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THE HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES OF THEODORE LAETSCH WITH A FOCUS  
ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENTS

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A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Exegetical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Theology

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by

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May 1991

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . . v

Chapter

1. THEODORE LAETSCH, PASTOR AND EXEGETE . . . . . 1

    Theodore Laetsch (1877-1962) . . . . . 1

    The Man and His Hermeneutics . . . . . 3

2. THE CONTEXT OF THE HERMENEUTICS OF LAETSCH . . . . . 14

    The Reformation . . . . . 16

    C. F. W. Walther . . . . . 25

    George Stoeckhardt . . . . . 29

    Two Schools of Thought in the Missouri Synod . . . . . 33

3. THE HERMENEUTICAL OUTLOOK OF LUDWIG FUERBRINGER . . . . . 46

    The Influence of Ludwig Fuerbringer. . . . . 48

    The Hermeneutical Theory of Fuerbringer . . . . . 52

4. THE HERMENEUTICAL PROCEDURE OF FUERBRINGER . . . . . 76

    Establishing the Text . . . . . 76

    The Interpretation of the Text . . . . . 83

5. THEODORE LAETSCH: THEOLOGICAL EXEGETE . . . . . 153

    The Res-to-Verba Emphasis . . . . . 156

    The Res-to-Verba Emphasis in Laetsch's Writings . . . . . 165

    Exegetical Case Studies . . . . . 178

        1 Corinthians 1:21-31 . . . . . 179

        Psalm 17:15 . . . . . 179

        Hosea 1-3 . . . . . 180

        Acts 20:17 . . . . . 182

        Acts 16:9 . . . . . 183

        Divorce and Remarriage . . . . . 184

        2 Corinthians 4:4 . . . . . 185

        Acts 3:13 . . . . . 186

        1 John 4:10 . . . . . 187

        1 John 3:1-5 . . . . . 188

        Hebrews 13:4 . . . . . 191

        1 Corinthians 10:16,17 . . . . . 192

        Exodus 4:14-17 . . . . . 193

        Psalm 50:16 and Isaiah 52:11 . . . . . 194

        Proverbs 30:1-6 . . . . . 195

        1 John 1:1-4 . . . . . 197

        Micah 7:16,17 . . . . . 200

        Jeremiah 5:1 . . . . . 202

Jeremiah 6:27 . . . . .	205
Jeremiah 11:16 . . . . .	207
Jeremiah 15:19 . . . . .	208
Jeremiah 15 . . . . .	209
Jeremiah 31:8 . . . . .	210
Jeremiah 33:14-16 . . . . .	212
Jeremiah 46:26 . . . . .	216
Lamentations 2:9 . . . . .	217
The Song of Songs . . . . .	218
Hosea 9:16 . . . . .	219
Hosea 14 . . . . .	220
Joel 2:23 . . . . .	222
Amos 9:6 . . . . .	224
Jonah 1:11-15 . . . . .	225
Micah 4:1 . . . . .	226
Micah 7:11 . . . . .	228
Habakkuk 2:1 . . . . .	229
Zephaniah 3:11-12 . . . . .	231
Zechariah 1:8 . . . . .	233
Zechariah 11:1-3 . . . . .	234
Conclusion . . . . .	235

6. THEODORE LAETSCH AND THE OLD TESTAMENT . . . . . 237

Hebrews 4:14-16 . . . . .	241
Deuteronomy 18:15-19 . . . . .	244
Hosea 1:10 - 2:1 . . . . .	247
Hosea 2:16,17 . . . . .	252
Hosea 2:19,20 . . . . .	254
1 Timothy 4:7 . . . . .	256
1 Timothy 2:6 . . . . .	258
1 Peter 2:9,10 . . . . .	259
Acts 3:1-16 . . . . .	264
Hebrews 12:18-24 . . . . .	265
1 Peter 1:3-9 . . . . .	268
Hebrews 13:8 . . . . .	270
Hebrews 10:20 . . . . .	271
Hebrews 10:22 . . . . .	273
The Old Testament Prophets . . . . .	274
2 Corinthians 5:21 . . . . .	276
Psalm 40:12-15 . . . . .	278
Acts 4:11,12 . . . . .	279
1 Corinthians 14:40 . . . . .	281
Hebrews 1:5 . . . . .	283
2 Samuel 7:14 . . . . .	285
Romans 8:32 . . . . .	287
Deuteronomy 30:12-14 . . . . .	288
Ephesians 1:10 . . . . .	290
Isaiah 49:24-26 . . . . .	291
Jeremiah 3:16,17 . . . . .	293
Jeremiah 23:5,6 and 33:14,15 . . . . .	295
Jeremiah 30:1-3 . . . . .	297
Jeremiah 30-33 . . . . .	297

Hosea 11:1 . . . . .	300
Hosea 14 . . . . .	302
The Book of Joel . . . . .	302
Amos 9:13 . . . . .	305
Theology of "The Day" in Obadiah . . . . .	306
Micah 5:2 . . . . .	306
Habakkuk 2:4 . . . . .	307
The Gospel of the Old Testament . . . . .	308
CONCLUSION . . . . .	311
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	314

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will summarize the findings which resulted from an in-depth study of all the published works of Dr. Theodore Laetsch, professor of practical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. These writings include a commentary on Jeremiah and Lamentations, a commentary on the Minor Prophets, and eighty-six articles which appeared in the Concordia Theological Monthly.

The study was undertaken with the specific goal of ascertaining the hermeneutical principles of Laetsch, particularly those principles that address the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The phrase "hermeneutical principles" will be employed in this paper in the following sense: an exegete's presuppositions or assumptions, spoken or otherwise, which govern his interpretation of individual passages. These principles may be theological or philosophical in nature, and they may cover a whole range of subjects, such as methodology of interpretation, Christology, prophecy-fulfillment, philosophy of history, theory of language, and even the personal characteristics of the interpreter.

The task of determining Laetsch's hermeneutical principles was eased somewhat by the fact that his writings provide an ample cross-section of his career as a teacher. His journal articles span a twenty-year period which roughly coincides with his seminary professorship, while his two commentaries were compiled and published during his retirement. Also there is in his writings an adequate sample of his

treatment of Biblical texts: his commentaries, of course, deal with Old Testament books, whereas the majority of his journal articles discuss New Testament texts, primarily the Eisenach Epistles.

Laetsch, perhaps due to a pastoral drive to reach theological conclusions and applications, often left unsaid his hermeneutical principles. Having in view the goal of edifying his readers, Laetsch kept his hermeneutics largely in the background, perhaps as part of the "shop talk" that preceded his writings, but not often included in the writings themselves. This situation made the present investigation somewhat more difficult and shaped it into an inductive study, a reasoning from the particular to the general.

In order to explain preliminarily the thesis of this dissertation a brief word of background explanation is in order. Within confessional churches the art of Biblical interpretation has often been described as the traversing of a "hermeneutical circle" which has upon it two reference points, the words of the Scriptures themselves and the doctrinal content of a church body's confession. Lutheran systematians are accustomed to referring to these two points as the "formal and material principles" respectively: the formal principle reminds the interpreter that the Scriptures are the sole source and norm of all doctrine, while the material principle directs the interpreter to make sure that all his work of interpretation is done in service of what is seen as the Scriptures' own cardinal teaching, the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

It is important that this hermeneutical circle remain intact and that a healthy balance between these two poles be maintained. On the one hand, the ignoring of the doctrinal pole entails the faulty assump-

tion that a purely presuppositionless, tabula rasa (clean slate) approach to the Scriptures is a possible option. On the other hand, an overemphasis on the doctrinal pole is also possible: where the interpreter, forgetting that his teachings came from the Scriptures in the first place, fails to check continually the Scriptures themselves to see whether or not his teachings are entirely accurate. At the very least, an overemphasis on doctrine can lead to a colorization of the Scriptures, where the Scriptures are no longer fully heard in their own right and according to their own terms and categories.

In the history of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod there has been a constant watchfulness to preserve the integrity of the hermeneutical circle. However, it appears that at various times in that history there has been an accentuating of one point on the circle over against the other. In particular, the doctrinal point has received increasing attention, especially when aberrant doctrines were encountered both outside and even within the framework of American Lutheranism. To be sure, the Scriptures have never been totally ignored; they have been appealed to unceasingly. But the real question here is concerning which point on the hermeneutical circle receives more emphasis and attention.

Against this historical backdrop and as the result of a careful reading of all the writings of Theodore Laetsch a threefold thesis regarding the hermeneutics of Theodore Laetsch has emerged. First of all, Laetsch, this dissertation contends, is one of those exegetes in the Missouri Synod who emphasized the doctrinal point on the hermeneutical circle in the face of doctrinal opponents both within and without his church. Secondly, it is maintained that Laetsch's chief



hermeneutical mentor for this doctrinal emphasis was Ludwig Fuerbringer, at least in terms of direct, immediate influence. It was Fuerbringer who set down in writing a whole set of hermeneutical principles for use by Laetsch's generation, although there remains the possibility that Fuerbringer was misunderstood at various points. The third subpoint of the thesis flows from the first two as a practical outcome, of which mention has already been made: this concern over doctrine has the potential of creating an imbalance on the hermeneutical circle and of hampering the fresh and original, albeit confessional, exegesis of individual Scripture passages. The Scriptures may tend to be placed into a secondary position, where they merely provide aetiologies for doctrines that the interpreter already holds to be true; or even worse, out of doctrinal concern the interpreter may possibly push a Scripture passage beyond its original scope and intention.

It is hoped that this dissertation will offer a meaningful contribution to Old Testament studies in the church and that it will serve as a catalyst for further discussion, particularly in the area of prophecy and fulfillment, a major focus of this paper.

## CHAPTER 1

### THEODORE LAETSCH, PASTOR AND EXEGETE

The first chapter will provide a brief biographical sketch of the professional life of Theodore Laetsch and will conclude with a discussion of personal factors which have a bearing on the quest for Laetsch's hermeneutical stance.

#### Theodore Laetsch (1877-1962)

Theodore F. K. Laetsch was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on February 11, 1877, to Rudolph Laetsch and his wife Elizabeth (nee Eisfeld).<sup>1</sup> He attended Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and went on to Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, receiving his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1898. Later in life he was to receive further academic honors when he was awarded in 1939 the degree of Doctor of Theology honoris causa from Lutheran Seminary, Adelaide, South Australia.

Upon his graduation from the seminary he served as pastor of four Wisconsin parishes in the towns of Chippewa Falls, Deer Park, Eau Claire, and Sheboygan. During this time he was married to Louise Holling, and their marriage was blessed with four sons: Theodore, Bernhard, Harold, and Willis. Willis was to follow in his father's footsteps--he wrote his Bachelor of Divinity thesis for Concordia

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise indicated the biographical information in this section is derived from the obituary in the Lutheran Witness 82 (1963):18 and its parallel in Der Lutheraner 119 (1963):12.

Seminary, St. Louis, on the divine name "Jehovah,"<sup>2</sup> and he later taught Old Testament at Concordia Teachers College in Seward, Nebraska.

From 1920 to 1927 Laetsch was the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in South St. Louis, Missouri. During his tenure there Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, became aware of his teaching abilities and ultimately called him as a professor in practical theology, a post which he held until his retirement in 1948. Though it is difficult to tell exactly when, Laetsch was known to cross over into the exegetical department, teaching such courses as Old Testament Introduction.<sup>3</sup> Other professional activities included serving as vice-president of the Western District of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, as chairman of the Western District Mission Board, as a member of Concordia Seminary Board of Control, as a member of the Concordia Theological Monthly editorial committee, as co-editor of Der Lutheraner, and as editor of two volumes of The Abiding Word, published in observance of Synod's one-hundredth anniversary.

In his retirement Laetsch devoted his time to his commentaries. There is evidence that much of his writing in this period consisted simply of editing his class notes which he had amassed over the years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Willis E. Laetsch, God's Manifestation of Jehovah, Concordia Seminary Library, 1938.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Dr. Walter Roehrs, whose tenure overlapped with Laetsch's from 1944 to 1948.

<sup>4</sup>Compare, for example, his journal articles on Hosea 1-3, Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932):33-45, 120-7, 187-96, 262-8, and his commentary treatment of the same chapters, The Minor Prophets (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 17-40. Whole paragraphs from his articles were taken over verbatim into his commentary.

A third commentary on the Book of Proverbs was in process,<sup>5</sup> but Laetsch died on December 29, 1962, prior to its completion. He was given Christian burial at Sheboygan, Wisconsin, on January 2, 1963.

#### The Man and His Hermeneutics

Since the study of hermeneutics deals with presuppositions and assumptions which the exegete brings to bear on a Biblical text, it is imperative to examine the exegete himself, the interpreter behind the interpretation. This approach recognizes that hermeneutical principles may often stem from who or what a man is, and not only from what he has been trained to do. The remainder of this chapter will be an attempt to piece together a character sketch of Theodore Laetsch, and the next chapter will look at the interaction between Laetsch and the environment of Biblical studies around him.

First of all, it is very difficult to construct a complete character sketch because very little has ever been written about Laetsch, and Laetsch himself was hesitant to provide any personal glimpses in his writings. The "Theodore Laetsch" file at the Concordia Historical Institute in St. Louis is paper-thin and contains only a few miscellaneous items such as a handful of photographs and his obituaries.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, Laetsch's own reticence undoubtedly stemmed from his

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<sup>5</sup>Personal correspondence from his son Willis E. Laetsch dated July 2, 1987. Willis has been living in retirement in Tucson, Arizona, since 1981 and would still like to gather his father's notes on Proverbs in order to publish them. As this correspondence indicates, none of his father's unpublished writings are retrievable at the time of this writing.

<sup>6</sup>"Theodore Laetsch" file, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Missouri.

humility; but one can only speculate concerning the silence of others. The fact that Laetsch spent almost three-fifths of his professional career in the parish was certainly a factor. Secondly, fellow exegetes may have been hesitant to quote him because it was always remembered that Laetsch was called, first and foremost, to the practical department of the seminary. Any references to Laetsch's position at the seminary, regardless of whether they mention his exegetical pursuits or not, always refer to the practical department first.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, Laetsch's tenure as professor came during a period of relative calm, when there were very few major exegetical issues under discussion within the Missouri Synod. The Synod had already been dealing with the "modernists" for decades, and the issues which would culminate in the turmoil of the 1970s were only starting to come to the church's attention. (To this might be added the apparent tendency among synodical professors to avoid quoting one another under any circumstances.) Except for a few rumblings about typology or other undercurrents, the hermeneutical stance of the Synod was basically monolithic, and this monolith appears to have been preserved by editorial policies, in which, incidentally, Laetsch himself had a voice as a member of the editorial committee of the Concordia Theological Monthly.

Theodore Laetsch was a pastor before he was anything else. Twenty-nine of his fifty professional years were spent in parishes, and even after he joined the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, he remained a pastor at heart. It should be noted that upon his retirement he moved back to Sheboygan, Wisconsin, the site of his last Wisconsin

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<sup>7</sup>See, for example, his obituary in Der Lutheraner 119 (1963):12.

pastorate. If "Joseph's bones" are allowed to speak, his interment at Sheboygan might also give an indication of where he considered his professional roots to be. As was mentioned in the introduction, his pastoral attitude and writing style pose problems for the investigator who is searching for hermeneutical principles. Most of his journal articles are sermon studies, where the focus is upon the interpretation itself and not the hermeneutical route taken to arrive at the interpretation. His commentaries, too, clearly have in mind the homiletician and his hearers: Laetsch in his exposition of a given text moved quickly on to contemporary faith and life-directed applications, and this "bottom line" approach compounds the problem of determining the hermeneutical presuppositions with which he confronted the pericope from the very beginning.

There is, however, a definite positive side to the pastoral posture of Laetsch: the life's work of Laetsch is one of the noblest attempts this author has seen to span the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between exegetical theology and practical theology. In our own age, when exegetes tend to avoid carefully any theological conclusions, Laetsch's approach comes off as being refreshing, if not courageous. He never seemed to forget that even exegesis itself is not an end in itself in the context of the church but a means to an end, that exegesis must arrive at the point of being exegetical theology, and thus also practical theology, a specifically targeted message from God. Laetsch was confessionally fearless and never shrank from making a firm decision about what the text says nor from applying it directly to the lives of people. From one perspective he appears to have been perhaps a little hasty or overzealous in drawing conclusions from time to time, but

Laetsch's courage is much to be preferred over the timidity of the exegete who merely multiplies interpretive options. Laetsch has been remembered in the Missouri Synod as a unique kind of theologian: a man who has been accorded a certain measure of respect for both his exegetical and homiletical talents.

Since Laetsch served the majority of his professional life as a pastor, he came to the St. Louis faculty as somewhat of an outsider to the Synod's academic world and its discussions. He has been described as a "self-taught theologian,"<sup>8</sup> and this aspect alone would account for the very few references to him by his contemporaries. His career as a scholar was described in a prepublication tract, printed by Concordia Publishing House, which advertised Laetsch's commentary on Jeremiah and Lamentations: "Through this commentary he brings to fruition long years of intensive scholarship and special collateral study."<sup>9</sup> This "intensive scholarship" appears on the whole to have been undertaken in isolation from the narrower or broader academic world around him. For example, Laetsch bypasses most questions about dates by accepting without question Ussher's chronology, much to the amazement of Paul Peters of the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Laetsch's chief ideological foes--unionism, syncretism, worldliness, modernism, and others--are

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<sup>8</sup>Interview with Dr. Walter Roehrs.

<sup>9</sup>"Theodore Laetsch" file, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Peters, "Book Review of Laetsch's Commentary on the Minor Prophets," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 53 (1956):156-7. Peters states: "Although Ussher's chronology has been taken into the margin of the Authorized Version and is still being printed in English Bibles, yet a modern commentary should recognize the progress which has been made in the study of the chronology of the Old Testament."

normally introduced into his writings without any accompanying names or references, although it is possible that Laetsch considered such external references to be beyond the scope and pastoral intent of his homiletical comments.

The cumulative impression from reading all of Laetsch's works is that he was a fastidious man who followed a specific agenda in his exegesis, and for this reason it becomes very important to determine what that agenda was. Whatever it was, Laetsch never departed from it throughout his career: there is really no need to speak about an "early Laetsch" and a "late Laetsch" because of this consistency. From beginning to end his writing style and his overall approach to a text never substantially changed. Laetsch could not be described as a creative or pioneering exegete; usually he adopted what was for him the stock, standardized interpretation of a text to be found among his Missouri Synod colleagues, reinforced or embellished this majority opinion especially with etymologies, and then went on to his real area of creativity, that is, the application of the text to his hearers. He avidly read the hermeneutical "book," but he did not write it.

