in existence before his time. Others, including Luther, had made this assumption before Michaelis.

It is evident that forces were stirring on numerous fronts before Semler that augured the literary and historical criticism

of Scripture. However, it remained for Johann Salomo Semler to bring these critical theories in their full force and development into the theology of the church.

In the above we have given only the briefest overview of the forerunners of Semler. Many other men contributed through philological study of Hebrew and the cognate languages, through the writing of hermeneutical treatises, through the development of a science of isagogics, through the study of history and literature. We turn now to a study of the role played by Semler.

Kraus states that Michaelis had sought to patch the bursting ring of the dogma of inspiration, but Semler destroyed it completely as he sought for new foundations for a valid Protestant Biblical theology.³²

IV

JOHANN SALOMO SEMLER: THE INTRODUCTION OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

Johann Salomo Semler (1725—91) is acknowledged as the father of the modern historical and literary criticism of the Bible. He was raised in pietistic surroundings but drifted more and more into rationalism, although he despised the vulgar rationalists and according to his own testimony at least desired to hold on to the fundamental Christian doctrines.

While Semler had, as we have seen, forerunners in the matter of the historical and literary criticism of Scripture, he is generally acknowledged as the man who helped these theories to triumph in the Protestantism of his age. Semler appears

³² Ibid., p. 83.

to have been a highly gifted man with a great capacity for work. We quote from Hornig:

In line with his many and varied gifts Semler worked extensively in all areas of theology. As a newly elected professor in Halle he lectured during his first year on hermeneutics and church history. A few years later (winter 1758—59) he also lectured on dogmatics, ethics, polemics, and the history of the Reformation. As the bibliography prepared by J. G. Eichhorn shows, Semler published learned treatises also in the area of archaeology, numismatics, textual criticism, hermeneutics, exegesis, patristics, church history, history of dogma, and dogmatics. Witness to his special interest in the theology and history of the Reformation is the publication by Semler of thorough studies in primary sources and of manuscripts and documents which had not before been published.

After the death of his teacher and friend Baumgarten, Semler published this man's voluminous writings. Furthermore the German theology of that time owes to the initiative of Semler the exact knowledge of important works of English, French, and Dutch authors. Semler either caused the translation of these works or, in case other learned men sent him translations, he provided these with introductions and often with very detailed commentaries. Semler wielded great influence through his four-volume *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon* (1771 to 1775). This belongs to the most important theological works produced during the 18th century. In this work Semler brought the evidence for the gradual growth of the canon and at the same time proved the legalistic and formalistic understanding of the canon that prevailed in Orthodoxy as untenable.³³

Schmittner judges that in this work the old Protestant doctrine concerning Holy Scripture is overcome.³⁴

Students of Semler agree that one of his most important contributions to theological learning lies in the area of hermeneutical method. In this he turned against both Orthodoxy and Pietism. It is on account of these labors in the area of canon and of hermeneutics that he is considered the father of the historical-critical method.

What was Semler's concern? According to Schmittner we find Semler fighting a war on two fronts: on the one hand against Orthodoxy, which he accuses of fostering a legalistic doctrinal system which discourages a man from thinking and all but forbids him to examine the Bible critically, and on the other hand against the vulgar rationalism which he saw as a destroyer of the Christian faith. We quote from Schmittner:

On the one hand it is necessary to give to the Christian religion an unshakable territory which is capable of withstanding all attacks of philosophical, historical, and scientific criticism; on the other to safeguard to the individual who has become of age the right to make decisions according to his conscience without any compulsion stemming from dogmatics. He calls upon theology to speak understandably, *ad hominem*, "according as men can receive it"; that is, theology is to enter into their epistemological problems and not be content with a blind submission to the authority of received doctrine. When opinions occur which depart from the received doctrine, they are not to be condemned a priori, but they are to be heard and discussed in open dialog, in intellectual honesty, "in honest use . . . of

³³ Hornig, p. 11.

³⁴ Schmittner, p. 23.

reason," for God desires no *sacrificium intellectus* but a "free, moral, proper acceptance" of the truth. He is concerned about the right grounds of the Christian doctrine as opposed to the scruples of "thinking Christians" that arise from their reason and to the elite followers of rationalism, but on the other hand also as opposed to the need for security of Orthodoxy which Semler considered questionable.³⁵

It will be well in the following to keep in mind these two sides of Semler's concern. Hornig presents this concern as follows:

Semler looks upon Holy Scripture as "the ground of true Christianity"; he wishes to further the right use of Scripture and is certain that no one can justly accuse him of "looking to other fountains of knowledge beside Holy Scripture." Semler, like Luther before him, does not, in stressing the Scriptural principle, desire to encourage a legalistic Biblicism. Semler rejects the idea of a formal Scriptural principle which considers all Biblical statements in principle of the same value. In constructing theology he wants to take his point of departure from exegesis and hermeneutics. If the results of exegesis get into conflict with previously accepted exegetical and dogmatical formulations, then the traditional understandings are not to be held, but the results of a scientifically grounded exegesis are to be followed.³⁶

In seeking the meaning of Scripture Semler stresses the importance of the historical sense:

Everything depends on the "true historical understanding of Holy Scripture. I desired always first of all to seek the first

historical or hermeneutical or true sense. . . . Everywhere I found too little . . . historical sense, always the theological perversions."³⁷

Semler's Hermeneutics

Semler criticized the exegetical efforts of both Orthodoxy and Pietism. He found Orthodoxy struggling under a dogmatically bound exegesis, and Pietism suffering from mystical, allegorical interpretation. He believed that both of these were arbitrary and failed to find the sense intended by the Biblical writers. Against the method of both Orthodoxy and Pietism Semler praised the exegetical principles of Luther. He declared that Luther had the most correct hermeneutical principle so far as the sense of Scripture is concerned. As Luther had done before him, so also Semler condemned allegorizing the text and instructed his students to search for the meaning of the words. This does not mean, however, that Semler's hermeneutics is simply that of Luther and the Reformers. A careful examination of Semler's hermeneutics will reveal that it departs in important respects from Luther's hermeneutics.

Semler saw the task of hermeneutics as a double one. First of all, the exegete had to get at the intended sense of a passage in its historical setting. Second, he had to translate it for his hearers into concepts and language suited to their understanding. Schmittner quotes Semler on these points as follows:

Hermeneutical skill depends on sure and exact knowledge of the Biblical way of speaking and also on an exact grasp of the historical circumstances of a Biblical speech. Then one must be able to speak

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 6 f.

³⁶ Hornig, p. 151.

³⁷ Schmittner, pp. 28 f.

concerning these things now in such a way as the altered time and other circumstances of men around us demand, or one must make his explanation in such a way that they can understand it. All of hermeneutics can be subsumed under these two points.³⁸

In the following quotation we attempt to show what all, according to Semler's understanding, belongs to theological hermeneutics.

Theological hermeneutics according to Semler must pay attention to the universal rules of scientific interpretation of texts, but it must also take into consideration those factors which arise out of the special nature of the biblical texts and of their contents. Semler figures as belonging in the realm of hermeneutics not only grammar, rhetoric and logic, but also the history of the transmission of the text, the translations, textual criticism, and exegesis.

The cardinal rule of any scientific interpretation of the text must, according to Semler, be the endeavor to be guided strictly by the words of the text and to carry nothing of one's own thoughts into the text. . . . "The Holy writers," so Semler declares, "must alone be the lords and masters to tell us what they really meant." Semler is in sympathy with the traditional grammatical interpretation of the text but comes to the conclusion that this alone does not yet offer a guarantee that the text is being explained and understood according to its original intended sense. The epoch-making importance of Semler for the history of hermeneutics and exegesis lies in the (for his time) new demand for a *historical* interpretation of the text.³⁹

What this means for hermeneutics and exegesis may be made clear by the following paragraph from Hornig:

Only when one seeks to understand the Biblical texts without introducing extraneous thoughts as accounts of definite historical happenings wholly in the light of their own time does one, according to Semler, realize completely how far these texts are removed from us in time, and only so does one become capable of appropriate exegesis. He does not deny that the Biblical texts and the Word of God contained in them concern us also and are to be proclaimed to us. But what a given Bible text has to say to us today is, according to Semler, a question which can be answered only when one has established the original historical sense of this text. Only in this manner can we, in view of the changed historical situation, reach a correspondence in content between the past and the present proclamation of the Word of God. According to Semler the historical exegesis does not yet solve the problem of the actual proclamation, which must be directed to man today and speak to him in his specific situation. It does, however, constitute a necessary condition for a proper fulfillment of this task.⁴⁰

The historical understanding of Scripture which Semler demands brings the exegete squarely up against the question of the canon.

According to orthodox doctrine the canon is a divinely, verbally inspired and unchangeable collection of writings which equally obligates Christians in all its parts.⁴¹

Semler is convinced that anyone who would arrive at a true understanding of the

³⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁹ Hornig, p. 79 (Hornig's italics).

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 60.

canon must not orient himself by means of the orthodox doctrine but must examine the history of the origin of the canon. There one will arrive at the conclusion that the beginning of collecting the New Testament writings was made during the second century, that the lists of books which constituted the canon varied greatly in different churches, and that the fixing of the canon in the form we know today was the result of a process which lasted for some centuries, was carried on between rivaling traditions, and was accomplished by means of ecclesiastical compromises.⁴²

Semler is convinced that all theological questions which concern historical matters—and to these belong the inscripturation of oral tradition, the origin and delimitation of the canon, questions of genuineness and authorship—cannot be answered by means of dogmatical assertions but can be answered with some degree of dependability only through historical investigations. From this premise Semler raises the accusation against the Orthodox doctrine of Scripture that it lacks a foundation that rests on historical investigations. Semler believed that this understanding of the origin of the canon would shake to its foundations the doctrine of verbal inspiration as held by Orthodoxy.

Also, textual criticism played a most important part in Semler's hermeneutics and exegesis. If we may trust the criticisms leveled against some of the representatives of Orthodoxy by their detractors, some of the Orthodox theologians must have offered a good bit of resistance to textual criticisms in the beginning. In the following we quote from Schmittner, who

himself is for the most part quoting Semler:

"That the special practice and skill which is called criticism should under no circumstances be applied to Scripture . . . I have never been willing to be forced onto me, because now for a long time I have ascribed divinity and importance to the truths, to their efficacious . . . content, but considered the copying and the printing of the Bible to be the same human labor as when copyists and printers went to work on Plato or Horatius. A special divine rule and supervision of God in connection with the work of copying only he can maintain who believes that his dreams are reality." Semler distinguishes between divine content and human transmission. In this way Holy Scripture gains historical plasticity and fullness. To gain its content in its original form it is necessary to examine the process of transmission critically without respect for the taboos prescribed by the reigning understanding of Scripture. So Semler conceives "the idea . . . little by little to gather freer conceptions . . . concerning the history of the Bible as a book." He says that the historian will find it questionable whether the Biblical text "came to us so directly and unaltered that it is still quite genuine." Feeling the need for a dependable critically opened text with the best possible reading he defends the right of philological analysis against the suspicion of Orthodoxy, which flowed from the concern for the integrity of Scripture, and against the disinterest of Pietism, which grew from the aversion of Pietism against scientific meticulousness and abstraction. Realizing that he was entering a very wide field which had for the most part not been worked, Semler gives himself to the task of examining the Biblical texts according to principles developed in connection with secular

⁴² Ibid.

literature. He was convinced that it was legitimate to use textual criticism with Bible texts as well as with secular writers. In this way . . . he rent the veil between *hermeneutica sacra* and *hermeneutica profana*.⁴³

Along with other criticisms of Orthodoxy Semler criticized the strict separation of theology from philosophy which the dogmatists had at least in theory advocated. He held that not only the rules of logic but also the best contemporary historical, philological, and text-critical methods must be applied, as in all scientific disciplines, so also in theology.⁴⁴

On one point in particular Semler departs radically from the hermeneutics of Lutheran Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy recognized the Lutheran Confessions as one norm for the interpretation of Scripture. The demand was that Scripture should be interpreted in harmony with the analogy of faith. This was sometimes understood as the sum total of the clear *sedes doctrinae*, at other times as the confessional doctrinal statements of the church. These two understandings are not as far apart as they might seem to be on the surface, because the doctrinal statements were understood to be based on the clear passages of Scripture. Any careful student of the Lutheran Confessions soon realizes that the Confessions understand themselves as exposition of Scripture.⁴⁵

Because the Lutheran Confessions are believed by that body to be faithful ex-

positions of Biblical teaching, the church has expected its pastors and theologians to refrain from interpreting Scripture contrary to the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore in a sense the Confessions were viewed as a norm for interpretation, one of the hermeneutical principles according to which Scripture is to be understood. On this point Hornig writes:

Already in his early writings during the years 1757—60 Semler called for the realization of a theology that proceeds from hermeneutics and exegesis. Neither the Confessions of the church nor the received dogmatical systems can, according to Semler, claim the rank of a norm of interpretation, because this would place them above Scripture itself.⁴⁶

Semler repeatedly appeals to Luther in matters hermeneutical and exegetical. We therefore ask wherein Semler's hermeneutics differs from Luther's. On this subject we find the following significant statements in Hornig:

It is true there are in Luther noticeable tendencies in the direction of historical criticism, but these occur only sporadically and are not carried through methodically. Decisive for Luther's inner relationship to Holy Scripture is the experience that in it we are met by the living Word of God. This inner boundness to Scripture causes the text-critical considerations and questions one meets occasionally in Luther to recede into the background. For this reason one cannot really call Luther a representative of a historical-critical study of Scripture.

The differences which are apparent here may be seen also in the interpretation of Scripture which is focused on the meaning of the words. While Semler desires

⁴³ Schmittner, p. 21.

⁴⁴ Hornig, p. 131.

⁴⁵ See Edmund Schlink, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* 3d ed. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1948), pp. 6—11, 35, 38, 55—66, 418, 420.

⁴⁶ Hornig, pp. 78 f.

to hold fast the Christocentric understanding of Scripture, he differs from Luther in this, that he will not place the Christ principle ahead of the exegesis of any particular point or passage. And it is specifically the exegetical demand to find the *sensus literalis historicus* which forbids the use of a Christological or Christocentric method of interpretation. Referring a passage to Christ, according to Semler's historical-critical principles, is possible only where it rests directly on the wording of the text and can consequently also be verified by means of the text. In the interpretation of Scripture the *sensus literalis* is for Semler the historical sense, for Luther on the other hand the sense which refers it to Christ.

Hornig adds significantly:

This difference in method, which Semler did not discuss particularly, had to become apparent particularly in the interpretation of the Old Testament and can be documented there most clearly.⁴⁷

Semler's Theory of Accommodation

We come now to a discussion of one of the very important elements of Semler's hermeneutics, his particular theory of accommodation. This subject furnishes the material for Hornig's last chapter in his book on the historical-critical theology. It covers in all 25 pages.

The question of course goes far beyond Semler, and many theologians and philosophers had dealt with the subject before Semler. Hornig states the question as follows:

The dispute revolved around the question whether and in how far it can be maintained that Jesus and the apostles in their proclamation accommodated themselves to

the religious ideas and the general understanding of the universe (*Weltbild*) of their hearers. Closely connected with this was the other question, how such temporally conditioned elements of the New Testament message are to be judged from the standpoint of modern science. The manner in which these questions were answered had considerable consequences not only for systematic theology but also for the immediate practical proclamation. For the demand was made that the ideas which were recognized as temporally conditioned and erroneous should not be considered when the essence of Christianity is defined and should also be banished from the sermon.⁴⁸

Schmittner states the case as follows:

How does Semler believe that the problem is to be dealt with that the most central statements of the New Testament, the words of Jesus Himself and the testimony of the apostles to Christ, are most intimately bound up with ideas which appear questionable to modern critical thinking, which is bound by the results of the researches of natural and historical science? Does it not represent an essential limiting of Christian truth, a disregard of the authority of Jesus and of the apostles, if one chooses here on the basis of critical examination? We have arrived at the deciding point in the struggle between Orthodoxy and Enlightenment. Everything depends on whether the filtering judgment which wishes to distill that which is usable out of that which is foreign actually is that which "*Christum treibet*."⁴⁹

The theory of accommodation was not formulated by Semler. It belonged to the burning questions which toward the end

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 211.

