

# **A SUMMARY OF LUTHERAN HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES**

*by*

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## CHAPTER I. CONCERNING THE SENSE OF SCRIPTURE IN GENERAL

I, 1. The sense of Scripture is that which God through the Bible intends to reveal and convey to its readers, setting forth both divine thoughts and truths.

I, 2. Language is the vehicle for making known thought, although other methods may be used for the communication of ideas, such as signs. When faced by a document in writing, the normal assumption of the reader is that the writer wishes to communicate intelligently and desires to be understood. Although a writer's words and sentences might possibly mean various things, the reader does not try to see how many different meanings he can read into a given sentence, paragraph or chapter. The presuppositions with which the believer approaches the Bible is that it is God's Word and that the Triune God employed human authors who knew in most instances what they were penning. According to 1 Peter 1:10ff. the Old Testament prophets did not always understand everything that they were caused to record, especially is this the case in what the Spirit of Christ had them record about the Messiah's suffering, death and glorification.

I, 3. The sense of Scripture is to be sought in and determined by the canonical text of the Bible. This is one of the fundamental principles of Biblical interpretation. Often Biblical readers and expositors read interpretations between the lines, which are not the intent of the text, although there may be times when something may be inferred or suggested by the text that is not explicitly stated. If an exegete attributes a meaning to a passage that is not legitimately there, he is guilty of eisegesis, reading into it what is not there. This is a pitfall into which any interpreter can easily fall.

Words in a sentence must be considered in their syntactical relationships; likewise, sentences or part of a chapter must be dealt with in their context. One book of the Bible will frequently help to understand another book. If the style, the peculiarities, the manner of expression used by the Biblical authors are known, it may modify the reader's understanding of a Biblical author's writings. Besides taking into account the immediate context of a book, there is also the matter of considering the larger context, that is determined by the purpose of the book. The ultimate purpose of making men, women and children wise unto salvation by faith in Christ Jesus must ever be kept in view by the interpreter of both Testaments as the greater purpose of Holy Writ.

The canonical text of Scripture is to be found in the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew and Aramaic Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the Greek New Testament. One of the major differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is the addition by the former of the apocryphal writings to the Old Testament canon, writings that contain teachings contrary to the sixty-six books of the Bible. Protestant interpreters do not recognize the position of the Roman Catholic Church in that it adds as sources for Biblical teaching and ethics the oral tradition, the unanimous consensus of the Church Fathers, the decrees of the church councils, and the papal decrees of the Pope of Rome. The Church of Rome has placed these sources on an equal footing with the written Holy Scriptures, although the Roman Church claims that all doctrines developed by their church are in the Bible in germ form. Even after Vatican II tradition and Scripture are still the two major sources for doctrine and ethics. In the interpretation of the Bible, the

understanding given to texts of the Old and New Testaments by the Mother Church must be accepted. It is claimed by the Roman Church that there are sometimes deeper senses in the Scriptures, which the ordinary reader cannot see and find without the aid of the Roman Church, the official God-appointed interpreter of the Bible. Private interpretation is not only discouraged, but is forbidden. This would also be the basic stance of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Biblical interpreter cannot understand the truths of Scripture, unless he has the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. The Paraclete must guide the Biblical expositor. Some people believe in the "inner light or illumination" aside from the light the Word of God gives. However, an illumination not associated with the Word cannot be true, but often represents what people want to believe and promote. The Spirit enlightens men only through the Word of God.

An error in ascertaining the meaning of a Scripture passage or passages is the contention that the interpretation of such passages is to be determined by the general spirit of the Bible. For example, it is claimed that the doctrine of eternal punishment is contrary to the Bible's teaching on the love and the mercy of God. It is claimed that the command given Joshua for the extermination of the Canaanites was wrong and was not given by God because it contravenes the teachings of Christ in the New Testament.

I, 4. Every word, phrase, or sentence has one and only one definite meaning in a certain context or given connection.

While this principle is true, it must nevertheless be stated that though a word may occur only once, it yet may be used in different

passages in different senses, in the literal and the figurative.

I, 5. Hence the sense of Scripture is sometimes expressed literally, sometimes figuratively. It is necessary to determine when a word is employed in a literal and when in a figurative sense.

## CHAPTER II. CONCERNING THE LITERAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

II, 1. The literal sense is the common, ordinary meaning of a word. This must, however, be distinguished from the original meaning or the etymology which is often obsolete and quite different from the common meaning.

II, 2. The literal or proper sense of a word or phrase must always be accepted as the intended sense, unless there is an absolute necessity for understanding it figuratively.

This is a very important principle for which there is the utmost practical use, not only in the Bible, but universally in human communication. The proper sense has the right of way. Otherwise it would be impossible to be sure of anything enunciated in the Bible. It becomes necessary, however, to depart from the literal sense: a) when that is incompatible with the content or scope of the passage (The scope of a passage is its purpose or aim). For example, in 1 Cor. 3:13 where "fire" does not mean a physical fire, but a means of testing. In Isaiah 51:1, "rock" means human beings who follow the Word of God. In Isaiah 61 the terms "prison" and "captives" refer to the spiritually dead and those held in sin and trouble. In Matthew 8:22, the first "dead" cannot refer

to the physically dead, because such an interpretation would involve an obvious absurdity. See Romans 12:20 where "coals of fire" is not to be understood as real fiery coals, or in Matt. 7:4-5 where "beam" does not refer to a literal beam in a person's eye, or in Luke 13:32, where Jesus calls the ruler Herod a "fox."

b) The literal sense is often explained by parallel passages, in which a word or phrase in question is shown not to be the intended sense. Compare Luke 11:20 with Matt. 12:28; Mal. 4:5 with Matt. 17:11-12.

c) The literal sense can be seen not to be the intended sense when such an interpretation would conflict with doctrines, precepts or historical facts clearly set forth in other Biblical passages. Thus the teaching of a millennium, based on Rev. 20:1-10, conflicts with the rest of Scripture. "Scriptura ex scripturis explicanda est." (The Scriptures are to be explained by other Scriptures.)

On the other hand, it must be noted that there are also a number of reasons for not departing from the literal sense. The mere fact that a word or phrase or passage might be understood figuratively and would give sense if so understood, is not sufficient reason for understanding it in a figurative sense. Again, the mere fact that the literal interpretation is beyond the comprehension of human reason, is no reason for rejection of the literal sense. Here the matter of the many miracles of the Bible, both of the Old and New Testaments would be involved. Thus John 1:14, which teaches that the Infinite God assumed man's finite nature, is not to be repudiated as the meaning of this passage. The miracles that occur in baptism and in the Lord's Supper are not to be interpreted spiritually

instead of literally because of man's limited and finite mind which cannot explain such revelatory truths. Another reason on account of which the literal meaning may not be surrendered involves difficulties which could be taken care of by a figurative interpretation. Another illegitimate reason for not adopting the clearly indicated literal meaning would be that the Church in its past history, as expressed in the writings of the Church Fathers, has interpreted a passage or phrase figuratively. The latter is a stance that must be urged against, especially the Roman Catholic Church's exegesis. Or the fact that the literal meaning would not offer a lofty sense as the figurative explanation would not justify the substitution of the figurative meaning for the literal. Again, the fact that a word is employed in a figurative meaning in one passage does not mean that in all other passages where the same figure occurs that the word cannot be understood in a literal sense. In each instance the context will decide the interpretation.

These rules are extremely important in Biblical hermeneutics and must always be observed and practiced. Violating these rules can lead to serious doctrinal aberrations.

### CHAPTER III. CONCERNING THE FIGURATIVE SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

III, 1. When a word or expression is used in another than the proper sense or is applied to some object different from that to which it is appropriated in common usage, it is used in a figurative sense.

III, 2. Figures of speech are used very extensively in the Bible; figures of speech found in the literature of other nations are represented

in the Holy Scriptures such as: simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, irony, etc.

III, 3. The simile is a figure in which one thing is formally compared to another, so as to impress the mind with the resemblance or likeness. Examples of simile are found in Is. 55:10-11; Jer. 23:29; Is. 1:8; Ps. 102:6. Similes constitute no problem in interpretation.

III, 4. Metaphor is a figure by which from some supposed resemblance or analogy, a name, attribute or action belonging to or characteristic of one object is assigned to another to which it is not literally applicable. Compare the following passages for metaphors: Gen. 49:9, 14, 21; Jer. 2:13; Job 26:8; Deut. 32:40f.; Ps. 51:7; Matt. 5: 13; Ephes. 6:11.

Rules regarding the governing of metaphors are the following: a) The thing from which a metaphor is taken and with which some other thing is compared must be known, compare John 10, the Good Shepherd passage. Therefore, a knowledge of Biblical customs, geography, history, chronology, and archaeology is necessary. b) The scope of a metaphor must be studied. The immediate context may indicate this, or the general scope and context of the chapter in which it is found. Metaphors may have different meanings in different places, compare the use of "lion" in 1 Peter 5:8; Rev. 5:5; 2 Tim. 4:17. The point of comparison must be considered carefully and care must be taken that points of resemblance are not unduly multiplied.

