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The Material Principle of Lutheran Theology as a Hermeneutical Presupposition

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**The Material Principle of Lutheran Theology
as a Hermeneutical Presupposition**

**A Research Paper Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for elective
E-200**

by

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Advisor

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INTRODUCTION

The scope of this paper has been limited by suggestion of the advisor to a discussion of the material principle of Lutheran theology as a hermeneutical presupposition, although readings for the research elective included a much wider range of subjects related to contemporary hermeneutics. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate the theological background for the concept of the Lutheran material principle, to describe its function as a hermeneutical presupposition, and to demonstrate that certain presuppositions of some contemporary methods of interpretation contradict those underlying the material principle of Lutheran theology.

I. A Description of the Material Principle of Lutheran Theology.

It would be well to begin by defining the concept "material principle" as it is employed in Lutheran theology. In its most general sense, according to a glossary of theological terms prepared by F.E. Mayer, "material principle" means "the central thought of a respective theological system."¹ In a document prepared to treat the relationship between the formal and material principles of Lutheran theology, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church - - Missouri Synod identifies the material principle as God's justification of the sinner by grace for Christ's sake through faith.² W.H.T. Dau has demonstrated the relationship of this material principle to Lutheran theology in his rather extended definition of the concept:

The Material Principle of Lutheranism, then, is this, that no teaching can be essential to the life and well-being of the church, which does not present, clearly and unqualifiedly, Christ, the God-man, and His redemption by a vicarious atonement for men's sins: nor the saving grace of God as a free, unconditioned, and unlimited determination on the part of God to restore

¹ F.E. Mayer, The Religious Bodies of America, 4th ed., rev., by Arthur Carl Piepkorn (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 574.

² Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology, a Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church - - Missouri Synod (St. Louis: n.p., 1972).

fallen man to his original destiny; nor human faith as a clear understanding, a welcome acceptance of, and a firm trust in the Gospel of Christ as intended for, and applicable to, each believer individually.³

According to Dau, this principle is not the creation of Lutheran theologians, but clearly denotes the central teaching of the Scriptures themselves: "When the teachings of Scripture are examined one by one . . . it is seen that they rest on a marvelously benign disposition toward renegade man on the part of his grossly insulted Creator."⁴

In summary, when Lutherans speak of the material principle of their theology, they refer to the chief, central teaching which underlies and permeates the others, that on account of Christ's vicarious atonement, sinful men have a gracious God who offers them forgiveness that is received by faith in Christ's word and promises. Lutherans have confessed this as their central teaching because they have understood it to be the central theme of the Scriptures themselves.

II. The Theological Background for the Lutheran Material Principle

In comparison to the age of the Lutheran church, the application of the term "material principle" to refer to its central

³ W.H.T.T. Dau, "The Heritage of Lutheranism," What Lutherans Are Thinking, ed. E.C. Fendt (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1947) p. 21.

⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

teaching is rather recent. At the same time, the central teaching so described and the understanding of its significance for the church are traceable from the time of the Reformation.

According to Ragnar Bring, it was in the nineteenth century that the terms "material" and "formal principle" were introduced to the vocabulary of the Lutheran church. In his article entitled "Justification" in The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church he has written:

In order to set forth the meaning of the Reformation in the nineteenth century the terms "The Material and Formal Principles of the Reformation" were introduced. Material Principle meant justification through faith and the Formal Principle meant that the Bible was the only norm for faith and life. However, these two principles could not be separated if they were rightly to be understood, since for the Reformation the content of the Bible was justification, and only if justification is rightly interpreted can the Bible be understood as the norm for faith and life in a sense that is true to the Reformation.⁵

We will first illustrate the cardinal teachings of the Reformation that are comprehended under the heading "material principle" and then offer examples of later Lutheran theologians who employ the expression in their writings.

