

# Inerrancy and the Church

Edited by

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# 4

## Luther and Biblical Infallibility

*Robert D. Preus*

### A FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

If Luther were alive today would he believe in the inerrancy of Scripture? That, the subject of our present chapter, seems like a very unsound question, unworthy of a good scholar or historian or even a good theologian. After all, how could anyone know how Luther would have reacted to arguments pro and con on the subject of biblical inerrancy and to the mass of data available to us today as they impinge on that doctrine? The question, however, has been asked by just about every Luther scholar, historian or theologian, who has addressed Luther's use of the Scriptures and his attitude toward them. It has been phrased differently at times:

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e.g., Did Luther believe there were errors in the Bible? Did he believe that the Bible was wholly and in every respect true? My phrasing of the question, however, has a couple of advantages over the more scholarly and conservative posing of it. First, it reminds us of the great span of time separating Luther from us and of the very different motives and reasons and context for his reverent (I presume every Luther scholar would grant that) posture toward Scripture from that of modern theologians—whether liberal or conservative—and scholars. And it alerts us to the possible danger or inappropriateness of addressing a twentieth-century question to a sixteenth-century man. Second, the very unsoundness and unscholarly tone of the question is calculated to draw attention to the fact that we have no right as theologians or historians to speculate concerning how he would fit in with our present discussions concerning inerrancy; our duty is to determine what he actually believed and to rule out what he could not have believed in 1520 or 1546.

What I am getting at is not meant to imply that we cannot conclude that Luther (like Erasmus or Socinians later in the century) may well have been in advance of his day as he interpreted the Scriptures, or that Luther could have anticipated an understanding of the Scriptures' form that became explicit and accepted only after his day. But I would argue that such conclusions are unlikely (Luther, like every other historical figure we study, except Christ, was a child of his time); the burden of proof—irrefutable proof—lies squarely on the back of the scholar who proposes that Luther was in advance of his day, especially three or four hundred years in advance.

I realize that what I am saying may appear to reveal a strong bias on my part even before I examine the evidence and the secondary sources relevant to Luther's position on biblical authority and interpretation, and I readily admit that. However, that is not a theological prejudice on my part but a basic principle that ought to inform the method of any scholar who studies the history of Christian thought and to caution him against coming to facile, anachronistic conclusions.

I believe that my apprehension concerning that point of method is fully justified as one gives attention to Luther's doctrine of biblical authority and to all that has been written on the subject in

recent years. It is distressing and aggravating, for instance, to hear modern theologians claiming that Luther was a father of the so-called historical-critical method<sup>1</sup> and thus had to believe that the Bible was less than inerrant. One might dismiss that false assertion as just another attempt to adduce the authority of Luther and the Reformers to support a modern theory; it is indeed just that. But such a claim is also the result of a deep methodological aberration, namely, the inability (or refusal) to see and study Luther in his own context, his own age, his own world of thought. And it is on that point that I would like to make a few comments.

It is entirely possible that the humanism of the Renaissance paved the way for the historical-critical method with its frank rejection of biblical inerrancy and everything supernatural in the biblical account—a method that was consciously put into play only about the time of Semler, almost three hundred years later. But if that is so, it is not the emphasis *ad fontes*, or the interest in textual criticism, or the rejection of the allegorical method of exegesis, or even the critical questioning of the authenticity of historical documents such as the Donation of Constantine—all common to humanism—that prefigured the historical-critical method, but humanism itself, that is, its basic philosophy, theology, and anthropology. And that humanistic frame of thought and approach to Scripture that we see so clearly in Erasmus,<sup>2</sup> an approach that resembles the theology of Semler and the classical

1. A recent statement by Warren Quanbeck is quite typical of that position. See "The Confessions and Their Influence upon Biblical Interpretation," in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), p. 182: "The historical-critical study of the Bible, set in motion by the Renaissance and the Reformation, has made great contributions to the understanding of the biblical message. It has underscored and reenforced the teaching of the reformers at many points, even corrected the reformers' interpretations." Interestingly, an article by Kurt Marquart, "The Incompatibility between Historical-Critical Theology and the Lutheran Confessions" (p. 113ff.), denies the very assumption of Quanbeck that the historical-critical method has its origins in the approach of the Reformers to Scripture. See also Robert Preus, "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret and Use the Old and New Testaments?" in *1973 Reformation Lectures* (Mankato, Minn.: Bethany Lutheran College, 1973).
2. *Ratio seu methodus compendio perueniendi ad veram theologiam* (Basel, 1520). Erasmus's theology is summarized in that short work. He preferred the simple theology of the gospels to the rest of Scripture and drew his teachings mainly from them. Jesus was represented as a great teacher and example. Erasmus showed no interest in the high priestly office of Christ. His emphasis was almost entirely on the ethics of Jesus.

liberalism of Harnack, is precisely what Luther and all the Reformers, including Melanchthon, rejected *in toto*. Luther's *De servo arbitrio* and Melanchthon's first *Loci communes* prove that point emphatically. Thus, the fact that Luther and all the Reformers (as well as Flacius and the strictest of the later Lutherans and Calvinists, such as Calov and the Buxdorfs) eagerly made use of the many adventitious contributions of the humanists does not even faintly suggest that they deviated intentionally or unintentionally from that view of Scripture and its divine authority that was the common possession of all western Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

But perhaps Luther unintentionally and inadvertently approached and said things about Scripture that might have given rise to the historical-critical method and the accompanying denial of inerrancy. In principle such a possibility exists and is not in opposition to my caveat that we study Luther strictly in his context. After all, someone in the course of history has to sow the seed of every new thought, and someone too has to advocate the thought explicitly. Why not Luther in this case? Again however, all evidence and careful thought militate against such a surmise.

First, the time between Luther and Semler is too great; why would no one in the intervening period draw attention to Luther's more liberal and innovative thoughts, if he had them, on the matter of biblical authority and truthfulness? And why would all his truly loyal followers adopt in time of controversy a position of strict biblical inerrancy? Second, and more significantly, by 1535 (and certainly by 1545) Luther had formed a very final position in all matters of doctrine, including the authority of Scripture and what that implied for hermeneutics and the whole theological enterprise. Furthermore, his position in his later career was definitely not *in transitu* but clearly self-conscious. We have every reason to believe that the mature Luther understood his own position and the implications of what he said on theological issues. Thus we cannot say with any confidence, "If Luther were alive today he would have said things differently," or, "Those are the implications of Luther's theology that, if he were alive today, he would

3. See John F. Johnson's chapter (in this volume) on the position of the early church Fathers.

embrace." One statement from Luther's great confession (1528) is perhaps significant to establish the point.

I see that schisms and errors are increasing proportionately with the passage of time, and that there is no end to the rage and fury of Satan. Hence lest any persons during my lifetime or after my death appeal to me to misuse my writings and confirm their error as the Sacramentarians and Baptists are beginning to do, I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence if one shall say after my death, "If Dr. Luther were living now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not consider it sufficiently," etc., let me say now as then, and then as now, that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the Sacrament of the Altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idol talk; I am in dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert the Word of God, what will he be able to do with my or someone else's words?<sup>4</sup>

If those prolegomenous remarks about the method of studying the thought of a sixteenth-century theologian are cogent, then one substantial conclusion becomes apparent and basic for any study

4. Cited in *FC, SD*, VII, 29-31. See *WA*, 26:499-500. See also *LW*, 37:360-61. In no work of his did Luther more emphatically teach biblical authority and affirm his adherence to the *sensus literalis* of Scripture than in that great work. See *ibid.*, p. 308 *passim*.

Note the following keys to abbreviations used in this and following notes: *Er. Lat.* = Martin Luther, *Opera latina* (Frankfurt und Erlangen: Heyder und Simmer, 1865-73); *WA* = D. Martin Luther's *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883-); *W1* = D. Martin Luther's *Sämtliche Schriften*, herausgegeben von Johann Georg Walch, 1. Auflage (Halle: Johann Justinus Gebauer, 1740-53); *W2* = Martin Luther's *Sämliche Schriften*, herausgegeben von Johann Georg Walch, 2. Auflage (St. Louis: Concordia, 1818-1930). *LW Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert Fischer et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-).

of Luther's doctrine of Scripture; one should not impute any view regarding Scripture or its interpretation to Luther without solid, assertive evidence from his writings. And one ought to eschew innuendos, hyperbolic statements, outbursts, and snippets from Luther as evidence that he held a position toward Scripture in advance of his time, especially if there is no positive evidence to support such a contention. Luther, in his thousands of deliberate and definite remarks about Scripture and its interpretation, said many things that were clearly against the Romanists, *Schwaermer*, Zwingli, and many others of his day, and he said some things that were indeed novel. If he had held a view concerning the truthfulness or divine authority of Scripture different from the papists, or *Schwaermer*, or any adversary, or from tradition, we would expect him to have expressed himself plainly, as he did at Leipzig in 1519, at Marburg in 1529, against the heavenly prophets in 1525, and repeatedly throughout his career. But as far as I have been able to discern, his view (as we shall see), expressed so accurately in controversy, was invariably the highest view of Scripture and revealed a greater devotion to the written Word than that of his adversaries. And if occasionally an *obiter dictum*, ejaculation, or subjective opinion—so common to Luther—seems to make him appear radical or liberal at times in comparison with many of his contemporaries, we can only (without discounting them or psychologizing them away) balance such statements with the overwhelmingly massive evidence of Luther's mature and conservative view of Scripture.

#### LUTHER STUDIES: A HELP AND A HINDRANCE

To trace the discussions of Luther's doctrine of Scripture is in itself to write a history; that we cannot do. But we must mention how such studies have affected our understanding and appreciation of Luther's doctrine of biblical authority. With the exception of the apostle Paul, no theologian's ideas have been discussed so often and so heatedly as Luther's. Historians and theologians have had a kind of fascination for the man and his theology. That is so, perhaps, because he wrote so much, because he wrote so passionately and often changed his opinions until he became an older

man; or perhaps it is because of the intensely important themes he addressed himself to: salvation, law, authority, human rights, war, etc. At any rate, one cannot handle all the vast bibliography of Luther, just as one can hardly get through all of his works in a lifetime. Not only is Luther one of the most debated figures in the history of Christian thought, he is one of the most popular, at least today. Almost everyone wants to claim Luther as an ally, it seems, at least in some respect: Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, Existentialists, Neo-Orthodoxists, conservatives, liberals, even East German Communists.

Because of the great interest in Luther's doctrine of biblical authority and the sharp disagreement and controversy among scholars as they have sought to portray his thoughts on the matter, there has been a tremendous amount of literature on the subject in recent times. The literature of the past one hundred and fifty years has repeatedly explored all the data, though radically different conclusions have been drawn.