Theodore Laetsch remained a faithful follower and disciple, who always tried to reflect faithfully the heart and mind of his organization, the Missouri Synod. He was keenly aware that a synodical professor was also a public spokesman for the Synod, and to that end he labored tirelessly within the structures of the Synod. Laetsch had faith (in the broadest sense of the term) in the Missouri expression of the visible church. H. T. Mayer, in a tribute to Laetsch after his death, said that Laetsch assumed in his practical courses that all synodical congregations were well disciplined and solidly loyal to the



Lutheran Confessions.<sup>11</sup> Laetsch's confidence in the Missouri Synod filtered down to her individual members. Every layperson in the synod, he said, has rights which are equal to the rights of the highest official, and those rights ought never to be relinquished under any circumstances.<sup>12</sup> Laetsch was "Waltherian" in his view of the church to the extreme. To demonstrate the relationship between a pastor and his congregation, Laetsch used the relationship between Aaron and Moses as an illustration: Aaron, as Moses' spokesman, was to speak only what Moses told him to speak. Thus Laetsch says:

Similarly, to the congregation is given the Office of the Keys, delivering from the bondage of sin. The pastor is the spokesman, the representative of the congregation by divine appointment. The congregation tells the pastor what he is to do and say, puts the words in his mouth, is to him instead of God (sic). The pastor is to teach and do no more, no less, than the congregation tells him to teach and do, while the congregation is to tell him no more, no less, than God has given her the right to tell him.<sup>13</sup>

With this view of the Church, and with his view of the professorial role as an extension of the pastoral office, it is not surprising that Laetsch is not found to be a creative, pioneering exegete. He taught according to his understanding of what his church body was telling him to teach.

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<sup>11</sup>H. T. Mayer, "Foreword," Concordia Theological Monthly 34 (1963):133. However, regarding Henry W. Reimann, assistant professor of systematic theology from 1955 to 1963, who died around the same time and who was also honored in this foreword, Mayer states that Reimann made no such assumption and urged his students not to do so either.

<sup>12</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Privileges and Obligations," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1942):727.

<sup>13</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "The Administration of the Sacraments," Concordia Theological Monthly 10 (1939):403-4.

But there is an additional quandary here which can be introduced with the simple question: if a student is able to issue commands regarding what his teacher will be permitted to say on a given subject, the implication is that the student already fully grasps the subject--is not then the teacher reduced to teaching what the student already knows? The question admits to several possible answers. Surely the confessional stance of the Lutheran Church is a recognition of the fact that no one can take a purely tabula rasa approach to the Scriptures, but how detailed is the agenda that the collective student has outlined for his teacher? Can that agenda include the exegesis of individual passages? Regardless of where the reader finds himself in the spectrum of possible answers, there is still an emphasis evident in Laetsch's writings: for Laetsch there was a finely honed agenda which descended through several levels of subcategories, and thus he was somewhat hampered in doing much free, albeit confessional, thinking on a text. He saw his hermeneutical task not so much as the providing of new statements of direction for individual congregations, but as the providing of historical and grammatical particulars which confirm what has been said before. More on this subject will appear in a later chapter.

It was previously mentioned that Laetsch did not hesitate to make a decision about what a Biblical text said nor hesitate to apply his interpretation to the lives of his readers. Undoubtedly Laetsch became accustomed to this approach during his years in the parish ministry, where laypeople expect the resident theologian to give clear-cut, unequivocal answers. But there also appears to have been at work in Laetsch's writings a general trait, where there is a need to see

everything as being either black or white and a reluctance to recognize that there are any grey areas or matters still open for discussion. The writer of this dissertation is not alone in observing this characteristic in theologians.<sup>14</sup> For an exegete with this mindset the goal of exegesis is to answer definitively any old lingering questions, not to raise new questions. If it be correct that this trait is present in Laetsch, then this would account for many things. There is then at least a partial answer for Laetsch's above-mentioned "by the book" approach to exegesis and church practice, for his perceived role in the Missouri Synod as an echo of synodical positions, and, as shall be seen, for some of his hermeneutical presuppositions. To provide at this point just one preliminary example of how this trait might possibly affect hermeneutics, the reader is here introduced to Laetsch's view of typological Messianic prophecy. In general Laetsch thought that historical actions as such are too nebulous to convey any concrete, cognitive messages, but it is words, specifically defined, which provide the desired certainty of communication. And, in order to arrive at unmistakable, consistent definitions, the dictum "sensus literalis unus est" ("the intended sense is one") is continually emphasized. This black-and-white mindset might also account for the absence of written evidence of Laetsch's participation in hermeneutical discussions: at the risk of oversimplification, discussions with orthodox brothers cease when there is nothing left to discuss.

As Laetsch did not hesitate to make decisions of interpretation,

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<sup>14</sup>James W. Voelz, my colleague at Concordia Theological Seminary, has also observed this trait. In some unpublished notes he refers to a "no loose ends" mindset which affects a person's whole lifestyle.

neither was he slow at making decisions of application for his readers, especially in giving directions for their sanctified lives. His pastoral experience led him to be a practical theologian in the fullest sense of the term. In our present era one might be tempted to view Laetsch as being pietistic, but there is no reason to regard his applications as anything other than sincere expressions of Christian piety.

Perhaps the practical issue for which Laetsch was most famous and widely read is the subject of divorce and the related questions of malicious desertion and remarriage. The copy of his three-part article entitled, "Divorce and Malicious Desertion,"<sup>15</sup> found in the Concordia Seminary, St. Louis library, is worn out to the point of disintegration. This article provides a prime example of the creativity with which Laetsch approached practical problems in the church, if not exegesis as such. After saying that divorce is tantamount to adultery and that capital punishment is not too severe a punishment for adultery, Laetsch goes on to say that the church should be permitted to remarry divorced parties even if the marriage involves the guilty party from a previous marriage and the adulterous partner who was responsible for breaking up the previous marriage. Laetsch argues that marriage is a civil institution, and thus the church's forbidding of a second marriage would constitute a civil punishment which is outside the purview of the Church because of the separation of church and state.<sup>16</sup>

Since such practical examples provide somewhat of a window to

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<sup>15</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Divorce and Malicious Desertion," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932):850-5, 923-32; 4 (1933):127-33.

<sup>16</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Divorce and Malicious Desertion," Concordia Theological Monthly 4 (1933):130-1.

Laetsch's personality, the man behind the writings, a few more examples are listed below. Each example poses unique hermeneutical questions, but at least one can see a little of the perspective with which Laetsch confronted the Biblical texts. Laetsch says that because Christ is called the "righteous Branch" (Jer. 23:5), we are to follow that righteousness as our example.<sup>17</sup> Keeping the "marriage bed undefiled" (Heb. 13:4) means that we must avoid the "malicious destruction of the seed by unnatural means."<sup>18</sup> God was to punish Ephraim by turning her into a dried root that bears no fruit and by slaying her children (Hos. 9:16): the application is that one should shun fornication, abortions, and the use of contraceptives.<sup>19</sup> The general wickedness and lack of repentance named in Jeremiah 8:6 precludes our entering the "amusement temples" of our modern age.<sup>20</sup> The agonized struggle of the Christian living in this sinful world (ἀγώνισομαι in 1 Tim. 4:10) is likened to the contorted face of a big-time wrestler caught in a headlock or a toehold.<sup>21</sup> The pious Christian is portrayed as one who reads his Bible and the church periodicals.<sup>22</sup> Keeping away from a idle brother (2 Thess. 3:6) includes the prohibition of prayer fellowship with heterodox

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<sup>17</sup>Theodore Laetsch, Jeremiah (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), p. 191.

<sup>18</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Hebrews 13:1-9," Concordia Theological Monthly 11 (1940):755.

<sup>19</sup>Theodore Laetsch, The Minor Prophets (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 78.

<sup>20</sup>Laetsch, Jeremiah, p. 107.

<sup>21</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "I Timothy 4:4-11," Concordia Theological Monthly 5 (1934):781.

<sup>22</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Ephesians 2:19-22," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938):443.

church bodies.<sup>23</sup> There is considerable doubt as to whether the above examples sounded at all moralistic to Laetsch's contemporary audience. His interpretation of Hosea 9:16 (see above) is especially interesting in light of a comment made in another place, namely, that "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15) involves the ability to discern what Old Testament passages apply to us and which do not.<sup>24</sup>

Conversations with those who knew him paint the portrait of a man who was evangelical in doctrine without sacrificing precision in church practice. His frequent invoking of the "third use of the law" does not negate his firm hold upon the hermeneutical res (substance) of the Reformation,<sup>25</sup> of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith. The relationship between the res and the verba (the Scriptures), along with the nature of the verba themselves, is the primary focus of this paper. Laetsch's faithfulness, caring attitude, exegetical studiousness, self-awareness as God's spokesman, zeal to communicate, and ultimate goals all add up to a fine and much-remembered pastor and a fine teacher of pastors.

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<sup>23</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "II Thessalonians 3:6-14," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938):615.

<sup>24</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "The Prophets and Political and Social Problems," Concordia Theological Monthly 11 (1940):241.

<sup>25</sup>This hermeneutical res is affectively presented by Martin Franzmann, Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969), p. 1-12.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE CONTEXT OF THE HERMENEUTICS OF LAETSCH

This chapter deals with the subject of how Theodore Laetsch related to and was affected by the world of Biblical scholarship around him. Since it would be so easy to broaden this topic into a "history of exegesis in the church," the presentation here will be limited to the wider sweep of hermeneutical thinking found in the Missouri Synod. Further influences will be detailed in the explanation proper of Laetsch's hermeneutics. A good part of the discussion will center in the rectilinear versus typological debate: this is by no means accidental, but rather these two approaches to Messianic prophecy are symptomatic of a bigger picture of two different hermeneutical worlds.

In the investigation of Laetsch and his environment one is immediately faced with an enigma: on the one hand, Laetsch's surroundings have everything to do with his hermeneutics, but on the other hand, Laetsch stands alone and isolated from that environment. Regarding the second part of the enigma, it has already been noted that the first twenty-nine years of Laetsch's career were spent in the parish ministry, and the first twenty-two years of that period were spent in small towns in Wisconsin, where there was ample opportunity for Laetsch to develop his own hermeneutical style. It has been noted that there is very little documentation from any direction of any hermeneutical discussions between Laetsch and his contemporaries, and this remains the

case even after Laetsch arrived on the St. Louis faculty. His writings were sermonic and at times quite devotional, and in them he tended to present his interpretive destinations for use in the pulpit and not the hermeneutical routes to be taken in the inner sanctum of the pastor's study. His "this-is-the-final-answer" approach tended to close off debates before they began.

Now attention is turned to the first part of the enigma: that Laetsch's surroundings have everything to do with his hermeneutics. From the beginning of his writing career to the end he exhibited a consistency of style and approach which bespeaks an interpretive agenda from which he rarely departed. In short, and to quote an earlier thought, Laetsch went "by the book" in his interpretations in accordance with his self-perception of his role within the church.

How is the enigma to be resolved? Another way of putting the question is: to what extent was Laetsch a "self-taught" theologian? The answer is best to be found by moving the question itself to a different plane. It seems clear, as will be shown, that we can indeed determine the identity of "Laetsch's hermeneutical guidebook," but having said that much, the question one faces becomes one of determining exactly how Laetsch used the "book." To what extent did Laetsch slavishly follow it, or how much freedom did he exercise in departing from it or even overextending its rules? And, what are the boundaries of the rules themselves in their original intents and purposes?

It is at this point that the reader is left to speculate to the best of his ability and to speak of likelihoods and probabilities. The potency of outside influences upon Theodore Laetsch and the extent to which he went his own way can only be estimated.



H. T. Mayer, in his tribute to Laetsch, assigned to him two epithets that summarize quite well Laetsch's place in the history of the Missouri Synod. Mayer called him the "quintessence of the legacy of Pieper," and he added: "He was, in a sense, a last representative of a great tradition of theologians in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod."<sup>1</sup> With the passing of Laetsch Mayer sensed a theological "changing of the guard," thereby linking Laetsch firmly with the past rather than seeing him as a harbinger of the future. It is interesting that this "old guard" which Laetsch embodied is headed by a systematic theologian (Pieper) rather than an exegete. Laetsch labored at the very end of a univocal generation of men who not only taught the same things as Pieper but also talked the same way that Pieper talked. While Laetsch is to be commended for bridging the chasm between exegetical and practical theology, his whole generation tended to blur the distinction between exegesis and systematic theology. Rather than seeing hermeneutics as a set of propositions which allows the reader to make informed decisions about a text, there was a tendency to make hermeneutics a systematic theology that makes decisions about virtually every text in Scripture.

Below is a listing of factors that should be borne in mind in determining Laetsch's hermeneutics. The list must be highly selective since reasoned decisions rather than documentation are involved.

#### The Reformation

In discussing areas as broad as this and the following subjects it is necessary to distill them down to the issues that have the most

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<sup>1</sup>H. T. Mayer, "Foreword," Concordia Theological Monthly 34 (1963):133-4.

bearing on the hermeneutics of Theodore Laetsch. Of course the Reformation did produce hermeneutical principles which Lutherans have abided by to the present day, mottos such as sola Scriptura, "Scripture is its own interpreter," and many others. But the chief contribution of the Lutheran reformers to the field of hermeneutics was a singular hermeneutic, that everything in Scripture should be viewed in the light of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith.

The exchange, or dialog, between this Gospel and the Scriptures has been stated capably by Martin H. Franzmann, who summarized the Reformation hermeneutic in seven theses:<sup>2</sup>

- I. Qui non intelligit res non potest ex verbis sensum elicere.  
("He who does not understand the subject matter cannot bring out the meaning of the words.")

Franzmann describes the circular movement from the Scriptures (called the verba) to the subject matter of Scripture (called the res) and the return to the verba after one has been informed by the res. He likens this hermeneutical circle to the realm of human conversation: if one enters a conversation late, he will have difficulty defining the terms being used until he learns the subject under discussion. Having identified the subject matter of the Bible, the reformers saw no need to include in the Confessions a separate article on the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

- II. The res of the Lutheran Confessions is justification by grace through faith.

This second thesis is further articulated by quoting a translation of

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<sup>2</sup>Martin H. Franzmann, "Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics" (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969), p. 1-12.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 2-3.

the German version of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, sections 2-4:

This dispute has to do with the highest and chief article of all Christian doctrine, so that much indeed depends on this article, which also serves preeminently to give a clear, correct understanding of the whole Sacred Scripture and alone points the way to the unutterable treasure and the true knowledge of Christ, and also alone opens the door to the whole Bible, without which article no poor conscience can have a constant, certain consolation or know the riches of the grace of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The direct link made by the Confessions between Scriptural interpretation and the pastoral care of consciences is a link that is readily formed also by Theodore Laetsch.

III. "Justification by grace through faith" is confessional shorthand for "radical Gospel:" God, to whom man can find no way, has in Christ creatively opened up the way which man may and must go.

The central teaching of Scripture is deliberately cast in the broadest terms possible, because Scripture itself contains a multitude of synonyms for justification.<sup>5</sup> Herein lay another crucial point for the study of Laetsch, both in his hermeneutics and in his theory of language: there is apparent in Laetsch's work a continual wrestling with the varied terminology of Scripture on the one hand and the attempt, conscious or otherwise, to speak as a man who is the "quintessence of the legacy of Pieper" on the other hand. The whole matter becomes a question of the relationship between words and realities, and in the area of the relationship between the testaments the issue can be distilled down to the question: to what extent is the reality of the Gospel res, so clearly delineated in the New Testament terms, found

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. The word "radical" is used in the sense of the Latin radix, thus, the root doctrine of Scripture.

couched in the terminology of the Old Testament?

- IV. This Gospel is radical in three respects: (1) In its recognition of the condemning law and wrath of God and the guilt and lostness of man; (2) In its recognition of the sole working of God in man's salvation; (3) In its recognition of the transformation of man's existence produced by the saving act of God.<sup>6</sup>

Franzmann questions whether or not Lutherans have sufficiently heard the third point, the transformation or renewal of man's existence, a phrase which he identifies as sanctification in the narrow sense. On this point there is found a major difference between Laetsch's generation and today. The readiness of preachers in Laetsch's day to speak on sanctification issues evinces cries of "legalism!" today and is contrasted with the modern hesitancy to address the subject of renewal.<sup>6a</sup> Since the goal of Lutheran hermeneutics is the communication of the Gospel, this means a major hermeneutical issue is at stake: has there been in today's generation a redefining of the Reformation res, or has there been a rediscovery of the original res which had been lost for decades? For Laetsch the Old Testament in particular served as a bountiful source of sanctification material.

- V. The validity of this confessional res as a heuristic-hermeneutical principle can be documented from the Scripture itself: it is the cantus firmus to which all the prodigal variety of the Scriptural voices stand in contrapuntal relationship.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Franzmann spends the majority of his time explaining this thesis in Old Testament terms introduces a question about Laetsch that

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>6a</sup>Edmund Schlink, Theology of the Lutheran Confessions (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

will be fully discussed later. To pick up on Franzmann's analogy, the question is: how much of the reality of the cantus firmus is to be found in the Old Testament, or, to what extent is the Old Testament simply a tuning of the instruments?

VI. The validity of this confessional res becomes manifested when it is contrasted with other res (not in themselves wrong but insufficiently contoured and coloured).<sup>8</sup>

This thesis only intensifies the earnestness of the question posed under the previous thesis. Franzmann compares Calvin's res, the sovereignty of God, with the confessional res of the Gospel. While the doctrine of sovereignty sees as being central who God is, the radical-Gospel emphasizes what God does. To use Franzmann's own words, "The radical-Gospel statement begins--and ends--with the hard unmalleable fact of how God has acted and is acting" (emphasis his).<sup>9</sup> The Gospel is seen as a dynamic that actively intervenes in both Old Testament and New Testament history. Of course, Laetsch would not deny this, but there remains a question of emphasis. Laetsch appears to have a preference for "statives," words that describe a state of being rather than an action, at least when he has arrived at his hermeneutical conclusion.<sup>10</sup> At the risk of anticipating too much at this point, this apparent preference fits well with Laetsch's overall approach to Scripture. Statives lend themselves well to "timeless" abstract thoughts and "concepts" where

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>The word "stative" is used according to the meaning traditionally assigned to the term by Hebrew grammarians. It is hard to find in Hebrew any vocables that are essentially "stative," since even Hebrew verbs often convey the whole process of becoming. One senses that Laetsch would recoil at the popular expression, "God is a verb."

historical anchorings can become secondary and fade into the background. Also, once a state of being or abstraction is identified, it is an easy task to label it with a vocable, whereas actions often defy the categorization needed for such labelling. Laetsch clearly prefers word-based exegesis to an action-based one. Thus, the question under the previous thesis can be rephrased: to what extent is the Gospel dynamic active and at work in the Old Testament? Is it "there" or only promised or illustrated? What if some of the Old Testament material does not fit the concept--are we then to look for a secondary res of different "colours" and "contours?"

VII. This res does justice to both the theological and the craftsmanly aspects of interpretation. It leaves the interpreter open to both the overwhelming divinum and the tough humanum of Scripture. The connection between the res and the verba is an organic connection.<sup>11</sup>

Any elaboration of this thesis would be anticipating too much of what will follow. For the present suffice it to say that we will be looking not only at the "organic connection" between the res and verba, but also the relationship between the divinum and the humanum. Franzmann warns here against a "double-track" exegesis where the theological and the grammatico-historical are treated as two separate entities. The historical, the verbal, and the incarnational are all of one piece.<sup>12</sup> To separate the one track into two is to court danger, for then either one or the other becomes emphasized. When the humanum monopolizes the interpreter's attention, historical critical abuses creep in; but any movement in the opposite direction is the also a most formidable

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<sup>11</sup>Franzmann, "Theses," p. 11.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

danger. When the divinum starts to push aside the humanum, the result is allegory, as is well attested in the history of Old Testament exegesis.<sup>12a</sup>

Franzmann's reconstruction of the impact of the Reformation upon hermeneutics is admittedly only one such presentation among many, yet it is appropriate in several respects to the overall outline of the presentation at hand. Franzmann is especially clear and succinct in describing the operation of the hermeneutical circle and in providing working definitions for the two foci on the circle, the res of the Gospel and the verba of the Scriptures. At the same time, however, Franzmann and Laetsch stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of approaches to Scripture found within the Missouri Synod, and thus Franzmann sheds light upon Laetsch's approach by way of contrast. While Franzmann distills the doctrinal point on the hermeneutical circle down to an irreducible and singular Gospel core and thus minimizes the directional or informative role of doctrine in the interpretation of the Scriptures, Laetsch, on the other hand, expands the doctrinal point through systematic theology and thereby maximizes the role of doctrine in Scripture interpretation.

