

LUTHER'S PRINCIPLES
OF BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION

By

THE REV. A. SKEVINGTON WOOD, Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.
Methodist Minister, York Wesley Circuit

LONDON

THE TYNDALE PRESS

© The Tyndale Press

First Published - - - *February, 1960*

*Printed in Great Britain by
Green and Co., Crown Street, Lowestoft.*

LUTHER'S PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

'PROTESTANT interpretation of the Bible', according to Professor Robert M. Grant of Chicago, 'owes its life to the spirit of the Reformation.'¹ And after making that statement, Dr. Grant proceeds to cite a definitive affirmation of Martin Luther at the Leipzig Debate as reflecting the revolutionary new attitude. 'No believing Christian can be forced to recognise any authority beyond the sacred Scripture, which is exclusively invested with Divine right.'² Over against the pretentious claims of the papacy, Luther set the Word of God as its own interpreter, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, independent of Church and councils, of fathers and tradition. Thus opened a fresh and significant chapter in the history of hermeneutics.

The Bible, of course, was central in the reforming policy of Luther. 'As a theologian,' wrote Professor Henry E. Jacobs, 'Luther's chief effort, on the negative side, was to free theology from its bondage to philosophy, and to return to the simplicity of Scripture. He was dissatisfied with technical theological terms because of their inadequacy, even when the elements of truth they contained restrained him from abandoning them. He was not without a historical sense and reverence for antiquity, provided it was subjected to the tests of Holy Scripture. Scripture was not to be interpreted by the Fathers, but the Fathers were judged by their agreement or disagreement with Scripture.'³

I

Interpretation, then, was a focal issue in the Protestant Reformation. That is apparent in Luther's historic confession at the Diet of Worms in 1520, when Johann von Eck, Official General of the Archbishop of Trier, required a recantation of his alleged errors. 'Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason (for I believe neither in the Pope nor Councils alone, since it has been established that they have often erred and contradicted

¹ R. M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church*, p. 109.

² M. Luther, *Werke*, Weimer Auflage (W.A.), II, p. 279.

³ H. E. Jacobs, 'Luther' in *E.R.E.* VIII, p. 201.

themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures adduced by me and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God, and I am neither able nor willing to recant, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.'⁴ The earliest printed version inserted the now famous declaration, 'Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.' Roland Bainton thinks that the words, though not actually recorded on the spot, could yet be genuine because the listeners may have been too moved at the moment to write them down.⁵ Or perhaps they were drowned in the ensuing commotion, for Conrad Peutinger reports: 'There was a great noise.'⁶ In any case, they symbolize Luther's position. He took his stand upon the sole authority of Scripture and repudiated all other interpretations of it save its own.

The centrality of interpretation in the Reformation issue is even more markedly apparent in Luther's interview with Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg in 1518. In the estimate of Professor Jedin of Bonn, Cajetan was the greatest theologian of his time, held in the highest esteem for his erudite commentary on the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, from whom he had taken his monastic name as a Dominican.⁷ No doubt he imagined that he would have little difficulty in convincing the youthful rebel from Wittenberg that his views were doctrinally untenable. He therefore demanded an unequivocal recantation. But this Luther's conscience would not allow him to make unless he was first informed and then convinced of his errors from the Word of God, untrammelled by any superimposed interpretation. When he refused to withdraw his previous denial of the validity of indulgences, Cajetan quoted the *Extravagante* of Clement VI's Papal Bull *Unigenitus* of 1343, which plainly asserted that Christ's passion and death had acquired an inexhaustible treasure for the Church, reserved in heaven, to which the Virgin Mary and the saints continued to contribute and which had been specifically entrusted to Peter and his successors for the purpose of releasing the faithful from their temporal penalties. But the Cardinal discovered that Luther was more conversant with Canon Law than he had assumed and was, indeed, prepared to press a legal quibble about the verb *acquisivit*.

Moreover, as Schwiebert points out, 'in raising the question of the true treasure of the Church, the Gospel, Cajetan had touched the

⁴ W.A., vii, p. 838.

⁵ R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 185.

⁶ J. Kuehn, *Luther und der Wörmser Reichstag*, p. 75, n. 4.

⁷ H. Jedin, *History of the Council of Trent*, i, p. 171.

very heart of Luther's new theology, the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Luther had no intentions of being refuted on the evidence of a papal bull when his whole teaching had been painfully rediscovered on the basis of the New Testament. With Luther this was a matter so vital that he would die rather than deny his new understanding of Scripture unless convinced of error.⁸ And so he bluntly rejected the authority of the decretal together with that of the Pope who promulgated it, on the sole ground that it misrepresented Scripture. Luther's Nominalist training at Erfurt may have laid the foundations of his attitude, for William of Ockham had affirmed that 'Holy Scriptures cannot err, the Pope can'.⁹ In the written statement submitted to Cajetan on the third day of the enquiry Luther explained his position more fully. 'Indeed I did not possess the extraordinary indiscretion so as to discard so many important clear proofs of Scripture on account of a single ambiguous and obscure decretal of a Pope who is a mere human being. Much rather I considered it proper that the words of Scripture, in which saints are described as being deficient in merits, are to be preferred to human words in which the saints are said to have more merits than they need. For a Pope is not above but under the Word of God.'¹⁰ The Cardinal, however, reminded Luther that Scripture itself has to be interpreted and that the Pope is the supreme interpreter. His ruling takes precedence over Church, Council or even Scripture itself. 'His Holiness abuses Scripture', retorted Luther. 'I deny that he is above Scripture.' Although Cajetan swore that Luther must leave the court and not return unless he was prepared to retract, he nevertheless confided afterwards to Staupitz: 'I am not going to talk with him any more. His eyes are as deep as a lake, and there are amazing speculations in his head.'¹¹ Clearly, the nub of Luther's argument lay in his challenge to the Roman monopoly of interpretation. As Harnack put the situation: 'If a tradition, a text of Scripture or a dogmatic affirmation was inconvenient, the Church, that is Rome, had the right of interpreting.'¹² In his treatise *The Papacy at Rome* — an answer to Eck's notorious *Thirteenth Thesis* — Luther complained that the papists interpreted the Scriptures in accordance with their own insane folly and that the Pope 'soiled them like a snivel-

⁸ E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, p. 351.

⁹ R. H. Murray, *Erasmus and Luther*, p. 145.

¹⁰ M. Luther, *Works*, ed. J. Pelikan (P.E.), xxxi, 266, 267.

¹¹ Bainton, *op. cit.*, pp. 95, 96.

¹² A. Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte*, III, p. 665.

ling child'.¹³ 'Thus we can see how beautifully the Romanists treat the Scriptures and make out of them what they like, as if they were a nose of wax to be pulled around at will.'¹⁴ And again later, in his defence of the articles condemned in the Bull of 1520: 'Lo, thus the Pope tricks and seduces the whole world; he takes out of the Divine Word what he will, though it belongs equally to everybody, and pretends to drink malmsey out of the same cask from which others can scarcely get water. God's simple, single Word, with its one single virtue, is gold for him, but he will not let others pass it as copper. Cease, Pope; the game has gone far enough.'¹⁵

But even as early as 1517, when Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg in order to initiate an academic disputation on indulgences, interpretation is seen to be the underlying issue. That classic document opens with this pronouncement: 'Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said *Poenitentiam agite* willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.'¹⁶ Luther proceeds to discuss the interpretation of Matthew iv. 17 and the Vulgate rendering 'Do penance' for the Greek *metanoete*. 'This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance i.e. confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests. Yet it means not inward repentance only; nay, there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work divers mortifications of the flesh. The penalty (of sin), therefore, continues so long as hatred of self continues; for this is the true inward repentance, and continues until our entrance into the Kingdom of heaven.'¹⁷ Although the Theses, as Jacobs rightly adjudges, can scarcely be called in their entirety 'a trumpet-blast of reform',¹⁸ and Luther was still in the process of emancipation from Rome; nevertheless it is of the utmost significance that at the outset he should seek to lay a foundation of sound exegesis.

Interpretation, then, was a fundamental issue in the Reformation controversy. Luther's awareness of its cruciality and his ability to apply it to the situation which confronted him arose from his own religious experience. Interpretation was a key concern in his individual struggle for spiritual existence before he made it so in the collective conflict with Rome. To this we must turn, for, as Professor Warren A. Quanbeck informs us in a recent and helpful essay, 'in order to understand Luther's principles of interpretation, it is neces-

¹³ W.A., vi, pp. 316, 321.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 305.

¹⁵ M. Luther, *Works*, Holman Edition (H.E.), III, p. 90.