Why should that be, when the same data are used by all the Luther researchers? Luther spoke prolifically about Scripture and its authority. Was he perhaps unclear on the matter, equivocal, unsure of his position? Hardly. Perhaps his extemporaneous manner of addressing questions, his dogmatism, his penchant for hyperbole give rise to different interpretations. At most, that can only be a partial explanation for the diversity of opinion regarding his true views on biblical authority. The better explanation lies in the scholars and theologians themselves who study Luther—in their respective ideologies that color their interpretation of him on many issues and their desire to have Luther as an ally for their own ideas. That is an undeniable fact, whether conservative or liberal scholars offer us their findings. Now it may appear that I am engaging at this point in a dubious practice, what the logicians call "poisoning the wells," as I suggest that the prejudices or beliefs of Luther scholars have determined their conclusions. And I am as well undermining whatever conclusions I might bring forth in this study of Luther's doctrine of biblical authority. But please notice that I am directing my charge against virtually all historians and theologians who have studied Luther, whether it be the dispassionate and objective Leopold von Ranke, who did not

bother to discuss Luther's doctrine of biblical authority because he did not consider doctrine the stuff of history, the conservative Ewald Plass, who represents Luther's position in the form of Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod doctrine, existentialist Martin Heineken, who portrays Luther's doctrine with a Kierkegaardian existentialist brush, or liberal Joseph Sittler, who denies that Luther even believed in the normative authority of Scripture (a "static" doctrine, according to Sittler), that is, that Scripture was divinely authoritative by virtue of its divine origin and form. And we could go on and on giving examples of that very thing. Isaac Dorner, the nineteenth-century Prussian Union historian and theologian, represented Luther as teaching that some portions of Scripture are more inspired than others and some not the Word of God at all.<sup>5</sup> In more recent times dialectical theologian Emil Brunner commended Luther for teaching a merely material theory of biblical authority, the authority of its evangelical content not its words,<sup>6</sup> a position shared by not a few Lutherans. In all those cases the theologian or historian quotes Luther and insists that he understands Luther's true position concerning Scripture.

How do we react to all that and explain the apparently conflicting data in Luther: on the one hand his derogatory statements about James, Hebrews, Esther, etc., his seeming impatience and criticism with certain statements in the Scriptures, his pitting one Scripture passage or pericope against another (let us call that negative data) and on the other hand his continuous affirmations concerning the divine authority, origin, and truthfulness of Scripture (let us call that the positive data)? Several solutions have been

5. Isaac A. Dorner, *History of Protestant Theology*, trans. George Robson and Sophia Taylor, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 1:243-45. Two historians of dogma who have transcended the tendency to interpret Luther in the light of their own ideologies are Adolf von Harnack and Otto Ritschl. Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (London: Williams & Norgate, 1896). Otto Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1908-27). Ritschl (1:70ff.) actually drew attention to the point mentioned above when he spoke of the "self-evident presuppositions" of the "modern theologians" of the day. He and Harnack both saw certain apparent conflicts in Luther, which they do not seek to harmonize, e.g., Luther's statements on canonicity as opposed to his very pious attitude toward Scripture as a whole.
6. *The Christian Doctrine of God, Dogmatics*, vol. 1., trans. Olive Wion (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), pp. 109-11.

tried. One can give the negative data priority over the positive data by interpreting the positive data as mere medieval nominalistic incrustations on the more progressive and advanced theology of Luther—incrustations that he could rid himself of no more than his belief in devils or the sin of usury. That solution is not compelling because of the massive amount of positive data and especially because Luther emphatically asserted and believed the statements that constitute the positive data, just as he also in fact believed in devils and that usury was sinful.

Another solution would discount the negative data on the strength of the magnitude of the positive data. There is some force in that solution that, however, probably makes Luther more inconsistent than he really was but fails to explain away the negative data. After all, if one makes assertions utterly at variance with one's own mature thought, the historian or researcher owes it to his research to offer some plausible explanation for such inconsistency.

Still another solution would be to accept the force of the vast positive data at its face value as representing Luther's firm and mature convictions regarding biblical authority and then meticulously to find or at least propose explanations one by one for the conflicting statements of Luther's found in the negative data. The trouble with that solution is that though many of Luther's statements that appear to conflict with his ordinarily high-view toward Scripture can be explained away as hyperbole, unthinking and uncritical outbursts, or in some cases as inauthentic, his statements on matters of canonicity, though subsiding in intensity, continued throughout his life and cannot be explained away by any of the aforementioned felicitous expedencies.

Still another possible solution would be simply to let Luther's seeming contradictions concerning the Bible stand in all their contrariety. That solution (Adolf von Harnack?) is, I believe, methodologically unsound. One can in principle piously refrain from attempting to solve apparently conflicting statements only in the case of writings that one believes to be of divine origin and thus transcending critical human analysis (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity or of any mystery of faith contained in the Bible). In the case of Luther such a procedure would be utterly self-defeating.

For if the scholar, in attempting to discover Luther's opinion, finds him to be simply and categorically in disagreement with himself, then *eo ipso* the scholar cannot know Luther's opinion on the subject under consideration. And of course, such a solution that merely collects data and makes no attempt to evaluate, assess, and harmonize when that is called for is no solution at all.

Now except for the last, all the aforementioned solutions to the seeming conflicts between Luther's statements concerning Scripture have been attempted and with varying degrees of success. Kahnis, Tholuck, Luthardt, Craemer, and in more recent times Emil Brunner, Joseph Sittler, Edgar Carlson, and many, many others have opted for the first solution, ignoring the copious positive data, and thus making Luther an anachronistic forerunner of positive theology, crisis theology, existentialism, neo-orthodoxy, or the historical-critical method.<sup>7</sup>

A smaller number of conservative scholars have opted for the second solution, tended to ignore the negative data, and simply concluded that Luther shared pretty much the nominalistic thinking of his day on inspiration, authority, and inerrancy—with the addition of a keen insight into the power of the Word.

The third approach to solving the problem of conflicting data in Luther has been the most fruitful and has been carried on by theologians and historians with both conservative and liberal bent. Among liberals two great historians of dogma stand out: Adolf von Harnack and, even more, Otto Ritschl. They concluded that there are basic conflicts in Luther that he was never fully able to resolve himself, and so he held to a high view of biblical authority and inerrancy and at the same time made highly questionable statements about Scripture and radically doubted and altered generally accepted ideas about canonicity. Among more conservative theologians we have Wilhelm Rohnert, Wilhelm Koelling, and Wilhelm Walther in Germany and in America C. F. W. Walther, Adolf Hoehnecke, Francis Pieper, and Michael Reu, the last Luther scholar to make a definitive study of Luther's doctrine of Scripture on the basis of primary sources. The conclu-

7. See Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. H. W. Romoser et al (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 1:276ff.; Joseph Sittler, *The Doctrine of the Word* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948).

sions of those scholars are that many of the negative data are simply taken out of context and irrelevant to the subject of biblical authority; other negative data are careless or passing statements of Luther's that simply cannot be used to mitigate his clearly articulated position. And in the matter of canonicity they contend that Luther's position, which they usually reject, is again irrelevant to the subject of the inspiration of Scripture or its inerrancy and authority since the antilogomena were not considered to be Scripture by Luther.<sup>8</sup>

### LUTHER'S EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICS

The purpose of this study is to present Luther's doctrine of biblical infallibility. What do we mean by infallibility? What are we looking for as we study the writings of Luther in respect to that issue? We will not construct in advance a notion of biblical infallibility and then show how Luther taught it. Rather, we will examine his writings and his basic approach to Scripture and see what he said about Scripture and how he treated the Scriptures in order to learn just what his notion of biblical infallibility was. To do that I will examine Luther's views on three issues that are related to the idea of infallibility: the divine origin of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, and the truthfulness of Scripture. But

8. For bibliographical data on Luther's studies and the conclusions of Luther scholars on Luther's doctrine of Scripture, see Michael Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1944). For bibliographical information after the mid-forties, see E. Thestrup Pedersen, *Luther som skriftfortolker, en studie i Luthers skriftsyn hermeneutik og eksegesi* (Kobenhavn: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959). Reu's conclusions are based in part upon the data and conclusions of Wilhelm Walther, *Das Erbe der Reformation* (Leipzig: A. Duchert, 1918). It is interesting that Walther's monumental work in German and Reu's definitive study in English have been totally ignored by Rogers and McKim in their historical approach to the authority and interpretation of the Bible. See Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979). The only reference to Reu's work is the citation from Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), in which Heick accuses Reu (for altogether wrong reasons) of being unreliable and giving a "distorted view of Luther." That, I think, is the most shameful put down and the most outrageous piece of bad scholarship I have ever encountered in anyone, except perhaps for Sittler, who has aspired to write on the history of Christian thought. Rogers and McKim do not even include Reu (or Heick, for that matter) in their selected bibliography.

first we must say a few words about Luther's exegetical approach to Scripture.

Luther's notion of biblical infallibility arose from his firm belief that the Bible is the Word of God and that God spoke to him there powerfully and authoritatively. That belief of Luther's was more assumed than articulated, though one can find scores of statements of Luther's in which he expressly asserts that Scripture is God's Word that saves poor sinners. As a theologian and teacher, Luther saw himself first and foremost as an exegete, an interpreter of Scripture, a *bonus textualis*, as he put it.<sup>9</sup> That in itself was a break with scholastic tradition that extolled scholastic theology and those who wrote commentaries on Thomas Aquinas and Peter Lombard. There can be no doubt that Luther's love for exegesis and lecturing on books of the Bible was due to what he discovered therein, namely the gospel of justification by faith that comforted his tired conscience and informed his exegetical lectures, whether on Romans, Galatians, Genesis, or Isaiah. The exciting activities of the humanists, as they studied the biblical languages and dug into the Scriptures, no doubt only confirmed Luther in his first theological love.

Luther's background in the Occamistic tradition of *sola scriptura* reinforced him in his devotion to the exegesis of the sacred Scriptures. So we would expect Luther in his multitudinous writings to extol the Scriptures and to urge every aspiring theologian to read and reread them, struggle with them, depend upon them, and embrace their content with avidity. And so he did.<sup>10</sup> To Luther, the theologian was simply to accept what Scripture says according to the clear meaning of the words.<sup>11</sup> Against the medieval scholastics he insisted that the sense of Scripture was single and was clear.<sup>12</sup> The simple purpose of the exegete was to determine and draw out the meaning of the biblical text and to apply it.

From his many exegetical works, but also from his other writings, we are able to learn a great deal about Luther's approach to the Bible (hermeneutics) and his attitude toward it (which affect-

9. *W2*, 5:456.

10. *W2*, 6:96; 13:1898; 15:1271; 18:332, 732.