III, 5. Metonymy -- change of name -- is a figure in which the name of one object is put in place of another object, the two being so related



that mention of the one naturally suggests the other. It is founded on the close relation between the two, not the resemblance, e.g., "bottle" for "liquor"; "cup" for "wine." There are various kinds of metaphor:

1) the cause for the effect or the effect for the cause; 2) the subject for the effect, or the effect for the cause; 3) the container for the thing contained, the sign for the thing signified. Cf. Deut. 17:6; Prov. 12:19; Ex. 5:2; Deut. 30:20; Luke 2:30; Lev. 19:32; Gen. 19:32; Gen. 48:38; Is. 1:2; Ps. 23:5; 1 Cor. 10:21; Rom. 3:30; Gen. 49:10, etc.

III, 6. Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which part of a thing is placed for the whole, or a whole for the part, the species for the genus. It is closely related to metonymy. But here it is not customary to change the name from one thing to another, but give the subject a name which signifies something more or less than the writer intended. Acts 2:26; Gen. 6:12; Matt. 12:40. Thus the species is put for the genus, "man" for "human beings" in general, in Ps. 1:1. Cf. "gold" for "money," a "sword" for "weapons"; "Jew and Greek" for all mankind, Rom. 1:16, more rarely the genus is put for the species, as e.g., in Mark 16:15; Col. 1:23; Luke 3:6. There are many different kinds of figures of speech in the Bible.

III, 7. Hyperbole is a figure of speech in which the expression is an evident exaggeration of the meaning intended to be conveyed, or by which things are represented as being much greater or less, better or worse, than they really are. The exaggeration is not intended to deceive but to make the thought or word more effective and emphatic. Nor does the exaggeration deceive, because it is clear to everyone what is meant. It

is a legitimate figure of speech. Cf. "skyscrapers." Note the examples in Ps. 6:6; Ps. 119:136; 1 Sam. 25:37; 1 Kings 1:40; Gen. 13:16; 2 Sam. 1:23; 1 Kings 10:27; Judges 7:12.

III, 8. Irony is a figure of speech in which the language literally means exactly the opposite of what the author intends to say. Irony ridicules while it pretends to praise. Cf. I Kings 18:27; Job 12:2.

III, 9. Personification is a figure of speech by which life is attributed to inanimate things. This figure is used very much in the Old Testament especially. Cf. Ps. 114:3-4; Is. 55:12.

III, 10. Apostrophe is a figure of speech in which the speaker or writer addresses an absent person as if present, a dead person as if living, or an inanimate thing as if it were living. Apostrophe is often combined with Personification, or includes it. Cf. Ps. 114:5ff.; 2 Sam. 1:19ff.

III, 11a. Interrogation is a figure of speech in which a question is asked for the purpose of stating one's own opinion more strongly, not actually to get information. It is called a rhetorical question. Cf. Job 13:7ff.; Rom. 8:33ff.

III, 11b. Exclamation is a figure similar to Interrogation, used to express more strongly one's feelings or thought.

III, 12. Fable, Riddle, Enigma, Allegory and Parable. A fable is a story in which animals and inanimate things are represented as speaking and acting like intelligent men. Some do not recognize that there is such a thing as a fable in the Bible; they call it a parable instead. But see Judges 9:9-15; 2 Kings 14:9; Ezekiel 17:1-10.

A Riddle is a puzzle or conundrum; cf. Judges 14:12ff.

An Enigma is about the same as a riddle; it is a dark saying, like that in Revelation 13:18.

An Allegory is a figure of speech in which one thing is described under the image of another. It is a continued metaphor. Allegory and parable might be considered under chapter 4, concerning types, but strictly speaking they belong here. There are only two or three instances of mystical allegory and parable in the Bible, and these should be classed under "types." Types are such sections of Scripture as have a mystical meaning or sense but also involve some intended literal meaning. There is no intended literal sense in allegories and parables. Cf. Psalm 80 which may be termed a rhetorical allegory. Also cf. Eccles. 12:1ff.

A Parable is a figure of speech in which a narrative, not historical, but true to the facts and experiences of human life, is used to illustrate some spiritual truth. A parable is a continued simile, as an allegory is a continued metaphor. The word comes from Greek paraballo, "to compare something to something else."

#### CHAPTER IV. CONCERNING TYPES

IV, 1. A type is a person, thing, office, institution or event of the Old Testament that is intended by the Holy Ghost to prefigure some corresponding person, thing, office, etc. in the New Testament. That which prefigures is called Type; that which is prefigured is called the antitype. For example, Melchizedek was a type of Christ and Christ is the antitype of Melchizedek. An emblem or figure is of the same nature as a type.

There must be one or more points of resemblance between a type and the antitype. In many respects they may be totally dissimilar; in fact, it is essential that it be so, or else there would be identity. In the antitype there is always something higher or more noble than the type. But in order to be a type, it must be intended as such by God. Only what according to Scripture itself is intended to be a type may be called a type.

The mere fact that there is some resemblance between two persons does not make something a type. However, it is not necessary that Scriptures expressly state it, just so it is indicated in some way. Thus the whole Old Testament is spoken of as an adumbration of the New Testament, cf. Colossians 2:16-17. In Hebr. 4:9 the Sabbath is presented as a type of the everlasting rest in heaven. According to 1 Pet. 2:9-10 the priests were types of the New Testament Christians. The cities of refuge (Numbers 35:6) foreshadow the provisions of the Gospel by which sinners may be saved from death. According to Deut. 18:15 the prophetic office in the Old Testament was a type of Christ's prophetic office. Certain events may be types, e.g., 1 Peter 3:20-21. The exodus from Egypt, the sojourn in the wilderness, the giving of the manna, the supplying of water from a rock -- all were types, cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-11. The lifting up of the serpent of brass was a type of the Cross, John 3:14. The conquest of Canaan, the restoration from the captivity, Jonah in the stomach of the great fish, all were types of great things to come.

The following rules must be observed in analyzing types:

- 1) The question as to which things are described in the Old Testament

are types and of what they are types must be determined by the Scriptures, by either explicit or implicit testimony.

2) We must first ascertain carefully the literal sense of the passage describing a type and then note the points of resemblance between the type and the antitype, and seek to determine in what respects the former prefigures or represents the latter.

3) The Interpreter must not unduly multiply points of comparison, remembering that the type is always inferior to the antitype.

#### CHAPTER V. CONCERNING THE ANALOGY OF FAITH

V, 1. Scripture must be interpreted according to the analogy of faith.

V, 2. The analogy of faith is the clearly revealed Scripture doctrines or in other words -- the body of doctrines derived from those passages in which doctrines are clearly set forth (*sedes doctrinae*). It has become a technical term in theology. The term is derived from Romans 12:6, where the Greek reads: analogian logian tes pisteos. Analogia means proportion, correspondence, harmony, something analogous to. To expound the Scripture according to the analogy of faith is to explain all passages so as not to conflict with other clear passages. Romans 12:6 is interpreted in different ways; but as the term-analogy of faith- is employed, "faith" must mean not the subjective faith of the believer, but objective faith, that which is believed. It means simply that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture. Obscure and doubtful passages are to be interpreted in the light of clear passages.

V, 3. There is in reality agreement and harmony between all the doctrines of Scripture. But in many cases we cannot see this agreement, at least not clearly.

V, 4. We can determine the connection and relation between the various Scripture doctrines only insofar as Scripture itself reveals this connection.

V, 5. When two doctrines which to us seem to contradict each other are both clearly revealed in Scripture, we must accept them both.

The assertions in V, 4 and V, 5 are very important.

V, 6. Obscure passages must be interpreted in accordance with those that are clear and plain; e.g., Revelation 20.

V, 7. Scripture itself teaches that the doctrine of justification is the most important article of faith and that therefore no interpretation that conflicts with this doctrine must be admitted. Cf. Acts 10: 43.

V, 8. An interpretation may be according to the analogy of faith and still not be the correct one.

V, 9. An interpretation which is not according to the analogy of faith cannot be correct.

## CHAPTER VI. THE COMPARISON OF PASSAGES

VI, 1. Parallel passages are passages that are similar; that is there are different passages in which the same words or phrases occur; or which treat of the same subject matter, or express the same idea or doctrine. In the former case the parallel is said to be verbal, in the

latter case real. When two or more passages correspond exactly in words and meaning the parallel is called complete, e.g., Eph. 1:7 and Col. 1:14; Is. 40:7-8 and 1Pet.1:24-25. The parallel is partial or incomplete when the passages correspond only in part, e.g., Rom. 11:32 and Gal. 3:22.

VI, 2. To ascertain the meaning of a word or passage, it is very frequently of the greatest importance to study parallel passages. What is obscure or doubtful in one passage is often clear in another; or one passage may throw light on another, e.g., Hebr. 12:17 might not be understood if we did not compare Gen. 27:34ff. This shows that Esau could not succeed in changing the mind of his father, -- the "repentance" referred to means merely change of mind. So also in Ex. 4:21 and 10:27 compared with Ex. 9:34. Luke 14:26 is to be compared with Matt. 10:37. In Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14 the "abomination of desolation" there spoken of might not be understood aright, if we did not have also Luke 21:20, showing that the desolation referred to is physical, the attack of an army.

