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The Significance of Luther's Hermeneutics for the Protestant Reformation

By RAYMOND F. SURBURG

I

THE Protestant Reformation, called by Roman Catholics the Protestant Revolt, is generally conceded to have been one of the most significant movements in the last two thousand years of world history. Historians who have treated the Reformation have interpreted it from at least four distinct points of view: the religious-political, the rationalist, the liberal-romantic, and the economic-evolutionary.¹ A current scholar, Rosenstock-Huessy, lists the Protestant Reformation as the first of four political revolutions occurring between 1517 and 1918. He designates Luther as the leader of the German revolution in the sixteenth century, John Pym the head of the British in the seventeenth century, Robespierre the guiding spirit of the French in the eighteenth century, and Stalin the leader of the Russian in the twentieth century. The direction taken by all four revolutions, according to Rosenstock-Huessy, was determined by the process of the natural development of mankind.² Such an interpretation of the Lutheran Reformation is erroneous as a result of at least two incorrect premises; it is based on a wrong philosophy of history, and it fails to grasp the salient fact that the Lutheran Reformation was not primarily political but religious in character.

Many students of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, while recognizing the religious nature of the Protestant Revolt,

have not been aware that, above all, the movement inaugurated by Martin Luther was a hermeneutical revolution of the first magnitude. Luther's ultimate break with Rome was made possible by the discovery of principles of interpretation, which were either forgotten or unknown to the Medieval Church. Only as these new principles were found and applied, was it possible for Luther to direct the attention of European Christianity to the teachings of Christ and His Apostles. Luther's principles of interpretation were responsible for a true Biblical conception of Christianity. Thus Holl asserted concerning this matter:

The battle with the Roman Catholic Church, which Luther initiated with the nailing of the theses, developed at the same time into a battle concerning the understanding of the Bible. Luther could not complete it without developing his principles of interpretation.³

Luther's accomplishments in the field of Biblical hermeneutics have frequently not been properly and adequately appreciated. It is, of course, not surprising to find Roman Catholic scholars failing to understand, or ignoring, the Wittenberg Reformer's significance in the area of Biblical hermeneutics. Rome has denounced Luther's influence on Biblical interpretation as negative and harmful. Thus Monsignor Patrick O'Hara, in his book *The Facts About Luther*, portrayed the latter as a perverter of Scriptures and accused Luther of adopting erroneous principles of Scriptural interpretation which prevented those using Luther's translation of the German Bible from obtaining a correct understanding of the sure knowledge of God and His revelation, as it is in Christ and His Church.⁴ The same Roman Catholic prelate further claimed that Lutheran hermeneutical principles paved the way for rationalism and for modern infidelity. With these strictures Professor Adam also agreed.⁵ Father O'Brien, one of the current apologists for the Roman Catholic faith, asserted that "Luther constituted himself the authoritative interpreter of the Bible, and practically claimed for himself infallibility."⁶ Father Cornely described Luther's contribution to hermeneutical science and exegesis in these words: *Lutherus (1546) saepe quidem contra SS. Patrum interpretationem verbis contumeliosis loquitur, sed in Commentariis nihil invenitur, quod perfectum notet; . . .*⁷ Luther's translation

of the Bible into German, to which he devoted twelve years of his life and which represented a great achievement theologically and linguistically, is disposed of by Clayton in his life of Luther in one sentence, claiming it made the people dissatisfied with their old religion and its spiritual head, the Pope.⁸

While in contrast to these opinions one finds Protestant writers totally dissenting from the judgments of Roman Catholic scholarship regarding Luther's contribution to hermeneutical science and Biblical interpretation, it nevertheless will be found that even among Protestant scholars his stature as an interpreter of the Bible has not been adequately apprehended. Thus Terry, in his historical sketch of the various schools of interpretation, does not sufficiently appreciate the contribution of Luther's hermeneutical achievements.⁹ That Gilbert did not appreciate the contribution of Luther's hermeneutical revolution may be seen from the following statement:

His (i. e., Luther's) exposition does mark progress as compared with that of the medieval period, notably in its good sense and practical character, but the best, most original elements in his views are found throughout his writings as *almost wholly un-applied truths*.¹⁰

In the light of these false allegations made by Roman Catholic scholars and the failure of many Protestant scholars truly to understand Luther's contribution to the science of Biblical hermeneutics and its significance in the formative stage of the Reformation, a portrayal of Luther's achievements as Biblical hermeneut is herewith presented.¹¹