As a follow-up to this discussion of the Reformation hermeneutic, there is an excellent treatment given this subject by Horace Hummel.<sup>13</sup> He speaks of justification by faith, as the pivot on which all turns.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12a</sup>Horace Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 16-17.

<sup>13</sup>Horace Hummel, "Are Law and Gospel a Valid Hermeneutical Principle?" Concordia Theological Quarterly 46 (1982):181-206.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

The res and the verba, sometimes identified as the material and formal principles respectively, are in the following relationship: an "external source" is needed to identify the Gospel, because the Gospel cannot identify itself; this Gospel, in turn, is central to hermeneutics but never stands on its own as something exclusive of hermeneutics.<sup>15</sup>

Having determined the hermeneutical res of the Reformation and seen its function, a word needs to be spoken about its summary impact upon the hermeneutics of Theodore Laetsch. As was noted in the conclusion of the first chapter, Laetsch certainly had a firm grip on the Gospel res of the Reformation, but there remains the question of how the res is to function in the interpretation of Scripture.

The Reformation described a hermeneutical circle that is formed by only two points, the res and the verba, the Gospel and the Scriptures. Because that circle has been carefully drawn for all Lutherans since 1580, Laetsch and any modern exegete approach a Biblical text from basically the same historical perspective: the circle has been closed and carefully preserved for a long time. But a circle has no clear starting point. The question is: at what point does a twentieth century scholar or pastor enter that circle, at the res point or the verba point? Should he perceive his role in the Church as an exegetical theologian or as a theological exegete? Since the circle is a continuous shape, it may be hard for an individual scholar even to examine himself on the matter, especially after traversing the circuit for many years. But nonetheless, the question must be posed with each and every Biblical text the interpreter is about to face.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 189-90.



On the whole it appears that Laetsch tends to enter the circle at the res point. In practice this means that Laetsch's exegesis tends to approach a text with an a priori objective of simply confirming an interpretation which he views as having already been standardized by his confessional stance.<sup>16</sup> This approach to Scripture, which simply provides further linguistic rationale for foregone conclusions, is more in keeping with his self-perceived role as a professorial spokesman of the Church. But it would seem that greater justice is done to the principle of Sola Scriptura when the Lutheran interpreter consciously and deliberately enters the hermeneutical circle at the verba point. This Scriptural starting point is in evidence in the Lutheran Confessions:

Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should be understood and as good and evil, right or wrong (Formula of Concord, Epitome 7).<sup>17</sup>

If anything is found to be lacking in this confession, we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures (Augsburg Confession, conclusion).<sup>18</sup>

In such a way the Confessions urge their readers toward the establishment of doctrine by a Scriptural "touchstone" and not toward the verification of Scriptural interpretations through a doctrinal starting place.

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<sup>16</sup>Dr. Eugene Klug, former chairman of the systematics department at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, was asked about students' sermons that were doctrinally correct but exegetically incorrect. Dr. Klug responded by saying in effect that students were urged to double-check the doctrinal content especially of their initial sermons, but that as the student became more experienced he should move more toward the textual starting point as Lutheran doctrine became increasingly second nature to him.

<sup>17</sup>Theodore Tappert, ed., The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 465; F. Bente, Ed., Concordia Triglotta (Minneapolis: The Mott Press, 1955), p. 778.

<sup>18</sup>Tappert, Concord, p. 96; Bente, Triglotta, p. 95.

A Biblical text is best allowed to speak for itself and on its own terms when groundwork is done in general hermeneutics, the general laws of human expression, before moving, as indeed must be done, to the special hermeneutics of Lutheran doctrine, that is, the Spirit-led interpretation of Scripture according to the Gospel. In the Reformation the Bible was freed from traditional shackles in the conviction that both general and special hermeneutics most assuredly will lead the reader down the very same orthodox path.

The Sola Scriptura axiom itself is an article of faith in that it presupposes the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, that is, that each and every word of them is the very Word of God by way of a process known to God alone. In such a way a distinction is drawn between the Scriptures as the speech of God and the confessions as man's faithful response to the speech of God, and in view of this distinction there can be no question regarding exactly what provides the impetus to set the hermeneutical circle in motion. A reaction, after all, does not give a shape to the stimulus that caused it. In 1956 both seminary faculties of the Missouri Synod jointly testified to the Scriptural (verba) starting point on the hermeneutical circle:

A doctrine is an article of faith which the church in obedience to her Lord, and in response to her specific needs, derives according to sound principles of interpretation from Scripture as the sole source of doctrine and sets forth in a form adapted to teaching.<sup>19</sup>

#### C. F. W. Walther

Next in this selective survey of Laetsch's hermeneutical context is a brief look at a man who played a decisive role in bearing the

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<sup>19</sup>Richard Jungkuntz, ed., "A Review of the Question, 'What Is a Doctrine?'" Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1965.

Lutheran tradition to the United States. Walther ranks with Francis Pieper as one of Laetsch's spiritual mentors.<sup>20</sup>

Walther himself summarized his own hermeneutics in the form of nine principles,<sup>21</sup> which are reproduced here and then commented upon. These principles are an exposition of his sixteenth thesis on the doctrine of the Church: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church accepts God's Word as it interprets itself."

- A. The Evangelical Lutheran Church leaves the decision solely to the original text.
- B. The Evangelical Lutheran Church, in its interpretation of words and sentences, adheres to linguistic usage.
- C. The Evangelical Lutheran Church recognizes only the literal sense as the true meaning.
- D. The Evangelical Lutheran Church maintains that there is but one literal sense.
- E. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is guided in its interpretation by the context and purpose.
- F. The Evangelical Lutheran Church recognizes that the literal sense may be either the improper or the proper one; however, it does not deviate from the proper meaning of a word or sentence unless Scripture itself forces it to do so, names, by either the textual circumstances, a parallel passage, or the analogy of faith.
- G. The Evangelical Lutheran Church interprets the obscure passages in the light of the clear.
- H. The Evangelical Lutheran Church takes the articles of faith from those passages in which they are expressly taught, and judges according to these all incidental expressions regarding them.
- I. The Evangelical Lutheran Church rejects from the very outset every interpretation which does not agree with the analogy of faith.

Walther was one of the main teachers of hermeneutics in the

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<sup>20</sup>Although Pieper will not be treated separately in this chapter, Laetsch's admiration is in evidence in his article: "Pieper als Prediger" Concordia Theological Monthly 2 (1931):761-71.

<sup>21</sup>C. F. W. Walther, The True Visible Church, J. T. Mueller, trans., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 66-90, and reproduced in: Jungkuntz, Richard, ed., A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969), p. 10-11.

synod in its early days, even teaching a seminary course devoted entirely to hermeneutics, as is seen in the 1860 curriculum of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.<sup>22</sup> These principles make explicit much of the hermeneutical methodology that was implicit in the Lutheran Confessions; at the same time they freeze the action in the continuing development of synodical hermeneutics.

If one could ask Theodore Laetsch if he adhered to these principles, he would most certainly give an unqualified "yes." One could say that at this point the goal of this paper has been reached. However, as late as 1969 many interpreters with higher critical leanings were giving a similar positive response.<sup>23</sup> Considerable latitude has been evident in the application of Walther's principles, which suggests that the task of finding Laetsch's hermeneutical principles is not yet complete. What is needed is to discover Laetsch's own application of Walther's rules, a hermeneutics of the hermeneutics, as it were.

Walther's principles are an interesting mixture of statements pertaining to the res of Scripture and those pertaining to the verba. Of course, the res according to Walther is the Law-Gospel dialectic: all of his theses in his book, Law and Gospel, relate these twin doctrines to the "Word of God."<sup>24</sup> The Law-Gospel dynamic is undoubtedly what is meant by the phrase "analogy of faith" in thesis "I." Francis Pieper, for example, likens the analogia fidei to the regula fidei, that is, the

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<sup>22</sup>Carl S. Meyer, ed., Moving Frontiers (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 218.

<sup>23</sup>Jungkuntz, A Project, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup>C. F. W. Walther, Law and Gospel, W. T. H. Dau, trans., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 1-14.

sum total of all unmistakable verses of Scripture. In speaking of potential abuses of the analogia he names several examples where violence is done to the Law-Gospel dialectic.<sup>25</sup>

Originally the analogy of faith (or, regula fidei) was quite uncomplicated in meaning: its thrust is captured by the German phrase, "Was Christum treibet," and armed with this axiom the interpreter was freed to find Christ "under every stone." Walther preserved a great deal of this Reformation simplicity by discussing for the most part items which pertained directly to grace vis-a-vis works. But in the aftermath of Walther, the Lutheran res appears to have undergone a fine tuning, especially as the Missouri Synod was confronted with the question of fellowship with other American Lutherans and the possibility of unionism. At the various Lutheran Free Conferences held after the turn of the century a prevailing topic was the precise definition and scope of the analogy of faith. At the free conference held at Milwaukee in 1903, G. Friedrich Bente, attempting to define the analogy, simply reiterates some of Walther's principles. Bente states:

- (1) Sacred Scripture is the sole source of Christian doctrine.
- (2) The articles of faith are to be drawn from unquestionably clear passages of Scripture as the proper seats of doctrine.
- (3) Obscure passages are to be interpreted in accordance with clear ones.
- (4) No interpretation of Scripture dare violate the central article of justification.
- (5) All articles of faith are interrelated.<sup>26</sup>

The fifth point exhibits some of the struggle between Missouri and other

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<sup>25</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, p. 361-2.

<sup>26</sup>Meyer, Frontiers, p. 287.

Lutherans. It could be paraphrased with the familiar expression, "the Gospel and all the articles pertaining thereto." At that time the pertinent "articles" were election and conversion. The ultimate codification of the Missouri res would come by the hand of a colleague of Bente who led the way in concern over unionism, Francis Pieper.

Theodore Laetsch was ordained at the time when concerns over unionism were at their height, and his writings often mention the very same issues that were calling into question continued recognition of fellowship among American Lutherans. The concern of Laetsch and his comrades is truly understandable, but questions are raised for the area of hermeneutics. If the interpreter of Scripture becomes preoccupied with the res-point of the hermeneutical circle, there is the danger of forgetting that the verba-point, and that point alone, has the inherent authority to stand on its own. The interpreter's appeals to sola Scripture may become construed as "But my Bible says," and he must always be on guard against permitting his preliminary look at the res to affect his judgments and decisions made about the verba.

The next historical figure to be surveyed carried forward the presently conceived concern about a possible res imbalance to the specific areas of Christology and Messianic prophecy. There the question must be raised: was the slogan "was Christum treibet" as an expression of the hermeneutical res pressed beyond its original intention or even the intention of the Missouri Synod?

#### George Stoeckhardt

Stoeckhardt's career was far too long and illustrious to do any more than mention a couple of points pertinent to Laetsch's hermeneutics.

He fought many bitter battles for both the res and the verba, and he was one of Laetsch's teachers at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.<sup>27</sup>

Stoeckhardt, first of all, was a strong opponent of unionism as well as a fervent defender of the precisely defined analogia fidei in the presence of the disputes mentioned in the previous section. His doctrinal sensitivity had been heightened during the first thirty-six years of his life, when he labored under the abuses of the state church of Germany.

But Stoeckhardt's chief contribution to Laetsch's hermeneutics is tied more closely to the verba themselves in the area of prophecy and fulfillment. In a series of articles for Lehre und Wehre Stoeckhardt treated twenty-eight Messianic prophecies and concluded unanimously in favor of the "direct" (rectilinear) prophecy instead of the "modern" (typological) view.<sup>28</sup> The rectilinear view sees only messianic fulfillments in Old Testament prophecies, while the typological view sees both contemporary and messianic fulfillments (see Chapter 6, p. 237-41). Here a few possible causes will be offered for Stoeckhardt's view.

First of all, there was the rise of higher criticism in Germany, where Stoeckhardt grew up. The Bible came to be questioned and critiqued as a human document, and as this happened, a shroud of doubt was

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<sup>27</sup>Erwin L. Lueker, ed., Lutheran Cyclopedia (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954). p. 1011.

<sup>28</sup>George Stoeckhardt, "Weissagung und Erfuellung," Lehre und Wehre 30 (1884):42-49, 121-28, 161-70, 193-200, 252-9, 335-44, 375-80; 31 (1885):220-32, 265-75. "Christus in der alttestamentlichen Weissagung," Lehre und Wehre 36 (1890):209-17, 278-86, 317-25, 354-60; 37 (1891):5-12, 37-45, 97-107, 137-45, 295-303, 328-32, 365-72; 38 (1892):7-15, 70-79, 132-42, 161-72.

placed over the Scriptures in at least two ways. On the level of linguistics the definitions of individual Biblical terms were seen to be ambiguous by literary criticism, and the overall reliability of Biblical accounts was doubted by historical criticism. In other words, the underpinnings of the verba-point on the hermeneutical circle of the Reformation were being stripped away. The result of this phenomenon was a retreat by Laetsch and company to the confessional res-point and a heavy emphasis on the res-to-verba direction of the circle. The movement was from the simple statement, "This is what the Bible says," to the confession, "This is what the Church says the Bible says." As the Christological res continued to inform the verba, it did so in a very pointed way for Stoeckhardt in the form of rectilinear prophecy. The advantage of this theory of prophecy was that its assured results and absolute certainties were a ready antidote for the doubts and ambiguities of higher criticism. It was simultaneously a reinforcement of the res and the verba.

A second factor was the general elevation of historical consciousness by way of new historical theories and philosophies such as those of Georg Hegel. The history behind the verba was said to carry the brunt of revelation, much to the denigration of the verba themselves.<sup>29</sup> At the risk of saying too much too early, the rectilinear method remained firmly with the ipsissima verba often to the total exclusion of any historical considerations. The only variety of typology that Stoeckhardt could foresee was a hodgepodge assortment of subjective

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<sup>29</sup>As late as 1969 there was an appeal to take a more "history-minded" approach toward Scripture and even toward Walther's hermeneutical principles. Jungkuntz, A Project, p. 11.



extrapolations on vague historical patterns. Typology, in contrast to the brilliant light of rectilinear prophecy, was "lost in the fog."<sup>30</sup>

A third and final factor to be named here was the theological training of Stoeckhardt, who was educated in part in the Erlangen School. As a student of that university Stoeckhardt was under the influence of J. C. K. von Hofmann. Von Hofmann mediated between the rigidity of Stoeckhardt and the questionings of higher criticism by trying to take the best of both worlds, and all this without losing the confessional res. Christian Preus describes very well the mediating position of von Hofmann:

With orthodoxy he saw that the interpreter must operate within the traditions and confessions of the Church. With the critical schools he taught that the interpreter must employ proper methods of literary and historical criticism, and he showed that such studies need not be destructive to the faith. With pietism he agreed that the interpreter must himself be a man of faith; and with Schleiermacher he held that the personal religious experience of the individual is indispensable for a congenial understanding of the Scriptures. From the reformers he learned that the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Scripture, in the Church, and in the life of faith is basic for a genuine appreciation of Revelation.<sup>31</sup>

To summarize von Hofmann's position, he saw many of the findings of higher criticism as being potentially neutral when viewed from a consistently confessional point of view. Linguistic and historical studies were seen even as a new encouragement to study the Bible itself. With a renewed focus on the verba von Hofmann was attempting to avoid the "double-track" pitfall mentioned above: if the interpreter can preserve the verba-to-res direction of the hermeneutical circle without

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<sup>30</sup>William Hassold, "Rectilinear or Typological Interpretation of Messianic Prophecy?" Concordia Theological Monthly 38 (1967):159.

<sup>31</sup>John H. Hayes, and Frederick Prussner, Old Testament Theology-Its History and Development (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 83.

sacrificing the res-to-verba direction, then the hermeneutical circle will remain for him a true circle, and he will be less inclined to conceive of res and verba as opposite, or even hostile, polarities. Higher criticism, with its investigation of the texta nuda in their historical setting, was stressing the humanum of revelation, while confessional theology was emphasizing the divinum. Was a merger of the two possible? For von Hofmann the answer was "yes," and he phrased his positive response in the form of one word: Heilsgeschichte. History itself speaks as it is interpreted by the Spirit through the verba and the res. A history that is all too human at various points is divine nonetheless.

To put matters very bluntly, Stoeckhardt did not accept what von Hofmann and others of kindred spirit had proposed. For Stoeckhardt the study of the verba had been for the most part a simple, straightforward business, that of determining the dictionary definitions for a series of conceptual terms. But modern contextual studies of the verba were turning the verba into a whole verba-package with a myriad of possible combinations of factors. In short, the verba-point of the hermeneutical circle appeared to Stoeckhardt like far too slippery a thing, like too much of a moving target, for the supplying of prooftexts for his Lutheran res. Instead, Stoeckhardt retreated to a finely tuned res which, as it gave more specific directions to the verba, returned Stoeckhardt to his dictionaries once again.

#### Two Schools of Thought in the Missouri Synod

The clash between Stoeckhardt-type exegesis and von Hofmann-type exegesis, between German confessionalism and Erlangen studies, was to

manifest itself in the Missouri Synod in the two schools of thought: rectilinear prophecy and typology. These two approaches to prophecy give evidence of far more than a mere difference in on-the-surface methodology; they are rooted in fundamental differences in theology and philosophy. They are only manifestations of twin, overall views of res and verba as well as the scope of each. These two hermeneutics are both considered Christ-based, orthodox answers to higher criticism;<sup>32</sup> and yet, they provide totally different answers to a whole host of questions one meets when interpreting Biblical texts.

One key question, and perhaps the key question for this whole paper, is: what exactly is the nature and role of Biblical history? The answer to this question is at the same time a preliminary answer to the question of the relationship between the two testaments. If an interpreter sees in the Old Testament a progressive revelation in history of the saving purposes of God, he will be more inclined to view the New Testament as a continuation of the Old and Christ as the culmination of a whole series of God's saving acts. But Stoeckhardt, on the other hand, declines to see such a continuum, lest the cross be robbed of its uniqueness.<sup>33</sup> To him an Old Testament event and the Christ-event cannot be seen as individual steps in a singular divine gameplan; Old Testament passages speak of either one or the other.

The history of rectilinear and typological prophecy in the

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<sup>32</sup>This is stated by formal resolution of the exegetical department of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, on 18 May, 1988. Faculty Journal, 1987-88 Academic Year, p. 73-4.

<sup>33</sup>Hassold, "Rectilinear or Typological," p. 158.

