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Some Reflections On Menno Simons' and Martin Luther's Hermeneutics

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Students often express surprise when introduced to the variety of sixteenth-century reform parties, each claiming Scripture as their guide. Why such diversity derived from the simple principle of *sola scriptura*? Whence such diverse readings of the Scriptures? The answer lies with hermeneutics, the art of interpretation. In its broadest sense hermeneutics concerns not only the methodology of the interpreter but also his/her social-cultural context (*Sitz im Leben*). The limits of this paper dictate a selective probing of the hermeneutics of Martin Luther and Menno Simons. Two aspects have been singled out: their treatment of the relationship of Old and New Testament; and their assumptions about the hermeneutic community.

I. MARTIN LUTHER

If the rediscovery of the original biblical languages was "the great linguistic event of his time" and a major step toward "modern" biblical scholarship,¹ then Luther's translation of the New Testament into the vernacular constituted an equally momentous event with more immediate consequences. Coupled, as it was, to a public invitation to test the teachings and practices of the church, the availability of the Scriptures captured the imagination of Luther's contemporaries and initiated a debate the consequences of which are with us still. Scripture reading moved from class rooms, monasteries and churches to market places, shops, pubs, guild halls and dwellings of ordinary citizens, bringing with it a "Copernican revolution"² in the matter of church authority over the interpretation of Scriptures. Few saw it more clearly than the Dominican theologian and judge who presided over Luther's case at the curia

in Rome, Sylvester Mazzolini Prierias, when he wrote: “He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures too draw their strength and authority, is a heretic.”³

This was not a misunderstanding! Luther and his supporters arrived at a fundamentally different view. The church received its authority from the Word of God. Its teachings and practices were therefore subject to the scrutiny of the Word.

The church was born by the word of promise through faith, and by this same word is nourished and preserved. That is to say, it is promises of God that make the church, and not the church that makes the promise of God. For the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made...This one thing indeed the church can do: It can distinguish the Word of God from the word of men.⁴

Luther and his followers received more than they bargained for when artisans and peasants, with the aid of radical clerics, drew their own conclusions on what was the Word of God and what the word of men. Frightened by the consequences,⁵ the role of interpreting Scriptures became once more the prerogative of authorized exegetes.

The Scriptures, while not synonymous with the Word of God, constituted the original testimony to and of the Word. Novel was Luther’s insistence that tradition, councils, and papal pronouncements needed testing against the Word of God in Scripture. And here lay the crux of the matter that led not only to separation from Rome,⁶ but also to multiple fractures in the reform camp. It proved to be one thing to declare the Scriptures the instrument of divine “self-revelation” and its own interpreter,⁷ another to agree on what the Scriptures revealed. It soon became clear that not everyone in the Reformation camp followed Luther’s interpretation.

Scholarly consensus points to Luther’s “Was Christum Treibet” (What promotes or proclaims Christ) as his “basic hermeneutic principle.”⁸ Unlike modern studies that treat the Scriptures like a library collection shaped by a variety of influences over a span of two millennia,⁹ Luther approached the Scriptures as a sacred whole with a single purpose and a common core, namely, to promote Christ. Luther’s “point of reference for exegesis” was Paul’s declaration: “We preach Christ

crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block and unto the Greeks foolishness" (I Corinthians 1:23). As the Word of God to humankind, Christ crucified was the centre of Scriptures through whom they interpreted themselves.¹⁰ Luther's Christ was the post-resurrection Christ as understood through Paul rather than the synoptic Gospels, because,

Paul's epistles are gospel to a greater degree than the writings of Matthew, Mark and Luke, for the latter do little more than relate the history of the deeds and miracles of Christ. But no one stresses the grace we have through Christ as powerfully as Paul does, especially in his Epistle to the Romans.¹¹

To argue, therefore, that Luther's hermeneutic was "Gospel centred" (evangeliozentrisch), as some scholars have done,¹² means to understand Gospel in the way Luther understood Paul, as proclaiming the liberating experience of justification by faith. This understanding of the Gospel, inextricably interwoven with his own tormented search for a merciful God, was at the heart of Luther's critical selectivity: his canon within the canon. What Luther thought of James' epistle is well known. The Pauline letters, led by Romans, held first place as "the Chief part of the New Testament" and as "the purest gospel"; the Gospel of John and I Peter came "a close second", while the book of Hebrews deserved special praise because it revealed the "Christological core to both Testaments".¹³

