

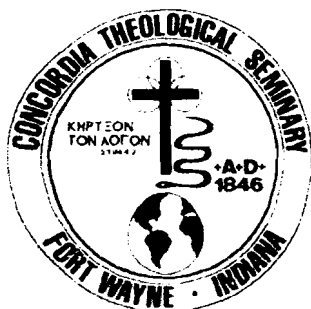
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The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions

Erling T. Teigen

One luxury in which the Confessions do not indulge themselves is methodological self-reflection. The Confessions are an exegesis or exposition of the Scriptures, and they simply practice an exegesis which can be called Lutheran because it is the exegetical principle which was developed by Luther in his writings. Luther, on the other hand, does, on occasion, permit himself that luxury of self-reflection, in adjectival form, by way of excursus, or in polemical attack. Luther's utterances on the clarity of Scripture are extensive. There is much simple reference to the matter in passing as he does his exegesis; but there is also a great deal of such discussion in more explicit, systematic form. It is especially in his polemical attacks on the methodology of his opponents that Luther presents a view on the clarity of Scripture which is systematically expressed, lends itself to close analysis, and is most accessible.

The latter loci are of two kinds. On the one hand, Luther is often led to attack the Roman hermeneutic because it assumes an obscurity which can only be penetrated by an allegorical or analogical interpretation by the initiate of the external church and her clergy. A clear understanding of Scripture is dependent upon the schoolmen and the ordained, upon professional skill in the allegorical method (which suggests some interesting observations about the historical-critical method). On the other hand, Luther's assertions of a clear, accessible Scripture are directed even more vehemently against the radical reformers, especially Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Karlstadt, for in their view, Luther thinks, whenever Scripture presents a doctrine which is at odds with empirical reality or reason, such as the doctrine of the Real Presence, another interpretation must be sought which is in accord with reality. Here we should note some interesting parallels in modern Protestantism, Lutheran Pietism, and Fundamentalism. While Luther harshly attacks the Roman church for arrogating to itself as an external church the office of interpreting an obscure Scripture, he polemicizes against the radical reformers for indulging in private interpretation which

ignores the general consensus of the church, good grammar, and logic, to say nothing of the testimony of Scripture itself.

Luther's idea of a clear and certain Scripture, which needs neither the help of the external church nor the private interpretation of the enthusiasts, is simply imported into the Confessions. Throughout the writings of Melancthon, Luther, and the Formula of Concord,¹ there was a simple dependence on the clear word of Scripture which can be formulated in concise, comprehensible statements.² It will be our task in this paper to show not so much that Luther believed the Scriptures to be massively clear by an exhaustive compilation of his utterances on the subject, but to show, through a few especially systematic passages, what he meant by that assertion. There are several loci in Luther to which one might appeal in order to understand Luther's theses on the clarity or the perspicuity of Scripture. We will examine two writings directed against the Roman Church and three directed against other Reformation figures.

The earliest work in which Luther explicitly refers to the clarity of Scripture is *Against Latomus* (1521). *Against Latomus'* persistent appeal to the fathers, Luther says: "Shall we be perpetually enslaved and never breathe in Christian liberty, nor sigh from out of this Babylon for our Scriptures and our home? Yet you say they were saints and illuminated the Scripture. Who has shown that they made the Scriptures clearer — what if they obscured them? . . . But doesn't obscure Scripture require explanation? Set aside the obscure and cling to the clear. Further, who has proved that the fathers are not obscure? . . . The Scriptures are common to all, and are clear enough in respect to what is necessary for salvation, and are also obscure enough for inquiring minds."³ The latter idea, that Scripture is clear to the believer and obscure for the skeptic, is further developed in the form of Scripture's internal clarity in *De Servo Arbitrio* later. *Latomus*, Luther believes, has elevated the fathers to the position of being the ultimate interpreters of an obscure Scripture. But, he says, "what did the fathers do except seek and present the clear and open testimonies of Scripture?"⁴

Luther also understands at this early date that the clarity of Scripture is a necessary corollary of revelation: "The integrity of Scripture must be guarded, and a man ought not presume that he speaks more safely and clearly with his mouth than God spoke with his mouth. He who does not understand the Word of God when it speaks of the things of God, ought not believe that he understands the words of a man speaking of things strange to him.

No one speaks better than he who best understands, but who understands the things of God better than God himself? Indeed, how much does a man really understand of the things of God?"⁵ Those who attempt to clarify an obscure Scripture in fact obscure it; the Scripture is in itself clear.

Perhaps the best known locus in Luther on the clarity of Scripture is in *De Servo Arbitrio — The Bondage of the Will* — of 1525, written against Erasmus.⁶ There Luther vehemently objects to Erasmus' idea that some of Scripture is obscure. Here and in the previously mentioned treatise Luther seems to think that the key misunderstanding in Roman theology is its assertion that the Scripture is unclear and obscure. Because of this assumption the Roman theologians have appealed to the fathers, to the councils, and the Pope as the final arbiter of what Scripture really says. Luther thinks that Erasmus makes two mistakes: (1) he mistakes the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God, and the profundity of the things of God for obscurity, and (2) he fails to distinguish between the internal clarity of Scripture and its external clarity. On the former they agree, Luther may say ironically, but certainly not on the latter.