II

Two factors prepared the way for the discovery of those important hermeneutical principles by Luther which were to have an extensive and controlling influence in reforming the Church of the sixteenth century. The first was the philosophical system of Occam, who as nominalist taught that reason was intended to be used in apprehending the truths of nature, philosophy, and science. According to Occam there was an unbridgeable gap between reason and faith.¹² This was radically different from the view held by St. Thomas, who taught that one could reason his way through natural theology (philosophy) to revealed truth (faith). The Thomistic system had accorded Aristotle an authorita-

tive place in Christian theology. Occam opposed the medieval position of the Church by drastically separating reason and faith. He maintained that in theology whatever the Christian knew was the result of divine revelation and not the product of man's reasoning or philosophizing. The Occamists, therefore, centered authority for theological dogmas in the Bible. Much of Luther's philosophical training had been in the school of Occam, called the *Via Moderna*. Luther's philosophical training may thus have been a contributing factor in his development as a student and interpreter of the Bible.

The second factor which prepared Luther for his revolutionary attitudes over against the hermeneutical system of the Church in which he had been nourished was the movement known as "Biblical Humanism." This movement supplied Luther with the tools that he and other scholars needed to rebuild the Christian Church. In 1509 the French Humanist Lefèvre d'Étaples published his *Psalterium Quintuplex*, an edition that supplied the Biblical student with a textual basis for exegetical lectures and at the same time also furnished an up-to-date commentary on the Psalms. In it Lefèvre censured those who trusted human merit and also weighed critically the sacramental system. This work with its emphasis on the grace of God gave a strong impetus to Bible reading, and Luther used it as a guide in his first Psalm lectures at Wittenberg, in 1512—1513. When Erasmus issued the New Testament in Greek, Luther at once procured a copy of it for his lectures on Romans. The second edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament, issued in 1519, was employed by Luther at the Wartburg in 1521 and 1522 as the basis for his translation of the New Testament and the foundation for his reforms. A European scholar made the following judgment concerning the importance of the publications of Erasmus' New Testament:

There can be no doubt but that something great and new had happened, which declared war on Scholasticism and occasioned its fall; for Christianity was taken back more than a thousand years to the very time of the first expositors of the New Testament, yes, even to the building of the canon itself.¹³

What Erasmus did for the New Testament, John Reuchlin accomplished for the Old Testament. The latter's *De Rudimentis Hebraicis*, a combined grammar and dictionary, was used by Lu-

ther and other reformers. The works of Erasmus and Reuchlin provided a new and scientific approach to the Scriptures.

In 1514, Luther undertook the study of Greek seriously, being aided by John Lang's knowledge of Greek and his extensive library of the classics. When in 1516 Luther started to use Erasmus' New Testament, he was still a novice in Greek, but by 1517 and 1518 his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew had greatly increased. By 1520, Luther had developed into an able linguist. Gilbert expressed the opinion that although Luther's knowledge of Greek and Hebrew was considerable for his day, it "was not sufficient to give a distinctively linguistic value to his exegetical work."¹⁴ However, in Schwiebert's opinion, Luther's translation of the Greek New Testament into German in 1522 and his complete translation of the Bible in 1534 was the work of a mature scholar and able linguist.¹⁵

By employing the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, Luther must be credited with placing Biblical interpretation on a sound foundation by demanding that the original text of the Bible be used in Biblical interpretation. In Luther's day the Vulgate was considered the authoritative text for exposition and interpretation. The Council of Trent declared the Vulgate the authentic text of the Church. By the term "authentic" the formulators of this position at Trent meant that the Latin translation is trustworthy and that its testimony cannot be rejected in public lectures or disputations.¹⁶ The Vatican Council (1870) reaffirmed this position by declaring the Latin Vulgate to be the official version of the Church and as such to be held as authentic in public readings, discourses, and disputes.¹⁷ While Roman Catholic scholars admit that the Vulgate is not free from errors¹⁸ and inferior to the Greek and Hebrew, yet the Roman Catholic Church has directed its teaching personnel to take the Vulgate as the fountain for all transactions of the Church, sermons, catechizing, and discussions. Even though Roman Catholic exegetes may use the original texts, the Scriptures written in Hebrew, Biblical Aramaic, and Greek, they are required to consult the Vulgate. Humphry, a Jesuit, in his volume *The Written Word*, wrote: "The Greek and Hebrew texts are of the greatest value, as means in order to arrive at the genuine full sense and full force of many passages in the Latin Vulgate."¹⁹

III

Despite the aid that Occamism and Biblical Humanism furnished Luther, it would be difficult to establish that they were directly responsible for the discovery of one of the basic principles of all sound interpretation: *Sensus literalis unus est*.

