

Lönning, Inge, “‘No Other Gospel’: Luther’s Concept of the ‘Middle of Scripture’ in Its Significance for Ecumenical Communion and Christian Confession Today,” *Luther’s Ecumenical Significance*, eds. Peter Manns and Harding Meyer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 229-45.

THE THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE OF
THE REFORMATION AS
AN ECUMENICAL PROBLEM

In his fine essay “Über die beiden Prinzipien des Protestantismus,”¹⁴ Albrecht Ritschl established that the origin of the common manner of speaking about the formal principle (*sola scriptura*) and the material principle (*sola gratia/sola fide*) of Reformation theology is to be found in the neo-Lutheran dogmatics of the early nineteenth century.¹⁵ The interpretative framework embedded in this mode of expression presupposes a sharp division between the question of authority and the question of content with regard to understanding Scripture. The scriptural principle only delimits the extent of what is normative. The understanding of what is normative, however, requires correct guidance by means of a second principle that involves content. Against this background the *sola scriptura* comes to be seen with a certain inevitability as the structurally parallel alternative to the formula “Scripture and tradition,” understood additively, just as the material princi-

ple logically appears as the alternative to a dogmatic understanding of Scripture which is expressed in such formulae as "nature and grace" and "faith and works."

To the post-Tridentine controversial theology, such an interpretative scheme had to be obvious, and indeed on both sides of the established confessional fence. It should be obvious that Luther's position on the problem of scriptural authority/scriptural understanding can only with difficulty be made to fit such a scheme. The difficulty can perhaps most easily be seen by looking at the history of the way in which his statements critical of the New Testament canon had been transmitted.¹⁶ From a somewhat hesitant apologetic stance vis-a-vis the harsh accusations of anti-Reformation polemics,¹⁷ the Lutheran tradition moves between the intermediate stage of a well-balanced theory of a two-fold canonicity of the New Testament¹⁸ to a position of almost total forgetfulness of Luther in this respect.¹⁹ A reminiscence, however, remains until today in the confessional doctrinal tradition of Lutheranism in the extraordinary fact from the point of view of theological history, that Lutheranism has not made a dogmatic determination concerning the biblical canon.²⁰ The silence of the Lutheran confession in this respect is indeed in itself ambiguous. From its Reformation roots, however, this should best be interpreted, perhaps, by means of the common, though somewhat contradictory term of an open canon. To the extent that this expression signifies more than a fundamental revisability of the limits of the canon, it necessarily points to the impossibility of a strict, formally understood scriptural principle.²¹

In the history of development of the Roman Catholic/Lutheran controversial theology, there are unmistakable signs of a real shift of fronts with regard to the problem of the authority of Scripture. The original anti-Reformation position, which, through concentration on the infallibility of the ecclesial magisterium defended intact the formal authority of the Holy Scripture against the supposedly destructive subjectivism of Luther, gradually moves towards the assertion of the material insufficiency of the Scripture and the consequent necessity for an additional, orally transmitted truth of revelation. In the process of this shift of accent there also follows, unavoidably, an interest in pointing out argumentatively the inadequacies of the written and the advantages of the oral transmission of the truth of revelation that has been entrusted to the church.²² On the Lutheran side, the undefended position of Luther, which has its theological uniqueness above all in the fact that the authority of Scripture is derived from the essentially oral nature of the gospel,²³ is replaced by an increasing formalization of the authority of Scripture. The material sufficiency of Scripture, which is challenged more and more fiercely by the opposing side, must be argumentatively defended. The inevitable consequence is the elaboration of the essentially written character of divine revelation, which takes away from the opposition between

law and gospel its constitutive function for the understanding of the authority of Scripture.²⁴ In the process of this shift of accent, then, questions about the authority of Scripture and questions concerning the understanding of Scripture fall further and further apart in the confessionally defined universe of Lutheran thought, which becomes clear in the unfortunate fate of the original Reformation thesis of the clarity of Scripture. If authority of Scripture and understanding of Scripture are disjoined, this thesis will either be silently relativized and put aside, or it will be overtaken in the service of a one-sided intellectualistic concept of revelation and will thus be surrendered as an easy prey to historical criticism.²⁵

This controversial-theological development has shown itself to be fateful not only for a correct understanding of Luther's thought, but also for the possibilities of a truly ecumenical theology, that is, one that is represented in open discussion and capable of correction. Indeed theology is always a polemical venture inasmuch as true knowledge and talk of God are critically related to the distorted ideas of God of a fallen world. A theology which is so extensively determined by a supposedly fundamental contrast to another confessional position within the church, that thought and reasoning are shaped by this contrast alone, is inevitably driven into the inflexibility of all purely reactive human endeavours. The already defined statement of the question of the controversy allows no new approach, no new, critical direction of the question. In practice this means: every question which is not incorporated as co-determinative into the agreed upon structure of the confessional controversy will be excluded by both sides. This perhaps also explains the fact that there is an ecumenical reservedness about Luther's theology both within and outside of the confessional tradition of Lutheranism. Within the framework of the opposition between a formalized principle of Scripture and Tradition, there is no room for a correct understanding of Luther's intentions in the matter of the relation of theology to Scripture.