Missouri Synod has been outlined very effectively by William Hassold.<sup>34</sup> To summarize the trends, the rectilinear view was preferred by the majority of exegetes roughly through the end of Laetsch's career, while during that time typology existed as a significant substratum. But over the past twenty-five years it would appear that typology has been gaining the upper hand. Generally speaking typology appears better able to tolerate the other position, since the speaking of a specific prophetic word within the continuum of divinely directed history is always considered to be a possibility. However, the rectilinear school appears to be less tolerant of typology, perhaps because there is seen the necessity of a "slippery slope" that must lead to the outright denial of all predictive prophecy. Stoeckhardt himself saw typology as a denial of "direct" prophecy.<sup>35</sup>

The typological undercurrent is here mentioned with just a few representative names. The Wisconsin Synod has always been rather solidly in the typological camp. August Pieper, a man largely responsible for the current shape of the Wisconsin Synod, maintained that only those portions of Psalm 22 that obviously reach beyond David should be considered rectilinear prophecies,<sup>36</sup> and also that Isaiah 40:3-5 speaks not only of John the Baptist but of all others of similar voice.<sup>37</sup> Paul

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<sup>34</sup>William Hassold, "Rectilinear or Typological Interpretation of Messianic Prophecy?" Concordia Theological Monthly 38(1967):155-67.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>36</sup>August Pieper, "Der 22. Psalm, fuer die Passionspredigt bearbeitet," Theologische Quartalschrift 2(1905), quoted in *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 163.

Peters argued against a purely rectilinear view of Isaiah 7:14-16<sup>38</sup> and expressed his displeasure with Laetsch's hermeneutics (especially in connection with Hosea 11:1) found in Laetsch's Minor Prophets commentary.<sup>39</sup> Peters goes so far as to say:

It is in this connection that we find ourselves confronted with the question where then, if at all, the prophets are actually speaking directly of the Messiah, without having any recourse to types and prefiguring images. This is the question which is under discussion in our day. How are we to answer it? The answer has to be sought for by all of us. As we know from our correspondence, it is being duly considered by the members of our theological faculties and by former students in the ministry, as well as by our present-day students in the classroom.<sup>40</sup> (emphasis mine)

This quote is interesting, not only for its information about the state of affairs in the Wisconsin Synod, but for its "if at all" comment. The synod had never denied the existence of predictive Messianic prophecy; rather the question has always been: are such prophecies spoken without any supporting and relevant historical context? Here again it is seen that typology, properly viewed, shares with the rectilinear method the common ground of predictive verba and thus can exhibit some toleration toward the opposing point of view. Peters also mentions incidentally H. C. Leupold, of another Lutheran tradition, who says regarding Psalm 22 that traces of typology "may be detected here and there,"<sup>41</sup> although Leupold much prefers to see this Psalm and other prophecies in the rectilinear mode.

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<sup>38</sup>Paul Peters, "Isaiah 7:14-16," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 58 (1961):101n.

<sup>39</sup>Paul Peters, "Book Review of Laetsch's Commentary on the Minor Prophets," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 53 (1956):157.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>41</sup>H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), p. 195.

Moving back to Missouri we single out in our survey just a few notable names which have been a part of a typological undercurrent. In 1921 William F. Arndt opened the Synod's eyes to the possibility of typology in Scripture.<sup>42</sup> For some Old Testament passages, he said, a typological interpretation is indispensable as with Hosea 11:1. But Arndt also issued two cautions for the pursuit of typology. First, not all Old Testament prophecies should be seen as typological; verbal, direct prophecies still exist as a separate category. Secondly, when Scripture itself does not verify a typological relationship, the interpreter may proceed according to the analogy of the New Testament, and here the interpreter can speak only of possibilities. P. E. Kretzmann was basically rectilinear in approach, but in his Popular Commentary his interpretations of Jeremiah 31:15 and Hosea 11:1 were typological, and he thereby left the door to typology at least slightly ajar.<sup>43</sup> Alfred Von Rohr Sauer distinguished three different kinds of Messianic prophecy: (1) direct, or rectilinear prophecies, (2) typological prophecies, and (3) New Testament reapplications or reinterpretations of Old Testament passages which in their original contexts do not appear to contain any Messianic material at all.<sup>44</sup> According to Raymond F. Surburg, Sauer later did a complete turnabout on this sub-

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<sup>42</sup>William F. Arndt, "Typisch messianische Weissagungen," Lehre und Wehre 57 (1921):359-67.

<sup>43</sup>Hassold, "Rectilinear or Typological," p. 165; P. E. Kretzmann, Popular Commentary of the Bible: Old Testament, Vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), p. 456-7; 647.

<sup>44</sup>Hassold, "Rectilinear or Typological," p. 166; Alfred von Rohr Sauer, "Problems of Messianic Interpretation," Concordia Theological Monthly 35 (1964):571.

ject, presumably by sliding all Old Testament prophecies into the third category.<sup>45</sup> At Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Walter Roehrs and Martin Franzmann carried forward the typological approach in the Old and New Testaments respectively, and the wide acceptance of their Concordia Self Study Commentary shows the relative acceptance of typology. Roehrs' article on typology<sup>46</sup> has received wide distribution, but as will be seen in an upcoming chapter on typology, there is considerable question as to whether or not his view of typology is in total agreement with a more current view on the subject, such as the typology espoused by Horace Hummel. Franzmann displays a theological view of history that is tailor-made for typology in his introduction to his comments on Isaiah 7:14.<sup>47</sup> Franzmann speaks of future-directed history in which the lives of Old Testament figures like Abraham and David were "charged with the future."<sup>48</sup> Martin Naumann of Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, had a view of history similar to Franzmann's. In his monograph Messianic Mountaintops he explains the title of his work by saying that the whole of the Old Testament is truly Messianic, and that the verses we traditionally identify as being particularly

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<sup>45</sup>Raymond F. Surburg, viva voce to the exegetical department of Concordia Theological Seminary, May 18, 1988.

<sup>46</sup>Walter R. Roehrs, "The Typological Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," Concordia Journal 10 (1984):204-16. This is an updated version of the article appearing in A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics (Richard Jungkuntz, ed.), Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969, p. 39-53.

<sup>47</sup>Martin Franzmann, "The Hermeneutics of Fulfillments: Is. 7:14 and Matt. 1:23" found in A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics (Richard Jungkuntz, ed.) Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969, p. 19-34.

<sup>48</sup>Franzmann, "Hermeneutics of Fulfillment," p. 23.

Messianic are simply peaks in the whole Messianic mountain range. Naumann warns against locating "Messianicity" in the Old Testament as though the Bible student were "picking raisins out of the cake" or "sifting nuggets from the sand."<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, Naumann sees David as a typical fulfillment of Genesis 49:10,11 and Solomon as a partial fulfillment of 2 Samuel 7.<sup>50</sup> Horace D. Hummel is the most articulate spokesman for the current view of typology most often espoused in the Missouri Synod. His Old Testament introduction, The Word Becoming Flesh, treats the whole testament from the typological point of view. As the title suggests, the saving power and real presence of God and his Son continued to be "incarnated" in history throughout both testaments.<sup>51</sup> Hummel demonstrates the possibility of holding to the res of the Reformation and discussing modern Biblical scholarship without going to higher critical excesses. It is interesting that Raymond Surburg sees Hummel's typology as being sui generis (one-of-a-kind) in its approach, but Surburg does not fully explain what makes Hummel's approach unique.<sup>52</sup>

There are two interesting footnotes to our survey of typology. The first one consists of the additional perspective given to the discussion by Raymond Surburg. He states that the "Statement of the Forty-four" in 1945 was a document that started the Missouri Synod on the road

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<sup>49</sup>Martin Naumann, "Messianic Mountaintops," The Springfielder 39 (1975):5-72.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 34, 53.

<sup>51</sup>Horace D. Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 16-18.

<sup>52</sup>Raymond Surburg, "The Proper Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Prophecy," unpublished paper, p. 17.



to historical criticism.<sup>53</sup> The significance of Surburg's remark is seen by its context: he was presenting a brief history of rectilinear and typological prophecy in the Missouri Synod. Similarly, Surburg began his paper cited above with a full-page description of rationalistic hermeneutics for prophecy and fulfillment. In neither of these citations does Surburg make a direct link between rationalism/historical criticism and typology, but such mention of all these elements in the same breath suggests a guilt by association. Reformed theology and allegory are also named virtually simultaneously with typology.<sup>54</sup> These associations point to a fear on the part of rectilinearists (and in Surburg's experience not a totally groundless fear) that the espousal of typology opens Pandora's box and that typology leads to the ultimate denial of any predictive, verbal prophecy. The fear is that typology, no matter how conservative it may be in its intention to supply a Lutheran answer for historical criticism, will ultimately succumb to historical criticism.

The second footnote is more of a question than a concern. It appears in the study edition of "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" circulated in the Missouri Synod in 1972. The issues it raises demonstrate that the dialog between typologists and rectilinearists, the two schools in Missouri, was reaching more earnest universal proportions:

We therefore reject the following view:

1. That the New Testament statements about Old Testament texts and events do not establish their meaning (for example, the claim

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<sup>53</sup>Raymond Surburg, viva voce.

<sup>54</sup>Raymond Surburg, "Proper Interpretation," p. 3, ll.

that Jesus' reference to Psalm 110 in Matthew 22:43-44 does not establish either that Psalm's Davidic authorship or its predictive Messianic character).

2. That Old Testament prophecies are to be regarded as Messianic prophecies, not in the sense of being genuinely predictive, but only in the sense that the New Testament later applies them to New Testament events.

3. That the Old Testament prophets never recognized that their prophecies reached beyond their own time to the time of Christ.<sup>55</sup>

Some of the apparent misunderstandings found in the above quote are verbalized as questions at the end of the section on Old Testament Prophecy:

1. Is it permissible to teach that the Old Testament prophetic vision of the future was limited to prognosticating on the basis of an astute reading of the signs of the times and a general expectation of the kingdom of God? Why or why not?

2. What is meant when the New Testament says that events, persons, and institutions of the Old Testament were "types" of Christ or shadows of things to come? Is there a difference between Messianic typology, on the one hand, and Messianic prophecy involving such events as the virgin birth and the crucifixion?

3. Did Jesus accommodate the content of his message to the comprehension and time of his hearers? What bearing does the answer to this question have in determining the nature of Old Testament prophecy?

4. Is it proper for a Christian interpreter to read a passage or pericope of the Old Testament "on its own terms" if those terms do not include what the New Testament may have to say about it? If so, is there anything essentially different between Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Old Testament?<sup>56</sup>

Having reviewed the typological school of thought in the Missouri Synod, the reader's attention is turned to the rectilinear school. Perhaps it would be better to speak of the purely rectilinear school, since Missourian typologists do not deny the existence of

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<sup>55</sup>J. A. O. Preus, Jr., "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles," (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1972), p. 36.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

verbal, predictive, Messianic prophecy. The discussion of this school will be still briefer because Theodore Laetsch is solidly within this camp, and to discuss him is to discuss the school. In fact, Laetsch appears in synodical history as the epitome of this school, as the finished product, or, as H. T. Mayer has put it, "a last representative of a great tradition of theologians in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod."<sup>57</sup> Also, in terms of stated hermeneutical principles, the rectilinear tradition is aptly summarized by one man, Ludwig Fuerbringer, who will be the subject of the entire next two chapters. The term "rectilinear" itself is somewhat of a puzzlement, not only regarding the origin of the term, but also regarding its etymology: what exactly is "linear" about this approach, and upon what plane shall the "line" be drawn?

The impact of George Stoeckhardt upon synodical hermeneutics has already been presented. With the rising tide of historical criticism it appears that Stoeckhardt for many years provided not just an answer to it but the answer of confessional theologians. He was the exegetical spokesman for confessionalism, while Franz Delitzsch gave the exegetical expression of the Erlangen position. Interestingly, Delitzsch, in opposition to such confessionalism, is quoted as having been against "fencing theology off with the letter of the Formula of Concord."<sup>58</sup> Nineteenth century Missouri could be characterized as the temporary victory of Stoeckhardt's res over the verba of Delitzsch. A co-defender

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<sup>57</sup>H. T. Mayer, "Foreword," Concordia Theological Monthly 34 (1963):133.

<sup>58</sup>Erwin L. Lueker, ed., Lutheran Cyclopedia, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 290.

with Stoeckhardt, known to us only by the initials "H. F.," had this to say about Delitzsch's hermeneutics:

Delitzsch proves by his example only that anyone who denies the direct prophecy of the Messiah and accepts only a typical prophecy, which is realized by means of a heilsgeschichtlich development, must of necessity give up the pure Messianic doctrine of the Old Testament.<sup>59</sup>

Noticeable in this quotation is how Delitzsch, Erlangen, Heilsgeschichte, von Hofmann, and typology are all perceived together as a singular opponent, which is seen ultimately as involving the denial of the Messiah in the Old Testament. Of course, Delitzsch would never for a minute deny the Messianic character of the Old Testament, but insofar as there were some in the Missouri Synod who concurred with Delitzsch's exegetical method, there is evidence that already in the 1870s the two schools in Missouri seemed forever doomed to talk past one another on Biblical Christology.

Francis Pieper was ostensibly rectilinear in approach. He was in effect the categorizer and systematizer of one vast Lutheran res, and in that function his Dogmatics became for all practical purposes one large hermeneutical guidebook for a whole generation of theologians like Theodore Laetsch. It could be said that his era became by his own hand the "Age of Systematics" rather than the "Age of Exegesis." His proof-texting method (Schriftbeweis) emphasized the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle, and, pursuing the same direction, Laetsch tends to sound like Pieper and to speak according to his categories no matter which Biblical text he is addressing. Doctrinally speaking Laetsch is Pieper confronting a rapidly changing sociological and eccle-

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<sup>59</sup>Hassold, "Rectilinear or Typological," p. 157.

siastical scene which involved the process of Americanization without compromising any part of Lutheran dogma.

Walter A. Maier, Sr. was the preaching arm of the rectilinear school. At one point in his career Maier confidently identified three hundred and thirty-three rectilinear prophecies, and he consistently rejected a typological interpretation of the Messianic Psalms.<sup>60</sup>

Raymond Surburg, of Concordia Theological Seminary-Fort Wayne, Indiana, continues to be a faithful supporter of the rectilinear school to the present day and is perhaps its spokesman-in-chief. His most frequent appeal is to the dictum sensus literalis unus est. Surburg exhibits deep concern over the apparent shift to typology, a movement that he himself has perceived; however, he also recognizes that both schools of thought are endeavoring to be faithful to Christology and the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>61</sup>

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide in broader terms and movements a historical context in which Theodore Laetsch can be viewed. Any such brief summary naturally runs the risk of oversimplifying a rather complex history, but it is nonetheless important to see the aspects of that history which are most intimately connected with the perceived issues at stake in Laetsch's hermeneutics, as he concurs or disagrees with points of view contemporary to his time. In outlining this history recognition is made of the fact that any interpreter sincerely desiring to speak meaningfully to his present audience is bound to react honestly, not only to the Biblical text itself, but also to

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<sup>60</sup>Raymond Surburg, "Proper Interpretation," p. 4, 12.

<sup>61</sup>Raymond Surburg, viva voce.

what other exegetes have said or are saying about the text. Against the backdrop of this history, and in view of the overwhelming impression left by an exhaustive and intense study of all of Laetsch's writings, Theodore Laetsch will be seen as being solidly in the rectilinear school of the Missouri Synod.

The rectilinear viewpoint toward Messianic prophecy, however, is only symptomatic of a much larger hermeneutical outlook, as has been pointed out in this chapter. In particular, this outlook assigns the doctrinal stance of the interpreter a formidable position and role on the hermeneutical circle, and, along with this doctrinal stance, a theory of language is espoused which best accommodates itself to the interpreter's perceived task, that of the doing of theology.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE HERMENEUTICAL OUTLOOK OF LUDWIG FUERBRINGER

The last chapter was concerned with the general hermeneutical climate in which Theodore Laetsch found himself and to which he reacted, both negatively and positively. This brief historical outline formed, as it were, the outer circle of influence upon Laetsch and his treatment of Scripture. Now, in terms of immediacy of influence, attention is turned in this chapter to the concentric circle of influence that is one step closer to Laetsch, namely, the man Ludwig Fuerbringer and his fundamental, overarching principles or presuppositions of interpretation, which form his overall outlook toward Biblical interpretation. The fourth chapter, in accordance with the formal thesis of this paper, will deal with what is perceived to be the concentric circle of influence that is the closest of all to Theodore Laetsch: Fuerbringer's specific, practical rules of procedure which provide the would-be interpreter with a carefully laid out modus operandi in the face of the Biblical text. The movement from this chapter to the next is to be seen as a progression from what the interpreter is to think to what the interpreter actually does.

Both the presuppositions of the present chapter and the procedures of the next chapter are drawn from Fuerbringer's booklet, Theological Hermeneutics, first published by Concordia Publishing House in German in 1912 and later reissued in English in 1924, just three years prior to the onset of Laetsch's professorship.

Before embarking upon a careful, detailed analysis of this volume, one very important point needs to be kept in mind. A point-by-point study of Fuerbringer's booklet was undertaken only after the reading of all the published writings of Theodore Laetsch. Although Laetsch never actually quotes any hermeneutical rules, it was discovered that there is considerable correspondence between the approaches to Scripture on the part of Fuerbringer and Laetsch. The extent of this correspondence was found to be so far-reaching that a conclusion was reached which appeared to be inevitable: that the Scriptural commentary of Laetsch is nothing more or less than the implementation, the putting into practice, or the final product of Fuerbringer's hermeneutical principles. With the reaching of this conclusion it thereby became apparent that a careful study of Fuerbringer's hermeneutics would indeed be a fruitful activity, even a necessary step, in the search for the hermeneutical principles, almost wholly unstated, of Theodore Laetsch. The study of the former's principles becomes at the same time a study of the latter's. Thus, the remainder of this paper moves in a direction opposite to the original investigation, starting with Fuerbringer as a fitting introduction and ending with Laetsch, moving from stated principles to the practice of them. The last two chapters will supply actual examples of Laetsch's utilization of Fuerbringer's principles along with additional phenomena peculiar to Laetsch.

Since the study of Laetsch's writings preceded in large measure the investigation of his environment, which includes the immediate context of Fuerbringer's booklet, a point of clarification needs to be made. Such a movement from effect to cause is indeed a perilous venture, but it is a necessary one if there is to be any perception at all



of the relationship between Laetsch and his environment. Thus, in the following pages the attempt is made to analyze Fuerbringer's hermeneutical principles, not as a detached set of ideals, but rather from Laetsch's point of view, a point of view that emerges from the sum total of Laetsch comments and interpretations. To state the matters in terms of cause-and-effect, the effect is seen as giving deeper insight into the inner workings and motivations of the original cause of the effect. Such circular reasoning, though laden with potential pitfalls, is not totally unlike the circular reasoning used in the traversing of the hermeneutical circle itself. The practical upshot of this logical backtracking is this: the following pages, at the very least, analyze Fuerbringer's hermeneutical principles as they were capable of being understood by Theodore Laetsch and other exegetes of a similar mind. Naturally, such an analysis carries with it the danger of going beyond the intentions of Fuerbringer himself, of using Laetsch to put words into Fuerbringer's mouth. However, such a danger is greatly minimized when one sees that there is virtually total agreement between Fuerbringer's interpretations of Biblical examples and Laetsch's commentary on the very same passages.