As to the first point, Luther admits that there are many hidden things in God. But he goes on to say, "That in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain — this is an idea put about by the ungodly sophists."⁷ This seems to be an unqualified assertion of an absolute clarity in Scripture. Luther then admits that some things *are* unclear, not, however, "because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar . . ."⁸ With this Luther seems to have qualified his idea of the clarity of Scripture. Then, however, comes Luther's point which is crucial, I think, to all of his expressions of a clear Scripture: ". . . But these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture."⁹ "The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is *all* quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has all been placed in the clearest light to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words."¹⁰ The clarity of Scripture is relative in regard to words and statements; some are more clear than others. But in regard to the subject matter and propositions of Scripture, that clarity is absolute.

Scripture, for Luther, is God's revelation. By its very nature revelation is that which clarifies the *mysterium*, that which cannot

be perceived and known empirically through the senses or by reason. Only the simple and literal-minded biblicist will condemn the whole as an obscurity or make obscurity a characteristic of that which is in essence clarifying or revealing. Is that which clarifies obscure? A monstrous absurdity, Luther would say.

Yet the clarity of Scripture is not to be confused with simplicity or comprehensibility. Were the subject matter of Scripture, God's revelation of Himself, truly simple, it would not need to be revealed. That which is revealed, the peace of God and all that belongs to the Gospel, transcends human understanding and is profound at the very heart of it. One has a feeling that Luther would be most impatient with modern Lutherans who are preoccupied with a "simple" Gospel and would object to such a misuse of his words. For Luther the Gospel is the highest and most profound majesty. It is *not* simple. But it is clear and can be understood as to its meaning. And a simple, childlike faith believes the profundities of the Scripture, like that enviable seven-year-old child who knows what the church is, even though the church is hidden away and is a profound mystery (SA III: XII). To confuse clarity with simplicity is to be simplistic.

Now what is behind all of this, I think, is this: Luther understands the difference between a proposition and a statement, which distinction I am not so sure very many of us in the twentieth century understand. For example, "It is raining," "Es regnet," and "Il pleut" are three different statements. The first is clear to all of us; the second is clear to a few of us; and the third is clear to hardly any of us. And yet, all three express the very same proposition. The difficulty is in the grammar and vocabulary of the statements, not in their subject matter. Likewise, "It is raining" and "Small droplets of conjoined hydrogen and oxygen formed by condensation due to the conjunction of heat and cold are descending" are two different statements which express the same proposition, and the proposition itself is certainly clear. But one of the statements is clear and other is at best superfluous.

For Luther the statements of Scripture express absolutely clear propositions. As in the Revelation of St. John, not every statement, not every metaphor, is clear and interpretable. But yet the proposition which is revealed is massively clear. If the vocabulary and grammar present problems in one place in Scripture, they are clear enough in another place. The proposition may be profound; it may be paradoxical; it may be incomprehensible. But it is accessible to all and may be clearly understood.

That the Scripture's clarity is not to be confused with simplicity Luther clearly thinks when he says, "Matters of the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries are no longer hidden away . . ." ¹² They remain the highest majesty and the profoundest mysteries, but in their revelation they are no longer hidden in God's secret counsels. They are revealed clearly and yet as profundities are clearly understood by all. It is, one can see from Luther's preaching, the task of Lutheran preaching to proclaim the pure text of God's Word and the profundities revealed therein — not to drag them down into a quagmire of simplisticness. Perhaps we might wonder aloud here how much twentieth century homiletical style belies this thesis.

For Luther, Erasmus also fails to distinguish between *internal* and *external* clarity. Luther cites the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is externally quite clear — the proposition can be understood; its meaning is apparent even to the unbeliever or to the fool of Psalm 14:1. What Luther means here is that all propositions of Scripture — whether they are conveyed by literal language or metaphoric language — are accessible to anyone. Anselm asserts the same thing in the *Proslogion* when he says that the fool understands what the words "that than which a greater cannot be thought" mean. ¹³ Any doctrine of revelation, therefore, can be said to be absolutely clear as a proposition. This clarity, however, is not to be confused with internal clarity, for internal clarity helps no one else — it is a matter of the heart.

For Luther speech is simply the God-given form of communication. Men must be able to express themselves with a certainty that their words will be understood and will mean the same thing to everyone. Not to believe that there is a consensus of meaning possible would be to condemn each believer to a hopeless solipsism. There is an objective and external clarity of Scripture which can be common to all.