There has been some embarrassment in modern scholarship about Luther's Christological reading of the "Hebrew Scriptures",¹⁴ but it must be remembered that Luther began his career as lecturer with the Psalms. He brought to this task devotional and contemplative attitudes from his monastic experience and treated the Psalms as living texts that revealed Christ. Initially Luther's approach to the Old Testament was in line with late medieval hermeneutic tendencies,¹⁵ but he soon abandoned medieval techniques of interpretation with their fourfold sense of the Scriptures. It was his lasting contribution to hermeneutics that he rejected multilevel meanings which, in effect, turned exegesis into "the art of concealed reinterpretation". An allegorical meaning was to be sought only when the "plain sense" made absolutely no sense.¹⁶

The Gospel became the hermeneutic bridge between the two Testaments. The Old contained the Gospel prophetically; the New in actuality.¹⁷ Luther compared the Old Testament

to “the swaddling clothes and the manger”, which “truly contained” Christ but were not identical with him. Thus “the entire Old Testament refers to Christ and agrees with Him but the law and the prophets are not rightly preached and understood, unless we find Christ wrapped in them.”¹⁸ Christ himself was not only the true interpreter of the Law but through his redemptive work its fulfilment.

Luther had no difficulties finding beneficiaries of the Gospel in the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, David and all the Old Testament saints lived by faith in the coming Christ.¹⁹ In other words, Luther read the Old Testament in search of Christ, the Gospel, and the faithful. At times this led to flights of fancy that have brought charges of “reckless subjectivism”.²⁰ In defense of Luther it must be said that with eyes of faith he saw himself in a long line of Abraham’s spiritual heirs. In this his vision followed a trajectory indicated by his favourite New Testament author, Paul.²¹

While Luther’s Christocentric treatment of the two Testaments has received considerable scholarly attention, less thought has been given to the qualification of the exegete or the implied hermeneutic community in which he/she carried out the task of interpretation. Luther himself combined in his own person the role of scholar-exegete and parish-preacher.²² He insisted that true exegesis required more than mastery of technical skill, for example, classical languages. A true understanding of the Scriptures came not through academic refinement but through trials and temptations (*Anfechtungen*), real life experiences on the spiritual battlefield between God and the devil. The main task of the preacher-exegete was to “draw the living word from the Old Testament and...proclaim it to the people as the apostles did...this was...proper apostolic and New Testament work.”²³ The title page of a Reformation pamphlet, dating from 1524, depicts such a preacher with Bible in one hand, a crucifix in the other, surrounded by attentive listeners.²⁴ By all accounts during the early years of the Reformation such eager listeners were not always passive recipients of spiritual instructions, but active participants in sifting the Word of God from the word of men. They constituted, even if only temporarily, the church as hermeneutic community, testing, discerning the truthfulness of the proclamation. Indeed, during the early years (1522 to 1524) Luther

himself advanced something like the notion of the congregation as hermeneutic community.²⁵ In his provocative "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture"²⁶ he suggested that local "sheep should judge" whether they heard Christ's voice or the voice of a stranger. Commenting on I Thessalonians 5:21, he wrote:

..here too judgment is withdrawn from the teachers and given to the students among the Christians, so that the situation is completely different among Christians from the way it is in the world...[A]mong Christians, each is the judge of the other, and on the other hand, each is subject to the other, no matter how well the spiritual tyrants have succeeded in turning Christendom into a secular power.²⁷

To follow New Testament precedent meant to "call from ourselves and elect those we find qualified, whom God has enlightened with intelligence, endowed with gifts, and anointed as priests..."²⁸ Such a view implied a discerning and committed church, the kind Luther would like to have established but despaired of because the events unfolding from 1524 on led him to conclude that "we Germans are a wild, crude, raging people with whom not much can be done..."²⁹ What he would like to have done under more favourable circumstances with a more suitable people "seriously yearning to be Christian" is documented in his "German Mass and Order of Service" of 1526.

