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**Words of Life
A Study of Luther's Hermeneutics**

by

J. Timothy Waterhouse, B.A.

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in
partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of**

Master of Arts

Department of Religion

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario**

August 18. 1992

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**"Words of Life
A Study of Luther's Hermeneutics"**

Submitted by J. Timothy Waterhouse, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Thesis Supervisor

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Abstract

Luther's vocation was the interpretation of scripture; hence, the importance of hermeneutics in his thought. Previous studies have called Luther's hermeneutics "revolutionary" or, alternatively, have declared that he brings nothing significantly new to the development of exegesis. The point of departure for this study is that neither of these approaches is an adequate assessment of Luther's hermeneutics. Instead, we propose - following the way of contemporary philosophical and theological hermeneutics - that the term hermeneutical shift be used to describe Luther's movement from the technicalities of the text to the conditions for authentic understanding.

The study is comprised of four major components: an analysis of contemporary philosophical and theological hermeneutics to provide a theoretical framework; a study of hermeneutics and Luther's theology, with a particular emphasis on his understanding of the nature and function of scripture; a review of the historical antecedents and setting, outlining Luther's lines of continuity and points of difference with the medieval tradition and humanism; finally, a detailed investigation of Luther's hermeneutical principles.

**"If I had to do without one or the other
- either the works or preaching of
Christ - I would rather do without the
works than without his preaching. For
the works do not help me, but his
words give life..."**

Martin Luther (1546)

**"A man who tells secrets or stories
must think of who is hearing or
reading, for a story has as many
versions as it has readers. Everyone
takes what he wants or can from it and
thus changes it to his measure. Some
pick out parts and reject the rest, some
strain the story through their mesh of
prejudice, some paint it with their own
delight. A story must have some points
of contact with the reader to make him
feel at home in it. Only then can he
accept wonders."**

John Steinbeck (1961)

Abbreviations

LW *Luther's Works. American Edition.* 56 vols. General Editors: Jaroslav Pelikan (vols 1-30) and Helmut T. Lehmann (vols 1-56). Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1976.

Sermons *Sermons of Martin Luther.* 8 vols. Edited by John Nickolas Lenker. Translated by John Nickolas Lenker and others. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Coming to terms with Luther's hermeneutics in light of the medieval tradition and the humanist movement is far from being a clear-cut issue. An evangelical theologian can pronounce with confidence that "in the 16th century, Luther initiated and fostered a hermeneutical revolution that changed the course of history."¹ Conversely, a church historian asserts with equal conviction that "the Reformation did not, however, mark with clarity a new era in the history of exegesis."² Is there a way out of the impasse?

By adjudicating the claims of the preceeding perspectives, our thesis is that neither one fully does justice to Luther's position. Instead of these conflicting assessments, we will propose - following the way of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gerhard Ebeling - that Luther's work involved a hermeneutical shift. This is not a case of indulging in semantic trickery, however. The perspective of a hermeneutical shift or realignment clearly conveys the lines of continuity and discontinuity among the medieval tradition, humanism and Luther. And, just as importantly, it is a more sympathetic and appropriate appraisal of Luther's hermeneutical project. It supports Luther's conviction that authentic understanding does not sentence the interpreter to the technicalities

of the text. The process of understanding is too expansive and important with too many soteriological entailments to be restrained in such a fashion.

Other commentators have also employed the term hermeneutical shift; however, it is used in a narrower sense to designate the reformer's movement from allegory to metaphor in the interpretation of scripture.³ Our use of the term suggests something much broader in scope, as Luther's departure from the technicalities of the text to the conditions for authentic understanding.

Our work will evolve over four stages. In chapter two we will define and examine hermeneutics from the vantage point of contemporary philosophy and theology. Luther's relationship to hermeneutics will also be discussed. Luther's understanding of scripture and its place in his theology will be the subject of chapter three. We will see that, for the reformer, scripture is one of the ways in which the Deity has condescended to the human condition in order to bridge the ontological, moral and epistemological chasms. As much as Luther loved and esteemed scripture, it was still an accommodation to the situation of humanity and, therefore, in a sense, provisional. We will strike a nerve in the underlying and unresolved tension in Luther's understanding of scripture. Luther's concept of the Word of God also comes into play here. Scripture and the Word, though very closely associated, were by no means identical. The Word of God as gospel contained a vivacious oral dimension with incumbent aural responsibilities on the devotee.

Chapter four will sketch the historical background and situation to Luther's work and his relationship with humanism and the medieval tradition. The Wittenberg reformer hardly developed his hermeneutics walled and moated from outside influences. Luther had his feet in many streams. Finally, in chapter five we will explain Luther's hermeneutical principles: the condition of the interpreter, the literal sense of scripture, the clarity of scripture, christological interpretation, the eschatological dimension, letter and spirit, law and gospel, historical and textual criticism, theological criticism. Luther did not compose a systematic treatment of the subject, and so his hermeneutical principles must be extracted from a variety of sources.

The subject of Luther and hermeneutics is intriguing. At first glance, however, the issue might seem to be a forced marriage of two reluctant partners: a sixteenth century historical figure and a contemporary philosophical and theological concern. Heiko Oberman has said that the primary task of a good historian is to become bilingual.⁴ That is to say, he or she must be able to speak the language of both the past and the present. Neither the past nor the present stand alone. Each one must be interpreted in light of the other. Oberman's dictum will be an encouraging beacon for our study.

We would be remiss not to acknowledge some of the issues and problems in Reformation and Luther studies. Generally speaking, two trends dominate Reformation research. One approach sets the Reformation in a medieval perspective and highlights its intellectual roots in medieval philosophy,

theology, and spirituality. The other approach understands the sixteenth century Reformation from the perspective of social history. Just because our investigation is explicitly theological in orientation, we do not in any way wish to diminish the importance of social and economic factors in Reformation studies.

Any researcher is soon abruptly aware of the phenomena of multiple Luthers. There are just as many Luthers today as there were in the sixteenth century: Luther the student, Luther the monk, Luther the religious reformer, Luther the professor, Luther the theologian, Luther the preacher and pastor, Luther the social critic, Luther the husband and father, Luther the enemy of the Catholic Church. There is also the much wider issue of "the medieval Luther" and "the modern Luther." In understanding the past we are assisted by the terms of the present, but at the same time we must resist over-dressing Luther in twentieth century garb. And, we must certainly resist any attempts to purge Luther of medieval or offensive traces in an effort to make him relevant. Luther was in symmetry with his age. He was a ward of the sixteenth century.

Evoking the reformer's name to support this position or that position is somewhat misleading; because of the sheer volume of his work, Luther can be quoted to support just about any cause. Significant historical figures take on over time a markedly protean nature. Like Napoleon or Babe Ruth, Luther is one of those characters who seemed larger than life as the apocryphal yarns about him grew exponentially over the passing years.

It is an arduous task to separate the reformer from his theology. While focusing on a certain aspect of his thought, as we have done, the outright magnetism of his personality keeps intruding. In dialoguing with Luther one does not remain untouched! Perhaps he was living proof of the efficacy of his hermeneutics.

Notes

1. David S. Dockery, "Martin Luther's Christological Hermeneutics", *Grace Theological Journal* 4 (1983), p. 189.
2. Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation", *Interpretation* XXXVII (July, 1988), p. 229.
3. See John J. Pilch "Luther's Hermeneutical Shift", *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970):445-448, and Darrell R. Reinke "From Allegory to Metaphor: More Notes on Luther's Hermeneutical Shift", *Harvard Theological Review*, 66 (1973): 386-395.
4. Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther. Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schevart, (New Haven, 1989), p. XVI.

Chapter 2. Hermeneutics: A Definition

Martin Luther probably would have eschewed such a pretentious term as hermeneutics. Nevertheless, it is a useful device in contemporary discussions as a way of exploring the relationship of a doctrine of scripture, exegesis as the concrete process of interpretation, and the explicit or implicit awareness of the ultimate conditions for understanding.

But what has Luther to do with hermeneutics? The reformer was first and foremost a biblical theologian and his theology was explicitly exegetical. As a university professor, writer, preacher, pastor, and statesman the interpretation, application, and communication of the meaning of scripture was a constant duty for Luther. His work always had both scholarly and pastoral dimensions.

The sixteenth century conflict between the Catholic Church and the reformers was, at least in part, a dispute over the nature and interpretation of scripture. The evolution of modern hermeneutics, as the nineteenth century scholar Wilhelm Dilthey suggested, was intimately tied with the post-reformation debates between Protestants and Catholics over the interpretation of scripture.

Viewed from a broad perspective, the rise of modern hermeneutics is connected with the Protestant tradition, especially liberal Protestantism. Obviously, such a key player in the Protestant drama as Luther has a part in the

development of hermeneutics. His significance moves beyond the orbit of church history to a place in western intellectual history.

Generally speaking, hermeneutics has become a focal point of discussion among representatives from a wide range of disciplines: theology, philosophy, philology, history, literary criticism with its roots in classical philology, and biblical exegesis. The boundaries of hermeneutics are not well defined or limited to one particular area. This situation comes with both advantages and pitfalls. When so many disciplines are involved in the dialogue, a rich and incisive quality of criticism is attainable. Yet, lurking close by is the possibility of methodological confusion when too many voices jostle for a hearing.

Though fundamental to all intellectual disciplines, including both the humanities and the natural sciences, hermeneutics deals with a constellation of concerns: interpretation, meaning, understanding, critique. Within the humanities discussions about hermeneutics have frequently revolved around the issues of the nature of a text, what it means to understand a text, and how understanding and interpretation are influenced by preunderstandings.

The philosophical-theological work in hermeneutics during the nineteenth century was initially concerned with the establishment of rules for proper translation and exegesis. As the discussion continued, however, its scope expanded to include the very primary concern of the conditions for the possibility of understanding. A salient result emerging from this development was the shedding of classical Cartesian and Kantian epistemology. In a

sense, hermeneutics usurped the place of traditional epistemology for some philosophers and theologians.

These thinkers pointed to two core problems with epistemology. First, they sensed that traditional epistemology reduced the entire cognitive process to a single model - empirical observation - borrowed from natural science. Second, and equally as important, they rejected the naive and ahistorical conception of the knower "as one who stands outside of that which is known"¹ In contrast to a rigid empiricism, hermeneutical philosophy has offered the dual process of explanation, suitable for the natural sciences, and understanding, appropriate for the humanities.

Significantly, hermeneutical thought has stressed the contextuality - historical and social - of the knowing subject and the influences of preunderstandings on the entire knowing process. That is to say in less technical terms, we carry to the knowing process indelible life experiences in the shape of biases from our particular time and place. And though they may be repressed from consciousness, these experiences cannot be expunged; nor can we detach ourselves from our unique moment in time.

In keeping with a historical sensitivity, some branches of hermeneutical thought view experience as the accumulated knowledge of a tradition. Similarly, truth is conceived in a horizontal way, as a process of reinterpretation of our predecessors' interpretation of their predecessors' interpretations and so on. A culture's meaningful creations are the reservoir for this experience. One

of culture's most durable and influential creations is the written text. Hermeneutics will frequently deal with questions of truth and knowledge by retrieving the past - in its numerous manifestations - for the present.

The philosophy of hermeneutics, as expounded by such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, is a theoretical foundation for theological hermeneutics of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs.² In particular, the pivotal work of Gadamer, as it has been adapted and applied by Ebeling, is noticeably congruent with the direction of Luther's thought. Ebeling has reminded us that Luther's reforming work was very much a linguistic innovation.³ In part from his own religious experience, Luther found new meanings or, at the very least, rediscovered old meanings for theological words and concepts. The reformer cared about words and the Word - the Word of God. His ongoing concern was to employ words in the service of the Word. "Languages are the sheaths in which the knife of the Spirit is contained," Luther asserted.⁴ He had in mind not only the biblical languages or the classical languages - the objects of scholarly study - but rather all languages.

Religious experiences and life in general, for Luther, are marked by a definite linguisticness. Here he parted company with the mystics who held to the ineffable nature of their experiences. When we come into contact with and are grasped by the Word, we discover something of the nature and very being of God. So too, Luther maintained, when we use and construct words verbally

or in a written format we disclose something of our innermost selves. Speaking of writers he remarked, "three fingers do everything, but the whole body and soul take part in the work."⁵ Significantly, philosophical hermeneutics and its theological interpreters echo these sentiments of Luther, albeit in a more intricate fashion.

Hans-Georg Gadamer sees language as the medium through which understanding takes place. He insists that understanding is language bound. But language is not static for it is continuously altered by the discoveries it facilitates. Perhaps more than any other thinker in the area of hermeneutics, Gadamer expresses an abiding concern - that moves beyond method - for the elucidation of the conditions in which understanding takes place. In fact an elongated discussion of method is quite harmful to hermeneutical philosophy, he believes, since it is usually directed by objectivist empirical principles. A fixation with method tends to obscure and impede the natural human capacity for understanding. To liberate this natural capacity by clarifying its nature and conditions is Gadamer's task.

Gadamer rejects the notion of making the original intention of the author the primary aim of interpreting a work. Drawing from aesthetics and the interpretation of art, he calls attention to the creation of an ever expanding tradition of meaning as a work develops new meanings in new contexts. The meaning one achieves is, therefore, connected, if it is authentic, with the meanings created in the work's history of interpretations. Significantly, though,

an interpreter cannot lay claim to the perfect truth he or she has seen and experienced - no absolute progress, no final exhaustion!

Gadamer claims that the rich fecundity of a work is only realized when an interpreter brings questions to it - questions inevitably reflecting the interpreter's preunderstandings (prejudices, biases). These questions assist in breaking new ground with a work; in turn, the work reshapes the preunderstandings of the interpreter. A work continuously takes on new meanings as it is examined from various points of view. Thus, ongoing interpretation reveals an abundance of meaning in a work which could not have been apparent at the time of composition. The meanings of a work are never depleted; its puissant capacity to modify the interpreter never wanes.