In the first discussion of clarity in *Bondage of the Will*, Luther summarily uses those terms "internal" and "external" clarity. In the second discussion he uses the same terminology in the context of judgment, the testing of the spirits. ¹⁴ Commenting on 1 Corinthians 12:15, "the spiritual man judges all things, but himself is judged by no one," Luther says, "This belongs to faith and is necessary for every individual Christian. We have called it above 'the internal clarity of Holy Scripture.' Perhaps this was what those had in mind who gave you to reply that everything must be decided by the judgment of the Spirit. But this judgment helps no one else, and with it we are not concerned, for no one, I

think, doubts its reality."¹⁵

But the issue for Luther and Erasmus is the external clarity of Scripture. What does Scripture mean? Does God reveal himself in such a way that in an objective, deductive sense anyone, believer or unbeliever, can understand what is said? "If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the word into the most definite light, and published to all the world."¹⁶ "There is, therefore, another, an external judgment, whereby with the greatest certainty we judge the spirits and dogmas of all men, not only for ourselves, but also for others and for their salvation. This judgment belongs to the public ministry of the Word and to the outward office, and is chiefly the concern of leaders and preachers of the Word . . . This is what we earlier called 'the external clarity of Holy Scripture.'"¹⁷

It would appear that Luther here contradicts his opposition to the claim of the priesthood and the church of the right to *interpret* Scripture. But Luther here clearly refers not to an external church nor to an office of the ministry which is centered in ecclesiastical power and human right. Rather, the office of the ministry is none other than the office of the Means of Grace which proclaims the Gospel on behalf of the believers. The Scriptures are clear and are to be proclaimed as such — not as ambiguous documents, admitting of all sorts of interpretations, and which can only be penetrated by those skilled in the art of allegorical interpretation and Aristotelian-Thomistic categories. The Scriptures are, in fact, the judge, and Luther does not speak of a judgment *upon* Scripture, or of an office which has the sole right of interpretation, but of a judgment which *Scripture* makes over all preaching, teaching, interpretation, and exposition: "Thus we say that all spirits are to be tested in the presence of the church at the bar of Scripture."¹⁸ This is clearly illustrated in Moses: "First, then, Moses says in Deuteronomy 17 [:8ff.] that if any difficult case arises, they are to go to the place which God has chosen for his name and consult the priests there, who must judge it according to the Law of the Lord. 'According to the Law of the Lord,' he says. But how can they judge unless the Law of the Lord is externally quite clear . . .?"¹⁹

In his polemic against Erasmus, it must be remembered, Luther's point is that the Roman church has arrogated to itself the right to interpret Scripture. He did not change his mind about that either, for in his 1535 commentary on Galatians, commenting

on Galatians 1:9 (“if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed”), he says, “We are presented here with an example that enables us to know for a certainty that it is an accursed lie that the pope is the arbiter of Scripture or that the church has authority over Scripture.”²⁰

In this connection it should be noted that Luther did not see this sort of a debate as an ivory tower concern. In the same Galatians commentary he says, “Then their consciences would be completely persuaded that Paul’s doctrine was the Word of God. Here Paul was dealing with a great and serious issue, namely, that all the churches might be preserved in sound doctrine. In short, the issue in the controversy was a matter of eternal life and death. For once the pure and certain Word is taken away, there remains no consolation, no salvation, no life.”²¹

Equally serious for Luther, however, is the obscurantist, spiritualizing bent of the radical reformers, Zwingli, Karlstadt, Oecolampadius and others. Whereas the problem in the papistic and scholastic hermeneutic was a dependence on the initiated priesthood as the arbiter of Scripture, with the Pope and Holy Mother Church as the chief teachers, as well as an over-dependence on the consensus of the theologians, the issue over against the radical reformers was private interpretation (and sometimes analytic and linguistic incompetence). Under the terms of that debate, a different set of presuppositions becomes apparent, and Luther’s attack there rises to a higher level of vehemence, not always pleasant reading. But his work in that battle is, I think, more carefully and impeccably worked out with cold, hard exegesis always in the forefront.

The basic premise of Zwingli, Karlstadt, and Oecolampadius was ultimately that the Holy Spirit works otherwise than through the Word alone. Luther’s harshest censure is against the Zwinglian and Enthusiast conception of a Holy Spirit who reveals God internally and subjectively, apart from the external Word.²² Since the Holy Spirit imparts truth to the believer also apart from the external Word, the interpretation of Scripture can take place through visions and subjective, private notions, much in the sense of Descartes’ later “clear and certain ideas” which can come only from God. If there is a god, Descartes thought, he would not allow me to be confused. Hence, both Zwingli and Karlstadt can claim spiritual revelations of the true meaning of “This is My body.”

It is interesting and not at all coincidental that Luther’s most explicit statements on the clarity of Scripture come, in this phase of the hermeneutical struggle, in the discussion of the Lord’s

Supper. It is in the exegesis of the Words of Institution that Luther does his most careful exegesis, a step at a time, painstakingly, leaving no issue undiscussed. While Luther may often have been blind to the machinations and duplicity of some of his colleagues, he seems to have had a prophetic notion of the fierce battle which would rage on this issue of the Sacrament after his death. Hence, his work is meticulously detailed and it is finally incorporated into the Formula of Concord: "Since Dr. Luther is rightly to be regarded as the most eminent teacher of the churches which adhere to the Augsburg Confession and as the person whose entire doctrine in sum and content was comprehended in the articles of the aforementioned Augsburg Confession and delivered to Emperor Charles V, therefore the true meaning and intention of the Augsburg Confession cannot be derived more correctly or better from any other source than from Dr. Luther's doctrinal and polemical writings" (SD VII, 41).²³ Since Luther's hermeneutical premises are so inextricably included in the works referred to and quoted from, I would suggest that here, quite specifically, the formulators accept Luther's hermeneutics, without any qualification attached.²⁴

For Luther it is simple a matter of the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture. Are the words of Scripture clear in themselves or are they not? He will suffer the importation of no philosophical categories, especially the Aristotelian metaphysics, a sin committed, surprisingly, not only by the scholastics, but also by the Zwinglians and fanatics and, after Luther's death, by the Philippists.

