

Martin Luther

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Luther and the Bible



Portrait of Luther by Lucas Cranach (1529)

This section explores Luther's understanding and treatment of Scripture. While Luther did not consider himself to be an *innovator*, his declarations concerning the sole authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*), the so-called 'formal principle of the Reformation,' formed the backbone of his reforming efforts and perhaps caused the greatest consternation among his opponents in the Church of Rome.

We begin by exploring Luther's understanding of the role and authority of Scripture, its proffered Christocentrism, interpretation, and, lastly, the important distinction Luther makes between law and gospel.

The Role and Authority of Scripture

When pressed to recant the contents of several of his published volumes before the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther declared that, 'Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason (for I believe in neither the Pope nor councils alone, since it has been established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures that I have adduced,



Luther before the Diet of Worms, 1521.

and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God; and I am neither able nor willing to recant, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.'¹

The statement is as telling as it is brief. Luther was rejecting the notion that the established church of his day was both the sole interpreter of Scripture, as well as an authority of *equal standing* alongside it. Earlier, at the Debate at Leipzig (1519), Luther had taken the risky step of declaring his agreement in this regard with John Huss (1369-1415), a Czech theologian who had been condemned and

¹ *Luther's Werke*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healy, 2000), Vol. 7, 836-38.

executed as a heretic some 100 years earlier following the Council of Constance. Huss, following John Wycliffe (1324-1384), who was also condemned, taught that the Bible should be made readily available to all the laity. Thus, Luther's professed alignment with Huss only added fuel to the fire of controversy.

However, it is vital that we not misunderstand Luther's advocacy of *sola Scriptura* as a tactless apologetic for pure 'private interpretation.' Luther still very much contended that the Scriptures *belonged* to the Holy Church *as the community of the faithful*. There was, therefore, an indissoluble bond between Scripture, the Fathers of the church, and the teachings of the Church *as it proclaims what is taught in Holy Writ*. The job of the church is to *submit* itself to the teachings of the Bible and to exposit them, not to alter or make additions to them which is precisely what Luther believed it had done concerning the doctrines around indulgences, purgatory, the sacraments (with regard to both their number and theological elaboration) and, most importantly, its understanding of (salvific) justification. Much less was it the place of the institutional church to keep the Bible from the laity, since the latter are part and parcel of what *constitutes* the church.

Luther rejected the widely accepted notion that the church on earth, comprised of fallible human beings, could not contradict the Bible. The Magisterium of the Roman church could err and, thus, did not possess the charism of infallibility in its doctrinal pronouncements. Indeed, it was the charge of New Testament Christians to constantly beware of the formal ecclesiastical teachings they are exposed to and under which they are told to submit. In



Luther and Cardinal Cajetan, 1518.

this regard, the first chapter of New Testament book of Galatians was key to Luther and was used by him frequently, including in his disputes with the papal envoy, Cardinal Cajetan, in 1518. In it, the apostle Paul warns explicitly against turning to 'a different gospel; which is really not another' (Gal 1:6) along with the declaration that 'even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!' (Gal 1:8). Here, Luther found clear support for his argument against an earth-bound church authority claiming to have sole interpretive powers over Scripture, or as a voice parallel with it. No created being—whether the pope or councils—is ever greater than Holy Writ.

Importantly, Luther also stressed that human reason (*ratio*) was to be subjected to Scriptural authority. He wrote that, 'Among Christians the rule is not to argue or investigate, not to be a smart aleck or a rationalistic know-it-all; but to hear,

believe, and persevere in the Word of God, through which alone we obtain whatever knowledge we have of God and divine things. We are not to determine out of ourselves what we must believe about him, but to hear and learn it from him.² Scripture, as *canon*, is the sole rule of faith, doctrine, and practice in the life of the Church. While the church Fathers, councils, theologians, and reason itself may be useful *guides* in interpreting Scripture, they are not final. Indeed, they often disagree with one another, or with the Bible itself, Luther contended, in which case, the Bible must always function as the final court of arbitration.