¹⁶ H.E., I, p. 29.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 16.

sary to set forth the inner development which was instrumental in forming them.¹⁹ Luther, like Wesley after him, was *homo unius libri*. *Sola Scriptura* was not only the battle-cry of a crusade: it was the pole-star of his own heart and mind. 'All that Luther was as a Christian man', wrote Dr. Stork, 'he owed to the Bible; and all that he did as a Reformer he achieved through the instrumentality of the Divine Word. From the time he found Christ, the Bible was to him the inspiration, the beauty and joy of his life. It was his guide in every perplexity; his solace in every sorrow and his watchword in every battle for the truth.'²⁰

We need not traverse again at any length the now reasonably familiar ground of Luther's rediscovery of the Bible in his personal experience. Suffice to say that the Protestant Reformation really started not on the steps of the Scala Sancta in Rome (where pious legend may have overlaid the tale) nor at the entrance to the newly-built Schlosskirche at Wittenberg (where the Theses were intended to inaugurate a discussion rather than touch off a revolt), but in the tower room of the Augustinian cloister where Luther sat before an open Bible and allowed Almighty God to address him face to face. This *Türmerlebnis* ('tower discovery') is dated by Schwiebert as 'some time in the fall of 1514'.²¹ It represents the final explosion in a chain reaction which began with Luther's first introduction to the Latin Bible, probably in the Cathedral at Magdeburg.²²

The real significance of the tower discovery lies in the realm of interpretation. Luther's hand at last grasped the key with which the Scriptures could be unlocked. He has left an autobiographical account in the preface to the Latin edition of his works published in 1545. He tells us that as he searched the Word of God he was led to devote particular attention to the Epistle to the Romans. The expression *iustitia Dei* in i. 17 was a considerable stumbling-block to him since his scholastic conditioning inclined him to assume that it referred to God's punitive justice. 'The concept of "God's righteousness" was repulsive to me, as I was accustomed to interpret it according to scholastic philosophy, namely, as the "formal or active" righteousness in which God proves Himself righteous in that He punishes the sinner as an unrighteous person . . . until after days and nights of wrestling with the problem, God finally took pity on me, so that I was able to comprehend the inner connection between

¹⁹ W. A. Quanbeck, *Luther Today: Martin Luther Lectures I*, p. 37.

²⁰ T. Stork, *Luther and the Bible*, p. iii. ²¹ Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

²² More likely than Erfurt — cf. Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, pp. 121, 122.

the two expressions "the righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel" and "the just shall live by faith". Then I began to comprehend "the righteousness of God" through which the righteous are saved by God's grace, namely, through faith; that the "righteousness of God" which is revealed through the Gospel was to be understood in a passive sense in which God through mercy justifies man by faith, as it is written "the just shall live by faith". Now I felt exactly as though I had been born again, and I believed that I had entered Paradise through widely opened doors. I then went through the Holy Scriptures as far as I could recall them from memory, and I found in other parts the same sense: the "work of God" is that which He works in us, the "strength of God" is that through which He makes us strong, the "wisdom of God" is that through which He makes us wise, and so the power of God, the blessing of God and the honour of God are likewise to be interpreted. As violently as I had formerly hated the expression "righteousness of God", so I was now as violently compelled to embrace the new conception of grace, and thus, for me, the expression really opened the gates of Paradise.²³

This experience marked the beginning of Luther's attachment to justification by faith as the plumbline by which he tested every theological opinion. But it was cradled in Scripture and was the fruit of his new interpretative insight. Luther's 'illumination', as he calls it in his *Table Talk*, or his 'inspiration', as Schwarz prefers to denominate it,²⁴ transformed the whole Bible for him and supplied his over-all hermeneutical clue. He had grasped the significance of one centripetal portion of God's Word: by it he proceeded to re-interpret the rest. As Schwarz has elucidated it, 'The meaning of one passage had been revealed to him. He therefore had received the true understanding of this one verse. Holy Writ, being God's revelation, must of necessity be a unity and its contents be in agreement. It is therefore permissible, or even necessary, to interpret the Bible in accordance with Romans 1: 17, if the true meaning of this verse has been revealed.'²⁵ Luther's entire exegetical output stems from this comprehension which he recognizes as a gift from God. 'I have not dared nor am I able to boast of anything but the Word of truth which the Lord has given me.'²⁶ Elsewhere he speaks of Christ, 'Who is the Master of my doctrine and also will witness on the Last Day that this doctrine is not mine but His own pure Gospel'.²⁷

²³ W.A., LIV, pp. 185, 187.

²⁴ W. Schwarz, *The Problem of Biblical Translation*, p. 169. ²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ M. Luther, *Works*, ed. J. N. Lenker (L.E.), II, p. 429. ²⁷ W.A., X, p. 1062.

And writing to Kurfurst Friedrich in 1522 he claims that he has not received the gospel from man, 'but solely from heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ'.²⁸

II

The foregoing historical exposition has been necessary to demonstrate the pivotal importance of interpretation both in the testimony of Protestantism and the personal experience of Luther himself. It has served to indicate that Luther's reappraisal dates from the earliest period of his career as an exegete and that in the many direct citations which will follow in this lecture (for we are anxious to let Luther speak for himself) we need not draw any overemphasized distinction between the younger and the more mature reformer. After the decisive moment of the *Türmerlebnis* there was development, to be sure, though not serious divergence. As Prenter says in *Spiritus Creator*, 'the development is within the new evangelical view of life and not away from it. It is a development, therefore, which does not signify any modification of the basic view, but is rather a progressive and final struggle with the traditional views based on the unchanged fundamental conclusion.'²⁹ With this reassurance, we may go to examine the works of Luther in their widest range with a view to laying bare his leading hermeneutical principles.

It is too often supposed that Luther's exegetical achievement was virtually negligible. A contributor to a well-known encyclopaedia of a former generation could even affirm that 'of the Reformers Luther did little strictly exegetical work apart from his preaching'.³⁰ That is wide of the mark on two counts. In the first place, the list of Luther's 'strictly exegetical work' is sufficiently impressive in itself. When in the year 1512 he accepted the chair of Biblical Studies in the University of Wittenberg he was virtually committing himself to the task of exposition as a life work. He was not slack concerning the promise implicit in his vocation. For the remainder of his career he delivered at least two or three lectures each week, unless prevented by sickness or his multifarious activities in the cause of the Reformation. The complete catalogue is as under.

1513-1514	Psalms
1515-1516	Romans
1516-1517	Galatians

²⁸ L.E., II, p. 455.

²⁹ R. Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, p. xvi.

³⁰ H. S. Nash, 'Hermeneutics' in *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia*, IV, p. 244.

1517-1518	Hebrews
1518-1521	Psalms: Galatians (revised), Titus, Judges (?)
1524-1525	Deuteronomy
1524-1526	Minor Prophets
1526	Ecclesiastes
1527	I John
1528	I Timothy
1528-1530	Isaiah
1530-1531	Song of Solomon
1531-1535	Galatians
1532-1535	Psalms
1535-1545	Genesis

This does not, of course, include Luther's herculean labour of translation. Yet, despite this considerable productivity, springing from more than competent technical equipment, Luther modestly disclaims any title to distinction. After thanking Johann Brenz for a sight of his commentary on Amos, he adds: 'Far be it from me to suggest any alterations, for I cannot set up as a master in the Divine writings. I only wish to be a learner in that school.'³¹

The noticeable omission from the curriculum, of course, is that of the four Gospels. But, as Ebeling explains, there was no exclusion on principle.³² Luther had once announced a series on the *Pericope*, or Gospel passages in the Liturgy, in 1521, but he was prevented from delivering it because of his summons to the Diet of Worms. Moreover the task of instruction was shared by his colleagues, and we know that Melanchthon gave a course on Matthew and John, whilst Dolsch lectured on Luke and a little later Lambert and Agricola. Luther himself handled the Gospels not in the classroom but in the pulpit. This is not to suggest, however, that his treatment is unworthy of consideration as serious exegesis. We need to realize that our accepted modern distinction between preaching and biblical exposition was unrecognized by Luther. His preaching was always expository in nature and his exegetical lectures invariably contained a homiletical element not nowadays associated, for good or ill, with scholarly comment. As Heikinnen makes clear, Luther's exegesis was essentially *kerygmatic*.³³ This realization that biblical theology and biblical proclamation are inter-related was part of Luther's reappraisal of the Word.

³¹ *The Letters of Martin Luther*, ed. M. Currie, p. 196.

³² G. Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung*, p. 13.

³³ J. W. Heikinnen, 'Luther's Lectures on the Romans,' *Interpretation*, vii, 180.

In considering Luther's hermeneutics, as indeed his whole theology, we must beware of undue systematization and the attempt to foster on to his teaching a precision which it does not pretend to possess. Unlike Calvin, Luther displayed a genius which was prophetic rather than logical, intuitive rather than analytical, and we shall go astray if we seek to squeeze his contribution into any conventional mould. For him the Bible was not so much a codification of precepts and principles as a living and life-giving message and his own exposition of it is in organic rather than organizational terms. Even if the co-ordinating scheme is undeveloped, the unity of thought is nevertheless real. Nor must we look for unimpeachable consistency throughout Luther's voluminous works. Even Homer nods and there are times when we have to admit that Luther appears to be at odds with himself. This is especially true in the application of his hermeneutical maxims and caused Seeberg to remark, in passing and with a certain delicate restraint, 'that his practice was not always exemplary and devoid of contradiction can merely be hinted at here'.³⁴ As with these factors in mind we scrutinize Luther's exegetical writings and such other treatises as advert to his methods, what principles of interpretation are seen to emerge?

III

The first has to do with the important matter of presuppositions. These comprise what Professor Martin Scharlemann calls 'the first hermeneutical circle'.³⁵ He believes that it is quite naïve to suppose that an interpreter can approach the text of Scripture in a totally objective manner, with his mind a *tabula rasa*, so to speak. Any interpreter must needs enter upon his task carrying with him certain presuppositions drawn, if from no superior source, from his own background and experience. Much of our contemporary inability to arrive at a satisfying exegesis of Scripture has arisen either from failure to recognize this phenomenon, or unwillingness to select the right perspective. In theological liberalism, for example, biblical interpretation has been attempted with a method and concepts borrowed from the study of comparative religion, or from the evolutionary assumption. In this way sacred Scripture has been dealt with in a secularized fashion without any genuine endeavour to discover what was the viewpoint of the writers themselves. It is

³⁴ R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, II, 289.