When Luther began his exegetical lectures at the University of Wittenberg in 1512, he followed the accepted methodology of his day, namely, of attributing a fourfold meaning (*Quadrigena*) to a text: the literal, the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical. As the student follows the Biblical lectures of the Wittenberg Reformer between 1512 and 1517, he notes how Luther gradually broke with the allegorical method. In his Lectures on *Romans*, delivered from November 3, 1512, to September, 1516, Luther expounded the text of this Pauline writing according to the grammatico-historical method, while his interpretation was almost entirely spiritual. Allegory was no longer employed in the interpretation of the spiritual text. In the lectures on Galatians, given from October 27, 1516, to March 10, 1517, Luther utilized only the grammatico-historical method. Thus, as Hamel has pointed out, there was severed one of the significant bonds that linked Luther with the past.²⁰ After 1517 the bonds of the allegorical method were completely broken. In the exposition on *The Ten Commandments* Luther referred to the fourfold sense of the Scriptures as a "sport for children." Henceforth the text of Scripture had but one meaning for him, even though in his practical explanations Luther often paid tribute to the allegorical sense. Thus in writing to Emser, Luther asserted: "Scripture shall not have a double meaning, but shall retain the one that accords with the meaning by the words."²¹ Again he said: "The Holy Ghost is the most simple Author and Speaker in heaven or earth, therefore His words cannot have more than one, the most simple, meaning."²² In the Christmas Postil for 1522 Luther wrote: "If we concede that Scripture has more than one sense, it loses its fighting force."²³

The abandonment of the allegorical method of exegesis by Luther and the use of the historico-grammatical method was an accomplishment whose influence dare not be underestimated. Of it Fullerton said: "For the first time in the history of the Church a really scientific principle of exegesis is enunciated as the controlling

principle in interpretation."²⁴ Ever since the second century the exegesis of Scripture had been dominated by a double meaning: the literal and the figurative. The latter in turn was designated by various names and was further subdivided, so that in the course of time it became customary to interpret Scripture, as has already been mentioned, in a fourfold way. Sometimes medieval exegetes found as many as seven different meanings in the Bible.²⁵ A little verse in circulation as late as the sixteenth century illustrates the fourfold sense:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

(The letter shows us what God and our fathers did;
The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;
The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;
The anagogy shows us where we end our strife.)²⁶

An example of the use of these senses of Scripture may be obtained from the interpretation of "Jerusalem" in Gal. 4:22 ff. Historically it refers to the city of the Jews; allegorically it means the Church of Christ; anagogically it signifies the heavenly city, and tropologically it refers to the human soul.

The allegorical method had risen among the Greeks of Alexandria and was applied by the Jews of Alexandria. Pantaenus, the founder of the Alexandrian School, adopted it from Philo; and subsequently his successors in Alexandria, Clement and Origen, continued it. From the time of the Alexandrian School until the days of Luther, the allegorical method was the predominant manner of Scriptural interpretation. The great weakness and deficiency of this method was its obscuration of the true meaning of Scripture. Mixed hopelessly with the allegorical method was an exaggerated typical interpretation. The allegorical methodology allowed the imagination of the interpreter to run wild so that the Bible becomes putty in the hands of the interpreter. Luther protested that his antagonists treat the Scriptures as if they were a nose of wax, to be pulled about at will. It was possible for different doctrinal systems to originate by the use of the allegorical method, yet there was nothing within the method to distinguish the true from the false. Only by a return to the literal method could the subjectivity and misconception which had characterized the history of Biblical

interpretation be removed. According to Bornkamm, Luther was especially opposed to the allegorical method because it destroyed the historical character of the books of the Old Testament.²⁷ For Luther the history of the Old Covenant was *Heilsgeschichte*; it contained the history of salvation. His fundamental understanding of Old Testament history was governed by the principle: *Ex historia aedificanda est fides*. The historical nature of the Old Testament can be established only by the adoption of the literal sense.