⁴⁹ Schmittner, p. 40.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 208.

of the 18th century occupied theological discussion. According to Hornig many publications of that time occupied themselves with this theme and took position either for or against.⁵⁰ Researchers in theological literature tell us that the thought that the incarnation of Christ represents a divine accommodation, the thought also that the Biblical writers in their proclamation made use of a certain accommodation, goes back to the time of the Greek church fathers.⁵¹

Even the dogmaticians of Orthodoxy had a certain theory of accommodation during the 17th century. Semler, who knew all this, never claimed to be the author of the theory of accommodation, although some have accused him of being the originator.⁵²

The Orthodox dogmaticians taught a certain theory of accommodation in connection with the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scripture, which they viewed as a direct dictation of the Holy Spirit to the Biblical writers. Hornig says the following on their theory of accommodation:

Every philosophically trained reader of the Hebrew and Greek Bible texts could establish without difficulty that the Biblical writings differ from one another in grammar, style, and manner of expression. The discovery of these differences appeared to be in contradiction to the basic Orthodox teaching that Holy Scripture has only one author and that it is the result of direct dictation of the Holy Spirit. In order to be able to continue to hold fast the verbal inspiration of Scripture without being compelled to deny the

human and historical element of the most widely differing linguistic usage, the dogmaticians held a theory of accommodation according to which they maintained that the Holy Spirit in the dictation accommodated Himself to the style and the language of the various Biblical writers.⁵³

In a footnote Hornig quotes Quenstedt on this subject, whose Latin we translate freely as follows:

There is a great diversity among the holy writers so far as style and manner of speaking are concerned, which seems to come from this: because the Holy Spirit accommodated Himself to the ordinary mode of speaking, leaving to each one his style of speech; it must not for this reason be denied that the Holy Spirit inspired to them individually the very words.⁵⁴

The debate about the theory of accommodation was in full swing during the time of Baumgarten, the teacher of Semler. What it was all about, or what it was in part about, may be made clear by the following quotation from Hornig:

As an example of such expressions where we assume that an accommodation of the Biblical writers to traditional ideas and to the limited power of comprehension of the common people Baumgarten quotes the so-called "optical expressions . . ." used in Holy Scripture, concerning the fixity of the earth and the rising and setting of the sun. Since these expressions in Scripture are not a correct description of what actually happens in nature, the question arises how these words of Scripture are to be understood and to be interpreted.

⁵⁰ Hornig, p. 211.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 213.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 214.

⁵⁴ Ibid., quotation from J. A. Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica sive Systema Theologicum*, I (Leipzig, 1702, 76b).

In answering this question Baumgarten gives three possible positions. The opponents of the theory of accommodation understand these optical expressions in a literal sense and consider them true as such. They proceed from the assumption that the words of Scripture are always an adequate description of what actually takes place, therefore also of the workings of nature (*Naturvorgänge*). Therefore they assume that these sayings of Scripture are to be considered the "basis for natural science" and demand that natural science be derived from Holy Scripture. The hypothesis that Jesus Christ and the apostles had accommodated themselves to contemporary understandings of nature — which are recognized as erroneous by modern research — is met by these theologians with the following arguments: (1) The assumption that there could be an accommodation in Holy Scripture "denies the truth of Holy Scripture"; and (2) the theory of accommodation "militates against the divine character of Scripture and the omniscience of God, who is the best natural scientist."⁵⁵

While both philosophers and theologians had dealt with theories of accommodation before Semler, he remains one of the chief representatives of these theories of accommodation.

Semler does not appear to have treated the Biblical view of nature as based on accommodation. Rather he seems to be of the opinion that the Biblical writers shared the understanding and the misunderstanding of nature that prevailed in their time. His theory of accommodation cuts deeper. Hornig tells us:

Accommodation according to Semler is a pedagogical act for the purpose of the

more rapid spread of Christianity. It consists in this, that Jesus and the apostles in a measure accommodated themselves to the specific way of thinking and to the traditional religious conceptions of their hearers. Semler sees an act of accommodation already in the fact that Jesus speaks to the people in parables but in speaking with His disciples dispenses with this mode of speaking and presents His thoughts directly. Yet even in speaking with His disciples Jesus took into consideration that they were not yet able to bear the full truth.⁵⁶

Semler widened the theory of accommodation in explaining what he and others with him consider the explanation of different ways of teaching that occur in the New Testament. On this subject Hornig says:

That the four evangelists in their way of presentation, argumentation, and terminology differ among themselves Semler explains from the missionary intent of the evangelists, who in composing their writings consciously accommodated themselves to the religious and national origin of their readers. Thus the Gospel according to St. Matthew is directed to the representatives of a strict, legalistic Judaism. Therefore it contains many quotations from the Old Testament and intends to convince the reader that in Jesus the promised Messiah has come. Also the Gospel according to St. Luke is destined for Jews and contains a genealogy which is meant to prove the descent of Jesus from the house of David. John on the other hand addresses Greek-speaking Jews in Asia Minor. He dispenses with the genealogy, shortens the historical accounts considerably, and does not attempt to prove his message with quotations from

⁵⁵ Hornig, p. 216.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 222.

the Old Testament. Rather he seeks to make the importance of Jesus Christ for salvation clear by taking the concepts of Logos and Monogenes which were already familiar to the Hellenistic Jews and applies them to Jesus Christ.⁵⁷

How Semler differs in his theory of accommodation from the theologians of Orthodoxy will be clear from the manner in which he treated the account of the creation in Genesis. On this subject Hornig says:

According to Semler's understanding the Christian faith implies belief in creation, that is, the conviction that God has created the world and all things. Therefore, so Semler emphasizes, belief in the creation must under all circumstances be maintained. This does not, however, mean, according to Semler, that the Christian is obligated to recognize the conception of nature and the descriptions of nature in the Old Testament. In accord with his historical-critical understanding of Scripture and on the basis of the conviction that in particular in connection with the Biblical conceptions of nature we are often dealing with temporally conditioned and mythological concepts, Semler declines to look upon all individual statements of the Biblical account of the creation as historically dependable statements.⁵⁸

What this did to the orthodox doctrine of Scripture and to the relation of Scripture to the sciences may be made clear by the following quotation from Hornig:

Since [according to Semler] the orthodox doctrine that everything in Scripture rests on a verbal inspiration from God itself rests on an error, Semler can see no reason why theology should not accept

the results of research in the natural sciences. Semler is convinced that theology must accept the independence of the disciplines of natural science and must surrender the orthodox claim to authority over these disciplines. In sharp contradiction to the orthodox conception Semler formulates as follows: "Whatever is true in philosophy is also true in theology." Against the orthodox argument that by this Holy Scripture was subjected to the judgment of human reason Semler argued with the statement that through our reason, which was given us by God, the very matters are recognized which are the result of God's creative work. Here, even as in the interpretation of Scripture, Semler assumes that the insights of reason are not acts of subjective arbitrariness but the result of strict scientific work.

Semler considers Holy Scripture the human-historical witness of the revelation of God, and reason not as the sum of definite innately known facts but as a function for knowing. Therefore also Semler does not wish to understand Scripture and reason as two magnitudes that might rival each other. Rather he emphasizes that reason is absolutely necessary for the understanding of Scripture and for arrival at Christian conviction. Therefore a conflict between Scripture and reason is simply inescapable when Scripture is understood as a collection of verbally inspired truths which can be used to disprove the results of natural science. Semler considered this kind of use of Scripture a misuse. Therefore he sharply opposes the representatives of a Biblicistic fundamentalism who "on account of the letter of Scripture, and in order to think and to speak Biblically, wished to determine the system of the planets and of natural occurrences according to Biblical expressions contrary to astronomy and physics which we consider incontro-

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 223.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 220.

vertible." Semler recognizes that the orthodox doctrine of Scripture drives the Christian into the dilemma of a double truth or forces him to deny the results of natural science.⁵⁹

Semler's theory of accommodation led him to demythologize the New Testament in certain respects. On this subject Hornig says:

The circumstance that the writers of the New Testament practiced accommodations which can be recognized both in their nature and in their extent by means of historical-critical exegesis, according to Semler justifies inner Biblical criticism as to content. The real proclamation of the Word of God is not to orient itself by means of the concepts that represent accommodations which were demanded at the time when Christianity was introduced on pedagogical grounds, but above all things on the clear principles of New Testament proclamation as they lie before us particularly in John and Paul. The realization of this demand leads Semler to demythologize, that is, to give up mythological concepts which come from a pre-Christian religious tradition and in part were retained by New Testament writers. Semler did not develop a clear definition of the concept of "mythology" or of "myth." When he speaks about oriental and Jewish mythology, this concept serves to designate a primitive pictorial way of thinking and speaking which has its origin in the religious imagination and speaks of supernatural divine things in anthropomorphic language.⁶⁰

We quote the following from Hornig to show that this concept is already very strong in Semler:

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 221 f.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 225.

From this historical-critical attitude there follows Semler's rejection of the mythological and legendary traditions and his demand for demythologization of the New Testament message. Not the circumstance that the myths speak of metaphysical entities demands criticism, according to Semler, but the fact that they personify spiritual realities, that they historicize the ahistorical. Semler sees in mythology the anthropomorphic tendency at work, to describe divine and metaphysical beings in the form of a man, according to human ways of acting and human ways of behaving. Thus mythology is a hypostasizing, an elevating of spiritual experiences and of religious concepts to substance. He wants to reverse this process through demythologizing.

With his demand for demythologizing Semler does not intend a reduction of the saving message of the New Testament.

Rather his demand has an apologetic intent: to defend the uniqueness and the historicity of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ over against contemporary attacks. When the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was denied and declared to be a product of religious fantasy and mythology, the distinction between history and myth appeared necessary. Otherwise it seemed that the whole New Testament message of salvation would be condemned as mythology. Semler is of the opinion that the mythological concepts and pictures are not an integrating part nor the necessary form of expression of the New Testament message but that they can certainly be separated from it.

If we compare the critical understanding of reality of Semler with the so-called Biblical realism of contemporary Württemberg theologians, we see basic differences. While Semler seeks to distinguish in the New Testament between the re-

demption accomplished by Christ and the human-historical concepts of redemption, between the historical facts and mythological pictures, the representatives of Biblical realism reject such distinctions a priori. They consider all Biblical statements to be equally real and in harmony with reality. Clinging to the tradition of the Orthodox understanding of Scripture they consider the Bible as "the trustworthy textbook of history," and on the basis of chronological statements in the Bible they seek to calculate the date when the world began and also the date when it will come to an end. Consciously they hold fast to the idea that the devil is a concrete personal being. Semler's attempt to explain the New Testament statements concerning the devil as an accommodation to mythological Jewish ways of thinking is felt on the basis of Biblical realism to be an unacceptable spiritualizing of Biblical statements.⁶¹

We believe that with this we have sufficiently characterized the theory of accommodation as it was in part taken over by Semler from previous theologians and philosophers and in part developed further by him. In the following we shall attempt to evaluate critically from the standpoint of its effect on Biblical theology the historical-critical method as represented by Semler.

The Effect of Semler's Historical-critical Theory on the Doctrines of the Church

Semler thought of himself as an enemy of the crass rationalism fostered by the contemporary deism and naturalism which came from England and France into Germany.⁶² He wanted to hold fast to and defend the revelation of God in Jesus

Christ. In harmony with the orthodox Lutheran dogmatics Semler distinguished between *revelatio generalis* and *revelatio specialis*. For the *revelatio generalis* he uses the German word *allgemeine Offenbarung*, and the *revelatio specialis* he calls *naehere Offenbarung*.⁶³ Trying to make clear what Semler understood by these terms Schmittner says:

Already natural revelation aimed at the salvation of man, "the ultimate aim of God." It gave to man the possibility of understanding himself as coming from God, that is, as His creature. It is possible to agree with Semler in this and in view of Rom. 1:19 ff.; 2:14 ff.; and John 1:4 to speak of a *Schöpfungsoffenbarung*; but then one must also say: The darkness comprehended it not. In the opinion of Semler, and even earlier of the Wolffian orthodoxy, this darkness is not so very dark but rather a moderate semi-darkness, which grows lighter and lighter as the Enlightenment proceeds, and finally in consistent rationalism it no longer needs a second supernatural source of light. By means of this natural source of light, which Semler does not consider to have been completely obliterated, a large number of "general natural truths," in particular the existence of God and His demands on men, can be known. "Therefore one must cease to denigrate the natural knowledge of God so very much, since it is and remains the first step to revealed knowledge." Men are, "as men, capable when they use their human capacities purposefully . . . to arrive at such a knowledge of God and of His will that it is sufficient to obligate them to a behavior consonant with this will." Semler emphasizes that "God Himself wisely arranged it that men were

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 233 f.

⁶² Ibid., p. 12.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 101; Schmittner, pp. 11—14.

never lacking who saw into these natural truths quite independently of the Scripture." Here one may ask why a revelation in Christ was necessary if man on the basis of his natural powers could know both God's existence and His demands, but Semler does hold to the necessity of a "nearer revelation."⁶⁴

Holy Scripture is, according to Semler, the bearer of the *revelatio specialis*. However, the greater part of the total concept of Scripture consists of truths that are known by nature, which all rational men are able to recognize. Only a small part is concerned with supernatural truths, the eternal counsels of God. Semler says:

It is undeniable that Holy Scripture . . . contains only a very few sentences . . . which . . . specifically concern the possibility of the best union with God and the agreement with all the purposes which He has for us. It is these sentences which really are the subject of the nearer revelation, whereby it is distinguished from that which men know concerning God by natural revelation.⁶⁵

Semler, so his defenders tell us, did not intend to attack the uniqueness of Scripture.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Semler distinguished fundamentally between Holy Scripture and the Word of God. He refused to identify the one with the other. Here Semler and others after him confused what he said with something Luther had said before. Luther had distinguished between the relative importance of various Biblical books. It is well known that among the Gospels he preferred John to the Synoptists. He preferred the Epistle to the Romans to

other New Testament epistles. To suppose that this is one and the same thing as distinguishing in Scripture between that which is the Word of God and that which is not the Word of God is one of the great confusions in modern theology of which already Semler seems to have been guilty.⁶⁷ Beginning with Semler the old orthodox formula *Scriptura Sacra est Verbum Dei* is changed to *Scriptura Sacra continet Verbum Dei*.⁶⁸ On Semler's understanding of the concept "Word of God" Hornig says:

Semler considers the Word of God first of all Christ Himself, for Christ is the incarnate Word of God. That is to say that also Jesus' doctrine must be counted as being Word of God. Jesus Christ as Logos and Monogenes is "the originator of wholesome insights for men" and has "disseminated grace and truth or perfect knowledge of God" among them. Semler does not yet recognize a basic distinction between the doctrine of Jesus and Pauline proclamation, between the Gospel of Jesus and the Gospel concerning Jesus. In harmony with his own concept of revelation Semler is able to call the apostolic message of Christ, of the Christ who was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification, the content of the Christian faith and therefore the one "Word of God" which alone concerns us.⁶⁹

Semler distinguishes between the divine content and the human form of Scripture. He refuses to identify revelation with Scripture itself. On this point Hornig says:

In harmony with the understanding which had been developed in Orthodoxy Sem-

⁶⁴ Schmittner, p. 12.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶⁸ Hornig, p. 84.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

ler understands by revelation the imparting of divine truths to definite historical persons who at the same time received the command to make known these divine truths through oral proclamation or through fixation by means of writing. Since Holy Scripture contains both the witness of the Old Testament revelations and also of the New Testament revelation in Christ, Scripture has a continuing and normative importance for the Christian religion as witness to revelation. However, Semler differs from the Orthodox understanding in this, that he rejects the identification of revelation and Scripture, because this negates the human-historical element. According to Semler, revelation is preserved through the medium of human understanding, restatement (*Wiedergabe*), and tradition but at the same time is veiled in a temporally conditioned garb. Since the communication of the divine truths may be viewed as inspiration of the matter (*Realinspiration*), not, however, as verbal inspiration, Semler considers the Orthodox designation of Scripture as "written revelation" as misleading and not in harmony with the facts.⁷⁰

Kraus is quite critical of Semler with respect to his understanding of revelation. He finds Semler and men of similar stripe as placing themselves into a position where they become the judges of revelation. In this connection we quote Kraus:

Where are the valid norms for such a critical evaluation of what is past? If one follows up this question, one very soon finds that the Biblical witness of revelation is subjected to a general concept of rational religious truths and moral laws. The historical-critical research is begun by a rejection of the Biblical concept of revelation. Without hindrance this evalu-

ating criticism can now proceed: "Since we are not morally improved by all the 24 books of the Old Testament, we cannot convince ourselves of their divine origin." Divine is therefore that which morally improves us, and this in turn is measured with general norms. Semler proceeds even more radically and judges: "The canon of the Old Testament consists of a collection of coarse Jewish prejudices which are positively opposed to Christianity, and only a small part of this canon contains divine and inspired writings for the Jews in which useful and usable truths also for Christians are found." Here the general evaluation of usable eternal truths is combined with a view of the Old Testament which one can only call "gnostic." The New Testament, according to Semler, contains the universal enlightened, eternal religion compared with which the Old Testament seems narrow, national, Jewish, and temporally bound.