Importantly, Gadamer insists that each generation must come up with interpretations appropriate for its time and yet faithful to the work. The issuing of a shared meaning arises through what he terms "a fusion of horizons." It is a dialectical endeavour whereby the perspective of a work and the perspectives of the interpreter are synthesized. By this Gadamer means the process of finding common bridges between a text and the interpreter without denying the context of either one. This is the essence of the hermeneutical task, "that something distant has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now."⁶

All acts of interpretation and understanding are bound within a polarity of familiarity and strangeness. The decisive hermeneutical step is for the

interpreter to acknowledge both poles, in order to bring to light the covert preunderstandings that redact that which is to be understood. However, presuppositionless understanding is not the aim. We need to discard a detrimental view of preunderstandings (prejudices, biases) originating from the Enlightenment. Generally, the Enlightenment regarded interpretation, in its most valuable form, as freedom from all prejudices. This was a myopic attempt on the part of Enlightenment thinkers, for in fact it really only blinded them to the preunderstandings they retained. In an ironic tone Gadamer points out that "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself."⁷

Instead of eliminating preunderstandings, Gadamer suggests they should be brought to light and given free reign in order to be tested during the process of interpretation. The experience of being "pulled up short" by the text - and not any particular method - places in relief the perspective of the text and the preunderstandings of the interpreter.⁸ This experience also involves a genuine openness to the claims of the text. Gadamer persuasively argues that a fundamental ingredient of interpretation is to let a text or work interpret us before we interpret it. He remarks: "the nature of the hermeneutic experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true."⁹

Gadamer's conclusions have obvious entailments for Protestant and Catholic theologians and for the study of religion in general. His work raises questions concerning the nature of sacred texts and promotes dialogue between Protestants and Catholics about the relationship of scriptures and tradition. Some Catholic writers have found Gadamer's rehabilitation of tradition encouraging, while Protestant theologians of the New Hermeneutic school (Ebeling and Fuchs) have enthusiastically pointed to lines of congruence between philosophical hermeneutics and Reformation thought. The theology of the Word of God, originating from the New Hermeneutic movement, could be construed as a hybrid of philosophical hermeneutics and Lutheran themes.¹⁰

The New Hermeneutic theologians claim that reality is manifested as word. The word is a dynamic, recurring event. For these theologians the Word of God comes by way of the human word despite the latter's limitations, its unpredictability and mutability. The Word of God is seen and heard as both judging and promising. It calls into question limited human perspectives and preunderstandings, while pointing to the potential for truly authentic understanding.

The Word of God does not transfer an exact body of knowledge with a precise table of contents and index. Hermeneutical theology maintains that the Word of God is not synonymous with a particular text - however sacred it may be taken to be - or with a particular event - however foundational it may seem.

The Word of God lives because it continues to happen in multifarious contexts, yet is never completely exhausted, limited, or dulled by those contexts. The vitality of the Word of God is ensured by the tension that it is both dependent yet self-sustaining.

The formation of the canon of scripture is a significant event in church history. Equally important is the history of its interpretation, since, as Ebeling has stated on numerous occasions, church history itself is really nothing other than the history of the interpretation of scripture.¹¹

The Christian scripture is pivotal in the history of the transmission of the Word of God. But it is not the apex of this process, though it can be decisive when an existential relationship is established with it. The relationship assumes that the Word of God, as presented in scripture, has been set in terms which are consequential for the horizon of the era. Scripture is not the Word of God in and of itself; rather, it is only the Word of God as proclaimed and interpreted scripture.¹²

Many of the themes espoused by the New Hermeneutic movement have deep roots in the soil of Luther's thought. The work of a theologian like Ebeling is living proof of Gadamer's fusion of horizons. But why is Luther's thought such a wealthy source for hermeneutical theology? According to both Gadamer and Ebeling, a decisive hermeneutical realignment occurred during the Reformation period. But what caused this reorganization, this hermeneutical shift? It was a shift that shared common elements with its cousin,

Renaissance humanism, and its predecessor, the medieval Catholic tradition. Gadamer, in part, examines the issue in terms of historical alienation. He explains it this way:

The hermeneutical problem clearly does not arise, for instance, with the Renaissance humanists, who rediscovered classical antiquity and tried to be the successors of the ancient authors, imitating them, indeed, openly competing with them rather than merely understanding them. The hermeneutical problem only emerges clearly when there is no powerful tradition present to absorb one's attitude into itself and when one is aware of confronting an alien tradition to which he has never belonged or he no longer unquestioningly accepts.¹³

What Gadamer describes could easily apply to the situation of the sixteenth century Reformation.

Luther was continuously involved in exegesis and proclamation. Thus, the reformer nurtured a more sympathetic and compelling hermeneutic to express his religious insights when he found the available traditions decomposing and deficient. Luther's efforts foreshadowed future hermeneutical realignments in western history.

Notes

1. Randy L. Maddox, "Contemporary Hermeneutic Philosophy and Theological Studies," *Religious Studies*, 21 (1985) :517.
2. See Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*, (London, 1980).
3. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction To His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson, (Philadelphia, 1970), p. 13.
4. Cited by Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction To His Thought*, p. 43.
5. Cited by Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction To His Thought*, p. 30.
6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge, (Los Angeles, 1976) p. 23.
7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming, (New York, 1975), p. 239.
8. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 237.
9. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 9.
10. Avery Dulles, "Hermeneutical Theology," *Communio*, 6 (1979) :20.
11. See Gerhard Ebeling, *The Problem of Historicity*, trans. Grover Foley, (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 3-33.
12. Ebeling, *The Problem of Historicity*, p. 15.
13. Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, pp. 45 - 46.

Chapter 3. Hermeneutics and Luther's Theology

Martin Luther's understanding of the nature and function of scripture and his hermeneutical principles should be investigated within the context of his theology. Luther was not a systematic theologian in the traditional sense; however, several significant themes appear continuously throughout his work - in the early, middle, and later Luther - and two of them are particularly germane to our study: his theology of accommodation and his theology of the Word.¹

3.1 Luther's Theology of Accommodation

Essentially, Luther's theology of accommodation addresses the issue of the method of God's revelation to humankind. He advanced an understanding of revelation that can be described as God's accommodation to humankind's ontological, moral, and epistemological condition in a world indelibly blighted by sin.² By doing so, he tried to answer the question of how finite humanity might establish a relationship with an infinite God.

A basic assumption in Luther's theology is the seemingly unbridgeable chasm existing between God and humanity. Human beings, Luther contended, cannot approach God ontologically, morally, or epistemologically. That being the case, God must come to humankind in a fashion suited to the human condition. This act of adaptation or condescension on God's part permits women and men to establish a relationship with the Deity that surmounts the ontological, moral, and epistemological gaps.

The reformer's theology of accommodation is concerned with appearance and reality in the revelation of God to humankind. It is a perplexing issue because Luther thought of revelation in terms of God appearing in ways and forms that would seem to overwhelmingly contradict a divine presence. Yet, God allows for the human condition and reveals himself in such a way that humankind can discern the reality of the divine behind the contradictory manifestation. On the surface, these various manifestations seem to have little in common with the reality of God. Nevertheless, Luther maintained the presence of God in these appearances which he designated as signs, images, or more frequently as God's garments or masks (*larvae*).³ As a result, God has bridged the ontological, moral, and epistemological chasms between the finite and the infinite.

The first chasm or gap dividing the Deity from humankind is of an ontological nature. God completely transcends not only men and women and their mundane world, but the whole universe as well. Luther variously referred

to God's transcendence as "the hidden God," "the unrevealed God," "the unclothed God," or "the naked Deity."⁴ In twentieth century theological parlance, Paul Tillich's concept of "the God beyond God" conveys Luther's thought quite well.⁵

The reformer also postulated a kind of ontological dualism that reverberated throughout his entire theology. Continuously, Luther argued that a definite distinction must be maintained between God in his divine essence and God clothed in the flesh of Jesus Christ, in the written Word, and in other numerous ways in which he chooses to be revealed. In its simplest terms, Luther suggested that it is the distinction between "God as preached, revealed, offered and worshipped," on the one hand; and on the other, "about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshipped."⁶

In what he considered to be one of his best pieces of theological writing, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), Luther warned his readers not to speculate about and seek after the naked Deity. "God must be left to himself in his own majesty," advised Luther, "for in this regard we have nothing to do with him, nor has he willed that we should have anything to do with him."⁷ In a typically curt tone, Luther contended that "to the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours."⁸

Men and women as fallen creatures tainted by sin can have no affiliation with a Deity who so utterly transcends the created order. Transcendence, for Luther, meant that God was not subject to the constrictions and parameters of

time and space. Quite clearly the transcendence of God implies that women and men in their creaturely existences are unable to comprehend a Being beyond the scope of time and who existed before the world's creation. Indeed, the Deity's ontological status of transcendence is a significant factor in humankind's epistemological limitations fostering a hermeneutical frustration. In his lectures on the first chapter of Genesis, Luther concluded: "...that God was incomprehensible in his essential rest, before the creation of the world, but that now after the creation, he is within, without, and above all creatures, that he is still incomprehensible. Nothing else can be said, because our mind cannot grasp what lies outside time."⁹

Along with the ontological aperture between God and humankind, Luther pointed to a moral fissure in the relationship. The doctrine of original sin is an integral part of his anthropological perspective. Human beings, since the fall of Adam, possess a misshapen nature. They are fundamentally flawed in all parts of their being. Due to the fall of Adam, a once harmonious relationship with the Deity has been irreparably ruptured.

Luther understood the Genesis narrative of Adam's fall to mean that men and women in all areas of their being - physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual - have moved away from God. And even those human characteristics and actions appearing to be beneficial and good have not escaped the pervasive disfiguring of sin. Luther paints a bleak portrait of the human condition after the fall: "...now only sin, wrath, disfavour, deception are to be found in us.

Our entire activity, our wisdom, all our thoughts and desires in matters pertaining to God are not sincere and true but sheer falsehood, deception, and sham."¹⁰ The human state is such that it deserves nothing but God's condemnation.

Finally, Luther posited an unnegotiable epistemological chasm between God and humankind. He suggested that humans are unable to comprehend or even fathom God's thoughts. Commenting on St. John's Gospel, Luther described the Logos, the Word, or the second person of the Trinity, in terms of a conversation within the Godhead. This divine conversation is a significant aspect of the hidden God or naked Deity. Compared with the trivial locutions of humankind, this dialogue is as "complete and excellent and perfect as God himself."¹¹ It is an invisible and incomprehensible conversation that existed before creation and was the means by which all creatures were brought into existence.

Although human beings are unable to apprehend the conversation within the Godhead, Luther could claim that in a state of innocence before the fall, Adam had a perfect knowledge of God and nature appropriate to being created in God's image. Since the fall, however, humankind's knowledge of both God and nature has been detrimentally impaired. The original conditions have been lost and the intellect has been so darkened "that we no longer know God or perceive the works of God."¹² Humankind's knowledge of the natural world was corrupted too, as Luther even speculated that scientific knowledge had

declined markedly since Adam's fall. He portrayed the first couple as physically and intellectually superior beings - they were perfect theologians and philosophers who had a consummate knowledge of, among other things, zoology and astronomy.¹³

Adjacent to Adam's fall was the event of the flood during the era of Noah. The flood, suggested Luther, exacerbated the downward spiral of humankind's knowledge of nature and even nature itself. "Not only our flesh is disfigured by the leprosy of sin," he lamented, "but everything we use in this life has become corrupt...."¹⁴ The degradation was total and continuous!

The gulf between a holy God and a corrupt humankind abrogated any approach from the side of the finite. For Luther, this condition necessarily pointed to the need for some form of revelatory event, some act of accommodation on the part of God. Only an initiative from the infinite to the finite could establish the kind of durable rapprochement necessary to bridge the ontological, moral, and epistemological chasms.

Luther found in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament the various means by which God had bridged the chasms by adapting to the conditions of corrupted humanity and the limitations of time and space. The coverings, garments, masks, through which the Deity chose to reveal his will, were from the very stuff of nature and history.

The masks of God (*larvae Dei*) is significant for Luther's understanding of scripture and is a potent term in his theological vocabulary. By it he means

any of the external forms - the universe, nature, events in history, other persons, and even Christ and scripture - enabling God to enact his will.

One of the repeatedly used masks of God is the realm of creation or nature. Created things, to Luther's mind, easily served as signs indicating the presence of God. In his first Lectures on the Psalms (1513-1515), he suggested that all creatures were a parable full of "mystical instruction." "Every creature of God," he said, "is a word of God."¹⁵ Luther encouraged his students to "look upon all creature as utterances of God."¹⁶ In Luther's epistemology, all things from the natural order have the potential to become a Word of God and a mask for God. However, the created thing is only a sign and not the reality. Luther noted that throughout history, and particularly in his own day, many misguided devotees were fixated on the created thing instead of the reality signified by it. God alone is the reality and the invisible things of God are understood from his signs or masks. Created things, as signs pointing to God's presence, are one of the means of negotiating the aperture between the finite and the infinite.

Luther pointed to some of the ways that God used nature as a mask in the Hebrew Bible. After the fall of Adam, God appeared in a gentle breeze. Later, in the Tabernacle and in the desert God employed cloud and fire. Luther noted that Moses referred to these items as "the face of God" through which God manifested himself.¹⁷ The reason for the faces, presumed Luther, was that they were made necessary by the badly misshapen condition of human

nature. Because of sin, human beings could not recognize or comprehend the divine nature without a covering.

Luther was careful to highlight the underlying dualism between God and his various masks in creation. When the Deity and the covering are not properly distinguished, one ends up with a delusory knowledge of God. The result is idolatry.

Luther also acknowledged that God frequently used human activity in history as a mask. Apart from faith, humankind sees only the works of men and woman, nations and rulers in history. But faith discerns the power of God doing wonders beneath human affairs.

In the Hebrew Bible God took on many masks. God is sometimes reported to have appeared in the form of an angel or a man. Luther held this as a powerful example of the Deity adapting to meet the spiritual condition of humankind. Luther interpreted the account of Jacob wrestling with an angel as an appearance of Christ. He was convinced this was a certain testimony that at some point in time God would dwell with us in human flesh.

The Word of God in its various forms is yet another sign, covering, or mask of God in the Hebrew Bible. Despite the simplicity of the words and the stories of the Hebrew Bible, Luther understood them as the words, works, judgements, deeds, majesty, power and wisdom of God. In a reverential tone, he claimed that these words were the very "swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ lies..."¹⁸ The purpose of these ingenuous words is to make fools

of all the wise in order to be accessible to the small and simple. In God's movement of accommodation in the scriptures, any human being may speak the Word of God. In this way the Deity stoops to speak and deal with humankind in a blatantly mortal fashion.