Nicholas of Lyra, whom Luther followed in the early years of his interpretative work, had realized the fallacies of the allegorical method and stressed the acceptance of the literal meaning. Lyra, however, did not totally succeed in freeing himself from the bondage of the allegorical method. Roman Catholic scholars presume to credit the return of Biblical interpretation to the literal method to Nicholas of Lyra. The emphasis on the historico-grammatical method in Biblical interpretation was new for the humanism of Luther's time. Only a half year before the Leipzig debate there appeared the *Methodus* of Erasmus, in which the latter praised the allegorical method of Origen. When Luther embarked upon his exegetical lectures at Wittenberg University, the fourfold sense of Scripture was dominant, as is evident from a perusal of the *Manuale Curatorum* of Ulrich Surgant (appeared in 1502) and the *Tractatus de modo praedicandi* of Dungersheim (appeared in 1514). The Roman Catholic Church has always welcomed the use of the fourfold sense of Scripture, because this method of interpretation permits the justification of any doctrine whatsoever from either the Old or the New Testament. Luther, however, must be credited with initiating a new *modus operandi* in the history of Biblical interpretation, one which has influenced Scriptural exposition to the present time. A survey of the exegetical works of the sixteenth century reveals the fact that both Protestant and Roman Catholic exegetes followed Luther's lead in making the historico-grammatical method the controlling principle of Scriptural exposition. As a result of Luther's employment of, and emphasis upon, this hermeneutical rule, the Council of Trent and Roman exegesis in the sixteenth century and subsequent centuries were compelled to reckon with it.

Although Luther forced the recognition of the literal sense as

a fundamental law of Scriptural interpretation, the Roman Catholic Church to this day has refused to reject the use of allegory. Thus Seisenberger wrote "that the meaning of the text must not everywhere be limited to the literal meaning, as underlying the letter many a mystery is often concealed. There is, therefore, more than one meaning of the written word."²⁸ Gigot justified the use of the allegorical method by the Church Fathers on the ground that the authors of the New Testament admitted the existence of a typical sense in various books of the Old Testament.²⁹ Contrary to any New Testament warrant or support he contended for the existence of a typical sense in connection with persons and events spoken of in the writings of the New Testament. Gigot asserted:

It is true that the New Testament dispensation is the fulfillment of that of the Old Testament, and is final from the standpoint of Revelation; yet it does not seem improbable that, in some other way, it may symbolize and prefigure events in the life of the Church through the centuries.³⁰

In a footnote he illustrated this method of interpretation: Martha and Mary typify the active and contemplative life, the bark of Peter on the sea is an image of the Church under persecution.

The rejection of the fourfold sense of Scripture and its inevitable consequence of mysticism led Luther to the discovery of the theological doctrine of justification by faith under circumstances that have become the subject of much research within recent years.

The translators and exegetes of the Middle Ages had not known nor applied the hermeneutical principle that the Scripture has but one meaning. As a consequence the Bible had remained a closed book as a guide to salvation. The finding of the true meaning of the Biblical phrase "righteousness of God" in Rom. 1:17 (*iustitia Dei*) became the key by which Luther was able correctly to set forth the heart of the Bible. Saarnivaara believes that Luther's discovery of the true meaning of Rom. 1:17 — generally known as the "tower experience" — occurred toward the end of 1518 and not between 1513 and 1515, as generally believed by many Luther scholars.³¹

Prior to 1518 Luther held, and gave expression to, the Augustinian view of justification. The great fourth-century Church Father taught that man is justified and saved by faith and not by

works, but this justification was portrayed as a gradual renewal or healing of man's human nature from the corruption of sin. Non-imputation of sins for the sake of Christ was considered by Augustine a temporary supplement to this process of healing. Between 1512 and 1518 Luther held the ethical and moral concept of justification, and not the forensic. According to the *Preface* to his works, written in 1545, Luther ascribed the interim between his lectures on Hebrews (completed in the spring of 1518) and his second series of lectures on the Psalms (started in the beginning of 1519) as the time during which he discovered the true meaning of justification by faith, namely, that by the gracious declaration of God, man is declared righteous. Now for the first time Luther realized that God justified the sinner by mercifully imputing or reckoning the obedience of Jesus to the sinner as his righteousness, thereby forgiving him his sins for Christ's sake.

While Luther's new insight into the doctrine of justification, with its concomitant correct understanding of the relationship of justification and sanctification, was a religious experience of great importance for Luther's personal faith, its significance extended beyond this. Luther's new understanding was above all the discovery of the meaning of the Word concerning justification. His "tower experience" was the recovery by Luther of the Scriptural way of salvation. The crucial point in the discovery of the Scriptural teaching of justification by faith was the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the account of the sinner. Thus Saarnivaara described the meaning of Luther's find:

The entire content of his discovery in the tower was the insight that, according to the simple and literal meaning of this written Word of God, man is justified by the gracious imputation of God when by faith he appropriates the Gospel promise of forgiveness of sins in the blood of Christ.³²

From another point of view the discovery of the full Reformation insight of justification meant also the "Lutheran" distinction between Law and Gospel. The proper differentiation between Law and Gospel, a cardinal point of Lutheran theology and teaching, was of greatest importance in the comprehension of the meaning of the Bible. The Augustinian-Catholic doctrine of justification was a confusion of Law and Gospel. According to that doctrine

"Christ differed from Moses only in time and in perfection." Neither the Pope nor all his learned men and universities, Luther declared, had ever taken into consideration the art of distinguishing between Law and Gospel. In fact, outside of Holy Scriptures no book had been written which had rightfully differentiated between them. A correct interpretation of the Word of God rests on the recognition of these two principal constituent elements of the Bible.