Those people who seriously strive to be Christians and to confess the Gospel with hand and mouth should register by name and perhaps assemble in some house to pray, and to carry out other Christian functions. According to this order one could know, punish, improve, expel, or place under ban (according to the rule of Christ in Matt. 18:15-17) those who did not behave in a Christian way. Here one could also impose upon the Christians a common offering, which one could give willingly and distribute among the poor according to the example of St. Paul, 2 Cor. 9. There would be no need for much or for great singing. Here one could also have a nice short form of baptism and sacrament and direct everything to the Word, to prayer, and to love. Here one should have a good short catechism on faith, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer. In short, if one had the people and persons who seriously yearned to be Christians, the order and forms could soon be established.³⁰

If Luther ever seriously entertained such notions by 1526, they were little more than utopian fantasies. The course of

events inclined in a different direction—toward a magisterial church. Luther, of course, realized that the church could not be legislated into being through territorial church orders. Writing to Philip of Hesse in January 1527, he warned against instituting “a heap of laws with weighty words”. It was better to concentrate on educating good pastors, qualified to preach the Gospel. Only the Word of God could call the true church into being. But the temptation to step into the power vacuum created by the demise of Rome’s authority was too great for the temporal rulers. As reform was imposed from above by means of church visitations, church orders, and confessionalization,³¹ local congregations lost their potential as hermeneutic communities.³² Lutheran territorial churches became churches dominated by a new clerical elite, that of the Herr Pfarrer. But the congregational ideal expressed by Luther between 1522 to 1524 lived on among the “step children” of the Reformation, the Anabaptists.

II. MENNO SIMONS

During the last four decades we have gained a better understanding of the context in which Anabaptist hermeneutics formed and functioned.³³ The subject has received repeated attention,³⁴ most recently by John Roth³⁵ and Stuart Murray.³⁶ Murray describes “an Anabaptist hermeneutic... carefully thought out, distinctive and coherent”.³⁷ Following Henry Poettcker,³⁸ Murray treated Menno Simons’ hermeneutics as typical Anabaptist. The model for what it meant to be typically Anabaptist came basically from Swiss sources and the discussion of Anabaptist hermeneutics was strongly influenced by John Howard Yoder’s seminal essay on the subject, published in 1967. Yoder argued that at a crucial point the major reformers “abandoned” their initial vision of the visible church as the hermeneutic community and were thereafter “obliged to shift the locus of infallibility to the inspired text and technically qualified theological experts”.³⁹ Anabaptists, in contrast, took “the initial Protestant concept of the discerning Church” to its “logical conclusion”.⁴⁰ Yoder considered the idea of the congregation as hermeneutic community and the striking New Testament orientation of the Anabaptists as two issues on which they made a novel contribution. According to Yoder, the issue of hermeneutics condensed to the

“integrity and obedience of the listening congregation”. To be a committed believer meant to be obedient to the teachings of Jesus.⁴¹ The New Testament orientation implied a progressive salvation history.⁴² God’s purposes “are working themselves out through history”, so that change or movement from the Old to the New Testament can be seen as “a fundamental part of God’s plan”. By “focusing” on the “historical character of revelation”, a focus of “fundamental exegetical importance”, according to Yoder, Anabaptists anticipated developments of Reformed covenantal theology.⁴³

Yoder’s suggestions were taken up by other scholars. Walter Klaassen agreed that congregational participation in discerning the meaning of Scripture constituted a valuable Anabaptist contribution to hermeneutics. It followed that the scholar-exegete was subject to the same congregational process of discerning and was called upon to let obedience in discipleship inform epistemology. These hermeneutic principles could guard against the “tyranny of specialized knowledge...as well as...the tyranny of individualist interpretation and of the visionary”.⁴⁴

The “profound implications” of the “every-member approach to Scripture” were elaborated further by Murray who emphasized that leadership in the Anabaptist tradition functioned differently from that in the magisterial tradition. Instead of providing “authoritative answers to doctrinal questions or authoritative interpretations of biblical texts”, the Anabaptists “enfranchised laymen and women” to explore the Scriptures themselves.⁴⁵ Murray placed Menno into this broader Anabaptist context. Whether this approach, from the general to the particular, is justified would need further investigation.

