

Chapter 4 What Makes the Bible Become Holy Scripture?

Holy Scripture is its own interpreter.

The question that deals with the authority of the Bible has assumed different aspects in the present age from what it had at the time of Luther. But Luther made important, basic hermeneutical decisions that have not lost their validity even today. As within this entire presentation of Luther's theology, questions from our own time need to be taken into account as well, most especially at this juncture.

4.1. The Priority of the Scripture over the Hearers and Interpreters

Luther's foundational thesis reads: *Sacra scriptura "sui ipsius interpretres"*¹ — the Holy Scripture "is its own interpreter." This thesis goes way beyond the methodology that involves work with a concordance, by means of which a particular scriptural passage is to be interpreted by other passages and must be brought into agreement with them. It refers specifically to the effect that the text has, with reference to the one who reads, hears, and interprets it. In this comprehensive sense the phrase *Sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpretres* means: "The text itself causes one to pay attention."

Even with all the interpretive work, which can be carried out academically — by means of solid research that is clear and is subject to controls — the understanding of the biblical text is, in the final analysis, still unattain-

1. WA 7:97.23 (*Assertio omnium articulorum*, 1520); for the citation in its context, see 4.3 below (n. 17).

generally valid for interpreting Scripture, as well as for being interpreted by Scripture, as one comes to know about the self by means of Scripture; but one cannot set forth in advance some purely formal, hypothetical, and verifiable approach that can guarantee a result. An abstract, primal, and foundational rule of interpretation is impossible.

4.3. The Self-Disclosure of the Holy Scripture by Means of Law and Gospel

It is decisive for Luther's understanding of the Bible that he does not seek to establish its authority as Holy Scripture in advance as a *formal* "scriptural principle." Such a claim for authority, which is advocated by fundamentalists, is not possible because the conflict about the appropriate method of biblical interpretation is always at issue. This conflict can be resolved only in the *material* sense, using the substance of the actual texts to settle the argument.

In his conflict with the Roman papacy, Luther argues in a classic passage:

Say for once — if you can — according to which judge, according to which criterion, can a point of contention be decided when the opinions of two of the church fathers disagree with one another? In such a case, the decision has to be based on the judgment of Scripture, which cannot happen if we do not give Scripture pride of place. . . . Having said this, the Holy Scripture itself on its own, to the greatest extent possible, is easy to understand, clearly and plainly, being its own interpreter [*sui ipsius interpres*], in that it puts all statements of human beings to the test, judging and enlightening, as is written in Psalm 119[:130]: "The explanation," or according to its actual meaning in the Hebrew: the opening or the gate — "of your words enlightens and gives understanding to youngsters." The Spirit clearly points here to the enlightenment [of the Scripture] and teaches that insight is given only by means of the Word of God, as through an open door or (as those [scholastics] say) through a first principle [*principium primum*], from which one must start in order to come to the light and to insight.¹⁷

reformational "Scripture principle" should fail to take into account the paradox that lies therein. This Word makes sense only when understood as the description of a conflict — the conflict that academic theology presented at the time of Luther, still presents today, and will continue to present in time to come. Whoever speaks of the "scriptural principle" can do so only in radical criticism of a concept of academic study that assumes there is a timeless, pure a priori.

17. WA 7:97.19-29 (*Assertio omnium articulorum*; 1520).

But must not this affirmation also be categorized as the work of a single individual? Is it not Luther's private discovery? This *singularitas*, this type of viewpoint that is held by a single individual, was judged to be a deep form of evil for a monk; prereformational Luther was of the same opinion. Part of Luther's deepest struggle involved the question he posed as he critiqued himself time and again: Am I the only one who is right over against such a strong tradition?

And yet, Luther's thesis *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, which he claimed was correct in opposition to official Roman teaching, is not the bare affirmation of an individual; it is set forth in substantive detail when Luther identifies what he considers to be most essential in the "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings" — with the three rules for theological study, *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*¹⁸ — as well as in the "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" — which discusses his discovery that the righteousness of God is provided for the sinner through the *promissio*.¹⁹ To be sure, Luther describes this discovery when he looks back upon the way he himself traveled, but for him this involves much more than autobiographical information; for him it involves the paradigmatic description of all readers of the Bible who wrestle with the text with nothing less than the hope of salvation, who passionately knock on the door and hope thereby that a door of knowledge, that doorway to Paradise, to the true life, will open itself. Luther's description certainly sets the scene for the question about the authority of the Bible in dramatic fashion. According to it, one does not arrive at the solution to the question "in the passionless calm of a knowledge which is in the element of pure thought alone";²⁰ instead, it includes a change in the existence of the reader and interpreter. The Holy Scripture verifies itself, in that it awakens *faith*. As has been stated already,²¹ it does not work for one to take the so-called scriptural principle and try to differentiate between a "Protestant formal principle" and a "Protestant material principle," which states the teaching about justification; one certainly ought not to treat them as separate. Both are one and the same: wrapped up in the event that takes place when the righteousness of God is actually given as a gift, at the moment the *promissio* is articulated, one encounters the authority of Scripture, its efficacy and clarity — its ability to enlighten — as well as its sufficiency: its power to bring one to salvation — if indeed Scripture is given "for

18. Cf. chap. 2.1.1-3 above.

19. Cf. n. 2 above.

20. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, preface to the second edition of *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969), 42.