Luther sums up his views concerning Scriptural authority toward the beginning of his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518), offering an order of *hermeneutical priority*: 'I testify that I desire to say or maintain absolutely nothing except, first of all, what is in the Holy Scriptures and can be maintained from them; and then what is in and from the writings of the church fathers and is accepted by the Roman church and preserved both in the canons and the papal decrees. But if any proposition cannot be proved or disproved from them I shall simply maintain it, for the sake of debate, on the basis of the judgment of reason and experience, always, however, without violating the judgment of any of my superiors in these matters.'³

The Interpretation of Scripture



Luther's 1534 German translation of the Bible

Early in his life as a theologian, Luther somewhat loosely followed the generally accepted practice of interpreting Scripture according to the *quadriga*, or, 'fourfold sense of Scripture.' This fourfold sense included examining Biblical passages for a *literal* sense (i.e., face value), an *allegorical* sense (teachings in the form of allegory), a *tropological* sense (i.e., moral and ethical guidance), and an *anagogical* sense (i.e., future hope). He later came to reject this method, however, believing that it became too confusing, too speculative to provide sure grounds for doctrine and practice.

Instead, Luther began working toward a more historical and Christological interpretation which centred on the clarity and unity of Scripture as a holistic collection of books ultimately pointing toward Christ. The authors of Scripture, guided by the single Divine author of Scripture, were always intent on promoting the saving messiah, presenting his benefits, and illustrating both his judgment and grace.

² LW, 13.237.

³ LW, 31:83.

In his *Bondage of the Will* (1525), Luther takes pains, against Desiderius Erasmus (1466/1469-1536), to assert both the clarity and the fundamental necessity of this clarity for the life of the church. He acknowledges that there are, of course, things in the Bible which are obscure or hidden. But this does not mean that the central, *saving* message of Scripture is not clearly evident and discernable. There is abundant *perspicuity* concerning the biblical teachings.

The clarity of Scripture, Luther taught, falls under two distinct rubric: the *external* and the *internal*. The external is simply the manifest ministry of the Word (*verbi ministerium*). Here, we find Scripture telling us in the written word what must be known for salvation. Luther wrote that, 'above those things which are either contained in or proved by Holy Writ are not only plain, but also salutary, and can therefore safely be published, learned, and known as indeed they ought to be.'⁴ However, to the extent that Luther believed the human heart to be darkened and dulled by sin and against the things of God, we must also receive the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit in order that the ministry of the Word is opened up to us. True understanding of the Word of God, *in the heart*, is a gift engendered by the Spirit and creates in us the very understanding which we are unable, on our own, to possess. As Luther says,

Now when I say that you should fix the Word of God in your heart, I do not mean merely that you should know it and meditate on it. That is nothing. I mean rather that you should regard and esteem it as it ought to be regarded and esteemed. That is, you should hold it to be a living, eternal, all-powerful Word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you so eternally; that brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ, with His flesh and blood and everything He is and has. For it is the kind of Word that can and does do all these things, and therefore it should be so regarded. That is its own proper honour. It is not satisfied with any other kind of honour. In short, the proper honour for the Word is nothing else than a genuine faith from the bottom of one's heart, a faith that holds the Word to be true, that trusts it, and stakes its life upon it for eternity.⁵

Similarly, in his *Commentary on Galatians*, Luther stresses the coupling of Word and Spirit in that the Spirit comes to us *through* the Word. This is an invisible work of the Spirit by which he regenerates the heart and gives understanding. By this, we are able to make spiritual judgments and to understand God's will for us through Scripture.

Along these lines, Luther frequently stressed the centrality of Christ as being the fundamental emphasis of the entire Bible. This was an important part of Luther's move away from the *quadriga*, or other methods that relied too heavily on allegory. Luther's Biblical Christocentrism has sometimes been called an

⁴ *Luther's Works*, J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, eds. (St. Louis, PA: Concordia, Fortress Press. 1999), 33:45.

⁵ *Ibid*, 36:278.

incarnational view of Scripture. Avoiding overly metaphysical interpretations, Luther constantly deployed Christological terms. Scripture is *revelational*, not cryptic. Though God remains mysterious and unknown to humanity in his *essence*, he is made known *as he relates* to humanity through Christ.