Kraus adds, and this we may well note:

We cannot sufficiently emphasize that these judgments seek to dominate the understanding of the Old Testament down to the present. They spring from the spirit of the Enlightenment and from that modern Gnosis which to a large extent has become the real impulse or at least the dominating characteristic of the historical-critical research. . . .⁷¹

We are not surprised that Semler had an idea of what ought to be done with the Old Testament. He writes:

A healthy excerpt from the books of the Old Testament would recommend the Christian doctrine and religion much better and much more convincingly than the cold repetitions of happenings which are totally outlandish, totally foreign and unknown for us and for our taste in

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

⁷¹ Kraus, pp. 99 f.

knowledge and morals and will continue to be so.⁷²

One thing appears certain: Semler's understanding of the nature of Holy Scripture is a far cry from that of Luther and the other Reformers. These approach Holy Scripture with the unshakable conviction that it is the inspired Word of God. One wonders in what sense one can still speak of inspiration where the understanding of Semler reigns. Semler, it appears, not only justly criticized the Orthodox doctrine of Biblical inspiration on those points in which it went beyond Scripture itself but was willing to amend the Biblical text itself where it did not suit his concept of inspiration. On this point Schmittner says:

There are also weak points in Semler's argumentation. For instance, he tries to get around 2 Tim. 3:16, one of the most important *dicta probantia* of the orthodox doctrine of inspiration . . . by means of the highly questionable text-critical elimination of the καί, by which he arrives at his own basic thought (only that Scripture is inspired by God which can demonstrate that it is useful for doctrine).⁷³

Hornig has the following to say concerning Semler and the doctrine of inspiration:

In the dogmatics of high orthodoxy the doctrine of verbal inspiration was not proved by a reference to the late Jewish concepts but was based immediately on exegetical arguments. Semler therefore considers it his task to examine the proof passages that were cited. The classical text for verbal inspiration was above all others 2 Tim. 3:16. Semler does not agree with the interpretation of the orthodox dogma-

ticians of this passage. The expression πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος can, according to Semler's understanding, be applied only to the Old Testament canon but in no way to all the writings in the New Testament canon, which originated much later. The remaining passages which are quoted as completing the Scripture proof for the Orthodox doctrine (2 Peter 1:21; John 14:26) cannot change this. In a further objection Semler calls attention to the fact that Holy Scripture hardly says anything concerning the nature and manner of the process of inspiration. That a certain *Theopneustie* was imparted to prophets and apostles Semler, who himself was willing to assume some kind of subject inspiration, will not deny. To this extent he agrees with the Orthodox doctrine. But the thesis that this divine inspiration was a verbal inspiration and that consequently the words of Holy Scripture are to be looked upon as "divine speech" Semler rejects decidedly. He holds that concerning the concept inspiration no more can be taken from the Biblical statements than this, that there was a communication of knowledge, an influence of God on the soul of certain historical persons. Semler holds that the theologians in their doctrine of inspiration should accept the same limitations which are expressed in the Biblical statements. "We have the principles of Christianity from and according to God's revelation and inspiration to the apostles. The specific nature and manner of this influence on their soul they never considered it necessary to describe."⁷⁴

Students of Semler tell us that Semler's understanding of Scripture destroys the idea of the unity of Scripture. He saw in the Old Testament not a portion of Scripture that points directly to Christ and is

⁷² Ibid., p. 100.

⁷³ Schmittner, p. 27.

⁷⁴ Hornig, pp. 68 f.

fulfilled in the New Testament but a narrow document of Jewish nationalism. Hirsch, summarizing Semler's understanding of the Old Testament, says:

The expected Messiah is a national liberator from the foreign domination and the founder of a Jewish world kingdom which subjugates the heathen. This they call the kingdom of God.⁷⁵

Still paraphrasing Semler, Hirsch says: The Christian religion on the other hand has the spiritual worship which rests wholly upon the conscience which recognizes the divine content of the doctrine and is borne by the element of purity and perfection of life in imitation of God. The promises of the Christian religion comprehend the inner happiness of such a heart and mind, the freedom from the fear of death, and the expectation of completion in the invisible, eternal realm of spirits under God. The blessing of Jesus, finally, as the true Savior of all men consists in this, that He makes us inwardly spiritually new and good men. In one point after the other therefore the Christian religion is different from the Old Testament and Jewish. Its relation to this is no other than its relation to heathenism: It demonstrates itself through its universality and inwardness as another, better religion which in an ethical religious manner becomes for men the way to perfection. For a Christian who has in the doctrine of Jesus found this better religion, only those passages of the Old Testament can become a genuine Word of God in which individual men rising above the confines of Jewish thinking have approached the knowledge of a universal inner religion that aims at the goodness and perfection of men.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Hirsch, p. 62.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 62 f.

Hirsch adds:

This changes for Semler the whole relation of the Christian to the Old Testament. The old view of *Heilsgeschichte*, which was thought to work itself out within Biblical religion, loses the ground under its feet. In its place there comes the picture of a religious history of mankind which follows a universal law, that the beginning and perfection are generally not found together. Only slowly there is prepared in the particularistic pre-Christian religions, Judaism and heathenism equally, the knowledge of a universal and inward religion. What is special about Old Testament and Jewish religion is only this, that by chance it became the historical ground for Him whom God had destined to be the Savior of humanity, that is, the bringer of the perfect religion.⁷⁷

Hirsch judges that the true heir and successor of Semler is Schleiermacher. Of him Hirsch says:

He developed the new theological system which Semler with the vast amount of his preliminary work and the limitations of his own nature did not accomplish.⁷⁸

What kind of theology this is in the matters that most intimately concern our salvation we intend to examine briefly in the following.

Hornig tells us that Semler "tried to hold fast both to the supernatural character of the revelation in Christ and to the historicity of the death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven of Christ."⁷⁹ This should not be understood as though Semler had held to everything in the Apostles' Creed. On this point Schmittner says:

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

⁷⁹ Hornig, p. 126.

After all that has been said heretofore, it does not seem strange that Semler could accept the Apostles' Creed only in a decidedly reduced form. . . .

He quotes Semler as follows:

One cannot exactly say that all articles of the Symbol are necessary to know and to believe for salvation.⁸⁰

But a few fundamental propositions, so Semler insists, must be held fast since in them the efficacious Word of God, experienced in all its importance, is expressed in a manner we must accept. He quotes Semler further as follows:

It is certain that all Christians, no matter how they may differ otherwise in their concepts . . . nevertheless agree in a few articles or principles. . . . This only foundation of the Christian religion . . . includes such doctrinal truths as were there from the very beginning and are really contained in the primary sources of the Christian religion, whose acceptance and application brings forth a better inner frame of mind than took place in Judaism and heathenism, which therefore are affirmed by all Christians and are expressively confessed at baptism, namely:

(1) a better living knowledge of a God who is the most proper father of all men, (2) a sure conviction that Jesus taught the best and most fruitful knowledge of God, his true spiritual worship, and also the most perfect duties in divine authority . . . (3) that God through the Holy Spirit further imparted to the apostles this true knowledge through the Holy Spirit . . . after the death of Jesus, through whose doctrine all Christians receive their measure of the Holy Spirit, so that in a Christian life they constantly show their better frame of mind. Who-

ever . . . is . . . a Christian must . . . as it were, be a new creature and must through his moral condition and behavior show himself to be a disciple of Christ.⁸¹

Semler appears to have held that all doctrinal articles of the Lutheran Confessions were without exception derived from Holy Scripture and grounded in the same.⁸² The difficulty one finds with this statement is that Semler seems to have had a different idea of what constitutes a doctrinal article in the Confessions from what the confessors themselves believed. This is certainly indicated by the fact that he spoke for a *quatenus* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.⁸³

We quote from Schmittner to show how Semler understood soteriology:

The majority of statements by Semler in the matter of soteriology seem to indicate that he cannot accept the thought of a reconciliation of man with God by means of the death of Christ in the sense of an expiatory sacrifice or a vicarious obedience, since he could in such a happening see only an external, mechanical, natural, magical, event, valid through the mere fact that it happened, independently of human knowledge concerning it. Such a radical *extra hominem* would be for him without any reference to moral and spiritual consciousness; it could in no way be accommodated as significant in a self-understanding which stresses the importance of personal encounter and a decision in one's own conscience.⁸⁴

As he appears to have departed from the

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 56 f.

⁸² Hornig, p. 153.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Schmittner, p. 53.

⁸⁰ Schmittner, p. 56.

Biblical doctrine of the atonement, so he also definitely departs from the doctrine of original sin as taught in the Lutheran Church. Referring to Semler's understanding of soteriology Schmittner says:

This understanding shapes Semler's presentation of the doctrine of sin and grace. He rejects the doctrine of original sin (especially that of the late anti-Pelagian Augustine) in the same way as he rejects the view of Flacius and of gnesio-Lutherans concerning the asynergistic-passive, yes, resisting disposition of man in the appropriation of grace.⁸⁵

For the same reason Semler is very critical of Luther's *De servo arbitrio*, and he speaks well of Erasmus.⁸⁶

If all this adds up to the fact that Semler had an un-Lutheran understanding of human nature, we must grant this. We must not, however, conclude that he shared the optimistic understanding of human nature that was prevalent in rationalism. Hornig says:

According to Semler, it is not the moral fearfulness of pietism but the consciousness of sin which is the mark of the Christian life. This understanding is so important because . . . it departs from the optimistic understanding of man that prevailed in the Enlightenment. Semler does not share in the prevalent confidence in the goodness of human nature. Rather he insists against the naturalists that they misunderstand the Christian consciousness of sin when they believe that they must fight against this with rational arguments.⁸⁷

According to Hornig, Semler wanted to hold fast to the doctrine of justification as

taught by the Reformers and also to the distinction between Law and Gospel.

We have noted previously that Semler does not seem to have had a Biblical understanding of the work of Christ. This is borne out by Hornig:

Since Semler defends the New Testament thoughts of reconciliation and redemption and of the sacrifice and vicarious satisfaction of Jesus Christ against the rationalistic criticism of the radical theology of the Enlightenment, we may be surprised to find that he is sometimes rather indifferent toward the differences in the understanding of these concepts. An explanation of this attitude may be found in the fact that, according to Semler, the statements of the New Testament are not a strict, closed, doctrinal unity but also with respect to soteriology admit varying understandings and interpretations. Semler is of the opinion that the redemption wrought through Jesus Christ must be understood in a spiritual sense as a redemption from the power of the devil. It is, however, typical that Semler does not claim that his interpretation is the only interpretation but will also let the interpretation which he himself rejects stand as a Christian understanding.⁸⁸

One is not surprised therefore that Semler sometimes speaks very much like a Lutheran in matters of soteriology and at other times in ways which appear to a Lutheran to be a denial of the Biblical and Lutheran doctrine of the redemption in Christ Jesus.

While Semler at times seems to want to hold fast to the Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel, Hirsch, who cannot be accused of being particularly Lutheran or orthodox, accuses him of knocking a hole into the old evangelical,

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

⁸⁶ Hornig, p. 133.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 105.

dogmatical doctrine of Law and Gospel through his denial of the active obedience of Christ. Because Luther had taught that not everything in the law of Moses concerns Christians but only that which is in harmony with the natural law, Hirsch says:

[Semler] immediately draws this conclusion from the insight of Luther: The theologumenon, as though Jesus Christ had freed us from the Law of Moses by His obedience, is to be given up. It is an inadmissible generalization, which is true only for Jews who are converted to Christianity.

Semler judges that by this a hole has been made in the old evangelical dogmatical doctrine of Law and Gospel.⁸⁹

Here we must return to Semler's doctrine of Scripture. We have seen that he distinguished between Scripture and the Word of God. When he was asked what is the Word of God in Scripture, Semler answered: "Law and Gospel is the Word of God." With his doctrine of accommodation this permitted him to reject many things in Scripture as not being the Word of God.

How Semler used the distinction between Law and Gospel we may learn from the following statement in Hornig:

Semler stresses the distinction between Law and Gospel more strongly than do the later Orthodox dogmaticians. He interprets the Gospel as the total conquest and abolition of the Law. Through the work of redemption of Jesus Christ, through His death on the cross and His resurrection, we have been redeemed from the dominion and the curse of the law. With this statement, as Semler understands it, the New Testament proclamation of freedom from the Law has not yet been described in all its implications. For Jesus

Christ has redeemed us not only from the curse and the dominion of the Law but also from its precepts and demands. Semler sees this latter understanding threatened by the traditional division of the Law into three kinds of laws: moral laws, civil laws, and ceremonial laws. He says that this division is not Scriptural. When it is maintained that Jesus Christ has redeemed us only from the "Levitical and ceremonial law," this must be viewed as an inadmissible limiting of Paul's statement. For Paul teaches an unlimited freedom from the Law which Jesus has accomplished through His death on the cross.⁹⁰

It is evident that Semler here occupies the position of the so-called antinomians. This is freely recognized by Hornig. Hornig tells us that it was Semler's opinion that Luther and Melancthon had originally proclaimed total freedom from the Law but that in the antinomian controversies they had been misled and had in part given up their position. Semler's antinomianism is characterized by Hornig as follows:

In the life of Christians the deciding thing, according to Semler, is that the thinking of the Christians agrees with the spirit of Christ. The good works of the new obedience are distinguished from the works demanded in the Law not so much with respect to their content as with respect to their motive. Christian discipleship, according to Semler, consists in taking on the mind of Christ. But if the life of Christians is lived with this mind, then the Christian no longer needs the instruction of an ethics based in Law (*einer gesetzlichen Ethik*).⁹¹

Hornig recognizes that with this posi-

⁸⁹ Hirsch, p. 64.

⁹⁰ Hornig, pp. 95 f.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 142.

tion Semler accepted the position of Johann Agricola in opposition to Luther.⁹²

Semler did not consider Agricola in principle an antinomian but merely an opponent of the opinion that the Law of Moses had any kind of abiding power over a Christian.⁹³

We are therefore not surprised that Semler criticized the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions concerning the third use of the Law. He called this teaching *eine sehr entbehrliche Lebrart*.

In this rather long section on the influence of Semler's historical-critical method on his understanding of Christian doctrine we must devote some attention to his understanding of eschatology, which we will recognize as the understanding of this subject that is found in much modern theology. Semler considered the Biblical statements concerning the end of the world as a

conscious accommodation of the apostles to the traditional concepts of late Jewish Apocalyptic; he relativizes them as such and separates them from the real content of New Testament proclamation.⁹⁴

Hornig returns to the subject of Semler's understanding of eschatology toward the end of his book. He asks whether, while rejecting what he considered a mythological garb in the Biblical teachings of eschatology, Semler retained any belief in an eschatology that figures with a future end of the world. He finds that this is not so and says:

It is evident that Semler totally abandoned the futuristic eschatology which looks to the end of the world and of history.⁹⁵

Schmittner sees Semler advancing step by step toward a creedless Christianity. He says:

While Semler's earlier work still sees dogma as being essentially related to the Gospel, it appears in his later works almost only under a pragmatistic-sociological aspect, as an external agreement which is to facilitate the social coexistence of Christians and the instruction and divine worship but does not really belong to the essence of Christianity. Semler does not recognize the confessional character of dogma, the confession of faith contained in it, the necessary "intolerance of revelation itself," from which alone dogma dare receive its authority.⁹⁶

From all this it is evident that while Semler thought of himself as the foe of rationalism, who would defend Christian truth against the attacks of the vulgar rationalists, he himself gave up one article of faith after the other and himself played into the hands of the rationalists. Above all things Semler denied the divine inspiration of Scripture as a whole and brought in a concept of inspiration that differs not only from the exaggerated concept of Orthodoxy but also from the claims of Holy Scripture itself.

Our church is today faced with the historical and literary criticism whose proponent Semler was in his day. As our church faces this criticism it must ask itself in all earnestness what will happen if we accept and use this theory as it has come to us historically, not only to our concept of the Scripture itself, but to all Christian doctrine, to the articles of faith to which we subscribe in the Lutheran Confessions, and to the ecumenical creeds themselves.

Springfield, Ill.

⁹² Ibid., p. 143.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 144.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 231.

⁹⁶ Schmittner, pp. 64 f.

Lutheran Hermeneutics and Hermeneutics Today

JOHN WARWICK MONTGOMERY

“Le problème de l’herméneutique est, depuis plusieurs années, à côté de celui du ‘Jésus historique,’ le problème le plus souvent traité au sein de la théologie protestante.” So wrote Jesuit theologian René Marlé as he observed the Protestant scene in 1963.¹ The last two years have marked an even greater intensification of interest in the hermeneutic question, as is well evidenced by the appearance this year of an American counterpart to Gerhard Ebeling’s *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, the first volume of which is titled *The Bultmann School of Biblical Interpretation: New Directions?*² The latest issue of *Dialog* is appropriately devoted to “Biblical Interpretation,” and there we find Samuel Laeuchli of the Garrett Theological Seminary noting the crucial nature of the present hermeneutic quest: “After even a superficial study of the questions involved, one comes rather soon to one’s senses, realizing that in this pertinent debate a great deal is at stake—the meaning of scriptural language, the possibility

of a theological discipline, and above all, the task of preaching and teaching in the church and to the world.”³

Laeuchli is not exaggerating: the very possibility of the theological enterprise and the continuance of evangelical proclamation depend squarely upon the church’s response to current hermeneutic issues. Because hermeneutics is no longer seen as an isolated and rather prosaic subbranch of exegetical theology but as the focal point of all the theological disciplines—as the key to the overall relation of Word and faith,⁴ the church that takes a misstep here may well find itself fatally committed to heresy or to irrelevance. Thus it behooves us in all seriousness to examine the approaches to the hermeneutic task being advocated today and to compare them with Scripture and with the hermeneutical heritage of the Reformation.

The present essay endeavors to provide such a comparison, with special reference

¹ René Marlé, *Le Problème théologique de l’herméneutique: Les grands axes de la recherche contemporaine* (Paris: Editions de l’Orante, 1963), p. 7.

² James M. Robinson, et al., *The Bultmann School of Biblical Interpretation: New Directions?* Vol. I of *Journal for Theology and the Church* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

³ Samuel Laeuchli, “Issues in the Quest of a Hermeneutic,” *Dialog*, IV (Autumn 1965), 250.

⁴ See especially Gerhard Ebeling’s programmatic essay, “The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism,” which appeared in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, XLVII (1950), 11 ff., when the journal was reestablished under Ebeling’s editorship; the same essay may be consulted in Ebeling’s *Wort und Glaube* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), pp. 12 ff., and in its English translation, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 27 ff.