#### The Influence of Ludwig Fuerbringer

Ludwig Ernst Fuerbringer was a native American, born on March 29, 1864, at Frankenmuth, Michigan. He graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1885, and for the first eight years of his ministry he returned to Frankenmuth to serve as pastor in his home congregation. In 1893 he was called to a professorship at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and his arrival there was almost simultaneous to

the arrival of Theodore Laetsch as a seminary student. Fuerbringer became president of the seminary in 1931, just four years after Laetsch became a professor there in the practical department. Fuerbringer served as president until his retirement in 1943 and died in 1947, one year prior to Laetsch's retirement. Simple chronology tells us that Fuerbringer was a man of boundless stamina: he was already sixty-seven years old when he became seminary president and age seventy-nine when he retired, bringing him to a total of fifty-eight years of full-time professional service to his church. His wide-ranging tasks coupled with his literary output also point to his boundless energy.<sup>1</sup>

By overlaying Fuerbringer's biography upon Laetsch's one can see how intertwined the lives of these two men were. Being twelve years the senior of Laetsch, Fuerbringer was always one step ahead of Laetsch in his career. Fuerbringer had the opportunity to exert a double influence upon Laetsch, both educationally in a professor-student relationship and administratively in a president-professor relationship. Bearing in mind that Laetsch became pastor of Trinity, South St. Louis in 1920 and that Fuerbringer was by that time a well established and highly respected professor (at his post for twenty-seven years), it is probable that Fuerbringer was at least partly instrumental in the initial selection of Laetsch as a professor, especially since Laetsch's call as professor preceded Fuerbringer's ascendancy to president by only four years.

There is ample evidence to suggest that Fuerbringer and Laetsch were like-minded men of kindred spirits. Both men had a documented interest in missions, Laetsch serving on the Western District Mission

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<sup>1</sup>Erwin L. Lueker, ed., Lutheran Cyclopedia (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 397.

Board and Fuerbringer writing, amongst many mission topics, on the origins of the synodical mission efforts in Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

Both men saw the need for the synod to Americanize and at the same time to preserve doctrinal integrity by not conforming to the ways of the world. Already in 1906 Fuerbringer was urging the synodical parochial schools to make the changeover to English as the need arose, stating that a parochial school is an ecclesiastical institution and not merely a means of preserving German culture.<sup>3</sup> Fuerbringer was uniquely qualified to instruct the synod concerning Americanization, having his feet, as it were, on both continents as a native of the Saginaw Valley as well as having a burning interest in synodical history.<sup>4</sup>

Fuerbringer, like Laetsch, strikes one as having been a man devoted to the organization, possessing a zealous faithfulness for the synod and its structures. Both men had C. F. W. Walther as their mentor on the doctrine of the Church and the separation of Church and state. In 1915-16 Fuerbringer compiled many of Walther's letters for distribution to the synod by Concordia Publishing House.

Fuerbringer shared with Laetsch an absorbing interest in systematics. Along with their exegetical pursuits, both men had in effect a "double major" in their careers: exegesis-systematics, along with the accompanying attempt to bridge the unbridgible chasm between the two.

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<sup>2</sup>Ludwig Fuerbringer, "Wie Stet es mit unserer Mission in Brasilien?" Der Lutheraner 56 (1900):230, cited in Moving Frontiers, Carl S. Meyer, ed., Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 304.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, his historical interest in his booklet, 80 Eventful Years (Concordia Publishing House, 1944), where Fuerbringer presents a capsule history of the Missouri Synod.

In terms of hermeneutics Fuerbringer worked with the highly refined synodical res of Pieper, and with such a preponderance of res material at his disposal, he like Laetsch emphasized the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle.

Aside from all the above considerations, the most important thing about Fuerbringer has yet to be mentioned. In 1912 Fuerbringer wrote the booklet entitled Theologische Hermeneutik (Concordia Publishing House), a hermeneutical guidebook for seminary students. This booklet was reprinted by Concordia in English (Theological Hermeneutics) in 1924. The subject of this dissertation is the quest for the hermeneutical principles of Theodore Laetsch; the contention of this paper is that the quest has reached its final destination with Ludwig Fuerbringer and with this handbook, where Fuerbringer put down in writing what Laetsch was hesitant to do. It was mentioned earlier that Laetsch was an interpreter who went "by the book" throughout his career; Theological Hermeneutics is the "book" that Laetsch followed, whether he was always consciously aware of its presence or not. First, a general analysis of this hermeneutical handbook will be undertaken, and then a more detailed, step-by-step study of it will follow, relating the book to Theodore Laetsch and res-verba considerations.

Ludwig Fuerbringer's Theological Hermeneutics is the hermeneutical "book" that Theodore Laetsch followed. In its context the book spelled out in so many words and in many subcategories the principles that had been used by Stoeckhardt and continued to be tacitly used by Laetsch, the last great theologian of this tradition. When the reader of this book sees the surgical precision with which Fuerbringer set down his principles, he may be struck by a strange sort of parallel-

ism: the Stoeckhardt-Fuerbringer-Laetsch tradition could so easily reduce Biblical texts down to faith and life "applications" of the minutest detail; it is equally amazing that this same tradition could reduce its systematic res to such minutely detailed, methodological rules for the interpretation of the verba. The res informed the verba to a degree perhaps not thought to be possible.

The subtitle of Fuerbringer's work is, "An Outline for the Classroom." This stated purpose of the book helps us to appreciate its impact upon a whole generation of pastors and interpreters in the Missouri Synod. One can picture Laetsch himself, armed with Fuerbringer's handbook going immediately into the parish ministry, where for twenty-nine years of pastoral practice and no further formal theological education he could practice these principles.

The main body of the text starts out with six pages of introduction to textual criticism by William F. Arndt. We will pick up at the portion of the book written by Fuerbringer himself. The survey below will be quite extensive, because it operates with the assumption that when we see the principles of Ludwig Fuerbringer we are also seeing those of Theodore Laetsch. Of course, some of its forty-four paragraphs will be more pertinent to our discussion than others.

#### The Hermeneutical Theory of Fuerbringer

The first four paragraphs of Fuerbringer's work are introductory in nature, providing his overall approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures.

Paragraph one of Fuerbringer's four paragraph introduction provides his working definition of hermeneutics:

Biblical or theological hermeneutics is the name applied to that branch of theology in which the principles and rules are set forth by means of which we may discover the true sense of Scripture and give a correct exposition of the meaning which the Holy Spirit has laid down in the words of Scripture.

Hermeneutics is a branch of exegetical theology and holds the same relation to exegesis as theory does to practice.<sup>5</sup>

When doing this analysis of Fuerbringer's hermeneutics there is always the danger of being hyperanalytical by reading into his words an overall agenda that really is not there. (The same caution might be issued to those who use his principles when interpreting the words of Scripture.) However, the "practice" of exegesis often betrays things about the "theory" which were left unstated. Thus, a hermeneutic of the hermeneutic is sometimes necessary in order to see the freight carried by terms and statements that are by themselves neutral. The reader will find that Theodore Laetsch corresponds very closely to Fuerbringer both in the theory and the practice.

It is interesting that Fuerbringer adds to his definition the phrase, ". . . the meaning which the Holy Spirit had laid down in the words of Scripture." This phrase signals perhaps more than what first meets the eye, especially in view of the focus on individual Scriptural words that is seen in Fuerbringer's school of thought. Of course, in opposition to a critical questioning of the ipsissima verba, the Lutheran exegete must be grammatical as well as historical holding to the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, but already here one senses that the historical aspect may be allowed to fade into the background, leaving the interpreter with a very small and neat verba-package, one that is easily manageable for systematical thinking. It is that neat

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<sup>5</sup>Ludwig Fuerbringer, Theological Hermeneutics (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1924) p. 361.

package that will lead us unambiguously to the "true" sense of Scripture.

Fuerbringer continues in paragraph two:

The principles and rules of interpretation must not be fixed arbitrarily. They are included in the general laws of human thought and expression. Above all, these principles and rules are based upon the nature, form, and purpose of Holy Writ.<sup>6</sup> (emphases his.)

Notice how general hermeneutics, identified as "the general laws of human thought and expression," is to give way ultimately ("Above all . . .") to the nature, form, and purpose of Scripture. These three items are explained in three notes under paragraph two. The nature of Scripture is described thusly:

The Scriptures are the revelation of God set forth in human language. For this reason the exegete must accept the Biblical doctrine of inspiration, of the inerrancy of Scripture, and of the divine origin of its contents.<sup>7</sup>

Here it needs to be borne in mind that Fuerbringer is being discussed in terms of how he was capable of being understood and how he evidently was understood by men like Theodore Laetsch. This statement on the nature of the Scriptures clearly recognizes both their divine and human aspects, but the primary focus is upon their divine character. To be sure, such a confession needs to be made in the presence of those who would treat the Scriptures "like any other book;" but the real question is concerning the relationship between these two sides of the Scriptures as well as the extent to which the divine will be found to override the human. More specifically, to what extent does the divine nature of the Scriptures necessarily involve the overriding of the human side or the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

suspension of "the general laws of human thought and expression?" In and of itself, Fuerbringer's statement does not require the modification of either aspect: the doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, after all, do not answer questions of meaning, but only the question of obedience. Yet, it is in the implementation of Fuerbringer's statement that one is led to wonder whether or not the humanum of the Scriptures is being heard in the fullness of its "plain and natural meaning."

Can the tension between the divine and human aspects of Scripture be allowed to remain, or must the tension be alleviated through a dehumanizing of the words? This tension is reflected in William F. Arndt's use of Fuerbringer's expression, "divine origin," found in Arndt's "Exegesis" entry in the Lutheran Cyclopedia:

In later centuries the tendency prevailed for a while to stress typological interpretation, that is, to find types and symbols in nearly everything the Old Testament relates; the principle that we can with certainty speak of persons or events as being types, that is, as prefiguring persons and events in the New Testament, only where the Bible itself gives us indication to that effect, was disregarded. At the present time a rather common defect of exegetical works is that while they properly stress the linguistic and historical aspects of a text, they ignore its divine origin.<sup>8</sup>  
(emphasis mine)

It is difficult to understand Arndt's point about typology and how a far-reaching use of it entails the concomitant ignoring of the Scriptures' "divine origin," but the point here is that both the divine and human aspects of the Scriptures are clearly recognized. Arndt's caution about ignoring the divine character of the Scriptures is a point well taken, but a word of caution is in order for the opposite direction as well: the confession of the "divine origin" of the Scriptures need not or should not lead to an ignoring of "the linguistic and historical

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<sup>8</sup>Lueker, ed., Lutheran Cyclopedia, p. 361.



aspects of a text." Of course, Arndt undoubtedly would need no reminder of a text's linguistic and historical aspects, but neither would a Lutheran typologist need a reminder of a text's divine origin.

Fuerbringer describes the form of Holy Writ in the standard terminology of the historico-grammatical method, urging the use of the original languages and the consideration of the complete historical background of a text. But what bearing do historical circumstances have upon a text? Fuerbringer answers the question:

Regarding their form, the Scriptures are a collection of books written at different times and in various places by different authors, under divers circumstances, for various purposes, and in different languages. In their composition the laws of human speech in general and, especially, the rules of the Hebrew and Greek languages were observed; and the so-called historical circumstances connected with their origin wielded a certain influence upon the form and structure of the various books.<sup>9</sup>

At first blush this statement appears merely to list a set of truisms that are known well to any first-year seminarian; however, if Fuerbringer's words are not heard rightly, more can be read into his words than what first meets the eye. Historical circumstances are said to have had exerted a certain influence on the "form and structure" of the Biblical books, but nothing is said about the theological content of them. As the term suggests, historical circumstances are circumstantial to theological truth, but they are not an integral part of the truth. History, with all the human perversions contained therein, tends to be seen only as the stage upon which truth of "divine origin" must be revealed if it is going to reach the ears of man at all. There does not appear to be a strong sense that God himself can cause truths of "divine origin" to originate for man, as it were, within history or by means of

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<sup>9</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 2.

history as God himself interprets it; rather, Fuerbringer appears to emphasize that divine truth, of heavenly origin, is superimposed upon the form and structure of history.

The repercussions of Fuerbringer's view of historical circumstances are many when viewed in the light of the previous paragraph. Carrying his comments to their ultimate conclusion, Fuerbringer can be heard as saying: the seat or locus of God's truth and the revelation of it is found only in the words of Scripture as such and not in the history toward which they point. These words, having been distinguished for discussion purposes from their preliminary historical context, now stand naked and alone, and they must be supplied with some kind of context if they are to be understood at all. Therefore Fuerbringer supplies the verba with a new context, the res of his systematic grid, an organization of theology which can stand on its own, aloof from any historical contexts. The res-to-verba direction is now securely in place, and left behind in the dust are all the twists and turns of the historical plane.

Before continuing this discussion of history or historical circumstances, it is necessary to provide a working definition of "history" as it is here being used. In speaking of history as performing a given role in God's revelation of himself to man, there is not any intention of assigning to history an autonomous, independent role, as though history in and of itself could be "read" by mankind in order to ascertain the will and purposes of God. Scripture itself indicates that man is totally inept at such a reading of the "signs of the times" (Matt. 16:3) and even less capable of finding a message of hope in those signs. Nor is there intended, on the other hand, that an interpreter ought to

investigate and subsequently question the Biblical record of history according to the dictates of scientific inquiry. The Biblical record does not admit to any varying degrees of probability in its historical statements. Nor, in the context of the viewpoint of this paper, is there room for pure subjectivism in the interpretation of Biblical history. The Biblical record is not man's belief-claims about history, his reflections or implications about history, his providing of a symbolical context to history, nor his extrapolations of present history into the past. Biblical history is not history as man understands it, but rather as God himself understands it, since the Bible is specifically God's revelation of himself and not man's calculated conclusions about God. Also to be excluded are the notions that history "speaks" to man only as it is re-created in the present and that theology is altered and adjusted in order to accommodate the historical circumstances in Biblical times or the present.

"History," then, is a series of events in our world that God Himself caused to happen (the perversity of the human will notwithstanding), that he caused to be recorded accurately in the Scriptures, and that he has interpreted according to his own will, purposes, and point of view. This interpretation may take the form of immediate, explicit statements as it does, for example, in Jesus' statement, "I am the resurrection and the life," in connection with his raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11); or, the interpretation may be implicit in the larger Scriptural context, such as when the people exclaim "God has visited his people," in connection with the raising of the widow's son (Luke 7). But the real point is that if God himself is the author of both a salvific event within history and the interpretation of that

event, if he himself is the author of both the event, as theology in action, and the thetical exposition of the event's meaning, then the historical event cannot be considered circumstantial to theological truth, or even less, coincidental to theology. God is seen as revealing himself through the media of both event and interpretation.

If the above point is carried to its ultimate conclusion, the issue at stake can be finally reduced to the question: is God "incarnate" in history and in control of it, or is he not? If the sequence of world history is seen as operating independently of God's control, then historical events can be seen as circumstantial to theological truth; but if both event and word are under God's control, then both of them in tandem can reveal God's saving will and can be subsumed under the category of things of "divine origin."

Fuerbringer's comments about history's role in hermeneutics beg for a precise definition of the "historico-grammatical" method. It is two forthcoming definitions that separated the two schools in Missouri, the res-to-verba and the verba-to-res camps. The former sees the relationship of history to grammar as being one of subservience: grammar, partially informed at the outset by history, is the bearer of meaning. The latter wants to see history and grammar as correlatives: history and grammar are the bearers of meaning. The former, operating with a single bearer of meaning and a complex res, emphasizes the res-to-verba direction; the latter, working with a more complex verba-package, consisting of the twin poles of history and grammar, and a singular confessional res, likes to move in the opposite direction at least in actual practice.

To take one additional step, it was said earlier that the res

to-verba school is characterized by the rectilinear approach to Messianic prophecy while the verba-to-res school shows its colors by advocating typology. In these two approaches can be seen the bigger picture of two different hermeneutical schools of thought. The interpreter who sees both history and grammar as being tandem media of God's revelation will be on the watch for types and antitypes, not contenting himself only with historically introduced vocabulary grammatically arranged. But why the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school went virtually entirely rectilinear deserves a further word of explanation. One point is rather obvious: if history is preliminary to truth and the words are the bearer of the truth, it becomes relatively easy to excise the words from their historical setting, just as a practical-minded person barges past preliminaries to get to the "bottom line." After all, preliminaries only suggest tentative quantities, but the "final word" on a subject breeds a longed-for certainty.

But more can still be said. The readers are referred to Arndt's definition of typology. It must not escape our attention that in this quotation Arndt mentions in the same breath the word "type" and the word "symbol," thereby apparently placing both terms in the same general category. Even the most avid rectilinearist will admit to some typology;<sup>10</sup> to fail to do so would entail a denial of the New Testament. But the Arndt citation poses the question: what exactly does a rectilinear exegete mean when he uses the word "typology?" Fuerbringer gives us the answer in our last quotation of him, and for the sake of convenience the

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<sup>10</sup>Raymond Surburg, for example, names a rather long list of Old Testament types in his unpublished paper, "The Proper Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Prophecy," p. 5-6.

pertinent portion of that quotation is here repeated:

The so-called historical circumstances connected with their origin wielded a certain influence upon the form and structure of the various books.<sup>11</sup>

As was said in connection with this quote Fuerbringer saw history as exerting only an external, on-the-surface influence on the words of Scripture, where the interpreter is informed (sometimes) by historical circumstances of external matters like "form and structure" without being led to the heart of the matter, that is, theological content. From this on-the-surface view of history's role flows an on-the-surface conception of typology, where an Old Testament type just happens to correspond externally (as the historical accounts tell us) to the external appearance of a New Testament antitype. But an Old Testament type is contentless, devoid of any theological freight, import, or dynamic. Instead, the rectilinear view of typology is that types are similar to "symbols," that is, earthly metaphors or sermon illustrations of divine truth. As symbols the Old Testament types may point in the direction of divine activity and realities, but the types do not participate in those realities. Quoted here is a comment of Raymond Surburg about the tabernacle, a statement so immensely typical of the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school:

The reader of Hebrews will find in the tabernacle and its furniture a prefigurement of the permanent realities of the Christian religion.<sup>12</sup> (emphasis mine)

In a somewhat similar vein is the following statement from the pen of Theodore Laetsch:

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<sup>11</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p.2.

<sup>12</sup>Surburg, "Proper Interpretation," p.6.

While the Old Testament had only the example, the pattern, the shadow, of things to come . . . the New Testament has the body, the very image of good things, the heavenly things themselves, the eternal actualities and realities which Christ has procured. (emphasis mine)<sup>13</sup>

To members of the rectilinear school typology of the kind found in the Missouri Synod is akin to symbolology, a matter of a suggestive image and a corresponding reality. Typology, however, differs from symbolology in that typology, as perceived by Fuerbringer and Laetsch, utilizes existing historical images and thus precludes the necessity of creating new ones. Precisely here is where one finds the omnipresent association of typology and allegory on the part of members of both schools in Missouri.<sup>14</sup> As the logic appears to go, Old Testament types are found on the plane of history. Since they are historical phenomena, they provide an earthbound, outward "form and structure" to divine, heavenly realities. When earthly things point to heavenly things, allegory is the result. The state of the case is this-- when a rectilinearist talks about "typology," the product is a strange hybrid, a description where he dresses his own hermeneutics in the garb of his opponents. When this in fact is done, the result is indeed allegory: Since practitioners of a purely rectilinear approach lift "divine" prophecy out of the realm of human history, they erect for themselves a bilevel world-view which makes them more prone to allegorizing than anyone else. In the above quote of Laetsch one can note the phrase, "heavenly things," an expression that is suggestive of allegory.