Turning to Menno and Luther, it is at once obvious that they shared a number of hermeneutic assumptions. Like Luther, Menno believed it essential to distinguish between the Word of God and that of man.⁴⁶

... I do not tolerate human doctrines, clever reasoning, nor twisting of Scriptures, nor glosses, nor imaginations...but only the plain Scripture; truth, and immutable testimony...I seek nothing but the pure, unadulterated Word of God and its testimony.⁴⁷

Like Luther, Menno read the Psalms in a personal, devotional way, hearing Christ in them. Like Luther, Menno was

a careful exegete, who engaged in word studies and used several editions of the Bible to assure the correct meaning. Like Luther, Menno sought the “plain” meaning of the Scriptures. To those who questioned his skills he replied: “The Word is plain and needs no interpretation.”⁴⁸ Yet Menno implicitly acknowledged that not all passages were plain. It was necessary to regard what had been “written before and after, by which we may ascertain the right meaning”.⁴⁹

Like Luther’s, Menno’s approach to the Scriptures has been described as Christocentric. Poettcker saw similarities to Luther’s principle “Was Christum Treibet”. Like Luther, Menno found Christ in unexpected places of the Old Testament and, like Luther, he believed that the Scriptures were best understood through the heart rather than intellect.⁵⁰ Above all, one needed a regenerate and obedient heart to understand the Scriptures.⁵¹

But Menno’s reading of the Scriptures lacked Luther’s single-minded preoccupation with justification by faith; his Christology placed the emphasis on obedience and on the purity of the church.⁵² The theological core of Menno’s thought remains controversial. Christology, ecclesiology, individual regeneration, practical holiness have all been singled out as central. The leading Dutch scholar, Sjouke Voolstra, has suggested “true penitence as the core of Menno Simons’ theology”,⁵³ and, more recently, the Lutheran scholar, Egil Grislis, drew attention to Menno’s emphasis on progressive sanctification.⁵⁴ Clearly Menno’s soteriological emphasis was transformational; his concern was with real change in the life of individuals and in the corporate life of the church.⁵⁵ One could cite many passages to document this concern, but the main point here is that Menno’s Christological reading of the Scriptures had a different focus than Luther’s. That focus was on the life and teachings of Jesus. It was Christ’s “life and conversation here on earth” that served

*...as example set before us to follow so that we thereby might become partakers of His nature in the spirit, to become like unto Him. So Christ is everywhere represented to us as humble, meek, merciful, just, holy, wise, spiritual, long-suffering; patient, peaceable, lovely, obedient, and good, as the perfection of all things; for in Him is an upright nature. Behold this is the image of God, of Christ as to the Spirit which we have as an example until we become like it in nature and reveal it by our walk.*⁵⁶

Menno repeated often that he wanted to direct the attention of his readers to “Jesus Christ alone and to his Holy Word which He taught and left on earth and sealed with his blood and death, and afterwards had it preached and taught throughout the world by His faithful witness and holy apostles”.⁵⁷ Menno lacked Luther’s critical selectivity based on justification by faith alone, because his Christology remained more in the *imitatio* and *philosophi Christi* tradition. Christ was not only the Redeemer “through whom all we that sincerely believe have received the pardon for our sins; and grace, favour, mercy, freedom, peace, life eternal, a reconciled Father and free access to God in the Spirit”, but also the great example and pedagogue. Not surprisingly, Menno gravitated toward the Synoptic Gospels.⁵⁸

Menno’s treatment of the relationship of the two Testaments fell within traditional boundaries. He approached the Old Testament through its messianic-prophetic reading found in the New. He granted a twofold meaning of the Old Testament: a literal meaning for the people of the Old Covenant, a spiritual meaning for those under the New.⁵⁹ The New Testament applied literally to the people of the New Covenant. Menno tended to read the New Testament as a call to individual repentance and to a corporate following of the rule of Christ. His tendency, therefore, was to see Christ as the “true Moses”, the “new law giver”. Obedience to the Word of God as manifest in the teachings of Jesus led to the fulfilment of the new law.⁶⁰ Menno drew strength and inspiration from the lives of the faithful in both Testaments. Both Testaments were therefore profitable for “instruction, admonition and correction”. This practical reading of the Scriptures meant that Menno had little use for allegoric interpretation. He did use traditional typology as it related to Christ. Thus Melchizedek was a type of Christ, as were Samson and David.