What Luther means by a clear word of Scripture is noted in *That These Words of Christ 'This Is My Body,' etc. Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics* (1527): " 'This is my body.' Here is no obscure or ambiguous word, for to make bread into body is distinct, clear, lucid speaking."²⁵

But Luther's harshest and sharpest attack on the spiritualized presence posited by other reformers comes in the *Great Confession* of 1528. Luther's idea of the clarity of Scripture is revealed especially in this section, which I think needs to be quoted at length:

Tell me, who can imagine any sensible man's saying what Oecolampadius says here, viz. that this text, "This is my body," is not clear because the body of Christ is not visibly present in the sacrament, and only believers understand these words, as Augustine allegedly says. Must a text be unclear if a thing is invisible and none but the believer perceives it?

What part of Scripture then would remain clear? If everything that faith teaches is invisible, then this text cannot be clear, "God created heaven and earth" . . .

We know, however, that these words, "This is my body," etc. are clear and lucid. Whether a Christian or a heathen, a Jew or a Turk hears them, he must acknowledge that they speak of the body of Christ which is in the bread. How otherwise could the heathen and Jews mock us, saying that the Christians eat their God, if they did not understand this text clearly and distinctly? When the believer grasps and the unbeliever despises that which is said, however, this is due not to the obscurity or clarity of the words but to the hearts that hear it.

The poets are most skillful of all at describing, with perfectly clear words, not only invisible but even insignificant things. How many a man is deceived by fair words of liars, the meaning of which he understands perfectly well! How the people are seduced now when the fanatics speak of insignificant things (to say nothing of invisible things), precisely for the reason that they understand the words clearly and perfectly well! Indeed, the words by which men deceive the people and prattle about trivia are often clearer and more distinct than those which they speak in truth. For if they had not understood clearly and distinctly the meaning of the words, they would never have been deceived. As I have said, however, Oecolampadius and this spirit show a deficiency in elementary dialectics by inferring that because the subject matter is obscure or difficult to understand, the meaning of the words is obscure. This is bad distinguishing, in other words, ignorance of the third part of dialectics.²⁶

This is precisely Luther's idea of the clarity of Scripture — that it is a deficiency in elementary dialectics (knowing how to analyze, think, and talk) to infer that "because the subject matter is obscure or difficult to understand, the meaning of the words is obscure." An idea, a concept, the subject matter of Scripture may very well be incomprehensible, but the proposition itself is clear and accessible to anyone with a reasonable mind. Luther then asserts of the words "is" and "My body": "Consequently, we must remain content with them as the perfectly clear, certain, sure words of God which can never deceive us or allow us to err."²⁷ Luther here and elsewhere shows an intolerance for those who refuse to think and analyze. The words of Scripture must be analyzed as to their language and meaning. He is also intolerant

of those who argue against him by simply saying, "I disagree; I think it means this," without analytically, dialectically demonstrating the basis for their assertions.

In *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525) Luther sees another kind of obfuscation of the clear word of Scripture: "[Karlstadt has not derived] his interpretation from but outside of Scripture, [and] wants to bring this kind of notion to Scripture, bending, forcing, and torturing it according to his own conceit instead of letting his stupid mind be changed and directed by the Word and Scripture of God."²⁸ According to Luther, "Dr. Karlstadt's error reveals itself in his attitude toward faith and the Word of God, namely that reason readily and willingly accepts it, while in reality reason balks at the Word of God and the articles of faith."²⁹ The accusation is essentially the same as that leveled against Thomas in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* — of harmonizing articles of revelation with empirical "reality" and reason. And yet for Luther that which cannot be grasped by reason and that which is not in accord with the visible is the subject of revelation and is clear and distinct in its meaning.