The distinction between Law and Gospel also has implications for the interpretation of the Old Testament. Luther found Law and Gospel in both Testaments of the Bible. Thus Luther asserted concerning the presence of Law and Gospel in the Old Testament:

But in the New Testament there are given, along with the teaching about grace, many other teachings that are laws and commandments for the ruling of the flesh, since in this life the spirit is not perfected and grace alone cannot rule. Just so in the Old Testament there are, besides the laws, certain promises and offers of grace, by which the holy fathers and prophets, under law, were kept, like us, under the faith of Christ.³³

IV

The further development in Luther's life between 1518 and 1521 found him arriving at a hermeneutical principle which has become a cornerstone in Biblical interpretation, namely, the Scripture is its own interpreter and hence alone has the authority to determine doctrine and life. While the Occamists emphasized the authority of Scripture more strongly than any other school of theology in the Roman Catholic Church, they nevertheless recognized the Church, functioning through a General Council, as the final court of appeal in the determination of doctrine. That Luther shared this view till 1518 is evident from his appeal to a General Church Council, which he made after his meeting with Cardinal Cajetan, thereby eliminating the Pope as authority apart from and above Scripture. Luther's disputation with Eck in 1519 led further to the rejection of the authority of Church Councils and to the assertion by Luther that history had shown Church Councils to have erred. In speaking of the unjust condemnation of certain evangelical articles by the Council of Constance, Luther said:

A faithful Christian cannot be forced beyond the Holy Scriptures, which are really the divine law (*ius divinum*), unless a new and authentic revelation is added; indeed, we are prohibited by the divine law from believing something that is not proved by the divine Writing or clear revelation.³⁴

At this time Luther made the following pronouncement as to the authority of Scripture: "The statement of all writings (sc. of the Fathers) must be judged according to the divine Writ, whose authority is greater than the powers of perception of the entire human race."³⁵ In regard to the Church as interpreter, Luther asserted: "The Church also has no power to establish new divine promises of grace, as some foolishly speak, that everything which the Church ordains is of no lesser authority than that which is ordained of God, since she is guided by the Holy Spirit. For the Church comes into being through the Word of promise through faith. . . . God's Word stands incomparably high above the Church; in this Word she, as a creature, cannot resolve, order, or execute, but can only be resolved, ordered, and carried out. For who generates his father, who has first called his Creator into being?"³⁶ In his *Assertio omnium Articulorum*, issued in January, 1521, Luther averred that he most surely would not permit himself to be forced by the authority of any St. Peter, however great it may be, unless it is confirmed by the judgment of the divine Scripture.³⁷ In an extensive statement, Luther also explained that the Fathers could not bind him in his interpretation of Holy Writ. "Scripture is the *primum principium*; it is in itself the most certain, the most accessible, the most readily understandable (book), which interprets itself and approves, judges, and illumines all (words) of all."³⁸ On March 29, 1521, Luther designated the Holy Ghost as the most lucid Writer, whose writings do not need the help of church and tradition to be understood correctly, if they are taken in their literal meaning.³⁹ Scripture, for Luther, was not one of several pillars upon which the house of faith rested; no, it was the sole foundation. The Church was no longer considered the arbiter of Scripture, but Scripture was the judge of the Church. In declaring the Holy Writings the only source and norm for doctrine, Luther returned to the very teaching of Christ, who said: "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and

ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31, 32).

At the Council of Trent the position of Luther was condemned in the disciplinary decree *Insuper*, which states: "No one . . . shall presume to interpret Sacred Scriptures contrary to the sense which Holy Mother the Church held and holds, to whom it belongs to judge the true sense and interpretation of Holy Scripture."⁴⁰ Steinmueller gives two practical rules to be followed by interpreters obedient to the decisions of the Roman Catholic Church: 1. The sense proposed by the Church must be considered authentic. Thus John 20:20 ff. refers to the Sacrament of Penance; James 5:14 ff. meant the Sacrament of Extreme Unction; Matt. 16:13 ff. and John 21:15 ff. a promise of the primacy of Peter. 2. Even though the Church has not officially interpreted a text, when a meaning has been proposed for a given passage, it is the duty of the interpreter to accept the traditional explanation.⁴¹