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to the Lutheran hermeneutic. It is this essayist's conviction that far too little of present hermeneutic discussion takes into account the church's past wrestlings with interpretive problems. How readily we forget Bernard of Chartres' sage words: "Nous sommes comme des nains assis sur les épaules de géants. Nous voyons donc plus de choses que les Anciens, et de plus lointaines, mais ce n'est ni par l'acuité de notre vue, ni par la hauteur de notre taille, c'est seulement qu'ils nous portent et nous haussent de leur hauteur gigantesque."⁵ The insights of the Reformation, above all, must not be neglected in our contemporary hermeneutic quest, for that epoch wrestled most tenaciously and heroically with the core problems of Biblical interpretation and application.

Our first task will be to obtain a clear picture of the mid-20th-century hermeneutic stance in Protestantism. Next we shall observe the manner in which the contemporary hermeneutic movement understands Luther's approach to Scripture; and this in turn will lead to a reexamination of the Lutheran hermeneutic. Finally we shall take a hard doctrinal and epistemological look at the current hermeneutic orientation and pose the unavoidable question of confessional limits as regards the employment of interpretive methodology.

THE LEITMOTIV OF CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTICS

Is it possible to arrive at any single characterization of Protestant hermeneutics today? The bewildering variety of theo-

logical approaches both in Europe and in America would seem to militate against any unified hermeneutic theme. Bultmann's successor at Marburg, Werner Georg Kümmel, sees no less than five distinct orientations in European New Testament scholarship, not counting "orthodox" Barthians and Bultmannians:⁶ (1) conservatives (e.g., Karl Heinrich Rengstorff of Münster), (2) *Heilsgeschichte* scholars (e.g., Kümmel himself), (3) the post-Bultmannian group (including Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling, Hans Conzelmann, Ernst Käsemann, and Günther Bornkamm, as well as the more individualistic Heinrich Ott), (4) the Pannenberg school, led by the young Mainz theologian Wolfhard Pannenberg, and (5) independents, whose views defy group categorization (e.g., Ethelbert Stauffer, Helmut Thielicke, and Oscar Cullmann). And if these several groupings were not sufficiently intimidating, we can remind ourselves that they leave out contemporary American theological thought entirely! Yet I do believe that a single hermeneutic orientation can be traced in current theology. To find it we must set forth the hermeneutic thrust of individual European and American theologians and then observe the common thread binding them together. Our survey, though necessarily cursory, will endeavor to render faithfully the hermeneutic perspective of the views discussed; references to primary and secondary literature will offer avenues for further study to those wishing it.

⁵ Quoted in Etienne Gilson, *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, 2d ed. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1944), p. 402.

⁶ Kümmel presented this typology in discussion with Carl F. H. Henry; see the latter's "European Theology Today," *Faith and Thought: Journal of the Victoria Institute*, XCIV (Spring 1965), 9-91, especially p. 12.

Rudolf Bultmann

We begin with Rudolf Bultmann, whose preoccupation with hermeneutics has probably been the single most important factor in bringing about the overwhelming current interest in the subject. Bultmann sets forth his hermeneutical position most clearly in his essay, "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?"⁷ His answer: Though exegesis must not presuppose its results, it can never dispense with the method of historical-critical research (including the nonmiraculous view of the universe that sees "the whole historical process as a closed unity") or with an existential "life relation" between Scriptural text and the interpreter himself; thus all Biblical interpretation involves a necessary circularity (the so-called "hermeneutical circle" embracing text and exegete), and no exegesis can properly be regarded as "objective."⁸

The validity of Bultmann's hermeneutics depends on whether or not he is right when he says that to speak of God is simultaneously to speak of oneself. That is, hermeneutics — when its object is to understand the meaning of Christian faith in the Bible — deals with history, and

one cannot interpret history validly from some distant, disengaged vantage point. . . . We can now see in what terms Bultmann is willing to speak of the Bible as authoritative: the Bible is authoritative only in so far as it communicates the claim (*Anspruch*) of God on me and thus leads me to radical obedience in faith. It is authoritative in so far as it calls into question my previous self-understanding and leads me to a new self-understanding — from seeing myself as one who must and perhaps can make his own way to seeing myself as a sinner before God who by God's now occurring act of grace has been given new life with an openness to the future.⁹

Karl Barth

Barth roundly condemns Bultmann's claim that before interpreting Scripture one has to "put on the armor" of Heidegger's existential philosophy. Implicitly in his *Church Dogmatics* and explicitly in his *Rudolph Bultmann: Ein Versuch ihn zu verstehen*,¹⁰ Barth sets himself against such a hermeneutic — which for him is nothing less than a return to the Old Liberalism. Barth rejects the Bultmannian notion of a normative *Vorverständnis* brought to Scripture from the outside; the interpreter, says Barth, must allow the Bible to act as a "catalyst" on his powers of comprehension, thereby modifying and refining the

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, "Ist voraussetzungslose Exegese möglich?" *Theologische Zeitschrift*, XIII (1957), 409—17; English translation in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian Living Age Books, 1960), pp. 289—96.

⁸ Cf. on Bultmann's circularity principle Armin Henry Limper, "Hermeneutics and Eschatology: Rudolf Bultmann's Interpretation of John, Chapters 13—17" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Divinity School, University of Chicago, 1960), and John Warwick Montgomery, "The Fourth Gospel Yesterday and Today," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXIV (April 1963), 203—205.

⁹ Jackson Forstman, "Bultmann's Conception and Use of Scripture," *Interpretation*, XVII (1963), 459—61. The same point is made in greater detail and with even more force in chap. i ("Qu'est-ce que l'objectivité?") of André Malet, *Mythos et logos: La pensée de Rudolf Bultmann*, Lettre-préface de R. Bultmann (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1962), pp. 5—19.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann: Ein Versuch ihn zu verstehen* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952).

preconceptions he brings to the reading of Scripture.¹¹

Yet, as the Italian scholar Rivero has cogently shown, Barth never succeeded in completely ridding his own theology of existential-dialectic elements.¹² Thus he is as willing as Bultmann to admit that neutral investigation of *Historie* will never yield a resurrected Christ (for Barth the "objectivity" of the *heilsgeschichtliche* Resurrection is discovered only in the faith relation).¹³ Barth's position, we are told, "disposes of many difficulties arising from the intellectualist bedevilment of the concept of faith, and sets it clearly in the context of existential encounter and response. . . . Although the New Testament message is often formulated 'Jesus is the Christ,' the Object of faith is not doctrinal propositions about Jesus, but the divine presence or objectivity encountered in Him."¹⁴

¹¹ See the excellent comparative treatment of Bultmann and Barth on the problem of hermeneutical *Vorverständnis* by Jesuit L. Malevez, "Exegèse biblique et philosophie," *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, LXXVIII (Nov.-Dec. 1956), 897-914, 1027-42; English translation as Appendix II to Malevez, *The Christian Message and Myth: The Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1958), pp. 168-212.

¹² Emmanuele Rivero, *La teologia esistenzialistica di Karl Barth: Analisi, interpretazione e discussione del sistema* (Napoli, 1955). Bouillard agrees, though for various reasons he is not happy with the flat characterization of Barth as an "existentialist": "Certes, cette théologie [de Barth] offre des aspects existentialistes (au sens très large de ce mot): son auteur lui-même en convient [D. III, 4. viii; Bultmann, p. 38]" — Henri Bouillard, *Karl Barth*, III (Paris: Aubier, 1957), 298-99.

¹³ See John Warwick Montgomery, "Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology of History," *The Cresset*, XXVII (Nov. 1963), 8-14.

¹⁴ James Brown, *Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Buber and Barth: Subject and Object in Modern*

Since truth is conceived as personal encounter with the Christ of Scripture and not as the propositional affirmations of the Bible, the Biblical writers "can be at fault in every word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the same scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word."¹⁵ Not unlike Bultmann, Barth asserts: "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it."¹⁶ Well recognizing the ecumenical implications of this view for dialog with Roman Catholicism, Robert McAfee Brown declares that Barth "delivers us from what can be a very perverse notion of *sola Scriptura* that would assert that we go to the Bible and to the Bible alone, as though in the process we could really bypass tradition. He delivers us from a kind of Biblicism that is content to rest simply with a parroting of the vindication, 'the Bible says.'" ¹⁷ And the eminent Jesuit theologian Gustave Weigel perceptively notes that for Barth Scripture is the word of God, not in the sense that its propositions are spoken by

Theology (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 145-46.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-), I, Part 2, 529 to 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, Pt. 1, 123. For an excellent discussion of this and related passages in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* see Robert D. Preus, "The Word of God in the Theology of Karl Barth," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXI (Feb. 1960), 105-15.

¹⁷ Robert McAfee Brown, "Scripture and Tradition in the Theology of Karl Barth," in Leonard J. Swidler, ed., *Scripture and Ecumenism: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965), p. 42.

God, but in the sense that the vision of the men who wrote the words points efficaciously to the transcendent Lord God. Barth does not give an exegesis of the Scriptures, but gives the existentialist meaning of the Biblical narratives.¹⁸

In Barth's approach to Biblical interpretation, then, the "hermeneutical circle" of text and interpreter remains unbroken in spite of his opposition to Bultmann, and it is only through the existential dynamic of the hermeneutic situation that a fallible book becomes God's Word and revelatory. Only when we see this fully can we appreciate Oscar Cullmann's recent about-face: his refusal any longer to support the Barthian hermeneutic that would give philological and historical exegesis merely a preliminary role to theological interpretation proper. Cullmann observes that Barth is especially exposed to the danger of uncon-

trolled theological speculation "à cause de la richesse de sa pensée," and in order to avoid this danger of allowing the existential situation or theological tradition to engulf the clear teaching of Scripture, Cullmann now opts for objective philological treatment of the text throughout all exegetical operations.¹⁹

Post-Bultmannians

The most influential movement in European theology today is variously called "post-Bultmannianism" and "the New Hermeneutic." Bultmann's satisfaction with the mere "thatness" of the historical Jesus — his unwillingness to pursue the historical question beyond the perspective of the early church's interpretation of Jesus — has impelled a number of his students to engage in a hermeneutic quest for a more meaningful conjunction of the Jesus of history with the Christ of the early church. Wide differences exist among the post-Bultmannians (e.g., between Fuchs and Ott), but they are united in their endeavor to connect faith and history hermeneutically. Though they have departed from their master in many respects, they all maintain the centrality of Bultmann's "hermeneutical circle" and his conviction that an objective identification of the Biblical text with God's Word is a manifestation of unfaith. Thus Ernst Käsemann writes:

¹⁸ Gustave Weigel, *A Survey of Protestant Theology in Our Day* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1954), p. 33. Weigel's remarks on p. 30 are also to the point here: "Barth especially is interested in a return to the reformers, not to the content of their teaching, but merely to their starting point. Against the liberals, Barth and Brunner go back to the Bible as the Word of God, and they free the theological enterprise from the chains of philological method in order to achieve the true meaning of the Scriptures, which philology cannot detect. Against the Orthodox, the Neo-Orthodox reject any Biblicism whereby verbal inspiration or literal inerrancy condemn the theologian to make affirmations that have nothing to do with God. Seemingly, therefore, the Neo-Orthodox are a Center theology, but a closer examination of their thought has led many critics to believe that they are basically liberals in a strange guise. In America Neo-Orthodoxy in the Barthian manner is not popular, though his work is sufficiently known. The paradoxical character of such thought is bewildering because the constant linking of 'Yes' and 'No,' with no possibility of bringing them into some kind of unified synthesis, leaves the student dizzy."

¹⁹ Oscar Cullmann, "La nécessité et la fonction de l'exégèse philologique et historique de la Bible," in Jean Boisset, et al., *Le Problème biblique dans le Protestantisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), pp. 131—47. Cullmann here disavows the Barthian position on "theological exegesis" that he advocated in "Les problèmes posés par la méthode exégétique de l'école de Karl Barth," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, VIII (Jan.—Feb. 1928), 70—83.

In New Testament language we are driven to test the spirits even within Scripture itself. We cannot simply accept a dogma or a system of doctrine but are placed in a situation vis-à-vis Scripture which is, at the same time and inseparably, both responsibility and freedom. Only to such an attitude can the Word of God reveal itself in Scripture; and that Word, as biblical criticism makes plain, has no existence in the realm of the objective — that is, outside our act of decision.²⁰

Gerhard Ebeling is doubtless the most influential spirit of the New Hermeneutic. For him systematic theology has as its subject matter "the word event itself, in which the reality of man comes true," and by "word event" is meant "the event of interpretation";²¹ theology, then, has its source in the hermeneutic circle embracing Biblical text and existentially grounded interpreter.²² In reviewing Ebeling's *Das Wesen des christlichen Glaubens*,²³ James M. Robinson uses the term "neo-liberalism" to describe his position and notes that

²⁰ Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, I (2d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1960), 232—33; English translation in Käsemann's *Essays on New Testament Themes*, in *Studies in Biblical Theology*, No. 41 (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 58.

²¹ Gerhard Ebeling, *Theologie und Verkündigung; Ein Gespräch mit Rudolf Bultmann*, in *Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie*, I (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1962), 14 to 15. Cf. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., *The New Hermeneutic*, in *New Frontiers in Theology*, II (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), *passim*.

²² Ebeling discusses the hermeneutical circle in his *Wort und Glaube*, p. 337.

²³ Gerhard Ebeling, *Das Wesen des christlichen Glaubens* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1959); trans. R. G. Smith, *The Nature of Faith*, (London: Collins, 1961).

"although Ebeling devotes chapters to most of the traditional doctrines, he would not refer to these as the objects of faith. Faith is not to be bifurcated into the believer and his beliefs on the analogy of the scientist and his objects of study, that is, the subject-object pattern of scientific epistemology is not applicable for faith."²⁴ Marlé offers in much the same terms a fuller analysis of Ebeling's conscious break with the hermeneutic of orthodox Protestantism:

For him, the fundamental error of Protestant orthodoxy (and doubtless, in his view, the error of all orthodoxy) has been to consider the Word of God independently of its actualization in preaching — to make it in some way an object instead of seeing a movement there. That is why, moreover, orthodoxy could not recognize the peculiarly theological importance of hermeneutics. For hermeneutics is precisely that which permits the Word of God to be truly Word, in other words to attain its meaning, by conjoining with the one to whom it is addressed. . . . The [Protestant] perspective was transformed from the day when hermeneutics was no longer regarded as the simple application of rules external to the reality concerned, but as the way of disclosing that reality from the inside. According to Ebeling, the role of Heidegger and of Bultmann has been determinative in this regard. For both — and Ebeling resolutely follows in their wake — hermeneutics expresses a relationship to reality, allowing that reality to express itself, indeed, to realize its meaning.²⁵

In Ernst Fuchs the "dynamic" (vs. or-

²⁴ James M. Robinson, "Neo-Liberalism," *Interpretation*, XV (Oct. 1961), 488.

²⁵ Marlé, pp. 88—89.

thodox propositional) concept of the Word seems to attain its zenith. By a hermeneutical principle Fuchs means the situation in which one places something to see what it really is, thereby allowing it to display its meaning; so, for example, to find out what a cat is, put it in front of a mouse.²⁶ Scripture, then, cannot be interpreted objectively; it must be placed into dynamic, existential relation with its theological interpreter. Instead of being objectified, the Word actively objectifies everything else while forever remaining subject. "Freedom for the Word" is manifested not in reliance on objective history or on a propositionally inerrant text but in a staking of everything on the Word of love.²⁷ Fuchs's hypostatizing of language is but a logical outcome of the post-Bultmannian rejection of the subject-object distinction, but it gives to his writings such an air of mystical unreality that he is much less frequently quoted than his confrère Ebeling. Marlé devotes but three sentences to him (in the last footnote of his book); for those surprised at his neglect of Fuchs—especially for those students of Fuchs who would see in him the most profound theologian of the New Hermeneutic—Marlé must confess that he has found in Fuchs

"much obscurity, a multitude of viewpoints more rapidly touched on than given depth treatment, and a most abstract terminology, the original force of which has escaped us."²⁸

Heinrich Ott, Karl Barth's successor at Basel, rejects "the so-called 'subject-object schema' and the view that all thinking and language to a very great extent necessarily have an objectifying character";²⁹ he goes so far as to assert that "the objective mode of knowledge is entirely inappropriate to historical reality because there are no such things as objectively verifiable facts, and, secondly, that all true knowledge of history is finally knowledge by encounter and confrontation."³⁰ Ott's attempt to repristinate Heidegger theologically will be evident from these existential (and virtually solipsistic) assertions that intentionally eliminate the possibility of an objective Biblical hermeneutic.³¹

²⁸ Marlé, p. 139.

²⁹ Heinrich Ott, "Was ist systematische Theologie?" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, LVIII, Beiheft 2 (Sept. 1961), p. 32; English translation in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, in *New Frontiers in Theology I* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 93.

³⁰ Heinrich Ott, *Die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus und die Ontologie der Geschichte* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1960); English translation in Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville, eds., *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ* (New York: Abingdon, 1964), p. 148. Readers of the present essay may be interested to learn that an orthodox Reformation counterweight to the Braaten-Harrisville symposium is forthcoming under the title, *Jesus of Nazareth: Savior and Lord*. Carl F. H. Henry is the editor, and this essayist provides the concluding chapter, "Toward a Christian Philosophy of History."