Significantly, Luther placed the scriptures in the category of masks, coverings, or signs of God. God speaks, Luther asserted in his lectures on Genesis, "as man speaks with man."¹⁹ The scriptures are an eminent form of accommodation to the corrupt condition of humanity. Nevertheless, the reformer, as we will notice in the study of his hermeneutical method, did not shy away from apparent contradictions and historical inaccuracies in the text of scripture. He did in fact suggest that these textual conundrums further establish God's willingness to accommodate his Word to the conditions of fallible humanity.

In keeping with his understanding of the majesty of the hidden God, Luther believed that many things were not recorded in scripture. He noticed that Moses wrote only about the creation of visible things in order to keep humankind from frivolous speculation: "Our Lord God did well to leave many things unwritten. Besides, we would have belittled what we now have and sought after the things which are higher."²⁰

As we will explore later, Luther's concept of the Word of God is a general term for the multifarious manifestations of the Deity. In the New Testament Jesus Christ is the personal and incarnate Word. The incarnation,

the flesh, or humanity of Jesus is a mask or cover of God and the sign of his presence in the world. Luther juxtaposed the hidden and unrevealed God and Jesus Christ, in the simplicity of human flesh, as the revealed God. The incarnation is the supreme act of accommodation to the human condition. Luther almost goes so far as to suggest that the incarnation is a decoy to prevent humankind from deliberating on the hidden God. Instead, humankind is able to see the gentleness of God, the forgiveness of sin, and every mercy in the flesh and humanity of Jesus Christ. We are to flee from any speculation about the secret will of the naked God, admonishes Luther, "and grasp by faith the God clothed in Christ."²¹

Luther contrasted the majesty of God with both God masked in the flesh of Jesus Christ and God clothed in the Word. The Word of God is an example of the condescension and adaptation of the Deity, because the form of spoken and written words by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and the apostles in the New Testament are used by God. Significantly, Luther made no distinction among the various manifestations of the Word of God - sacramental, written, spoken - because they are all veils or masks by which the revealed God is presented to the condition of the world. These various masks are the face of God, meaning that God is present and appears to humankind. Though the masks are in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Luther judged those in the New Testament to be qualitatively superior to those in the Hebrew

Bible. Scripture in general, as the inscribed Word, is simply one of many masks in the divine repertoire.

Luther's theology of accommodation is a theology of masks and signs, veils and covers, leading to the knowledge of God appropriate to the flagitious human condition. These masks bridge the chasms between the finite and the infinite, and apart from them God remains unapproachable.

3.2 Luther's Theology of the Word

Luther's theology is a theology of the Word. Too often, however, the Word has been used as a synonym for scripture. In Luther's mind the two were closely related but by no means identical, for the Word is a much more embracing and dynamic concept that cannot be fixed to a static text.

Luther loved words and he loved to use them! He knew and appreciated the power of the printed word. The invention of the printing press was a supreme act of grace, he thought, by which the gospel could be furthered. The Protestant Reformation's command of the written and printed word radically altered the intellectual geography of Europe.²² Protestant reformers had tremendous respect for the word in the mundane sense; Luther had even more appreciation for the Word in the fully theological sense. While Luther held a lofty view of scripture - as his principal of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) would indicate - he maintained an even higher view of the Word.

Luther began to clarify and expound his theology of the Word during his forced seclusion in the Wartburg Castle (April 1521 - March 1522). These were heady and controversial days for the Reformation. During this period, and throughout his public career, Luther could be an atrabilious reformer when he surveyed a frequently tumultuous chain of events caused by those he felt were bootlegging his initiative. When Luther heard of the religious and civil unrest in Wittenberg, he returned to his university town preaching the dynamic power of the Word in order to check this eruption of religious legalism.

The Word never forces the extremes of coercion and violence in the reform of religion. Luther made the point this way: "No one should be dragged away from it (the mass) by the hair: for it should be left to God, and his Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work and interference."²³ Using force to accomplish dramatic change, as was happening in Wittenberg during Luther's absence, does not establish lasting change. Luther taught that human initiatives reach people's ears only, while the Word alone can produce a change in their inner beings: "And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force any one to have faith. That is God's work alone, who caused faith to live in the heart. Therefore we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it."²⁴ To realize true reform, the Word must be proclaimed so that the hearts of listeners are gradually won.

The dynamic character of the Word must be trusted to transform the habits, customs, and theology of an errant church, insisted Luther. During a

sermon he confided to his listeners: "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."²⁵

The dynamic power of the Word is a result of being an instrument of the Spirit. The association between the Word and the Spirit is to such a degree that the two are completely co-dependent. There are no authentic manifestations or operations of the Spirit without or outside of the Word. Against all immediate revelations of the Spirit, Luther placed Scripture, the written Word. But it must have the Spirit to be truly effective, for the text without the Spirit is prosaic and inanimate. It is nothing better than any other human word.

Luther believed that God must speak to the heart when the ears receive the Word; if not, the Word remains an external thing. He discussed the relationship in terms of the inner Word and the outward Word. For the outward Word, as scripture, is impuissant and unconvincing. It has far less value than the inner Word. Nevertheless, it is still a divine instrument. The outward Word always comes first. Luther does not hesitate to declare that "the Word comes first, and with the Word the Spirit breathes upon my heart so that I believe."²⁶

Luther is able to understand scripture, the outward or external Word, as the Word of God, because it speaks of Christ throughout. The christological

component, as we will investigate later, is a significant part of Luther's hermeneutical approach. Failing to be cognizant of scripture's testimony to Christ is to deal only with externals, the covering, the shell, and not the very heart and core of the matter. Luther conceded that scripture, because it is an accommodation to humankind, contains opaque portions, frequent circumlocutions, and many expanded accounts. However, standing clearly above such deficiencies is Christ as the central message of scripture. To Luther's way of thinking, the expanded, external Word with all its imperfections is law; on the other hand, the abridged, perfect, inner Word is gospel - as the promises of Christ available to the devotee.

Luther pursued the thought that just as Christ was in the vessel of Jesus' humanity, so too, through the Spirit's prodding, Christ is in the external Word. Thus, scripture becomes a kind of spiritual body for Christ and is the medium through which he encounters the devotee. Following a Johannine perspective, Luther thought of the incarnation in terms of the Word spoken into the world. The outward Word allows humankind to encounter the humanity of Christ. Importantly, Christ cannot be preached without the outward Word. Without it, Christ is nothing but a transcendent abstraction. The gospel, therefore, as the good news, as the promises of Christ, has a sacramental dimension, the visible, tangible written Word.

Luther's thoughts are equally applicable to the sacraments of the eucharist and baptism. Without the Word, the water, the bread and the wine

are simply physical objects. To be truly efficacious the elements must be "surrounded by the Word." Because the Word is the main event in the sacramental process, Luther could easily devalue the physical elements: "The baptism itself is of no concern to me. Besides, the Word is the principle part of baptism. If in an emergency there's no water at hand, it doesn't matter whether water or beer is used."²⁷ Though Luther never openly speculated about it, the same argument was applicable to the elements of the eucharist, leading to all sorts of culinary possibilities as long as they were "surrounded by the Word."

When Luther stresses that the Word is the main feature of any sacrament, he underscores the Word's critical function. The Word negates any garish display of pomp and ceremony that diverts attention away from the promises of Christ offered by the sacrament. Whether in preaching or in the sacraments, the outward or external Word remains the point of contact for faith.

Finally, in order to clarify Luther's understanding of scripture, a distinction between the spoken and the written Word must be attempted. Time and time again in his various roles as preacher, reformer, teacher, Luther highlights the eminence of the spoken Word. He takes Christ as his model, since Christ spoke all the time, but wrote nothing; nor did he command others to write, but sent out preachers instead. And the disciples too, observes Luther, preached more often than they wrote. The New Testament message

was not something written out, scripted, but rather it was passed on as an oral Word. "It is the way of the Gospel and the New Testament," exclaims Luther, "that it is to be preached and discussed orally with a living voice."²⁸ According to Finnish scholar Lennart Pinomaa, Luther's stress on the oral foundation of the New Testament anticipates the insights of twentieth century form critics.²⁹ Form criticism works on the assumption, though in a more sophisticated fashion than Luther, that individual sermon texts, oral traditions, and liturgical devices are the original components of the gospels.

The writing of books does not seem to fit the message of the New Testament, Luther candidly observed. He theorized that the cause of the gospel might have been better served by a continuous succession of "good, learned, spiritual, and industrious teachers, who orally communicated its spirit."³⁰ For Luther, the basic distinction between the law and the gospel is the distinction between words in books and living sounds. The alignment of law and writings on one side, and the gospel and oral preaching on the other, is not completely antagonistic. The function of the spoken, preached Word is to interpret and elucidate the gospel in the written Word.

In a sermon intended for the First Sunday in Advent, Luther suggested that the gospel was promised in the Hebrew Bible, but it was not preached orally and publicly until Christ came and sent out his apostles. This transformed the gospel "from dead writing and pen-work to the living voice and mouth."³¹ And the church, too, must be "a mouth-house, not a pen-house,

for since Christ's advent that Gospel is preached orally which before was hidden in books."³²

Due to the oral/aural nature of the gospel, all body organs, except the ears, have become obsolete in the soteriological process: "...for in the new law all those countless burdens of the ceremonies, that is, the dangers of sins have been taken away. God no longer requires the feet or the hands or any other member; He requires only the ears."³³ Luther's slogan was *fides ex auditer* (faith out of hearing), for the only work by which one is a Christian is the hearing of the Word of God.

Both the written Word and the oral Word speak about Christ. The written Word as law speaks in the form of command. The oral Word as gospel speaks in the form of promise and gift about the forgiveness of sins. Luther insists that God forgives sins through the oral proclamation of the gospel. Therefore, ears are the true organs of the Christian.

Since the oral proclamation of the Word was so important, Luther emphasized the high calling of the preacher. However, not only the role of the preacher was important; the actual physical architecture where the Word was proclaimed was equally decisive. In keeping with Luther's understanding of the Word, churches were to be functional, utilitarian vehicles in the soteriological process. Many fine and impressive looking churches could be found in every town and city, but few of them were truly conducive for listening to sermons, observed Luther. Instead, he recommended "...modest churches with low

arches are the best for preachers and for listeners, for the ultimate object of these buildings is not the bellowing and bawling of choristers, but the Word of God and its proclamation."³⁴ Undoubtedly, there was little need for ostentatious architecture as the church was to serve the Word.

Finally, the question must be addressed as to why a written gospel exists at all if the oral Word is so significant. Again, Luther points to God's willingness to accommodate the human condition. Ideally, only the orally proclaimed Word of the gospel should exist. Because of heretics, false teachers, and many errors, however, a documented gospel was necessary to keep the early church in the way of truth, lest all Christians eventually go astray. The New Testament writings were a preventative measure against all false doctrines.

The oral Word was an interpretation and elucidation of the written Word, in Luther's terms; on the other hand, the written Word was the standard and norm by which the proclamation could be judged. The oral Word must be based on the written Word. The two always work together in tandem. And, for the reformer, they were an effective antidote against those fanatics who claimed immediate revelation without the Word. The written Word of scripture and the oral Word together, emphasized Luther, are the means by which God works faith and gives his Spirit.

Luther is not concerned with positioning scripture, as God's Word, over against human interpretation, as the human word. Interpretation must

necessarily be done again and again by repeated listening to the Word. Luther's stress on the continuous listening dimension nullifies any one interpretation from being eternally normative and above scripture itself.

Scripture, as simply a written record, belongs to the past. It is letter and, therefore, law. It is not the Word of God. It is the Word of God when it is proclaimed in the present as an interpretation grounded in the written Word. Interpretation and proclamation are essential characteristics of the Word. Thus, to borrow the words of theologian and Reformation scholar Gerhard Ebeling: "scripture is therefore not the Word of God *per se* but as proclaimed and interpreted scripture."³⁵

When Luther's understanding of scripture and his hermeneutical principles are set within the context of his theology, a number of assumptions about the nature of scripture rise to the surface - evidence suggesting that the reformer was not a "biblicist" in the pejorative sense of the term.

Scripture, for Luther, was one of the ways - albeit a significant one - that the Deity has dealt with a seemingly unbridgeable chasm. Scripture, quite simply, is an accommodation to the distinctive conditions of the human situation. It is something addressed and suited to humanity. In this sense, Luther could claim that, though it speaks of the divine and is divine in origin, it is still a very human kind of work.

Yet scripture is also part of the Word of God. But it does not completely embrace all that is contained by that term. Luther's theology possesses many

alternating currents. Perhaps the most trenchant is the unresolved tension in his understanding of the Word of God: the evangelical content of scripture is the measure of the Word of God; on the other hand, the Word can be that which is written.

Even in its scripted condition as a sacred text, the written Word possesses an effusive vocal presence. Luther almost took for granted that the text of scripture would be sung, chanted, read aloud, repeated, retold, memorized and woven into the fabric of every Christian life as an auditory fact.³⁶ This coalesces with his emphasis on the oral bearing of the Word of God. There is even something pervasively sensual in Luther's description of the Word. He encouraged his listeners to "hear it, sing it, read it, use it, and learn it."³⁷

Finally, in the context of the theology of the Word, Luther established three important rubrics for the use of scripture: scripture as the Word must be listened to; it must always be expounded and interpreted; it must always be applied.

The themes we have explored in this chapter will certainly resurface when we examine Luther's hermeneutics in detail.

Notes

1. In addition to the primary sources listed in the notes, I am indebted to the following secondary sources for this chapter: Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Shultz, (Philadelphia, 1966); Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction To His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson, (Philadelphia, 1970) and *The Problem of Historicity*, trans. Grover Foley, (Philadelphia, 1967); William A Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, (Cambridge, 1987); W. J. Hausmann, *An Analysis of Luther's View of the Accommodation of God in Revelation*, Ph. D. Dissertation (Drew University, 1978); Lennart Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther's Theology*, trans. Walter Kukkonen, (Philadelphia, 1963).
2. See Hausmann, pp. 3 - 11.
3. LW9:40-41.
4. LW33:139-140.
5. See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (Glasgow, 1952), pp. 180-183.
6. LW33:139.
7. LW33:139.
8. LW33:139.
9. LW1:11.
10. LW22:124-125.
11. LW22:10.
12. LW1:114.
13. See Hausmann pp. 8-9.
14. LW1:64.
15. LW11:39.
16. LW11:39.
17. LW1:11.
18. LW35:236.
19. LW4:61.
20. LW54:319.
21. LW33:144.