In regard to the authority of the Church Fathers, rejected by Luther, the Vatican Council asserted: "It is not lawful for the exegete to interpret contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers," which means, the interpretation which the Fathers either received or rejected must likewise be received or rejected. Thus Mal. 1:10 must be accepted as a prophecy of the Eucharist; 1 Cor. 4:7 refers to the gratuity of divine election and of supernatural gifts.⁴²

In contrast to the Church of his day, Luther taught the perspicuity, or *Allgemeinverständlichkeit*, of the Word of God. "There is not on earth a book more lucidly written than Holy Scripture," Luther declared.⁴³ Consequently the individual Christian is not dependent on the Church for its interpretation of the meaning and doctrines of Holy Writ. Luther did not deny the existence of difficulties in Scripture, for he often quoted the remark of Gregory that the Bible is "a river in which a lamb may wade and the elephant must swim." He contended for the perspicuity of the Scriptures in the chief matters of salvation, especially as it pertained to Law and Gospel. The dark words of the Word must be explained with the help of the clear words of the Bible. It was Luther's contention that the Bible could be understood in terms of itself—*sacra*

Scriptura sui ipsius interpres — with no Patristic commentary necessary. As a corollary to this truth, the maxim was deduced that a document must be given opportunity to speak for itself, a writing must be interpreted in the light of its own statements.

By insisting on the right of the text of Scripture, as literally interpreted, to stand alone, Luther made a valuable contribution to the science of Protestant hermeneutics. In adopting this principle of interpretation, he departed radically from the overwhelming majority of medieval exegetes. The exegetical method which obtained when Luther embarked on his Biblical lectures on the Psalms in 1512, was for the interpreter to present the exegetical materials of the past in the form of a *catena*, a chain of explanation gathered together from the Patristic commentaries. A number of such *catenae* existed in Luther's day, and they borrowed largely from Augustine, Hilary, Jerome, and the Greek Fathers. When Luther began his First Psalm Lectures, he relied particularly on Augustine's *Commentary of the Psalms*, Lyra's *Commentary on the Psalms*, and Lefèvre's *Psalterium Quintuplex*. In the beginning of the Psalm Lectures, Luther followed the required exegetical method of presenting the thoughts and explanations of approved expositors; however, beginning with Psalm 90, Luther gave his own explanation, with Patristic quotations much fewer in number. Gradually Luther dispensed with the use of the Church Fathers' explanation and insisted that the text be allowed to speak for itself.

V

From the hermeneutical rule that the Bible is its own interpreter derives another cherished principle of the Reformation, namely, that each believer, as he lets Scripture interpret Scripture, has the privilege and duty to examine and judge doctrine. "To ascertain and judge about doctrine pertains to all and to every Christian; and in such a way that let him be anathema who injures their right by a single hair."⁴⁴

This right of private judgment has been denounced by Roman Catholics as the cause for modern individualism and the divisiveness of modern civilization. The celebrated neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain, in his *Three Reformers*, grouped Luther with Descartes and Rousseau and claimed that the religious subjectivism of Luther,

the philosophical subjectivism of Descartes, and the social subjectivism of Rousseau were woven of one cloth.⁴⁵ The Roman Catholic Church historian Joseph Lortz has accused Luther's principle of private judgment in interpretation as responsible for the rejection of the idea of authority in the sphere of religion.⁴⁶ However, the facts do not support this allegation. Luther's quarrel with Rome was not so much about the idea of the necessity of having authority in religion as about the seat of religious authority. Thus Beard asserted: "The debate with the Catholics was not as to whether Scripture was authoritative, but whether tradition and the Church were to be admitted to an equal position of influence. . . ." ⁴⁷ In the final analysis it was a question of the authority of Scripture. According to the clear teaching of the Bible, the seat for religious authority was to be found in the Scriptures themselves; in other words, the Scriptures were self-authenticating. Luther certainly believed in religious authority, and he ascribed to the Bible the supreme authority in religious matters. Throughout the latter part of his life, Luther fought a battle on two fronts: on the one side he warred against the tyranny of the Pope, and on the other side against the religious arbitrariness of the *Schwärmer*, or the sectarians. Pauck described the position of Luther on religious authority as:

. . . that of a theonomous Biblicism, i. e., in the Bible he found the Word of God by faith in which God could become *his* God. Thus he overcame a heteronomous objectivism which excludes personal commitment, as well as an autonomous subjectivism which disregards super-personal authority.⁴⁸