³⁵ MS paper kindly loaned.

the contribution of Luther, to which we might well allow ourselves to be recalled today, that he insists that the Bible itself must teach us how to interpret the Bible. The first hermeneutical circle is to be drawn from the design of the Word. The sphere from which the methodology of hermeneutics is to be derived is that of Scripture itself. The true principles of biblical interpretation are themselves quarried from biblical sources. To break this circuit is to deprive interpretation of its essential dynamic and authority.

Moreover, the primary presupposition is that which concerns the nature of Scripture. The interpretation of any piece of literature, argues G. H. Schodde, depends upon the character of the work under review. 'Accordingly the rules of the correct interpretation of the Scriptures will depend upon the character of the writings themselves and the principles which an interpreter will employ in his interpretation of the Scriptures will be in harmony with his ideas of what the Scriptures are as to origin, character, history, etc. In the nature of the case the dogmatical stand of the interpreter will materially influence his hermeneutics and exegesis. In the legitimate sense of the term, every interpreter of the Bible is "prejudiced", i.e. is guided by certain principles which he holds antecedently to his work of interpretation.'³⁶ Luther was convinced that the nature of Scripture must itself be determined by Scripture. The interpreter must begin by acquiescing to the distinctively biblical conception of the Bible.

Luther leaves us in no doubt as to what this is. 'In Scripture', he writes, '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.'³⁷ '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.'³⁸ 'The entire Scriptures are assigned to the Holy Ghost'; 'the Holy Scriptures did not grow on earth'; 'the Holy Scriptures have been spoken by the Holy Ghost'³⁹ — these are but a sample from literally hundreds of similar statements which could be adduced.⁴⁰ We must not spend time, however, in reaffirming Luther's acceptance of plenary inspiration as an essential presupposition of his exegesis. It is noteworthy that, in an able article in the *Scottish Journal of*

³⁶ G. H. Schodde, 'Interpretation' in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, III, *in loc.*

³⁷ M. Luther, *Works*, St. Louis Edition (St. L.), IX, p. 1818.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 1800. ³⁹ St.L., III, p. 1890; VI, p. 2095; III, p. 1895.

⁴⁰ cf. F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I, p. 278.

Theology, B. A. Gerrish of New York concedes that Luther never really questioned the traditional theory of inerrant Scripture and speaks of his 'strict view of verbal inspiration'.⁴¹

IV

Moving from the realm of presuppositions to the actual content of Luther's hermeneutical teaching, we shall endeavour to elaborate some of his principles of interpretation arising from the joint watch-words of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura* — constituting according to Melancthon the material and formal principles of the Reformation.

James Wood in his recent book on interpretation is surely right in asserting that 'the starting-point for Luther is that Divine inspiration is necessary for the true interpretation of the Bible'.⁴² 'If God does not open and explain Holy Writ,' declares Luther, 'none else can understand it; it will remain a closed book, enveloped in darkness.'⁴³ This, of course, springs from Luther's own experience. It was only when he himself received his inspiration that he was able to grasp the significance of Scripture. He believed that it was necessary to draw on God's grace and wisdom anew for the interpretation of each successive passage. So the primary prerequisite was prayer. 'Therefore the first duty', he told Spalatin, 'is to begin with a prayer of such a nature that God in His great mercy may grant you the true understanding of His words.'⁴⁴ Such a prayer is answered when the Holy Spirit interprets the Word which He has already inspired.⁴⁵ The instruction of the Spirit is essential to a right division of the Word. 'The Bible cannot be mastered by study or talent', Luther writes again to Spalatin; 'you must rely solely on the influx of the Spirit.'⁴⁶ 'No-one can understand God or His Word who has not received such understanding directly from the Holy Ghost.'⁴⁷ It is the office of the Spirit to press home the Word, and to ensure its reception. 'For nobody understands His precepts unless it be given him from above. . . . You understand them, however, because the Holy Spirit teaches you. . . . Therefore those most sadly err who presume to understand the Holy Scriptures and the law of God by taking hold of them with their own understanding and study.'⁴⁸ And again, referring to what is recorded in the Fourth Gospel con-

⁴¹ B. A. Gerrish, 'Biblical Authority and the Continental Reformation' in *S.J.T.*, x, 346. ⁴² J. D. Wood, *The Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 88.

⁴³ P.E., XIII, p. 17.

⁴⁴ L.E., I, p. 57.

⁴⁵ W.A., VII, p. 97.

⁴⁶ *Dr. Martin Luthers Briefwechsel*, eds. E. L. Enders and G. Kawerau, I, p. 141.

⁴⁷ W.A., VII, p. 546.

⁴⁸ W.A., LVII, p. 185; cf. xv, p. 565.

cerning the pre-existent Logos: 'No man can accept it unless his heart has been touched and opened by the Holy Spirit. It is as impossible of comprehension by reason as it is inaccessible to the touch of the hand.'⁴⁹

Such dependence upon the instruction of the Spirit will recognize the limitations of unaided reason. Luther is convinced that it is not within the capacity of the human intellect to understand God's Word. 'Many speculate wisely but nobody is wise in Scripture and understands it if he does not fear the Lord. And he who fears more, understands more. For "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom".'⁵⁰ In one of his letters to an unnamed recipient he satirizes 'these master minds, who love to grovel in God's Word with their human reason, like the sow in a turnip field'.⁵¹ Obviously it is not to be expected that revelational truth should be apprehended by unregenerate reason. 'If it were susceptible to our wisdom', Luther argues, 'then God would not need to reveal it from heaven or proclaim it through Holy Scripture.'⁵² So he concludes: 'In it (i.e. the Bible) not one word is of so small account as to allow of our understanding it by reason.'⁵³ Luther's scepticism concerning the adequacy of reason to arrive at a knowledge of spiritual reality is in part, no doubt, an inheritance from his Ockhamist tutelage.

On the other hand, reason need not be discarded altogether. It is to be subordinated to the Word of God. Luther differentiates between the magisterial and the ministerial uses of reason. 'Our intellect', he says, 'must adjust itself to the Word of God and to Holy Scripture.'⁵⁴ Reason in its *usus magisterialis* must not be permitted to intrude upon God's Word. Man's natural knowledge of God, even when it is accurately preserved in his perverted intellect, must nevertheless be subjected to the Word. Otherwise the Word is brought into contempt. But reason in its *usus ministerialis* as 'the receiving subject or apprehending instrument', as Hollaz defines it, must certainly be employed whenever Scripture is referred to as the repository of divine truth.⁵⁵ In the words of H. H. Kramm: 'Luther condemns that reason which tries to be wiser than the Word of God, the reason that wants to be an authority criticizing the Word of God, or inventing laws and doctrines in addition to the Word of God. This reason is the sign of human pride in unregenerate souls.'⁵⁶ It is quite distinct

⁴⁹ P.E., XXII, p. 8.

⁵⁰ W.A., IV, p. 519.

⁵¹ Letters, p. 178.

⁵² P.E., XXII, p. 6.

⁵³ M. Luther, *Werke*, Erlangen Edition (E.E.), xv, p. 144.

⁵⁴ W.A., XLII, p. 35.

⁵⁵ cf. J. T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ H. H. Kramm, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, p. 109.

from the submissive reason of the regenerate man which meekly accepts the truths that are revealed in the Book of God. Luther by no means despises learning, but he is only prepared to be guided by such scholarship as is baptized at Pentecost. 'The Holy Spirit teaches man better than all books; He teaches him to understand the Scriptures better than he can understand from the teaching of any other; and of his own accord he does everything God wills he should, so the Law dare make no demands upon him.'⁵⁷ 'The captive understanding', comments Quanbeck, 'is Luther's strong expression for the proper relation to the Bible. The exegete is not a free agent, but a prisoner of the Word. He is not at liberty to use Scripture for his own ends, but must bring his life into conformity to its purposes. God does not meet man as an equal, nor put Himself into man's hands to be used like a magician's spook, but retains authority and control.'⁵⁸ This existential note recurs throughout Luther's references to the believer's response to the Word. The knowledge to be sought from Scripture is never abstract or esoteric but always related to life as it has to be lived.

Nor is it divorced from personal experience. On the contrary, it is mediated through it. The way in which the Spirit conveys His interpretation of the Word is through the mind and soul of the man who submits himself to the discipline of instruction. In his Introduction to the Magnificat, Luther stresses that in this sacred canticle the Virgin Mary was speaking out of her own experience in which she was enlightened and taught by the Holy Spirit. No-one, he says, can properly apprehend God's Word apart from the Spirit. 'But', he continues, 'no-one can receive it from the Holy Spirit without experiencing, proving and feeling it. In such experience the Holy Spirit instructs us as in His own school, outside of which naught is learned save empty words and idle fables.'⁵⁹ Luther anticipated Calvin's emphasis on the testimony of the Spirit by which the Scripture obtains the credit it deserves and commands our unreserved assent.⁶⁰ 'No-one is able to speak worthily or to hear any part of Scripture', says Luther, 'if his disposition of mind is not in conformity therewith so that he feels inside what he hears or speaks outside and cries: Yes, indeed that is so!'⁶¹ Hence his maxim: *Sola experientia fecit theologum*. 'Experience is necessary for the understanding of the Word. It is not merely to be repeated and known, but to be lived and felt.'⁶² After Luther's death in 1546 a scrap of paper was found

⁵⁷ L.E., XII, pp. 16, 17.