11. *WA*, 10:I:1:447; cf. *W2*, 3:21; 22:577.

12. *W2*, 1:950-52; 11:313; 18:1447.

ed his hermeneutics). In our present study we cannot, unfortunately, offer any kind of summary of Luther's hermeneutics, an acquaintance with which would be helpful—though not indispensable—for a full appreciation of his idea of biblical authority and infallibility.<sup>13</sup> Neither can we precede our discussion of Luther's doctrine of biblical infallibility with a full summary of his entire doctrine of the Word of God in the broader sense, helpful as that might be to give us perspective. But we must say a few things relative to Luther's approach to Scripture, lest his views on biblical authority be distorted.<sup>14</sup>

First, as we have already mentioned, Luther believed fervently that the Holy Spirit made a person a theologian through the study of Scripture and in no other way. In his well-known statement on the theme *Oratio, meditatio et tentatio faciunt theologum* (prayer, study [of Scripture], and affliction make one a theologian), Luther, placing by far the greatest emphasis on the second point, *meditatio* (the assiduous study of Scripture), wrote:

You should meditate, that is, not in the heart alone, but also externally, work on and ply the oral speech and the lettered words in the book, read them and reread them again and again, noting carefully and reflecting upon what the Holy Spirit means by these words. And have a care that you do not tire of it or think it enough if you have read, heard, said it once or twice, and now profoundly

13. We can only mention some of the studies on Lutheran hermeneutics: E. Thestrup Pedersen, *ibid.*; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959); W. M. Oesch, "Die Lehre von der Inspiration und ihre Anwendung auf die Urgeschichte," in *Fuldaer hefte* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1960); John Warwick Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967); John Reumann, ed., *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Arnold J. Koelpin, ed., *No Other Gospel* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980); Peter Meinhold, *Luthers Sprachphilosophie* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958); Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments* (Neukirchener: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969); Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).
14. I briefly touched upon those before in "The Early Church Through Luther," in Norman Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 372-77.

understand it all; for in that manner a person will never become much of a theologian.<sup>15</sup>

Again in the same vein he remarked:

He [the theologian] should adhere to this primary principle: in sacred matters there is no arguing or philosophizing; for if one were to operate with the rational and probable arguments in this area, it would be possible for me to twist all the articles of faith just as easily as Arius, the Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists did. But in theology we must only hear and believe and be convinced in our heart that God is truthful, however absurd that which God says in His Word may appear to be to reason.<sup>16</sup>

There is no doubt that for Luther the Holy Spirit made a person a theologian by leading him into an understanding of the intended sense of Scripture and in no other way.

This is our foundation: where the Holy Scripture establishes something that must be believed, there we must not deviate from the words as they sound, neither from the order as it stands, unless an express article of faith (based on clear Scripture passages) compels us to interpret the words otherwise, or arrange them differently. Else, what would become of the Bible?<sup>17</sup>

It is significant that Luther had assumed the divine authority and infallibility of Scripture, which is the Spirit's own Word, as he emphasized how the Holy Spirit makes a person a theologian.

Second, as we consider Luther's doctrine of biblical authority and infallibility, we must keep in mind what he believed about the main message of Scripture—the gospel, or the Christocentricity of Scripture. To Luther, all the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, point to Christ. “The entire Scripture points only to Christ,” he wrote.<sup>18</sup> “All the words of the Scripture have the purpose that Christ might be known.”<sup>19</sup> “Take Christ out of the

15. *W2*, 14:435.

16. *W2*, 5:456.

17. *WA*, 18:147.

18. *WA*, 2:73; cf. *WA*, 3:620; 17:2:334; 52:509.

19. *WA*, 14:97:2.

Scriptures and what else will you find in them?"<sup>20</sup> "The cross of Christ appears everywhere in Scripture."<sup>21</sup> "All Scripture teaches nothing else but the cross."<sup>22</sup> What Luther said about the Christocentricity of Scripture, namely that Christ and His atonement is the main message of the entire book, is no mere theoretical statement. Neither is it a mere hermeneutical principle, though it is certainly that. Commenting on Luther's principle of Christocentricity, Thestrup Pedersen rightly says, "If we misunderstood Scripture's main content, then ever so correct a philological, grammatical analysis of the individual words and sentences will not help us a bit."<sup>23</sup> The principle of biblical Christocentricity not only informed Luther's exegesis of Scripture and his approach to Scripture but also his attitude toward and love for Scripture. That is extremely important as we study Luther's attitude toward the Bible. Luther valued Scripture more because of its content than because of its form as God's Word. But that does not imply that he valued the form less; the very opposite is the case. If at times he seems to despise the Scripture as the mere crib that holds the Christ child, it is only because the crib cannot be compared to what it holds.<sup>24</sup>

According to Luther, Scripture was written for the sake of its message, the gospel. That must be borne in mind when at times

20. *WA*, 18:606:29.

21. *WA*, 3:63:1.

22. *WA*, 9:560:1; cf. *WA*, 4:153:27; 40:III:652:15; 54:29:3, 414:13; 56:5:9.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

24. Luther's beautiful statement, in which he likens Scripture to the crib that holds the Christ child, has often been used by scholars to show that he took a condescending attitude toward Scripture. The exact opposite is the case. The well-known statement reads as follows, "I beg and faithfully warn every pious Christian not to stumble at the simplicity of language and the stories that will often meet him there [in Scripture]. He should not doubt that however simple they may seem, these are the very words, deeds, judgments, and history of the high majesty and wisdom of God; for this is the Scripture which makes fools out of all the wise and prudent and is open only to babes and fools, as Christ says, Matthew 11:25. Away with your overweening conceit! Think of Scripture as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest lode, which will never be mined out, so that you may find the divine wisdom which God places before you in such foolish and ordinary form. He does this in order to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, to which the angels directed the shepherds, Luke 2:12. Swaddling clothes are plain and ordinary, but precious is the treasure, Christ, lying in them." (*W2*, 14:3)

he seems to oppose Christ to the Scriptures. He said, for instance, "If our adversaries urge Scripture, we urge Christ against the Scripture." And again he wrote, "One must not understand Scripture contrary to Christ, but in favor of him; therefore Scripture must be brought into relation to Christ or must not be regarded as Scripture."<sup>25</sup> What he was saying in those two statements is that his opponents should not oppose Scripture to its own chief message. He was applying his own principle of biblical Christocentricity. His opponents were misusing Scripture by citing law against the biblical gospel. To cite a Scripture passage in order to militate against the force of the biblical gospel was an awful confusion of law and gospel to Luther and an abuse of Scripture. In such a context Luther was enhancing Scripture in its "servant role" of proclaiming Christ; what a noble, precious role the Scriptures have! It is in that role, and because of their content, not usually because of their form, that Luther extolled the Scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

Third, Luther believed in the power of the Word and of Scripture, an important reason for his valuing the Scriptures so highly and a factor important for us to understand as we seek to study Luther's doctrine of biblical infallibility in its proper context. Again, Luther's doctrine of the efficacy or power of Scripture was no mere theoretical consideration. Scripture not only comforts and strengthens the Christian throughout his faith-life,<sup>27</sup> it not only instructs us in worship and theology,<sup>28</sup> but it is the Holy Spirit's own vehicle—an intrinsically powerful vehicle—to quicken, regenerate, and work faith in the lost sinner. "All the works which

25. *W2*, 19:144.

26. Almost invariably it is in its soteriological purpose that Scripture became so precious and valuable to Luther. *W2*, 9:1819: "God gave us Holy Scripture that we should not only read it, but also search, meditate, and ponder on it. In this way one will find eternal life in it" (cf. *W2*, 9:111, 655, 885, 1788, 1792, 1802). *WA*, 48:122: "The matter of greatest importance is that the readers of Scripture are not only diligent but also believing. This is what the Lord means when He says, 'How readeest thou?' What are you learning? He says in effect, see to it that you believe when you read Scripture and that you rightly divide the Word of Truth, that you look for nothing in it except Me, without Whom no one comes to the Father and that from Scripture you teach this to others."

27. *W2*, 1:1344; 2:1200ff., 1385; 3:18; 4:2098; 5:274; 6:439.

28. *W2*, 4:1424; 13:573, 2215-16; 14:435.

Christ performed are recorded in the Word, and in the Word and through the Word He will give us everything, and without the Word He will give us nothing."<sup>29</sup> The Word brings us to faith, and the Holy Spirit comes through it.<sup>30</sup> It brings us to eternal life and gives life.<sup>31</sup> To be sure, the preached Word has all the power to convert and save that the written Word of Scripture possessed; Luther never ceased to exalt the power of the preached Word.<sup>32</sup> At times, he even gave prominence to the preached Word, not because it is intrinsically different or more powerful than the written Word of Scripture, but because the usual mode of proclaiming the gospel and carrying out Christ's Great Commission is by preaching, oral proclamation.<sup>33</sup> There is no question, however, that Luther saw no intrinsic difference between the power of the written and the preached gospel. And of course, as we shall see, the preached Word must be based squarely on the written Word of Scripture.<sup>34</sup>

### SCRIPTURE IS THE WORD OF GOD

Nothing is more evident as one reads the works of Martin Luther than that he believed Scripture to be the very Word of God. There is nothing strange about that. Practically everybody in those days, except perhaps for a few renegade humanists, would have affirmed the divine origin of Scripture. What is remarkable about Luther in that regard, however, is the profoundness of his belief and how it affected his exegesis, his theology, and his career as a Reformer. Very definitely, it affected his notions concerning biblical infallibility. And so in the present study, we must first see how Luther spoke and what he meant when he described Scripture as divine and as God's Word.

29. *W2*, 13:1556; cf. *WA*, 8:491; 10:I:1:168; 52:2.

30. *W2*, 3:760; 5:271, 415; *WA*, 11:33.

31. *W2*, 9:1819; cf. p. 1788.

32. *WA*, 37:437; *WA*, 47:120.

33. *WA*, 10:I:625-27. E.g., p. 627: "Gospel means nothing else than preaching, and a crying out of the grace and mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . In essence it is not what stands in books or is written with letters, but much more a preaching by mouth and living Word, a voice which sounds forth into the whole world and is publicly cried so that everybody hears it. . . ."

34. *WA*, 2:446ff.; 7:96ff.; cf. *WA*, 12:278.