As several quotations will demonstrate, the teaching that the sinner is justified by God's grace through faith on account

⁵ Ragnar Bring, "Justification", The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church, ed. Julius Bodensieck (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965), Vol. 2, p. 1194.

of Christ's atonement is considered central in the Lutheran Confessions. Article IV of the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, which describes the justification of the sinner, states:

But since in this controversy the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which, understood aright, illumines and amplifies the honor of Christ (which is of especial service for the clear, correct understandings of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible), and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences, we ask His Imperial Majesty to hear us with forbearance in regard to matters of such importance.⁶

In the Formula of Concord under Article III, "Of the Righteousness of Faith before God," it reads:

This article concerning justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the chief article in the entire Christian doctrine, without which no poor consciences can have any firm consolation, or can truly know the riches of the grace of Christ, as Dr. Luther has also written: "If this only article remains pure on the battlefield, the Christian Church also remains pure, and in goodly harmony and without any sects; but if it does not remain pure, it is not possible that any error or fanatical spirit can be resisted" (Tom. 5, Jena, p. 159).⁷

F.E. Mayer, in a location where he offers additional Confessional support for the centrality of this teaching, writes: "According to the Lutheran Confessions, the main thought of the Gospels

⁶ F. Bente, ed., Concordia Triglotta (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 121 (Ap. IV, 2).

⁷ Ibid., p. 917 (FC, SD, III, 6).

and Epistles in the entire Scripture is that we should believe that in Jesus Christ through faith we have a gracious God."⁸

Dau writes that Luther was thoroughly convinced of the centrality of the Gospel in Scripture and offers as evidence this quotation from him: "Scripture must be understood, not against, but in favor of, Christ, and must be related to Him or not be regarded as true Scripture."⁹ Again, Dau writes, "Every other doctrine of Scripture is in Luther's theology correlated to the doctrine of justification either as a cause or as an effect."¹⁰

The material principle as currently employed in Lutheran theology is consistent with Luther's view of the Bible, according to Robert Preus; for Luther held that the Bible was given to lead men to salvation through Christ.¹¹ Stated in another way, the material principle is consistent with Luther's solus Christus principle, namely, that all Scripture addresses salvation in Christ in terms of Law or Gospel.¹²

⁸ F.E. Mayer, p. 145. He offers also these Confessional references: Ap. IV, 87, 102; XII, 53; XX, 2.

⁹ W.H.T. Dau, p. 17.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹ Robert D. Preus, The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 295.

¹² Herbert T. Mayer, Interpreting the Holy Scriptures (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 39.

As Herbert T. Mayer has pointed out, the sola gratia of the Reformation has bearing also upon what we call the material principle:

With the phrase sola gratia, "by grace alone," Luther affirms that the central teaching and unifying theme of the entire Bible is that God declares the sinner to be righteous solely and alone for the sake of Christ.¹³

Sola fide, "by faith alone," is the Reformation's way of describing the way the grace of God in Christ is received, namely, only by the faith which is given by God, not by any effort on man's part.

The material principle of Lutheran theology, then, comprehends the essence of three Reformation principles: solus Christus, that Scripture teaches only Christ as the Savior of mankind from sin, and that Christ and His work are the very center of Scripture; sola gratia; that Christ's work for man's salvation is motivated entirely from the side of God on account of His gracious disposition; and sola fide, that Christ's vicarious atonement is appropriated to man only by the faith which God works in him.

The material principle is also affected by the Reformation's sola Scriptura principle. As Robert Preus has written,

The Christocentricity of Scripture unites the formal (sola Scriptura) principle of theology with the ma-

¹³ Ibid., p. 40.

terial principle (justification through faith in Christ) in such a way that neither stands alone, but each complements the other perfectly.¹⁴

Luther was not describing only the chief doctrine of the "Lutheran" church when he spoke of justification of the sinner only by grace, only through faith, and only on account of Christ's work. He was also asserting that this is the consistent teaching of Scripture, and that Scripture itself is the court in which doctrines must be tried in the light of its Christocentricity. Thus, Scripture declares Christ throughout, and is the norm for Christian theology; the Gospel is never separable from its Christological source. As evidence we offer the following observations of Werner Elert:

In Luther . . . the interrelationship of the authority, the sufficiency, and the perspicuity of Scripture is inseparable because Scripture, as he reads it, is strictly Christocentric. Accordingly, one can say that the doctrine of justification is the key to his "Scripture Principle."¹⁵

The declaration "nothing but Christ should be preached" . . . was what gave the Scripture principle as defined

¹⁴ Robert D. Preus, p. 331.