Everything in the universe of Luther's Reformation stands or falls with the thesis of the clarity of Holy Scripture. That Christian theology is substantially bound to the task of interpretation of Scripture, that is, that it grows out of the struggle to resolve this task and leads into the struggle concerning the constantly renewed resolution of this same task,²⁶ all this can only be understood when the clarity thesis is presupposed. The same is true of the unprecedented theological concentration on the understanding of the central message of Scripture and the remarkable calmness with regard to the question of the limit of the canon of Scripture. The function of the thesis of the clarity of Scripture, however, is only properly recognized when the essential content has been somewhat correctly determined. For Luther it is not a question, as is later the case with Orthodox dogmatists, of the quality of transparency (*perspicuitas*), which statements of Scripture should in a specific way have. Rather, the expression *claritas scripturae* should be under-

stood quite unambiguously from the contrast between light and darkness and the imagery associated with these two concepts.²⁷ In the controversy with Erasmus, the alternative is worked out with special sharpness. Either one starts, like Erasmus, from the point that Scripture is dark and must be clarified by means of an authoritative interpretation in order to attain the necessary clearness or, conversely—like Luther—one starts from the illuminating power of the message of Scripture and the necessity of clarifying all human agencies of interpretation. There are, of course, according to Luther's view of Scripture, signs which are obscure. It is decisive, however, that all the key teachings of Scripture (*res scripturae*) lie in bright daylight.²⁸ This has been so since Christ's resurrection: the incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity, the atonement, the Lordship of Christ, all these have become accessible through the fact that Holy Scripture henceforth is presented as the pure proclamation of Christ and only as this.²⁹

Previously in the fundamental methodical statements in "De servo arbitrio," the thesis of the clarity of Scripture is described as "our first principle"³⁰ which must form the basis of all theological proof. To want to prove such a basic principle is, in general discussion, an absurd and impossible enterprise. In theology, however, in view of the bad habit which presupposes the obscurity and ambiguity of Scripture, it is unavoidable.³¹ That Scripture is to be considered³² a spiritual light, much brighter than the sun, is based characteristically on the use of a set of central light statements from both Testaments. Thus the function of the external clarity of Scripture (*claritas externa scripturae*) is defined more precisely in that the church openly distinguishes and judges spirits and dogmas and thus makes possible the certainty of faith in Christ.³³

That the clarity of Scripture is based on its gravitation towards Christ is seen very distinctly in Luther's "Prefaces" to the Bible. The vivid conception of luminosity is also encountered here, and indeed in a central place: the Letter to the Romans is described as a bright light, "almost sufficient to illuminate the whole of Scripture"³⁴ (the Old Testament). It is not by chance that in the same context the promotion or urging of Christ (*Christus treiben*) is presented purely and simply as the criterion of the New Testament. The context is the passage, much debated, both in the Reformation century as well as in later centuries, from the "Preface to the Epistle of James":

The office of a true Apostle is that he preaches about the suffering, the resurrection and the office of Christ, and that he lays the same foundation for faith as Christ himself says in John 15: "You will witness concerning me," and all upright sacred books agree on one thing, that they all collectively preach and promote Christ. Likewise, the true criterion for criticizing all books is to see whether they promote Christ or not, since all Scripture manifests Christ, Romans 3, and Paul will know nothing except Christ, 1 Corinthians 2. Whatever does not teach Christ is not Apostolic, even if Peter and Paul should teach it. On the other

hand, whatever preaches Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod should do it!"³⁵

Here it is manifest that the criterion of "promoting Christ" is to be understood as a theological equivalent to the traditional formal criteria of apostolicity and inspiration which criteria thereby receive a material precision and profile. The attribute of apostolicity only becomes understandable in its polemically sharpened form when considered against the background of the Pauline "no other Gospel" (Gal. 1:8), which played a demonstrably decisive role in Luther's theological development.³⁶ The attribute of inspiration is insolubly linked to the attribute of "that which promotes Christ" insofar as the Holy Spirit is the only agent in this world capable of "promoting Christ," that is, of communicating Christ and his consummated salvific work to faith.³⁷

It should of course be noted that the criterion—or *prufesteyn*—in its critical function is nothing other than the opposite side of the first and most fundamental theological statement of Luther's "Prefaces" to the Bible—there is one and only one Gospel.³⁸ On the other hand, a formal idea of the tradition, in this case a concept of literary genre, is filled with content in Luther's thought process. It is not by chance then that this directly brings about a corresponding material interpretation of the concept of the New Testament.³⁹ The reference in "De servo arbitrio"⁴⁰ to Christ's resurrection—more exactly, the breaking of the seal on the tomb—as the all illuminating revelation of Scripture, corresponds exactly in content to the definition of the concept of gospel, which, with an allusion to the David and Goliath story, defines the gospel as the good news of "a true David, who has fought and overcome sin, death and the devil."⁴¹ This definition is then directly extended into the thought of the intrinsic unity of the gospel: "Thus we see now that there is no more than one gospel, just as there is only one Christ, since the gospel is and can be nothing else than a sermon on the Christ of God and the son of David . . ."⁴² From the main ecumenical declaration of the Reformation, Eph. 4:3ff.,⁴³ theological reasoning would need to make more precise that the unity of faith, the unity of baptism, the unity of the church, and the unity of God are insolubly bound to the essential unity of the gospel.

In two respects Luther's scriptural principle—which we, with complete historical reason, feel able to define as the theological principle of the Reformation—would require yet another conceptual addition in order to become completely comprehensible. It is a matter of the convergence, or better, the tendential unification of the two questions of the authority and the content of the message of Scripture. Luther quite understandably proceeds from the tradition that the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture. In place of the interpretative schemes which were based upon the subtle theory of the