For Luther, Scripture was a divine Word. He made that point in a great variety of ways. "God declares His Word" in the Bible, Luther said, speaking on 1 Corinthians 15:39-44.<sup>35</sup> We should read the Bible, he wrote, "because therein God has written His own wisdom."<sup>36</sup> What we in the Bible read and hear God Himself "speaks to us,"<sup>37</sup> for the Bible is "the holy Word of God."<sup>38</sup> Very often Luther employed the terms "Scripture" (which he uses much more often than the term "Bible") and "Word of God" epexegetically, or in apposition to each other, as virtual synonyms. For instance, he spoke of "*verbum Dei et sacra scriptura*" or "*Gottes Wort und die heilige Schrift*" in many contexts, referring to the same thing by both phrases.<sup>39</sup> In that way he identified Scripture as the Word of God. On other occasions Luther used the terms "Scripture" and "Word of God" within a single sentence or context, so that the reader knows that he is referring to the same thing by both terms and thus using the terms interchangeably. For instance he wrote, "When the Lord Christ says in John 5:39, 'Search the Scriptures,' He wills that we diligently search and reflect upon God's Word."<sup>40</sup> In that way once again Luther identified Scripture and the Word of God. On other occasions Luther put the little word "or" (*oder, sive*) between the two terms, as when he said that the Enthusiasts would not submit to "God's Word or the Holy Scripture."<sup>41</sup> In many contexts Luther simply said that Scripture "is" God's Word, as when he said that "the bad conscience of the pope always reminds him that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God."<sup>42</sup>

Very often Luther spoke of the "divine Scripture" (*göttliche Schrift, scriptura divina*), thus referring either to its divine origin, or,

35. *WI*, 8:1303.

36. *WI*, 22:1069.

37. *WI*, 9:1800.

38. *WI*, 22:3.

39. *WI*, 3:717, 1536; 4:1697; 8:26:1111, and especially 8:1316 where the phrase "*Gottes Wort und die heilige Schrift*" occurs several times. Cf. also *WI*, 1:57, 152; 5:805, 1067; 8:301, 600, 1107, 1226, etc.

40. *WI*, 3:1817; cf. 6:438; 7:178, 1984; 10:473, 1645, etc.

41. *WI*, 14:413; cf. 8:1111, 1129.

42. *WI*, 4:2118; 7:1541, 1549; 9:86, 1818: "We ourselves hold that the Holy Scriptures are God's saving Word which makes us forever blessed"; *WI*, 12:637: "Now we Christians have Scripture, and we are sure that it is the Word of God."

more likely, to its divine form as God's Word, or perhaps to its divine origin and saving message.<sup>43</sup> Or Luther simply referred to God's speaking to us in the Scriptures as the author of the Scriptures. For instance, he wrote, "God does not deal with us according to His majesty, but takes a human form and speaks with us throughout the entire Scripture, as a man speaks with another man."<sup>44</sup> In that connection it is interesting that Luther translated *legei* in Galatians 3:16 as it cites the Old Testament as "Er (God) spricht," not "Es (Scripture) spricht." And Luther, the exegete, said, "You are so to deal with it [the text of Scripture] that you believe that God Himself is saying this."<sup>45</sup>

Another common practice for Luther was to call Scripture God's book, or God's letter to us, in contrast to all human books. That too was his way of stressing the divine authorship of Scripture. Within the words of Scripture "are not the words of men" but "God speaks to us and does it Himself."<sup>46</sup> According to Luther, God has given the Scriptures to us.<sup>47</sup> The Scriptures are "God's letter" to us,<sup>48</sup> "our letter from God."<sup>49</sup> And so the Scriptures are a book that "no man ever wrote."<sup>50</sup> The very serious and even polemical context in which we find Luther using that kind of phraseology prevents us from concluding that he was speaking metaphorically as he stressed the divine authorship of Scripture and called it "God's Book," or "God's Epistle," or that he was

43. *WI*, 1:924; 4:867; 7:1086; 10:927, 1570.

44. *WI*, 1:1422; cf. 2:901: "God Himself" speaks in Scripture; cf. also 3:273; 9:1800, 1845, 1853 (on 2 Timothy 3:16). *WI*, 10:1018: "So then Scripture is God's own testimony concerning Himself"; *WI*, 14:491: "God has spoken the whole Scripture" ("*Die ganze Schrift hat Gott geredet*").

45. *WI*, 3:21; 14:4. There is no reason to suppose that Luther was speaking metaphorically or hyperbolically when he said that God speaks the Scriptures or speaks in the Scriptures and is therefore the author of the book. He was speaking about what is actually the case. Otherwise, there is no accounting for outbursts such as the following, "It is cursed unbelief and odious flesh which will not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in the Scriptures and that it is God's Word, but tells us that it is the word merely of Isaiah, or Paul, or some other mere man who has not created heaven and earth" (*W2*, 1:1800).

46. *WI*, 3:68; cf. 3:753.

47. *WI*, 9:1819.

48. *WI*, 9:1808.

49. *WI*, 1:1069.

50. *WI*, 4:211; cf. 1:1278. The language of Scripture is not human but divine (*WI*, 8:1230).

uncritically following the language of his day. Listen to one of his outbursts that touches on the matter. Commenting on 1 Peter 3:15 he wrote, "Therefore if the people will not believe you, you are to keep silent. For you are under no obligation to force them to hold that Scripture is God's Book, or Word."<sup>51</sup> Luther often called Scripture "God's Book."<sup>52</sup> When he called Scripture God's book, he was not thinking of God as the content of Scripture but as the author of Scripture. He was, of course, not ruling out the human authors of Scripture as willing, thinking, feeling instruments of God, but he was affirming that God is the author of Scripture in the primary sense and that Scripture represents His thoughts, His message to mankind.

Luther very often also called Scripture "God's wisdom" or "divine wisdom."<sup>53</sup> He wrote, "... the Holy Scriptures are not human, but divine wisdom." In such a phrase *wisdom* refers to the content of Scripture, the gospel and mysteries of faith, and the term *God's* refers to the origin and nature of that wisdom.

Having observed Luther's common terminology as he spoke of Scripture in reference to its origin and nature, we now turn our attention briefly to some of his more outstanding statements concerning its divine origin. Luther's common terminology in itself has clearly demonstrated what his doctrine concerning the divine origin of Scripture is; the few statements now to be cited will serve only to clarify and heighten his position.

Specifically, Luther attributed the entire Scripture to the Holy Spirit as its author.<sup>54</sup> The Spirit of God is directly the author of Scripture; He stands behind the Psalms of David.<sup>55</sup>

And so the entire Holy Scriptures are attributed to the Holy Ghost, together with the outward Word and Sacrament, which touch and move our outward ears and senses; just as our Lord Jesus Himself ascribes His words to the Holy Ghost when He in Luke 4:18 cites Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me." ... What a glo-

51. *WI*, 9:1071; cf. *WI*, 9:1238.

52. *WI*, 9:1830; *WI*, 22:5: "Die heilige schrift ist das höchste und best Buch Gottes."

53. *WI*, 1:2:149, 152; 2:2; 5:610; 8:700; 9:1789.

54. *WA*, 2:556; *W2*, 15:1481.

55. *WA*, 31:I:393.

rious, proud pride this is: He who can boast that the Spirit of the Lord is speaking through Him and that His tongue is speaking the Word of the Holy Spirit must truly be very sure of His position. This will not be David, the son of Jesse, born in sins, but He who has been aroused to be prophet by God's promise. Should not he compose lovely psalms who has such a Master to teach him and speak through him? . . . David will not countenance the words to be ascribed to him. They are "pleasant, agreeable psalms of Israel," he says, but I did not make them up; rather, "the Spirit of the Lord has spoken through me." . . . The Holy Scriptures are spoken through the Holy Ghost according to the statement of David.<sup>56</sup>

Of course, human authors wrote the Scriptures as God's spokesmen and instruments, but their word was the Spirit's Word and revelation. Concerning creation Luther wrote, "Hence when Moses writes that God made heaven and earth and all that is in them in six days, you are to accept that it was six days and not to develop an explanation that six days were only one day."<sup>57</sup> But then he went on to say, "If you cannot understand how it could have been six days, then accord the *Holy Spirit* the honor that He is more learned than you. For you are to deal with the Scriptures in such a way that you think that God Himself is speaking to you there." Luther understood the Holy Spirit as the direct author of Genesis and of all Scripture. Yes, Moses, Isaiah, Paul, and other men wrote the Scriptures. But "there is a great difference between the Word which was sent from heaven and that which I devise by my own choice and devotion. The Holy Scriptures did not grow on earth."<sup>58</sup>

Now what does all that strong language of Luther's tell us about his doctrine of Scripture? Two things: (1) God is the author of Scripture (*Deus locutus est*), and (2) Scripture is formally God's Word right now (*Deus loquens*) and thus carries with it the power, the majesty, the authority, and infallibility of God Himself. We shall speak later of the implications of those two conclusions.

Does the fact that he considered God to be the author of Scrip-

56. *W2*, 3:1889.

57. *W2*, 3:21.

58. *W2*, 7:2095.

ture mean that for Luther Scripture was verbally inspired? Definitely. The evidence already presented should settle that matter. But since certain liberal theologians and scholars have questioned that conclusion, we might offer a few statements from Luther that indicate that, if he was unaware of the later formulation, he clearly anticipated the doctrine of verbal inspiration on several occasions.

Luther, by his very identification of Scripture as God's Word, had in mind the very words of Scripture. He said, "The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, written and (as I might say) lettered and formed in letters."<sup>59</sup> To Luther, all the words of Scripture were weighted, counted, measured divine words (*omnia verba Dei sunt in pondere, numero, mensura*).<sup>60</sup> The very words and phrases in Scripture are divine, according to Luther.<sup>61</sup> Luther did not seem to be advanced or sophisticated enough to distinguish between the *res* and the *verba* of Scripture, as Calixt and certain seventeenth-century Lutherans did in their denial of verbal inspiration. When Luther attributed Scripture to the Holy Spirit or to God,<sup>62</sup> he was speaking very probably of Scripture distributively. Certainly, he did so in cases where he specifically attributed certain texts to the Holy Spirit.<sup>63</sup> In his commentaries he again and again cited the Holy Spirit as the author of a given verse or even word, and he pored over each word as given by the Holy Spirit.

Luther did not teach a "mechanical inspiration" or "dictation theory" of inspiration. Neither did any follower of his teach or suggest such a thing, for that matter.<sup>64</sup> But he did speak of the Holy Spirit's placing His Word in the mouth of the prophets,<sup>65</sup> and spoke of the holy writers as penmen of the Holy Spirit.<sup>66</sup> Again and again, as we have seen, he attributed the authorship of all Scripture to the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Scriptures were writ-

59. *W2*, 9:1770.

60. *WA*, 3:64.

61. *WA*, 40:III:254: Non solum enim vocabula, sed et phrasis est divina, qua Spiritus Sanctus et scriptura utitur.

62. *WA*, 40:I:83; 40:II:457; 5:491.

63. *WA*, 5:536, 543, 547; 54:39.

64. See Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 1:287-91.

65. *WI*, 3:785.