Did Luther accept human reason as an authority on a par with Scripture, or even above it? Harnack has made the assertion: "The Reformation protested against all formal, external authority in matters of religion. . . . Thus Luther also protested against the authority of the letter of the Bible."⁴⁹ Luther's statement at Worms: "Unless I am convinced by testimony from Scripture or evident reason," has been interpreted by some as demanding unrestricted liberty of thought and conscience and as defending the position that the only authority to which man was responsible was his own subjective and arbitrary conscience. However, it has been shown by Preuss that Luther's word "or evident reason" means: unless

I am convinced from Scripture or through logically correct deductions from Holy Writ, I will not change my position. Only ten days after his confession at Worms, Luther wrote to the Emperor Charles as follows:

For God, the Searcher of hearts, is my Witness that I am most ready to submit to and obey your Majesty either in life or in death, to glory or to shame, for gain or for loss. As I have offered myself, thus I do now, *excepting nothing save the Word of God*, in which not only (as Christ teaches in Matthew 4) does man live, but which also the angels of Christ desire to see (1 Peter 1). *As it is above all things, it ought to be held free and unbound in all*, as Paul teaches (2 Tim. 2:9). *It ought not to depend on human judgment nor to yield to the opinion of men, no matter how great, how numerous, how learned, and how holy they are.*⁵⁰

Luther allowed reason to serve as a handmaiden to theology in order to find out the meaning of the original text of the Scriptures or to rectify human errors in the original texts. However, Luther condemns that reason which tries to be wiser than the Word of God, or as wise as the Word of God, or which wants to be an authority criticizing the teachings of the Scriptures.

VI

As an important aid in determining the interpretation of the more difficult passages of the Bible, Luther stressed the "analogy of faith." His emphasis on the single meaning of Scripture was associated with the rule that a single passage was not to be torn out of its own context, out of its larger context, nor out of its organic connection with the entire Word of God. Thus in his debate with Eck at Leipzig, Luther asserted: "The understanding of a statement of Scripture must be sought in the entirety of Scripture, and in the sum total of all related facts."⁵¹ Again he said:

That is not the right way to interpret the Scriptures, to collect statements from different parts of the Bible without any regard for logical order or context. But that is the way it is commonly done; and it leads to nothing but errors. In order not to go wrong, the theologian must therefore keep in mind the whole of Scripture *et contraria contrariis conferre et sicut duo Cherubim adversis cultibus utriusque diversitatis consensum in medio propitiarii invenire.*⁵²

It must be borne in mind that Luther had a different conception about the analogy of faith from that held by the Church. The Early Fathers of the Church, when they spoke of the *analogia fidei*, meant the general principles of faith, of which there were a number of summaries available. Analogy of faith was a term which in the course of time was applied to the creeds of the Church. The Nicene Creed was made a standard of judgment. Traditions of the Church were elevated to the same height, thus creating the ridiculous situation of making that which was taken from the Bible, the standard according to which Holy Writ was to be tested.⁵³ The analogy of faith, according to Luther, is to be found in the Word of God itself. Mackinnon has asserted that the use of the analogy of faith, however, was the Lutheran equivalent of the allegorical method, i. e., the explanation of the text in the light of, or in accordance with, the dictates of the Christian faith. He averred: "In reality he (i. e., Luther) only discarded this method to revive and apply it in another form, and its application might and did lead to results as arbitrary as those deprecated and denounced in the case of the Fathers and Schoolmen."⁵⁴ While it is true that Luther was not always consistent in the use of the analogy of faith, it is erroneous to identify the analogy of faith with the allegorical method. Preserved Smith also considered the employment of the analogy of faith a hindrance to sound interpretation, when he wrote: "The fundamental assumption that the sense of Scripture is one and that obscure sentences must be interpreted by those that are clear — by the analogy of faith as the phrase was — put bonds upon the expositor."⁵⁵ Modern liberal theologians, who have rejected the belief of the inerrancy of the Word of God and its authority, cannot appreciate the analogy of faith, a rule of interpretation accepted by all who regard the Bible as the inspired Word of the living God.