³¹ For a valuable insight into Ott's most recent thinking, see Robert W. Funk's report of the Second Drew University Consultation on

²⁶ Ernst Fuchs, *Hermeneutik* (Bad Cannstatt: R. Müllerschön, 1954), pp. 103—18.

²⁷ See Fuchs, "Was wird in der Exegese interpretiert?" in his *Zur Frage nach dem historischen Jesus*, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, No. 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), pp. 286 ff.; trans. Andrew Scobie, *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, in *Studies in Biblical Theology*, No. 42 (London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 84 ff. A semi-popular work directly reflecting Fuchs's hermeneutic approach is Heinz Zahrnt, *Es begann mit Jesus von Nazareth* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1960); trans. J. S. Bowden, *The Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

The practical exegetical consequences of the post-Bultmannian hermeneutic can be seen in the work of Hans Conzelmann and Günther Bornkamm. Conzelmann regards the New Testament writers as free reshapers of the Jesus tradition; thus Luke's own existential stance produces a "subordinationist" portrait of Jesus, and Luke "deliberately takes the 'today' [Lk. 4:21] which is expressed in this passage [Mk. 2:19] as belonging to the past, and builds up the picture of Jesus' whole career on the basis of this historical interpretation."³² Discrepancies and historical-geographical blunders are rife in Luke's Gospel, for Conzelmann does not hold to any kind of propositional inspiration. A single example will suffice:

The locality of the Baptist becomes remarkably vague. Luke can associate him neither with Judea nor with Galilee, for these are both areas of Jesus' activity. Yet on the other hand there has to be some connection, so the Baptist is placed on the border. It is obvious that Luke has no exact knowledge of the area, and this is why he can make such a straightforward symbolical use of localities.

He creates a further discrepancy by introducing a motif of his own: in place

Hermeneutics (April 9—11, 1964), in which Ott participated; the report was published under the title "Colloquium on Hermeneutics," *Theology Today*, XXI (Oct. 1964), 287—306. Funk succinctly summarizes Ott's position as follows: "Ott continues to attempt to mediate between Barth and Bultmann, as he did in his early works. He has increasingly taken his cues from the later Heidegger in endeavoring to work out a theological program which transcends the subject-object dichotomy and is thus nonobjectifying in character." (P. 289)

³² Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 170—71.

of the Pharisees and Sadducees he puts the ὄχλοι [Luke 3:7].³³

Günther Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth*³⁴ leaves one in little doubt as to the effect of the New Hermeneutic on Biblical theology. In a penetrating review of this book, Otto Piper of Princeton writes:

The English translation has been hailed by some American scholars as "the best presentation of Jesus that we have" and as an "event in the intellectual history of our time." May this reviewer be forgiven for dissenting from the views of his esteemed colleagues. . . .

This new position . . . does not differ in principle from Bultmann's. Though faith is not necessarily to be understood in existentialist terms, nonetheless the theologian has already arrived at the knowledge of the religious truth before he opened his New Testament, and consequently everything in the Gospels that is not fit to illustrate this truth is *a priori* doomed to be rejected.³⁵

Paul J. Achtemeier, in evaluating the post-Bultmannian "New Quest," finds the whole movement riddled with unexamined and perilous *a priori*s; it is in fact a revival of the ancient heresy of Docetism.

We have, in short, the anomalous fact that the new quest of the historical Jesus is being carried on by a group of men who would have to regard any valid his-

³³ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁴ Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

³⁵ Otto A. Piper, "A Unitary God with Jesus as His First Theologian," *Interpretation*, XV (Oct. 1961), 473—74. For further evidences of Bornkamm's aprioristic exegesis, see Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, trans. Percy Scott (London: SCM Press, 1963).

torical fact about Jesus of Nazareth as threatening the purity of the Christian faith. That the renewed search is carried on within a perspective that contains such a strange contradiction would seem to indicate that the movement, as now conceived, can hardly reach conclusive results.³⁶

This antipathy to objective data among the post-Bultmannians is quite understandable in the light of our preceding discussion: these theologians are simply working out the logical implications of the hermeneutical circle—the “dynamic interaction” of text and interpreter—that appears in varying degrees in virtually all of contemporary theology.

American Lutheranism

Leaving the European scene,³⁷ we hasten on to America, particularly to the Lutheran

³⁶ Paul J. Achtemeier, “Is the New Quest Docetic?” *Theology Today*, XIX (Oct. 1962), 364.

³⁷ It will be noted that we have not discussed the hermeneutics of those European theologians whom Kümmel considers conservative or independent (see above, the text at note 6). If more space were at our disposal, we could show that even the most orthodox of these theologians balk at an unqualified, objective identification of the historical Scripture with God’s Word. For Kümmel and the *Heilsgeschichte* school, as for the positions we have discussed above, divine revelation “exists only in response” (quoted in Carl F. H. Henry, *Faith and Thought: Journal of the Victoria Institute*, XCIV, 34) and must not be viewed propositionally. Rengstorf and the “conservatives” seem to use the Holy Spirit as a kind of *deus ex machina* to bolster an epistemologically weak hermeneutic (see Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, *Die Auferstehung Jesu*, 4th ed. [Witten/Ruhr: Luther-Verlag, 1960], p. 109). Stauffer properly recognizes the necessity of an objective treatment of the Gospel records (see Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston [New York: Knopf, 1960]) but handles most of the theological concepts of the Bible as mythical motifs

theological situation in our own country. Is the same nonpropositional, nonobjective view of Biblical interpretation in evidence here? The answer is very definitely, “Yes.” Examples could be multiplied; we shall restrict ourselves only to the more prominent. As early as 1948 Joseph Sittler endeavored to reorient Lutherans from a verbal, “static” approach to the Bible, to a “dynamic,” “instrumental” understanding of God’s Word.

All verbal forms, all means of communication through speech, prove too weak for this massive bestowal [of Revelation]. . . . We must ask after the Word of God in the same way faith asks after Jesus Christ. That is to say, that the Word of God *becomes* Word of God for us. . . . To assert the inerrancy of the text of scripture is to elevate to a normative position an arbitrary theological construction.³⁸

Martin Heineken has consistently approached the problem of Biblical interpretation from the standpoint of Kierkegaard’s existentialism. In *The Moment Before God*, Heineken’s most influential

(cf. Krister Stendahl’s comments in the text at note 52 below). Pannenberg and Thielicke, though their theologies are a healthy corrective to the current existential-dialectic mainstream, draw the line at inerrant Biblical authority. And Cullmann, whose theology is perhaps the most attractive of all, while categorically refusing to view the resurrection of Christ (or any link in the temporal sequence of salvation history) as mythical, nonetheless regards the Fall and the ultimate Eschaton as Biblical myths (see, on Cullmann, Jean Frisque, *Oscar Cullmann: Une théologie de l’histoire du salut* [Tournai, (Belgique:) Casterman, 1960], and the critical remarks in Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law*, trans. Ross Mackenzie [Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961], *passim*).

³⁸ Joseph Sittler, *The Doctrine of the Word* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), pp. 62–63, 68 (Sittler’s italics).

book, truth is identified with paradoxical subjectivity, faith is understood as blind "encounter with the unknown," and the objective historical accuracy of the Biblical text is considered totally irrelevant to Christian commitment.

It is thus impossible to find an objectively certain basis for the revelation of God in Christ. Again, Kierkegaard's prophetic insight is apparent in the controversies waged over the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of the Bible. Fundamentalists, who staked everything on a repudiation of higher criticism, have definitely lost the battle. As far as any merely historical facts can be established with a degree of certainty, the composite character of many of the books of the Bible is established. Yet the witness of faith is not thereby affected. . . . A very radical critic of the Bible may really be a "believer" if he makes the proper distinctions and does not try to bolster with irrelevant argument that which must be "believed" in a transformation of existence.³⁹

That the "dynamic" (as opposed to "propositional") view of Scripture is now quite well established in Lutheran theological circles in the United States is evident from the 1963 symposium volume, *Theology in the Life of the Church*, to which 14 members of the Conference of Lutheran Professors of Theology contributed essays. In the chapter dealing with "The Bible," Warren Quanbeck of Luther Seminary

considers hopelessly outmoded the conviction of Protestant orthodoxy that Scripture is "a collection of revealed propositions unfolding the truth about God, the world, and man" and that "because the Holy Spirit was the real author of Scripture, every proposition in it was guaranteed infallible and inerrant, not only in spiritual, but in secular matters."⁴⁰ For Quanbeck, Biblical exegesis requires the hermeneutic assumption that "since human language is always relative, being conditioned by its historical development and usage, there can be no absolute expression of the truth even in the language of theology. Truth is made known in Jesus Christ, who is God's Word, his address to mankind. Christ is the only absolute."⁴¹

The very recent introduction of the post-Bultmannian New Hermeneutic into the American theological scene is doing much to reinforce and deepen the theological stance represented by such older Lutheran theologians as Sittler, Heineken, and Quanbeck. The focal center of the "young Turks" is *Dialog*, the Lutheran theological journal begun in 1962 under the editorship of Carl E. Braaten of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Two other members of the editorial staff whose frequent contributions set the tone of the journal are Roy A. Harrisville of Luther Seminary and Robert W. Jenson of Luther College. Significantly, Braaten wrote his doctoral dissertation on Martin Kähler (1835—1912), who "with apparently equal justification can be viewed as a forerunner of either Karl Barth or Ru-

³⁹ Martin J. Heineken, *The Moment Before God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), p. 262. In his Foreword the author writes: "It has been asserted that this book is not so much about Kierkegaard as it is an expression of my own views. This is cheerfully admitted" (p. vii). "Cheerfully" is hardly *le mot juste*, however, since the vital objectifying elements in Kierkegaard are totally neglected in Heineken's interpretation of him.

⁴⁰ *Theology in the Life of the Church*, ed. Robert W. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

dolf Bultmann"⁴² and whose "influence cuts across such varied theologies as those of Tillich, Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann."⁴³ In a Foreword to Braaten's partial translation of Kähler's *Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus*, Paul Tillich makes the revealing assertion: "I do believe that one emphasis in Kähler's answer is decisive for our present situation, namely, the necessity to make the certainty of faith independent of the unavoidable incertitudes of historical research."⁴⁴ Braaten agrees, and stresses the fact that Kähler rejected the objective approach to Biblical interpretation characteristic of Protestant orthodoxy:

Kähler felt that the orthodox definition of faith involving the sequence of *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia* led to an intellectualistic regimentation of the *ordo salutis*. Volitional assent to intellectual information about God and Christ was made a prerequisite of saving faith. This information was to be found in the Bible and was secured by the doctrine of verbal inspiration. This attempt of Protestant Orthodoxy to provide a threshold of objectivity over which a person must pass to enter the household of faith was particularly offensive to Kähler. . . . [For him] the Bible is nothing less than the Word of God to those who believe in Christ. . . . With Kähler's christological view of biblical authority it was possible to arbitrate the painfully fruitless discussion about whether everything in the Bible or only parts of it are the Word of God.

⁴² Martin Kähler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

The first alternative can be set aside by a *reductio ad absurdum*.⁴⁵

Harrisville, who has flatly stated in a *Dialog* article, "we admit to the discrepancies and the broken connections in Scripture,"⁴⁶ is the co-editor with Braaten of two volumes that endeavor through translations of current German theological articles to introduce American theologians to post-Bultmannian trends. In the second of these anthologies,⁴⁷ Harrisville himself writes a paper in which he, like his European counterparts, rejects the subject-object distinction in hermeneutics and history and classes attempts to operate with an objective text as throwbacks to the liberal "life of Jesus" era.⁴⁸ Jenson, a critic of the present essayist for his belief in plenary inspiration,⁴⁹ likewise blurs the hermeneutic task by interlacing Biblical text with "dogmatic tradition" and with "the live questions of our present existence"; thus, for him, "even the profoundest reading and

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17—18, 31.

⁴⁶ Roy A. Harrisville, "A Theology of Rediscovery," *Dialog*, II (Summer 1963), 190. Harrisville's book, *His Hidden Grace: An Essay on Biblical Criticism* (New York: Abingdon, 1965), is an attempt to make the higher criticism of Scripture palatable if not attractive to clergymen schooled in classical Lutheran theology.

⁴⁷ Cited in note 30 above. The first is Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville, *Kerygma and History: A Symposium on the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962).

⁴⁸ Harrisville, "Representative American Lives of Jesus," *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ*, pp. 172—96.

⁴⁹ Robert W. Jenson, "Barth Weak on Scripture?" *Dialog*, I (Autumn 1962), 57—58; this is a comment on my report, "Barth in Chicago: Kerygmatic Strength and Epistemological Weakness," *Dialog*, I (Autumn 1962), 56—57.

understanding of the Bible will not in itself give us a message to proclaim," and "at the moment when we must speak, Scripture provides no guarantee that we will speak rightly."⁵⁰

And now, what of the question with which this section began? How can the numerous positions here described be related to one another? We might point out the clear historical connections; for example, Heinz Kimmerle has shown that Wilhelm Dilthey, on whom Martin Heidegger and Bultmann based their existentialisms, derived his hermeneutic from the later Friedrich Schleiermacher⁵¹ — thus a chain is forged from the subjective psychologism of Schleiermacher (from which Ritschlian modernism grew) to the post-Bultmannian New Hermeneutic. And we have already noted the dependence of Barth as well as Bultmann on Martin Kähler, whose distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie* places Biblical theology in a nonobjective frame of reference. But such historical connections, though they evidence a relationship among the positions we have dis-

cussed, do not tell us precisely what that relationship is.

On Dec. 30, 1957, at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, a symposium was held on "Problems in Biblical Hermeneutics." Two papers at that symposium, both presented by advocates of the new approach in Biblical study, set forth in bold strokes the core connections among the views we have been treating. Let us hear first from Lutheran Krister Stendahl of Harvard:

Recent studies by Käsemann, Dahl, Bornkamm, Stauffer, and others have reopened the question about the historical Jesus and tried to indicate the necessity of overcoming our defeatism at this point. This has great significance for historical studies but for the problem of interpretation in terms of hermeneutics it seems to remain a fact that by and large we have to approach Jesus in the traditions about him, not the traditions about him in the light of factual historical information....

This state of affairs has a tendency to cut two ways: It has led to the strange situation where modern biblical studies deal with the traditional theological concepts of incarnation, miracles, redemption, justification, election, and all the rest in a language which causes some old liberals to shiver and leads the listeners to many modern preachers to believe that the liberal era of doubt and disbelief is finally overcome once and for all. Yet the preacher as well as the scholar knows — or should know — that he is expounding *traditions*, the faith of the Church in Christ, while people might think that he is telling them the simple facts about Jesus of Nazareth. In the long run it must become clear that the situation which has allowed this kind of double talk and has made it possible to capitalize on the

⁵⁰ Jenson, "An Hermeneutical Apology for Systematics," *Dialog*, IV (Autumn 1965), 269, 274. Jenson has specialized in Barth; see his *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1963).

⁵¹ Cf. James M. Robinson, "Hermeneutic Since Barth," in his *The New Hermeneutic*, pp. 70—71. Kimmerle is a student of the Dilthey critic Hans-Georg Gadamer, who, though he is trying to give an "ontological turn" to hermeneutics by concentrating on linguistic understanding rather than existential psychology, nevertheless (like Dilthey) takes the hermeneutical circle for granted, asserting that "historic tradition can only be understood by recalling the basic continuing concretizing taking place in the continuation of things." (*Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960], p. 355)

distance between "sender" and "receiver," is actually based on an insight into the nature of the biblical material which is more radical in its positivism than that of the liberals.⁵²

Thus modern Biblical hermeneutics has shifted its concern from Scripture as a record of objective fact to Scripture as a compendium of traditions reflecting the faith stance of the writers. It has in consequence become possible to use traditional Biblical-theological terminology without committing oneself to the veracity of the events or interpretations involved; and this admitted "double talk" is actually more radical than the old liberalism.⁵³

Another speaker at the SBL symposium, J. Coert Rylaarsdam of the University of Chicago Divinity School, has rendered contemporary theology, liberal and conservative, an immense service by spelling out explicitly the radical and unbridgeable chasm separating the hermeneutics of Reformation orthodoxy from the hermeneutics of 20th-century Protestantism. The following paragraphs cannot receive too close attention:

For orthodoxy the forms and processes of revelation were summed up in the contents of the Bible and in the form of events it reported. The Bible was called "the objective Word of God," or "the Word of God written." It was revelation,

⁵² Krister Stendahl, "Implications of Form-Criticism and Tradition-Criticism for Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXVII (March 1958), 34—36.

⁵³ A good example of this nonfactual, "dramatic-mythical" treatment of traditional Biblical concepts is provided by the Norwegian Lutheran New Testament scholar Ragnar Leivestad in his *Christ the Conqueror; Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1954).

rather than faith's testimony to revelation. The paradox between revelation and biblical history was wiped out in like manner. Orthodoxy not only said God revealed himself in history, but also that there was a bit of history which was revelation. To be sure, this bit of history was set apart, not subject to the laws of history in general, and so, in a sense, irrelevant for it. But, chronologically and materially, revelation was history. The Nile turned into real blood; and every first-born son in Egypt really died. This may or may not be so; but for orthodoxy the meaning of revelation depended on it. There was no gap between fact and faith. Fact demanded faith and the dependence of faith on fact is not paradoxical, but absolute. The integrity and factual accuracy of the Bible is the guarantee for the history on which faith rests.