However, it should be noted that, because a word or phrase has a certain meaning in one passage, this does not prove that it has that meaning in every passage in which it might occur.

## CHAPTER VII. THE SCOPE OF SCRIPTURE

VII, 1. In interpreting Scripture, it is of the greatest importance to ascertain the scope of the writing under consideration, i.e., the purpose or aim an author has in view.

VII, 2. It is important to distinguish between the "scopus generalis" of the Bible, and the special scope of a particular book of the

Bible or portion of the Bible. The scope of a book or portion of a book must harmonize with the scope of the Bible as a whole.

VII, 3. The general scope of the Bible is Christ, or that Christ is the Savior of mankind. The Old Testament points forward to Christ; the New Testament points back to Him. Some passages speak directly of Him, some show the need for Christ. Thus in John 5:46 Christ Himself says that Moses wrote of Him. Similarly in John 1:45 Philip tells Nathaniel: "We have found the one of whom Moses wrote in the Law, and the prophets did, too, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Passages that are especially important regarding Christ as foretold in the Old Testament are Luke 24:25-27; Acts 10:43; Acts 3:24; Romans 3:21; 1 Peter 1:10. Those interpreters that cannot find Christ in the Old Testament are false interpreters. Lutherans are accused by modern theologians of finding too much of the New Testament in the Old Testament, but this is an a priori judgment on their part. On the other hand one must avoid finding Christ in everything in the Old Testament, because this leads to undue allegorizing and farfetched interpretations.

VII, 4. The special scope of a particular book or portion of a book may be ascertained in various ways: 1) It is sometimes formally stated as in Luke 1:4, either at the beginning or the close of a book. Cf. John 20:31. 2) Sometimes the scope may be ascertained by the circumstances that occasioned the writing, e.g., Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. 3) Sometimes it must be arrived at by careful observation.

#### CHAPTER VIII THE INTERPRETATION OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

VIII, 1. There is a close connection between the Old Testament prophecy



and the New Testament fulfillment, which God Himself has established, which no person, therefore, dare change or set aside. The same connection exists between the prophecy and the inspired account of the fulfillment. For that reason, the Christian exegete must maintain both that which is reported as a fulfillment of prophecy which has taken place by the premeditated counsel and plan of God; and also the report of the fulfillment as decisive for the understanding and interpretation of prophecy. Compare Hosea 11:1 with Matt. 2:15; Jer. 31:15 with Matt. 2:17; Is. 11:1 with Matt. 2:23 and John 1:46; Numbers 21:8-9 with John 3:14-15; Gen. 22:18 with Gal. 3:16; Ps 41:10 with John 13:18.

VIII, 2. Besides this, one must also observe especially the following rules: a) In the interpretation, one must investigate whether there is in the New Testament any report of an event which is expressly declared to be a fulfillment of prophecy. If this is the case, the exegete is relieved of further labors and investigations, and the meaning of the individual words is definitely established. Compare Isaiah 7:14 with Matt. 1:22-23; Micah 5:1 with Matt. 2:5-6. In this matter the parallel passages listed in a cross reference Bible are helpful. However, it is still necessary always to make an independent investigation to determine whether the parallels are real and not only seeming.

b) If one cannot find a passage in which a prophecy is expressly said to be fulfilled, one should then ascertain whether all essentials of the prophecy are found in a certain person or in a certain event; and in such a case one is justified in applying the two to each other, particularly when no other historical manifestation fulfills all the elements of the prophecy.

Compare Daniel 11:36-39 and 12:1 with 2 Thess. 2:3-4; 1 Timothy 4:13 and Matt. 24:15, 21-22, with Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7, 11; Rev. 11:2-3 and Rev. 12:6, 14.

c) Whenever the Old Testament prophecy speaks of the abrogation of the Levitical forms of worship and the end of the Old Covenant, the expositor may recognize a prophecy which refers to the time of the New Covenant or New Testament; compare Jer. 31:31-34 with Hebr. 8:6-13; likewise, wherever the coming of many heathen to the salvation of Israel is treated, or where the glorious restoration of the kingdom of Israel and Judah is proclaimed; compare Is. 11:10-12 with Romans 15:9-12; Amos 9:11-12 with Acts 15:4-17. This is important especially as against chiliasts or millennialists.

d) The Old Testament prophets have often expressed prophecies concerning the blessedness of the kingdom of Christ, to the kingdom of grace and that of glory, in words which apparently speak of temporal success and earthly glory, but which in the exegesis must be understood and explained in a spiritual way, cf. Is. 2:2-5; 11:6-9; 60:17-20; Joel 3:23; Amos 9:13-15; Micah 4:1-5; and also Luke 17:20; John 18:36.

e) Regarding the right understanding of Messianic prophecies, the exegete must not let himself be misled by the circumstances that they often stand directly alongside of historical or temporal statements which have no prophetic import. Compare the framework or context of Is. 7:14; Micah 2:12-13. The exegete must likewise guard against the perversions of many exegetes who in just such prophecies assume a twofold or multiple sense, and set aside the direct Messianic application. Compare the typical

interpretation of 2 Sam. 7:12-17 and Psalm 22.

VIII, 3. In the quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament, it is to be noted that not all by far are literally and exactly reproduced in the New Testament. Compare Lev. 18:5 with Romans 10:5; Ps. 32:1-2 with Romans 4:7-8. In this respect great freedom and variety prevail. Still, these differing forms of the quotations do not conflict with the right teaching concerning verbal inspiration, but rather confirm it. For they can be explained only in this way that the Holy Spirit, the author of the whole Scriptures, quotes Himself and hence can quote freely.

Note that in certain cases, the Old Testament text is expanded in the quotations, compare Luke 4:18 with Is. 61:1. In other cases it is contracted, cf. Matt. 4:15 with Is. 9:1. Oftener the clauses are rearranged, cf. Rom. 9:25 with Hosea 1:10 and 2:23. Or two passages are fused in one and are introduced under one name, cf. Matt. 27:9-10 with Zech. 11:12-13 and Jer. 32:6-15; Mark 1:2-3 with Mal. 3:1 and Is. 40:3. At times a passage may also be cited with opposite wording, but correctly according to the sense, cf. Matt. 2:6 with Micah 5:2. In very many quotations the translation of the Septuagint is retained, cf. Rom. 4:7-8 with Ps. 32:1-2; Rom. 10:5 with Lev. 18:5. This is done even in cases where the Septuagint does not translate accurately, but has hit upon the intended sense of the original text, cf. Luke 3:6 with Is. 40:5 and 52:10; Heb. 10:5 with Ps. 40:7. However, where the Septuagint has not hit upon the intended sense or meaning, the quotation is made in an accurate translation from the Hebrew, cf. Matt. 2:15 with Hos. 11:1; Rom. 11:35 with Job 42:1,2.

There are cases where the Holy Spirit has not bound Himself either to the Septuagint or to the original Hebrew text, but has alluded freely to an Old Testament passage, cf. Eph. 5:14 with Is. 60:1. Or the Holy Spirit has reproduced a Scripture truth freely, cf. John 7:38 with Is. 58:11; 44:3 and 55:1. There are also cases where the Holy Spirit has used the Old Testament in a new sense, cf. Rom. 10:6-8 with Deut. 30:11-14; 1 Cor. 14:21 with Is. 28:11-12.

### LUTHERAN HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

Scripture gives to the exegete valid rules of interpretation which must be followed and obeyed. The hermeneutical axioms, used in Lutheranism and in the Lutheran Confessions, are the following:

1. The Bible must be interpreted according to its own claims that it is the inspired Word of God.
2. The Bible canon is a unit as a whole and in all of its parts and therefore cannot contradict itself.
3. Since the Bible is God's Word in human language, it must be interpreted according to its human side.
4. The interpretation of Scripture is never an end in itself, but its purpose is the glorification of God and the salvation of sinful men.
5. The true interpreter of Scripture is a Christian who possesses the gift of the Spirit and believes that all his abilities come from God.
6. Biblical hermeneutics presupposes that God's Word is in the original languages of the Bible and that this text has been preserved in the extant manuscripts. Therefore, the interpreter operates with the best text available and closest to the original.
7. In determining the meaning of a word of Scripture, one must assume that the author used the word in its common meaning (*usus loquendi*) until it is obvious that he is using a different meaning.
8. The interpretation of every word and passage of Holy Scripture must be in agreement with its context.
9. No interpretation is correct unless it is grammatically correct, that is, according to the grammar and syntax of the language in which it originally was written.
10. Every interpretation of Scripture must be historically correct, that is, the Bible must be understood as a historical book, and be interpreted according to its historical circumstances both of the Bible itself and the world in which it was written.
11. The Bible should be interpreted with the assumption that the author had only one intended sense in mind when he wrote the given Word or passage. (Sensus literalis unus est)

12. Scriptura Scripturam Interpretatur. Scriptura sua luce radiat,  
i.e., Scripture interprets Scripture. The Scripture is its own  
light.
13. All formulation of Christian doctrine must agree with the analogy  
of faith and must never contradict the analogy of faith.
14. All Biblical interpretation must have Christ as its center, teach  
Christ, and glorify Him as Lord and Savior.
15. In the interpretation of figurative language the interpreter seeks  
the point of comparison and does not go beyond it. (Ne tropus ultra tertium)
16. In interpreting types, the interpreter designates as typical those  
portions of Scripture which the Scripture itself indicates as  
typical.
17. In interpreting prophecy, one seeks the interpretation in the fulfillment,  
but all Biblical hermeneutics must be employed to make certain the fulfillment  
matches the prophecy.
18. To the doctrine of Scripture belongs also the valid and the necessary  
deductions from Scripture; not all doctrines of Scripture are  
taught in expressed words.