21. Cf. n. 3 above.

the salvation" of human beings (2 Tim. 3:15). *The question about the significance of the reformational turning point in Luther's theology and the question about Luther's understanding of biblical authority are the same; they are one and the same question.*

It is not by chance that this authority to effect salvation came clear for Luther when he was engaged in the study of the Epistle to the Romans. Thus it is only at first glance that it seems arbitrary when he singles out Romans — along with the Epistle to the Galatians — as furnishing the criterion for the interpretation of the entire Holy Scripture in his 1522 preface: it is "a shining light" that is "fully sufficient for illuminating the entire Scripture."²² Because it concerns the salvation of human beings, the "subject of theology" is "the guilty and lost human being and the justifying or saving God."²³ This is articulated most clearly in Romans, which not only offers a short summary "of the whole Christian and evangelical teaching" but also offers the "point of entry . . . into the entire Old Testament."²⁴ Luther's identification of the subject of theology as "the sinning human being and the justifying God" corresponds exactly to what was noted earlier, that Luther had only one phrase of the entire German Bible typeset in capital letters: *SVNDE VERGIBT* (forgives sins) (Rom. 3:25), which he further identified in a marginal gloss as "the chief point" and the "center-point of this epistle and of the entire Scripture²⁵ — also of the Old Testament."²⁶ Luther's placement of Romans in the position of highest importance is determinative for his understanding and assessment of the individual biblical writings.

Both Roman Catholic and historical-critical camps have relegated Luther's decision to elevate the importance of Romans to the status of nothing more than his personal decision, that of just a single individual. But if Scripture really is to be characterized as *sui ipsius interpres*, then this ability to interpret itself can take place only in a material fashion: in that the text itself creates faith or, to state it another way, in that the text itself distinguishes between law and gospel for its hearers, readers, and interpreters. Only this material differentiation, which is the substance of Luther's refor-

22. Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel*, 177; cf. *LW* 35:366 ("Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans"). Jörg Armbruster, *Luthers Bibelvorreden. Studien zu ihrer Theologie*, AGWB, vol. 5 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2005), indicates that a thorough orientation to Romans or to Pauline theology as a whole yields the most important material presentation of the rule *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (110-15, 140-42).

23. Cf. above, chap. 2.2.

24. Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel*, 196; cf. *LW* 35:380.

25. Cf. the introduction above, nn. 16 and 17.

26. Cf. 4.7 below.

mational discovery²⁷ but at the same time occurs afresh, ever and again, makes it possible to hear and to read Scripture on the basis of its center point, so that faith comes into existence. Scripture cannot claim to be normative in a formal sense. Rather, *its authority consists in that it works faith.* The Lutheran tradition has articulated this in such a way that its *auctoritas normativa* follows from its *auctoritas causativa* — because of the authority that it has to create faith.

Thus one must remain unconvinced by any of the three alternative models that have played a significant role in the history of the church and in spirituality. The first provides a formal teaching office, which exists in order to harmonize disputed passages. The second is to give formal affirmation to the notion that a preestablished harmony exists within Scripture, which is to be read in a flat way and which does not have a central message. The third is that there is a formal principle that lies behind the text and is to be extracted by critical reason.

“Scripture is clear and interprets itself. Indeed, this does not take place in such a way that it yields different meanings based on the understandings and perspectives of each interpreter, but it has one meaning, and this meaning is obvious; it itself makes the meaning clear; it is its own interpreter and does not need a human being — no matter who it is — to first help it along . . . by means of interpretive skills. . . . The normative function of Scripture demonstrates its claim to be normative by basing it on the way it is existentially verified when it interprets itself, in the way Scripture conveys its own intended meaning.”²⁸ It is no secret that Luther got himself into a variety of conflicts as the Reformation progressed when he sought to use this self-interpreting ability in matters of theology and the church, and such conflicts continue even today for the church that calls itself by his name — in fact, in a way that is depicted in sharp relief by the challenge of pluralism.

4.4. Spirit and Letter

For a long time already scholars have emphasized that the biblical texts are really to be considered as God’s Word — as the living voice, the *viva vox*²⁹ — only when they are preached, only when presented in oral fashion. To support this, words by Luther such as the following have been cited:

27. Cf. chap. 3.3 above.

28. Notger Slenczka, “Die Schrift als ‘einzige Norm und Richtschnur,’” in *Die Autorität der Heiligen Schrift für Lehre und Verkündigung der Kirche*, ed. Karl-Hermann Kandler (Neuendettelsau: Freimund Verlag, 2001), 61 and 65.