It is interesting here, we would add parenthetically, that the issue which is dealt with here also arose in the Philippistic controversies of the 1550's and 1560's. There the issues were intra-Lutheran, not so much directly involving Catholicism, Zwinglianism, or Calvinism. The Gnesio-Lutherans were at heart fighting against the Philippistic habit of introducing Aristotelian categories into the interpretation of Scripture in order to harmonize or reconcile empirical reality with revelation. For one thing, an axiom of the physical world, the "finitum non capax infiniti," was made by both Thomas and the radical reformers a normative axiom with which articles of faith had to agree. And that application particularly affected the doctrines of the Real Presence, Christology, and Incarnation. Luther realizes the paradox of it all — the same error produced what often seem to us to be contrary doctrines — the transubstantiation of Rome and the spiritualized presence of Zwinglianism and Calvinism. Thomas has an edge, however, and never draws nearly so much venom from Luther's pen. He sees, at least, that the words "This is my body" must be taken in their clear, distinct, literal sense; but forgetting to do an exegesis of *touto*, Thomas contorts the Aristotelian doctrine of substance and accident in such a way as to rid the Sacrament of the finite so that the infinite can exist in its place. At least, Luther might allow, Thomas permits the body and blood to be there. The radical reformers, however, in their efforts

to harmonize revelation with empirical notions, rid the Sacrament of the infinite, the true body and blood of Christ.

In the later Philippistic battles, it was again the importation of such philosophical categories which was the bone of contention. In the synergistic controversy, it was Melanchthon's introduction of the notion of concurrent causes in conversion (the Word, the Spirit, and the will) which was rejected finally by Article II of the Formula. Scripture teaches conversion from God's view, not, primarily, from man's. But Melanchthon and others felt compelled, out of ethical interests, to depart from the Bible's theocentric model and discuss conversion also from an anthropocentric view, thus importing a foreign element into what is in reality a clear and distinct Scripture.

And in the Lord's Supper controversy, Melanchthon, beginning in a far more sophisticated way than Zwingli and Karlstadt, seems to have felt the need to harmonize empirical reality with clear and distinct revelation and thought that the presence of Christ's body and blood is parallel to the bread and wine, but not in the bread and wine, as Scripture clearly teaches. For, Melanchthon, it was sufficient to believe that Christ in His omnipresence, present at the sacramental action, is received only under this rubric: "It becomes a sacrament only when all causes are brought together and the intended purpose of the Savior for which it is instituted is carried out . . . Therefore it is only a sacrament when the eating is undertaken."³⁰ Since, (1) the material cause is that which is changed (the elements of bread and wine), (2) the formal cause is, in this case, the action of consecrating, distributing and receiving, (3) the efficient cause is the power of Christ and His Word, and (4) the final cause is the appropriation of the elements for the forgiveness of sins; there can be no Real Presence until all of those causes are carried out. But the Formula of Concord dropped David Chytraeus' use of that terminology as it had appeared in the Swabian-Saxon Concord in an article on the Sacrament written by him, which may very well have contributed to his pique: "Accordingly, I cannot be reckoned among its authors but only among its subscribers."³¹ Also implicitly rejected by the Formula was the Melanchthonian syllogism: "The form of the supper gives the thing its essence; the form of the supper is the complete *actio*. Therefore the complete *actio* gives the thing its essence."³² The Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality (nothing is actual but only potential until it has been instantiated with particular attributes) was also inherent in Bucer's receptionism, and is rejected by the Formula (SD VII, 74).

It is that importation of philosophical and empirical categories which is rejected by Luther in his writings against the Roman theologians to a degree, but particularly in those against the spiritualizers and by the Gnesio-Lutherans against the Philip-pists. The assertion of a clear and distinct Scripture is directed, for both Luther and the later confessors, primarily against the importation of any foreign categories at all, other than the rules of normal grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. The task of Luther's exegesis and the exegesis of the Formula is never to make revelation's content or subject matter consistent with man's empirical world view. For Luther the subject matter of revelation is believed by faith and is not necessarily comprehensible to reason or consistent with empirical reality. What is clear about Scripture and what is accessible to the human mind is the meaning of the propositions which are revealed. Not always is every sentence or image clear, but what the whole proposition of Scripture and every individual proposition means — that is perfectly "clear and distinct." It is accessible to all men, externally clear, through the normal use of grammar and vocabulary.

That, for one thing, is Luther's understanding of the clarity of Scripture in his diatribe against Karlstadt in *Against the Heavenly Prophets*: "They [sincere hearts] want the Word of God and say 'Why should I care for Karlstadt's dreams, sneers, and slanders? I see the clear, distinct, and powerful words of God which compel me to confess that the body and blood of Christ are in the sacrament . . . How Christ is brought into the bread or strikes up the tune we demand, I do not know. But I do know full well that the Word of God cannot lie, and it says that the body and blood of Christ are in the Sacrament.'"³³

Another aspect of Luther's idea of the clarity of Scripture is enunciated in this treatise. For Luther the Scriptures are clear externally, without any mystical, internal, or subjective revelations by which they might be interpreted. Both Karlstadt and Zwingli, Luther thought, were interpreting on the basis of dreams, visions and other revelations of the Spirit, apart from the external Word. Zwingli purportedly had arrived at his *significat* through a dream in which an angel referred him to Exodus 12:11.³⁴ Karlstadt too operated with such an internal revelation: "Should you ask how one gains access to this same lofty spirit, they do not refer you to the outward Gospel. but to some imaginary realm, saying: Remain in 'self-abstraction' where I now am and you will have the same experience. A heavenly voice will come, and God himself will speak to you. If you inquire further as to the nature of

this 'self-abstraction' you will find that they know as much about it as Dr. Karlstadt knows of Greek and Hebrew."³⁵ "If you ask who directs them to teach and act in this way, they point upward and reply, 'Ah, God tells me so, and the spirit says so.' Indeed, all idle dreams are nothing but God's word."³⁶