¹⁵ Werner Elert, The Structure of Lutheranism, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 190.

by Lutheranism its truly reformational character.¹⁶

Lutheran theologians in the centuries succeeding the Reformation adhered closely to the principle that Christ is the center of Scripture. For example, Calov wrote:

Inasmuch as Christ is the end of the Law (Rom. 10:4) and the center of the Gospel (John 20:31), therefore Jesus Christ is to be considered the length and depth and breadth and focal point to which all things in the Scriptures are related (Ps. 40:7-8; John 5:39; Acts 3:19, 24; 10:43), nay, He is the epitome and the totality of the entire Scriptures.¹⁷

Again, Dannhauer wrote: "Christ crucified . . . is the heart, the entire sweep, the center, the nucleus, the treasure, the pearl of all the Scriptures"18

This was not mere lip-service to Luther. These theologians found Christ throughout Scripture.¹⁹ According to them:

The Christocentricity of Scripture is not therefore merely some worn cliché, but a principle established directly by Scripture and by Christ Himself (John 5:39, 2 Tim. 3:15) from the mass of prophecy and typology throughout Scripture. The Christocentricity of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Robert D. Preus, p. 270.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Scripture became a hermeneutical norm. All Scripture must be read and expounded Christologically.²⁰

Having demonstrated that the background to what since the nineteenth century has been called "the material principle of Lutheran theology" is to be seen in the Reformation's principles of solus Christus, sola gratia, and sola fide, and that these principles under such expressions as "Christ is the center of Scripture" have been affirmed to be central to the Lutheran understanding of Scripture, we shall offer a few examples of their incorporation under the expression "material principle". Charles Porterfield Krauth in 1871 spoke of the material principle as the very heart of Lutheranism, distinguishing it from the Reformed churches, which tended to focus primarily on the formal principle.²¹ Francis Pieper in volume I of his Christliche Dogmatik, first published in 1917, used the term material principle in distinguishing the Lutheran church from other denominations.²² F.E. in 1954 gave a rather complete description of the material principle in Lutheran theology in preparation for his book, The Re-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 331.

²¹ Charles Porterfield Krauth, The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963 reprint of 1871 edition), p. 123.

²² Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), Vol. 1. p. 23.

ligious Bodies of America, when he wrote:

When speaking of the material principle of theology, Lutherans do not have in mind a basic principle according to which a body of doctrine may be developed. The material principle of Lutheran theology is in reality only a synopsis and summary of the Christian truth. When Lutheran theologians speak of justification by faith as the material principle of theology, they merely wish to indicate that all theological thinking must begin at this article, center in it, and culminate in it.²³

III. The Material Principle as a Prescriptive Hermeneutical Pre-supposition.

The material principle of Lutheran theology constitutes a prescriptive hermeneutical presupposition, that is, it prescribes how Lutherans approach the interpretation of Scripture. This follows from what has been demonstrated so far, which is that Lutheran theology has maintained that the central teaching of Scripture is justification of the sinner by grace through faith in Christ. Consistent with the principle that Scripture is Christocentric, that its unified testimony is Christ alone as the Savior from sin, is that one who interprets Scripture comes to it expecting to hear salvation in Christ proclaimed (Gospel) and trust in anything else condemned (Law). Hermann Diem in his book Was heisst Schriftgemäss demonstrates that the Reformation's prin-

²³ F.E. Mayer, p. 146.

ciple of justification as it has been described earlier is in fact a worthy hermeneutical presupposition, since it is in keeping with Scripture.²⁴

The document Gospel and Scripture, which refers to the material principle also as "Gospel" (in the narrow sense), explains the implications it has for interpretation:

The Gospel provides a rule of thumb, or norm, applicable to all of Scripture, namely, that Scripture cannot be against Christ or be in conflict with the chief article concerning the free remission of sins by grace through faith in His sole mediatorship.²⁵

Herbert T. Mayer, in a book describing Biblical interpretation, has written in a similar vein: "A basic principle for all Bible study . . . is that Jesus Christ and the message of God's grace and love must be kept in the forefront at all times".²⁶

In his "Essays in Hermeneutics" Martin H. Franzmann described the source and implications of this Christocentric presupposition:

The Spirit of truth . . . will lead us to seek and find

²⁴ Hermann Diem, Was heisst Schriftgemäss? (Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen Kreis Moers, 1958), p. 68.