...all the Scriptures admonish us to rejoice in Christ our Lord; for it is He of whom the patriarch Jacob prophesied that He would be the expectation of the people, that is, the one for whom the people of God should look with great desire, even as Christ testifies: Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad.⁶¹

True followers of Christ held to the same “unadulterated Word of God, testified through Moses and the prophets,

through Christ and the apostles upon which they build their faith which saves our souls. Everything that is contrary thereto they consider accursed".⁶² Yet Menno's high regard for the New Testament did imply a notion of progressive salvation history similar to the one posited by Yoder for Swiss Anabaptists. He distinguished three historic periods: 1) the period before the Law; 2) the period under the Law given on Sinai; and 3) the period of the New Covenant. With Christ had come the perfection; he represented a historical watershed. Just as the Old Testament applied literally to the people of the Old Covenant, so the New Testament applied literally to the people of the New Covenant.⁶³ With this view came a tendency to read the New Testament as instruction and admonition, commandments and prohibitions. "What is not specifically commanded in the Scriptures is therefore forbidden."⁶⁴ Menno's uniqueness as an exegete is found precisely in "his strong and unrelenting insistence on obedience to the command of Christ and the apostles".⁶⁵ The resulting tendency has been criticized as leading to an "unhealthy biblicism" or, worse, a "spirit of law and judgmentalism".⁶⁶

Scholars have assumed that as an Anabaptist leader Menno functioned within a congregation as hermeneutic community. But the evidence is not without ambivalence. As late as 1556 Menno struck a rather individual note: "I can neither teach nor live by the faith of others. I must live by my own faith as the Spirit of the Lord has taught me through His Word." At the same time he complained that "everyone follows his own head, and imagines it to be the Spirit and Scripture".⁶⁷ This seems hardly a description of the congregation as a functional hermeneutic community. Yet Murray claims for Menno a position similar to that worked out by Yoder for the early Swiss Anabaptists.⁶⁸ Unfortunately Murray's evidence appears limited to passages in which Menno registers his willingness to change his mind (e.g., on his Christology) if someone can convince him with "plainer Scriptures" that his views are wrong.⁶⁹ But offers to accept Scriptural correction were standard during Reformation debates. They are hardly proof of a leader bowing to congregational consensus on the interpretation of Scriptures. No evidence exists that Menno submitted any of his works to congregational censorship. His writings must be considered solo efforts in the same sense as Luther's.

Yet the question of the congregation's role in discerning the meaning of the Scriptures remains. Menno wrote as a leader and an apologist for a larger community, defined in terms very similar to Luther's ideal of 1536. Menno served a group of committed believers, separated from the world and exclusive of open transgressors. This fellowship of believers shared more than a common confession; in Menno's words, they constituted a community of

...All those who are born of God, who are gifted with the Spirit of the Lord, who are, according to the Scriptures, called into one body and love in Christ Jesus, are prepared by such love to serve their neighbours, not only with money and goods, but also after the example of their Lord and Head, Jesus Christ, in an evangelical manner, with life and blood. They show mercy and love, as much as they can. No one among them is allowed to beg. They take to heart the need of the saints. They entertain those in distress. They take the stranger into their houses. They comfort the afflicted; assist the needy; clothe the naked; feed the hungry; do not turn their face from the poor; do not despise their own flesh. Isaiah 58:7,8.⁷⁰

When this notion of church as community is coupled with Menno's statements about true servants of the Word of God, then indeed a different relationship emerges between ordinary members and leaders than came to dominate the state churches. In this early expression of the "free church" it was incumbent on all members to discern the word and will of God and together follow Christ as the nonresistant church under the cross.