It is equally against such notions of inward revelation by which the externally clear Word is to be interpreted that Luther protests. Scripture is of no private interpretation: "We do not believe anyone who presents his own explanation and interpretation of Scripture. For no correct understanding can be arrived at by one's own interpretation."³⁷ In the Smalcald Articles, Luther is certainly thinking of such revelations when he says, "Enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendents 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. Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil" (SA III: VIII, 9-10).³⁸

For Luther and the Confessions, it is, then, from this rubric of a clear Scripture, a biblical revelation which by its very nature is clarifying and which interprets itself, that all other principles of an historical, contextual, grammatical exegesis emanate. All other principles of Luther's hermeneutics are simple recognitions of the nature of revelation, that the hidden God, in human language, reveals the profundities of His nature and will. Revelation is to make clear that which is hidden. Hence to posit any obscurity or ambiguity at all is to negate the very definition of revelation. To assume the necessity of any human agency, empirical reason, or ecclesiastical authority as arbiter over the substance of the Word is to detract from the work of the Spirit who Himself clarifies through the word of Scripture.

The interpreter of Scripture is thus to import no foreign categories into the translation or interpretation of Scripture. Those foreign categories which are excluded range from mystic vision or internal revelation, which are uncertain, to inherent reason and an empirical world view. To attempt to reconcile any article of revelation with empirical reason or world view, from creation by divine fiat to the reality of Christ's presence in the Sacrament is to import a metaphysic which stands outside of the clear Word. The perspicuous Word stands, for Luther and the Confessions, all by itself.

There is, for Luther, a necessary corollary to the perspicuous Word, which corollary is essential to an understanding of the hermeneutical principles of Luther and the Confessions — the power of the Word, the Word's efficaciousness. That by which the mighty God reveals Himself with abundant clarity is also His effective power. His immutable will is revealed in it and condemns sin; His Gospel reveals what in His hidden counsels, in eternity, He has purposed to do; and by His *mandata* to the church, He reveals in clear propositions and clear commands how He wills to carry out His eternal election of grace. For Luther that Scripture is not only the revelation of God; through it He also effectively works. The word of the Gospel is the very power by which God works; by it the Holy Spirit works — "He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth" (SC II).³⁹

Not only the Gospel in the narrow sense, but any *mandatum Dei* is effective — it accomplishes what God wills. God's Word, for Luther, that which God speaks through any mouth He chooses, has *Kraft und Macht*. The world is created by the sheer power of God's Word. And the incarnation, the beginning of the new creation, is by the power of the same Word. "How did his mother Mary become pregnant? . . . The angel Gabriel brings the word: 'Behold you will conceive and bear a son, etc.' With these words, Christ comes not only into her heart, but also into her womb as she hears, grasps and believes it. No one can say otherwise, than that the power comes through the Word. As one cannot deny the fact that she thus becomes pregnant through the Word, and no one knows how it comes about, so it is in the sacrament also. For as soon as Christ says, 'This is my body,' his body is present through the Word and power of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁰ From creation to incarnation to consecration — it is, for Luther, the effective power of the external Word by which God deals with man. The same language is incorporated into the Confessions, when the Solid Declaration (VII:78) quotes from the *Great Confession*, from Luther's brilliant treatment of *Thaetelwort* and *Heisselwort*: "Here too, if I were to say over all the bread there is, 'This is the body of Christ,' nothing would happen, but when we follow his institution and command in the Supper and say, 'This is my body,' then it is his body, not because of our speaking or our declarative word [*Thaetelwort*], but because of his command in which he has told us so to speak and to do and has attached his own command and deed to our speaking."⁴¹

This concept of the power of the Word of God, the word of the Gospel, and the *mandata Dei* given to the church is certainly not generally accepted in Reformed, Holiness, or Fundamentalistic theology. It is a far cry from Jonathan Edwards' exposition in "A Divine and Supernatural Light": "When it is said that this light is given immediately by God and not obtained by natural means, hereby is intended that it is given by God without making use of any means that operate by their own power or natural force. God makes use of means; but it is not as mediate causes to produce this effect . . . The word of God is not proper cause of this effect, but is made use of only to convey to the mind the subject matter of this saving instruction; . . . it is the cause of a notion of them in our heads, but not of the sense of their divine excellency in our hearts. . . That due sense of the heart, wherein this light formally consists, is immediately by the Spirit of God."⁴²

Much could and really should be said on this point, but let us limit ourselves here to a relatively brief digression. For quite a number of years some of our friends in Lutheran circles who do not accept the verbal inspiration and infallibility of Scripture have in derision called us "Fundamentalists." To believe such things about Scripture makes one a Fundamentalist, it is thought. I think, however, that there are some other characteristics of Fundamentalism which are worth noting. For one thing, most painfully absent from Fundamentalism's doctrine of Scripture is this very power and efficacy of Scripture which for Luther is so important. The absence of any notion of the power of the Word and the notion of a *mandatum Dei* which is effective through the Word, of course, entails an absence of any concept of sacramental efficacy. The Confessional belief in an inspired and inerrant Scripture which is inherently powerful as the means through which the Holy Spirit works is, in fact, the very antithesis of Fundamentalism. Now, in the ecumenical Lutheran literature that I read, I find precious little discussion or recognition of the power of God's Word. And when one sees Lutherans signing agreements with the Reformed in which the best that can be said about the Real Presence is that it coincides with the omnipresence of Christ, but which at worst completely spiritualizes or denies His actual presence, I start to wonder who the Fundamentalists really are.