Luther ultimately contended that Biblical interpreters should not necessarily assume that the Scriptures have more than one meaning. He wrote, ‘The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer, his words could have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the grammatical or the literal meaning.’⁶ By this, Luther did not mean ‘literal’ in the sense that the Bible is a sort of technical treatise or scientific manual that merely collects ‘facts.’ Rather, he meant literal in the sense of *authorial intent*, that is, what did the writer literally intend to convey? Avoiding a crass literalism, Luther understood that the Biblical literature deploys all manner of literary forms and figures of speech in conveying its message including allegory, metaphor, hyperbole, synecdoche, and other figures of speech. He acknowledged that, ‘Scripture deals only with Christ everywhere, if it is looked at inwardly, even though on the face of it, it may sound differently by the use of shadows and figures.’⁷ The simplest meaning behind the words, however, was always to be preferred.

Luther also strongly advocated the interpretative tool sometimes referred to as the *analogia fidei*, the ‘analogy of faith.’ This principle simply states that the best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself. Scripture, in this sense, is somewhat ‘self-interpreting.’ This assumes both the general perspicuity of Scripture, along with the ability of the exegete to use other, clearer passages of Scripture to interpret those that are not as clear. Simply put, Luther stated that, ‘One passage of Scripture must be clarified by other passages.’⁸

Law and Gospel

Luther famously understood the entirety of Scripture as a tension between law and gospel. The Old Testament contains mainly the law, with hints of the grace of the gospel; while the New Testament contains primarily the gospel and grace, with hints of the law. The two must be read in light of one another. The task of the Christian, then, is to ‘rightly divide’ the Word of God.

Luther understood the use of the law to consist of two fundamental aspects: the first was civil protection for ancient Israel and was thus largely situated within the historico-cultural time period in which it was written and actively used. Much of the law is still valid, however, to the extent that it continues to restrain civil society in its inherent wickedness. The second use of the law has the entirely enduring feature of convicting sinners of their sin and, hence, their fundamental need of Divine forgiveness and grace, knowing that they are

⁶ Ibid, 39:178.

⁷ Ibid, 25:405.

⁸ Ibid, 37:177.

constitutively incapable of fulfilling the panoply of the law's dictates. This is the *spiritual* use of the law.

The very saving work of Christ is to translate the sinner from a state of being under the law and accursed by it, to the gospel. Christ brings us from, 'the Law to the Gospel, from wrath to grace, from sin to righteousness, and from death to life.'⁹ The law is a suffocating demand, while the gospel, received in faith, is a saving gulp of air, given solely by grace (*sola gratia*).

In this sense, Luther saw elements of the law and the gospel throughout the entirety of Scripture. It is only by holding the two in tension, or better, as two sides of the same coin each informing the other, that one can truly understand the 'good news' of the gospel message of Christ.

The Texts: Though Luther's writings concerning his doctrine of Scripture appear in sundry, scattered places throughout the entire corpus of his work, a great deal can be discerned from a prefatory passage appearing in his well-known, *On The Bondage of Will*, as well as from his *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. In the former reading, Luther outlines both his understanding of the role the Bible must take in determining the outcome of disputes within the church while, in the latter, he expounds upon the necessity of following Scripture to protect oneself from the errors of persons and/or institutions which might threaten us with a 'false gospel.'

Supplemental suggested reading: The *95 Theses*. If the student has not read Luther's famous 95 theses of 1517, these should also be taken in as seminal reading for understanding Luther's conclusions in connection with his doctrine of Scripture and authority. An online edition can be found at:

<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/ninetyfive.html>.

Further Reading

Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), chs. 1 & 9.

Bayer, Oswald, 'Luther as an interpreter of Holy Scripture' in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 5.

Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), chs. 6 & 7.

⁹ Ibid, 26:48.

David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), ch. 7.

Questions for consideration

1. In what capacity is Luther's approach to Scripture a development of earlier approaches?
2. Was Luther wise to move away from the *quadriga* as an effective method for approaching the Bible?
3. In what ways does Luther's distinction between law and gospel both enhance and/or complicate Biblical exegesis?
4. How might Luther avoid the charge of 'private interpretation' of Scripture?