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<sup>13</sup>Theodore Laetsch, II Corinthians 3:12-28, Concordia Theological Monthly 14 (1943): 104.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 11; H. T. Mayer, Interpreting the Holy Scriptures (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 24.

One last point needs to be introduced here before the treatment of Fuerbringer's hermeneutics continues forward. History for Fuerbringer and Laetsch always appears to be minimized in its role and impact. To use Fuerbringer's own words, history tends to be thought of as "historical circumstances," as an entity that is in actuality beside the point theologically, coexisting alongside revelation. If an interpreter is consistent in such an evaluation of history and he sees history as being only a matter of outward "form and structure," this means that the beauty of Old Testament history is only skin-deep. The study of Old Testament history becomes merely the determination of what metaphors work best for doctrinal realities. Putting the matter rather crassly, the Old Testament informs us that the tabernacle might work better as "a prefigurement of the permanent realities of the Christian religion" than the "symbol" of, for example, the lion slain by Samson.

If history is "human" but revelation "divine," then the interpreter would do well to avoid tainting revelation by mixing in historical considerations. In fact, dwelling upon history, the "circumstances," ultimately involves a departure from revelation toward something that is circumstantial to revelation. Both the rectilinear and typological schools wrestle with the higher critical presupposition of a "closed universe." The final shape of the rectilinear apologetic is: "The revelation of God does indeed reach all the way down to the plane of human history." The typological defense is: "God reveals himself in history." Again, by "history" is meant worldly events which are determined by God himself, effected by him in spite of man's departures from God's purposes (see, for example, the participants in the trial of



Christ), and explained by him according to his own point of view. From a confessional standpoint this is the only real "history" there is.

Attention is now turned to Fuerbringer's comments on the purpose of the Scriptures:

Regarding their purpose, the Scriptures are a guide to our salvation. 2 Tim. 3, 15; John 5, 39; Luke 11, 28. For this reason the exposition of Scripture, for which Hermeneutics lays down the necessary rules, must be not only grammatically and historically correct, but also be truly theological and must agree with the purpose of all theological activity.<sup>15</sup>

Fuerbringer goes on to quote C. G. Hofmann, who names a twofold purpose of Scripture, the "salvation of man and the honor of God." There is a special danger here of reading into this quote considerably more than what Fuerbringer intended to say. At the most elemental and pastoral level he is simply saying that the ultimate goal of exegetical activity is the doing of theology, and hence there is here at least a partial explanation of the title of Fuerbringer's book. His words serve as a foil against the Semleristic treatment of the Bible "like any other book," an approach which had already produced enough theologically barren commentaries by Fuerbringer's time. A thorough exegetical treatment must produce theological material sufficient for the production of a true "sermon study" of the Theodore Laetsch variety, in which the interpreter desires to communicate to his audience with the same earnestness evident in God's communication to him. In view of this, Fuerbringer realizes that it is a habitus practicus theosdotos (sic),<sup>16</sup> a God-given ability for one who is already in the posture of faith.

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<sup>15</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

Any potential danger in Fuerbringer's comment on the purpose of Scripture is found only in the interpreter's practical application, or overapplication, of it. Perhaps pertinent at this point is von Hofmann's comment that the Reformation freed exegetes from the domination of theology!<sup>17</sup> A comparison of Fuerbringer and von Hofmann, again reveals a difference in emphasis, with the former emphasizing the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle and the latter stressing the verba-to-res direction. The former wants to look back on the road of Scriptural interpretation from the point of view of already standing firmly upon his theological destination, while the latter pictures himself as still traversing the Scriptural road with the theological destination already in sight but as yet a short distance off.

Each individual interpreter decides for himself which direction on the hermeneutical circle is going to receive the most attention. But in order to make such a decision he must ask himself the same question that has already been asked in this dissertation: just how extensive and how detailed is his theological res? The verba-to-res school views the Reformation res as being the singular focal point of the Gospel, as a singular Vorverstaendnis<sup>18</sup> that opens the door for the exegete to his very first serious study of the Scriptures. However, with Fuerbringer, Laetsch, and the rest of the res-to-verba school we get a different picture. If one can trust the logic of Fuerbringer's statement on the purpose of Scripture, he says that the "necessary rules" of hermeneutics

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<sup>17</sup>J. C. K. von Hofmann, Biblische Hermeneutik, 1860, quoted in John F. Johnson, "Analogia Fidei as Hermeneutical Principle," The Springfielder 36 (1973): 257.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

have a bearing upon grammar, history, and theology. In other words, for Fuerbringer the theological res can be expressed by more than just a singular focal statement; it can be expressed as a whole code of interpretive rules whereby the regula fidei can become regulae fidei. It was previously mentioned with some amazement how Fuerbringer could reduce his confessional viewpoint down to such precise rules which cover even methodology. Such a task would be difficult indeed if one were operating with a singular Vorverstaendnis (pre-understanding); but the task becomes easier when the interpreter's res has progressed from a confessional to a systematic one. If the rules of interpretation become sufficiently extensive and precise, little room is left for diversity of opinion on the interpretation of individual passages: a constitutional article concedes a certain measure of freedom, but a handbook does not. Pieper intended his Dogmatics to be a rearrangement of the Biblical material, but if a systematic body of doctrine is presented too forcefully in the foreground, the Bible may be seen as a rearrangement of Pieper.

There is, however, another side to the coin presented in the previous paragraph. One is confronted with the realistic situation of a Lutheran exegete confronting a Biblical text. It is impossible for him to dismiss from his mind all the systematics homework he has done in the past and to retain in his mind only the "bare Gospel" hermeneutic. Even if he were able to do so, he could be accused of being a "Gospel reductionist," a danger to which Raymond Surburg devotes an entire article.<sup>19</sup> Suffice it to say that the verba-to-res advocate also needs

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<sup>19</sup>Raymond Surburg, "An Evaluation of the Law-Gospel Principle as a Hermeneutical Method," The Springfielder 36 (1973): 280-93.

to be reminded that there are two directions to the hermeneutical circle. But on the other hand, theology cannot stand on its own in isolation from the exegesis of the Scriptures, nor does it carry an authority of its own apart from the Scriptures.

Finally, notice Fuerbringer's juxtaposition of grammar/history on one hand and theology on the other. Undoubtedly Fuerbringer's target was the critic who endeavors in his scholarship to remain theologically noncommittal or even atheological. But the res-to-verba school needs to make sure that it heeds its own advice: if theology is given an independent existence alongside the Scriptures, the rift between grammar/history and theology remains intact. It seems far better simply to say that Biblical grammar and history, in the service of God and his revelation of himself, are theological. Let the hermeneutical circle remain complete no matter which point on the circle is emphasized. As will be explained later, one of the chief ways that Fuerbringer and Laetsch preserve the rift is to think of theologizing as a "theologicalizing" or spiritualizing of the mundane matters of grammar and history.

The present investigation now moves forward to paragraph three of Fuerbringer's hermeneutics. If the treatment of the first two paragraphs has seemed overlong to the reader, he is asked to bear in mind that the first four of Fuerbringer's forty-four paragraphs are introductory and give a summary description of his overall hermeneutical posture. Naturally, if Theodore Laetsch is an extension of Fuerbringer, the importance of these first four paragraphs cannot be minimized. In paragraph three Fuerbringer discusses the role of hermeneutics:

Since the Scriptures are clear in themselves and may be understood

even by simple minds, the absolute necessity of Hermeneutics as a special branch of theology cannot be maintained. On the other hand, Hermeneutics must not be regarded as superfluous. The study of Hermeneutics is very helpful to the theologian in his capacity as exegete, because it shows him how to go about his work systematically. Its principles help him to avoid exegetical errors; they aid him in substantiating his exposition of Scripture and in reassuring himself and others that he has proceeded correctly in expounding the Scriptures; they also serve him as a standard whereby he may test and judge the methods and results of other exegetes. (Proper use of commentaries.)<sup>20</sup>

This quotation captures the tension that persists for any Biblical exegete: although the perspicuity of Scripture obviates the necessity for any further rules on interpretation, the exegete still faces the perpetual frustration of seeing other exegetes, equally sincere, espousing interpretations different from his own. Thus, for Fuerbringer hermeneutics is not absolutely necessary but yet "must not be regarded as superfluous." This frustration is in evidence when Fuerbringer speaks of the interpreter's "substantiating his exposition" and "reassuring himself."

How is this tension to be resolved? For the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school there is a tendency to magnify that aspect of hermeneutics which must "not be regarded as superfluous." The effort is made to provide the interpreter with every last fragment of substantiation and reassurance possible by guaranteeing for him not only methods, but even results, of interpretation. As the theological basis for hermeneutical principles expands through systematics and apologetics, the hermeneutical principles themselves become more pointedly directional for methodology of interpretation, and as methodological rules multiply, the number of Biblical pericopes for which there are assured results of

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<sup>20</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 3.

interpretation also multiplies. More than that, the assured interpretive result with a given Bible passage in one generation is bound to become the assured result of the next generation as well, unless the first generation did not in fact achieve the desired assurance. In the final analysis, then, it is possible to conceive of an authoritative church tradition, comprised of the sum total of all assured results, under whose auspices only one official synodical commentary is necessary.

It is theology that leads the way in championing the correct exposition of Scripture, and there are indications within this quote of theology's exalted position. First of all, there is the identification of "Hermeneutics" as a special branch of theology; the verba-to-res school, it appears, might be more inclined to define hermeneutics as a branch of exegesis in keeping with its emphasis on the verba. Secondly, Fuerbringer mentions the "theologian in his capacity as exegete." The verba-to-res proponent might rather speak of the exegete in his capacity as theologian, and he might even pose the question: "Is there any theologian other than an exegetical theologian?" From this viewpoint comes von Hofmann's comment about rescuing exegesis from theology.

To be sure, a verba-to-res advocate also looks to the guidance of theology in his interpretation of the Scriptures, unless he would want to become a pure "Biblical Theologian." The difference between the two schools in Missouri is again a matter of degree. The verba-to-res school, with its singular confessional res, conceives of its res as a "calf that has been let out of the stall" to make its presence felt in every corner of the Scriptures and the history they portray in a myriad of ways, many of which may be somewhat ill-defined. The Fuerbringer-Laetsch school prefers to see the role of theology as more centripetal

then centrifugal: its confessional res is viewed more as an orderly series of statements, as fenceposts which together form a corral, fencing in the meaning of individual pericopes in a uniform, well-defined way. Herein lay the two different views of Messianic prophecies: the rectilinear school sees the "doctrine of Christology" presented in the Old Testament "this way" regardless of how it is said, who speaks it, or any other "circumstantial" history; typologists, on the other hand, feel free to multiply the ways that Christ can be prophesied and hesitate to pin down a precise definition of any single mode of prophecy, because there is no way of calculating exactly what the "calf" will do once he has been let out of the stall. The rectilinearist works deductively from his Christological given; the typologist works inductively, arriving at a cumulative picture of the Messiah by tracing his movements through the pages of Scriptural history.

One more thought needs to be expressed here about the role of theology in exegesis. The Fuerbringer-Laetsch school extricates itself from the dilemma of the multiplicity of interpretations vis-a-vis the clarity of Scripture by positing what appears to be an abnormally large number of sedes doctrinae, that is, Biblical passages where the interpreter feels safe in saying, "Regardless of what hermeneutic you operate with, this is what this passage unmistakably says!" Every Lutheran exegete will, of course, recognize the presence of many doctrinal sedes, but a survey of Laetsch's writings reveals that for a res-to-verba scholar almost every pericope bears the stamp of "unmistakable" in meaning, and the number of passages that are adjudged as truly doubtful can be counted on one hand, since theology can be trusted to determine both "methods and results" at every turn. For example, even a verse

like Hosea 11:1 has for Laetsch an unmistakable Messianic sensus unus.<sup>21</sup> But what is for Laetsch an assured exegetical result ("as anyone can plainly see") is for another exegete, one with verba-to-res leanings, a doctrinaire interpretation, where a whole body of theology has loaded a passage with a little too much a little too quickly. A doctrine/sedes complex has the advantage, both cognitively and pedagogically, of being "stative," of freezing the motion picture frame in the ongoing movie of God's activity. And when doctrinal time stands still, contextual matters fade from view.

Anticipating a future point to be made by Fuerbringer, the clear and unambiguous sedes inform us about the dark passages, and the New Testament is the "clearer portion of Holy Writ."<sup>22</sup> Due caution must be observed here lest a mechanical observance of this last principle sign the death certificate for Lutheran studies of the Old Testament. After all, to be consistent in one's thinking, an exegete who has a firm grip on his theology might do well simply to dispose of the Old Testament "metaphor" as soon as the doctrinal code for the metaphor has been deciphered. Having broken the code of the Old Testament and at the same time recognizing that most termini technici in systematics are taken over from the New Testament, a more fundamental question is: is it possible to speak about salvation by grace through faith by using terminology which is peculiar to the Old Testament?

The fourth and final introductory paragraph deals with the general qualifications of the theological exegete:

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<sup>21</sup>Theodore Laetsch, The Minor Prophets (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 88-9.

<sup>22</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 16.



A theologian, however, in order to have the proper exegetical qualifications, must not be satisfied with a knowledge of the correct principles and rules of Hermeneutics. He must also have a good reasoning power, a keen judgment, a faithful memory, a knowledge of the original languages of the Bible; he should possess a certain measure of rhetorical, archeological (sic), and historical knowledge; he must be thoroughly familiar with the doctrines contained in the divine revelation; and he must be truly enlightened by the Spirit of God and be a true Christian at heart.<sup>23</sup>

Evident in this quotation is the full hermeneutical circle: a theologian must have adequate exegetical credentials among which is a good grasp of theology. Again the res-to-verba direction on the circle is emphasized, for Fuerbringer enters the circle and departs from it at the point of theology. It is somewhat curious that Fuerbringer says in effect, "Not only must a student know his hermeneutics; he must also have all the necessary exegetical tools." A verba-to-res proponent might legitimately ask, "Is it possible to have any hermeneutical rules at all without having all the exegetical tools?" Another way of phrasing this question is: what is the "raw material" of interpretation, the Scriptures themselves or one's set of doctrines? If it be the Scriptures, can one establish rules for handling the raw material without a full knowledge of what that raw material is? If doctrine becomes the raw material, or a major part of it, then the Scriptures are assigned a secondary position, and they become the object of one's "handling" by what has preceded them. A seminary student, for example, armed with the doctrinal raw material of his systematics classes, can often "handle" a text in a way that bespeaks poor exegesis even though his sermon may be doctrinally correct.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

Under paragraph two Fuerbringer qualified somewhat the role of history, saying that historical circumstances wielded only a "certain" influence. That same qualifier is used here: while the exegete must be "thoroughly familiar" with doctrine, only a "certain measure" of knowledge of historical considerations is required. For the first time Fuerbringer introduces the subject of rhetoric, which for him undoubtedly includes all figures of speech and modes of speaking of which human language is capable. Since the hermeneutics of Fuerbringer focuses more of its attention on the res rather than the verba, and since rhetorical device often arise within the contingencies of history, there is a tendency to downplay the impact of figures of speech upon Biblical interpretation. Accordingly, the reader senses in Laetsch's writings what can be best described as a hermeneutical atmosphere. He is transported by Laetsch's comments into the realm of "holy language," where human devices are supplanted by the straightforward talk of divine revelation. The only worthy bearer of doctrine is the forthright, propositional statement. Life and death matters are best conveyed by divine declarations that say "this is the way it is." But human figures of speech are unworthy as bearers of divine doctrine. They are examples of a human being's playing of verbal games and thus are too frivolous, in a sense, for the treatment of serious business. Propositional statements directly inform their audience, but at best figures of speech provide only overall impressions for the audience to ponder. Human devices, many of which fall under the category of poetry, are perhaps acceptable for one's devotional life or for hymnody ("when I cross the verge of Jordan"), but in order to be "thoroughly familiar" with doctrine plainer statements are needed. It is in this light that we

must see the Fuerbringer-Laetsch view of typology. Because typology is more reliant upon figures of speech such as the double entendre, it is deemed a "second-rate" form of Messianic prophecy,<sup>24</sup> a method that is "lost in the fog."<sup>25</sup> Of course, most typologists will see more in a type than a mere poetic metaphor or figure of speech.

We can only reaffirm with Fuerbringer that the exegete must be "truly enlightened by the Spirit of God." But yet this virtual truism can be interpreted and applied in a multitude of ways. There is a danger here which will be fully discussed later on the basis of Laetsch's writings and will only be introduced at this point. The problem, it appears to this author, manifests itself when the noun "Spirit" is converted into the adjective "spiritual." Quite prophetically English grammar dictates that the capital "S" of "Spirit" becomes a small "s" in the adjectival form. Something seems to be lost in transition between Fuerbringer's mention of being "enlightened by the Spirit" and his mention of "spiritual enlightenment" only a few lines later.<sup>26</sup> For Fuerbringer as well as for Laetsch oftentimes the word "spiritual" takes on the meaning of "immaterial" in the sense of being apart or separated from physical things. Hence the door is opened for a strange form of dualism that denigrates material things, and the predominantly physical Old Testament is assigned a secondary importance. To illustrate Fuerbringer's use of the word "spiritual," the reader's

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<sup>24</sup>Walter R. Roehrs, "The Typological Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," Concordia Journal 10 (1984): 215-16.

<sup>25</sup>William Hassold, "Rectilinear or Typological Interpretation of Messianic Prophecy?" Concordia Theological Monthly 38 (1967): 159.

<sup>26</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 3.

attention is directed toward how the word is bandied about in the modern-day Church: a marriage counsellor, for example, sees his objective as steering his clients away from the gross, physical aspects of marriage by inserting into the union the "spiritual dimension." It must be more than coincidental that in all of his writings Theodore Laetsch very rarely mentions the sacraments, and in the hermeneutical booklet presently under discussion Fuerbringer never mentions them. What the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school means by "spiritual" is often captured by the phrase: "setting aside (for the moment) material, human, and historical things. . ." As a balance to this mindset, a decidedly sacramental viewpoint sees the Spirit of God enlightening the hearer so that he knows a God who reveals himself in historical acts, through the material realm, and by way of the medium of human language.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE HERMENEUTICAL PROCEDURE OF FUERBRINGER

This chapter narrows down the investigation of the hermeneutics of Theodore Laetsch to the most immediate concentric circle of influence namely the methodological rules of Fuerbringer whereby his general Scriptural outlook, presented in the previous chapter, is reflected in actual practice. In keeping with Fuerbringer's own outline, the material will be discussed under the headings, "Establishing the Text," and "The Interpretation of the Text." Although references to the work of Laetsch himself will appear more frequently, the final two chapters will be devoted exclusively to Laetsch, not necessarily in one-to-one correspondences to Fuerbringer's individual rules, but in demonstration of how Fuerbringer's influence has made its presence felt.