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LUTHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SCRIPTURE  
and  
BASIC HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES  
Dr. Raymond F. Surburg

Frederick C. Grant, In An Introduction to New Testament Thought stated that the Scriptures testify about themselves as follows:

Everywhere it is taken for granted that what is written in scripture is the work of divine inspiration, and is therefore trustworthy, infallible, and inerrant. The scripture must be "fulfilled" (Luke 22:37). What was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4; I Cor. 10:11); what is described or related in the Old Testament is unquestionably true. No New Testament writer would dream of questioning a statement contained in the Old Testament, though the exact manner or mode of its inspiration is nowhere stated explicitly.<sup>1</sup>

This is the judgment of a critical scholar who does not believe himself bound by Scriptural teaching. But he does accurately enunciate the position of the Scriptures concerning their inerrancy and infallibility.

Emil Brunner claims that the doctrine of verbal inspiration was a doctrine that was known before New Testament times: "The doctrine of verbal inspiration was already known to pre-Christian Judaism. . . and was probably also taken over by Paul and the rest of the apostles."<sup>2</sup> Brunner argues that the doctrine of verbal inspiration was of no great consequence throughout the medieval period because of the use of allegorical interpretation allowed by the scholastics, but that the doctrine was revived in the days of the Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

Luther found the gospel message of free and full salvation in Christ the heart of the Bible. Luther's triumphant rejoicing in the gospel message of grace influenced his whole use of the Bible. The God who spoke (Deus Locutus) is the God who is still speaking in the Bible (Deus loquens), and what He there utters is not primarily and essentially not law, but gospel. In the Scriptures Christ was all in all.<sup>4</sup>

Reinhold Seeberg, in his Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte summarized Luther's position as follows:

The thought of the absolute authority of Scripture finds its culmination in Luther. . . in the inspiration of the Bible. To him the words of Scripture are the real words of God, for the Holy Spirit has comprehended His wisdom and mystery in the Word and revealed it in Scripture, for which reason he (Luther) distinguishes the "manifest external Word" (W. 36,501). The veracious God speaks in Scripture and therefore we must believingly

accept what is written in it (W 40 2, 593). What St. Paul says, the Holy Spirit says, and so whatever opposes the Word of Paul opposes the Holy Spirit (W 10.2, 139f.). According to God's will, the Apostles were to be infallible teachers (Di, 12). They possess authority as do the prophets (ibid, 100). In addition, they received the Holy Ghost so that their words are the words of God. (W 40.1, 173f.) As men, they are subject to sin and error, just as Peter was at Antioch, but then the Holy Spirit corrects their failings (W 40, 1, 195f.). He moves them to speak the truth, even when they commit grammatical errors. . . For this reason Scripture is the Word of God and not the word of man (W5, 184; 8, 597). What is more: God is the Author of the Gospel (W 8, 584) and the Holy Spirit Himself is the writer of Genesis (W 44, 532). Scripture therefore is the very Word of the Holy Spirit (W 7, 638; 46, 545; 47, 133).<sup>5</sup>

Seeberg in his Dogmengeschichte claims that Luther took over the medieval theory of inspiration "and treats Luther's position fairly in that he disclaims that the great Reformer espoused 'mechanical inspiration.'"<sup>6</sup> To depict Luther as a person who was a forerunner of the historical critical method simply is not factual.

Dr. Pieper in his Christian Dogmatics repudiated the assertion that there was a difference between Luther and later Lutherans on the doctrine of inspiration:

The alleged difference between Luther and the Lutheran dogmaticians is pure fabrication. The real difference between Luther and the dogmaticians is that the dogmaticians weakly stammer and re-echo what Luther had taught much more strongly about Scripture from Scripture. Quenstedt, for example, writes concerning Holy Scripture as the inspired Word of God: "The canonical Holy Scriptures in the original text are the infallible truth and are free from every error; in other words, in the canonical sacred Scriptures there is found no lie, no falsity, no error, not even in the least, whether in subject matter or expressions, but in all things and in all details that are handed down in them, they are most certainly true, whether they pertain to doctrines or morals, to history or chronology, to topography or nomenclature. No ignorance, no thoughtlessness, no forgetfulness, no lapse of memory. No ignorance can and dare be ascribed to the amanuenses of the Holy Ghost in their penning the Sacred Writings" (Systema I, 112). This statement of Quenstedt has been called a "horrible assertion." But everything that Quenstedt says about Scripture is said by Luther, including the details mentioned by Quenstedt, only Luther states these things with incomparably greater force. To demonstrate this, we shall record here, first, what Luther says regarding the entire Scripture, and, then, what Luther says on the details concerning which it is claimed that he plainly differed from the dogmaticians.<sup>7</sup>

In this section of his Christian Dogmatics Dr. Pieper argues against those who claim

that Luther had a different doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy than that held by the Lutheran Confessions and the dogmaticians of the seventeenth century.

Dr. Pieper quotes from the St. Louis edition of Luther's works as follows:  
"So, then, the entire Scriptures are assigned to the Holy Ghost" (III:1890); "The Holy Scriptures did not grow on earth" (St. L. VII: 2095).<sup>8</sup> "The Holy Scriptures have been spoken by the Holy Ghost (St. L., III: 1895); Scripture is 'the book of the Holy Ghost' (St. L., IX: 1775. Scripture is God's Epistle addressed to men" (St. L., I: 1055).<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Pieper claims that there are hundreds of similar passages in Luther's writings. Other passages in the St. Louis edition supporting Pieper's position would be:

No other doctrine should be proclaimed in the Church than the pure Word of God, that is, the Holy Scriptures (St. L. IX:87).

In the Book of the Holy Ghost, that is, Holy Scripture, we must seek and find Christ, not only in the promise (gospel), but also in the law (St. L. IX: 1775).

It is our unbelief and corrupt carnal mind which does not allow us to perceive and consider that God speaks to us in Scripture, or that Scripture is the Word of God (St. L. IX: 1800).

In Scriptures you are reading not the word of man, but the Word of the most exalted God, who desires to have disciples that diligently observe and note what he says (St. L. IX: 1818).<sup>9</sup>

Today a great deal is made about the human side of the Scriptures. The emphasis on the humanity of Scriptures is supposed to be a great accomplishment of the historical critical method. Luther was aware of the human side of Scripture, but only in the sense that God employed human writers to record his word. Luther criticized those people who claim that the Scriptures in their entirety are not God's Word because human writers were used. In remarking on I Peter 3:15 Luther said:

But if they take exception and say: You preach that one should not hold to man's doctrine and yet Peter and Paul and even Christ were men-when you hear people of this stamp who are so blinded and hardened as to deny that which Christ and the apostles spoke and wrote in God's Word, or doubt it, then be silent, speak no more with them and let them go. (St. L. IX: 1238).

Luther maintained that the so-called human parts of the Bible must be identified as the Word of God. The Reformer believed that the Holy Spirit inspired David to state what was in his heart. Thus he wrote: "I believe that the Holy Ghost Himself wanted to take the trouble to compile a short Bible and book of illustrations for all Christendom and all saints" (St. L. XIV:21).

Luther regarded the so-called trivial things (levicula) in the Bible as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus the Reformer asserted:

God takes pleasure in describing such lowly things to show and testify that He does not despise or abhor the household, nor wants to be far away from it and from a pious husband, his wife, and children (St. L. II:537ff).

The story of Judah and Tamar, which Luther calls an atrocious tale, is also attributed to the Holy Ghost:

The Holy Spirit is wonderfully diligent in narrating this shameful adulterous story. . . What has induced the most pure mouth of the Holy Spirit to condescend to such low, despised, yes, and even unchaste and filthy things and damnable. . . to teach a lesson to the Church and congregation of God? (St. L. II:120ff).

Concerning the Mosaic creation Luther asserted:

If you cannot understand how it could have been done in six days then accord the Holy Ghost the honor that he is more learned than you are. When you read the words of Holy Scripture, you must realize that God is speaking them (St. L. III:21).

Regarding the differences found in the Four Evangelists Luther wrote:

The Holy Spirit arranged it so that no evangelist agrees with the other in using the same words (St. L. 19:1104).

Concerning the chronology of Scripture, Luther held that whenever the chronological data disagreed with the Bible, the secular writers were to be corrected by the Scriptures:

I make use of secular writers in such a way that I am not compelled to contradict Scripture. For I believe that in the Scriptures the God of truth speaks, but in the histories good people display, according to their ability, their diligence and fidelity (but only as men), or at least that their (The Scriptures) copyists have perhaps erred (St. L. XIV: 1481).



Luther held that the autographs only were inerrant. He realized that there were copyist mistakes in the transmitted manuscripts. He assumed a copyist mistake had been made in Acts. 13:19f, a discrepancy that later texts verified. Luther believed that there was a contradiction between Numbers 14:22 and I Cor. 10:9 (WA 64:66), a problem rectified by recent translations.