Further research is needed on how the church as hermeneutic community actually functioned. Did leaders like Menno really entrust the interpretation of Scripture to ordinary members and themselves submit to congregational consensus? Or was congregational consensus achieved by effective leadership?

Lutherans and Mennonites never lived as solitudes. They have interacted and engaged each other on a variety of levels in a variety of contexts. They hold much in common, not only in terms of Reformation background but also in terms of contemporary and future problems. Faced with increasing illiteracy of the Scriptures, we Lutherans can learn from a model of the church as hermeneutic community. May this small contribution to Menno's anniversary further dialogue between our rich traditions. If nothing else, let this study contribute to our appreciation of one another.

Notes

- 1 Heiko Oberman, *Luther. Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 170. The significance of linguistic developments did not escape Luther. As soon as Erasmus' Greek New Testament became available, Luther used it.
- 2 This concept usually designates Luther's reorientation from an anthropocentric to a theocentric soteriology. Cf. Philip Watson, *Let God Be God. An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) 33ff.
- 3 Oberman, *Luther* 193.
- 4 "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (1520) in Martin Luther, *Works* (American Edition), ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1955-1986) (hereafter *LW*) 36:107.
- 5 The mobilization of commoners for the Reformation led to the Revolution of 1525. Peter Blickle, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a new perspective*, trans. by Thomas Brady and H.C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).
- 6 Jared Wicks, S.J., "Roman Reactions to Luther: The First Year (1518)," *Catholic Historical Review*, LXIX (1983) 521-562. Scott S. Lekert, "Catholic Controversialist Theology and Sola Scriptura: The case of Jacob van Hoogstraten," *Catholic Historical Journal*, LXXIV (1988) 13-33.
- 7 Kenneth Hagen claims "Luther warned against interpretation". *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians, 1519-1538* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1993) 15, 19. Yet Luther warned that the Scriptures had a "wax nose", that its face was easily distorted unless rightly interpreted through Christ. *LW*, 22:339.
- 8 Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther. An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) 104. Hagen, rightly critical of Ebeling's modernizing tendency, goes too far when he suggests that "Luther had no hermeneutics", and when he advocates the setting aside of "modern preoccupations with philosophy, hermeneutics, methodology, and exegesis, as well as modern editions of Luther", in order to understand Luther on his "own terms". Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture*, X, 15, 56.
- 9 John Miller, *The Origins of the Bible: Rethinking Canon History* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1994).
- 10 Oberman, *Luther*, 171, 173.
- 11 "Operationes in Psalmes," *LW*, 30:4. Cited by Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career 1521-1530* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 230.
- 12 Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture*, 18, n 62.
- 13 *LW*, 35: 380. Romans summed up "the whole Christian and evangelical doctrine". Eric Gritsch, *Martin - God's Court Jester. Luther in Retrospect* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 97. Cf. Ebeling, *Luther*, 50.

- Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture*, 57. Inge Lonning, "No Other Gospel: Luther's Concept of the 'Middle of Scripture' in its Significance for Ecumenical Communion and Christian Confession Today" in *Luther's Ecumenical Significance. An Interconfessional Consultation*, ed. by Peter Manns et al (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 229ff., esp. 230, 234.
- 14 Hagen laments that "Most modern exegesis of the Old Testament... is done in sympathy with Jewish methods so that faith in Christ is out of the question". Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture*, 3, 61.
- 15 James Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) 180, 227.
- 16 Ebeling, *Luther*, 102, 107. Once the meaning of Scripture "was reduced to the relationship between Christ, the word and faith, the whole mighty hermeneutic system became meaningless and was... replaced by a concern for the fundamental theme of Scripture in its literal sense".
- 17 Jonathan Trigg claims that "Luther's hermeneutics minimizes the boundary between the Testaments" in a way Augustine did not. Augustine had seen the incarnation as a historical watershed. The medieval tradition went further in that direction, while Luther's Reformation breakthrough took him in the opposite direction. *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994) 53-55.
- 18 Watson, *Let God be God*, 149. Gritsch, *God's Jester*, 97. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 87-102.
- 19 According to Trigg "the two Testaments no longer stand over against one another as law and gospel, flesh and Spirit." *Baptism in Luther*, 53. Hagen argues that Luther held to one testament of faith with two covenants, an old and a new one. *Luther's Approach to Scripture*, p.92.
- 20 Ebeling deals with such charges. *Luther*, 112. David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), esp. "Abraham and the Reformation", 32ff; "Luther and the Drunkenness of Noah", 98ff, esp. 110-111.
- 21 Steinmetz and others have suggested that Luther failed to grasp the historical context in which Paul wrote about Law and Gospel. *Luther in Context*, 43.
- 22 Luther preached 137 sermons in 1523 alone. Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career*, 199.
- 23 Paul Althaus, *Theology of Luther*, 73-74 n.2.
- 24 Johannes Eberlin von Gintzburg, "Ain Fraitlich trostliche vermanung an alle frummen Christen/ zu Augusburg" (1524) in *Flugschriften des Frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*, edited by H.J. Köhler (Zug, Ch.: Interdocumentation Company) Fiche 233/Nr. 652; Fiche 602/Nr. 1559.
- 25 In advice given to the Altenburg city council in 1522, Luther maintained that the "Scripture gives...every Christian the power to judge