#### Establishing the Text

Fuerbringer begins this section by carefully delineating the object of his hermeneutics in paragraph five:

The text for the interpretation of which theological Hermeneutics must lay down principles and rules is comprised in the canonical writings of the Old and New Testament. These writings originated during the period of the Old Covenant and in the first century of the New Covenant.<sup>1</sup>

Fuerbringer sees the titles for the two halves of Scripture as being technical terms derived directly from Scripture itself. The title of

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<sup>1</sup>Ludwig Fuerbringer, Theological Hermeneutics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), p. 4.

"Old Covenant" comes from 2 Corinthians 3:14 (παλαιάς διαθήκης). The term "New Covenant" is viewed by Fuerbringer as stemming from Matthew 26:28; it is interesting to note that he does not cite Luke 22:20, where the word καινή definitely does appear, but instead quotes a passage where, according to the Revised Standard Version and Bruce Metzger, the word καινή probably was not in the original text.<sup>2</sup>

It seems rather curious that Fuerbringer should say that the Old Testament was written "during the period of the Old Covenant" and that the New Testament originated during the New Covenant period, an era which continues to this day. This parallel phraseology is symptomatic in a preliminary way of a tendency found in the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school, a tendency that will be amply documented later in the writings of Laetsch. Suffice it for now to say that Laetsch was inclined to think of, and even speak of, the Old Testament period as the "dispensation of the law" and the New Testament period as "the Gospel era."<sup>3</sup> An advance signal of this trend was given already by Stoeckhardt, who emphasized the discontinuity between the testaments. In this tendency we see one of the most pervasive fundamental differences between the two schools in the Missouri Synod. The res-to-verba school wants to see the Gospel in the Old Testament as consisting primarily of identifiable Christological islands in an otherwise alien sea of law, in surroundings that are antithetic to the Gospel; the verba-to-res school, on the other hand, emphasizes a Gospel continuum that spans both testaments, in which

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<sup>2</sup>Bruce Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "II Corinthians 4:3-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 7 (1936): 30.

we see "more of the same" of God's gracious activity when we read the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> The difference between the two schools on this point is again a matter of degree or emphasis, since both schools will talk of both continuity and discontinuity between the testaments, but the difference is real nonetheless and lies at the root of the opposing views toward Messianic prophecy. The rectilinear approach of the res-to-verba school sterilizes a Messianic prophecy (obviously a "Gospel" passage) from its hostile, legal surroundings; to do anything else would be to "rob Christ of his glory."<sup>5</sup> The typological approach of the verba-to-res school can more easily intertwine the Gospel element (the Messianic prophecy) with its Old Testament context; it is simply a matter of seeing the Gospel element in hospitable Gospel surroundings.<sup>6</sup> The typologist might repeat here the passage that Fuerbringer himself has just quoted, 2 Corinthians 3:14, arguing that once the "veil is lifted" the reader of Scripture can then see that the Gospel was at work in the Old Testament all along.

But at once in the above discussion an even more fundamental question begs for an answer, a question that will only be introduced at this point. Both schools will adamantly insist that there is no such thing as Gospel apart from Jesus Christ. That being the case, it must be asked: to what extent is Christ "really present" in the Old

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<sup>4</sup>Horace Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>This is a phrase which your present author has heard repeatedly from the mouths of rectilinear proponents.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Martin Franzmann's treatment of Isaiah 7:14 in A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics, Richard Jungkuntz, ed., (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969), p. 19-33.

Testament? Is he present in the sense of being alive, well, and graciously active, or is he present only by way of symbol and metaphor? Is he really "there," or is he only promised? How does the Christological "even now, not yet" apply to the Old Testament, and how does the "realized eschatology" of the New Testament differ from it? Regarding Theodore Laetsch one tentative answer to these questions comes from a strange place: the pre-publication tract issued by Concordia Publishing House to advertise Laetsch's Jeremiah commentary. Concordia titillates the prospective reader by saying that in the book Dr. Laetsch writes eloquently about "the promise of divine grace through the coming Messiah" (emphases mine).<sup>7</sup>

Paragraphs six and seven, both of which deal with textual criticism, are quoted here together:

6. The exegete must for this reason, first of all, endeavor to ascertain the original form of the text. (Textual criticism, verbal criticism, lower criticism.)
7. The original manuscripts of all the books of the Bible were lost in ages long past, and none of the old copies now extant can be considered correct in every detail. Nevertheless, the sacred text has been handed down to us complete, without any omissions, and may be found in the sources which are at hand for textual criticism.<sup>8</sup>

There is not much material in these paragraphs that is pertinent to our investigation. Under paragraph seven Fuerbringer lists in detail the biblical sources that were available in his day and the comparative value of each. He cautions against "modern conjectural criticism" where the text is changed without any supporting documentation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Theodore Laetsch file, Concordia Historical Institute.

<sup>8</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 5.



One curious thought expressed here is: one may be uncertain about the correct shape of a text, but of one thing he can be sure--that the correct, original text can be found somewhere among the extant documents. This thought is indicative of what your present author has found to be true, namely, that the res-to-verba school appears to exude a greater confidence about determining the original text than the verba-to-res school does. One is tempted to read between the lines a subsequent thought: if the correct reading does exist somewhere among the documents available, one can be sure that somehow he will find it!

Wherein lay this confidence? A hint of explanation comes from a comment of Fuerbringer on paragraph seven:

Not a single doctrine of faith would be lost or changed even in a very small degree if one were to use the poorest manuscripts for determining the text.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to sounding a trifle overconfident, perhaps with pastoral considerations in mind, this statement can possibly move the reader one step further if he tries to implement what the statement says. He might conclude that somewhere among the manuscripts there is a version of the text that is doctrinally correct. In short, it is possible that doctrine becomes a decisive factor in the determination of a text, although Fuerbringer himself does not admit to such a prospect in this booklet. At the very least we can observe that using doctrine per se in textual criticism fits quite handily into a res-to-verba emphasis. Again it is a matter of emphasis: instead of saying that the verba point clearly to correct doctrine, Fuerbringer chooses to say that our doctrine, which we already know to be correct, comforts and reassures us about the trust-

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

worthiness of the verba. Later examples of doctrine determining a text will be deduced from Theodore Laetsch, but one example is immediately at hand: Fuerbringer's use of Matthew 26:28, mentioned above. It appears that his covenantal theology may have influenced his decision to include the word  $\kappa\alpha\iota\nu\eta$  in the text.

More than that, the reader is here reminded of a previous point. Not only can doctrinal forces be marshalled to establish a text; doctrine can be used to define the words found in a text that is already well established, and the result is a "doctrinaire" interpretation. What brings this previous thought to mind is Fuerbringer's use of Galatians 6:16, which occurs under paragraph five. There he says that the idea of a Biblical canon is found in the Bible itself, basing his conclusion on the appearance of  $\tau\omega\ \kappa\alpha\nu\omicron\nu\iota$  in the Galatians verse. It seems clear that Fuerbringer is attaching to the term far more baggage than the apostle Paul intended in the original text.

Paragraphs eight through ten all deal with textual variants and are also quoted together:

8. The variant readings now found in the manuscripts were caused by the copyists either unintentionally or intentionally.
9. Unintentional alterations of the original text are due to the fact that the copyists misread the text or failed to hear distinctly what was dictated; or they are due to slips of memory or failure to understand the text.
10. Intentional changes of the text in the manuscripts of the Old Testament can be proved in but very few cases. In the manuscripts of the New Testament, however, variant readings may often be found which aim either to correct the language, or to elucidate and embellish it, to improve the orthography, to eliminate historical and harmonistic difficulties and dogmatic objections, or to solve seeming contradictions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 6-8.

Under paragraphs nine and ten Fuerbringer provides a concise but rather thorough listing of possible textual corruptions and the various reasons or occasions for them. In so doing he invokes traditional axioms such as the preference for the shorter or more difficult reading. Although most of this material is hermeneutically neutral, a "wait and see" attitude is in order for determining how the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school applies it to more highly contested passages. Laetsch himself inserted very little textual critical argumentation into his writings and worked primarily with the text as it had already been established.

Once again, one can only offer conjectures regarding the extent to which the res-to-verba school's own doctrinal considerations affected decisions made about variant readings. For example, does not doctrine itself often make one reading "more difficult" than another? While it is impossible to document, the last statement of the previous paragraph does suggest a couple of things: first, that the res-to-verba school has never had much difficulty giving "final answers" as to which variant readings are correct, especially since the assurance is given that the correct original reading exists somewhere among the extant documents; secondly, it is hard to imagine Fuerbringer and Laetsch disagreeing on any variant reading questions. Concerning the information supplied in paragraphs nine and ten their school would be inclined to say, "These are the factors that your church took into consideration in arriving at the correct reading." The verba-to-res school, however, can be more open-ended, saying, "These are the factors that every earnest Bible student will have to take into consideration in making his own decision about which reading is correct." The first approach has a res emphasis,

the second a verba emphasis. Put another way, the res-to-verba school cannot afford to be open-ended or tentative about variants, because too much is at stake, namely, a whole system of church dogma. On the other hand, the verba-to-res school can grant greater freedom to the individual exegete: the interpreter can decide what he must as long as the singular law-Gospel hermeneutic is borne in mind. One can sense Fuerbringer's uneasiness with tentativeness when he quotes under paragraph seven the standard conservative apologetic:

Adducing variant readings when treating the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible is entirely beside the mark.<sup>12</sup>

Any conservative exegete will support this statement as well he should, provided that he also remembers the equally standard retort to it, that is, that the doctrine of inspiration never determines which variant reading is correct.

#### The Interpretation of the Text

The remainder of Fuerbringer's booklet is devoted to the mechanics of drawing out the meaning from Biblical texts. Judging by the way these last thirty-four paragraphs build upon one another and reach a crescendo on specific issues, one might wonder if Fuerbringer had as his purpose for writing this book the mere furnishing of introductory information or if he had from the outset some particular "axes to grind." It will also be interesting to relate these specific procedures to Fuerbringer's overall outlook as it was described in the previous chapter. Fuerbringer's own title for this section is "The Interpretation of the Text," but it is subtitled, "Biblical Hermeneutics." Just how this sub-

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

title relates to the title of the whole work, "Theological Hermeneutics," is a provocative question in its own right; the sum total of our analysis of Fuerbringer will provide an answer.

Fuerbringer relates in paragraph eleven:

The Holy Scriptures were recorded in human language, and all Biblical books have come down to us in the languages in which they were originally written. For this reason the exegete, in order to be able to expound the Biblical text, should have a full knowledge of the original languages of both the Old and the New Testament.<sup>13</sup>

Fuerbringer reiterates here what he has stated in paragraph four. In view of the everpresent temptation for the res-to-verba advocate to forget to do his raw exegetical homework, this paragraph stands as a necessary corrective.

But at the risk of appearing rather brazen, an exegete is compelled to pose the question: why should the interpreter who has been so thoroughly immersed in correct theology be required to know Hebrew and Greek? Again one is confronted by the seminary student who preaches nothing but die reine Lehre (the pure doctrine) even when he is not entirely sure what exactly his sermon text says. To bring this question within the specific scope of this paper, below is a preliminary, look at the total work of Theodore Laetsch. In both his journal articles and his commentaries Laetsch does the following: he determines what the correct rendering of the text is, he explains the meaning of almost every original word, he endeavors to supply whatever theology that can be drawn from the text, and he applies this theology in the everyday lives of his anticipated audience, down to the minutest detail. Having seen all this one can now phrase the question: why do I have to

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

to know Hebrew and Greek when I have Theodore Laetsch?

The higher critical school does not need to press for the study of the original languages, because the verba themselves are only the visible tip of the iceberg. What really matters, it is said, are the various layers of tradition that are found behind the text itself. If the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle is pushed too far, a similar neglect of the original languages might result, except that the same outcome is achieved from the opposite direction. Whereas higher criticism would make the original words a secondary consideration and thus somewhat irrelevant, a res-to-verba overemphasis can make the original words a secondary consideration by making them redundant. In other words, if the Hebrew and Greek can be thrust aside by focusing on what lies behind the text, it is also possible to thrust them aside by focusing on what lies in front of the text. It is simply a matter of the location of the tradition that monopolizes the interpreter's attention. Higher criticism deals with a tradition that is prior to the text; the Fuerbringer-Laetsch schools deals with a tradition that is subsequent to the text, namely, the systematized dogma of the church.

H. T. Mayer describes the Lutheran tradition under the title, "the analogy of faith." He says that, although Luther himself limited the analogy to the Gospel of reconciliation, post-Reformation Lutheranism expanded the analogy to include a whole catalog of Gospel-related articles.<sup>14</sup> Adolf Hoenecke pinpoints the expansion of the Lutheran anal-

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<sup>14</sup>H. T. Mayer, Interpreting the Holy Scriptures (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 45-7.

ogy to the time of the Formula of Concord.<sup>15</sup> The codification of the analogy within Missouri Synod circles has been outlined in this dissertation in chapter two. However one traces the growth of the analogy into a full-blown tradition, whether he homes in on the Formula or the dogmatics of Pieper, there seems little doubt that the analogy grew point by point (along with a mushrooming list of sedes doctrinae) in answer to a series of doctrinal aberrations. It also seems clear that the more particularistic the interpreter becomes in his view of the resultant tradition, the more particularistic he becomes in his interpretation of the individual passages. And, there is the grave temptation to allow the Hebrew and Greek to suffer in the process: when the exegete studies the original languages, and when he sees possible options of interpretation, his dogma is always at hand to insure that he "gets it right."

Fuerbringer continues in paragraph twelve:

For a full understanding of any language, and hence also the original languages of the Bible, it is necessary to know what the words of that language mean, and, furthermore, to understand the manner in which these words are placed together and connected with each other in sentences. (Substance and form of speech. Correct use of both lexicon and grammar.)<sup>16</sup>

Student George Thomas,<sup>17</sup> presumably at the suggestion of his instructor,

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<sup>15</sup>Adolf Hoenecke, "Ueber den Schriftkeweis in der Kondordienformel," Theologische Quartalschrift, 1904, quoted in William Hassold, "Rectilinear of Typological Interpretation of Messianic Prophecy?" Concordia Theological Monthly 38 (1967): 162.

<sup>16</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup>The copy of Fuerbringer's booklet used in this study is the shelf copy from the library of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This shelf copy is a photographic reproduction of a volume that was at one time in the possession of a student named George Thomas, a 1947 graduate of the seminary. In reproducing the text itself of Fuerbringer's book,

identified the word "substance" (last line of quote) with "words, vocables," and the phrase "form of speech" with the word "grammar." For all practical purposes, and with the exception of paragraph twenty-seven, paragraph twelve is Fuerbringer's last mention of the role of grammar in interpretation. Throughout the rest of his book he focuses almost exclusively on the nature and meaning of Biblical vocables. Individual words, after all, are the "substance" of the Bible's message; grammatical relationships provide only the "form," the scaffolding upon which the vocables are hung.

For the purpose of this dissertation, this point brings us to an extremely important conclusion about the methodology of the Fuerbringer-Laetsch hermeneutical school, which is evident in all of Laetsch's writings. The res-to-verba emphasis in its hermeneutics leads to an intensely word-based, vocabulary-bound method in their exegesis.

The question might be posed: if the res of the interpreter is to inform the verba, just how can that happen, or, at least what is the easiest, most direct way for that to happen? To refer to an earlier point, a small and neat verba-package is easily manageable for systematic thinking. In other words, it can be a tenuous, rather slippery affair to relate doctrinal concerns to grammatical relationships; but how much simpler it is to bring the influence of doctrine to bear upon individual words. Individual vocables provide isolated and identifiable

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the library staff also reproduced notes penciled in by Thomas in the margins and in between the lines of the text. It has been ascertained through the registrar's office that Thomas took Hermeneutics class with W. F. Arndt and Old Testament Eisagogics with Theodore Laetsch, and that in both classes Fuerbringer's booklet was used as a textbook. Since most of Thomas' notes appear in the section of Fuerbringer's book which deals with Messianic prophecy, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Thomas' notes reflect the comments made in class by Theodore Laetsch.



points of reference for which the exegete can furnish a (systematical) frame of reference. The grammatical scaffolding upon which the vocables are hung assumes a secondary importance once the interpreter has identified the vocabularic "substance" of the Biblical message.

To advance the present argument one step further, Fuerbringer was quoted earlier as saying that "the historical circumstances . . . wielded a certain influence upon the form and structure of the various books" (p. 56, emphasis mine). For Fuerbringer both grammar and history are "matters of form" as opposed to "substance." Both of them are the stage upon which the substance is found. In short, the term "grammar" becomes for Fuerbringer his expression on the plane of linguistics for his attitude toward the role of history as a bearer of meaning. Practically, in the working through of a text, as soon as an interpreter begins to examine a vocable's place and function within that grammatical arrangement we call a sentence, he is already and at the same time launching out into the historical context of the vocable; and, as soon as the interpreter begins to do that much, his substance-vocable has been set in motion. It can no longer be the "stative" he thought he had pinned down, but instead it now defies being encapsuled as a timeless "concept," so longed for by systematicians. It is in this light, for example, that we should see the Fuerbringer-Laetsch propensity to ignore or to gloss over the contextual concerns in a chapter like Isaiah 7 or to dismiss as irrelevant the grammatical parallelism in Hosea 11:1.

Vocables become constant in meaning when they are extracted from the contextual matters of grammar and history. As constant, fixed points they serve well as termini technici in one's systematic schema,

because systematics affords precious little room for relative terms. But what if the terms used in one's systematical tradition do not always match the terms found in Scripture? And, even if some matches are found, does mere outward similarity of vocabulary guarantee similarity of meaning? When verba-terms do not match one's res-terms, is not there the danger that the hermeneutical circle may become disjointed and that the two points on the circle may "talk past" each other or artificially inform one another? This danger is especially immanent for Old Testament exegesis and the evaluation of the Old Testament's usefulness and applicability. Historically speaking, the terms of the Old Testament are located in a setting that is one step further removed from us than the New Testament. Add to that the fact that Old Testament Hebrew is especially defiant when it comes to pinning down meanings of vocables apart from their contexts. When a Hebrew vocable is emptied of its context, it is often also emptied of any content that is transportable to another sphere.

Paragraphs thirteen and fourteen both introduce the subject of word etymologies and are quoted together:

13. Every word has an original etymological meaning and a meaning in actual popular usage (usus loquendi). The etymological meaning may either have been retained in popular usage, or it may have been lost.
14. The etymological meaning and the usus loquendi of a word may be identical, or they may merely hold some relation to each other, either close or distant.<sup>18</sup>

The second statement is a rephrasing of the first. George Thomas notes in the margin the instructor's examples of a word where the etymological meaning had been lost: the word *βίβλος* no longer conjures up in the

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<sup>18</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 9.

minds of the New Testament audience the origins of a scroll from the papyrus plant. Another example might be the word  $\xi\kappa\kappa\lambda\eta\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ , which by New Testament times simply meant "church."

Paragraph fifteen discusses the relative importance of these two possible word meanings:

Knowledge of the original meaning of words, according to their etymology, very often is of practical value to the exegete; however, his first and chief aim should be to understand the meaning of words according to the usus loquendi, because in interpreting Scripture he always deals with words as they were actually used to convey a certain sense.<sup>19</sup>

As Laetsch's extensive word studies indicate, undoubtedly he would concur with these last three statements of Fuerbringer<sup>19a</sup>, but oftentimes Laetsch failed to practice what his school preached, as he repeatedly pushed the etymological meaning at the expense of the usus loquendi.