### The Authority of Scripture

Luther held that the Church has no right to teach anything contrary to God's Word, or to promulgate teachings independently of it.

Every Christian knows that the Church cannot decree or regulate any thing independently of the Bible. He who, nevertheless, does so belongs to the nominal church only, as Christ says in Jn. 10:27, 'My sheep hear my voice.' They do not hear the voice of the stranger but flee him. . . . Something is not God's Word because the Church says it, but the Church is where the word of God is spoken . . . . Therefore, things that are ordained without the word of God are not ordinations of the Church, but of Satan's synagogue which goes under the name of the Church (WA, 8:49).

Every believer has the obligation and right to evaluate and judge teachers and doctrines in the light of the Scriptures:

Bishops, Pope, the learned. . . have the right to teach; but the sheep (the believers) are to judge whether they are teaching what Christ says, or what a stranger says (WA ,11:409).

On the basis of this principle, Luther wrote:

We should . . . let the Scripture rule and master us, and we should not be masters ourselves according to our mad heads, setting ourselves above Scriptures (WA, 47:367).

On the question whether or not the Scripture contradicted itself Luther asserted:

"that Scripture does not contradict itself nor any one article of faith, even though to our mind a contradiction and inconsistency may exist" (WA, 34:II:385).

Because of this truth Luther was convinced that the Bible was to be explained in an "harmonistic way." The Bible must never be interpreted in a manner that one passage contradicts another, for "the Bible agrees with itself everywhere (St. L.3:18) "It is impossible that Scripture would contradict itself" (St. L. 9:356).

Luther's Christocentric Principles and Its Relationship to the Total Scripture.

That Luther is supposed to have taken a liberal attitude to the Scripture is often the claim of those opposed to verbal and plenary inspiration.<sup>10</sup> Thus Luther is quoted as saying: "If our opponents urge Scripture, we urge Christ against Scripture" (WA 39, 1:47). This assertion of Luther has been cited as evidence that one can use Christ for not accepting clear statements of Scripture. Only that which "Christum treibt" is supposed to be binding on the consciences of men. However, an examination of the context of this passage will show that this is an erroneous interpretation. Luther's discussion concerns the doctrine of justification by grace, which was not accepted by the Romanists. The latter appealed to Scriptural passages as: "Thou shalt keep the commandments" (Dt. 8:6), "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God (Mt. 22:37), "This do, and thou shalt live" (Luke 10:28). When the Roman Catholics used these passages to support the necessity of good works, Luther claimed that against such misuse he would "urge Christ against the Scripture." In speaking about "urging Christ against (such misuse of) Scripture" Luther wrote: "Scripture is to be understood as testifying for Christ, not against Him; it must therefore be considered as referring to Him, or not to be considered true Scripture (WA, 39:I:47). In affirming that Scripture is God's Word insofar as it impels towards Christ, he is laying down a principle of interpretation, not of selection. There is no part of Scripture which does not impel toward Christ. "The whole Scripture exists for the Son" (WA Tr 5, 5585).

When Luther asserted that he would quote Christ against the Scripture, he was saying, that if there were individuals who would take certain words and employ them in a way that would place them in conflict with his actual teachings (as the Romanists did do with the quoted passages), they are not the true Scripture, even though they are taken from the Bible.

Luther is depicted as taking a liberal attitude toward the Bible, because of certain remarks made by him concerning Biblical books that Ancient Church classified as Antilegomena, Luther was following the Ancient Church which had doubts

relative to the canonicity of certain books. Francis Pieper said concerning this matter:

Even the weakest mind can see without much reflection how foolish it is to conclude from an adverse verdict of Luther on a book which he did not regard as canonical that he held liberal views on the inspiration of those books which he regarded as canonical, just the opposite ought to be concluded.<sup>11</sup>

Those who want to have Luther appear as exhibiting a liberal attitude to Biblical studies have also cited W. Link's Annotations to the Five Books of Moses, where Luther says that "some hay, straw, and stubble slipped in at times (into the writings) of these good and faithful teachers" (St. L. 14:150). Dr. Pieper responded to this interpretation as follows:

It is utterly impossible to refer Luther's words to the 'Biblical authors, that is, to the Prophets insofar as they wrote the Bible of the Old Testament. Luther is rather speaking of those periods in the lives of the prophets when they were not moved as infallible organs of the Holy Spirit to write the Holy Scriptures, but when outside the state of (this kind of) inspiration they, just like other people, made the Scriptures of the Old Testament the object of their study and, in doing this, entered 'in a book the good thoughts the Holy Spirit awakened in them during this study. To this study and this writing which took place when they were not inspired to write the Holy Scriptures, refer Luther's words: "Though some hay, straw, and wood (stubble) slipped in at times, etc.' What Luther teaches is that the Prophets of the Old Testament did not always infallibly speak and write God's word, but only at times, temporarily, namely, when inspired by the Holy Ghost. Read his remarks on Gen. 44:18: 'The Holy Ghost did not always touch the hearts of the prophets.'<sup>12</sup>

#### LUTHER'S HERMENEUTICS

Not every person can understand the Scriptures according to Luther. Regarding this requirement the Reformer asserted:

No human being sees one iota of Scripture unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they knew how to tell and set forth all that the Bible contains, yet they are unable to feel and know how it. . . For the Spirit is needed for the understanding of the Bible as a whole and its every part (WA, 18:609).

The Holy Bible wants to be dealt with fear and humility, and one can get into its meaning better by studying it with pious prayer than with keenness of intellect. It is therefore impossible for those who rely on their bare ingenuity (nudo ingenio) and rush into the Bible with dirty feet, like pigs, as though Scripture were a sort of human knowledge, not to harm themselves and others, whom they instruct. So utterly they fail to understand it (WA, 1:507).

Luther insisted that a passage be studied in the light of its context:

It will not do to tear a statement out of its context and then urge it (drauf pochen, use it as a strong proof). One might consider the meaning of the entire text, the relation of its thoughts to one another (wie er an einander hängt (WA, 18:69).

Scripture must interpret Scripture, passages that treat of the same subject or ideas must be used to explain one another:

The Bible wants to interpret itself by comparison of passages from everywhere. . . . And the safest of all ways to search for the meaning of Scripture is to strive for it by comparison of the passages (WA, 14:556).

However, Luther warns against placing passages together for purposes of elucidation that do not belong together;

It is not enough to cite a different passage without the slightest regard to whether it proves the same point or something else. No mistake is more easily and commonly made in dealing with the Bible than bringing together Scripture passages that are different, as though they were identical (WA, 18:728).

Luther and the other Reformers believed that the Bible was clear and plain and that any converted believer could understand the Scriptures as far as his spiritual needs were concerned. Against the papacy he stated:

No clearer book has been written than the Holy Bible. . . . It is a horrible . . . crime against Scripture and all Christendom to say that the Bible is dark and not so clear that everybody may understand it in order to teach and prove his faith (WA, 8:236).

Luther was opposed to the allegorical method, a methodology that had been in vogue for over a thousand years in the history of the Church.

#### Luther and the Literal Sense

In commenting on Isaiah 36:6 Luther wrote:

The Christian reader should devote his first effort to searching what is called the literal sense. It alone is the entire substance of faith and Christian theology; it holds its own in tribulation and temptation and gains victory over the gates of hell and triumphs to the praise and glory of God. But allegory is often uncertain and unreliable and very unsafe as a prop of faith, since it frequently depends upon human conjecture and opinion. If anyone leans on it, he is leaning on the reed of Egypt (WA, 14:560).

Luther insisted that the Scriptures be interpreted in their literal sense because they had been given by God:

The Holy Spirit is the plainest Writer and Speaker in heaven and on earth. His words can therefore have no more than one sense, and it is the most obvious sense. This we call the literal or natural sense. . . It is . . . surer and safer to abide by the words in their simple sense (WA, 23:92).

Luther was strongly opposed to those who departed from the literal meaning of the text. When the text should be understood in a literal manner, the Reformer believed it was wrong to deal with it figuratively:

It is the manner of all who evade arguments by means of figurative language, arrogantly holding the text itself in contempt and having for their aim merely to pick out a certain term and twisting and crucifying it on the cross of their own opinion, with utter disregard of the circumstances, of the preceding and following context, and of the intent and purpose of the writer (WA, 18:713).

Luther insisted:

Whoever is so bold as to give the words of Scripture a meaning that differs from the sense that their simple sound confers is obliged to prove his explanation from the text before him or from the article of faith (WA, 23:92).

Neither a conclusion or a figure of speech should be admitted in any place of the Bible, unless evident contextual circumstances or the absurdity of anything obviously militating against an article of faith requires it. On the contrary, we must everywhere adhere to the simple, pure and natural meaning of the words. This accords with the rules of grammar and the usage of speech which God has given men (WA, 18:700).

Luther opposed Zwingli on the interpretation of the words of institution. Zwingli rejected the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper and consequently the fact that the recipient also received the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Luther was completely against Zwingli's alloeosis. Accepting Zwingli's interpretation would result in uncertainty and obscuring the teaching of Christ. Luther warned his readers against this faulty method of interpretation:

Beware, beware, I say, of that alloeosis. It is the devil's mask; for from it is born such a Christ, according to whom I would not wish to be a Christian (WA, 26:319).