²⁵ Gospel and Scripture, p. 7.

²⁶ Herbert T. Mayer, p. 75.

Christ as the whole content of Scripture. That does not mean that we are to allegorize and twist texts to find explicit reference to our Lord where none such exists. It does mean that we view and treat Scripture as an organic whole, with one author, the parts of which are vitally related to the one central theme of God's redemptive work in Christ.²⁷

Thus, it is by the work of God's Spirit that the exegete perceives the message which Scripture describes as central and which illuminates the entire process of interpretation. In this vein, F.E. Mayer has written:

As the various facets of the diamond catch, refract, reflect the light, so the phrase "justification by faith alone" gives brilliance to every phase of Christian revelation, and in turn each facet of Christian truth sheds new brilliance on this so-called central doctrine²⁸

The doctrine of justification is, as it were, the strand on which all the pearls of Christian revelation are strung.²⁹

* The implications of losing the centrality of the Gospel described by the material principle include the loss of saving faith itself and the loss of one's ability to understand the mes-

²⁷ Martin H. Franzmann, "Essays in Hermeneutics", Concordia Theological Monthly 19:10 (October 1948) : 746.

²⁸ F.E. Mayer, p. 146.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

sage of all of Scripture, for this insight is the very key to rightly interpreting what Scripture has to say.³⁰

It follows that a major source for divisions within the church stems from differences in what is adopted as material principle, for this influences the way all of Scripture is to be understood.³¹ For example, at the heart of the theology of Calvinistic Reformed churches is the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God, rather than justification by grace through faith. The implications of these different centers are readily apparent in the divergence of understanding concerning the doctrine of God's election to salvation. One confession expects to find in all of Scripture a God who is gracious to sinners in Christ, while the other expects to find a God whose sovereignty is everywhere exercised and nowhere compromised, even in terms of human logic.

A second illustration concerns contemporary liberation theology, which posits as the central and chief theme of Scripture the liberation of the poor and underprivileged from economic and political oppression. Approaching Scripture from this point of view will lead to a different understanding, for example, of the beatitudes in Christ's Sermon on the Mount than if one expects to find salvation from sin in Christ everywhere proclaimed.

³⁰ Francis Pieper, vol. 2, p. 520; see also p. 516.

³¹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 31.

It might be objected that it is prejudicial and non-objective to read Scripture with the expectation that justification by faith is taught everywhere either in terms of Law or Gospel. However, Lutherans do not apologize for this presupposition, for, as has been demonstrated in the earlier quotations from the Lutheran Confessions and Lutheran theologians, they contend that this material principle is clearly that which is taught by the Scriptures themselves as the key to interpretation.

To posit that the material principle of Lutheran theology is the material principle of Scripture is based on several presuppositions. To say that Scripture has a material principle, a central thought, presumes first that Scripture is definable. To say that it is Christocentric presupposes that there are demonstrable limits to what we call Scripture. Historically, this has been referred to as the canon. If there were no authoritative canon, one could not meaningfully speak of the centrality of justification by faith, for someone might produce a document not considered by the one positing its centrality which would contradict such justification. For something to have a center, it must also have a definable perimeter.

For Scripture (not just theology) to have a material principle, one must also presuppose the unity of Scripture. Lutherans have traditionally described Scripture's unity as consisting of three propositions: 1) that it has one divine author; 2) that it

has a unified confession that Jesus Christ is man's only savior; and 3) that it has one fundamental purpose, "to make men wise unto salvation."³²

In one sense, this unity is another way of describing the material principle (see point 2). In another sense, it describes the material principle as an intentional, intrinsic characteristic of Scripture, existing because it has been written by one author for one central purpose, rather than a secondary, man-made principle derived by virtue of scientific observation.

To summarize the way in which the material principle of Lutheran theology is a prescriptive hermeneutical presupposition, we may quote Horace Hummel: "It provides an indispensable center and focus to which all exegetical conclusions must be integrally related and vetoes many centrifugal interpretations that secular scholarship often proposes."³³ Lutherans justify this presupposition by the claim that it is "according to Scripture," and that it is a necessary presupposition if one is to understand Scripture

³² Ralph A. Bohlmann, "Confessional Biblical Interpretation: Some Basic Principles," Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics, ed. John Reumann in collaboration with Harold H. Ditmanson and Samuel H. Nafzger (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 206.