⁵⁸ *Luther Today*, p. 101.

⁵⁹ H.E., III, p. 127.

⁶⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I. vii. 5.

⁶¹ W.A., III, p. 549.

⁶² W.A., V, p. 108.

on his table containing these words in Latin. 'No-one can understand the Bucolics of Virgil who has not been a herdsman for five years; nor his Georgics unless he has laboured for five years in the fields. In order to understand aright the epistles of Cicero a man must have been full twenty years in the public service of a great State. No-one need fancy he has tasted Holy Scripture who has not ruled the churches for a hundred years with prophets, like Elijah and Elisha, with John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles.'⁶³

However, this underscoring of what might be termed experiential interpretation by no means justifies the stale charge of subjectivism raised with such tiresome frequency against Luther. In his generally commendable study, *The Bible in the Church*, Professor Grant appears to fall a victim to this misconception. Luther's subjective spiritual interpretation of Scripture he describes as 'the glory of the Reformation'.⁶⁴ By way of contrast, Calvin is represented as a vigorous exponent of a healthier objective type of exegesis. But at the end of the same chapter, after dealing with Calvin, Pascal and the English reformers, Dr. Grant returns to Luther. 'The Reformation interpretation of the Bible, as we have seen, was given classical expression by Martin Luther. He rejects the traditional interpretation for it stands in the way of our personal understanding of Scripture. "The teachings of the Fathers are useful only to lead us to the Scriptures, as they were led, and then we must hold to the Scriptures alone."⁶⁵ The resulting exegesis is subjective, to be sure; but it is also objective. It is based on the literal meaning of the original writings. . . . The Bible is not one standard of authority among others, as it was for Medieval Catholicism. It is the sole standard. And it is not an objective standard as it was for Thomas Aquinas. It is a standard at once objective and subjective, for in it and through it God Himself speaks to the human heart. The Bible authenticates itself.'⁶⁶ This more balanced summary goes far to correct the impression given earlier by Grant that Luther's approach to the Bible was predominantly subjective. Such, as we have seen, is far from being the case. Luther recognizes the Spirit as the sole Interpreter, but he is also aware that the Spirit must communicate Himself to a receptive medium. His witness is answered by the acquiescing testimony of the regenerate spirit within. Christian experience Luther regarded as itself the product of the biblical message, or, rather, of the power of the Holy Spirit mediated through the Scrip-

⁶³ E.E., LVII, p. 16.

⁶⁴ Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁶⁵ W.A., XVIII, p. 1588.

⁶⁶ Grant, *op. cit.*, pp. 116, 117.

tures. 'Thus the congruence of experience and exposition in the study of the New Testament,' concludes Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan, 'Luther believed, was not a subjective thing, but the creation of the Creator Spirit Himself.'⁶⁷

V

Luther firmly holds to the perspicuity of Scripture. He is convinced of its basic clarity. He assumes that each passage of God's Word possesses one clear, definite and true sense of its own. *Scriptura sua radiat luce* was his slogan. 'There is not on earth a book more lucidly written than the Holy Scripture', he announces. 'Compared with all other books, it is as the sun compared with all other lights.'⁶⁸ It is his complaint against the Romanists that they persisted in regarding the Bible as a closed book, comprehended only by the ecclesiastical pundits. Whenever he sought to reprove them out of the Scripture they raised the objection that its final interpretation is exclusively the prerogative of the Pope.⁶⁹ But Luther had to meet a similar obscurantist tendency in Erasmus. The great humanist of Rotterdam, whom Dr. Rupp wittily hails as the original Flying Dutchman because economic necessity compelled him to be 'in journeyings oft', seemed to overestimate the mysterious element in the Word. Whilst he acknowledged that 'the precepts destined to regulate our existence' were patent and evident, he found many other passages to be so obscure that no-one had ever unravelled them. Indeed, he went so far as to suggest that 'there are some sanctuaries in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not willed that we should enter too soon, and if we try to penetrate them we are surrounded with darkness.'⁷⁰ In his reply to Erasmus — *De Servo Arbitrio* as against *De Libero Arbitrio* — Luther is not slow to remark that by exaggerating the obscurity of Scripture his friend was guilty of resorting to the selfsame stratagem of traditional apologetic to which he had previously objected in the *Paraclesis* prefixed to his edition of the Greek Testament. There Erasmus had wholeheartedly dissented from those who refused to place the Scriptures in the hands of unlearned and ignorant men and had hoped rather that they might be read and understood not only by the Scots and Irish, but also by the Turks and Saracens, by the ploughboy, the weaver and the traveller. Luther vehemently denies that the Scriptures are abstruse. 'It is with such

⁶⁷ P.E., XXI, xiv. ⁶⁸ M. Luther, *Comment on Psalm 37*. ⁶⁹ W.A., VI, p. 406.
⁷⁰ Quoted in E. G. Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, p. 272.

scarecrows that Satan has frightened away men from reading the Sacred Writings, and has rendered the Holy Scriptures contemptible, that he might cause his poison of philosophy to prevail in the Church.⁷¹ And so he claims 'that no part of Holy Scripture is dark. . . . Christ hath not so enlightened us that any part of His doctrine and His Word which He bids us regard and follow should be left in the dark'.⁷² In Luther's opinion, the Diatribe of Erasmus 'not being able to endure the brightness, nay the lightning of the most clear Scriptures, pretending by every kind of manoeuvre that it does not see (which is the truth of the case) wishes to persuade us that our eyes are also covered that we cannot see'.⁷³ Elsewhere in *De Servo Arbitrio* Luther refers emphatically to 'the all clear Scriptures of God' and 'the all clear light of the Scripture'.⁷⁴

Luther argues that the perspicuity of Scripture is evidenced by the way in which throughout the Christian centuries devout scholars have based their arguments upon it and drawn their proof-texts from it. 'The Holy Scriptures must needs be clearer, easier of interpretation and more certain than any other scriptures, for all teachers prove their statements by them, as by clearer and more stable writings, and wish their own writings to be established and explained by them. But no-one can ever prove a dark saying by one that is still darker; therefore, necessity compels us to run to the Bible with all the writings of the doctors, and thence to get our verdict and judgment upon them; for Scripture alone is the true overlord and master of all writings on earth. If not, what are the Scriptures good for? Let us reject them and be satisfied with the books of men and human teachers.'⁷⁵ If we cannot look to the Bible for the light of knowledge, where else shall we find it? Luther accuses Erasmus of abandoning men to the broken light of human wisdom by buttressing as he does the orthodox doctrine of Scriptural obscurity. 'And you, too, my friend Erasmus, know very well what you are saying, when you deny that the Scripture is clear, for you at the same time drop in my ear this assertion: "it of necessity follows therefore, that all your saints, whom you adduce, are much less clear". And truly it would be so. For who shall certify us concerning their light, if you make the Scriptures obscure? Therefore they who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of Scripture, leave us nothing else but darkness.'⁷⁶

⁷¹ M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, ed. H. Cole, p. 25.

⁷² M. Luther, *Werke*, Walch Edition, xviii, pp. 2163-2164.

⁷³ *Bondage*, p. 236.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 27, 290.

⁷⁵ H.E., III, p. 16.

⁷⁶ *Bondage*, p. 109.

It is from this point of view that Luther registers his complaint about the many 'commentaries and books' through which 'the dear Bible is being buried and covered up so that no-one takes note of the text'. He refers to his own experience. 'When I was young, I familiarized myself with the Bible, read it often, and became well-acquainted with the text; so well that I knew where every passage that was mentioned was to be found: thus I became a *bonus textualis*. Not till then did I read the commentators. But finally I had to disregard them all and put them away because the use of them did not satisfy my conscience, and I had to take my stand again on the Bible: for it is much better to see with your own eyes than with another's.'⁷⁷ In his Preface to Romans Luther speaks in the same strain: 'For heretofore it (i.e. the Epistle) has been evilly darkened with commentaries and all kinds of idle talk, though it is, in itself, a bright light, almost enough to illumine all the Scripture.'⁷⁸ No book, not even a book about the Book, can match the Book itself. 'You shall know', writes Luther, in the preface to the first volume of the 1539 edition of his German works, 'that the Holy Scripture is such a book that it makes the wisdom of all other books foolishness, whilst it also teaches eternal life.'⁷⁹

This insistence on the self-explanatory clarity of Scripture released the Book from bondage to the experts. A similar emancipation is overdue today. The Roman dogma of Scriptural obscurity and oligarchical interpretation reappears in another form. Instead of the Pope and his doctors we now meet those specialists in the history of the biblical period who would imply that without an acquaintance with the contemporary background it is impossible even for the simple believer to grasp the meaning of the Word. So, to borrow Luther's own vivid phrase, they 'hatch the eggs and become our idol'. This is not to suggest, of course, that the researches of our scholars are in vain. They possess an incalculable apologetic value and we are perpetually indebted to them. But it must not therefore be assumed that an adequate understanding of Scripture depends upon our familiarity with its secular historical context. The only background really necessary for a reliable and sufficient comprehension of Scripture is provided by Scripture itself.⁸⁰ Hence Luther's repeated warning against the danger of substituting human interpretation for the text, i.e. the clear words of Scripture itself. 'With the text and from the foundation of the Holy Scriptures I have silenced and

⁷⁷ St. L., XXII, pp. 54, 55. ⁷⁸ H.E., VI, p. 447.