Luther was aware of the fact that the Scriptures do employ figurative language. The Reformer knew that there were parables and types in the Bible, but he also believed that when these literary forms were employed that they could be recognized. The normal rule is to follow the literal meaning of the text.

If everyone is allowed to invent conclusions and figures of speech according to his own whim, nothing could be determined and proved to a certainty concerning an article of faith. . . . We must avoid as the most deadly poison all figurative language that the Bible itself does not force us to find in a passage (WA, 18:700f).

Refusing to abide by the plain and literal meaning of the Bible was a problem in Luther's time just as it is in the 20th century. Barth, Brunner, Bultmann have resorted to methods that reject the clear and literal meaning of the Scriptural text. Form criticism and Bultmannian demythologizing resort to questioning the literal character of texts that give no indications that they are parabolic or symbolical.

Luther warns against doing violence to the plain meaning of the Bible:

No violence should be done to the words of God. . . ; but as far as possible we should retain them in their simplest meaning and take them in their grammatical and literal sense, unless an obvious circumstance plainly forbids it (WA, 6:509).

We must not commit sacrilege against the word of God and without warrant of any express passage of Scripture give a word a meaning that differs from its natural sense (WA, 11:434).

### The Attributes of Scripture

For the Reformer of Wittenberg Scriptures were not only authoritative and normative but they also contained a causative authority, that is, they were powerful, creating and sustaining faith and engendering works, the evidence of a justifying faith. "In other words," wrote Dr. J. T. Mueller, "Luther regarded the divine Word of Scripture as the efficacious means of grace, by which the Holy Spirit works faith in men and keeps them in the true faith to the end. In many respects this causative authority of the Bible is central in Luther's theological thought and reformatory work. Against his Romanist and enthusiastic opponents he

consistently defends the divine Word as both the normative and the causative authority of the Christian faith and life."<sup>14</sup>

Luther taught that "faith cometh by learning and preaching by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17); "The words that I speak unto you are spirit and life" (John 6:36); "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16). This did not mean that Luther ascribed a magical power to the Word of God, but the Word of God became the means through which the Holy Spirit operated. Luther was aware of the problem of why some believed and others did not. This is a problem which he did not endeavor to solve, considering it a mystery that would be answered in heaven (Rom. 11:33-36; I Cor. 13:9-12). The Wittenberg Reformer did not formulate the doctrine of the efficacy of the Word as it was done during the age of orthodoxy. And yet what the later Lutheran dogmaticians formulated as the attributes of Holy Writ are found scattered through Luther's writings.<sup>15</sup>

In contradistinction to Rome, Luther stressed the sola Scriptura as the only source of authority. "Back to the divine Word" however, did not mean the return to the Bible as a divine set of rules, a legal code, but to the living and dynamic Word of God, by means of which the Holy Spirit accomplishes His saving work in men. Seeberg wrote that Luther believed that the Word was the sole authority of the Christian Church and that this word interpret itself, and that it becomes such an authority because of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit."<sup>16</sup> The same Spirit who inspired the objective Word causes the individual believer to have subjective certainty about the doctrines of the Holy Scripture. Luther wrote very clearly: "The Holy Spirit must address us through the Word of God."<sup>17</sup> Again he asserted: "The content of Scripture is true and certain per se, but we perceive this fact only inasmuch as by its objective operation we experience it subjectively."<sup>18</sup>

Luther insisted on the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Word, in Scripture and the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit was not to be separated from the Word, a position he took against enthusiasm and spiritualism. Seeberg quoted the following passages from Luther:

Since God has now permitted His holy Gospel to go forth, He deals with us in two ways: first outwardly, and second, inwardly. Outwardly He deals with us through the oral Word [oral, that is, the proclaimed Word, which Luther emphasized since the Roman Catholic Church had practically ceased preaching the gospel], or the Gospel and through visible signs, as Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Inwardly He deals with us through the Holy Spirit and faith. . . but always in such a way and in this order that the outward means must precede the inward means. So, then, God has willed that He will not give to anyone the inward gifts [of the Spirit and faith] except through the outward means.<sup>19</sup>

In describing Luther's teaching on the causative authority of Scripture Seeberg wrote:

The indissoluble connection of Word and Spirit proves itself also by this that the Spirit grants to anyone nothing else and nothing more than that which the Word, heard by him says. He goes further than the Word goes. The Holy Spirit therefore does not enlarge the area of revelation, but puts into the hearts of men only what the words declare.<sup>20</sup>

In his explanation of the Third Article Luther taught that the Holy Spirit has called us by the Gospel; it was not by man's strength and reason that he became a Christian.

#### The Perspicuity of Scriptures

Over against Rome and the enthusiasts Luther reaffirmed the clarity of the Scriptures. In an exposition of Psalm 37 Luther stated:

If anyone of them [the papists] should trouble you and say: "You must have the interpretations of the Fathers since Scripture is obscure," then reply: "It is not true! There is no clearer book upon earth than the Holy Bible, which in comparison to all other books is like the sun in its relation to all other lights. They say such things only because they want to lead us away from Scripture and elevate themselves to the place of masters over us, in order that we might believe their sermons based upon their own dreams. . . It is indeed true, some passages in Scripture are obscure, but in these you find nothing but what is found elsewhere in clear and plain passages. . . . Do not permit yourselves to be led out of and away from Scripture, no matter how hard they [the papists] may try; for if you get away from Scripture, you are lost; then they will mislead you as they please. But if you stay in the Bible, you have won the victory. . . Be absolutely certain that there is nothing else than the same clear sun behind it. So if you find an obscure passage in Scripture, do not be alarmed, for certainly the same truth is set forth in it which in another place is taught plainly. <sup>21</sup> If you cannot understand the obscure, then adhere to the clear.



Luther believed that the Scriptures were clear in a threefold way. To quote J. T. Mueller:

A comparison of Luther's expressions on the perspicuity of Scripture shows that he speaks of clarity of the Bible in a threefold way, namely, its grammatical clarity, its spiritual clarity and its essential clarity.<sup>22</sup>

By the grammatical perspicuity is meant that any reader could understand the words and expressions in the Scriptures because they are clear in conforming to the normal usage of language. By spiritual perspicuity is meant that the Scriptures are clear to those who believe in Christ Jesus. Luther wrote: "Take Christ out of the Bible, then what more will you find in it?" (St. L. XVIII:168ff). The essential perspicuity relates to an understanding of the mysteries of faith, discussed by Paul in I Cor. 13:9-12.

#### The Sufficiency of the Scriptures

In Christian teaching we must not declare anything which the Holy Scripture does not teach" (St. L. XIX:593). Again: "The apostles proved all their teaching from Scripture. So we too must exercise ourselves in it that it is to us the norm of all things" (St. L. IX:915). This shows that Luther held the Bible sufficient to establish all teachings and that the laity could judge the clergy's teachings and lives by the Bible's clear and authoritative doctrines and precepts. The Scriptures were all sufficient for salvation.

During the hectic times of the early sixteenth century, when Luther was grappling with the theological questions of his time, he wrote these words to George Spalatin:

In the first place, it is most certain that one cannot enter into the Scriptures by study or skill alone. Therefore, you should begin by praying that, if it pleases the Lord to accomplish something through you for His glory, and not for your own glory or that of any other man, he may grant you a true understanding of His words. For there is no master of the Scripture other than Him who is the author. Hence it is written, "They shall be taught by God."<sup>23</sup>

# FOOTNOTES

1. Frederick C. Grant, An Introduction to New Testament Thought (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 75.
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3. Ibid., p. 114.
4. J. Theodore Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," in John F. Walvoord, editor, Inspiration and Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), p. 93.
5. Reinhold Seeberg, Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, vierter Band, erste Abteilung, Die Lehre Luthers, IV, 1 (Leipzig, 1933), IV, 1, p. 414f. The symbol "Di" in Seeberg's Dogmengeschichte stands for: Die Disputationen, Dr. M. Luthers, ed. Drews, 1896. Cf. p. 55.
6. Ibid.
7. Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), I, pp. 277-278.
8. Ibid., p. 278.
9. Ibid., pp. 276ff.
10. Cf. Warren Quanbeck, "The Bible," in Robert Bertram, editor, Theology in the Life of the Church (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 22-23.; Ralph W. Doermann, "Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation," in Fred W. Meuser and Stanlet D. Schneider, editors, Interpreting Luther's Legacy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), pp. 18-20.
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13. These quotations are taken from Uuras Saarnivaara, Hathe God Said? (Minneapolis: Osterhus Publishing House, Inc., 1957), pp. 12-57.
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15. Ibid., p. 108.
16. Seeberg, op. cit., p. 411.
17. Spiritus Sanctus muss uns ansprechen Verbo Dei, W 29, 580, Seeberg, op. cit., p. 411.
18. Seeberg, op. cit., p. 411.
19. W 18,136; 33, 189ff.; Seeberg, op. cit., p. 381f.
20. Ibid., p. 338.
21. St. L. V:334ff. Cf. John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), pp. 139-141.
22. Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," op. cit., p. 111.
23. Theodore Tappert, Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), p. 112.