66. *WI*, 3:1889; cf. *WI*, 9:356, 1774-75; 14:349.

ten by the Holy Ghost," he wrote.<sup>67</sup> It is true, as Bodamer has pointed out, that "in Luther we never find a dogmatic presentation of the teaching of verbal inspiration, as we find it in the later Lutheran Dogmaticians."<sup>68</sup> Pedersen puts the matter differently, and perhaps not at all misleadingly, when he says that Luther had no definite "doctrine" or "theory" of inspiration at all but rather a belief in inspiration.<sup>69</sup> By that he means that Luther never explained how Scripture is God's Word but merely believed it. But that Luther believed and affirmed what at a much later date came to be called verbal inspiration—that he believed, confessed, and taught that everything in Scripture and every single word of Scripture is God's Word—is subject to no doubt. And if he did not have a "doctrine" of inspiration, as Pedersen says, that means only that he did not try to explain philosophically, psychologically, or in any other way *how* (*pōs*) Scripture was the Word of God, though he affirmed at the same time *that* (*hoti*) it was so.

Since the Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture, since He spoke through the prophets and the apostles, since Scripture is "His Book," through the Scriptures He preaches and speaks to the world.<sup>70</sup> Scripture is the clearest and most lucid book in all the world.<sup>71</sup> "The Holy Spirit is the most simple writer and speaker in heaven and earth; therefore His words have only one sense, the most simple one which we call the literal sense."<sup>72</sup> To Luther, the intrinsic clarity of Scripture, which is a corollary of its divine origin and the result of it, was a fundamental principle for both exegesis and the entire theological enterprise. Luther was talking here about the intrinsic clarity of Scripture, that Scripture "in itself is

67. *WI*, 9:770.

68. W. Bodamer, "Luther's Stellung zur Lehre von der Verbalinspiration," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 34 (1936): 244. See Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 50 passim; Eugene Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz* (Amsterdam: J. H. Kok N. V. Kampen, 1971), pp. 17-38. Bodamer's presentation of Luther's doctrine is the most extensive in terms of documentation, especially from Luther's exegetical works, ever written. He has unearthed over a thousand citations from Luther clearly asserting that the Bible is the Word of God; over one hundred of those are found in this article. I have drawn extensively from his data, which is according to *WI*.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

70. *WI*, 2:1664; 3:358, 1907; 9:349, 356; 14:349.

71. *WI*, 22:577.

72. *WA*, 7:650; cf. 7:638.

the most certain, easy to understand, clear and consistent of all books; thus all other books are proved by it, judged by it, and illumined by it."<sup>73</sup>

In that and many other contexts Luther clearly was speaking of the clarity of Scripture *as it is written*, not its capacity to convince us of the truthfulness of its message (which Luther of course also believed).<sup>74</sup> *Per sese*, Scripture is a light, like the sun, objectively and cognitively clear, so that all may understand it. That was what Luther called the "external clarity" that exists in the Scriptural message itself as opposed to the internal clarity of Scripture that occurs in the believer when the Spirit of God convinces him of its message.<sup>75</sup> That external clarity of Scripture is really a very simple concept for Luther; he referred simply to the fact that the words of the Bible, as they stand and in their context, are not equivocal, solecistic, or obscure but understandable and lucid to the reader. That does not imply that there are not grammatical, contextual, and historical problems related to the text that will engage scholars at times in debate.<sup>76</sup> Nor was he contradicting himself when he said that Christ was the center of Scripture and understanding the gospel was essential for the exegete to understand the Scriptures at all.<sup>77</sup> The fact that we do not know the meaning of a *hapax legomenon* or cannot identify a geographical location does not impugn the intrinsic clarity of the book. That an understanding of the gospel and of the distinction between law and gospel are essential to a correct hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures is simply a datum that is drawn from the clear

73. *WA*, 797: *per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans.*

74. H. Ostergard-Nielsen, *Scriptura sacra et viva vox* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1957), p. 24, says that Luther's notion of biblical clarity meant that the Scriptures had the ability to make their message clear and to convince one of their assertions. Pedersen (p. 52) calls that theory "metaphysical theology" and accuses Ostergard-Nielsen of confusing the objective authority of Scripture with its inner persuasive power.

75. *WA*, 12:439; 18:609.

76. *WA*, 18:606:22: *Hoc sane fateor, esse multa loca in scripturis obscura et abstrusa, non ob maiestatem rerum sed ob ignorantiam vocabulorum et grammaticae, sed quae nihil impediunt scientiam omnium rerum in scripturis; cf. 18:653:30.*

77. *WA*, 18:606:24.

Scriptures themselves; it is not an imposition of a foreign hermeneutical principle employed to clarify their message.

The practice of pious exegesis, which was Luther's greatest love, was predicated on the fact that Scripture was God's own cognitive and clear language about God. That he yielded always and without qualification to the conclusions and findings of his exegesis was predicated on his conviction that Scripture was God's Word and carried with it God's authority and truthfulness as it conveyed God's saving message of the gospel.<sup>78</sup> As we now proceed to examine what Luther believed about the authority and truthfulness of Scripture, we shall easily perceive how essential his notion of the external clarity of Scripture was to his thoughts on biblical authority.

### THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

In the hundreds of contexts where Luther spoke of the divinity and majesty of the Scriptures, where he affirmed that Scripture was God's Word and book and that God speaks (present tense) in and through it so that when Scripture speaks God speaks to us, Luther was *eo ipso* referring to the authority and infallibility of Scripture. He was, in fact, expressing himself in just such a fashion about Scripture for the very purpose of affirming its divine authority and infallibility and applying that to the reader. For the affirmation of the divine authority and nature of Scripture was never an end in itself to Luther, but was always for the sake of the gospel (as we have seen) and to assure the reader that the cognitive gospel presented in Scripture comes with divine power and infallible authority. The statements of Luther's we have studied thus far do not tell us the exact nature and function of biblical authority and infallibility. We shall now examine some of Luther's statements where he directly addresses that topic.

Luther inherited his basic notion of biblical authority from the

78. I must add at this point that not only the "external clarity" that we have been talking about but also the "internal clarity," namely, that the believer is enlightened and convinced by the Word of Scripture, is predicated on the fact that Scripture is in fact the Word of the Holy Spirit. *WA*, 18:609:5ff.

Fathers, Occamists,<sup>79</sup> and Nominalists,<sup>80</sup> but he did not inherit their hermeneutics. Already in Leipzig in 1519 (and before) he adhered, like the Nominalists, to a principle of *sola scriptura*, according to which neither the church nor pope possessed authority that could militate against the authority of the Bible.<sup>81</sup> However, the papists of his day also believed in the divine authority of Scripture to prove doctrine, as did the scholastics before them,<sup>82</sup> that is, in principle. In practice they insisted that only an authoritative interpretation of the divine Word could be accepted. Thus they made Scripture a “waxen nose” that could be turned any way the authoritative interpreter pleased.<sup>83</sup> That was the way the pope became lord over Scripture—by his refusal to bow to the clear and plain *sensus literalis* whenever it did not suit him and by his willful and bad interpretative propensities.<sup>84</sup> Such was the situation when Luther entered church history. In a highly significant statement Luther described that deplorable situation.

All admit that Jesus says, John 10:35; “The Scripture cannot be broken,” and that its authority is absolutely inviolable, so that no man may contradict or deny it. That premise, or *major*, that the perfect knowledge of God, theology, must be derived from Scripture all and everyone admits. But where the *minor* is concerned, the soldiers at once make a farce out of Scripture through their arbitrary glosses and distinctions, so that the power and authority of all Scripture goes by the board. For today, too, you cannot prove anything to the pope or any Thomist by Scripture, even though they acknowledge the authority of Scripture. “Let us not rend the coat,” they say, “but cast lots for it,” (John 19:24). For is that not playing a game of chance with Scripture, if one deals with it arbitrarily and twists it according to his whim? Do not our teachers of the universities take unto themselves the right to interpret Scripture? And it has reached such a pass that they laugh at him who

79. Reu, pp. 133-36; Fr. Kropatschek, *Das Schriftprinzip der lutherischen Kirche*, I, Die Vorgeschichte das Erbe des Mittelalters (Leipzig: A. Deichertsche, 1904), pp. 438ff.

80. Reinhold Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1930), 4:724.

81. *WA*, 5:643, 645.

82. *WA*, 10:I:633.

83. *WA*, 5:208; 6:305; 46:464. See Pedersen, p. 48.

84. *WA*, 5:646; 7:98, 100.

simply quotes Scripture, while they, as they say, operate with irrefutable arguments from reason. This is the game they play. They do not teach what Scripture demands, but each one tries his luck as to how he may square Scripture with his own ideas, how much of Scripture he can win. And in this game the pope is—and he deserves it—the chief of the soldiers, for he has passed a law, binding upon all, that it is his prerogative and his alone to interpret Scripture definitively. Others may interpret the Scripture, but only magisterially, by way of disputation and investigation, but not in such a way that the interpretation is final. Well, he plays with his partners in such a way that the die must fall in his favor, in that he alone has the right to interpret Scripture.<sup>85</sup>

That statement indicates that to Luther the issue in his day with the papists was centered in the *sola scriptura*, not in the mere question of authority. And the *sola scriptura* principle is violated by any intrusion on the plain authoritative meaning of the Scripture. To Luther, it was simply axiomatic that if Scripture is not alone the source and norm of Christian doctrine, it is not the source and norm at all; any violation of the *sola scriptura* principle is a violation of biblical authority per se.<sup>86</sup>

It was not long before another equally dangerous adversary to the *sola scriptura* raised his ugly head, the Enthusiast, who too imposed his own arbitrary interpretations on the Scriptures when the spirit moved him. The authority crisis that Luther faced so steadfastly was centered in those two parallel antitheses to the *sola scriptura*.<sup>87</sup> And so from very early in his career, we find Luther defending the Word of God and its authority above pope, church, and councils.<sup>88</sup> Commenting on Galatians 1:9, he stated: "It is damnable to think that the pope is lord and arbiter over Scripture or that the church has any power over Scripture. The pope and the church are to approve and commend and preach the Scrip-

85. *W2*, 4:307ff; cf. *W2*, 18:425ff.

86. Luther was followed in that understanding of the *sola scriptura* by all Lutherans, cf. John Andrew Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica, sive systema theologiae* (Leipzig, 1715), P. 1, C. 3, S. 2, q. 1 (1:49).

87. See Smalcald Articles, III, VIII; cf. Robert Preus, "Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Journal* 4 (1978): 16-24.