³³ Horace D. Hummel, "The Influence of Confessional Themes on Biblical Exegesis," Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics, p. 224. Dr. Hummel provides an excellent presentation of practically applying the material principle in exegesis on pp. 224 ff.

properly.

IV. Examples of Interpretive Presuppositions Which Contradict the Material Principle.

Within the broad contemporary field of interpretive methods, there are presuppositions which run contrary to the material principle as we have described it. Several will be described here for the purpose of illustration.

First, the many methods which fall under the general heading of "historical criticism" have as a fundamental presupposition that Scripture must be interpreted as any other human book. Only if it is so considered may the canons of current secular historical investigations, which were designed to probe strictly human works, be defensibly applied. Scripture is considered still to be a theological book, to be sure; however, it consists not in God's revelation to man through men but the witness of men to God's revelation. Hence, in no real way can God be considered in consistent criticism as the single author of Scripture, but rather as one whose revelatory acts are witnessed to by various men of faith. R.C. Briggs gives evidence of this position when he writes that "Scripture is Christian tradition."³⁴

³⁴ R.C. Briggs Interpreting the New Testament Today (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 223.

The Lutheran systematician Duane Priebe admits to a similar opinion when he writes that "the difference between Scripture and tradition is that in Scripture, tradition becomes fixed."³⁵ There is no real qualitative difference between the character of the church's witness and the written Scriptures, according to this view.

This position has considerable bearing of what is meant by the material principle of Lutheran theology. As we have seen, the understanding that justification by grace through faith in Christ is not only our theology's but also Scripture's center rests on the proposition of the unity of Scripture, one facet of which is its having one ultimate author.³⁶ Only thus could there exist an intentional central theme. When one considers Scripture only to be the collected witness of faithful men over many generations, its unity could be at best accidental, that is, upon reading their collected witness we would discover that there is a certain consistency in their witness.

Most who consider Scripture to be a collection of men's witness to God's revelation, however, would not state even

³⁵ Duane A. Priebe, "Theology and Hermeneutics", Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics, p. 300.

³⁶ Ralph A. Bohlmann, p. 206.

that strongly Scripture's unity. R.C. Briggs claims: "It is impossible to discover a definable unity in the teaching of the New Testament."³⁷ He goes on to say that there is no unity in either theology or expectations among the books of the Old and New Testaments.³⁸ He, therefore, prefers to speak of continuity rather than unity; that is, the various witnesses of Scripture are in continuity with the Christian confession, although their theologies may be variously presented.³⁹

Differences on what Scripture's unity means are also apparent within the Lutheran church. Harold Ditmanson in Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics writes that for theologians from the Lutheran Church - - Missouri Synod (LCMS) unity of authorship is the foundation for the assertion of unity of doctrinal content and testimony. On the other hand, theologians from the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) contend that Scripture's unity resides in its many authors' consistent proclamation of the divine activity and their central witness to God's redemptive purpose.⁴⁰ Along with this difference of under-

³⁷ R.C. Briggs, p. 221.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 274.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 276.

⁴⁰ Harold H. Ditmanson, "Perspectives on the Hermeneutics Debate," Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics, p. 88.

standing concerning Scripture's unity is that theological pluralism within Scripture is affirmed by theologians of the ALC and LCA and expressly denied by theologians of the LCMS.⁴¹

The implications of the LCMS position on unity are that this hermeneutical presupposition unifies apparent differences within Scripture, and that one can and must apply the hermeneutical principle of the material principle, which is the distinction between Law and Gospel, to all Scriptures.⁴² On the other hand, contrast the statement of Arland J. Hultgren:

It is inappropriate to impose systematic conceptions upon all parts of the Bible . . . such as covenant, redemptive history, law and gospel All such approaches fail to take seriously the function of the actually existing biblical books within their historical settings, and they prevent us from hearing what the various authors were trying to say in their own times and places.⁴³

According to his position, the unity of the Old and New Testaments is an affirmation of faith which interprets oneself as being

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴² Ibid., p. 88.