22. See Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*. (Oxford, 1988), pp. 11-13.
23. LW51:76
24. LW51:76
25. *LW51:78*
26. LW54:63.
27. LW54:394
28. Sermons I:44.
29. See Pinomaa, p. 106
30. Sermons I:43.
31. Sermons I:44.
32. Sermons I:44.
33. LW29:224.
34. LW54:272.
35. See Ebeling, *The Problem of Historicity*, p. 15.
36. See Graham, pp. 1-8, pp 141-154.
37. LW51:144.

Chapter 4. The Historical and Intellectual Background to Luther's Hermeneutics

Luther's hermeneutics were not formulated within an intellectual and social vacuum. His work stands firmly in the current of two important tributaries: late medieval religion and humanism. Luther's hermeneutical concerns must also be viewed in the context of the long - and frequently meandering - history of biblical interpretation. Chapter four will sketch these important antecedents.¹

4.1 Late Medieval Religion

A persistent trend in some studies of the background to the Reformation has been to describe the Late Middle Ages in terms of decay, disintegration and general decline. The two hundred years between the great religious and cultural synthesis of the thirteenth century, and the Protestant reform movements of the sixteenth, are frequently depicted as a wasteland. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, the title of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's classic

study of the period, reflects this perception.² However, more recent scholarship has argued quite convincingly just the opposite was the case. Bernd Moeller, in his pivotal article "Piety in Germany around 1500," suggests that the evidence points to an overwhelming growth in popular religion on the eve of the Reformation.³

Instead of decay, the period was one of challenge and change. There were obvious abuses in the institutional church, but there were just as many calls for reform. Indeed, there was an unprecedented growth in popular religious movements aimed at stopping the wounds of a hemorrhaging late medieval church. The formation of religious brotherhoods, pilgrimages, indulgences, enormous - not to mention bizarre - relic collections, the popularity of mystical literature, popular ascetic movements, and ambitious building programs were laity-based and resulted in an inflation period in popular religion. In the words of Lucien Febvre, it was an age with "an immense appetite for the divine."⁴

To a degree, this new religious vitality reflected a latent - and at times not so latent - anti-clericalism and anti-papalism. Luther's treatise *Appeal to the German Nobility* (1520) contains many of the common grievances. Luther, however, could be equally critical of both the institutional church and popular religion. He detected the latent paganism in many popular religious practices.

The surge in popular piety has also been interpreted as an attempt to come to grips with what some commentators have deemed "an age of

anxiety."⁵ To borrow the theological nomenclature of Paul Tillich, all three types of anxiety - death, guilt, and loss of meaning - seemed to have been sewn into the very fabric of the time.⁶ Luther's spiritual struggle and his devastating bouts of despair (*anfechtungen*) were a response to the anxiety of his age. While popular religion developed a feverish activism, Luther eventually promoted his own solution - justification by faith alone - to the problem of guilt and condemnation.

One of the striking ironies of the Late Middle Ages is that popular religion blossomed while the influence of the institutional church waned. To most of the faithful north of the Alps, a correlation existed between the purity of the Christian faith and the distance to Rome - Christianity deteriorated as proximity to Rome increased. The negative image of the official church held by most Germans was further exacerbated by two significant trends in late medieval Catholicism. These two trends, in turn, allowed the Reformation to establish a foothold within the mainstream.⁷

The first trend was the accelerated growth of doctrinal pluralism. One of the most prominent characteristics of medieval religious thought is the rise of schools of theology. By the Late Middle Ages a number of clearly defined schools of theology had been established. Thomism, Scotism and Nominalism were three of the most prominent. The growth of theological schools was assisted by the founding, expansion, and increasing influence of European

universities. As many as nine different theological schools were in existence by the early sixteenth century.⁸

Interestingly, while Luther never missed an opportunity to deliver a sharp, critical barb at the theological schools and the schoolmen, i.e., scholastic theology and scholastic theologians, he always considered himself a Nominalist - the tradition in which he was trained at the University of Erfurt. As well, the reform movement, at least in its embryonic stage, was very much a university program directed toward the improvement of the curriculum. Luther's initial protest drew its impetus and its supporters from the faculty and students of the University of Wittenberg. In this sense, the Reformation was very much enmeshed in the educational life of the Late Middle Ages.

A side-effect from the growth of theological schools and the expansion of universities was the inevitable intellectual diversification. Each of the schools often maintained divergent positions on a number of essential theological issues, e.g., justification. A wide range of opinions existed on important questions related to personal faith and ecclesiastical affairs. The fact that the Catholic Church refused or was unable to clearly define what was "true doctrine" further confused matters.

The Late Middle Ages was marked by a wide and lengthy spectrum of theological thought. Within this context, many of the early reformers maintained positions that were hardly revolutionary. The demarcation between orthodox and heterodox was so blurred that many of the ideas held by the

reformers drew little official attention. Theological diversity was an important intellectual pre-condition to the Reformation. In the ambience of pluralism, Luther and other reformers could explore and nurture their ideas unscathed by official sanctions. When the ecclesiastical bureaucracy did act it was too late!

The second important trend in the late medieval period was the deterioration of authority. Some commentators speak of this period in terms of a growing crisis in authority.⁹ In an era of intense theological debate and speculation a method for enforcing orthodoxy was imperative. Two historical developments debilitated the papacy and the church from regulating orthodoxy and checking divergent teachings. The authority of the papacy never fully recovered from the Great Schism (1378 -1417), when as many as three claimants had designs on the pope's scepter. The authority of the church was further arrested with the failure of conciliarism - an attempt to reform the church from within through a series of general church councils. Compounding the situation was the rapidly increasing power of secular rulers who ignored the traditional authority of the papacy and were apathetic to its problems. Those secular rulers who embraced the Reformation openly disregarded the authority of the papacy. A convincing case could be made that the most valuable ally of Luther's reform was his secular ruler, Frederick the Wise. The twofold crisis of authority regarding orthodox doctrine and the inability to enforce it contributed greatly to the Reformation.

Finally, something must be said concerning a misleading assumption about the late medieval period. There is a story - perhaps apocryphal - that when Luther entered the Erfurt monastery, he was initially forbidden from reading scripture and only later did he find a chained bible in its library.¹⁰ The bible was chained no doubt, to prevent it from being misplaced or stolen. However, the image of a chained bible was subsequently marketed with dazzling flair by Protestant propagandists. It was for them a loaded symbol of the Catholic Church's attitude toward scripture - utter neglect and concealment. Nothing is probably further from the truth. We know the first thing Luther received when he entered the monastery was a red leather bound bible and that he had plenty of time for personal bible study within the rigorous monastic schedule.¹¹

The bible permeated the life and thought of the medieval world. "The bible was the most studied book of the Middle Ages," is the judgement of one respected scholar.¹² Teachers in the Middle Ages regarded the bible as the most important school book and bible study represented the highest branch of learning. The importance of scripture was not taken lightly, nor was the text of scripture itself. The example of a University of Leipzig professor was typical of the medieval attitude; he spent twenty-four years lecturing on Isaiah and reached only chapter nine!¹³

Importantly, Luther oriented his hermeneutics toward a criticism of the popular religious culture, church doctrine, and ecclesiastical leaders who

exploited popular religious practices for their own ends. He did this, though, within the scripture-soaked environment of the Late Middle Ages.

4.2 Humanism

The second important antecedent in the cultural and intellectual context of Luther's hermeneutics is humanism. Historically, humanism was an outgrowth of the Italian Renaissance and a movement of reform originating and dominated by the intellectual elite of Europe. Luther took an expedient approach to humanism. He quite eagerly purchased and used the technical tools and insights developed by the movement, but he did not buy into its worldview. His comments could be just as vituperative about the humanists as they were with the official custodians of Rome.

Similar to the malleable condition of popular religion and official doctrine in the Late Middle Ages, humanism, too, is a problematic study because it was a fluid and wide ranging movement. Scholars have proposed a number of definitions. Humanism has been viewed as a movement concerned with classical scholarship and philosophy, and it has been associated with a new philosophy of the Renaissance. Both interpretations have merit, but they do not paint a complete picture.

Acknowledging the difficulty in generalizing about a multi-faceted movement, Paul Oskar Kristeller portrays humanism primarily as a cultural and

educational concern that sought to promote eloquence in its many manifestations.¹⁴ Kristeller agrees that matters of theology, morality, philosophy, and politics were of secondary importance. In order to foster eloquence, classical antiquity was mined for examples of the very best in architecture and art, writing and rhetoric. According to Kristeller, method took priority over substance. This is to say, humanism was more interested in how ideas were obtained and expressed instead of the actual substance of the ideas. This led to a wide diversity of ideas within the movement. Both the profane and the Christian could lay claim to the title of humanist.

Associated with this concern for written and spoken eloquence was what Bernd Moeller has described as "a gradual discovery of a new feeling for the world and for life, a fresh enthusiasm for the power and freedom of man; and it included a joyous readiness to learn about and to reshape earthly conditions."¹⁵ Moeller goes on to suggest that two tendencies within the humanist movement of the early sixteenth century can be distinguished. One group consisted of those who were primarily interested in literary scholarship and in the study of antiquity and languages. These humanists cultivated quiet detachment from the world in the service of scholarship, and a simpler form of religion free from superstition. Erasmus and Mutianus Rufus were humanists of this persuasion. Secondly, Moeller notes a more robust tendency within humanism, especially, after 1510, aimed at applying the insights of classical studies to contemporary events and conditions. It was marked by a vigorous

interest in law, medicine, natural history, and politics. There was a strong desire to master the world, a tendency not found in the earlier humanists.

Scholars have also pointed to Northern humanism or German humanism as a somewhat separate movement.¹⁶ Northern humanism was far more religiously oriented than its fifteenth century Italian ancestor. Christian and classical motifs were used by the Northern humanists as opposed to the more secular orientation of the Italian movement.

An integral component of the humanist spirit was contained in the slogan *ad fontes* (to the sources). It was both a rallying cry for reform against the obscurity of medieval scholasticism and a declaration of the humanist method.

It is here that Luther truly benefited from humanism. *Ad fontes* represented the desire to expurgate the sacred texts - the bible and the writings of the early church fathers - from the many layers of commentaries, interpretations, and opinions in order to engage directly with them. To uncover the insights and experiences of their authors, the ancient writings were to be studied in their original languages. The humanist concern with the "text" of scripture reflected the conviction that, through literary and historical analysis, scripture may provide moral and doctrinal insights of importance to the specific historical situation of the interpreter. The humanist interest in ancient texts, languages, and historical and literary criticism supplied the early foundation for modern historical criticism.¹⁷ One of the important results of the humanist concern with classical sources was the radical critique of ecclesiastical

institutions and theology. Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457), on the basis of literary analysis, exposed *The Donation of Constantine* as a ninth century forgery. The document had been used to support the papal claim of temporal authority. Later, Valla challenged the traditional New Testament rendering of the Greek word *metanoia* as "do penance." "Repentance," he claimed, is what the word really means.¹⁸ This interpretation was employed by Erasmus in his 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament. In turn, Luther, on the basis of Erasmus' work, used this as scriptural evidence against indulgences. Luther begins his famous *Ninety-five Theses* with these words: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, Repent (Matt 4,17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."¹⁹

The relationship between the Reformation and humanism and the extent to which Luther was influenced by it, are much debated issues. Despite obvious connections between the two historical movements, Alister McGrath has highlighted numerous tensions between humanism and the Reformation - particularly its Luther - Wittenberg manifestation.²⁰

The humanists and the reformers were both hostile to medieval scholasticism. The humanists rejected the scholastic writings because of their unintelligibility and awkward expression. Luther and other reformers attacked scholasticism because it simply represented bad theology. Luther had no trouble understanding scholastic theology. The humanists criticized its style and relevance, while Luther criticized its theology and doctrine.

Secondly, the humanists and the reformers diverged in their attitude towards scripture. Both agreed that scripture reported the nascent expression of Christian belief and practice. For the humanists, scripture's authority rested primarily on its antiquity, simplicity, and eloquence. For Luther, on the other hand, scripture's authority was grounded in his concept of the Word of God. Scripture clearly provided the commands and promises of God. Similarly, the humanists evaluated the patristic writers on the basis of antiquity and eloquence, while Luther used faithfulness to the New Testament as the primary criterion. In this way Luther esteemed Augustine over someone like Jerome or Origen. These tensions have led McGrath to conclude that Luther's reforming theology owes very little to humanism.²¹

However, it must be stressed again that Luther and other reformers benefited greatly from the tools of humanism: Greek and Hebrew grammars, new editions of Augustine and the works of other patristic writers, a new Greek text of the New Testament. Significantly, the reformers coopted, for their own theological purpose, the humanist method of returning directly to the original text and language of the New Testament. Luther regarded the fundamental advances in sacred philology as highly providential, in so far as the Deity had now established a way for the purification and reform of doctrine. Through immediate and unhindered access to the original text, Luther believed the theologian could now wrestle directly with the Word of God.

Finally, the Reformation is indebted to humanism for its early and spirited propagation. The humanists were the ones, for the most part, who initially marketed Luther's ideas and espoused his cause, even though their support may have been based on a theological misunderstanding. They were the first to accept Luther and he would find many of his lasting supporters among young humanists - most notably Philip Melancthon. Had Luther appeared fifty years earlier with his demands for the reform of the life and teaching of the church, he would have found few supporters since he would not have had the preparation provided by the humanists.²²

By 1525, however, the Reformation had taken on a life of its own; the Reformation and the humanist movement became clearly distinguishable. Erasmus and other humanists led written attacks against Luther for what they considered to be major theological flaws and for the excesses of the reform particularly during the debacle of the Peasants' Revolt. Many humanists incorrectly blamed Luther for infusing the lowest class with theological ideas that were potentially explosive. But the chief stumbling block was the reformer's denial of freedom of the will and his decisively negative anthropology. In this context, Erasmus composed his optimistic *Diatribes*, while Luther replied with what he considered the crown of his writings, *On the Bondage of the Will*.²³

Even though sharp divergences existed between the humanist movement and the Reformation, the candid conclusion of Bernd Moeller is probably close

to the mark: "No humanism, no Reformation."²⁴ For Luther, the humanist movement was decisive in that he exploited its products to advance his own theology and hermeneutics without adopting its world view. There is no getting around the fact Luther owed a tremendous debt to humanism. Whether he fully repaid this debt is a matter of speculation for theologians and historians.