The most distinctive feature of the current theological emphasis is its dynamic view of revelation. This is not only true of its neo-orthodox wing; it is equally true of the successors of liberalism; or, for that matter, in such Jewish theologians as Buber and Heschel. Revelation is not a static form with a stable content, subject to descriptive analysis; it is a dynamic action, existentially apprehended, the source of faith and inspired response. Revelation, *per se*, is not subject to analysis. Deeply aware of the conditionedness of all forms, material and intellectual, contemporary theology shies away from equating any of them with revelation. Relativism, long with us, plays a more radical role than ever before. Forms may be the media of revelation; they are an inevitable outcome of it. They can serve as a cue to its meaning; but, as such, forms are never revelation. To use the technical term, there is a paradoxical relationship

between the action of God, which is revelation, and all objective structures and processes that are patient of descriptive analysis.⁵⁴

Here we have not only a clear and precise statement of the classical Protestant hermeneutic stance but also a lucid description of the ideological thread uniting contemporary hermeneutical positions from Barth to the post-Bultmannians. For orthodoxy the Bible in its entirety is God's objective revelation, and both the events and the interpretations comprising it are veracious; faith accepts and is grounded in the propositional validity of the Scriptural text, and all sound exegesis of the Bible must proceed from this presuppositional base. For contemporary hermeneutics, however, the text of Scripture cannot be understood as objective, historically veracious revelation separated from the exegete (the subject-object distinction); an existential-dialectical relation between text and interpreter (the hermeneutical circle) has to be assumed; and since God's revelation can never be equated with the Scriptural text, hermeneutical affirmations will necessarily have a paradoxical quality, and relativism will "play a more radical role than ever before." In brief, for orthodox Protestantism the Bible has stood as an unblemished historical revelation, objectively distinguishable from its interpreters, who in order to understand it must allow it to interpret itself apart from the existential orientations reflected in church tradition or in the mind-set of the exegete; but for 20th-century hermeneutics the Bible, as

a fallible witness to revelation, cannot be qualitatively distinguished from its interpreters, past or present, and to understand it we must recognize the relativistic dialectic that connects us as interpreters with the text we endeavor to interpret.

LUTHER'S HERMENEUTIC IN FICTION AND IN FACT

Having obtained a detailed picture of the contemporary Protestant hermeneutic scene, we can now benefit from a historical analysis of Reformation Lutheranism's interpretive approach to Holy Writ. Our particular concern is to discover whether the confessional roots of Lutheranism encourage, permit, or reject the existential-dialectic hermeneutics of present-day Protestant (not excluding Lutheran) thought. Since a theological wedge is frequently driven today between Luther and the representatives of classical Lutheran orthodoxy,⁵⁵ emphasis will be placed here on Luther himself. This is not to say that we agree with the stereotyped criticisms of the much maligned orthodox theologians; indeed, criticism of them is but the first step toward criticism of Luther and of the Confessions, for as C. S. Lewis well noted in reference to the 19th-century Tübingen-school attack on Paul as a perverter of Jesus' teachings:

In the earlier history of every rebellion there is a stage at which you do not yet attack the King in person. You say, "The King is all right. It is his Ministers who

⁵⁴ J. Coert Rylaarsdam, "The Problem of Faith and History in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXVII (March 1958), 27—29.

⁵⁵ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), *passim*, and the present essayist's editorial Introduction to *Chytraeus on Sacrifice* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1962).

are wrong. They misrepresent him and corrupt all his plans — which, I'm sure, are good plans if only the Ministers would let them take effect." And the first victory consists in beheading a few Ministers: only at a later stage do you go on and behead the King himself.⁵⁶

But considerations of space prohibit our dealing here with the hermeneutics of classical orthodoxy. Presumably, in any case, it will be granted that if Luther manifests a thoroughgoing "orthodox" hermeneutic, his orthodoxist followers are deserving of no more condemnation than he is.

At present, however, the advocates of the modern hermeneutical stance have no interest in criticizing Luther; quite the opposite, for they claim that he is a forerunner of the very interpretive approach they are supporting. So for many years it has been fashionable to associate Luther with Kierkegaard, the theological father of existentialism.⁵⁷ Along the same line, Sittler unfavorably compares the hermeneutic of Protestant orthodoxy with "Luther's dialectical understanding of the Word":

The post-Reformation theologians did not understand the Scriptures in this way. They failed sufficiently to ponder the fact that the Bible, when it speaks of revelation, points beyond itself to an event to which it bears witness, but which is not the Bible itself. Luther's theological concern was directed toward this event, this divine self-disclosure, to which the Bible is a singular and incomparable witness.

⁵⁶ C. S. Lewis' Introduction to J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. x.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Heineken, *The Moment Before God*, *passim*.

But Luther did not equate Scripture with the divine event.⁵⁸

Luther's Christological approach to the Bible is supposed to have freed him from static, plenary inspiration and given him an existentially dynamic hermeneutic; thus Quanbeck interprets Luther's view:

The apprehension of the Bible in static or mechanical terms is necessarily inadequate. The reader must approach it as a dynamic and personal message in which he is himself existentially involved in order to experience its purpose and power. . . .

Luther's view of the authority of Scripture differs greatly from that of the Middle Ages. For the Occamist theologian, Scripture is authoritative because every word in it has been inspired by the Holy Spirit. This is true of the Lutheran scholastics also, with the significant difference that, standing on Luther's shoulders, they rejected the four-fold interpretation and insisted on the historical sense of Scripture. Luther stands apart from both groups. Scripture is his authority because it reveals Jesus Christ, because in it God speaks His Word of judgment and grace.⁵⁹

(Note here that the proportion is created: Medieval exegesis is to Luther's exegesis

⁵⁸ Sittler, pp. 34—35. Sittler relies here on Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God* (London: Epworth Press, 1947), a secondary source of generally high quality, which, however, leaves something to be desired in its treatment of Luther's doctrine of the Word. A more recent work presenting essentially the same interpretation of Luther's Biblical hermeneutic is Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, trans. John Schmidt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961).

⁵⁹ Warren A. Quanbeck, "Luther's Early Exegesis," in Roland H. Bainton, et al., *Luther Today* in Martin Luther Lectures, I (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1957), pp. 92, 99.

as the propositional, plenary inspiration of Lutheran orthodoxy is to an existential hermeneutic. We shall see very shortly how the terms of this proportion must be exactly reversed!) This same general evaluation of Luther is shared by a recent student of his Galatians commentary who claims that, in contrast to Calvin, Luther's "interpretations tend to be subjective, directed toward the individual, existential life of the believer"; accordingly Luther's hermeneutic principles can "lead to an extreme—to a subjectivism (as in Schleiermacher or Bultmann) which stresses the religious feeling or the existential (personal) dimensions of subjective faith over against the object of faith, thus losing what Prenter calls Luther's 'realism'." ⁶⁰

For most of contemporary Biblical scholarship, however, as Rylaarsdam has made clear, stress on "the existential (personal) dimensions of subjective faith over against the object of faith" is anything but an "extreme." Thus no time has been lost in endeavoring to bring Luther into the very midst of the Bultmannian and post-Bultmannian hermeneutic camp. Bultmann's interpreters have consistently claimed that in him "one sees in unmistakable outlines the shadow of Luther," ⁶¹ for just as Luther saw the inadequacy of man's moral efforts toward salvation, so

(we are told) Bultmann sees the inadequacy of man's "intellectual" efforts to "justify himself" by way of a propositionally inerrant Scripture. ⁶²

The post-Bultmannian advocates of the New Hermeneutic have been especially vocal in claiming Luther as their spiritual father. The following comment by Käsemann is typical:

Neither miracle nor the canon nor the Jesus of history is able to give security to our faith. For our faith there can be no objectivity in this sense. That is the finding which New Testament scholarship has made plain in its own fashion. But this finding is only the obverse of that acknowledgment which Luther's exposition of the third article of the Creed expresses. ⁶³

Ebeling has made Luther one of his specialties; his *Habilitationsschrift* in fact dealt with the Reformer's hermeneutics. ⁶⁴ We are therefore justified in including a rather long quotation from Ebeling—a quotation which shows with crystal clarity how Luther has been drawn into the orbit of the nonpropositional, existential, circular, "word-event" hermeneutic:

The fundamental problem for him is not a verbal description of God but the ex-

⁶⁰ Thomas D. Parker, "The Interpretation of Scripture. I. A Comparison of Calvin and Luther on Galatians," *Interpretation*, XVII (Jan. 1963), 68, 75. Interestingly enough, Sittler, in his *Doctrine of the Word*, takes a diametrically opposite tack by claiming that Calvin as well as Luther maintained Sittler's dialectic-existential view of the Word (pp. 27—32).

⁶¹ So argues Robert Scharlemann in "Shadow on the Tomb," *Dialog*, I (Spring 1962), 22—29.

⁶² André Malet concludes his detailed treatment of Bultmann with this analogy (pp. 394—96).

⁶³ Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, I, 236.

⁶⁴ *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung. Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (1942). Cf. his article, "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, XLVIII (1951), 172-230. Ebeling is responsible for the article on Luther's theology in the third edition of *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, IV (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1960), 495—519.

posure of man's existence before God; that is to say, the proclamation of God's judgment over man. With this we are not brought into the horizon of metaphors. The linguistic use of metaphors has now quite another task with reference to the subject-matter of theology, namely, to bring man into the real situation, where the subject-matter itself occurs. . . . This understanding of language is not defined from the point of view of signification but from the viewpoint of the word-event which must be accounted for and which, in turn, enables such accountability. The hermeneutical result is, therefore, that the very word as such is of hermeneutical importance and is able to illumine, to bring about clarity, and to give life. The hermeneutical task can only consist of the fact that we devote ourselves to the service of the word-event in such a way that the word becomes truly word, and that it occurs as pure word in the fullness of its power. Luther's thesis on the Bible as *sui ipsius interpret* must be understood along this line.⁶⁵

For Ebeling's Luther, then, the hermeneutical focus does not lie in "verbal description" or in "signification," nor is the Scripture objectively Word; rather, in order for the Word to become "truly" Word, we must "devote ourselves to the service of the word-event." Marlé expresses amazement at how Ebeling has been able to give Luther "une étonnante actualité";⁶⁶ quite so: in the above passage Luther is practically indistinguishable from his contemporary interpreter.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Gerhard Ebeling, "The New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," *Theology Today*, XXI (April 1964), 45—46.

⁶⁶ Marlé p. 80.

⁶⁷ Robert Scharlemann has recently performed a parallel operation on the great Lu-

Says Ebeling at an earlier point in the article from which the above extended passage was quoted: "We can by no means short-circuit the hermeneutics of the Reformation and pass it off as a mere precursor of modern historico-critical hermeneutics."⁶⁸ To which we respond with a hearty "Amen"! Therefore let us by analysis of primary sources determine what in fact Luther's attitude was toward the interpretation of the Biblical text. Is he properly to be aligned with the contemporary dialectical-existential approach, or does he view the Scripture in another way?

The issue here is emphatically not whether Luther's own existential experiences (his realization of justification by grace through faith, his *Anfechtungen*, etc.) played a role in his Biblical exegesis. Certainly they did—as they do for all readers of God's Word. The question is rather whether Luther considered his experiences to conjoin with the Scriptural text in a dialectic manner so that, in the terms of the contemporary hermeneutical circle, each could legitimately work upon the other, and "God's Word could truly become God's Word." Granted that psy-

theran theologian of classical orthodoxy, Johann Gerhard. In *Thomas Aquinas and John Gerhard* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964) Scharlemann characterizes Gerhard's doctrine of Creation as "the dialectic of obedience" and his doctrine of Redemption as "the dialectic of the court." As Ebeling's Luther comes to sound like Ebeling, so Scharlemann's Gerhard speaks the language of Scharlemann. Contrast Edmund Smits, "The Lutheran Theologians of the 17th Century and the Fathers of the Ancient Church," *The Symposium on Seventeenth Century Lutheranism: Selected Papers*, I (St. Louis, Mo.: The Symposium on Seventeenth Century Lutheranism, 1962), 1—31.

⁶⁸ Ebeling, "The New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," p. 35.

chological or sociological conditions often led the sensitive Luther to an interest in certain passages of Holy Writ; granted even that on occasion his existential stance colored the Scripture he was endeavoring to understand. But *in principle* did he consider such "word-event" situations to be self-validating, or did he believe that Scripture properly stood over his existential life as an objectively inerrant revelation, proclaiming factual truth to him in judgment and in grace?

Further, the issue of Luther vis-à-vis contemporary hermeneutics does not turn on his employment of Christological exegesis or of the justification principle or of the basic Law-Gospel distinction. That Luther uses these interpretive approaches to Scripture (and sometimes even overuses them!) no one acquainted with the Reformer's exegetical writings will deny. But this does not commit Luther to a dialectic, experiential hermeneutic. It would do so only if Luther saw these principles as legitimately arising out of existential experience. Does he? Or does he believe that they arise solely from the objective, perspicuous text of an infallible Scripture?

One could attempt to answer these key questions by *catenae* of Luther quotations, derived from the overwhelming riches of the Weimar Ausgabe. But in order to avoid the damning epithet of "proof-texter" and in order to see the issues in the historical context of Luther's life, we shall observe how he employed Scripture in the three major theological controversies of his career: his battle with Roman Catholic ecclesiocentrism, with Erasmian humanism, and with Zwinglian sacramentarianism.

At Worms Luther was presented with

clean-cut alternatives: recanting his position, which patently ran counter to the *de facto* (shall we say existential?) church teaching of his day, or suffer the ban of the Holy Roman Empire. Not an easy choice. A coward would have recanted; a *hybris*-motivated man would have set the power of his personal existential experience over against the tradition of the church. Luther was neither; his refusal to compromise truth showed that he was no coward, and the total subjection of his existential decision to the Word of Scripture evidenced his humility. Listen to his confession:

Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason (for I believe in neither the Pope nor councils alone, since it has been established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures that I have adduced, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God; and I am neither able nor willing to recant, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.⁶⁹

This earth-shaking testimony has become so familiar to us that we neglect to see what precisely it says. If no other statement from Luther were available, his confession at Worms would be sufficient to establish his hermeneutical stance in contradistinction to the current dialectic movement. For Luther says: (1) My conscience—my existential life—has been taken captive by the Word (here clearly iden-

⁶⁹ D. Martin Luthers Werke, 7, (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1897), 836—38; hereafter cited as *W.A.* See Gordon Rupp's excellent treatment of this incident: *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms*, 2d ed (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), pp. 96 ff.

tified with the Holy Scriptures); thus Luther, even at the most formidable *κατ'ός* of his life, refused to succumb to the temptation of placing personal experience on the same level as God's Word or of giving it any kind of dialectic relation with Scripture (thereby allowing it to become a legitimate basis for his theological stand). (2) The testimonies of the Holy Scriptures are sure—unlike Pope and councils who err and contradict themselves; thus for Luther the objectively inerrant, noncontradictory character of Scripture was taken for granted, in diametric contrast to the objectively fallible judgments of the church. (3) Evident reason is legitimately to be employed in reaching theological truth; thus Luther was no subjectivistic irrationalist who in existential fashion considers an objective, propositionally perspicuous Bible to be an offense to faith.⁷⁰

Indeed, in Luther's biblical opposition to the Roman Catholicism of his day, we can see exactly the opposite proportion to that suggested by Quanbeck.⁷¹

Instead of

Medieval exegesis
Luther's exegesis

=

we have

Medieval exegesis
Luther's exegesis

=

Orthodox hermeneutics
Contemporary hermeneutics

Contemporary hermeneutics
Orthodox hermeneutics

⁷⁰ The ghost of this perennial stereotype of "Luther the existential irrationalist" has been well laid by two recent publications: Robert H. Fischer, "A Reasonable Luther," in *Reformation Studies: Essays in Honor of Roland H. Bainton*, ed. Franklin H. Littell (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1962), pp. 30—45, 255—56; and B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁷¹ See above, the text quotation corresponding to note 59.

Why? Because the Romanism Luther so vehemently opposed consciously permitted a dialectic interrelation between Scripture and existential situation, thereby allowing the latter to influence the interpretation of the former. Beryl Smalley, the foremost specialist on medieval Biblical scholarship, has made clear how, during its formative period, medieval exegesis allowed "present needs" to swallow up the objective message of Scripture:

The Latin Fathers, followed by the assistants of Charlemagne, made Bible study serve their present needs. They retained both the literal sense and textual criticism, but only as a basis for the spiritual interpretation. First and foremost the Scriptures were a means to holiness. *Lectio divina* formed one side of the ascetic triangle: reading, prayer, contemplation. Equally vital was its role in upholding the faith. The long line of commentators who developed the spiritual senses were not only contemplatives but men of action. They built up the Church, defending her doctrines against pagans, Jews and here-

tics. They rallied her to the defense of the Christian State under Charlemagne. They supported the Gregorian reform against the secular power. They set forth the duties of clergy and laity.