⁷⁹ W.A., I, p. 659. ⁸⁰ cf. Pieper, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 365, 366.

slain all my opponents. For whoever is well founded and practised in the text will become a good and fine theologian, since a passage, or text, from the Bible has more weight than many commentators and glosses, which are not strong and round and do not help in the controversy.⁸¹ Hence his advice to his pupils is this: '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 step out of Scripture, you are lost: then they will lead you just as they wish. But if you remain in Scripture, you have won the victory and you will regard their raging in no other way than when the crag of the sea smiles at the waves and billows. All their writings are nothing else than waves that rock to and fro. Be assured and certain that there is nothing clearer than the sun, I mean, Holy Scripture. If a cloud drifts before it, nothing else than the same clear sun is nevertheless behind it.'⁸²

That last quotation makes it evident that whilst asserting the fundamental clarity of Scripture, Luther does not deny that there are passages hard to be understood. 'This indeed I confess, that there are many *places* in the Scriptures obscure and abstruse; not from the majesty of the things, but from our ignorance of certain terms and grammatical particulars; but which do not prevent a knowledge of all the *things* in the Scriptures.'⁸³ Luther distinguishes between the intelligibility of the contents of Scripture and the clarity of words through which this revealed content is communicated. Mysteries there must be, for finite reason cannot hope to climb up into the majesty of the divine. The things of God will not be fully comprehensible to the human mind, but the things of Scripture are always clear. In other words, although the 'how' may be concealed, the 'that' remains unambiguously plain. 'Scripture simply confesses the Trinity of God, the humanity of Christ, and the unpardonable sin. There is here no obscurity or ambiguity whatever. But how these things are, Scripture does not say, nor is it necessary to be known. The sophists employ their dreams here; attack and condemn them, and acquit Scripture.'⁸⁴ And so in a resoundingly triumphant passage Luther can provide the conclusion of the whole matter. 'For what thing of more importance can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals are broken, the stone rolled away from the door of the sepulchre, and that greatest of all mysteries brought to light, Christ made man: that God is Trinity and Unity: that Christ suffered

⁸¹ E.E., LVI, p. 7.

⁸² St. L., v, p. 334.

⁸³ *Bondage*, pp. 25, 26.

⁸⁴ St. L., XVIII, pp. 1682ff.

for us and will reign to all eternity? Are not these things known and proclaimed even in our streets?'⁸⁵

VI

A further hermeneutical principle follows logically from Luther's assertion of the perspicuity of Scripture. It is crystallized in the phrase, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.⁸⁶ 'That is the true method of interpretation,' says Luther, 'which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way.'⁸⁷ He effectively employs the comparative technique by setting one portion of the Word beside another and allowing the plainer texts to illuminate the more difficult, as Origen, Jerome and Augustine had recommended.⁸⁸ Luther acknowledges his indebtedness to the past when he writes: 'The holy Fathers explained Scripture by taking the clear, lucid passages and with them shed light on obscure and doubtful passages.'⁸⁹ 'In this manner', he tells us, 'Scripture is its own light. It is a fine thing when Scripture explains itself.'⁹⁰

In laying down the rule that 'one passage must be explained by another', Luther adds immediately, 'namely, a doubtful and obscure passage must be explained by a clear and certain passage'.⁹¹ Obviously, the clear passage needs no explanation, although, of course, it may be corroborated by other Scriptures. In his controversy with the *Schwärmer* or 'Enthusiasts' Luther had occasion to object to their habit of obscuring what was already sufficiently plain by further comparisons. Behind their spurious exegesis of John vi, for instance, there lies the misconception that even the clear must be further elaborated. Luther repudiates such a work of exegetical supererogation. 'The result of this method will be that no passage in Scripture will remain certain and clear, and the comparison of one passage with another will never end. . . . To demand that clear and certain passages be explained by drawing in other passages amounts to an iniquitous deriding of the truth and injection of fog into the light. If one set out to explain all passages by first comparing them with other passages, he would be reducing the whole of Scripture to a vast and uncertain chaos.'⁹²

This formula of Scripture as its own interpreter is closely linked

⁸⁵ *Bondage*, p. 26.

⁸⁶ W.A., VII, p. 97.

⁸⁷ H.E., III, p. 334.

⁸⁸ cf. Origen, *De Principiis*, IV; Augustine, *De Doctrina* I-III; Jerome, *Ad Paulum Ep.* liii, 6. 7.

⁸⁹ St. L., XX, p. 856.

⁹⁰ St. L., XI, p. 2335.

⁹¹ St. L., V, p. 335.

⁹² St. L., XX, p. 325.

with another — that all exposition should be in accordance with the analogy of faith. The use of this term by Luther and the reformers generally is in fact a misapplication of its original occurrence in Romans xii. 6. 'The expression *propheteian kata ten analogian tes pisteos*', comments Denney in the *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 'implies that more faith one has — the more completely Christian he is — the greater the prophetic endowment will be.' He adds that 'in theology "the analogy of faith" is used in quite a different sense, though it was supposed to be justified by this passage. To interpret Scripture e.g. according to the analogy of faith, meant to interpret the parts, especially difficult or obscure parts, in consistency with the whole. The scope of the whole, again, was supposed to be represented in the Creed or Rule of Faith; and to interpret *kata ten analogian tes pisteos* meant simply not to run counter to the Creed.' Denney concludes somewhat curtly: 'In the passage before us this is an anachronism as well as an irrelevance.'⁹³

However inappropriate the term *analogia fidei* may be to reflect the apostle's intention, it is nevertheless useful to delineate Luther's own attitude. For him the rule of faith is the Scripture itself. No extraneous canon is invoked. He finds his sufficient criterion within the Word of God. Creeds and confessions are only of value in so far as they embody the rule of Scripture. But he demands that reference must be made to the Scripture as a whole and not merely to selected parts of it. 'It behoves a theologian, if he would avoid error, to have regard to the whole of Scripture and compare contraries with contraries.'⁹⁴ The sophists, indeed, 'support themselves with Scripture, because they would look laughable if they tried to force their own dreams on men; but they do not quote Scripture in its entirety. They always snatch up what appears to favour them; but what is against them they either cleverly conceal or corrupt with their cunning glosses'.⁹⁵ That is why Luther can call the Bible a heresy book, because the mere citation of texts without recourse to the rule of faith may be so engineered as to give the impression of vindicating the most extreme heterodoxy. What Luther means by *analogia fidei* is neatly expressed by James Wood when he says that 'the interpretation has to be congruent with the general norm of the Word of God'.⁹⁶

This is something radically different, however, from Schleiermacher's *das Schriftganze* by which he claimed that the Christian

⁹³ E.G.T., II, in loc.

⁹⁵ P.E., I, p. 107.

⁹⁴ M. Luther, *Opera Latina*, ed. H. Schmidt, III, p. 185.

⁹⁶ Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

articles of faith must not be drawn from those Scriptures which treat of separate doctrines, but only from the general scope and tenor of the Bible. He contended that 'it is a most precarious procedure to quote Scripture passages in dogmatic treatises and, besides, in itself, quite inadequate'.⁹⁷ Luther was equally conscious of the peril involved. He disapproved the indiscriminate concatenation of Bible verses without due respect to their meaning and context. 'Heretofore I have held that where something was to be proved by the Scriptures, the Scriptures quoted must really refer to the point at issue. I learn now that it is not enough to throw many passages together helter-skelter whether they fit or not. If this is to be the way, then I can easily prove from the Scriptures that beer is better than wine.'⁹⁸ But, as Mueller brings out, Schleiermacher's application of *das Schriftganze* was only a pretext to excuse his thoroughly unscriptural method of deriving theological truths from reason or the pious self-consciousness. Kliefoth was surely justified in dismissing this alleged disparity between the part and the whole in Scripture, as represented in Schleiermacher and Hofmann after him, as an 'inconceivable concept'.⁹⁹

Luther displays a recognition of the unity of Scripture which is startlingly up-to-date. It severs him from many interpreters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and links him with some of the most recent trends. He found no difficulty in interpreting the New Testament in the light of the Old, and the Old Testament in the light of the New. For him the two sections of Scripture constitute a single entity. He would subscribe to the dictum of Augustine that the New Testament is latent in the Old and the Old Testament patent in the New.¹⁰⁰ Not only does the New Testament form a unit with the Old Testament: it is also a unit within itself. Despite the individual preferences which he expressed and of which much (too much) has been made by the undiscerning, there is no real ground for surmising that Luther recognized any serious inequality between the various volumes received into the Canon. 'To conceive of the New Testament in such a way and to split it up into different sections of unequal worth', observes Professor Aland, 'would be fundamentally to misunderstand Luther.'¹⁰¹ There follows a quotation from Luther's Preface to the New Testament to indicate his unequivocal opinion.

⁹⁷ F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Glaubenslehre*, I, p. 30. ⁹⁸ W.A., VI, p. 301.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Pieper, *op. cit.*, I, p. 201.

¹⁰⁰ Augustine, *Quaestionum in Heptateuchum*, II, 73.

¹⁰¹ K. Aland, 'Luther as Exegete' in *Expository Times*, LXIX, p. 70.