4.3 Luther and the History Of Biblical Interpretation

Placing Luther within the context of the history of biblical interpretation is essential for a thorough understanding of his hermeneutics.²⁵ Frequently, Luther is depicted as the biblical reformer who broke decisively from the medieval method of the *quadriga* and replaced it with the true literal sense of scripture. This equation operates on a number of highly suspect assumptions about medieval hermeneutics and Luther's hermeneutics and the relationship between them.

The *quadriga* has been reviled as a badly flawed device which unnecessarily burdened the text with extraneous interpretations. As well, the misconception exists that the *quadriga* was the only method in use until the advent of Luther.²⁶ Continuing, then, in the same vein, the reformer is either celebrated as the harbinger of the historical-critical method or, for the more evangelically inclined, as the one who "returned" the church to the literal

interpretation of the bible. These assumptions are patently false. No definite border exists between medieval hermeneutics and Luther's, and the Protestant Reformation did not necessarily usher in a new era in the history of biblical interpretation.²⁷ It is more accurate to say that points of continuity and discontinuity exist.

Unlike the historical-critical method which searches for the "original" meaning of the text as the only legitimate interpretation, medieval exegetes assumed that scripture had multiple meanings, and that the intended meaning of the author may in fact not be the most significant. The controlling axiom of medieval interpretation was the words of St. Paul in II Corinthians 3:6, "The letter kills but the spirit makes alive". Following the tradition of Augustine, Luther understood this as a distinction between law and gospel. Many patristic writers and medieval theologians, nevertheless, used the apostle's direction as a hermeneutical device - the letter which kills was associated with a literal interpretation and the spirit which gives life was construed as the spiritual or allegorical interpretation. Medieval theologians were not innovators, for they simply amplified a well established tradition that had allowed the early church to deal with a number of perennial hermeneutical problems.

First, the letter-spirit distinction enabled interpreters to deal with absurdities, contradictions and confusing events in what purports to be a straightforward historical narrative. Origen (c. 185 - c.254), an eloquent apologist for the allegorical method, candidly stated the problem:

And who is so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, "planted a paradise eastward in Eden," and set in it a visible and palpable "tree of life," of such sort that anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life.... I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual event.²⁸

What is often couched in the trappings of historical narrative may well be metaphor or figure. To confuse metaphor and history would lead to absurdities and damage the Christian faith. The letter-spirit distinction allowed the interpreter to penetrate through the historical narrative, to demythologize the text, in order to reach the essential truths.

Secondly, related to the issue of metaphor and history is the problem of finding an edifying meaning in all parts of scripture. Not every story found in scripture enhances the faith, hope, and love of the average Christian devotee. When an edifying meaning is not available at the literal face-value level of interpretation, then one must be sought at the level of metaphor and allegory.

Thirdly, the early church inherited a thorny hermeneutical problem when it claimed the Hebrew Bible as part of its canon of scripture. The letter - spirit distinction was necessary to sustain the continuity between Israel and the church and between the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Testament. A historical-literal interpretation of the text was mortgaged for its value as a prophetic witness to the advent of Christ and the New Testament church.

Christian exegetes continued to develop the spiritual sense of scripture into what is commonly referred to as the *quadrige*. The *quadrige*, or fourfold method, has been traced back to John Cassian (d.c. 433).²⁹ If a literal

interpretation of scripture was unable to enhance the theological virtues of faith, love, and hope, then an exegete could explore the text from three spiritual senses: the allegorical sense instructed the devotee about the church and doctrine; the tropological sense gave moral instruction to the devotee; the anagogical sense spoke about the future. In the fourteenth century the *quadriga* was summarized in the following lines:

Litera gesta docet. Quid credas allegoria. Moralis quid agis. Quo tendas anagogia.
 (The letter teaches what has been done, the allegory what you are to believe, the moral what you must do and the anagogy where you are heading.)³⁰

All three interpretations which go beyond the literal-historical are, generally speaking, allegorical. Often, though, the *quadriga* was employed only partially by medieval exegetes, depending upon the context of the passage and the theological prejudices of the interpreter. The *quadriga* functioned as flexible rules for possible interpretations, rather than a static method slavishly followed in every instance of interpretation.

Medieval theologians and exegetes assumed that scripture would make sense on several levels, because it was the Deity's revelation of what was occurring in the several levels of the divine order. Just as important, the *quadriga* encouraged exegetes to study a passage from different points of view and to make intelligible even the most vexing portions of the sacred text. Even the most confusing and repellent parts of scripture, the medieval interpreters insisted, must contain a relevant meaning for the faithful.

Despite the popularity of the *quadriga*, an awareness of the significance of the literal meaning was never lost. In the twelfth century the school of St. Victor initiated a trend in medieval exegesis focusing on the literal sense of scripture.³¹ The literal sense of the sacred text was examined as one would study any other literary document. Andrew of St. Victor, in particular, drew heavily on Jewish resources to expand the literal-historical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. The spiritual sense of scripture, Thomas Aquinas contended in the thirteenth century, is always founded on the literal sense. He explained the literal sense as the meaning intended by the author; however, the author was God and not the human prophet or disciple.³²

In the fourteenth century the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra (1265 - 1349), who has been called the best equipped biblical scholar of the Middle Ages, advanced a theory of the double literal sense of scripture.³³ The literal-historical sense is the meaning of the words intended by the author and addressed to a particular audience in a particular historical setting. However, the meaning of scripture in a later and vastly different context is the literal-prophetic sense. In applying his method to the Hebrew Bible, Lyra argued that a scripture passage contained a meaning applicable to the time of the writer and a second meaning referring to Christ and the New Testament.

In a further development, Jacob Perez (d. 1480) and Faber Stapulensis (1455-1536) both subscribed to what has been deemed the prophetic-literal sense.³⁴ Essentially, Perez and Stapulensis rejected or, at the very least,

radically de-emphasized the literal-historical sense of scripture. Stapulensis was adamant that the historical sense is none other than the letter which kills the spirit. The historical sense is a plain, objective, unconcerned rendering of the text. For Stapulensis, the Psalms must be read in light of the New Testament and St. Paul should be studied as an inspired spokesman for God and not simply as a historic figure. The literal-historical interpretation, asserted Stapulensis, is only a product of human speculation by carnal exegetes. At the core, the real issue of interpretation was the spiritual state of the interpreter.

From this brief survey of medieval hermeneutics certain themes come to light. Unlike modern historical criticism which operates on the premise that the words of scripture have only one meaning, medieval interpretation was infused with the idea of multiple levels of meaning. Medieval exegetes acknowledged that the words of scripture had a particular historical relevance. Nevertheless this was not the only meaning available, for the words carried an implicit meaning, which may be decoded from the perspective of Christian faith, for a much wider audience in a totally different setting. Scripture was not, however, a theological or cultural Rorschach. The medieval exegetes admit to parameters of interpretation which are indicated by the language of scripture itself. Indeed, the *quadriga*, while permitting multiple levels of meaning, nevertheless, structured those meanings within a limited set of possibilities. Uncontrolled and free ranging interpretation would have been just as confusing to the medieval exegete as it would be to the modern scholar. Unfortunately, the

misconception persists that medieval exegetes ravished the text of scripture with their wild imaginations.³⁵ A more balanced assessment has been offered by Gerhard Ebeling: "Instead of taking the fourfold sense of the Scriptures as an offspring of a licentious exegetical caprice, as is usually done, the distinction of the three spiritual dimensions of interpretations must be understood as an effort to stop, through regulation by church dogma, the danger of an allegorical fantasy which would digress into the heretical".³⁶ Medieval interpreters were a circumspect and restrained group in their approach to the sacred text.

Luther was very much a part of the medieval tradition. The reformer falls in line, at least initially, with the tradition established by Lyra and Stapulensis. The connection with Lyra was captured in a popular rhyme:

*Si Lyra non lyrasset
Lutherus non sallasset.
(If Lyra had not sung, Luther would not have danced)"*

Like his medieval predecessors, Luther would have been perplexed by the historical-critical assumption of only one valid meaning for a text - that being the one intended by the author or authors.³⁸ This kind of approach was an interpretation easily satisfied with the letter of the text. Though he quickly abandoned the formal *quadriga*, Luther still advocated the medieval approach of a prudent middle way: a text is neither all letter, as an exclusively literal-historical interpretation suggests; nor is it all spirit, as the sixteenth century enthusiasts - Luther's *Schwärmer* - claimed.

Most scholars concur that in his first lectures on the Psalms (1513-1515), Luther is still ensconced in the medieval hermeneutical tradition.³⁹ In some instances in these early lectures, Luther firmly holds to the fourfold pattern. He will, for example, delineate certain significant theological terms, such as judgement and righteousness, according to the fourfold sense of scripture.⁴⁰ However, Luther pays less attention to the anagogical sense or future-directed meaning, preferring to emphasize the relevance of the text for the individual devotee and the church, the tropological and allegorical senses. Equally important, he approaches the literal sense of scripture as theologically significant, not merely as a deposit of historical data.

By the time of his 1519 lectures on Galatians, Luther had discarded the medieval technique of interlinear glosses and extended scholia, electing to use, instead, a verse by verse commentary on the text. In these lectures Luther also noticeably confined the use of the *quadriga*. He declared that the fourfold sense is permissible, but only as "extra ornamentation" and cannot be used to establish a doctrine of faith. He suggested that the method had only questionable support: "For that four-horse team ... is not sufficiently supported by the authority of Scripture, by the custom of the fathers, or by grammatical principles."⁴¹ The fourfold method produced a "milky teaching," but may be used to nurture those less versed in the faith, admitted Luther.

The reformer confessed that he was once quite a successful allegorizer: "When I was a monk, I was a master in the use of allegory Before I

allegorized everything, even a chamber pot⁴² The compulsion toward allegorizing scripture, contended Luther, was a cancer introduced in the church by certain early historical writers; he usually placed the blame on Origen and Jerome. For Luther, the word "Origenizes" was a pejorative synonym for excessive allegorizing.⁴³ Though he never completely abandoned the use of allegory - he found it to be a useful homiletic device - Luther noticeably curtailed its application after 1519. In his Genesis lectures from the 1530s, he insisted allegories must be based on the historical account itself. Allegories which have little or no connection with the historical sense "should simply be disapproved as empty dreams."⁴⁴

After he completed lecturing on the first three chapters of Genesis, Luther alleged he had "treated all these facts in their historical meaning, which is their real and true one"⁴⁵ Only in this way could the interpreter arrive at "some sure and plain meaning" and avoid a plethora of "nonsensical allegories."⁴⁶ He went on to say, "Ever since I began to adhere to the historical meaning, I myself have always had a strong dislike for allegories and did not make use of them, unless the text itself indicated them or the interpretations could be drawn from the New Testament."⁴⁷

Luther probably over-estimated both his original seduction by allegories and his consistency in avoiding them later. But we can say with confidence that, in contrast with much of the medieval tradition, Luther ignored the fourfold method of exposition for most of his career and, generally, placed

stringent limits on the use of allegories. He claimed that he sought only the "legitimate, proper, and germane sense" of scripture.⁴⁸ He would refer to the method as "a grammatical and theological exposition."⁴⁹ In our next chapter we will examine the hermeneutical principles Luther employed to sustain his grammatical and theological exposition.

Notes

1. In this chapter I have been assisted by the following secondary sources: Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, (Oxford, 1987) and *Reformation Thought: an Introduction* (Oxford, 1988); Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans by H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr., (Philadelphia, 1972), Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents*, (Philadelphia, 1981); Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1500*, (New Haven, 1980).
2. J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, (New York, 1954).
3. Bernd Moeller, "Piety in Germany Around 1500," *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven Ozment, p. 56.
4. Cited by Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, (Nashville, 1988), p. 30.
5. George, p. 22.
6. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (Glasgow, 1952), pp. 63-68
7. See McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, pp. 2-25.
8. See McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, pp. 50-65.
9. See McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins*, pp. 12-28.
10. Mentioned by Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther, The Man and His Work*, trans, Lawrence W. Denef, (Minneapolis, 1986), p. 63.
11. See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road To Reformation 1483 - 1521*, trans James L. Schaaf, (Philadelphia, 1985) pp. 82-90.
12. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible In The Middle Ages*, (Oxford, 1952), p. xxvii.
13. Mentioned by Willem J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, trans, John Schmidt, (Philadelphia 1961), p. 63.
14. Paul Oskar Kristeller. *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains*, (New York, 1961), p. 10.
15. Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation*, p. 19.
16. See McGrath *Reformation Thought*, pp 34 - 35.
17. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins*, p. 39.
18. George, p. 48.
19. LW 31:25.

20. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, pp. 45-48.
21. McGrath, *Reformation Thought* p. 45.
22. Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation*, p. 34.
23. For the balanced assessment of the Luther-Erasmus debate, see Harry J. M'Sorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, "The bondage of the Will,"* (New York, 1969).
24. Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation*, p. 36.
25. See Oberman, pp. 281 - 314.
26. This is the position of Klaus Runia, "The Hermeneutics of The Reformers," *Calvin Theological Journal* 17 (1984), p. 122.
27. See Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* XXXVII (July, 1983), pp. 229 - 239.
28. Origen, *On First Principles*, ed. G. W. Butterworth, (New York, 1966), p. 288.
29. See James S. Preus, *From Shadow To Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther*, (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 21 - 22.
30. Cited by Runia, p. 122
31. See Smalley, pp 115 - 195.
32. See Oberman, p. 285.
33. See Oberman, p. 286.
34. See Oberman, p. 287
35. See Runia, p. 122.
36. See Gerhard Ebeling, "The New Hermeneutics and The Early Luther". *Theology Today* XXI (April 1964), pp. 38-39.
37. Cited by Runia, p. 122.
38. See David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority Of Pre-Critical Exegesis." *Theology Today* XXXVI (April, 1980), p. 27.
39. See Preus, pp. 153-175.
40. LW 10:24.
41. LW 27:311.

- 42. LW 54:46.
- 43. LW 48:54.
- 44. LW 1:233.
- 45. LW 1:231.
- 46. LW 1:231.
- 47. LW 1:232-233.
- 48. LW 14:294.
- 49. LW 14:294.