88. *WA*, 6:505-6; 9:561; 17:1:99.

tures, but that does not mean that they are over Scripture.”<sup>89</sup> The church of God has divine authority only when it follows the Word of God, according to Luther.<sup>90</sup>

All that corresponds with Luther’s larger doctrine of the Word that we have already touched upon. To him, the church lives by the Word of God and is thus bound by that Word.<sup>91</sup> The authority of God does not somehow come upon the Word in an event, situation, or ecclesiastical interpretation but is intrinsic to the Word as Word of God. And so the church is completely under that Word and can in no way manipulate it. “The church does not create the Word, but is created by the Word.”<sup>92</sup> Thus nothing should be presented in the church unless it is proved by the authority of both Testaments and agrees with Scripture.<sup>93</sup> Luther did not view biblical authority as some legalistic club that coerced the church into obedience but as God’s own voice in her midst to lead and bless her. God’s Word accomplishes everything good in the church, Luther insisted, even though we sleep and are having a good time.<sup>94</sup> God keeps and protects His church through the Word.<sup>95</sup> And so the Word is the most valuable possession the church or Christians can have, worth more than angels, saints, and all creatures.<sup>96</sup>

Luther’s principle of *sola scriptura* outlaws not only the authority of pope, church, and council as sources and norms of doctrine but also human reason and experience. Whatever our senses or experience may say to the contrary, we must always yield to Scripture, he maintained.<sup>97</sup> “God’s Word is not for jesting. If you cannot understand it, take off your hat before it.”<sup>98</sup>

In matters of Faith that pertain to the divine essence and will and to our salvation we must close our eyes and our ears and all our

89. *WA*, 41:I:119; cf. 40:III:435.

90. *WA*, 40:431.

91. *WA*, 6:561; cf. *WA*, 7:131.

92. *WA*, 8:597; cf. Reu, p. 36.

93. *WA*, 4:180.

94. *W2*, 20:21.

95. *W2*, 15:2506.

96. *W2*, 18:1322.

97. *WA*, 4:517.

98. *WA*, 20:571.

senses and just hear and observe diligently what and how Scripture speaks. We must wrap ourselves completely in the Word and follow it without assessing our reason.<sup>99</sup>

And so Luther again and again called the Word of Scripture our "touchstone," our "rule."<sup>100</sup> What destroyed all progress at the colloquy with Zwingli at Marburg was, according to Luther, Zwingli's refusal to face up to the clear affirmations of Scripture, though professing, like the papists, adherence to the infallible authority of the Bible.<sup>101</sup>

But did not Luther himself employ reason as he interpreted Scripture? Of course he did. He recognized reason, even in a fallen sinner, as a gift of God, as he said in his little catechism. And he did not despise logic for one moment. Neither did he eschew a ministerial use of reason in the exegetical and theological task.<sup>102</sup> But reason cannot sit in judgment of Scripture.<sup>103</sup> It has been said that Luther's great confession at Wurms placed reason alongside Scripture as a source of doctrine. He wrote, "Unless I shall be convinced by testimonies of the Scriptures and by clear reason . . . I am conquered by the writings [in Scripture] cited by me, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."<sup>104</sup> Here, however, Luther was referring to a regenerate reason that simply attempts to understand and submit to the Word, not reason in any independent sense.

Luther derived his doctrine of biblical authority from the divine origin of Scripture as God's Word. He argued, "Whoever concedes that the evangelists wrote the word of God, with him we will

99. *WA*, 23:699.

100. *WA*, 33:304; 36:501; 37:44; 46:780.

101. Reu, pp. 54-55. See also Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), pp. 215-300; cf. *WA*, 11:434; 23:119.

102. *WA*, 50:654ff. For Luther's ideas on the use of reason see Bengt Hagglund, *Theologie und Philosophie bei Luther und in der Occamistischen Tradition* (Lund: CWK Gleerups Forlag, 1955), pp. 115ff. See also Brian Albert Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1962), pp. 28ff.

103. *WA*, 51:123, 192; cf. 51:194.

104. *WA*, 7:838: Nisi convictus fuero testimoniis scripturarum aut ratione evident . . . victus sum scripturis a me adductis et capta conscientia in verbis dei. . . . See Reu, pp. 28-35; Hans Preuss, *Die Entwicklung des Schriftprinzips bei Luther bis zur Leipziger Disputation* (Leipzig: R. Voigtlanders Verlag, 1901), p. 62.

meet. Whoever denies this, with him I will not even speak. For in such a case he has no part in Christian discussion. We must not even discuss things with one who denies the foundations (*principia*) of the faith."<sup>105</sup> And so against the sentences of the Fathers, against the authority of men, against angels and devils, Luther placed the Word alone. There he took his stand as a theologian. In that Word he boasted and defied Thomists, Sophists, Henry VIII, and all the gates of hell. And why? Because "God's Word is above all; divine majesty is on my side."<sup>106</sup>

The authority of Scripture, which springs from its divine origin, was infallible to Luther. Commenting on 1 Peter 3:15 he wrote:

When the unbelievers and adversaries argue and say, You preach that the teaching of men should not be held, even though Peter and Paul, yes, and Christ Himself, were men—when you hear such people who are so completely blind and hardened that they deny that what Christ and apostles spoke and wrote is the Word of God and who have doubts concerning it, then just keep silent, do not speak one word to them, let them go their way. Just say this: I will give You ample evidence from Scripture. If you believe this, fine. If not, be on your way.<sup>107</sup>

And so Scripture, because it is God's wisdom and Word, is the final, divine, and infallible authority in matters of theology and Christian doctrine. "We must maintain this, that everything that we praise as an article of faith is confirmed clearly and purely and with evident testimony from Scripture."<sup>108</sup> "Paul takes them all together," Luther wrote, "himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth and masters of all kinds, and he subjects them to the Holy Scripture. Scripture must reign as queen, all must obey her and be subject to her, not teachers, judges and arbiters over her."<sup>109</sup>

For Luther, the authority of Scripture meant that when Paul or Isaiah spoke, God spoke. Deriving its authority from its divine

105. *WA*, Tr. 3:2884a.

106. *W2*, 19:337.

107. *W2*, 9:1238.

108. *WA* 6:560; cf. 6:321ff.

109. *WA*, 40:I:102.

authorship, Scripture always has a divine authority. In practice that means that Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi* of theology, as the later Lutherans were wont to say,<sup>110</sup> the source of everything we can know or say about God. All doctrine must be proved by Scripture, the divinely authoritative Word. The later, explicitly articulated doctrine that Scripture was the *principium cognoscendi* was clearly adumbrated by Luther; he insisted that Scripture was authoritative specifically as a cognitive source of theology.

Therefore nothing but the divine words are to be the first principles (*prima principia*) for Christians. All human words, however, are conclusions which are deduced from them and must again be subjected to them and approved by them. . . . If this were not true, why should Augustine and the holy fathers, whenever they contradict each other, go back to the Holy Scriptures as the first principles of truth (*ad sacras literas seu prima principia veritatis*) and illumine and approve by their light and trustworthiness their own dark and uncertain views? By doing this they teach that the divine words are more understandable and certain than the words of all men, even their own. . . . I do not want to be honored as one who is more learned than all; but this I desire, that Scripture alone rule as queen, and that it not be explained through my spirit or other men's spirit but be understood by itself and in its own spirit.<sup>111</sup>

Again Luther said that the first principles of all Christians are based upon the divine Word and that all theological conclusions are to be drawn from that Word.<sup>112</sup> And so Scripture was authoritative as a *principium*, as the cognitive source of all theology in the church.

At this point I must mention two gross misunderstandings of Luther's doctrine of biblical authority and comment on them. First is the caricature that Luther did not adhere—or did so only inconsistently and at times—to the so-called proof-text method of

110. See Preus, 1:256-62.

111. *WA*, 6:506.

112. *WA*, 7:98.

theologizing.<sup>113</sup> How do we respond to that bizarre allegation? Certainly, one can show that Luther on thousands and thousands of occasions proved his doctrine from Scripture, that is, from pericopes and specific passages of Scripture. And on thousands of occasions he showed that one clear Bible verse is enough to establish an article of faith. And Luther insisted that each article of faith must have its own proof, that is, its own biblical basis. That was one of the chief issues with Zwingli at the colloquy in Marburg. Zwingli had used passages from Scripture that did not deal with the Lord's Supper to mitigate the force of passages that did, according to Luther. Luther's principle against such reductionistic exegesis was the following: "Every article of faith is in itself its own principle and receives no corroboration [proof] by means of another [article of faith]."<sup>114</sup> If one will not accept every article of faith because of itself, that is, because God has revealed it clearly in Holy Writ, he despises God, so far as Luther was concerned, and in the end is in danger of rejecting everything God has said in His Word. "He who makes God into a liar in one of His words and blasphemes, saying that it is unimportant if He is despised and made out to be a liar, blasphemes God in His entirety and considers all blasphemy a trifling thing."<sup>115</sup>

Luther clearly inveighed against anyone who would only at times and inconsistently use the proof-text method in his theological work. To Luther everything was to be believed and followed in Scripture or nothing, "For whoever despises a single word of God does not regard any as important."<sup>116</sup> And again he wrote:

113. For instance, Joseph Sittler (p. 25) seems to think that only in certain extraordinary situations, such as in his controversy over the meaning of the words of institution of the Lord's Supper, did Luther insist "upon a literal acceptance of the biblical words." Sittler accuses anyone who attempts to argue from such extraordinary situations that Luther was committed to the proof-text method of using an "apologetic which triumphantly seizes upon a detached [*sic*] word of Luther, brushes aside all historical and theological context by which such a word is to be understood—and then flails about with a chance epigram as if it were a sufficient club to silence all enquiry." I rather suspect that those last bombastic words are meant to describe those of us who affirm that Luther, like every other theologian of his day, believed in *dicta probantia*.

114. Walter Koehler, *Das Marburger Religionsgespräch 1529* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1929), p. 34.

115. *WA*, 23:85.

116. *WA*, 26:449.

And whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a single word and does so willfully and again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words. Therefore it is true, absolutely and without exception that everything is believed or nothing is believed [*omnia vel nihil redari*]. The Holy Spirit does not allow Himself to be separated or divided so that He should teach and cause to be believed one doctrine rightly and another falsely.<sup>117</sup>

According to Luther, the Christian theologian simply repeats and teaches what the prophets and apostles have said.<sup>118</sup> That means that every article of faith must have a *sedes*. As far as Luther was concerned, if one “pooh poohs” a *sedes* for one article of faith, he despises the whole of Scripture. Against the Sacramentarians he wrote,

They are revealing what kind of spirit is in them and how much they think of God’s Word, ridiculing these precious words [the words of institution] as five poor, miserable words; they do not believe that these are God’s words. Or if they believe that they are God’s words, they would not call them miserable, poor words, but would prize one little word and letter more highly than the whole world.<sup>119</sup>

In the same vein Luther said again in one of his better known statements concerning the authority of Scripture, “It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy fathers’ words or works. Otherwise what they ate, how they dressed, and what kind of houses they lived in would have to become articles of faith—as happened in the case of relics. This means that the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel.”<sup>120</sup> But how else can the written Word establish articles of faith except as individual statements, pericopes, *sedes* are interpreted to yield the articles of faith? How else would Luther have

117. *WA*, 54:158; cf. 32:59; 50:269.