... Do not depend on the conclusions of other people, even if they be angels, but rather on the conscience of each, for each must have his own faith and must know the difference between correct and false teaching.” Cited Gert Haendler, *Luther on Ministerial Office and Congregational Function* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 56.

26 *LW* 39: 303–14.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 Haendler, *Luther*, 81.

30 “The German Mass and Order of Service” (1526) in *LW* 53: 53–90, esp. 64.

31 For a discussion of the long range social impact see the essays in *Kirchenzucht und Sozialdisziplinierung im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, ed. by Heinz Schilling, *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, Beiheft 16, 1994.

32 As late as 1530 Luther could write that the congregation, including Hansl and Gretel, had the authority to wield the “keys” to bind and loose. *LW* 40: 371–373.

33 For historiographic developments in Anabaptist studies see my “Between Paradigms: Anabaptist Studies at the Crossroads,” *The Conrad Grebel Review*, VIII (1990) 1–22.

34 *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. by Willard Swartley (Institute of Mennonite Studies, Elkhart, 1984) (hereafter *EBI*).

35 John Roth, “Community as Conversation: A New Model of Anabaptist Hermeneutics” in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology. Text Reader Series*, ed. by W. Pipkin (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994) 35–50.

36 Stuart Wood Murray, “Spirit, Discipleship, Community: The Contemporary Significance of Anabaptist Hermeneutics” (Ph.D. dissertation, Whitefield Institute, 1992). This work is valuable although it lacks grounding in primary sources. The author consistently misspelt *Sitz im Leben* as *Sitz im Lieben*.

37 *Ibid.* 27.

38 Henry A. Poettcker, “The Hermeneutics of Menno Simons: An Investigation of the Principles of Interpretation which Menno Brought to his Study of Scripture” (Th.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1961). Cf. his published articles.

39 John H. Yoder, “The Hermeneutic of the Anabaptists,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (hereafter *MQR*), 41 (1967), 291–308, reproduced in *EBI*, 11–28, esp. 28.

40 Yoder, *EBI*, 22.

41 *Ibid.* 28. Yoder contrasted this commitment to obedience with a mere commitment to credal “orthodoxy”. *Ibid.* 20.

42 Yoder wrote: “The origins of Anabaptist originality on this point, already visible in September of 1524, have not yet been traced.” *Ibid.* 28.

Subsequently some scholars have assumed this to be a closed question. Christocentrism is cited as the explanation.