'Therefore let it first be known that we must rid ourselves of the delusion that there are four Gospels and only four Gospels. . . . On the contrary, we must adhere to this . . . the New Testament is one book, in which are written the Gospel and God's promise, as well as the history of those who believed and those who did not. Thus every man may be sure that there is only one Gospel, only one book in the New Testament, only one faith, and only one God Who promises (salvation).'¹⁰²

VII

One of the most valuable of Luther's hermeneutical principles is his insistence on the primacy of the literal sense. He resolutely sets aside the verbal jugglery involved in multiple exegesis and firmly takes his stand upon the plain and obvious significance of the Word. 'The literal sense of Scripture alone', he asserts, 'is the whole essence of faith and Christian theology.'¹⁰³ And again: 'If we wish to handle Scripture aright, our sole effort will be to obtain the one, simple, seminal and certain literal sense.'¹⁰⁴

This meant the rejection of what Dean Farrar dubbed 'the fatal dream' of the fourfold sense, so dear to the Medieval Schoolmen.¹⁰⁵ Scripture was expounded by means of the *Quadriga*, or fourfold rule, around which, according to Guibert of Nogent, every sacred page revolved as on wheels.¹⁰⁶ Luther himself explains it: 'In the schools of theologians it is a well-known rule that Scripture is to be understood in four ways, literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical.'¹⁰⁷ 'The literal meaning speaks of acts, the allegorical of what you believe, the moral of what you do, the anagogical of what you hope.'¹⁰⁸ The text was held to contain a double meaning, literal and spiritual. The spiritual sense was further subdivided into the moral or tropological, the allegorical and the anagogical. The tropological sense applied to the individual believer, the allegorical to the Church and the anagogical to the future. Since so much capital has been made out of the abuses to which this type of exegesis was prone, it ought to be observed that throughout the Middle Ages and into the period of the Reformation only the literal sense was valid in disputations

¹⁰² W.A., VI, p. 2.

¹⁰³ Quoted in F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 327.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* ¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁰⁶ Guibert of Nogent, 'How to Make a Sermon' in *Early Medieval Theology*, ed. G. E. McCracken and A. Cabaniss (L.C.C. IX), p. 291.

¹⁰⁷ Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

¹⁰⁸ *Luther Today*, p. 62.

and in exegesis it was not considered essential to search for all four possibilities in every verse. Whatever its weaknesses, this discipline at least provided an incentive to examine the text thoroughly from a variety of angles.

As we shall see later, Luther did not altogether set aside spiritual interpretation, but he emphatically urged the priority and superiority of the literal sense. For a thousand years the Church had buttressed its theological edifice by means of an authoritative exegesis which depended upon allegory as its chief medium of interpretation. Luther struck a mortal blow at this vulnerable spot. From his own experience he knew the futility of allegorization: 'mere jugglery', 'a merry game', 'monkey tricks' — that is how he stigmatizes it.¹⁰⁹ He had suffered much from that sort of pseudo-exposition of which Dr. John Lowe speaks so trenchantly, where 'anything can mean anything'.¹¹⁰ 'When I was a monk', Luther frankly acknowledges, 'I was an adept in allegory. I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans, I came to have some knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is no allegory, and learned to know what Christ was.'¹¹¹ His emancipation was only gradual, for there are occasions, especially in his lectures on the Psalms, when we catch him relapsing into his former style. 'It was very difficult for me to break away from my habitual zeal for allegory', he confides. 'And yet I was aware that allegories were empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures. It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine.'¹¹² In thus attempting to reinstate the *sensus literalis* Luther was, in fact, continuing a tradition which had never been altogether buried. Thomas Aquinas had upheld it and before him Albertus Magnus and Richard of St. Victor. Nicholas of Lyra more immediately prepared the path for Luther: hence the jingle:

*Si Lyra non lyrasset
Lutherus non saltasset.*

But it was a long time before Luther recognized the worth of Lyra's contribution.

Luther does not altogether abandon allegory, for in the passage quoted above (which is from his late lectures on Genesis) he adds: 'After this (i.e. the literal sense) has been treated and correctly

¹⁰⁹ H.E., III, p. 334: Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

¹¹⁰ *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. C. W. Dugmore, p. 121.

¹¹¹ W.A., I, p. 136. ¹¹² W.A., XLII, p. 173.

understood, then one may also employ allegories as an adornment and flowers to embellish and illuminate the account. The bare allegories, which stand in no relation to the account, and do not illuminate it, should simply be disapproved as empty dreams. . . . Therefore let those who want to make use of allegories base them on the historical account itself.¹¹³

Luther's stress on the literal sense is related to his belief in the perspicuity of Scripture. He holds that the Word of God has 'one simple, direct, indisputable meaning, on which our faith may rest without wavering'.¹¹⁴ 'The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth,' he says, 'and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense.'¹¹⁵ So in his own exegesis he sets out to discover 'the simple sense of His simple words'.¹¹⁶ In the lectures on Genesis he winds up his exposition of the first three chapters by claiming that according to his ability he has treated the contents in their historical meaning, which he believes to be their real and true one. He dissociates himself from what he calls 'the ridiculous procedure' which Origen and Jerome pursued in expounding these same chapters, for they departed from the historical account to enquire after a spiritual meaning of which they had no knowledge. Augustine, too, was not irreproachable in this respect. To subject the text to such fanciful elaboration is, Luther feels, a desecration of the sacred writers. He therefore concludes that 'in the interpretation of Holy Scripture the main task must be to derive from it some sure and plain meaning'.¹¹⁷

His chief objection to the heavenly prophets of Zwickau was that they spiritualized away the literal sense of Scripture. 'Brother,' — so he addresses Carlstadt — 'the natural meaning of the words is queen, transcending all subtle, acute, sophisticated fancy. From it we may not deviate unless compelled by a clear article of the faith. Otherwise the spiritual jugglers would not have a single letter in Scripture. Therefore, interpretations of God's Word must be lucid and definite, having a firm, sure, and true foundation on which one may confidently rely.'¹¹⁸ Erasmus is rebuked for the same tendency. 'When shall we ever have any plain and pure text, without tropes and conclusions, either for or against freewill? Has the Scripture no such texts anywhere? And shall the cause of free will remain for ever in doubt, like a reed shaken with the wind, as being that

113 *ibid.*
116 *ibid.*

114 H.E., I, p. 370.

115 H.E., III, p. 350.

117 P.E., I, p. 231; cf. p. 232.

118 P.E., XL, p. 190.

which can be supported by no certain text, but which stands upon conclusions and tropes only, introduced by men mutually disagreeing with each other? But let our sentiment be this:— that neither conclusion nor trope is to be admitted into the Scriptures, unless the evident state of the particulars, or the absurdity of any particular as militating against an article of faith, require it: but, that the simple, pure and natural meaning of the words is to be adhered to, which is according to the rules of grammar and to that common use of speech which God has given to men.¹¹⁹ And this too, of course, is the offence of the Romanists who, according to Luther, toss the words of God to and fro, as gamblers throw their dice, and 'take from the Scriptures their single, simple, constant sense'.¹²⁰

Luther apparently prefers to speak of the grammatical and historical rather than the literal sense, although it is evident that the three terms are intimately related.¹²¹ In his own exegesis he usually puts into practice the precepts he has enjoined upon others, especially in respect of the principle at present under review. It will be worthwhile to watch him at work. His first procedure is to determine the semantic range of the particular passage before him. He examines it in relation to its context. He endeavours to expound it in congruity with the over-all design of the chapter and book in which it occurs. For example, in dealing with the fifth Psalm, he immediately sets aside what Lyra and the other commentators have written and considers what is the intention of the Holy Spirit through the Psalmist as indicated in the text itself. 'It is certain that this Psalm does not treat of sufferings and tribulations, for David (lit. the person who harps) does not say one word about them. The whole Psalm is a complaint concerning the ungodly, the unjust, and the wicked. The scope of the Psalm, therefore, according to my judgment, is this:— the prophet is praying against hypocrites, deceitful workers, and false prophets, who seduce and deceive the people of God and the heritage of Christ by their human traditions; whom Christ calls in Matthew 7 "ravening wolves" and the apostle in Titus 1: 10 "vain talkers and deceivers".' And Luther explains that, as in the preceding Psalm David inveighed against a mere profession of righteousness in the realm of practice, so here he attacks the same abuse in the realm of doctrine. 'We shall therefore find that this Psalm is directed against all false prophets, hypocrites, heretics, superstitious ones and the whole generation of those who devour the people of

¹¹⁹ *Bondage*, p. 205.

¹²⁰ H.E., III, p. 37.

¹²¹ H.E., II, 189; III, p. 352.

God by an adulteration of His Word, and by a false show of works.'¹²² It is interesting that Luther's interpretation is confirmed by more recent commentators. Professor Kirkpatrick, for instance, describes this fifth Psalm as 'a morning prayer uttered by one who is exposed to danger from the machinations of unscrupulous and hypocritical enemies',¹²³

In his initial approach to the text Luther also considers its relationship to the rule of faith. He attempts to envisage it in the light of the total content of Scripture and to define its precise position in the harmony of truth. In order to understand any portion of the Word it is necessary to know what is taught by the Word as a whole. 'Scripture is indeed the rule of doctrine,' — so Paulsen expounds Luther's principle here — 'but, *vice versa*, doctrine is also the rule of Scripture which must be interpreted *ex analogia fidei*.'¹²⁴ Nevertheless, having ascertained the general scope of the passage before him, Luther then concerns himself with the elucidation of the philological and syntactic sense. He says he tries to observe the rule never to fight against the grammar. He makes it quite clear, however, that this is a subsidiary investigation, the value of which depends entirely upon the contribution it makes towards establishing the true meaning of the text. 'Therefore in every exposition the subject should be given consideration first; that is, it must be determined what is under consideration. After this has been done, the next step is that the words should be adapted to the matter if the character of the language so permits, not the matter to the words.'¹²⁵ In dealing with the *crux exegetica* in Genesis iv. 13 he complains that previous commentators have been misled by a restricted philological method divorced from the necessary cooperation of theology. Hence the learned Dominican, Pagnino, had offered the translation (as does our Authorized Version), 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.' But, as Luther pithily puts it, this is to make a martyr out of Cain and a sinner out of Abel, so he strikingly renders Cain's *cri de coeur* as, 'My iniquity is greater than can be forgiven.' 'Thus we see that philologists who are nothing but philologists,' he concludes, 'and have no knowledge of theological matters have their perplexing difficulties with such passages and torture not only Scripture but also themselves and their hearers. First the meaning should be established in such a manner that it is everywhere in agreement, and then

¹²² M. Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, ed. H. Cole, I, pp. 177, 178.