118. *W2*, 3:1890.

119. *W2*, 20:1040.

120. *SA*, II:II:15.

affirmed the article of justification by faith, for instance, except on the basis of *dicta probantia* such as Romans 1:16; 3:28; Galatians 2:20; and others? Certainly such an article of faith cannot be proved by the whole of Scripture or by passages not dealing with justification. To assert that Luther did not use the proof-text method is nonsense and renders his doctrine of biblical authority meaningless and inapplicable.

A second misrepresentation of Luther's principle of biblical authority portrays him as teaching that the authority of Scripture resides in its content, or message (the gospel), rather than in the very words, or divine form, of Scripture.<sup>121</sup> That notion has been taught by Lutherans and attributed to Luther in many different forms until our very day, when it is considered "Lutheran" to derive the authority of Scripture, or its infallibility, from its gospel-content rather than from its origin.<sup>122</sup> Like the first misrepresentation, this portrayal of Luther's position describes him as placing biblical authority in something other than the biblical words themselves. Thus the Bible itself is not the normative authority for all doctrine, but the biblical gospel is. Of course, to Luther the biblical gospel (also as it was preached from the pulpit and taught in the church) was the power of God unto salvation, and he extolled the power of that gospel in his writings.<sup>123</sup> But again and again Luther made clear that to him the normative authority of Scripture resided not in its subject matter, the gospel, but in its words. Thus he based all his theology on the text of Scripture as such. The very sentences and assertions and words of Scripture, in their proper context, were authoritative to him.<sup>124</sup> "A single letter,

121. See I. A. Dorner, *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, trans. W. L. Alexander and D. W. Simon (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1878), 1:231.

122. Kent S. Knutson, "The Authority of Scripture," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40 (1969): 160, 163 passim; Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 29. For the opposite view, which shows the reductionistic tendency in such a misrepresentation of Luther's authority principle, see Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Gene Lund (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), pp. 30ff.; Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), pp. 27ff.

123. *WA*, 47:120; cf. 37:437.

124. *W2*, 14:435.

yea, a single tittle, of Scripture counts for more than heaven and earth."<sup>125</sup>

The view attributed to Luther that Scripture is authoritative by virtue of its evangelical content, rather than its divine origin, suggests that some of Scripture may be less authoritative than the rest or that certain teachings of Scripture are not divinely authoritative at all. That is surely not Luther's view, as we have seen. It is true, of course, and of very great significance that Luther saw certain books of Scripture to be of more value than others and the article concerning Christ and His atonement to be the central teaching of Scripture.<sup>126</sup> But at the same time he insisted that nothing in the Scriptures was vain or contemptuous. Commenting on Psalm 16:10, he said that there are no insignificant matters (*levicula*) in Scripture.<sup>127</sup> He wrote on another occasion, "It is impossible that there is a single letter in Paul which the entire church should not follow and observe."<sup>128</sup> And though much in the Mosaic law applies only to the Jews of the Old Testament,<sup>129</sup> nevertheless everything in Moses is in some way edifying to the Christian community.<sup>130</sup> And so the authority of Scripture to Luther was the authority of the words of Scripture as such; it was a plenary authority, and it was absolute. Every assertion of Scripture, however near or far from its gospel center, was an authority for Christian belief; every command of Scripture, if it applies to the New Testament Christian, was an authority for action in life.

### THE INFALLIBILITY OF SCRIPTURE

As we address ourselves to Luther's notion of biblical infallibility (that Scripture cannot err), we must make two observations by way of introduction. First, as we have seen, Luther understood the God of grace and salvation as a speaking God. He spoke to mankind through the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures that are His Word. The human writers of the Scriptures were His instruments

125. *W2*, 9:650.

126. *Er.*, 40:324ff.; 48:18; 50:26-29; *Er. Lat.*, 10:137.

127. *WA*, 5:463; *Tr.* 1:736.

128. *W2*, 19:20.

129. *W2*, 3:9; 12:1037; 20:146.

130. *W2*, 20:153.

(*organum spiritus sancti*).<sup>131</sup> To hear and read the Scriptures, therefore, is nothing else than to hear God.<sup>132</sup> No wonder, therefore, that the Word of God was so precious to Luther; it came from "the mouth of God" and was "written for us" in order to serve and save us.<sup>133</sup> Thus the inerrancy of the Bible, or its truthfulness, was a corollary of its authority for Luther. "In theology one thing only is necessary, that we hear and believe and conclude in our heart: God is truthful, however absurd what He says in His Word may seem to our reason."<sup>134</sup> That truthfulness of God in His Word, of the biblical message, was of crucial importance to Luther because the message itself was so important to him. "I let you in your hostility cry that the Scripture contradicts itself, ascribing righteousness now to faith, and at other times to works. But it is impossible that Scripture contradict itself; it only seems so to foolish, coarse, and hardened hypocrites."<sup>135</sup> It is clear that to Luther the notion of an authoritative Word of God that nevertheless contains errors or contradictions would be a cruel piece of nonsense.

Second, Luther's insistence that the *bonus textualis* not merely determine the *sensus literalis* of the text of Scripture but accept it in spite of all other considerations and difficulties can only be explained by his total adherence to biblical inerrancy, and that as a basic principle of biblical interpretation. Why else would he insist on the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament of the altar? Why else would he insist that the right hand of God is everywhere and thus Christ is omnipresent in His state of exaltation also according to His human nature?<sup>136</sup> To Luther, the exegete is constantly engaged in taking his reason captive to the written Word against the sensible dictates of reason, experience,

131. *WA*, 3:262.

132. *WA*, 3:14, 41, 451; 4:318.

133. *WA*, 4:535.

134. *WA*, 40:II:593.

135. *WA*, 40:I:420.

136. *W2*, 47:213; *TR*, 4:4812; 26:244, 346, 437.

and all evidence.<sup>137</sup> We shall have occasion to come back to that subject a bit later.

Luther's view of the truthfulness, or inerrancy (to use a later term), of Scripture is a very clear and straightforward one. He simply believed in the truthfulness of the assertions of the biblical text.<sup>138</sup> He wrote, "You must follow straight after Scripture and accept it and speak not one syllable against it, for it is God's mouth."<sup>139</sup> And what will be the result when you follow such a procedure? You will find that "the Scriptures have never erred,"<sup>140</sup> that "the Scriptures cannot err,"<sup>141</sup> that "it is certain that the Scripture cannot disagree with itself,"<sup>142</sup> that "it is impossible that Scripture should contradict itself; it only appears so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites"<sup>143</sup> "for it is established by God's Word that God does not lie, nor does his Word lie."<sup>144</sup> No, "it is cursed unbelief and the odious flesh which would not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in Scripture and that it is God's Word, but tells us that it is the word merely of Isaiah, Paul, or some other mere man, who has not created heaven and earth."<sup>145</sup> We are not all apostles, Luther insisted; they were infallible teachers sent by God, but not we; they were unable "to err or be mistaken in the faith."<sup>146</sup>

From the quotations above, which could be greatly multi-

137. *WA*, 56:329:27: *Sapientia carnis aduersaria est verbo Dei, verbum autem Dei est immutabile et insuperabile. Ideo necesse est sapientiam carnis mutari et suam formam reliquere ac formam verbi suscipere. Quod fit, dum per fidem seipsam captiuat et destruit, conformat se verbo, credens verbum esse verum, se vero falsam. Cf. WA, 16:594:36.*
138. His view of inerrancy or truthfulness has nothing to do with the transmission of the text. Luther not only recognized errors and the possibility of errors of transmission (like any humanistic lower critic of his day) but even suggested—sometimes too facily—copyists' errors to solve vexing problems that could not be solved any other way. For instance, in reference to the seeming contradiction between Acts 13:20 and 1 Kings 6:1, Luther suggested (*W2*, 4:600) that the copyist might well have written *tetrakosiois* for *triakosiois*; cf. *W2*, 14:491. Such a practice only confirms his commitment to the inerrancy of the original text of Scripture.
139. *W2*, 19:337.
140. *W2*, 15:481.
141. *W2*, 19:1073.
142. *W2*, 20:798; cf. 14:491; 15:1481; 19:1073.
143. *W2*, 9:356.
144. *W2*, 20:789.
145. *W2*, 9:1800.
146. *WA*, 39:I:48.

plied,<sup>147</sup> we can draw three conclusions. First, Luther believed all the assertions of Scripture to be truthful, not merely those that were central or seemed to be of prime importance. Second, he believed in absolute, *a priori* inerrancy, that is, the infallibility of all biblical assertions. Notice how often he said that Scripture cannot err, cannot disagree with itself. Third, his notion of the nature of biblical truthfulness is the simple, unsophisticated notion that (1) Scripture does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact, and (2) Scripture does not contradict itself. Such a notion of the nature of inerrancy is utterly essential for the theologian—and Luther made that plain—if, on the basis of Scripture, he is ever to arrive at a knowledge of the truth and thus proclaim the true doctrine.

But what about the seeming discrepancies and contradictions of the Scripture? Did Luther, like an obscurantist, deny or ignore them? By no means. He recognized those difficulties and tried to cope with them. Commenting on Peter's denial in John, Luther wrote,<sup>148</sup> "John creates a confusion here. . . ."<sup>149</sup> Again he said in his comments on Matthew 27:9,<sup>150</sup> "Matthew does not hit the right place in his Scripture quotation. . . ."<sup>151</sup> But in none of those cases did Luther solve the problem by crying "error" and thus attribute to Scripture what he had consistently denied. Rather, he let the difficulty rest, if he could not solve it. That is the role of good scholarship, he believed, and pious respect for the Scriptures and their Author, the Holy Spirit. Concerning John 2:13-16 Luther commented:

Here the question arises how the statements of Matthew and John harmonize with each other. . . . These are questions and remain questions which I will not solve. But nothing much depends upon it. What do I care that there are many sharp and very clever people who raise all kinds of questions and demand an answer on every single point.<sup>152</sup>

147. See Pieper, p. 281, *passim*. Reu, pp. 65-102.

148. *WA*, 28:269.

149. Cf. *WA*, 46:726.

150. *WA*, 23:6:42.

151. Cf. *W2*, 1:721: "Here in the case of Abraham 60 years are lost. . . ."

152. *W2*, 7:1780.