# THE NEW HERMENEUTIC VERSUS THE OLD HERMENEUTICS IN NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

by

Raymond F. Surburg

The new hermeneutic is a development in continental theology after World War II. It has developed from the hermeneutics of Rudolph Bultmann.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the new hermeneutic it is necessary to look at the thought of Bultmann. In the 1920's Bultmann joined Barth in protesting against the old liberalism. When Barth published his famous Römerbrief (1919) Bultmann welcomed it as a breakthrough in Biblical Interpretation. However, the friendship with Barth did not last too long because Barth did not employ the historical critical method even though he was not in principle opposed to its use. Bultmann had been thoroughly indoctrinated in critical methodology and his entire scholarly endeavor was shaped by its use. Bultmann took the position that nothing which contradicts science can be accepted even though clearly taught in the Bible. Bultmann's hermeneutics was thoroughly opposed to any form of supernaturalism, which in essence means cutting out the very heart of that which is distinctive about Biblical teaching, whether found in the Old or the New Testaments.<sup>2</sup> Any doctrine which goes against reason must therefore be rejected. Obviously miracles cannot be taken seriously. Doctrines like the incarnation, resurrection, ascension and a visible return of Christ are out of the question for any person who desires to be intellectually respectable. This rules out the concept of prophecy and eschatology.

Over against the Old Testament Bultmann took a very negative attitude.<sup>3</sup> Christians may entirely ignore the Old Testament or if they believe it should be used, then its value would be as law to show need for the Gospel. The Old Testament is a totally human document, at best preparing the way for Christianity. For Bultmann there is no such concept and reality as holy history or theology of

history, only events of salvation. Since Bultmann espoused existentialism early in his life, even before coming into contact with the existentialist philosopher Heidegger, he rejects all precritical notions according to which man casts his religious experiences into the form of an external, worldly, historical event.<sup>4</sup> For the Marburg professor this is a myth and the interpreter must get rid of the form that the myth has assumed and yet retain the religious intention of the myth.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Bultmann differs from the old liberalism of Harnack, one of Bultmann's teachers.

With Kierkegaard, Bultmann held that the inner side of religious experience was existential in character, thus here also he departs from the earlier twentieth century theological liberalism.<sup>6</sup> The myth must be peeled off in order to find the existential meaning within it.

Dr. Ramm claims that Bultmann's "existentialism in turn leads him to the notion that the Word of God must be address which summons a man to decision either for or against the address. Hence the message of the New Testament as address is kerygma. This in turn must lead to powerful kerygmatic preaching from the sacred desk."<sup>7</sup> Bultmann's theological system is a synthesis of these different strands and enabled him to win away from Barth the theological leadership of European scholarship as found in Germany and Switzerland.<sup>8</sup>

The new hermeneutic has utilized all of Bultmann's contributions. The proponents of the new hermeneutic are convinced that Bultmann's hermeneutics constitutes a new breakthrough in relationship to the old hermeneutics, to which there can be no return.<sup>9</sup> However, the new hermeneuticians believe that Bultmann did not realize all the implications that must follow if his positions are valid. Ernst Fuchs, Gerhard Ebeling and Gadamer are all convinced that the new hermeneutic is the answer to correct Biblical interpretation. Philosophically and theologically the new hermeneutic is more comprehensive than anything so far

advocated. The older Biblical and sacred hermeneutics was too narrow in its understanding of the issues of the interpreting of a Biblical text.<sup>10</sup> Earlier already, it is claimed, Schleiermacher and Dilthey had suggested that interpretation was far more comprehensive than traditionally conceived and practiced. Historical-philological interpretation was inadequate according to this new school of interpretation. Wilhelm Dilthey, greatly influenced by Hegel, claimed that the stream of history had to be experienced in one's self before *Verstehen* or comprehension could occur.<sup>11</sup> Erklärung was placed in opposition to mere Verstehen. It was the philosopher Heidegger who is supposed to have grasped this more comprehensive function of hermeneutics.

The new hermeneutic follows Heidegger in its claim that language itself is interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Fuchs, Ebeling and their followers also claim that language is existential in character. When an individual speaks he is said to be interpreting, thus the language act is hermeneutical. It is at this juncture where the problem arises for many students of the new hermeneutic for they note that here a radical shift occurs. Hermeneutics is no longer fundamentally the setting forth of principles by which the text of Scriptures is understood, but a profound investigation of the hermeneutical function of speech. In some instances the older hermeneutics is employed but there is much more involved in the interpretation of ancient Biblical texts.

The new hermeneuticians wish to eliminate the older psychologism and historicism that has characterized the older theological liberalism that has been found wanting by Bultmann and the post-Bultmannians.<sup>13</sup> According to psychologism the text and events are interpreted in psychological terms; while historicism was guilty of explaining everything in terms of the law of causality. Both approaches were considered deficient because of the relativistic stance from which they spoke. By understanding the word ontologically the new hermeneutic believes it has avoided this dilemma.

The big problem in trying to understand the new hermeneutic is the manner in which its proponents use the vocable "word." It is difficult to grasp the various nuances of this word. Sometimes "word" seems to mean existential truth which reveals itself in speech. At other times it means speaking itself; yet at other times it refers to the existential truth contained in the text. Sometimes "word" is said to be the Word of God that breaks forth from a sermon. Some of the advocates of the new hermeneutic seem to imitate the procedure of the logical positivists who classify sentences into different categories. In reading the literature one notes that some sentences are programmatic, that is, they endeavor to state the structure of hermeneutics and understanding as such. Still other sentences are existential because they do not merely attempt to impart information but their purpose is to involve the reader in participation and profound communication. Still other sentences are factual or scientific, their purpose is to inform, whether it be on a popular level or more theoretical (light is composed of rapidly moving photons). Other sentences are formal and only set forth relationships as in logic, mathematics, or grammar.

It is within this context of "word" that the new hermeneutic delineates its existential understanding of the Word of God. For Ebeling and Fuchs, the Word of God is more of a movement than an idea. Within the text of Scripture God communicates existentially; the Word of God must be dug out of the text by exposition and exegesis of the text. The Word of God is received by the listener as such when he makes a decision and accepts it by faith. In describing the new hermeneutic Ramm wrote: "Existential considerations permeate each step of the procedure. For this reason the new hermeneutic is very critical of the so-called neutral, objective, scientific approach to exegesis as represented by Oscar Cullmann. No such exegesis is possible. The expositor must come to the text with existential understanding of religious matters (Vorverst ndnis), but he may not come with a

prejudice (Vorurteil) as to what the text must say (as allegorical exegesis)."<sup>14</sup>

The new hermeneutic, following Bultmann, claims that faith cannot elaborate its content. Bultmann and the post-Bultmannians teach that the New Testament authors had true faith and that they are only witnesses to the Christ event. According to the new hermeneutic the New Testament writers were not exempt from error; in reporting the Christ event they introduced materials that cannot be accepted today. Bultmann insisted that the New Testament writings needed to be demythologized, that myth vitiated the reports of the information regarding the life of Christ. The foreign materials (foreign to the existential communication of the Word of God in the texts) must be criticized as to the contents (known as *Sacchkritik*, content criticism), which is a characteristic of the new hermeneutic.

In this respect Barth is much better than Bultmann and his followers. While Barth does not hold to the old Protestant doctrine of inspiration as held by Calvin, Luther and other reformers,<sup>15</sup> he does believe the content of the text. Barth, for example, believes in the existence of angels,<sup>16</sup> while for the Bultmannians this simply cannot be accepted in a scientific age. Since people do not rise from the dead once they have become deceased, Bultmann rejected the statement that Christ rose from the dead. Such a belief the modern interpreter may reject because it is contrary to the scientific understanding of the way nature functions. Content criticism became an essential element in the demythologization program of Bultmann as outlined in his famous essay of 1941. The content criticism of the new hermeneutic goes even beyond that of Bultmann's demythologization and is applied to the entire New Testament.

Bultmann had made much of the proclamation of the kerygma in preaching. The new hermeneuticians extend the kerygmatic proclamation of the New Testament to Christian preaching. According to this new school of interpretation the preacher must pose certain questions to the text, questions that man's existentialistic

situation prescribe. The text in turn must ask questions of the interpreter. There must be an existential encounter with the text. Christian preaching, however, must also be relevant for not only the text but also the historical and cultural situation of the hearers determines the kerygmatic proclamation of the sermon. For the new hermeneuticians the essence of kerygmatic preaching is announcing God's love and forgiveness in Christ, and calls upon the hearer to a decision of faith.

The new hermeneutic is not limited to theology but claims also the areas of philosophy and other branches of human knowledge. Ebeling, Fuchs, Gadamer, Funk claim that the new hermeneutic should also be the foundation for the reconstruction of philosophy, for a new program in epistemology. The liberal arts need also to be built upon the new foundation furnished by this new system of interpretation.