- 43 Ibid. 26–27. Zwingli had argued against the Anabaptists for “one covenant between God and man, beginning with Abraham, of which Christ simply provides the fulfilment”. This was the argument of Zwingli against the Anabaptists. Yoder wrote that the “concept of a sequence of covenants was, in the sixteenth century, the position of the Anabaptists”.
- 44 Walter Klaassen, “Anabaptist Hermeneutics: Presuppositions, Principles and Practice” in *EBI*, 5–10, esp. 7–8, 10.
- 45 Murray’s view of the Anabaptists seems somewhat idealistic. He believes that, unlike Luther who judged Scripture in light of his doctrine, Anabaptists “judged doctrines in light of Scripture”. Murray, “Spirit, Discipleship, Community,” 29, 79, 95.
- 46 Christoph Bornhäuser suggested that Luther’s “Von Menschlehre zu meiden” of 1522 had a lasting influence on Menno. *Leben und Lehre Menno Simons. Ein Kampf um das Fundament des Glaubens* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973) 9, 54.
- 47 “Brief Confession on the Incarnation” (1544) in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, edited by J.C. Wenger and translated by L. Verduin (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984) (hereafter *CWM*), 452. Cf. “The New Birth” (1537) where he polemicized against the “high and mighty...wise and learned ones who from the beginning have perverted the Scriptures”, 95. See also “Foundation of Christian Doctrine” (1539/40), 127.
- 48 *CWM*, 214. Bornhäuser suggests that Menno failed to consciously address the problem of interpretation. *Leben und Lehre Simons*, 48, n.5. Murray writes of “thoughtful observations”. “Spirit, Discipleship, Community,” 40.
- 49 “Christian Baptism” (1539), *CWM*, 268.
- 50 Henry Poettcker, “Menno Simons’ Encounter with the Bible,” *MQR*, 44 (1966) 112–126, esp. 113, 115–116. Also in *EBI*, 62–76.
- 51 “Reply to Gellius Faber” (1554), *CWM*, 653, 694–695.
- 52 Menno’s Christology has been criticized as monophysite or even as “dotic”. It has been suggested that the Melchiorite doctrine of the celestial flesh which Menno embraced had extra-biblical sources. Joyce Irwin, “Embryology and the Incarnation: A Sixteenth-Century Debate,” *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, IX (1978), pp.93–104, esp. 94–95.
- 53 Sjouke Voolstra, “True Penitence: The Core of Menno Simon’s Theology,” *MQR*, 42 (1988) 387.
- 54 Egil Grisliis, “Menno Simons on Sanctification,” *MQR*, 69 (1994), 226–246. According to Grisliis, Menno “employed traditional devotional language from the mystical and/or *devotio moderna* tradition”.
- 55 Carl R. Trueman’s observation that the English reformers influenced by Luther tended toward a stronger “works-oriented view of salvation”

is true for Menno Simons, as well as for a host of so called Lutherans. *Luther's Legacy. Salvation and English Reformers 1525-1556* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1994) 57.

- 56 "The Spiritual Resurrection" (1536), *CWM*, 53ff, esp. 55- 56. Italics mine.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 62; cf "Reply to Gellius Faber," *CWM*, 173.
- 58 Poettcker, "Hermeneutics of Simons," 126, 290.
- 59 Psalms that refer literally to David refer spiritually to the "true David", Christ. The same was true of Solomon, etc. "The Blasphemy of John of Leiden," *CWM*, 33ff, 42.
- 60 Bornhäuser, *Leben und Lehre Simons*, 57. Poettcker suggested that Menno's emphasis on the New over the Old Testament reflected Anabaptist consensus. "Simons' Encounter with the Bible," 119.
- 61 "The Blasphemy of John of Leiden," *CWM*, 36.
- 62 Menno found it intolerable when opponents applied an Old Testament non-literal reading to the New Testament. His understanding of the Covenants awaits further research. *CWM*, 627.
- 63 Poettcker, "Hermeneutics of Simons," 225-226.
- 64 "The New Birth" (c.1537), *CWM*, 87ff, 94.
- 65 Poettcker, "Hermeneutics of Simons," 400.
- 66 Bornhäuser believed that Menno's later writings "breathe not the Spirit of Christ, but the spirit of *Gesetzlichkeit und Rechthaberei*. *Leben und Lehre Simons*, 60. A less critical observation in Poettcker, "Hermeneutics of Simons," 147.
- 67 "Instruction of Discipline to the Church at Emden," *CWM*, 1051; cited by Murray, "Spirit, Discipleship, Community," 225.
- 68 Cf. *Ibid.* 7: "Congregational Hermeneutics," 224ff.
- 69 *CWM*, 452; cited by Murray, "Spirit, Discipleship, Community," 240.
- 70 *CWM*, 558.