Chapter 5. Luther's Hermeneutical Principles

To speak of Luther's hermeneutical "principles" or "method" is somewhat misleading. At no point did the reformer compose or systematically arrange a set of rules on the nature and procedure of interpretation and understanding. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that certain themes consistently permeate Luther's work as an interpreter of scripture. His pastiche of ruminations on the subject appear in diverse contexts: classroom lectures, sermons, polemic treatises, devotional treatises, personal letters, theses for scholarly debate, and off-hand remarks at the dinner table.

We will examine Luther's method by highlighting the prominent themes in his work: the condition of the interpreter, the literal sense of scripture, the clarity of scripture, christological interpretation, the eschatological dimension, letter and spirit, law and gospel, historical and textual criticism, and theological criticism.

A cursory glance at Luther's position might place him as a possible progenitor of the historical-critical method. He was, after all, concerned with the simple, germane sense of scripture and was critical of much of the medieval

hermeneutical system - was it not a superfluous scaffolding inhibiting a "true" understanding of the sacred text? However, Luther is never satisfied with the plain literal-historical explanation. His approach to interpretation remained strictly theological. In this sense, Luther's method was more medieval than modern.

Over his lengthy career as an interpreter of scripture, Luther highlighted certain themes, depending on the context of his work, while downplaying others. At times he followed the work of others and on other occasions he tried uncharted waters. He felt that he was breaking new ground in his interpretation of scripture. Very often interpretation was a matter of trial and error.

Luther took his vocation seriously. He was never reticent about reminding listeners that he was a "Doctor of Holy Scripture." It was not a title he had eagerly sought, as he claimed he had been "forced and driven into this position."¹ Once in this position, however, he could not in good conscience "keep silent or cease to teach" regardless of the opposition he encountered.² Scripture was the basis of his self-understanding. He understood himself as a biblical theologian and that is how he wanted others to view him. Scripture was the bedrock of his theology. Paul Althaus begins his introduction to Luther's thought with this assessment: "All Luther's theological thinking presupposes the authority of Scripture. His theology is nothing more than an attempt to interpret Scripture. Its form is basically exegesis."³

5.1 The Condition of the Interpreter

Luther set three important pre-conditions for anyone who sought to interpret scripture. First, one must come with an attitude of reverence to the sacred text. Secondly, accurate interpretation requires the harnessing of human reason. Thirdly, interpretation must be forged by human experience.

There is little value, to Luther's way of thinking, of approaching the text of scripture with a so-called "objective" or disinterested attitude. One had to be immediately aware of the existential entailments of the text, its divine origin and, therefore, its implications for one's ultimate destiny. Human reason and human methods are not enough to garner the truth; indeed, such an approach is an affront to scripture resulting from human pride and a misplaced trust in human reason. Luther, instead, offered this advice: "To begin with, it is absolutely certain that one cannot enter into the meaning of Scripture by study and innate intelligence. Therefore, your first task is to begin with prayer. You must ask that the Lord in his great mercy grant you a true understanding of his words...."⁴

A faithful interpretation of scripture demanded that human reason be held captive. Luther's invectives against reason are well known.⁵ Luther was not advocating irrationality, for reason in its proper sphere was a great blessing. But when human reason was the escort to understanding scripture, Luther could only call it "Frau Hulda, the devil's seductress."⁶ Because it leads one

astray in matters of faith, human reason is an ineffectual instrument for the subject matter of scripture. In his Genesis lectures, Luther warned his students that human reason cannot avoid being overwhelmed by this subject matter and coming into conflict with it.

Human reason is also treacherous since it is an ally of philosophy and dialectic. While there is nothing inherently wrong with philosophy and dialectic, they do nevertheless, create a "flood of harm" when used in bible study. Those who are slaves to Aristotle and Porphyry "cannot catch on to the meaning of even a single chapter of Scripture, much less teach it."⁷ In the end, Luther advised: "You must therefore despair of your own intelligence and rely solely on the infusion of the Spirit."⁸

The interpreter must always be mindful of the epistemological condition of humanity. The Christian devotee has only a vague inkling of the invisible things of God, and these are only grasped by faith. Despite his academic degrees, Luther humbly confessed his own ignorance: "Though I am a great doctor, I haven't yet progressed beyond the instruction of children in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer."⁹ Much of scripture contains things which human reason alone simply cannot grasp. The meaning of the words from the creation narrative went way beyond his understanding, admitted Luther. Nevertheless, he stated: "I therefore, take my reason captive and subscribe it to the Word, even though I do not understand it."¹⁰

Luther often repeated the maxim: "experience alone makes the theologian."¹¹ He did not learn his theology all at once: "I had to ponder over it ever more deeply," he related, "and my spiritual trials were of help to me in this, for one does not learn anything without practice."¹² By experience and practice Luther meant a number of things. Certainly, he suggested the wisdom that slowly accrues through the turbulence of living. But more importantly, he had in mind the experience of *anfechtungen* (trials) and spiritual realities. The words of scripture are vacuous apart from spiritual experience.

For Luther, the prototypical spiritual experience was his so-called "tower experience," where he had come to terms with a new understanding of the word righteousness in Romans 1:17. No longer did he take it as the righteousness by which God punishes the unrighteous sinner, but as the righteousness by which the devotee lives by a gift of God, namely faith. Many years after, Luther retold the experience this way:

Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.¹³

The sentence, "There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me," is significant. For the crucible of his spiritual experience had a profound impact on his hermeneutical principles.

5.2 The Literal Sense of Scripture

We have already noted that Luther has sometimes been portrayed as the reformer who disinfected the church from the contagion of the allegorical method and replaced it with the literal interpretation of scripture. Obviously, parts of this caricature need to be briefly addressed. Certainly, late medieval interpreters like Lyra and Stapulensis were equally critical of the traditional fourfold method. The humanist movement of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries generally marginalized the allegorical interpretation of scripture.¹⁴ Luther was part of this trend. But he overestimated his consistency in abandoning the allegorical method. He often employed allegories as helpful and persuasive homiletic devices throughout his career. And when a literal interpretation of a scripture passage offended his theological sensibilities, Luther could be resigned to an allegorical or quasi-allegorical interpretation. This was the case with the always thorny book, *The Song of Solomon*. Instead of taking the work at face-value as a Hebrew love poem, Luther preferred to interpret it as a song of thanksgiving to God for the gifts of peace and his Word.¹⁵

These considerations aside, Luther tenaciously strove to unlock what he called in his second lectures on the Psalms, "the grammatical and theological meaning."¹⁶ In his controversy with Erasmus, ostensibly dealing with two divergent anthropologies, Luther made important remarks about his

hermeneutical practice: "... we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man."¹⁷ Further, Luther only allowed the interpreter to depart from the grammatical sense if forced to by "the nature of the context and the absurdity of the literal sense as conflicting with one or another of the articles of faith."¹⁸

But Luther does not advocate a superficial literalism. He was a biblical scholar who enthusiastically employed the historical, grammatical, and contemporary devices offered by the humanist tradition. Though he harshly scolded some of the early church fathers, Luther certainly benefited from their insights - particularly Augustine and Ambrose. When Luther opted for the literal meaning, it was not a naive approach. He never succumbed to a fixation on biblical literalism as a new absolutist principle of religious authority.

Luther maintained that the literal meaning is really the spiritual meaning of scripture. The spiritual meaning is not something extra appended to the text in the way of medieval interpretation. Rather, the spiritual or theological meaning of the text is apparent in the grammatical sense. Or, to use one of Luther's expressions: "the Spirit is hidden in the letter."¹⁹

5.3 The Clarity of Scripture and Scripture as its Own Interpreter

Closely related to Luther's emphasis on the literal sense of scripture are two connected principles: the clarity or perspicuity of scripture and scripture as its own interpreter. Again, Luther expounds these two principles in his conflict with Erasmus. In the preface to his *Diatribes*, Erasmus mentions the obscurity of scripture and claims that some truths are not for common ears. He goes on to state "that Holy Scripture is in very many places obscured by figures of speech... in some places it seems at first sight to be self-contradictory... we are forced willy-nilly to forsake the literal sense of the words and seek their meaning modified by interpretation."²⁰ Because scripture is concerned with esoteric matters beyond the normal range of human understanding, scripture must be interpreted, confessed Erasmus, in light of and in deference to the traditions and teaching authority of the church.

Luther quite vigorously objected to Erasmus' notions. He freely admitted that scripture contains difficult and apparently obscure sections; nevertheless, the real cause of the problem is not inherent in the text or its message, but is due to the linguistic and grammatical ignorance of the interpreter. The weakness of the human mind and not the vocabulary of the text is the underlying source of the issue, emphasized Luther. The very fact commentaries and guides to scripture are produced attests to the dowdy state of the human intellect. Luther goes on to argue that just because some claim that scripture

is obscure does not mean all interpreters are in the dark: "Who will say that a public fountain is not in the light because those who are in the narrow side street do not see it, whereas all who are in the marketplace do see it."²¹ The assertion that scripture is a cryptic document is nothing other than a statement about the attitude and point of view of the interpreter: "It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth."²²

Perhaps those who perpetuated the notion of the obscurity of scripture are motivated by the desire to subjugate the sacred text to human standards and authority, surmised Luther. The problem is exacerbated, he lamented, because those who refuse to accept the simplicity of scripture's words are soon intoxicated by the products of their wild imaginations. After surveying church history, Luther sadly concluded: "that all heresies and errors in connection with the Scriptures have arisen, not from the simplicity of the words, as is almost universally stated, but from neglect of the simplicity of the words, and from tropes or inferences hatched out of men's own heads."²³

Finally, Luther wondered what possible reason God would have had for leaving scripture so unpenetrable: "In short, if scripture is obscure or ambiguous, what point was there in God giving it to us?"²⁴ "Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough," reflected Luther, "without having our obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness augmented for us from heaven."²⁵

In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther informs Erasmus about two kinds of clarity in scripture: "one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart."²⁶ The external or objective clarity refers to scripture as the preached Word or gospel; its message is for all devotees. Internal or subjective clarity designates the message of scripture addressed to the individual Christian in his or her particular place. It is a context-specific communication assisting only the individual and benefiting no one else. However, in both instances the enlightening of the Holy Spirit is necessary, "for the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it."²⁷

Directly issuing from Luther's commitment to the clarity of scripture is his principle that scripture is its own interpreter. Scripture is its own light. Since the message of scripture is the same throughout, those places which appear dark and unintelligible are illuminated by other portions of the text. Writes Luther: "If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words and sometimes as yet hidden in obscure words."²⁸

Luther held that scripture could not be properly interpreted without the assistance and illumination of the Holy Spirit. Importantly, the Spirit comes in and through scripture itself. Luther advances his position on two fronts. On the one hand, he took umbrage with the *Schwärmer* (enthusiasts) who claimed

illumination by the Spirit without the Word. On the other hand, Luther believed he negated the papal claim of authority over scripture. They were two sides of the same coin for Luther, since they both made assertions which circumvented scripture or the Spirit as the interpreter of scripture.

5.3 Christological Interpretation

"Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them," Luther asked Erasmus.²⁹ Luther's christological hermeneutic is generally regarded as the reformer's most enduring and consistent interpretive principle. Some scholars press the claim that the centrality of Christ is the new element in Luther's doctrine of scripture compared with medieval exegesis. Comments Willem Kooiman: "To place Christ in the centre of the Bible, as totally as Luther did, was previously unheard of. With great monotony he hammered consistently upon this single anvil."³⁰

Luther perpetually upheld the unity of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, because the oneness has its basis in the fact that Jesus Christ is the centre of all scripture. He used the phrase "punctus mathematicus" (mathematical point) to describe his view. Christ is the centre of a circle around which everything - the stories and illustrations of the Hebrew Bible and the preaching of the New Testament - points to and moves. Christ is the *scopus* of the entire scripture, including the Hebrew Bible. In his *Preface to the*

Old Testament (1523), Luther remarked: "Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies and to which the angel points the shepherds. Simple and lowly are these swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ who lies in them."³¹ The words of the sacred text point like a compass needle to this magnetic pole of scripture.

For Luther, the New Testament is nothing "but a public preaching and proclamation of Christ as set forth through the sayings of the Old Testament and fulfilled through Christ."³² Thus, Luther's fundamental hermeneutic is that scripture in its entirety is nothing but the preaching of the good news about Jesus Christ, since the function of all interpretation is to find Christ.

Luther fully appreciated that the knowledge of languages, grammar, and history is essential for translation and interpretation. But an understanding of Christ is the all sufficient ingredient in a true and beneficial interpretation: "I think that if the Bible is to come up again, we Christians are the ones who must do the work, for we have the understanding of Christ without which even the knowledge of the language is nothing."³³

Yet how revolutionary was this principle? Late medieval exegetes like Jacob Perez and Faber Stapulensis engaged in an intensive christological interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.³⁴ In his earliest lectures on the Psalms (1513 - 1515) Luther unreservedly aligns himself with this hermeneutical trend. He held that Christ was the literal meaning and the content of the Psalms. However, he did not always let the interpretation rest there; from the

christological content one could then move to the moral or tropological interpretation, that is to draw a personal application from the text.

Theoretically, the contents of the Hebrew Bible point to Christ. In practice, though, this principle led to some very flexible exegesis. Luther could not avoid the tendency to read Christian events and dogmas into Jewish narratives in order to unpack their christological meaning. The songs, prayers, and lamentations of David undergo a theological metamorphosis to become the words of Christ.

When Luther lectured on the Psalms for a second time (1519 -1521), he shifted his emphasis from a rigid christological hermeneutic to his grammatical-theological exposition.³⁵ This allowed him to make independent exegetical decisions congruent with the Hebrew text. In his exposition of Psalm 1, Luther probed the meaning of each Hebrew word, suggesting that the passage is essentially about two attitudes, godliness and ungodliness.³⁶ And, he concluded, because the Word of God is eternal, the message of the text is applicable to people in every age.³⁷ Luther could unearth a theologically edifying meaning from a Hebrew text apart from a christological interpretation - an approach which took seriously the grammar and historical context of the work and the spiritual experience of the author. But, Luther hardly came to the text devoid of theological presuppositions. He culled the meaning of godly and ungodly from his previously developed position of the priority of faith in Christ over works.