They subordinated scholarship meanwhile to mysticism and to propaganda. It was natural in troubled times, when chroniclers were beginning their paragraphs not 'Eo tempore . . .', but 'Ea tempestate. . . .'. The decline of biblical

scholarship is less surprising than its endurance. The wonder is that even in a minor degree it survived, as a thread, if a slender thread, in the skein that ran from the Alexandrians to the Victorines.⁷²

As "early medieval and many twelfth-century commentators had digressed 'anagogically,'" and as the 13th century displayed a "growing interest in things present," so Smalley predicts that in the exegesis of the later Middle Ages "secular interests and naturalism will increase."⁷³ In this prediction Smalley is quite correct. Torrance has recently shown that Thomas Aquinas, whose theological exegesis so deeply colored the thought patterns of the later medieval church, accepted the "hermeneutical circle"⁷⁴ and was unaware of the degree to

which he allowed "ecclesiastical tradition" to outweigh the authority of the Scriptural message:

St. Thomas had a giant mind, to which there have been few equals, but his own immense intellectual powers laid him open to great temptations. His prior understanding of human experience, of the intellect and the soul, his masterful interpretation of Aristotelian physics, metaphysics, and psychology proved too strong and rigid a mould into which to pour the Christian faith. It is philosophy that tends to be the master, while theology tends to lose its unique nature as a science in its own right in spite of the claims advanced for it. In so far as the contents of theology surpass the powers of scientific investigation they are to be accepted as revealed truth but in the end the authority of ecclesiastical tradition outweighs in practice the authority of sacred scripture so that interpretation of revealed truth is schematized to the mind of the church.⁷⁵

The schematization "of revealed truth to the mind of the church" becomes more and more characteristic of Roman Biblical hermeneutics as the medieval period draws to a close, and it reaches a high degree of refinement in such Counter-Reformation interpreters of the Bible as Sixtus of Siena.⁷⁶ And it was precisely this existential accommodation of objective Scriptural teaching to "the mind of the church" that

⁷² Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952), p. 358.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 372—73. On the wide influence of the "fourfold" scheme of Biblical interpretation on medieval exegesis see Harry Caplan, "The Four Senses of Scriptural Interpretation and the Mediaeval Theory of Preaching," *Speculum*, IV (1929), 282—90.

⁷⁴ For primary evidence, see *Summa Theol.*, 2.2, q.8, a.1, ad 2; and see T. F. Torrance, "Scientific Hermeneutics According to St. Thomas Aquinas," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, XIII (Oct. 1962), 287—88. Unhappily, Torrance does not see that when church tradition submerges the Biblical text in Thomas' hermeneutic, this is due not to "deficiencies" in his application of the hermeneutical circle but to the very nature of the circle itself, wherein text and interpreter are placed in dialectical relation to each other. A valuable contrast with Thomas' exegesis is provided by the objectively textual approach of Athanasius, who was so highly regarded both by Luther (see Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert [London: SPCK, 1931]) and by the theologians of classical Lutheran orthodoxy (see David Chytraeus, *On Sacrifice: A Reformation Treatise in Biblical Theology*,

trans. and ed. John Warwick Montgomery [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962]); see T. E. Pollard, "The Exegesis of Scripture and the Arian Controversy," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XLI (1958—1959), 414—29.

⁷⁵ Torrance, p. 289.

⁷⁶ John Warwick Montgomery, "Sixtus of Siena and Roman Catholic Biblical Scholarship in the Reformation Period," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, LIV/2 (1963), 214—34.

Luther opposed at Worms and throughout his career. For him, unlike both medieval Roman and contemporary Protestant hermeneutics,⁷⁷ the objective message of God's written Word must stand forever over the corporate and the individual conscience — judging them, not in any sense being judged by them.

Likewise in dealing with the Renaissance humanists of his day Luther stood firm: Scripture speaks as clearly against the ability of the human will in salvation as it does against any form of traditional work-righteousness. Luther's opposition to Erasmus was squarely based on his convictions that whenever Scripture speaks it speaks with absolute authority and clarity, that propositional assertions of truth can, and

must, be drawn from the Biblical revelation, and that the literal meaning of the Scriptural text must be accepted unless the Biblical context itself (not any external influence) forces a metaphorical interpretation. Listen to the following typical passages from *De servo arbitrio*, which expressly spell out the distance separating Luther from the nonpropositional, existentially oriented hermeneutics of contemporary Protestantism:

If you [Erasmus] are referring to essential truths — why, what more irreligious assertion could a man possibly make than that he wants to be free to assert precisely *nothing* about such things? The Christian will rather say this: "So little do I like sceptical principles, that, so far as the weakness of my flesh permits, not merely shall I make it my invariable rule steadfastly to adhere to the sacred text in all that it teaches, and to assert that teaching, but I also want to be as positive as I can about those non-essentials which Scripture does not determine; for uncertainty is the most miserable thing in the world." . . . What is this new-fangled religion of yours, this novel sort of humility, that, by your own example, you would take from us power to judge men's decisions and make us defer uncritically to human authority? Where does God's written Word tell us to do that?⁷⁸

The notion that in Scripture some things are recondite and all is not plain was spread by the godless Sophists (whom now you echo, Erasmus) — who have never yet cited a single item to prove their crazy view; nor can they. And Satan has used these unsubstantial spectres to scare men off reading the sacred text, and to destroy all sense of its value, so as to en-

⁷⁷ Present-day Roman Catholic scholars, it is worth noting, are exceedingly pleased to see the Protestant move toward dialectic Scriptural interpretation, for such a move opens up the possibility that Protestants, in accepting as legitimate the dynamic force of church tradition in interpreting the Bible, will once again listen to the voice of Rome. Readers may be interested in comparing with the earlier-cited contemporary Lutheran approaches to Scripture, "New Shape," Roman Catholic Eduard Schillebeeckx's paper, "Exegesis, Dogmatics and the Development of Dogma," which begins: "The religion of revelation is essentially a dialogue, a meeting between man and the living God," and which sees Christian doctrine as dynamically drawn by the church from the Scriptural *sensus plenior*, not as "formally theological deductions from New Testament data" (*Dogmatic vs Biblical Theology*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler [London: Burns & Oates, 1964], pp. 115–45). Cf. also Lutheran Wilhelm H. Wuellner's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The Word of God and the Church of Christ: The Ecumenical Implications of Biblical Hermeneutics" (University of Chicago Divinity School, 1958); and for a different evaluation John Warwick Montgomery, "Evangelical Unity in the Light of Contemporary Orthodox Eastern — Roman Catholic — Protestant Ecumenicity," *The Springfielder*, XXX (Autumn 1965), 8–30.

⁷⁸ Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, WA, 18, 604–605.

sure that his own brand of poisonous philosophy reigns supreme in the church. I certainly grant that many passages in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance. . . . Who will maintain that the town fountain does not stand in the light because the people down some alley cannot see it, while everyone in the square can see it? ⁷⁹ Let this be our conviction: that no "implication" or "figure" may be allowed to exist in any passage of Scripture unless such be required by some obvious feature of the words and the absurdity of their plain sense, as offending against an article of faith. Everywhere we should stick to just the simple, natural meaning of the words, as yielded by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech that God has created among men; for if anyone may devise "implications" and "figures" in Scripture at his own pleasure, what will all Scripture be but a reed shaken with the wind, and a sort of chameleon? There would then be no article of faith about which anything could be settled and proved for certain, without your being able to raise objections by means of some "figure." All "figures" should rather be avoided, as being the quickest poison, when Scripture itself does not absolutely require them.⁸⁰

The objective, propositional reliability and clarity of the Biblical text was also Luther's fundamental hermeneutic assumption in his battles with the sacramentarians over the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood. Here—on what has always been one of the key points of Lutheran doctrine—the lines are most decisively drawn between Luther and the modern Protestant

hermeneutics. For Luther is so convinced of the verbal soundness and objective perspicuity of the original text of the Bible that he is willing to center his whole defense of his Lord's Supper doctrine on the five words τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμά μου. His book, *That These Words of Christ, "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*, begins with a penetrating historical survey of the devil's successes in destroying the clear testimony of the church through corrupting the interpretation of the Bible. In the Middle Ages, Satan "had some of his followers in the Christians' schools, and through them he stealthily sneaked and crept into the holy Scriptures"; then Scripture became "like a broken net and no one would be restrained by it, but everyone made a hole in it wherever it pleased him to poke his snout, and followed his own opinions, interpreting and twisting Scripture any way he pleased."⁸¹ And now, says Luther, even with the restoration of the Gospel and the Scriptures, the *Schwärmer* perverts God's Word by refusing to stand under the literal force of its eucharistic message; again and again Luther comes back to this same argument—the words of Scripture must be taken as simple and literal truth:

Here let the judge between us be not alone Christians but also heathen, Turks, Tartars, Jews, idolaters, and the whole world: whose responsibility is it to prove his text? Should it be the Luther who asserts that Moses says, "In the beginning the

⁷⁹ Ibid., 606.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 700—701.

⁸¹ Martin Luther, "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics," in *Word and Sacrament III*, ed. Robert H. Fischer, Vol. XXXVII in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 13—14.

cuckoo ate the hedge sparrow," or the person who asserts that Moses says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"? I hope the decision would be that Luther ought to prove his text, since in no language does "God" mean the same as "cuckoo." Well, away creeps Luther to the cross, grieved that he cannot prove that "God" means "cuckoo." For anyone who ventures to interpret words in the Scriptures any other way than what they say, is under obligation to prove this contention out of the text of the very same passage or by an article of faith. But who will enable the fanatics to prove that "body" is the equivalent of "sign of the body," and "is" the equivalent of "represents"? No one has brought them to this point up to now.⁸²

Luther's encounters with tradition-oriented Romanists, rationalistically inclined humanists, and spiritualistic Protestants leave no doubt as to his standard of religious authority, the degree to which he subjected himself to it, or his approach to its interpretation. For Luther the canonical⁸³ Scripture was in its entirety God's

⁸² Ibid., p. 32. "His [Luther's] exegesis sought to derive the teachings of the Scriptures from the particular statements of the Scriptures rather than from the *a priori* principles of a theological system. Not even to his own theological speculation, therefore, would Luther consciously accord the status of an *a priori* principle that would dictate his exegesis, even though it cannot be denied that in his exegetical practice he sometimes operated with such *a priori* principles. Hence he was unwilling to have his doctrine of the ubiquity of the body of Christ, which was compounded of exegetical and speculative elements, lay down the terms for his exegesis of 'This is My Body'" (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, companion volume to *Luther's Works*, American Edition [St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1959], p. 141).

⁸³ It should be unnecessary to mention that Luther's early rejection of the General Epistle of

inerrant Word, and its clear propositional teachings stood in judgment over all other writings. Thus one does not have to look far in Luther to discover such unqualified assertions as the following:

I have learned to ascribe the honor of infallibility only to those books that are accepted as canonical. I am profoundly convinced that none of these writers has erred. All other writers, however they may have distinguished themselves in holiness or in doctrine, I read in this way: I evaluate what they say, not on the basis that they themselves believe that a thing is true, but only insofar as they are able to convince me by the authority of the canonical books or by clear reason.⁸⁴

The Holy Scriptures are assuredly clearer, easier of interpretation, and more certain than any other writings, for all teachers prove their statements by them, as by clearer and more stable writings, and wish their own treatises to be established and explained by them. But no one can ever prove a dark saying by one that is still darker. Therefore, necessity compels us to run to the Bible with all the writings of the doctors, and thence to get our verdict and judgment upon them; for Scripture alone is the true overlord and master of all writings and doctrines on earth.

James and some other Scripture portions stemmed from his (fallacious) criterion of *canonicity*, not from any weakness in his doctrine of *inspiration*.

⁸⁴ "Defense Against the Ill-tempered Judgment of Eck," *WA*, 2, 618. This passage and many others like it demonstrate, as I have argued elsewhere, that unless we make the clumsy blunder of equating "verbal inspiration" with traditional Romanist mechanical inspiration (the "dictation theory"), "it is difficult to feel . . . that Luther, if he lived today, would not in fact consider 'verbal inspiration' the biblical view most congenial to his own" (review of *Luther and the Bible* by Willem Jan Kooiman, *Christianity Today*, VI [Feb. 16, 1962], 498).

If not, what are the Scriptures good for? Let us reject them and be satisfied with the books of men and human teachers.⁸⁵

And here we arrive—in language no less than in substantive content—to the confessional statements of Lutheranism, where we read:

... wie D. Luther ... diesen Unterschied ausdrücklich gesetzt hat, dass alleine Gottes Wort die einige Richtschnur und Regel aller Lehre sein und bleiben solle, welchem keines Menschen Schriften gleich geachtet, sondern demselben alles unterworfen werden soll.

Hoc discrimen (inter divina et humana scripta) perspicue posuit, solas videlicet sacras litteras pro unica regula et norma omnium dogmatum agnoscendas, iisque nullius omnino hominis scripta adaequanda, sed potius omnia subiicienda esse.⁸⁶

The Lutheran Confessions, then, in harmony with and in dependence on Luther himself, categorically refuse to allow "dialectic relations" between Scripture and any human teacher or writing whatever; the Bible judges man's total existential life—it is not intertwined with it in "hermeneutical circle" or "word-event."⁸⁷ Moreover,

⁸⁵ "An Argument in Defense of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Wrongly Condemned in the Roman Bull," *WA*, 7, 308 ff. In the preceding paragraph of this work Luther asserts his belief that the Scriptures "never yet have erred" and quotes Augustine as holding the same conviction. Two excellent treatments of Luther's Scriptural position that reinforce the case we have been presenting are Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., "Luther's *Sola Scriptura*," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXI (Dec. 1960) 740—45; and Douglas Carter, "Luther As Exegete," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXII (Sept. 1961), 517—25.

⁸⁶ FC SD, Summary Formulation, 9.

⁸⁷ Emile Léonard properly interprets Art. V of the Augsburg Confession with this under-

standing: "the whole Scripture is about Christ alone everywhere")⁸⁸ from Scripture itself, so the Lutheran Confessions ground their justification principle in a verbally perspicuous and totally authoritative Scripture:

It is surely amazing that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith and specifically deny it to works. Do they suppose that this is repeated so often for no reason? Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares?⁸⁹

Never do the Confessions view the central

standing: "Il est bien vrai que, parmi les spiritualistes, Sébastien Franck professait que la Parole agit *ohne Mittel*, sans instrument, et que Schwenckfeld soutenait une doctrine semblable dans son traité *Vom Lauf des Wortes Gottes* (1527). Mais la pointe de l'article était autant contre le catholicisme, avec sa conception d'un Saint-Esprit (incarné dans l'Eglise) indépendant du texte de la Parole" (*Histoire Générale du Protestantisme*, I [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961], 158).

⁸⁸ Luther, *Vorlesung über den Römerbrief*, 1515—16, ed. J. Ficker (4th ed.; Leipzig, 1930), p. 240. Philip S. Watson in lectures on "The Theology of *Sola Scriptura*" (Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, Summer 1961) defended Luther's Christological reading of the Old Testament by noting that an entire play can properly be read in terms of its final act; this is quite true, but it should be stressed that Luther could *legitimately* do this (while many modern theologians cannot) because he was fully convinced that the entire Bible is the work of a single "Playwright," whose perspicuous composition warrants such interpretation. For a typical attempt by a contemporary mediating theologian to maintain a Christological view of the Bible, see Nels F. S. Ferré, "Notes by a Theologian on Biblical Hermeneutics," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXVIII (1959), 105—14, and Howard M. Teeple's devastating critique: "Notes on Theologians' Approach to the Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXIX (1960), 164—66.

⁸⁹ Ap. IV 107 f.

doctrine of justification as arising independently of Scripture or from an existential "life relation" with Scripture — nor do they ever (in accord with a reprehensible modern practice) employ the doctrine as a means of devaluating the literal truth of some portions of Scripture. To the contrary, they recognize full well that apart from the perspicuously inscripturated "words of the Holy Spirit" the fundamental Christian truth of justification could not be sustained at all.

A PERPLEX IN PERSPECTIVE

The hermeneutic of Luther and of the Lutheran Confessions stands, then, in irreconcilable opposition to the existential-dialectic hermeneutic of contemporary Protestant theology. To make of Luther a forerunner of Bultmann — or of Ebeling, Fuchs, or Ott — is almost ludicrous. As I have written elsewhere of the Luther-Bultmann analogy:

The parallel is, of course, fallacious and "constructed" (cf. the old saw: What does an elephant and a tube of toothpaste have in common? Answer: Neither one can ride a bicycle). Whereas Luther turned from moral guilt to confidence in the *objective* facts of Christ's death for his sin and resurrection for his justification, Bultmann turns from his intellectual doubts to *subjective* anthropological salvation — a direct about-face from the *objective* Gospel Luther proclaimed.⁹⁰

The contemporary hermeneutic is, as we have seen, a repristination of the very approach to the Bible Luther opposed throughout his career. Luther constantly

strove to maintain the objective purity of the Biblical message over against all adulterations of God's Word with human opinions. Existential-dialectic approaches to Scripture invariably produce such adulterations, for by interlocking text and interpreter into a "word-event" relationship uncontrolled by the subject-object distinction, they permit — if they do not actually encourage — the absorption of the Scriptural teaching into the existential-cultural situation of the interpreter. Instead of God's Word re-creating man in God's image, man re-creates God's Word in his own image.

Commenting on the Second Drew University Consultation on Hermeneutics, which so well reflects today's perplex in Biblical interpretation, Robert Funk perceptively wrote:

Neo-orthodoxy taught that God is never object but always subject, with the result that third generation neo-orthodox theologians have been forced to wrestle with the non-phenomenal character of God. They are unwilling to settle for God as noumenon (perhaps as a legacy of theologies of history, and perhaps as the result of a radical empiricism), which means that for them God does not "appear" at all. . . .