Furthermore, another essential of Fundamentalism, I think, is the notion that there are simply some fundamental doctrines of Scripture, variously numbered, on which there must be agreement before there can be outward or inward fellowship. Luther,

however, in commenting on Galatians 2:9 ["The right hand of fellowship"] says, "They [the Galatians] said: 'Paul, we preach the Gospel in unanimous consensus with you. There we are companions in doctrine and have fellowship in it; that is, we have the same doctrine. For we preach one Gospel, one Baptism, one Christ, and one faith. Therefore we cannot teach or command anything so far as you are concerned, for we are completely agreed in everything. For we do not teach anything different from what you teach . . .'"⁴³

On the other hand, there may be some truth in the charge of "Fundamentalism" laid against "conservative" Lutheranism. In the battle which raged in the church for an inspired, inerrant Scripture, the Lutherans often found their allies among the Evangelicals and Reformed where precious little attention was paid to the inherent power of the Word of God. Hence, a couple of generations of conservative Lutheran pastors have been raised and are still being raised on literature which does not know that power of the Word and which is not sacramentally oriented. In that sense, the charges of "Fundamentalism" may be more correct than we would wish.

There is also the modern apologetic movement which has likewise proceeded from generally Reformed presuppositions. One can sympathize with the desire to show that one does not check his intellect at the church door or leave it in the sacristy, and in that sense the apologetic movement has been valuable. It has also been valuable in showing the intellectual bankruptcy of skepticism. However, insofar as modern apologetics attempts to validate the Gospel and revelation along the lines of empirical reality and to appropriate "scientific certainty" to the Gospel, it has imported a world view and metaphysic into the interpretation of Scripture which is, in fact, foreign to Scripture. Our modern age has elevated "the scientific method" to a level of certainty and clarity which it has never had, which it never can have, and which it does not deserve. That elusive scientific certainty, however, is then supposed to be duplicated in the reading of revelation, and both the higher critical method and the modern apologetic movement, it seems to me, seek a clarity and certainty of Scripture which is more akin to empiricism and Logical Positivism than to a straightforward reading of propositional revelation.

There is a further corollary to the Lutheran doctrine of a clear Scripture. Paradoxically, the clear revelation of God in the external Word demands a dogmatical examination of the words of Scripture and an outward confession of what the words mean.

To believe that the Scriptures are clear is meaningless without such a confession. The task of exegesis for Luther and the Confessions is to ask "What does it mean?" of any Scripture. It is enthusiasm and biblicism to answer the question with "whatever it means, I believe," much less with any kind of relativistic answer, with a retreat behind vague generalities, or with a refusal to refute error analytically, on the basis of Scripture. Luther's idea of the clarity of Scripture admits no flight into vagueness, ambiguity, or subjective interpretation. For example, in his letter to the Christians at Frankfurt am Main, the pastors there are taken to task for not clearly confessing the meaning of the words in the Sacrament.⁴⁴ At a time of confession, it is not sufficient to let the words of Scripture stand without a clear expression of their true meaning, for at Frankfurt the pastors were satisfied to let each think as he would of the words "This is My body." Zwinglian and Lutheran could partake side by side. If asked what the words meant, the answer simply was, " 'This is My body' means what Christ means." The council is told by Luther that only Zwinglianism hides behind such "double-tongued" expressions, and for such dishonesty Luther has only ridicule: "So, where such preachers are found, they have it very good, and have found an easy way to preach and do not need to study and preach any more. For in everything, they can say this to the people: Dear people, be content in this — believe what Christ means; that is enough. Who couldn't preach then? Who wouldn't want to be one of their disciples? If we should be tired of preaching and teaching and the pain of all of Christ's commands and speaking, then we can just say I believe what Christ believes, or, much better, I let Christ believe for me and he will take care of what I should believe. Oh, that would be for me the finest Christian and the richest brother. And then the papists could say that they believe what the church believes. And the Pope could say I believe what my King believes. Why not? How could there be a better faith than this which has so little pain and sorrow? They tell about how a doctor met a collier on the bridge at Prague. Noting that he was a poor layman, the doctor asked, 'Dear man, what do you believe?' The collier answered, 'What the church believes.' The doctor: 'What does the church believe?' The collier: 'What I believe.' Later, when the doctor was about to die, the devil greatly troubled him because of his faith and he did not know where to turn and had no peace until he said, 'I believe what the collier believes.'"⁴⁵

For Luther an equivocal confession of what the clear Word teaches is first of all a flight from the cross which is laid on the

believer. The flight from dogmatical, analytic statements which exclude all wrong interpretations is for Luther not only lazy, but dishonest. And likewise, to simplify the content of the Word of God behind vague expressions is to destroy the sharpness and the clarity of the Scripture.