Similar to many late medieval interpreters, Luther proposed that the true literal sense is in fact the real spiritual sense of scripture - that sense which the Spirit intends. Unlike many commentators, though, he did not always insist on a reference to Christ in every passage. It was not a ponderous piece of hermeneutical equipment to be slavishly followed in all cases. Though it was still a very meaningful part of his hermeneutical method, Luther relied less on the christological principle in his later lectures on the various books of the Hebrew Bible. Particularly in his lectures on the prophets, Luther is quite willing to integrate literal, historical and christological elements.³⁸

Luther's christological hermeneutic also differs markedly from that of Erasmus and other humanists.³⁹ Initially, Luther was very receptive to the Dutch humanist. He had, after all, extensively used Erasmus' 1516 Greek edition of the New Testament. But he gradually became more and more chary of Erasmus, and eventually quite openly hostile, calling him "a croaking toad" and "a wormy nut that tastes like crap in one's mouth."⁴⁰

The reasons for the disagreement are many. Luther believed that Erasmus was duped by an overly optimistic anthropology which led him to emphasize human reason and ingenuity and minimize the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. "If I were to cut open Erasmus' heart," responds Luther, "I would find there nothing but ridicule about the Trinity, about the sacrament, etc. Everything is a laughing matter for him."⁴¹ In Luther's opinion, Erasmus

was largely style with little content: "He can talk well, but his words are artificial, not natural."⁴²

In part, though, Luther saw the conflict as a difference of perspectives on the christological hermeneutic. Luther chided Erasmus because "he never has anything to say about the article of justification. He mentions Christ for the sake of his stipend, but he doesn't care."⁴³ Even worse, Erasmus does not understand the gospel of Christ: "Paul calls it a mystery of God... that another bears our sin and says that he has committed it. Erasmus knows nothing about this."⁴⁴

Erasmus had also pointed to the centrality of Christ in scripture. For Erasmus, Christ was an example, teacher, guide, and way-shower, one who expounded a perfect morality. For Luther, Christ can only be properly understood as the redeemer and saviour of humankind, whose righteousness is the Christian's by faith. Erasmus' Christ, to Luther's mind, is a Christ of the law rather than the Christ who brings good news. Therefore, the difference in interpretation rests, in part, in the difference in their christologies. Whereas Erasmus sought a christological interpretation that would be morally beneficial to the devotee, Luther laboured for a christological understanding of the text that was pregnant with soteriological significance.

5.4 The Eschatological Principle

Rather than a strident interpretive principle, the eschatological component of Luther's hermeneutics is really more of a reflection on the nature of understanding the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as sacred texts. The eschatological principle does not commute scripture into a concordance to the signs of the times - adapting scriptural prophecies to fit contemporary events or interpreting current circumstances in light of the particularities of the sacred text. At several points in a tumultuous career, Luther admitted he was convinced the end of the world was near and so regressed to a simplistic interpretation of the prophetic texts. Ultimately, he realized that kind of hermeneutic is only an attempt by the interpreter to fob off a superficial reading as something profound. It suffuses the text with meanings that are only tangentially connected to it.

At the beginning of his vocation as a biblical interpreter, Luther warned his students not to expect that they could fully master the meaning of a passage of scripture. "One had always to progress in the understanding of scripture," he exhorted them while lecturing on Psalm 119.⁴⁵ Importantly, other meanings for a passage could not be arbitrarily disposed of, because the text had a perdurable fund of meaning. One interpreter may have seen clearly what another had missed.

While Luther believed that scripture - as an accommodation to the eschatological, moral and ontological state of humankind - contains the necessary soteriological tidings, the interpreter can never comprehend all the truth within it. This will be done only at the end time, when God chooses to reveal the fullness of truth contained in his Word; hence, the eschatological nature of scripture. This does not mean Luther believed that scripture was foggy in the sense that Erasmus did; rather, the sacred text contained a reservoir of meaning that will never be drained.

In his assumption about the inexhaustible nature of scripture, Luther certainly did not differ from the medieval exegetes who based their work with the *quadriga* on the same premise. It permitted the exegete extensive liberties in the interpretation of the text. Yet it also projected realistic parameters on each interpretation. Every interpretation is of a finite, limited nature. No single meaning of the text is true forever. No single interpretation can fully vent the wealth of meaning inherent in the text. Interpretation, then, is always restrained by its limitedness and by the limitedness of the interpreter. In his final written words, Luther expressed just those thoughts: "Let nobody suppose that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently unless he has ruled over the churches with the prophets for a hundred years.... We are beggars that is true."⁴⁶

5.5 Letter and Spirit

"The letter kills, but the spirit gives life." These words from St. Paul, as we noted earlier, had been the traditional support for the allegorical method. The hermeneutical task was construed as a movement from the literal to the hidden spiritual meaning; hence, the use of allegory to provide the most edifying interpretation of a text. This was based on the assumption that the plain literal sense of scripture was deficient and frequently obscure.

Luther argued that allegory was a Pelagian attitude towards the text - the interpreter essentially transforms or "works over" the text. Interpretation is not an end in itself, warned Luther; nor is spirit the apex of the completed interpretive process. Instead, letter and spirit are not so much attributes of the text as activities which it performs. Luther maintained that all interpretation - the spiritual allegorizing of medieval exegetes and the grammatical - historical interpretation of the humanists - is letter no matter how ingenious, accurate, or edifying it may appear. Letter is the construction performed on the text. On the other hand, the text also works on the interpreter by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit all interpretation is simply a human work and, like the law, brings to light and reflects the flawed human condition. The work of the Holy Spirit is the only method whereby the interpreter is able to move from words to meaning.

As much as Luther underscored the importance of the literal sense of scripture, he also admitted that it does not always convey the God-intended meaning. He believed it was possible to have expertise in the language of scripture, "but have no knowledge of the subject matter" contained in the language of scripture.⁴⁷ Luther frequently hammered away at this point against Erasmus, who, he claimed, was really a literary critic and historian masquerading as a theologian. Even as early as 1518, Luther wrote: "I always give Erasmus the highest praise and defend him as much as I can... Yet if I have to speak as a theologian rather than as a philologist, there are many things in Erasmus which seem to me to be completely incongruous with a knowledge of Christ."⁴⁸ Good philology did not necessarily translate into good theology, for Luther. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther launched a prolonged attack against those - he called them "the modern Hebraists" - who seek to interpret the Hebrew Bible by way of grammar alone: "But the Jews make fools of these modern Hebraists by convincing them that Holy Scripture cannot be understood except by means of grammatical rules and their minute system of pointing. Therefore no meaning is so preposterous that they would not defend and garnish it with their trusty rules of grammar."⁴⁹

Luther realized that he had benefited greatly from the products of the philologists. They were, he admitted, indispensable aids in the study of the scriptures. What he could not accept is a reliance on the positivistic study of

grammar and philology as an unimpeded thoroughfare to the meaning of scripture.

To interpret scripture from language and grammar only is to overlook the fact that theological and spiritual matters are treated in the text. A strictly philological understanding of scripture over against its theological meaning is really nothing other than the dualism of the letter and spirit.

"To understand the meaning of Scripture," Luther said, "the Spirit of Christ is necessary."⁵⁰ Luther did not wish to neglect the grammatical aspect or the letter of scripture, however. The letter and the spirit, like the law and the gospel, cannot be broken apart because they always work in tandem. Nevertheless, understanding without the spirit, even with the trappings of tradition and skill, is simply letter. Superficial and infirm, this kind of interpretation lacks the spirit and "remains empty; it does not enter into the heart."⁵¹

Luther suspected that many of the humanists could never approach the spirit of the text, despite their impressive intellectual skills. In his lecture on Romans, Luther put the issue this way:

"Great scholars who read much and abound in many books are not the best Christians. For all their books and their learning are letter and the soul's death.... We must therefore dread it when, in our time, through the making of many books, people become learned scholars who do not know at all what it means to be a Christian."⁵²

The point is that philological investigation and interpretation for its own sake, as a kind of removed exercise, is nothing but the "soul's death."

Understanding without the letter, however, is just as theologically impotent and even downright dangerous. This was the problem with the Enthusiasts. For the Spirit only comes with the letter. Commenting on I Corinthians 15, Luther stated: "But Scripture is not all spirit.... But the fact of the matter is that, although the letter by itself does not impart life, yet it must be present, and it must be heard or received. And the Holy Spirit must work through this in the heart...."⁵³

True understanding, then, involves both letter and spirit, grammar and theology. Lacking either of these aspects, or both, can only lead to disaster: "Therefore those who are familiar with the language and have the Spirit of God, as all believers do, understand without any difficulty, since they know the purport of all Scripture. But if one does not understand their language and does not have the Spirit or Christian discernment, the prophets seem to be drunk and full of wine."⁵⁴

Luther reminded his Wittenberg students that "the Holy Spirit, as you know, has deposited his wisdom and counsel and all mysteries into the Word and revealed these in Scripture...."⁵⁵ It was frivolous and misleading to seek anything else from scripture than the gospel which the Spirit reveals, namely "Jesus Christ, God's son, our Saviour, who died and rose for us."⁵⁶

5.6 Law and Gospel

Luther's theology is packed with dualisms. Law and gospel is one of the most recurring. At times, especially in his earlier writings, Luther uses law and gospel and letter and spirit interchangeably. In Luther's thinking letter and law appear synonymous because the law "which goes no farther than the oral or written word... consists only of the powerless letter."⁵⁷ By the same token, gospel and spirit go together because of the power to produce a transformation in the hearts of readers and listeners. Luther refers to the gospel as "a ministration of the spirit." Like Augustine, Luther asks "What is law without grace but a letter without spirit."⁵⁸

Luther taught that the Christian must carefully distinguish between law and gospel. However, though distinct, they were not to be construed as two antagonistic and antipodal positions only to be reconciled by the succession and supremacy of the gospel. Rather, each had its separate function. Similarly, no simple identification could be made with the Hebrew Bible as entirely law and the New Testament as completely gospel. Law and gospel could be found in both. Moses could proclaim law and gospel as well as Jesus. Law and gospel are together God's Word, "for God divides his teaching into law and gospel."⁵⁹

The mark of a true theologian, Luther claimed, is the ability to accurately distinguish between law and gospel. Luther chastised Erasmus for failing in

precisely this matter: "Erasmus has indeed put out very disgraceful prefaces, even if he did soften them, because he makes no distinction between Christ and Solon."⁶⁰ Speaking from experience, Luther also realized that it was a nearly unobtainable ideal. To friends he confessed: "There's no man living on earth who knows how to distinguish between the law and the gospel. We may think we understand it when we are listening to a sermon, but we're far from it."⁶¹ Luther even asserted that it was one of the devil's wildest tricks to confuse Christians about the law and the gospel: "It's the supreme art of the devil that he can make the law out of the gospel. If I can hold on to the distinction between law and gospel, I can say to him any and every time that he should kiss my backside."⁶²

The law is command, order, and requirement. It demands, forbids, and threatens with punishment. Because it is something written, enlettered, it is scripture in the true generic sense of the term. But it is still the Deity's voice. For God speaks through the law saying "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect from you."⁶³ In and of itself the law is holy and good. It functions in the civil realm to check unredeemed humanity. It restrains sin and breaks human pride. In this sense, Luther compared the law to the function of a hammer. Yet, more importantly, it is also a mirror since it shows human beings their true condition, thereby leading them to the gospel. For Luther, the law brings human sin to light, though it is powerless to transform the human condition. When the law is misappropriated as a soteriological method,

however, it becomes a tyrant. It may initially result in spiritual pride and presumption, but in the end leads only to despair and hopelessness.

The gospel is about promises instead of commands. It announces what God has done for us. It is spiritually therapeutic as "a message of healing and salvation; a precious, comforting word."⁶⁴ But what is the content of the message? Luther put it succinctly: "For at its briefest, the gospel is a discourse about Christ, that he is the Son of God and became man for us, that he died and was raised, and that he has been established as Lord over all things."⁶⁵ In distinction from the law, which as a book of commandments requires deeds, the gospel is "a book of divine promises in which God promises, offers, and gives us all his possessions and benefits in Christ."⁶⁶

Significantly, Luther pointed out that there is only one gospel, not four, though it is described by many different writers. The interpreter could not regard the epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter as an appendix or an addendum to the teaching of the four gospels. The gospel is all one even if the story is told in different ways: "Such a story can be told in various ways; one spins it out, and the other is brief. Thus the gospel is and should be nothing else than a chronicle, a story, a narrative about Christ, telling who he is, what he did, said and suffered - a subject which one describes briefly, another more fully, one this way, another that way."⁶⁷

Luther continually emphasized the kerygmatic nature of the gospel. It was something to be spoken and even shouted! The oral nature of the gospel

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implied aural responsibilities on the part of the devotee. Ears were the organs of the Christian. In this vein, Luther described the law and gospel as two sermons: one sermon teaches us "what we are to do and give to God," the other sermon announces "what has been given us by God."⁶⁸

Luther's comments on the law and gospel suggest that they can be understood as two different moods of address, that is to say, as a difference in ways of speaking.⁶⁹ The difference is not in the context - for the law points to Christ - but in the way the message is spoken. The law uses the imperative mood, "You must have." The gospel employs the declarative mood, "Behold, here is Christ and his spirit."⁷⁰ In this fashion, as two different forms of address, Luther's law and gospel hermeneutic allows the text to speak to the interpreter instead of succumbing to the Pelagian approach of placing the interpreter's agenda on the text.