The new hermeneutic in theology does not merely mean some additional insight regarding the science of hermeneutics, it is completely revolutionary to the extent that its proponents claim it actually is a new theology.<sup>17</sup>

#### Evaluation of the New Hermeneutic

What shall we say to this new hermeneutic? A very important question in theology is the significant question: What is the source of theology? What is the source for religious authority? There is no more important question! We have grown accustomed to answering that Scripture alone is the source and norm of all doctrine. We believe that the Bible is God's Word. On the pages of the Old and New Testaments God has seen fit to reveal to us what He would have us believe concerning Himself, concerning His nature, concerning His acts, concerning His plan of salvation. Being God's infallible Word the Bible is the source of Christian doctrine, the only source and norm. We call this the Sola Scriptura principle, a very important issue in the Reformation, in the confessional



writings that followed, and in the writings of the seventeenth century dogmatists.<sup>18</sup> And very closely related with this Sola Scriptura principle is its corollary; namely, since there is no higher authority than God's Word itself, and since there is no additional revelation to which we may appeal, the basic hermeneutical principle must be "let Scripture interpret Scripture," scriptura<sup>19</sup> scripturam interpretatur.

However, it is just at this point that the new hermeneutic moves away from the traditional position and goes in a completely different direction. It calls the traditional view which we have outlined as the static concept as opposed to the dynamic. In fact, Ernst Fuchs, Ott and others have gone so far as to label the traditional view "a manifestation of unfaith." If this objection were motivated from the concern that doctrine sometimes has been simply taught for doctrine's sake; if this criticism would be prompted because often doctrine has been intellectualized and not related to life, then we would be in hearty agreement with the criticism of the old theology as being static!

But a reading of the literature advocating the new hermeneutic will show that Ebeling, Fuchs, Gadamer, Robinson and others are not merely interested in making the applications in sermons more life-related, but they are saying that the Gospel message itself needs reformulating.<sup>20</sup> All those teachings of the Gospel message that modern man finds difficult to accept are to be trimmed away. It is actually a different Gospel that Ebeling, Fuchs, Ott, Bultmann, Robinson are proclaiming, in which all such external forms as faith in a pre-existent Jesus, the Virgin Birth, a physical resurrection of Jesus, a vicarious atonement, a second coming of Christ in the clouds must be removed.<sup>21</sup> Even a hasty perusal of the new hermeneuticians will make it clear that it is this type of Gospel that men like Bultmann, Ebeling and Fuchs are convinced should be offered to our generation, a gospel that will not require them to accept the so-called mythological form of the New Testament message but only its basic contents, a gospel

which will not require modern man to sacrifice his thinking! Bultmann has written:

Let us think simply of the newspapers. Have you ever read anywhere in them that political or social or economic events are performed by supernatural powers such as God, angels or demons? Such events are always ascribed to natural powers, or to good or bad will on the part of man, or to human wisdom or stupidity . . . therefore modern man acknowledges as reality only such phenomena or events as are comprehensible within the framework of the rational order of the universe. He does not acknowledge miracles because they do not fit into this lawful order. When a strange or miraculous accident occurs, he does not rest until he has found a rational cause.

Bultmann's conclusion, followed by all the new hermeneuticians is to scrap the supernatural because modern man cannot accept it.

This means that for Bultmann, Ebeling, Fuchs, Robinson, and others the source of religious authority is Scripture and modern culture. According to these men the New Testament exegete or preacher is to begin with the New Testament kerygma, i.e. the faith of the early church, but then this faith must be shaped so that it becomes acceptable to modern culture and philosophy. When this new formulation and message is proclaimed and men respond to it, then it is "language event" (so Ebeling); according to Fuchs it is "word event." They both agree on this that when this reformulation is made and men respond then the message is Word of God; this is what for Fuchs and Ebeling represents a dynamic word versus a static word.

For any Bible-believing Christian who follows the literal interpretation this is quite different from the historic Protestant principle that Scripture is the only source and norm of Christian doctrine. It surely is not in harmony with the stance of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. Many scholars, therefore, both in Europe and in America find the new hermeneutic objectionable on the ground that it changes the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1952 at the assembly of the United Lutheran Church of Germany (the confessional grouping of Lutheran provincial churches) a pastoral letter condemned the theology of demythologizing as "false

doctrine."<sup>23</sup> This confessional stand by the bishops was then followed by an officially sponsored volume in which a number of theologians explained their views in greater detail. In response Bultmann and his German followers retorted by claiming that the Lutheran bishops had betrayed the Reformation and attempted to show that Luther was on his side.

No one will accuse the American theologian Nels Ferre as being a conservative theologian. In his book, Searchlights on Contemporary Theology, the Vanderbilt University theologian wrote:

All attempts to claim that Bultmann has done away merely with an outworn cosmology, leaving the ontology of the Gospel undisturbed, are stuff and non-sense.<sup>24</sup>

Bultmann is not merely "bringing Christianity up-to-date by differentiating between outworn and indestructible events of the Christian faith. He is the pioneer of the most radical retranslation and transcalculation of faith itself into existential categories."<sup>25</sup>

S. H. Ogden, who appears to be sympathetic to some extent with the new hermeneutic, is ready to admit that the new hermeneutic is a revival of liberalism. He writes:

We have aligned ourselves with that 'liberal' tradition in Protestant Christianity that counts among the great names in its history those of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Hermann, Harnack, and Troeltsch and many more recently Schweitzer and the early Barth and, in part at least, Bultmann.<sup>26</sup>

Walter Marshall Horton, in his recent publication Twentieth Century Christianity classifies Bultmann and his disciples as Post-Barthian liberals. It is quite evident that the new hermeneuticians have retained a residue of the liberalism of the 19th century.<sup>27</sup> Both liberals and conservatives are in agreement that the new hermeneutic is neo-liberal.

In other respects the new hermeneutic is also deficient and in error when evaluated in the light of the interpretative principles used in the Lutheran

Confessions. Thus in its restriction of its understanding of supernatural it destroys prophecy and with that any real significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Church, and thus is a return to the position of Marcion in the 2nd century. By its emphasis upon existentialism, most of the traditional dogmatic teachings are eliminated. By its interpretation that faith is purely a relationship between persons and need not have a doctrinal content, the whole foundation for Christian doctrine has been undermined.

Dr. K. Runia of Australia, in an essay delivered at the Annual Public Lecture of the Tyndale Fellowship of Australia, gave the following evaluation of Bultmann and the new hermeneutic:

In denying all this (the doctrine of the atonement) the new school of demythologizing performs one great destructive reduction of the Gospel. Not only are all aspects that are not susceptible of existential interpretation eliminated from the Bible, but those that are open to such an interpretation are reinterpreted in such a way and to such an extent that the real Gospel completely vanishes into the midst of essential self-analysis. David Cairns has put it very pointedly in these words: "The actual result is to bring before modern man a gospel without the Gospels, so that not without justification we may quote Mary Magdalene and say: 'They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him'"<sup>28</sup>

The only teaching of the Apostles' Creed that has remained intact, according to Bultmann, is the assertion that he suffered, was crucified, died and was buried. The Virgin Birth, the conception caused by the Holy Spirit, Christ's resurrection, ascension and visible return are all denied.

#### The Relationship of the New Hermeneutic to the Old Testament

While Bultmann and his followers primarily operated with the Books of the New Testament and developed an approach that has revolutionized the understanding of the New Testament writings, yet it should be acknowledged that in some respects Bultmann was indebted to critical Old Testament scholars for some of the basic hermeneutical approaches he used.

The rejection of the supernatural was not first promoted by Bultmann and his devotees, but dated back to the days of the Enlightenment, when the uniqueness of the Old Testament was questioned and much of its historical data were reinterpreted as myth and saga. In some respects the antisupeaturalism of Bultmann was already adopted by the negative literary critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Old Testament criticism rejected the idea that the coming of the Messiah was foretold in many passages of the Old Testament, a stance the New Testament writers aver time and time again. This was also the position of Christ who claimed that in His ministry He was fulfilling direct Messianic predictions about His person and work. Bultmann is simply following critical Old Testament scholars when he denies the existence of Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. In fact, like critical Old Testament savants, Bultmann rejects prophecy per se, because that would be contrary to what we know about the ability of men to anticipate and know the future and against the idea of a closed universe.

It was Hermann Gunkel, a German Old Testament scholar, who developed the hermeneutical approach known as form criticism (German: Formengeschichte). As early as 1901 Gunkel had set forth his ideas on Form Criticism in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis. The ideas explicated in this commentary denied to Genesis any historical and factual value, but argued that in the Genesis volume there were different kinds of sagas employed. The Sitz-im-Leben for the different types of literature had to be determined and then the interpreter had to try to understand how the smaller units of literary types had been embodied into cycles of tradition. Gunkel operated with myth, saga, legends. The character of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges and I Samuel was changed by Gunkel's new hermeneutics. Books like Jonah, Esther and Daniel were relegated to the non-historical category by virtue of the fact that all three were said to

represent a special type of literary genre, which forbade them as was once the case, from being understood as recording true historical happenings.

In both the Old and New Testaments' interpretation today the new hermeneutic is being employed. The result has been that there is being fostered in theological seminaries and school of religions an understanding of the Bible that has little resemblance to that once held by the various communions of Protestantism, by Roman Catholicism, and by Lutheranism as reflected in its confessional writings in The Book of Concord of 1580.

#### Footnotes

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