⁴³ Arland J. Hultgren, "Hermeneutical Tendencies in the Three-Year Lectionary," Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics, p. 154.

within the community of the faithful there described.⁴⁴

As might be expected from the understanding that Scripture consists of the witness to God's revelatory acts by various men of faith, the canon of Scripture is called into question. If the Bible is not qualitatively different from church tradition, it may be asked why it should in any special sense be authoritative for Christian teaching. It would seem likely, in other words, that other witnesses would exist beyond Scripture's canon which might also be considered equally prescriptive for Christian teaching. R.C. Briggs, for example, states that the canon, as we have it, was established not on universal acceptance, but because it is a body of material that "provides access to a valid understanding of Jesus Christ."⁴⁵ He goes on to suggest that, logically, the canon ought to be revised today, since it contains "insuperable difficulties," many things that do not express or do actually contradict the Christian conscience, such as Paul's teaching on marriage and God's involvement in war.⁴⁶

Such an opinion of Scripture clearly impinges upon what one considers the material principle to be. We have demonstrated

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 159.

⁴⁵ R.C. Briggs, p. 226.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 224.

above that, in order to maintain the position that Scripture has a material principle, or central and pervasive teaching, it is necessary also to be able to define the perimeters of the Scriptures to which a center is posited. When Scripture is considered qualitatively not to differ from other witnesses in the Christian tradition, there is no guarantee that its material principle is anything more than a description of a theme of some Christian documents.

A final example of a contemporary position which contradicts (in this instance very clearly) the material principle of Lutheran theology comes from Schubert Ogden. Ogden outright denies the Christocentricity of Scripture.⁴⁷ He claims that man must be considered as a free and responsible being in the economy of "salvation" if such salvation is to be intelligible to contemporary man.⁴⁸ Hence, man cannot be held responsible for "choosing between alternatives, one of which is not open to him apart from Jesus Christ."⁴⁹ Salvation, therefore, is not dependant upon the

⁴⁷ Robert W. Funk, Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

Christ-event, as Bultmann maintained, but only on "some event in which God's grace becomes a concrete occurrence and is received by a decision of faith."⁵⁰

Ogden's denial of solus Christus apparently is not derived from his reading of Scripture, but rather from his presupposition of man's inherent freedom and responsibility before God. Here the autonomy of reason, which lies at the very heart of historical-critical methodology,⁵¹ finds its ultimate expression.

The implications of such a position with regard to the material principle we have described is only too obvious. First, it is denied that Scripture teaches only Christ as the way to man's salvation. Second, even if it were considered to be Scripture's central theme, such would still not be acceptable as a principle to describe the economy of salvation. There is no way, therefore, that God could have intended such a theme to be central in the Scriptures at all. It must be, if it exists there, the result of misunderstanding on the part of its various authors.

Other examples could be given concerning methods or presuppositions applied today to the interpretation of Scripture, but

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 99.

⁵¹ Kurt E. Marquart, "The Incompatibility between Historical-Critical Theology and the Lutheran Confessions," Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics, p. 319.

these will be considered sufficient. In summary, we may say that whenever the presuppositions we have described for the traditional understanding of the material principle of Lutheran theology are compromised, the function of the material principle itself is severely restricted. Rather than serving as a prescriptive hermeneutical principle, it becomes no more than a descriptive theologocial proposition.

V. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the material principle of Lutheran theology, justification of the sinner by grace through faith on account of Christ, has its theological roots in three principles which are at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation, solus Christus, sola gratia, and sola fide. It has also been shown that for Luther, as well as Lutheran theologians in succeeding centuries, this material principle serves as a prescriptive hermeneutical presupposition, determining their very approach to Scripture. For they were convinced that it was the central theme of Scripture which alone provided the key to its understanding.

It is a matter of great concern that even within the Lutheran church the principles which provide the foundation for the material principle (such as the unity of Scripture) have been eroded through certain presuppositions governing much of contemporary

Biblical interpretation. The effect has been that, even when traditional terminology has been employed, significant differences in meaning are apparent. To a large extent, even within Lutheranism, the material principle no longer prescribes the exegete's approach to interpreting Scripture, but only describes what is meant as the Gospel in the narrow sense. What this implies for the unity of the church, whose Reformer considered the material principle to be the very key to understanding the Scriptures, will only become more apparent in the years ahead.

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