¹²³ A. F. Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, I, p. 20.

¹²⁴ F. Paulsen, *Geschichte*, I, p. 199.

¹²⁵ P.E., I, p. 263.

philology should be brought into play.¹²⁶

It is noteworthy that in treating Genesis iv. 13 Luther strives to vindicate his interpretation, whether successfully or otherwise, by a careful and comparative study of the vocabulary involved. That is quite characteristic of his method. He is at pains to uncover the precise significance of each word. And it must be remembered that Luther's linguistic equipment was by no means negligible. He had studied Hebrew through Reuchlin's *Rudimenta* from 1509 and Greek from 1511. He had devoted himself to a monumental project of translation. In his *Essay on Translating* he recounts how he and two of his helpers once spent four days over three lines in the Book of Job.¹²⁷ We are not altogether surprised, then, that he should lay it down that 'to expound Scripture, to interpret it rightly and to fight against those people who quote wrongly . . . cannot be done without knowledge of the languages'.¹²⁸ But it is Luther's consistent objective through the right interpretation of the dead languages to arrive at the living message.

VIII

Luther fearlessly advanced the literal sense in the face of his opponents. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his controversy with Jerome Emser, Secretary to Duke George of Saxony and a Court Chaplain. (Luther addresses him unceremoniously as the Leipzig Goat — a dual allusion both to his escutcheon and his belligerency — and tells him that he must not defile the Holy Scriptures with his snout.) As Steimle has noted, 'Luther goes straight to the fundamental difference between them, the sole authority of Scripture in matters of faith and the right exposition of Scripture according to its grammatical sense. Over against Emser's position, that he would fight with the sword — i.e. the Word of truth — but that he would not permit it to remain in the scabbard of the word sense, but use the naked blade of the spiritual sense, Luther, in the most important section of his answer, under the subtitle "The Letter and the Spirit", utters the foundation principles of Protestant exegesis.'¹²⁹

This crucial insertion must now occupy our attention. It represents a most important segment in the core documentation of Luther's hermeneutics. Augustine had penned a treatise against

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 298. Luther's rendering of Genesis iv. 13 is supported by RV mg.

¹²⁷ H.E., V, p. 14.

¹²⁸ *Luther Speaks*, ed. H. P. Ehrenberg, p. 72.

¹²⁹ H.E., III, pp. 279-280.

Pelagius carrying the same title. It was from Augustine, perhaps through Lefevre, that Luther derived his own distinction between spirit and letter. As Quanbeck says, it became one of the basic elements in his principles of interpretation, although he tempered it somewhat by the strong historical tendency of his thought.¹³⁰ Emser took as his text 2 Corinthians iii. 6 ('the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life') and argued that anyone who understands Scripture only according to the letter and not according to the spirit had better turn to Virgil or some other heathen tale, for he will read only to his own destruction. He accused Luther of this very failure and consequently regarded him as merely beating the air with the scabbard instead of fighting with the sword itself.¹³¹ Luther follows Augustine in explaining that the apostle's words do not refer primarily to modes of speech but to the explicit prohibition of evil by the Law. "The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life" might be expressed in other words, thus: "The Law killeth, but the grace of God giveth life": or, "Grace gives help and does all that the Law demands and of itself cannot do."¹³² Indeed Luther actually quotes from Augustine — a fine sentence, as he calls it, from the commentary on Psalm xvii where he provides 'this happy and striking explanation, "the letter is none other than law apart from grace."' 'And so we may also say', Luther adds, 'the spirit is none other than grace apart from the Law.'¹³³ We must not overlook the fact, however, that Augustine does not altogether rule out the application of 2 Corinthians iii. 6 to the subject of interpretation: the sense may also fit that, he says in parenthesis.¹³⁴ Luther challenges Emser's contention as being unscriptural. He will recognize no hermeneutical method which is not itself derived from the Word. He boldly invites Emser to produce a single letter in the whole Bible that agrees with his magnification of the spiritual sense.¹³⁵ He proposes to put Emser to school with Paul in order that he may learn what is really intended by this distinction between the spirit and the letter. As it is, Emser has no conception of Paul's meaning. 'How well Emser agrees with St. Paul: like a donkey singing a duet with a nightingale.'¹³⁶ We must not create mysteries where the Scripture does not indicate them: only the Spirit 'speaketh mysteries' (1 Cor.

¹³⁰ *Luther Today*, p. 47.

¹³¹ H.E., III, p. 319.

¹³² *ibid.*, p. 356.

¹³³ *ibid.*, p. 362.

¹³⁴ Augustine, *De Spiritu et Littera*, V, 7. Luther declares: 'In that passage St. Paul does not write one iota about these two senses' (H.E., III, p. 353).

¹³⁵ H.E., III, p. 352.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 348.

xiv. 2). Hence he argues that Emser's spiritual sense is inadmissible in controversy, as all the Schoolmen agreed, 'but the other sense is the highest, best, strongest; in short, it is the whole substance, essence and foundation of Scripture, so that if the literal sense were taken away, all the Scriptures would be nothing.'¹³⁷ Instead of venturing too far and too high, like foolish chamois hunters, 'it is much surer and safer to abide by the words in their simple sense; they furnish the real pasture and right dwelling-places for all minds.'¹³⁸ Luther comes to the uncomplimentary conclusion that the text in 2 Corinthians iii squares with Emser's twofold sense, spiritual and literal, as perfectly as his head does with the profundities of philosophy.¹³⁹ He will have nothing to do with this double Bible which casts uncertainty upon the truth of God.¹⁴⁰

Luther then proceeds to expound at some length the true significance of the letter and the spirit in relation to the two ministries of the law and the gospel. But it is to be observed that here and elsewhere in his writings Luther does not relate these inflexibly to the division between the Testaments, as was the current fashion. It is not a matter of equating law with the Old Testament and gospel with the New. On the contrary, he asserts that without the light of the Spirit the whole of Scripture is law, and with the light of the Spirit the whole of Scripture is gospel. 'Where the Spirit is present', he says, 'all Scripture is saving.'¹⁴¹ The distinction between letter and spirit, then, is, as Prenter has reminded us, 'absolutely attached to the motion of faith away from man himself toward Christ. Those who understand the Gospel in a proud and false way are selfishly changing it into a *verbum imperfectum et longum*, to an empty and useless and false word, no matter how the word itself is the high and holy Gospel. The Word, however, which truly is *verbum spiritus*, eliminates all pride and all egotism in the hearer. But such a word is only understood by faith. In this manner faith itself becomes a parabolically expounded, living *verbum abbreviatum*. The distinction between Law and Gospel is understood by this parabolic interpretation, not as a rigid dialectic point, but as the dynamic contrast which includes both the beginning and the end of the motion of faith'.¹⁴² 'This is the difference between Law and Gospel,' says Luther himself, 'the Law is the word of Moses to us, the Gospel is the Word of God in us. The Law remains external, the Gospel is

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 349.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 350.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 351.

¹⁴¹ Quoted in *Luther Today*, p. 83.

¹⁴² Prenter, *op. cit.*, pp. 110, 111.

within.¹⁴³ Thus when the law is received inwardly by faith it becomes gospel, and when the gospel is not received inwardly by faith it becomes law. The Word, then, as letter is law: as spirit it is gospel.

If we suspect that Luther has been reasoning in a circle here we shall be right. He has ushered the spirit sense out of the back door only to welcome it at the front. But it must be noted on what totally different terms it is now received. Emser's spiritual sense was derived from the tradition of the Church and rational processes. Luther's spiritual sense is derived from the Scripture itself and the apprehension of faith. So he can speak of the Spirit giving 'a new interpretation, which is then the new literal sense.'¹⁴⁴ Now that is a highly significant admission. It indicates that whilst, as we have seen, Luther maintains the primacy of the literal sense, he does not exclude a further interpretation. In his recognition of a *sensus plenior* he was perhaps nearer to Origen than he knew. Yet he would wish to gather everything within one meaning. After he has stated, in a passage already quoted, that since the Holy Spirit is the plainest of all speakers His words can only have one simple sense, the literal, he immediately adds: 'That the things indicated by the simple sense of His simple words should signify something further and different, and therefore one thing should always signify another, is more than a question of words of language. For the same is true of all other things outside of the Scriptures, since all of God's works and creatures are living signs and words of God, as St. Augustine and all the teachers declare.' 'But', he concludes, 'we are not to say that the Scriptures or the Word of God have more than one meaning.'¹⁴⁵ By way of illustration, Luther employs the analogy of a picture. A portrait of an actual man signifies that person without requiring any explanation. But that does not lead us to assume that the word 'picture' has a twofold sense, a literal sense (the picture) and a spiritual sense (the person). In the same way, Luther infers, the things in Scripture have a further significance, but the Scriptures do not on that account possess a double sense, but only the single yet comprehensive meaning the words themselves convey. It will be detected that Luther has borrowed from Augustine not only the distinction between *littera* and *spiritus* but also that between *signum* and *res*.¹⁴⁶

Although, therefore, Luther urges the priority of the literal sense, it can hardly be said that to *sola Scriptura* he allies the further principle *sola historica sententiae*, as Gerrish claims. Indeed, the

¹⁴³ Quoted in *Luther Today*, p. 83.