VII

An important contribution by Luther to sound hermeneutics was his Christological approach to the interpretation of the whole Bible. Luther considered the Old and New Testaments as a unit, whose oneness was to be found in Christ Crucified. Already in his first Psalm lectures, Luther said: "I see nothing in Scripture

but Christ Crucified." In a sermon delivered on November 11, 1515, he asserted:

He who would read the Bible must simply take heed he does not err, for the Scripture may permit itself to be stretched and led, but let no one lead it according to his affects, but let him lead it to the source, i. e., the cross of Christ. Then he will surely strike the center; . . .⁵⁶

The concept that Christ could be found in the Old Testament was not new, for Erasmus had already stated: "Nothing is to be sought in Scripture but Christ." Erasmus, however, considered Christ the Center because He was the best model for the moral life. In contrast to this viewpoint, Christ is the Center because He is the crucified, risen and ascended One, through whom forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life are bestowed upon men devoid of merit. The Christo-centric rule of interpretation was paramount in all of Luther's interpretations of Scripture, whether in the Old or in the New Testament. Luther believed that the Gospels describe the life of Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament; the Apostles portray the teaching of the Apostolic Church as the true interpretation of the Old Testament. "Christ is the point in the circle from which the whole circle (of the Scripture) is drawn. . . ." "If you will interpret well and surely, then take Christ with you, for He is the Man whom the whole of (Scripture) concerns."⁵⁷

By Luther's emphasis on a Christological interpretation of Scripture he has been understood to have introduced a subjective element into his evaluation of Scripture: only those portions of Scripture are divine and inspired which are concerned with Christ. The statement of Luther: "This is the true touchstone by which all books are to be judged, when one sees whether they urge Christ or not, as all Scripture shows forth Christ, and St. Paul will know no one but Christ (1 Cor. 2:2)," has been construed as introducing a principle of selection of inspired material in the Bible.⁵⁸ But as Kramm has pointed out, that is a misunderstanding of Luther, who considered all canonical books as referring to Christ.⁵⁹ While modern higher criticism has rejected the Christo-centric interpretation of the Old Testament, Luther, it must be recognized, accepted the interpretation of Christ and the Apostles, which clearly portrayed the Old Testament as speaking and prophesying about the Messiah.

The account of Creation, the lives of the Patriarchs, the ceremonial laws of the Jews, and the narrative of Jonah, all referred to in the New Testament as having an important bearing on God's divine revelation, were cited by Christ and the Apostles in relation to the divine plan of redemption. It was from this viewpoint that Luther designated Genesis "almost an evangelical book." When the Wittenberg Reformer found the doctrine of the Trinity or the teaching of the first and second Adam in Genesis, or the portrayal of Abraham as a believer of justification by faith, Luther was merely following St. Paul. The Epistle to the Hebrews also furnished Luther with further warrant for his Christo-centric interpretation of the Old Testament. The principle "as far as it concerns Christ" must, therefore, not be considered a principle of selection, but one of interpretation.

The purpose of this essay was to set forth some of Luther's hermeneutical principles and thus to show how much the Lutheran Reformation owes to Luther's discovery of certain basic principles of interpretation. Farrar sums up our findings when he says: "And he not only gave them the open Bible, but taught them and all the world how best it might be interpreted."⁶⁰

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FOOTNOTES

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5. Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 8.
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8. Joseph Clayton, *Luther and His Work* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1937), p. 168.
9. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1890), pp. 47—48.
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11. For a collection of Luther's hermeneutical principles, see the articles by F. A. Hoppe, "Grundzüge der lutherischen Hermeneutik zusammengestellt aus Luther's Schriften," *Lehre und Wehre*, 28:57—72, 108—111, 148 to 157, (1882).
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16. William A. Dowd, *The Gospel Guide* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1935), p. 50.; G. Bardy and A. Tricot, "Les Versions," In A. Robert et A. Tricot, *Initiation Biblique* (Paris: Desclee & Cie, 1948), p. 390.
17. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919), II, 82. for the decree of the Council of Trent, a position reaffirmed by the Vatican Council, pp. 241—242.
18. S. G. Messmer, *Outlines of Bible Knowledge* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1927), p. 29.; Michael Seisenberger, *Practical Handbook for the Study of the Bible and of the Literature of the Bible* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1911), p. 254.
19. Quoted by Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1950), p. 25.
20. Adolf Hamel, *Der junge Luther und Augustin* (Guetersloh, 1935), II, p. 144.
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23. *Ibid.*, 10, I, 169, 2—3.
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29. Francis E. Gigot, *General Introduction to the Study of the Holy Scriptures* (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1900), p. 390.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 390.
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33. Martin Luther, "Introduction to the Old Testament," *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman and the Castle Press, 1932), VI, p. 368.
34. Weimar Edition, *op. cit.*, 2, 279, 23—26.
35. *Ibid.*, 2, 309, 34—36.
36. *Ibid.*, 6, 560, 31; 561, 2.

37. *Ibid.*, 7, 133, 33 ff.
38. *Ibid.*, 7, 97, 23—24, and Reu, *op. cit.*, pp. 27, 142.
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42. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
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58. Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
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60. Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 323.