In his brief tract *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, (1525), Luther clarifies an important hermeneutical principle connected with the law and gospel. To understand scripture correctly, an interpreter must deduce to whom a particular passage is addressed. God has used various ways to accommodate himself to the human condition. So too, Luther says "the Word has come to us in various ways."⁷¹ The problem lies in the fact that it is not enough to know whether it is God's Word, "rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken."⁷² God speaks also "to angels, wood, fish, birds, animals, and all creatures but this does not make it pertain to me."⁷³ In scripture, then, the

interpreter finds two kinds of communications: That which pertains to the interpreter and which he or she may and should personally appropriate; and that which does not pertain to the interpreter and, therefore, should be left alone. Luther strongly advised the interpreter to "distinguish well whether the word pertains to only one or to everybody."⁷⁴ Luther was never reluctant to declare, for example, that the laws of the Pentateuch had no claim on the Christian. To amplify this point, he used a typically homey illustration:

Suppose a housefather had a wife, a daughter, a son, a maid and a hired man. Now he speaks to the hired man and orders him to hitch up the horses and bring in a load of wood, or drive over to the field and do some other job. And suppose he tells the maid to milk the cows, churn some butter, and so on. And suppose he tells his wife to take care of the kitchen and his daughter to do some spinning and make the beds. All this would be the words of one master, one house father. Suppose now the maid decided she wanted to drive the horses and fetch the wood, the hired man sat down and began milking the cows, the daughter wanted to drive the wagon or plough the field, the wife took a notion to make the beds or spin and so forgot all about the kitchen; and then they all said, "The master has commanded this, these are the housefather's orders!" Then what? Then the house father would grab a club and knock them all into a heap and say, "Although it is my command, yet I have not commanded it of you; I gave each of you your instructions, you should have stuck to them."⁷⁵

The business of correctly understanding scripture was not strictly an academic exercise. Luther was convinced that the misguided excesses of the Peasant's Revolt (1525) had been caused by preachers who had failed to heed this hermeneutical principle. The peasants were pitifully misled and ruined by those who preached the law of the Hebrew Bible as addressed to them. The continuation of sects and factions within Christendom and the fragmentation of the reform movement, Luther maintained, demonstrated just how badly this principle had been neglected.

Differentiating between the law and gospel was a serious affair. Following this hermeneutical principle was truly a matter of life or death.

5.7 Historical and Textual Criticism

Though Luther located the primary and only reliable locus of Christian authority in scripture (*sola scriptura*), he was not blind to historical and textual problems. Luther appears to show some of the concerns of modern historical criticism, but he can only be considered a forerunner in a very superficial sense.

Luther was cognizant of problems of conflicting chronological data in scripture. In his reflections on the second chapter of John, he addressed the issue of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem which John places at the beginning of Jesus' career instead of the day after Palm Sunday. Luther noted that the evangelists do not all observe the same chronological order.⁷⁶ He surmised that Jesus may even have done this twice. Whatever the solution, it will have little bearing on the proper understanding of Jesus Christ and his work.

Luther also noticed similar problems in the Pentateuch with the chronology of the sons of Shem, and the sixty year period in the life of Abraham which does not seem congruent with the historical data.⁷⁷ Luther's approach was to rest on the principle that Christian faith would not be thwarted even if all information was lacking. If the data is not entirely accurate, it is still

beneficial. Further, since scripture is an accommodation to the human situation, some inaccuracies in the historical narratives are likely. The apparent errors, though, are not a reflection of the Deity but of finite humankind. The divine participation in the finitude of the human situation accounts for the allowance of errors in the sacred text. The Deity may also have taken the limitedness of human reason into consideration. Or too, what appear to be inaccuracies are possibly blind spots in human epistemology.

Luther's ruminative remarks on the historical problems are evidence of the underlying tension in his understanding of the nature of the sacred text. Scripture is similar to other human works, yet different too. The biblical books are historical and literary documents. They are also the words of God in human script. Nevertheless, the fragility of the form of God's accommodation does not in any way obstruct the content, claimed Luther.

In spare moments Luther also examined literary problems associated with scripture. He suggested, for example, that in dealing with numbers some of the biblical writers generously indulged in hyperbole: "When one often reads in the Bible that great numbers of people were slain - for example, eighty thousand - I believe that hardly one thousand were actually killed. What is meant is the whole people.... Otherwise I can't reconcile the numbers."⁷⁸ The reformer also speculated that many of the biblical writers used a variety of sources to compose their works. Moses was certainly an example: "I think many things had been written before Moses and that Moses took these things and added to

them what God had commanded."⁷⁹ Luther made a similar observation about some New Testament writings. In his *Preface to the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1523), he discussed the somewhat disorganized character of the writing and suggested, "that this is an epistle put together of many pieces, which does not deal systematically with any one subject."⁸⁰ Luther, on the basis of internal evidence, denied Paul's authorship of the epistle, disagreeing with even such an esteemed philologist as Erasmus over the matter.

In a precocious manner, Luther anticipated sentiments similar to the contemporary biblical criticism when he discerned that the biblical books were not intended as historical accounts but rather as theological tracts. The biblical writers were not historians but theologians. To support his claim, Luther noted that the language of poetry is frequently used in scripture to convey important truths. The book of Job was a case in point.

Job didn't speak the way it was written (in his book), but he thought those things. One doesn't speak that way under temptation.... The Hebrew poet, whoever he was, saw and wrote about those temptations, as Virgil described Aeneas, led him through all the seas and resting places, and made him a statesman and a soldier. Whoever wrote Job, it appears that he was a great theologian."⁸¹

From these reflections it seems the reformer could also broach the subject of comparative literature.

We must admit that Luther found the historical and literary problems associated with scripture interesting in a limited sort of way. Nevertheless, he was quick to claim that they were a distracting aside from the investigation of

the true marrow of the sacred text. And, he was equally quick to censure the "many sharp and shrewd people who are fond of bringing up all sorts of subtle questions and demanding definite and precise answers."⁸² Those who sweat over these kinds of questions are only dealing with the letter of scripture and ignoring the spirit. Such issues are of little consequence for an authentic understanding of the Christian faith. Luther was perceptive and wise enough to concede that with a sacred text "there are problems and will remain problems." He was confident enough to claim that these "will not prejudice our faith."⁸³

5.8 Theological Criticism

Luther engaged in a form of criticism that was strictly theological in perspective. He held that scripture speaks of Christ through and through, corroborating his fundamental theological insight that humanity is justified by faith alone. God through Christ has accommodated himself to ameliorate the human condition in a soteriological sense. The gospel is the announcement that the Christian has Christ's righteousness as her or his own by faith.

From this point of view, Luther freely criticized the biblical books according to how lucidly and trenchantly they presented Christ and the gospel. His critique of the canon is well known and his particularly vituperative assessment of James as "an epistle of straw" is frequently quoted. Though

Luther eventually softened his stance on James, he continued to use his critical principle.

"In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle," advised Luther, "are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine."⁸⁴ Luther lavished considerable praise on particular biblical books. St. Paul's epistle to the Romans he designated "the chief part of the New Testament and is truly the purest gospel."⁸⁵ Galatians he affectionately referred to as his "Katherine von Bora."⁸⁶ Luther was just as laudatory about books of the Hebrew Bible: "The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ death and resurrection so clearly - and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom - that it might well be called a little Bible."⁸⁷ The Hebrew prophets, too, were "mighty and ancient witnesses" who "proclaim and bear witness to the kingdom of Christ."⁸⁸

On the other hand, Luther casts a critical eye on those biblical writings where Christ and the good news are marginalized to an opaque message. In James there is too much of works and too little of faith for the reformer's liking. The Revelation of St. John deals almost entirely with visions and images and Luther can find little of Christ in it: "My spirit cannot accommodate itself

to this book. For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it."⁸⁹

In a very practical sense Luther ostracized Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, not only because the latter three failed to present the gospel clearly, but because he strongly doubted their apostolicity. Luther's theological standard along with the testimony of the church fathers produced an element of uncertainty about the boundaries of the canon. However, he appreciated that his view was not the final or definitive judgement on the issue. In his *Preface to the Revelation of St. John* (1522), Luther begins with the statement: "About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own opinions. I would not have anyone bound to my opinion and judgement."⁹⁰

Luther's critique of the canon is purely theological. It is not in the name of reason or literary finesse that he extols some books and criticizes others, but solely on the clarity of presentation of the gospel of Christ. In his last *Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude* (1546), Luther put the matter like this: "All genuine and sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate (*treiben*) Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ."⁹¹

Notes

1. LW 13:66.
2. LW 13:66.
3. Paul Althaus *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C Shultz. (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 3.
4. LW 48:53.
5. See Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason. A Study In The Theology Of Luther*, (Oxford, 1992).
6. LW 40:174.
7. LW 48:59.
8. LW 48:59.
9. LW 54:9.
10. LW 1:26.
11. LW 54:46.
12. LW 54:50.
13. LW 34:337.
14. See Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, (Philadelphia, 1981).
15. See LW 15:194-196 and LW 35:260.
16. LW 14:294.
17. LW 33:162.
18. LW 33:162
19. LW 11:34.
20. *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. E. G. Rupp and Philip S. Watson, (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 97.
21. LW 33:26.
22. LW 33:27.
23. LW 33:163.
24. LW 33:93.

25. LW 33:94.
26. LW33:90.
27. LW33:112.
28. LW 33:26.
29. LW 33:26.
30. Willem J Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, trans. John Schmidt, (Philadelphia, 1961), p. 175.
31. LW 35:236.
32. LW 35:236.
33. LW 35: 249.
34. See Oberman, *Forerunners*.
35. LW 14:294.
36. LW 14:288-289.
37. LW 14:290-291.
38. See Luther's Lectures on Isaiah, LW 16 and LW 17.
39. See John William Aldridge, *The Hermeneutic Of Erasmus*, (Richmond, 1966).
40. LW 54:77 and LW 54:73.
41. LW 54:81
42. LW 54:136
43. LW 54:136.
44. LW 54:73.
45. LW 12:431.
46. LW 54:73
47. LW 1:296.
48. LW 48:53.
49. LW 2:49-50.
50. LW 2:15.

51. Sermons VIII:238.
52. LW 25:198.
53. LW 28:77.
54. LW 30:23-24.
55. LW 28:77.
56. LW 28:77.
57. Sermons VIII:236.
58. Sermons VIII:236.
59. LW 54:42.
60. LW 54:189.
61. LW 54:127.
62. LW 54:106.
63. LW 35:162.
64. Sermons VIII:243.
65. LW 35:118.
66. LW 35:118.
67. LW 35:118.
68. LW 35:118.
69. Gerhard O. Forde, "Law and Gospel in Luther's Hermeneutic," *Interpretation* XXXVII (July 1983), p. 240.
70. Forde, p. 241.
71. LW 35:170.
72. LW 35:170.
73. LW 35:172.
74. LW 35:172.
75. LW 35:172.
76. LW 22:218.

- 77. LW 2:232.
- 78. LW 54:452.
- 79. LW 54:41.
- 80. LW 35:395.
- 81. LW 54:79-80.
- 82. LW 22:218.
- 83. LW 22:218.
- 84. LW 35:362.
- 85. Lw35:365.
- 86. LW 54:20.
- 87. LW 35:254.
- 88. LW 35:265.
- 89. LW 35:399.
- 90. LW 35:398.
- 91. LW 35:398.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Understanding scripture was a daily task for Martin Luther and he made use of a variety of hermeneutical principles to carry out his cherished duty. It required skill, sweat, patience, and humility. In biblical commentaries, lectures, sermons, and meditations the Wittenberg reformer constantly grappled with the meaning of scripture.

From our investigation of the place and function of scripture in Luther's theology, we have noticed that he was not slavishly devoted to an idolatry of the text; nor did his high opinion of scripture commit him to a fundamentalist position. Scripture is one of the ways in which the ontological, moral, and epistemological chasms have been bridged between the Deity and humankind. Scripture, then, is an accommodation to the human condition. And, while it presents the gospel, there is no simple proposition of identity between scripture and the Word. The structure of the text cannot completely contain the sensual and dynamic properties of the Word. An unresolved tension lurks just below the surface of Luther's understanding of scripture.

As a biblical interpreter, Luther hardly operated in a vacuum. He carried out a lively and often acrimonious exchange with the various streams of the medieval tradition and with the humanist movement. He rejected the allegorical method in the form of the *quadriga* and shared many of the concerns of the humanists. A correct understanding of scripture must be grounded in sound linguistic and historical knowledge. His grammatical and theological approach and his emphasis on the literal interpretation of scripture are very much in the humanist vein.

Yet, Luther is equally firm in his rejection of humanist religious biases. The tools and technology of the humanists Luther quite easily borrowed when expedient for a right understanding of the text. He soon realized that for many humanists - exemplified in his mind by Erasmus - the interpretation of scripture was a matter of text and context, while he was concerned with the theology of the text. Luther had little time for textual sleuths. A clinical attitude toward scripture lacks the necessary theological depth. Understanding the words and grammar of the text were a necessary part of the hermeneutical process, but such work was only a prolegomenon to the real kernel and marrow of the matter. Simply to engage in a historical and linguistic analysis of the sacred text for its own sake, is to become cocooned in the letter of the text and to ignore the spirit. According to Luther, those who do this are like "filthy swine wallowing and rolling in a beautiful garden, they rip and torture the Scriptures in their interpretation of them."¹

Luther is in many ways a hybrid figure. He rejected, generally speaking, the standard medieval hermeneutical method, but retained medieval assumptions. On the other hand, he used the humanist methods but vehemently disassociated himself from its theological presuppositions. Even more so, he rejected the humanist assumption that linguistic and historical analysis bring the interpreter to the true meaning of the sacred text. Against this background Luther tendered his hermeneutical principles.

We cannot claim with complete confidence that there is no observable demarcation between Luther and the medieval tradition of interpretation. On the other side of the issue, the reformer cannot be lauded as the harbinger of a hermeneutical revolution as some commentators suppose. And, he was certainly not the progenitor of the historical - critical method. Only very limited superficial evidence exists to support the claim.

Luther has much more in common with the pre-critical tradition of medieval hermeneutics. Scripture, for Luther, held an inexhaustible reservoir of meaning. Its meaning was certainly not gutted by a linguistic or historical analysis. Luther approached the text of scripture always from a theological perspective. Using his hermeneutical principles - though never in the form of a fully systematic method - Luther constantly posed theological questions to the text and waited for the soteriological answers. More appropriately, we may speak of Luther - in the terms of Gadamer and Ebeling - as a constituent in "a hermeneutics shift."

Luther realized that authentic understanding involves far more than the technicalities of the text. It was far too expansive and far too important an issue to be limited in such a way. In this Luther's thought meshes nicely with the philosophical and theological hermeneutical approach that was outlined in chapter two.

We have tried to understand Luther on his own terms - though this itself is an impossible historical and hermeneutical ideal. History, remarked Voltaire, is nothing but the heap of tricks we play on the dead. Hopefully, we have not played too many tricks on Luther!

Luther loved the Word. He used his words in the service of the Word. Luther loved words. He used them well. It is only fitting that the final words should be Luther's: "If you picture the Bible to be a mighty tree and every word a little branch, I have shaken every one of these branches because I wanted to know what it was and what it meant."²

Notes

1. LW 35:284.
2. LW 54:165.

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