Such Bible difficulties simply did not threaten the authority and integrity of Scripture, as far as Luther was concerned. In some cases what appears to be a difficulty or error in Scripture represents in fact only poor exegesis or hermeneutics on the part of the interpreter. For instance, if we should demand that the evangelists observe strict chronological order as they record things, there will indeed appear to be discrepancies in Scripture. But the evangelists do not observe order in their chronology.<sup>153</sup> "Let it be as it will, whether it be before or after, one or two occurrences; our faith does not suffer thereby." In his Genesis commentary Luther noticed that according to Genesis 11:11, it appears as though the chronology of Arpachshad was confused. He commented as follows, "One offers one solution, another offers another. But in the first place we will not be hurt at all if we cannot find a perfect solution. . . ." A bit later Luther added the words "For it is certain that Scripture does not lie."<sup>154</sup>

If Luther's solution, or reaction, to the apparent discrepancies within the Bible seems to be somewhat cavalier, it is not simply because he was a careless exegete; it is because he was so utterly convinced that the Scriptures are reliable and do not contradict themselves. Because of that, he did not really feel bound to defend the Scriptures on every issue. Furthermore, Luther knew how difficult it was for a sixteenth-century exegete to get at the immediate context and intention of texts written long ago. But perhaps most important, Luther realized how prone to error he himself was, how prone his flesh was to draw wrong inferences from Scripture, how prone he was to solve problems in the wrong way—especially when the Scriptures speak of the great mysteries of faith that are so hard for even the sanctified Christian to comprehend and apply. On one occasion he wrote:

I am much displeased with myself and I despise myself because I know that all that the Scriptures say about Christ is true and nothing can be greater or more important or sweeter or the source of greater joy than this; it should intoxicate me with the greatest joy because I see that Scripture is consonant with itself in all and

153. *W2*, 7:1781.

154. *W2*, 1:714.

through all and agrees with itself in such a way that it is impossible to doubt the truth and certainty of such a weighty matter in any detail. And yet I am hindered by the malice of my flesh and I am "bound by the law of sin" that I cannot let this gift permeate into my limbs and bones and even into my marrow as I should like.<sup>155</sup>

The inerrancy of Scripture was of immense importance to Luther because the gospel of Scripture was of such immense importance, and that gospel permeates all of Scripture. When he dealt with Scripture, Luther felt that he was dealing with God's Word and salvation. And so in standing before that Word he could only say, "I am bound. . . . The text stands there too mightily."<sup>156</sup> On the face of it Scripture seems to be a poor, miserable, unholy, contemptible book, unworthy of the Holy Spirit. And so every carnal person is offended by the Scriptures' simplicity. But Scripture mortifies the flesh and speaks contrary to our way of thinking. That is the struggle that every Christian exegete finds himself involved in as he reads and interprets the divine Word of Scripture.<sup>157</sup>

Luther's intense belief in the utter truthfulness of Scripture was in total harmony with his idea of revelation and his *theologia crucis*. The center of the Scriptures and of God's revelation to us, according to Luther, is Christ—not in His majesty<sup>158</sup> but in His humanity and humiliation, His cross and death.<sup>159</sup> But in just that revelation of Christ and His cross is the gospel, the only possible good news for fallen man.<sup>160</sup> For in His humiliation and death Christ atoned for our sins, and therefore we are justified by His grace through faith in Him. And where does that faith in God as He really is and as He has graciously revealed Himself have its source? In the Word of revelation, Scripture.<sup>161</sup> And so faith is directed toward the Word whose central message is the crucified Christ, a message that is foolishness to the natural man, which the natural man can-

155. *WA*, 40:III:652.

156. *W2*, 15:2050.

157. *WA*, 16:82:5; *WA, DB*, 8:10:24.

158. *WA*, 40:I:75:9; 43:403:20.

159. *WA*, 4:153:27; 14:97:2; 40:I:76:9; 56:5:9, 414:13.

160. See Pedersen, p. 99.

161. *WA*, 3:279:30; 29:199:3; 56:240:15. See Pedersen, pp. 17, 140 for more references.

not believe by his own reason and strength. But by the grace of the Holy Spirit we believe just that Word, that offensive Word that seems so wrong, so absurd, so error-ridden. Commenting on Galatians 3:6 Luther wrote, "This is the way faith speaks, God, I believe you when you speak to me. But what does God say? Impossible things, lies, stupid things, unsound, abominable, heretical, devilish things—if you consult your reason."<sup>162</sup>

The fact that the very central message of God's revelation to man, the gospel of justification, goes against the grain gives the Christian a context and posture for reading Scripture in the light of its utter truthfulness. For as we have seen, neither pope, nor church, nor Fathers, nor reason, nor experience judges Scripture; but Scripture is the judge, judge even—and especially—when it speaks of the article on which the church stands or falls, the sinner's justification before God for Christ's sake. And so the good theologian not only seeks the intended sense of Scripture and none other but also sticks with that intended sense, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. And the centrality of the work of Christ in Scripture, far from becoming an interpretative cipher that makes inerrancy an unnecessary *theologoumenon* and hermeneutically unworkable, lends support to the inerrancy of Scripture and is a basic hermeneutical principle for serious exegesis. For Luther, the divine form of Scripture and its evangelical center and content, the infallibility (truthfulness) of Scripture and its power, the normative authority of Scripture and its causative authority, the formal principle of theology and its material principle, all entail

162. (*Nam fides ita dicit: ego credo tibi Deo loquenti. Quid loquitur Deus? Impossibilia, mendacia, stulta, infirma, absurda, abominanda, haeretica et diabolica, si rationem consultas.*) Cf. *WA*, 10:III:23; 14:330:4; 40:I:360:2; 43:671:32ff. It is not our province to understand the hows and whys of Scripture, but we are simply to accept what it says. *WA*, 3:516:39; 4:511:11ff. For instance, Luther said that if you cannot understand how God could create the world in six days, let it stand and "accord the Holy Spirit the honor that He is more learned than you" *W2*, 3:21. And in another context when he was unable to harmonize some of the chronology connected with Abraham, Luther wrote, "I conclude the matter with the humble confession of my own ignorance, for it is only the Holy Spirit Who knows and understands everything" *W2*, 1:721.

each other, belong together, and work together.<sup>163</sup> What I have just said is the only conclusion that fits the data we have just surveyed.

### CONCLUSION

We have now concluded our brief study of Luther's doctrine of biblical infallibility in the context of his notion concerning the divine origin, authority, and truthfulness of Scripture. It is my hope that on the basis of this study, which merely reviewed well-known data and traversed well-known paths of Luther research, the reader will understand and appreciate not only that Luther believed in biblical infallibility but what his teaching really was. My conclusions on the basis of the data are the same as those of Wilhelm Walther and Michael Reu and, among dogmaticians, Adolph Hoehnecke and Francis Pieper. I make no apology for leaning heavily on the findings of those earlier scholars, especially Reu. No one since him has offered any substantive study of Luther's doctrine of biblical authority on the basis of primary sources. I only regret that the results of his research, which presents all the data pertinent to Luther's position, have not been consulted by so many modern theological dilettantes who, ignoring the caveat mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, have helter skelter consulted often tendential, secondary, and tertiary sources that have found in Luther every whim and theological trend that comes along today from higher criticism to process theology.<sup>164</sup> There is really nothing one can do about that except to

163. The finest discussion of the intimate and necessary relationships of the concepts mentioned above is by Harry Huth, *Gospel and Scripture, The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972).
164. The best example of such faulty and unscholarly method in recent times is the book by Rogers and McKim, mentioned above. The authors avoid any direct reading of Luther as he addressed himself in thousands of places to the subject of Scripture's authority, power, and intelligibility. They could at least have availed themselves of the *Registerband* of *W2* or the relatively good indexes of the monumental American edition of Luther's works, with their hundreds and hundreds of references to "God's Word" and "Scripture." Equally reprehensible is the fact that the secondary sources used by those authors are the wrong ones, in many cases not those of Luther scholars at all, but systematic theologians or historians whose *tendenz* Rogers and McKim apparently share.

voice the prayer that the present modest contribution to the subject of Luther and the infallibility of Scripture may to some degree counteract the aprioristic subjectivism that marks so much theological scholarship today and renders scholars incapable of analyzing or even describing the data that are—or ought to be—the basis of all their research.

Is Luther's doctrine of biblical authority evangelical? That question, which I think is quite legitimate, is answered affirmatively by most commentators who bother to answer it at all (but for different reasons, not all of which are valid). For instance, the modern proponent of the historical-critical method views Luther through his colored glasses and concludes mistakenly that his view of biblical authority was evangelical because he anticipated a more liberal view of Scripture. But that is to confuse obscurantism with legalism and so-called scholarship with evangelicalism. More subtly, however, such a conclusion is based on the assumption that one's (Luther's) doctrine of biblical authority is evangelical if it is based on the right understanding of Scripture's *form*. That assumption is fallacious. Non-Christian religions have holy books that are deemed to be God-given and inerrant, but such religions know nothing of the Christian gospel. Cults in America, such as the Jehovah Witnesses, have a very high view of Scripture in terms of its authority and inerrancy but reject the biblical gospel. It is not one's doctrine of the *form* of Scripture that marks his position as evangelical but his understanding concerning the *contents* and *goal* of Scripture. If that is true then Luther's bibliology and his doctrine of the Word were indeed evangelical. For as we have shown, he not only believed that the central teaching of Scripture was the evangelical doctrine of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith, but that Scripture was written for the sake of that gospel. And he believed that that biblical gospel, whether read or preached, was a mighty power not only to offer but also to impart and confer forgiveness, life, and salvation. That is the sense and context in which Luther's approach to Scripture, his doctrine of biblical authority, and his doctrine of the power of the Word are truly evangelical.

Luther affirmed both the *auctoritas normativa* (to which we have been addressing ourselves primarily in this chapter) and the

*auctoritas causativa* of Scripture—the causative as well as the normative authority of Scripture. The normative authority of Scripture may be defined as the infallible authority of the Scriptures as a source and norm of all doctrine and teachers in the church. The causative authority of Scripture is the inherent power of the biblical gospel to create faith in the hearts of sinners and to confer forgiveness and eternal life. Those two “authorities,” so consistently emphasized by Luther, do not conflict with each other but agree perfectly and work together.<sup>165</sup> Without the former one has no sure word of prophecy, no certain basis for his teaching; without the latter one preaches a gospel that is subject to error or change and has no power to convert. As I read Luther those two strong emphases come through loudly and clearly, almost uniquely among the Reformers (certainly with greater force than in the others), and mark his doctrine of Scripture and its divine authority as truly and eminently evangelical.

165. For the best discussion of that double aspect of Luther's doctrine of biblical authority, see Huth and Maier.