It is possible on this circumspective view to see why the question of non-objectifying speaking and thinking in theology is a crucial problem, and yet why it refuses to come into focus: it touches upon a root question, viz., can or how can one speak meaningfully of God, but it is also difficult to address in an ordered and logical way because it is not apparent what "logic" is appropriate to the question.⁹¹

⁹⁰ John Warwick Montgomery, *The Shape of the Past in: An Introduction to Philosophical Historiography* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Edwards, 1963), pp. 159—60.

⁹¹ Funk, pp. 303—304.

Here the chasm between Luther and the 20th-century hermeneutic yawns the widest, for Luther was never in doubt as to the "logic" appropriate to divine-human communication: It was and would always remain the logic of the Scriptural address. For Luther and for confessional Lutheranism, over against the *finitum non capax infiniti* tradition common both to idealistic philosophy and to classical Calvinism, God is indeed capable of "appearing" in the human situation and of making His will known to man in univocal language. When the contemporary hermeneutic reaches the nadir of "non-objectifying speaking and thinking in theology," it simply betrays its refusal to accept what for Luther was axiomatic to all theology: God is able to speak absolute, objective truth to man in man's language, and the Bible is that inerrant discourse. Luther's Christological principle in Biblical hermeneutics has implications few modern Lutherans wish to face; for just as Luther refused to limit the Incarnation or the Real Presence through rational speculation about what God could or could not do, so he would have had no patience with our endeavors to limit revelation to God's "acts" (as distinguished from His Scriptural words), to the "doctrinal" content of Scripture (over against its "non-theological" material), or to the "spiritual" in the Bible. The God of Luther and of confessional Lutheranism has never been tongue-tied.

The 20th-century hermeneutic perplex in theology is a reflection of the general cultural confusion of the epoch. Smalley, it will be remembered,⁹² commented that

⁹² See above, the text quotation corresponding to note 72.

the decline of medieval hermeneutics "was natural in troubled times." Certainly we today begin our chronicles with *Ea tempestate*, and the chaos of hot and cold wars has unsettled us to the point where subjective relativism—the bias against the objective absolutes—has come to dominate even the field of theology, where there is least justification for it.⁹³

Ironically, nontheological disciplines have in recent years been far more successful than theology in recovering ground lost to "nonobjectivistic" thinking. In spite of the popular view that Einsteinian physics and Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle have obliterated the subject-object distinction in favor of an "existential dynamism" in science, "Bohr has emphasized the fact that the observer and his instruments must be presupposed in any investigation, so that the instruments are not part of the phenomenon described but are used."⁹⁴ In philosophy, the existential tide that has conditioned so much of the twentieth century theology is receding under the impact of powerful analytical and linguistic criticism which has shown that dialectic-existential affirmations, owing to their subjective non-testability, are technically meaningless.⁹⁵ How remarkably like a

⁹³ See John Warwick Montgomery, "Ascension Perspective," *The Cresset*, XXIV (May 1961), 17—19.

⁹⁴ Victor F. Lenzen, *Procedures of Empirical Science*, Vol. I, No. 5 in *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), p. 28.

⁹⁵ John Warwick Montgomery, "Inspiration and Inerrancy: A New Departure," *Evangelical Theological Society Bulletin*, VIII (Spring 1965), 45—75, applies the insights of analytical philosophy to the question of Biblical authority; noninerrancy inspiration claims for the Bible (particularly those by contemporary

modern philosophical-linguistic analyst is Luther when he says that he should send the nonpropositional Erasmus off to Anticyra — a health resort for the mentally ill — since Erasmus necessarily asserts that he finds *no satisfaction in assertions!*⁹⁶

In the historical field also, the presuppositions of existentialism are being seriously questioned. The Dilthey tradition of subjective historiography (which has so profoundly colored Biblical scholarship from Barth and Bultmann to the post-Bultmannians) is incapable of sustaining the criticisms directed at it by analytically trained philosophers of history. So, for example, J. W. N. Watkins, reflecting the new drive toward objectivity in historical study, has little patience with the idea that "to understand Ghengis Khan the historian must be someone very like Ghengis Khan" and points out that historical truth is determined not by the historian's subjective "temperament and mentality" but by his inductive examination of factually objective evidence.⁹⁷

A recent literary tour de force has particularly well evidenced the growing self-awareness by belletristic scholars of the ghastly results of existential "life relation"

Lutherans both outside and inside The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod) are there seen to be philosophically nonsensical and theologically at variance with the Biblical epistemology.

⁹⁶ *WA* 18, 603—605.

⁹⁷ J. W. N. Watkins, "Philosophy of History: Publications in English," in *La Philosophie au milieu du vingtième siècle*, ed. Raymond Klibansky, 4 vols., 2d ed. (Firenze, 1961—62), III, 159, 174. On the implications of analytical historiography for theology of history, see my concluding chapter, "Toward a Christian Philosophy of History," in Carl F. H. Henry's forthcoming symposium, *Jesus of Nazareth: Savior and Lord*.

thinking in literary criticism. Frederick C. Crews of the English Department at the University of California (Berkeley), in *The Pooh Perplex*, has "analyzed" A. A. Milne's perennial children's classic, *Winnie the Pooh*,⁹⁸ through assuming the guise of "several academicians of varying critical persuasions."⁹⁹ Here we have a series of hilarious examples of what invariably happens when interpreters create an "existentially dynamic" relation between themselves and their text. "Harvey C. Window," author of a casebook significantly titled, *What Happened at Bethlehem*, writes on the "paradoxical" in Pooh; for him "all great literature is more complex than the naive reader can suspect," the literal meaning is to give way to "multivalent symbolism," and when the events of the book do not fit his paradoxical categories, they are reinterpreted until they do so. "P. R. Honeycomb," a poetical contributor to the "little magazines" who engages in "intensely personal criticism," brings his existential stance to bear on the text: "In wondering what I shall set down next in these notations, I am reminded of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. The only thing that is certain is that I am uncertain what to set down next, and in this I typify the whole modern age and the collision of elementary particles in particular, a fact I find peculiarly comforting." "Myron Masterson," a distinguished "angry young man" for the past 20 years, writes on "Poisoned Para-

⁹⁸ In a theological paper such as this it seems only right to cite the eminent Latin translation of Pooh: *Winnie ille Pu*, trans. Alexander Lenard (Novi Eboraci: Sumptibus Duttonis, 1960).

⁹⁹ Frederick C. Crews, *The Pooh Perplex* (New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1965).

dise: The Underside of Pooh," employing as his guides Karl Marx, St. John of the Cross, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sacco and Vanzetti, Sigmund Freud, and C. G. Jung; he rejects those finicky "experts" who have said that "there exist differences of opinion among these thinkers," for, after all, "each of them has helped to shape my literary and moral consciousness." "Woodbine Meadowlark," a perpetual graduate student romantically overwhelmed by the *Angst* of existence, paints a poohological picture in exact conformity with his world view:

The most perfect emblem of ignorance is contained in the "Woozle" scene, which gives us Pooh and Piglet (ethereal, pure-hearted Piglet, the real hero of the book) wandering helplessly in circles, following their own darling little tracks and misconceiving their goal ever more thoroughly as they proceed. Is this not the very essence of modern man, aching with existential *nausée* and losing himself more deeply in despair as his longing for certainty waxes?

"Simon Lacerous," editor of the feared quarterly, *Thumbscrew*, describes Pooh as "Another Book to Cross Off Your List" and terminates his acid analysis by completely losing the subject-object distinction between the book and himself; indeed, to use Fuchs' terminology (but hardly in a manner to please Fuchs), the poohological word has "objectified" its interpreter: "The more I think about it, the more convinced I become that Christopher Robin not only hates everything I stand for, he hates me personally." Finally, "Smedley Force," a spokesman for "responsible criticism," completely submerges the text by his interest in literary antecedents, conjectural emendations, and the "discovery" of errors and inconsistencies in the book. Such

endeavors, he is convinced, place us "on the threshold of the Golden Age of POOH!"¹⁰⁰

The fervent desire to avoid just such a "golden age of Pooh" has led more and more literary critics to stop running in hermeneutical circles (the *Doppeldeutigkeit* is intentional) and to seek objective canons of interpretation. The result can be seen in such a superlative study as Elder Olson's "Hamlet and the Hermeneutics of Drama,"¹⁰¹ where, over against all existential blendings of text and interpreter, Olson defines a perfect interpretation as "one which is absolutely commensurate in its basic, inferential, and evaluative propositions with the data, the implications, and the values contained within the work." Theologians should carefully ponder Olson's essay, for, just as he notes that the only alternative to this objective approach is "an endless succession of free improvisations on Shakespearean themes," so modern theology has offered ample evidence that the dialectic hermeneutic yields but a parallel series of unrestrained improvisations on God's Word.

Even in the theological field (where an oddly conservative temperament seems to encourage the persistence of liberal folly long after it has been rejected in other areas of knowledge!) there is evidence that hermeneutics is awaking from an enchanted sleep of half a century. Thus, as we have seen earlier,¹⁰² Cullmann has dis-

¹⁰⁰ The book also provides samples of Marxist and psychoanalytic interpretations of Pooh and some fascinating literary analyses based on specialized hermeneutic principles.

¹⁰¹ Elder Olson, "Hamlet and the Hermeneutics of Drama," *Modern Philology*, LXI (Feb. 1964), 225-37.

¹⁰² Note 19 above and corresponding text.

engaged himself from Barth's "theological exegesis." More significant yet is James Barr's demonstration that the dialectic "revelation through history" approach of the Neo-Orthodox "Biblical theology movement" has colored with theological *a priori* even such an ostensibly reliable work as Kittel's *Wörterbuch*. Albrecht Oepke, who in the *Wörterbuch* claims that "revelation is not the communication of rational knowledge,"¹⁰³ is taken by Barr as "a very bad example" of the absorption of philology by modern theological presuppositionalism.¹⁰⁴ In his inaugural address at Princeton in December 1962 Barr drew the lines even sharper:

God can speak specific verbal messages, when he wills, to the men of his choice. But for this, if we follow the way in which the Old Testament represents the incidents, there would have been no call of Abraham, no Exodus, no prophecy. Direct communication from God to man has fully as much claim to be called the core of the tradition as has revelation through events in history. If we persist in saying that this direct, specific communication must be subsumed under revelation through events in history and taken as subsidiary interpretation of the latter, I shall say that we are abandoning the Bible's own representation of the matter.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Albrecht Oepke, "ἀποκαλύπτω," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, III (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1938), 575.

¹⁰⁴ Barr shows that Oepke's article "is assimilated to modern theological usage to a degree that the actual linguistic material will not bear" (James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* [London: Oxford University Press, 1961], p. 230).

¹⁰⁵ James Barr, "The Interpretation of Scripture. II. Revelation Through History in

From philosophical theology severe criticisms are beginning to be voiced against the epistemological sloppiness of existentially immediate truth claims and against the strangely illogical argument, so frequently heard today, that to expect any kind of objective grounding for Christian affirmations is to exhibit unfaith.¹⁰⁶

In short, the hermeneutic of Luther and of the Lutheran Confessions can hardly be regarded as obscurantist today. In its insistence that "sensus literalis sive historicus . . . solus tota est fidei et theologiae Christianae substantia,"¹⁰⁷ it stands with the most advanced and clearheaded of contemporary scholarship.

But a far more powerful reason than scholarship *per se* impels us to hold on to the Lutheran hermeneutic. We have seen that the central doctrines of the Lutheran faith, such as justification and the Real Presence, were derived from Scripture through the application of this hermeneutic. To the extent that we move away from the literal sense and plain meaning of Scripture, to that very extent we undermine the salvatory doctrines Scripture proclaims and our church has so courageously preached. Desertion of the Lutheran hermeneutic by the introduction

the Old Testament and in Modern Theology," *Interpretation*, XVII (April 1963), 201–202.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), especially pp. 94–104; and several papers in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, (London: SCM Press, 1955), especially C. B. Martin, "A Religious Way of Knowing" (pp. 76–95), and Ronald W. Hepburn, "Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity." (Pp. 227–42)

¹⁰⁷ *WA*, 14, 560.

of nonverbal, nonpropositional, noninerrant conceptions of the Bible is, though we may not wish to see it, the ancient Calvinist *finitum non capax infiniti* heresy rearing its head;¹⁰⁸ and the result will be the eventual loss of the Real Presence and possibly even (as in Calvinistic modernism) the disappearance of any genuine Incarnation.¹⁰⁹ And to substitute a dialectic-existential "event of interpretation" for the objective message of *sola Scriptura* is to fall back into the subjectivistic evils of Pietism, to which more than one critic of Bultmann has attributed his theological failings.¹¹⁰

Moreover, let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that hermeneutics and Biblical inspiration are distinct problems or that hermeneutical decisions have no necessary bearing on our doctrine of inspiration. A few years ago, outside our circles, an exceedingly important paper was published with the title "Hermeneutics as a Cloak for the Denial of Scripture";¹¹¹ in it the author demonstrated by example how a non-literal, nonobjective hermeneutic can sap the meaning out of Scripture so as actually to deny its inspiration. Whenever we reach the point of affirming on the one hand that

the Bible is infallible or inerrant and admitting on the other hand to internal contradictions or factual inaccuracies within it, we not only make a farce of language, promoting ambiguity, confusion, and perhaps even deception in the church; more reprehensible than even these things, we in fact deny the plenary inspiration and authority of Scripture, regardless of the theological formulae we may insist on retaining.

And if church history can teach us anything, it should teach us that seemingly minute problems of Biblical hermeneutics (such as the historicity of Jonah and the leviathan) never remain minute. The decisions made on the "small" problems govern subsequent decisions on larger issues. Scripture is a seamless garment, and when the threads are unraveled at one place, soon the entire fabric gives way. From Jonah to the Resurrection is as short a distance as our Lord Himself placed between them.

Permissiveness in regard to the basic hermeneutic of Lutheranism is the surest way of introducing permissiveness throughout our doctrinal spectrum. Why? Because all doctrine (and this includes the contents of the creeds and confessions) derives from Scripture, and vagueness in Biblical interpretation will most definitely yield, sooner or later, vagueness in the understanding of confessional teaching.¹¹² Let us not soon forget this fact, for more powerful churches than ours have in an unbelievably short time and in our own experience passed doctrinally into a "golden

¹⁰⁸ So John R. Lavik criticizes Joseph Sittler's dialectic view of inspiration (*The Christian Church in a Secularized World* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1952], pp. 72—73).

¹⁰⁹ This should be carefully observed especially by those who assert that the hermeneutic of propositional inerrancy deserves the pejorative epithet "Calvinist-fundamentalist."

¹¹⁰ See, e.g., Reginald H. Fuller, *The New Testament in Current Study*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 30.

¹¹¹ J. Barton Payne, "Hermeneutics as a Cloak for the Denial of Scripture," *Evangelical Theological Society Bulletin*, III (Fall 1960), 93—100.

¹¹² Marlé stresses the related point that hermeneutic issues bear directly on interconfessional dialog and ecumenical discussion (pp. 97—102). Here also an unambiguous hermeneutic is mandatory.

age of Pooh" through hermeneutic contamination.

And if, having reached the end of this somewhat involved essay, we hesitate in our commitment to the Lutheran hermeneutic of literal sense and objective perspicuity, doubtless we can benefit from some maieutic advice. First let us hear from Luther as he stresses the eschatological merit of his hermeneutic as compared with the interpretive approach of the subjectively oriented *Schwärmer*:

Even supposing that our text and interpretation were uncertain or obscure — which it is not — as well as their text and interpretation, you still have this glorious, reassuring advantage that you can rely upon our text with a good conscience and say, "If I must have an uncertain, obscure text and interpretation, I would rather have the one uttered by the lips of God himself than one uttered by the lips of men. And if I must be deceived, I would rather be deceived by God (if that were possible) than by men. For if God deceives me, he will take the responsibility and make amends to me, but men cannot make amends to me if they have deceived me and led me into hell."¹¹³

Finally we shall listen to Gilbert Murray, one of the greatest classicists of our century, who, like Luther, had confidence in words.

¹¹³ Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," *Word and Sacrament III*, p. 305.

[We must] pause before thinking that it is a simple matter to understand and interpret even a book in our own language and belonging to our own civilization, not to speak of one removed from us by great gulfs.

And yet, as I said, we do it. It is a question, I suppose, of caring and of taking pains. I am often struck, when I read controversial literature about Homer, say, or Plato, to notice how comparatively small a part of the field the controversy covers. If you take the whole of what Plato or Homer means to one of the disputants, and the whole of what he means to the other, nine-tenths of the two wholes coincide. And they often coincide in the most important and essential things, those which are felt and do not particularly claim to be talked about. In the language of the stage, the great things "carry" — across the footlights, and across the ages.¹¹⁴

Perhaps the *καίρός* has come for The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod to take stock of herself: to see that she does not become enmeshed in a hermeneutic perplex when the interpretive task is, like most profoundly spiritual things, disarmingly simple: to bow to the full authority of God's Word that it may carry across the footlights to our darkling age.

Deerfield, Ill.

¹¹⁴ Gilbert Murray, *The Interpretation of Ancient Greek Literature; an Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford, January 27, 1909* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), p. 18.