29. Cf., e.g., LW 3:306 (*Lectures on Genesis*, chaps. 15– 20, on Gen. 19:29).

If such an understanding of the gospel is accurate, then the question about the authoritative power of the verbal and also the written⁴⁴ Word can be answered only by pointing out that the Word — especially the preached Word — is Jesus Christ himself who is thereby present, as is the Spirit. The Word is “the voice . . . that says: Christ is now your own, with his life, teaching, works, death, resurrection and everything that he is, has, does, and can do.”⁴⁵ The Word thus focuses on the sermon, since only in the midst of the community gathered for worship⁴⁶ can it unfold that for which it was given: life and deliverance are to be proclaimed and communicated.

In this way the measuring rod — the “canon” — is set up to establish what is absolute truth, what is truly new, which will never become old. That which is eternally new has a name: Jesus Christ.

[In this way] all the correct holy books agree, in that every one of them preaches and drives Christ home. That is also the correct touchstone for evaluating all books: to see whether they drive Christ home or not, since all Scripture shows Christ, Rom. 3[:21], and Saint Paul desires to know nothing but Christ, 1 Cor. 2[:2]. Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Saint Peter or Saint Paul teaches it. Once again, whatever preaches Christ, that is apostolic, even if it were to be presented by Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod.⁴⁷

With absolute clarity one can see where the dividing line falls that distinguishes Christian theology from a Bible fundamentalism. One cannot state it any more incisively than Luther does when he articulates the criterion that uses specific, material content — over against a claim for scriptural authority that is established on formal grounds.⁴⁸ The way and manner in which Scrip-

44. WA 7:97.1-3 (*Assertio omnium articulorum*): “nowhere can the Spirit be found more present and alive than in his holy books themselves, which he has written.”

45. Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel*, 171; cf. LW 35:35.361 (“Preface to the New Testament”).

46. Cf. 4.2 above.

47. Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel*, 216f.; cf. LW 35:396 (“Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude,” 1546/1522).

48. Of course, one should note that precisely for the sake of material authority a certain “formal” room to move about freely is needed. Luther thus allows the writings that he regards as questionable, i.e., James, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation, to remain in the canon in a “formal” sense, though they are not numbered. He does not exclude them from the canon, since others might find something canonical in them. Luther does not try to “master” Scripture; he approaches by anticipating that it is trustworthy, even at the point where he has great difficulty understanding it. A comparison of the first and second prefaces to the Revelation of John (1530) provides an example of how Luther’s judgment turned positive toward it.

ture “drives Christ home” and what provides the “correct touchstone for evaluating all books,” thus, the measuring rod for evaluation, is defined more specifically by the way law and gospel are to be distinguished.⁴⁹ “It has become a deplorable custom that the Gospels and the Epistles are treated like law books, in which one is to learn what we are to do, and in which the works of Christ are presented as nothing but an example held before one’s eyes. Wherever this errant opinion remains within the heart, there neither gospel nor epistle can be read usefully and in a Christian way; such readers remain nothing but heathen, as before.”⁵⁰ In short: the evangelical understanding of the center point of Scripture determines how to understand scriptural authority at all. The Word of Scripture that is preached and expressed verbally is nothing but Jesus Christ in his presence; he is present in the gospel as promise and gift and is to be differentiated from law.

Luther’s ingenious distinction and the relationship he describes concerning the inner and external clarity of Scripture correspond to this very specific and reflective use of Scripture — to one’s interaction with Scripture when applying it to the practical issues of life, which defines its “knowledge” as that by which one becomes known.

4.6. The Three Fronts for Luther’s Understanding of Scripture

4.6.1. Against the Skeptical Humanism of Erasmus of Rotterdam

The clarity of Scripture is twofold, just as its darkness has a twofold character: The one, the external, is placed in service of the spoken word; the other is located in the knowledge of the heart. If you speak about an inner clarity, no human being can consider even an *iota* of Scripture to be true, unless he has the Spirit of God. Everyone has a darkened heart, so that even when they can speak about and know how to set forth everything that is written in Scripture, they are still unable to consider anything true or to recognize it truly, nor do they believe God, neither that they are creatures of God nor anything else, which corresponds to the statement in that psalm: “The fool says in his heart: God is nothing [Ps. 14:1].” The [Holy] Spirit is namely necessary for understanding the entire Scripture and every single one of its beloved parts. If you speak of the *external* [clarity], nothing remains that is dark or that can have two meanings; instead,

49. Cf. 4.3 above, and chap. 3.2.

50. WA 101/1:8.14–9.5 (“Ein kleiner Unterricht, was man in den Evangelien suchen und erwarten soll”; *Kirchenpostille*, 1522). Cf. chap. 3.3.2 above.