It becomes a paradoxical fact that simply to repeat the words of Scripture, without clearly expressing their meaning, is to fail to assert a clear Scripture. But nevertheless, for Luther and the Confessions, the *mandatum Dei*, the command of God, to confess the truth (Romans 10:9-10) necessitates saying in however many words are needed precisely what the Scripture means. Such confession excludes pious opinion, private interpretation, and a reliance on the tradition of the church, popes, councils, or synods. And in our own day it excludes the ever-present majority opinion, where doctrine is determined by straw vote or a desire to hold the outward church together. The meaning of Scripture is to be unequivocally stated, whatever the cost; should such unequivocal confession cause disruption in the outward church, that is the cross the Christian must bear. The Confessions themselves practice precisely that exegesis. A clear Scripture is expounded and explained. Any proposition of Scripture can be expressed in different words, and the clarity of Scripture is not compromised. That is exegesis, and it is done under the rubric of clear Scripture.

Latter day Lutherans, among others, have had a tendency to make too great a distinction between dogmatics and exegesis. Were Luther and Chemnitz to enter into a debate with us about the relative merits of systematics and exegesis (which comes first, etc.), I suspect that they would be appalled and might say, "Whatever distinction can you be thinking about? All dogmatics must be exegesis; and all exegesis must be systematic and dogmatic. Our work, our confession, is exegesis. This is our confession of the clear Word of God." Part of being Lutheran is a disciplined approach to Scripture — both homiletically and dogmatically.

All of the foregoing, I think, emanates precisely from the rubric of "Claritas Scripturae." No hermeneutical system can be sensible which does not start from a perspicuous Word of God. Any that does not start from that point will lapse into a reborn scholasticism of destructive criticism or fanciful enthusiasm. Any hermeneutic worthy of the name must be simply a public accounting of how we treat the sacred writings. Luther was not afraid to account for his method, nor were the confessors bashful about practicing that exegesis.

FOOTNOTES

1. The discussion in the Formula of Concord at this point was guided especially by Chemnitz, who also commented extensively on the clarity of Scripture in *Examination of the Council of Trent*, I, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), Topic I. Compare also Eugene F. Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing House, 1971), pp. 210ff., and Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), pp. 57ff.
2. Compare Bohlmann, *ibid.*, p.60.
3. *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vol. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-), 32, p. 217.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
6. *Luther's Works*, 33, pp. 24ff. and 89ff.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
11. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert *et.al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 315.
12. *LW*, 33, p. 26.
13. Anselm of Canterbury, "Proslogion," in *Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1974), pp.93-94.
13. Anselm of Canterbury, "Proslogion," in *Anselm of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1974), pp. 93-94.
14. *LW*, 33, pp. 89ff.
15. *Ibid*, p. 90.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 90f.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *LW*, 26, p. 57.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
22. Cf. Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article 8, (Tappert, p. 313), where Luther also refers to the pope and Mohammed as enthusiasts.
23. Tappert, p. 576.
24. Bohlmann, pp. 60-64.
25. *Luther's Works*, 37, p. 109.
26. *Luther's Works*, 37, pp. 271ff.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
28. *Luther's Works*, 40, p. 153.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Philipp Melanchthon, "De Transubstantiatione" in *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider, IV (Halle: C.A. Schwetschke, 1837), p. 264.
31. Cited in Theodore Jungkuntz, *Formulators of the Formula of Concord*(St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), p. 83.

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32. Cited in Tom G.A. Hardt, *Venerabilis et Adorabilis Eucharistia: En studie i den Lutherska nattvardsläran under 1500-talet* (Upsala: Ljungbergs Boktryckeri, 1971), p. 261, note 269.
 33. *LW*, 40, p. 176.
 34. Cited in Herman Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959) p. 133, note 21; rev. ed. (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), p. 105, note 21.
 35. *LW*, 40, p. 147.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
 37. "Sermons on the Second Epistle of Peter", *LW*, 30, p. 167.
 38. Tappert, p. 313.
 39. Tappert, p. 345. Cf. LCII: 40-42 (Tappert, p. 416); SA III: VIII: 10 (Tappert, p. 313).
 40. "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ — Against the Fanatics," *Luther's Works*, 36, p. 341.
 41. *LW*, 37, p. 184; Tappert, pp. 583-584.
 42. Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light, Immediately Imparted to the Soul by the Spirit of God, Shown to Be Both a Scriptural and Rational Doctrine," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), II, p. 13.
 43. "Lectures on Galations", *Luther's Works*, 26, p. 104.
 44. *Sämmtliche Schriften*, XVII (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), pp. 2008ff. This letter is unfortunately not translated in *Luther's Works*.
 45. *Ibid.*, p. 2013 (my translation).