¹⁴⁴ H.E., III, p. 349.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 350.

¹⁴⁶ Augustine, *De Doctrina*, II.

latter goes on to admit that Luther allowed even the use of allegory, not as proof but as ornament and in accordance with the analogy of faith. In effect, Luther does concede a dual meaning of Scripture: or, at least two aspects of the same meaning. The Lutheran dogmatists elaborated this unsystematized and at times inconsistent insight into a differentiation between the external and internal *forma* of Scripture. Quenstedt defines it thus: 'We must distinguish between the grammatical and outer meaning of the Divine Word and the spiritual, inner and Divine meaning of the Divine Word. The first is the *forma* of the Word of God insofar as it is a word, the latter is its *forma* insofar as it is a Divine Word.'¹⁴⁷ But we shall not altogether resolve this tension until we have examined another of Luther's hermeneutical principles.

IX

Luther's interpretation of Scripture is at once Christocentric and Christological. It is Christocentric in that he regards the Lord Jesus Christ as the heart of the Bible. 'Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what will you find remaining in them?' he asks Erasmus.¹⁴⁸ 'In the whole Scripture there is nothing but Christ, either in plain words or involved words.'¹⁴⁹ 'The whole Scripture is about Christ alone everywhere, if we look to its inner meaning, though superficially it may sound different.'¹⁵⁰ Christ is 'the sun and truth in Scripture'.¹⁵¹ He is the geometrical centre of the Bible.¹⁵² He is the point from which the whole circle is drawn.¹⁵³ Scripture contains 'nothing but Christ and the Christian faith'.¹⁵⁴ And that categorical assertion obtains for the Old Testament as well as for the New, 'for it is beyond question that all the Scriptures point to Christ alone.'¹⁵⁵ 'The entire Old Testament refers to Christ and agrees with Him,' says Luther.¹⁵⁶

In his Introduction to the Old Testament he pens this classic passage: 'Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies. Simple and small are the swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, that lies in them.'¹⁵⁷ This Christocentric orientation of Scripture is raised to a major hermeneutical principle.

¹⁴⁷ J. A. Quenstedt, *Theologia*, I, p. 56.

¹⁴⁸ *Bondage*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁹ W.A., XI, p. 223.

¹⁵⁰ M. Luther, *Römerbrief*, ed. J. Ficker, p. 240.

¹⁵¹ W.A., III, p. 643.

¹⁵² W.A., Tr. II, 439.

¹⁵³ E.E., XLVI, p. 338.

¹⁵⁴ W.A., VIII, p. 236.

¹⁵⁵ H.E., II, p. 432.

¹⁵⁶ W.A., X, p. 576.

¹⁵⁷ H.E., VI, p. 368.

'If, then, you would interpret well and truly, set Christ before you,' Luther advises, 'for He is the man to Whom it all applies.'¹⁵⁸ And again, in his lectures on Romans: 'There a great stride has been made towards the right interpretation of Scripture, by understanding it all as bearing on Christ.'¹⁵⁹ It is in this context that we realize the discernment of Kramm's comment that for Luther the canon 'what urges Christ', in the much-quoted paragraph from his Preface to James and Jude, is a principle of interpretation, not of selection.¹⁶⁰

Luther's Christocentric approach to Scripture supplies the clue to the paradox involved in his insistence on the primacy of the literal sense whilst conceding that there is a further, inner, spiritual meaning. Luther takes his stand on the literal sense. That is fundamental. But he recognizes that there is an inward meaning of the Word to which the eyes of faith must penetrate. It is not supplementary to the literal sense but communicated by it. Luther's major contribution to hermeneutics lies in the fusion of literal and spiritual in a new and dynamic relationship. His view treats the Bible dialectically. It resolves the tension between the literal and the spiritual sense. It takes into account the interaction between the historical elements of Scripture. It transcends the normal categories of internal and external significance and achieves a vital synthesis between the letter and the spirit. This *rapprochement* is made possible because, as Blackman hints, for Luther Christ is both the literal and the spiritual sense of Scripture and these two are one in Him.¹⁶¹ It is He who reconciles the apparently incompatible. The acknowledgement of Christ as Lord of Scripture provides the context in which the holy alliance of letter and spirit may be achieved.¹⁶² In the first flush of his own discovery of this hermeneutical key, Luther could declare: 'Christ is the head of all the saints, the origin of all, the source of all streams. . . . Therefore the words of Scripture concerning Christ at the same time share life with Him. And in this way all the four senses of Scripture flow into one.'¹⁶³ Later he would discard the *Quadriga* because of its misuse by Roman propagandists. But his Christocentric exegesis nevertheless ensured that full justice should be done to every intrinsic shade of meaning in Scripture.

That introduces us lastly to Luther's Christological conception of Scripture, which is determinative for his whole hermeneutical pro-

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 379. ¹⁵⁹ *Römerbrief*, p. 4.

¹⁶⁰ Kramm, *op. cit.*, p. 114; H.E., VI, p. 478.

¹⁶¹ E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 120.

¹⁶² H. Cunliffe-Jones, *The Authority of the Biblical Revelation*, p. 102.

¹⁶³ *Luther Today*, p. 74.

gramme. His Christocentric perspective led him to affirm that, since Christ is the only revealer of God, He is the essential content of Scripture. But if the question be raised as to the mode of our Lord's manifestation in the Scriptures, Luther offers a profoundly constructive solution. As the divinity and power of God are embedded in the vessel of Christ's incarnate body, so the same divinity and power of God are embedded in Scripture, a vessel made of letters, composed of paper and printer's ink.¹⁶⁴ In order to grasp the biblical revelation in its fullness it is necessary to conceive of Scripture in terms of the divine-human nature of Christ.¹⁶⁵

Luther's recognition of this incarnational factor in the doctrine of Scripture is one of his most relevant insights and conditions the necessary presupposition of his hermeneutics about which we spoke earlier. The clue to Luther's biblical interpretation is the Christological method of Scripture itself. The very categories he employs are Christological rather than scientific, philosophical or even narrowly theological. For him the basic hermeneutical problem is the reconciliation of the divine and human elements of Scripture. The Bible is God's Book. Its writers were God-inspired men. Through it God still speaks. But the writers were also human and what they wrote has been recorded in the normal fashion. Luther realized that the problem raised is Christological at the core. His argument stems from the statement, *Scriptura sacra est Deus incarnatus*. He draws a deliberate analogy between Scripture and the Person of Christ, between the Word written and the Word made flesh. 'And the Word', he says, 'is just like the Son of God.'¹⁶⁶ As in the doctrine of the incarnation the Church announces that our Lord was at once fully God and fully man, so Luther would have us maintain the full divinity and full humanity, as it were, of Holy Scripture. The Chalcedonian formula concerning the two natures of Christ is also to be applied to the Bible. Moreover, Luther relates his concept of *communicatio idiomatum* to the Scriptures, as well as to the Person of Christ and the sacraments, thus safeguarding the unity of the Bible from arbitrary fragmentation.¹⁶⁷ What is predicated of one element pertains to the other: there is a sort of interpenetration. All this throws valuable light on the nature of Scripture and constitutes a

¹⁶⁴ W.A., III, p. 515.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 403, 404; cf. Erich Roth, 'Martin Luther and the Continental Reformation' in *Church Quarterly Review*, CLIII, p. 173.

¹⁶⁶ *Luther Today*, p. 84.

¹⁶⁷ cf. Y. Brilioth, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice*, p. 105; Seeberg, *op. cit.*, IV, pp. 382, 383.

contribution of major importance to the field represented by Scharlemann's first hermeneutical circle.

But its precise definition by Luther must be carefully observed. In recognizing that Scripture is both human and divine he does not thereby open the door to the suggestion of fallibility. He presses the analogy between the incarnation and Scripture to its utmost logical limit in what we have called his Christological approach. The human element of the Bible is no more liable to error than was the human nature of Christ. He scrupulously avoids the charge of what we might describe as Biblical Nestorianism. 'Luther was well aware of the human side of Scripture,' writes Dr. Pieper, 'but only in the sense that God caused His Word to be written by men in a human tongue. He is horrified at people who dare assert that Scripture is not entirely and in all its parts the Word of God, because the writers, such as Peter and Paul, after all were men.'¹⁶⁸ Commenting on 1 Peter iii. 15, Luther remarks: 'But if they take exception and say, You preach that one should not hold 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.'¹⁶⁹ It is within the sanctions imposed by such a conception that the whole of Luther's hermeneutics move.

This cursory and all too inadequate survey of an extensive corpus of hermeneutical material may at least serve to underline the pivotal significance of Luther's biblical interpretation and its relevance to current discussions. We close as we began with a quotation from Professor Grant's *The Bible in the Church*. Our investigations will have in some measure substantiated his claim that Luther's contribution in this sphere has 'permanent value for the interpretation of Scripture. Today the reviving theological interpretation of the Bible must look to him'.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Pieper, *op. cit.*, I, p. 278.

¹⁶⁹ St.L., IX, p. 1238.

¹⁷⁰ Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 117.