Perhaps here it is necessary to give a preliminary example from Laetsch's work: by delving into the term "Philippi" in Acts 16:12 Laetsch is able to show that Christ is the Fountain of life, the King of kings, and the victor over Satan.<sup>20</sup>

The Fuerbringer-Laetsch school appears to share a fascination with word studies with those who reacted against the pluralism of the "Biblical Theology" movement, although ironically for a different reason: whereas the latter presses for consistent meanings of words because it searches for a unifying theology, the former moves in the

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19a</sup>See, for example, Laetsch's search for the usus loquendi of words used with the marriage relationship in "Divorce and Malicious Desertion," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 850-55.

<sup>20</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Acts 16:9-15," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 608.

same direction perhaps because it presupposes a little too much theology. On the whole it appears that Fuerbringer and Laetsch will press into service either the etymological meaning or the usus loquendi depending upon which option best serves their theology.

Regardless of which meaning for a word carries the day in a given verse, and in spite of attempts to heed Fuerbringer's caution against overetymologizing, there is in the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school a built-in necessity to dig into each and every vocable in its own right. The vocable is the site of the "substance" of the Biblical message. History and syntax are part of the background and are "matters of form." Simply put, if history and syntax become secondary considerations in the quest for meaning, what advantage does the trained exegete have over the unilingual layperson unless the exegete does pursue etymologies? This is the atmosphere in which the reader finds himself when he is reading Theodore Laetsch.

Another question that arises regarding the usus loquendi of a vocable is: exactly whose usus is the interpreter talking about? Is he speaking of a verba-usus or a res-usus? That is, when the interpreter paints a portrait of a vocable, is he describing the word as it is used within the Scriptures themselves, or is he describing the word as it is used within the context of his own theological tradition, or is he possibly mingling the two uses and thus arriving at a "doctrinaire" interpretation? Precisely at this point opponents of the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school consistently urge that the text be permitted to speak "on its own terms."

As Fuerbringer indicates, the exegete must make a decision as to how much movement has taken place away from the etymological meaning

toward the usus loquendi. But in many cases he can offer only conjectures as he hypothetically transports himself a few millenia into the past. And not only is the movement from one toward the other sometimes difficult to ascertain; often the destination, the usus of Biblical times, must remain somewhat conjectural. If the Biblical usus remains in doubt in any way, it is a simple matter to remove all doubts about a word's usus by looking at the same word's function in a context that is more readily available and where all terms are precisely defined, namely, the systematic res of the interpreter. In any event, the confusing of the two poles on the hermeneutical circle and their respective uses of words is much easier to do than it might appear from the very first.

Of course, if an interpreter thinks that every Biblical usus flows smoothly into a contemporary doctrinal usus, he is so much as saying that the Scriptures and the dogma of the Church constitute a singular unbroken tradition, and the uniqueness of the Scriptures is thereby lost. More than that, the Scriptures are apt to be assigned a subservient position: they can be seen as presenting in rather crude and rudimentary fashion the doctrines which we have long since learned to present in a much more intelligible fashion.

In the quest for the usus loquendi of Biblical words the waters can be especially muddy in the Old Testament, where, apart from the cognate languages, the usus loquendi is about the only sense of a Hebrew vocable there is to be found; there is little talk about a Hebrew word's inherent import unless there is an important doctrinal issue involved, such as with Isaiah 7:14. Consequently, the res-to-verba school appears

to feel the need to give Hebrew vocables more of a "doctrinal assist," usually done by going the route of "symbol" and "metaphor." This process often amounts to a "theological demythologizing" of the Old Testament text. Should a res-to-verba advocate retort, "Yes, but every word of the Old Testament is true," it almost strikes us as being a moot point. As will be shown, for Theodore Laetsch a fail-safe way (sometimes) of finding a proper Old Testament usus is to turn to the Septuagint. Such an approach provides a consistency of terminology (the Greek) that spans both testaments and thus is perfectly suited to systematic thinking.

Paragraph sixteen is here quoted along with Fuerbringer's explanatory note:

The exegete must cling to that meaning which a word most generally carried in common usage (significatus communis sive vulgaris, usus generalis) unless there are sufficient reasons to compel him to accept some other meaning; for it is evident a priori that the speaker or writer would use his words in that sense in which those to whom he speaks or writes are accustomed to use them.  
NOTE. A distinction should be made between usus generalis in the wider and narrower sense. Usus generalis in the wider sense is the common use which has been made of a word in any language at all times and in all countries; usus generalis in the narrower sense is that use which was made of a word at a certain time or in a certain country or district. (Classical and Hellenistic Greek.)<sup>21</sup>

In the margin of this paragraph student George Thomas has the note, "significatus vulgaris=faith," a comment that mystifies your present author, unless the instructor intended to say that the common understanding of a word supplies the notitia (knowledge) necessary to faith. Before making further comment we see the counterpart to the usus generalis in paragraph seventeen:

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<sup>21</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 10.

A special meaning of a word, differing from the usus generalis is often found in certain circles or with certain classes of men (usus specialis). Accordingly we may take it for granted that writers who belonged to such circles and classes of men, or who wrote for readers affiliated with them, employed certain words in such an usus specialis. Only for sufficient reasons we may deviate from this rule.<sup>22</sup>

The last sentence in this quote is somewhat of a puzzlement, because it is difficult to tell what deviation Fuerbringer is talking about. Along with the parallel expression in paragraph sixteen, ". . . unless there are sufficient reasons. . .," the reader is told to depart from neither the general nor the special usage of a word. Perhaps there is a foretaste here of Fuerbringer's either-or application of the sensus unus dictum.

As an example of a special word usage Fuerbringer lists the "Hebraism," that is, where a New Testament Greek vocable exhibits the influence of Hebrew thought patterns and phraseology, such as with the expression *πρόσωπον λαμβάνει* ("to show partiality") in Galatians 2:6. The study of this phenomenon can be a fruitful activity. Consider, for example, how covenant faithfulness in the Old Testament is captured by the verb *אָמַן* and reproduced in the New Testament by the verb *τηρεῖν* in Matthew 28:20. But one need only think of the discussions about the relationship between Matthew 1:23 and Isaiah 7:14 in order to pose a question that the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school could well ask at this point: is not this phenomenon possible also in the opposite direction? Since all of Scripture was written by the one eternal Spirit who is not bound by time, cannot a New Testament usus inform us on the intended sense of an Old Testament word, supplying it with a unique (hitherto unknown?) usus specialis? Apart from the fact that this argument is rarely, if ever, heard from the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school, at least in

so many words, a few other things need to be considered. The question becomes an especially critical one, especially in the area of Old Testament Messianic prophecy.

First of all, although the Spirit of God is not bound by time, man is. In the Old Testament context was the audience (or the author) aware of the specialized Messianic usus of the words as they were spoken? An interpreter like Laetsch usually does not like to distinguish between a cognitive and an ontological level of prophecy for fear lest the Messianic faith of the Old Testament be undermined. Secondly, if Old Testament messianism is reduced to specialized usages within that sphere, then what if anything is Messianic about the remainder of the Old Testament, that vast sea of words where the usus generalis prevails? Again we pose the question: is it possible to speak of salvation by grace through faith using terminology that is peculiar to the Old Testament? The rectilinear school says that once Matthew has pinpointed the meaning of  $\aleph \Omega \zeta \psi$  in Isaiah 7 as being the virgin Mary, the interpreter's job is done; but does not Matthew's very quotation of Isaiah 7 presuppose that a different meaning for  $\aleph \Omega \zeta \psi$  may have prevailed until his time? Here the use or possible misuse of the sensus unus dictum enters the discussion. Thirdly, we are now forced to rephrase the original question that was placed into the mouth of the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school. The question has now become: "We assume the great impact that the New Testament has upon the meaning of Old Testament words; is it possible for the Old Testament to have a similar influence upon the New?" The best answer, it would appear, is "Fair is fair;" but Fuerbringer and Laetsch are not so inclined. Although they see the New



Testament as having a profound influence upon the substance of Old Testament words and their meaning/usage, the influence of the Old Testament upon the New is limited primarily to matters of outward form, such as phraseology or the determination of suitable metaphors. The New informs the Old theologically, but the Old informs the New only linguistically. In order for the Old Testament to inform the New theologically, the very same theology must be operative in both testaments, but as shall be seen, we cannot confidently conclude that the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school holds this to be true.

The next four paragraphs of Fuerbringer's hermeneutics will be only briefly discussed and shall not be quoted.<sup>23</sup> Paragraph eighteen speaks of special word usages found within certain authors or Biblical books. Paragraph nineteen treats words which are used in a narrower or wider sense. Paragraph twenty deals with various possible figures of speech to be found in the Biblical record. Among these figures are metaphors (for which there is only one point of comparison), parables, metonymy, synecdoche, anthropomorphisms, and anthropopathisms. As we might expect, the double entendre is not mentioned as a possibility, but we ask, cur alii prae aliis? What criteria are there for concluding that some figures are possible while others are not? Perhaps the double entendre is seen as a "verbal game," beneath the dignity required for doing theology. Paragraph twenty-one admits the possibility of some words being taken as tropes or figuratively. Reflecting Luther's comments on the Words of Institution, Fuerbringer reminds the reader that a copula can never be taken figuratively.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 11-12.

These last four paragraphs are innocuous enough and do not contribute a great deal to the discovery of the hermeneutical stance peculiar to the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school. However, they do continue to place the emphasis upon a vocabulary-bound exegetical method, where individual words are viewed as the substance of divine revelation, as the trappers of divine realities. If the bond between vocables and doctrinal realities becomes sufficiently strong, only one small step is required to identify a vocable with the reality behind it. Hence, the interpreter can harbor the fear that the discarding of a vocable (even temporarily) inevitably entails the discarding of a doctrine toward which the vocable points. Fearing the possible throwing out of the doctrine with the vocable the interpreter can become stilted in his Gospel presentation, using Biblical texts as the occasion for quoting his systematics textbooks, and lost is the possibility of an infinite variety of verbal expressions huddled around a singular Gospel hermeneutic. Proclamation of the truth in new ways yields to the preservation of the truth according to stock formulas. The truth can stand secure in a shelter of vocabulary even when many individual hearers cannot understand what is being said.

More than that, the tenacious clinging to vocabularic points of reference tends to set in concrete the logic of one's whole systematical frame of reference. Within such a state of affairs there is the temptation to foist upon a Biblical pericope a systematic logic that is alien to it (such as "goal-malady-means?") and to shrink from asking: "What is the logic of the pericope?" Is it not possible that other doctrinal connections might be emphasized which have been given little attention in the Missouri tradition, such as creation-redemption?

None of the above thoughts are meant to disparage the doctrine of verbal inspiration. This doctrine is the father of exegesis because by it the interpreter is forced to determine why the Spirit led the sacred writer to employ one particular word over another. But to this we hastily add: typologists, who see many Old Testament passages as having a double thrust, are perhaps even more aware of the need for great care in the selection of words. The choice of words is paramount in the deliberate formation of a double entendre. At the heart of the word-versus-reality question is a definition of the word "word." Is a "word" of necessity only a vocable, or is it a unit of meaning/communication that can be clothed in the flesh of manifold forms?

With this question in mind attention is now turned to paragraph twenty-two, in which Fuerbringer brings to the forefront a principle, and his own particular application of it, which appears to have been one of his major agenda items from the very outset:

Every word in the Holy Scriptures can have only one intended meaning in any one place and in any one relation. Sensus literalis unus est.<sup>24</sup>

Presumably at the suggestion of his instructor, George Thomas highlights this paragraph as being one of special significance. Virtually every Lutheran exegete accepts this Reformation principle; divergency of opinion stems from the interpretation and application of it. Fuerbringer himself seems to realize that this principle needs to be supplemented with words of explanation and even with additional whole paragraphs if the reader is to arrive at a Fuerbringian approach. Indeed, the majority of the remainder of this booklet is devoted to "filling in the par-

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

particulars" of the one and only "proper" usage of the rule. The particularism of his explanation reaches all the way down to the interpretation of individual Messianic prophecies. Such a casuistic approach might tempt the reader to exclaim: "Forget the rule, and just tell me what every single passage means!" At the very least the length of Fuerbringer's explanation suggests that both schools of the Missouri Synod can coexist, if not live together in peace, under the umbrella of this very general rubric.

In order to get the full flavor of Fuerbringer's understanding of the sensus unus dictum, it is necessary to review the five explanatory notes that he attaches to this paragraph. In the background of his entire explanation is the following logic: (1) The interpretation of historical phenomena breeds uncertainty because they are liable to be misinterpreted. (2) Therefore, we must look elsewhere for the certainty we desire, namely, to individual words. (3) However, no certainty can be generated by individual words unless we can arrive at unmistakable, unambiguous definitions for those words. (4) The only kind of definition that is unmistakable is a singular, unitary one. (5) The only truly meaningful kind of exegesis, the kind which results in hearing God say, "This is the way it is," is the one that can appeal to the one literal sense of individual vocables.

Note 1. This fundamental rule is based upon Scripture itself. If any particular word should allow of various meanings with the same right, we would be prevented from establishing the real and true sense of the word. This would be, not the right use, but a misuse of language. The very origin and purpose of Scripture, however, forbid any such possibility.<sup>25</sup>

Fuerbringer adduces 2 Timothy 3:15-17 and Psalm 19:8,9 as prooftexts for

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

this statement. It strikes your present author that already here the whole sensus unus discussion has gotten off on the wrong foot.

Fuerbringer appears, in reference to the possible "misuse of language," to place the sensus unus dictum entirely into the area of linguistics per se. However, if we pay attention to the full message of the two prooftexts Fuerbringer cites, we cannot divorce or isolate the linguistic practice urged by the dictum from the ultimate Christological and salutary concern expressed by the dictum. The sensus unus is as much a faith-evoked Christological rule as it is a grammatical rule stemming from a theory of language.

Luther urged the unum, simplicum, germanum, et certum sensus literalem (single, simple, native, and sure sense) of the Biblical text<sup>26</sup> in order to safeguard against fanciful interpretations produced by man's sinful imagination. Being so thoroughly imbued as he is with the opinio legis, man's unbridled departure from the plain sense of the words would automatically lead to a detraction from, or total retraction of, the Gospel of salvation by grace, the singular Reformation hermeneutic about which all of Scripture speaks.

But by reducing the sensus unus rule to the level of a linguistic prescription and then by moving on the basis of this purely linguistic foundation to strictly rectilinear interpretations of Messianic prophecies, Fuerbringer seems to fall into the trap of fundamentalist thinking: "Since I have proved my Bible to be accurate, I can now believe my Christology." Fuerbringer himself wrote in paragraph two:

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<sup>26</sup>Martin Luther, De Rhetorica II, as quoted in Frederic W. Farrar, History of Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), p. 327.

Hermeneutics is a "habitus practicus Θεόδοτος ad sensum Sacrae Scripturae inveniendum atque aliis demonstrandum . . . ad salutem hominem Deique honorem."<sup>27</sup>

Or, Fuerbringer might need to hear the words of his own systematics mentor, Francis Pieper: "Only after a man is justified does he take the right attitude toward the entire Scripture . . ."28

In the final analysis the sensus unus dictum is a practical expression of the Reformation res, justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith, that ultimately the one intended sense of all Scripture is Jesus Christ, who is the final "Word" of all of God's revelation. In this Spirit (with a capital "S") and possessing this "habitus practicus Θεόδοτος," the interpreter is not led to see, in a purely rectilinear fashion, which Scriptural portions pertain to Christ and which do not; rather, he sees all Scripture as being Christological, seeing the Gospel reality and dynamic behind the verba, regardless of what external form those words may take. Thus, the sensus unus concerns itself with the content of the words and not with any particular linguistic usages or figures of speech. (Of course, this statement presupposes the distinction between words as such and the doctrinal reality behind the words.) With a given Messianic prophecy the concern of the rule is that Christ be found there, but as to how he is pictured there the Reformation preserves the right to private interpretation. Along the same lines of thought, the doctrine of inspiration indicates that the Bible is the Word of God clothed in human language, but it leaves

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<sup>27</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 145.

unanswered the question of how this could be so. At the very least this doctrine would cause us to view with suspicion any thought that God must foretell the coming of his Messiah "this way" and no other way. The study of individual words and their referents is not unimportant, but the observance of the "was Christum treibet" (what urges Christ) axiom is absolutely crucial.

Fuerbringer's use of the sensus unus reintroduces us in a different way to the whole question of the role of Biblical history and the possible revelatory character of history in its own right. His treatment of the rule continues to foster the notion that the pursuit of Christology is a "game of words" (properly defined). But the role of history is clearly seen in a phrase which is virtually synonymous with the sensus literalis unus--the "native sense" of the text. Again the plea is heard to permit the Biblical text to speak to us on its own terms. What sense of the words is native to the context in which the words are found? In order to arrive at the native sense in the first place, the words must be examined in their immediate and remote contexts, especially in the Old Testament, where word definitions rely so heavily upon contextual matters. Having answered that question, only then are we in a position to answer a second question: exactly what is it that turns our attention toward the Messiah? As Martin Franzmann would pose the question, are we interpreting according to a confessional res which leaves us open to both the divinum and humanum of Scripture?<sup>29</sup> By contrast Fuerbringer seems to ask: is there a sensus of "divine ori-

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<sup>29</sup>Martin H. Franzmann, Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics, (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969), p. 11.

gin" which must be extracted from its historical (earth-originated) context?

The introduction to the booklet, A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics, contains some interesting thoughts on the native sense of Scripture. It describes proper Lutheran Biblical studies as a balancing off of the native sense of the text on the one hand and the fact that all the promises of God find their "Yes" in Jesus Christ on the other hand.<sup>30</sup> With these two factors in mind, the introduction continues, the typological approach "demands disciplined investigation."<sup>31</sup> A further comment in this introduction will be allowed to speak for itself:

As we keep this connection between the Spirit and history firmly in mind, we see by faith that the historical character of the Scriptures is evidence of their inspiration; for the Spirit of God works in history through inspired words uttered at particular times and places for particular needs of the people of God. We see both the oneness of all divine words, as creations of the one Spirit, and the particular quality of each word spoken in the power of the Spirit at a certain point in history. We shall therefore avoid the danger of trying to make each word say everything.<sup>32</sup>

We continue with Fuerbringer's second explanatory note under his discussion of the sensus literalis unus:

Note 2. This principle holds good also in such cases where the one true sense is expressed less clearly, where the expounder may not be able to give the intended sense with absolute certainty, and where also orthodox exegetes may voice various opinions (cruces interpretum).<sup>33</sup>

Among the crux passages listed by Fuerbringer is the infamous "Baptism

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<sup>30</sup>Richard Jungkuntz, ed., A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>33</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 12.



of the dead" verse (1 Cor. 15:29). As was stated earlier, the number of passages whose meaning remains in doubt can be counted on one hand when the interpreter applies Fuerbringer's whole extensive hermeneutical code of ethics, a code that extends to a host of individual passages. By admitting only to a very small number of crux passages, Fuerbringer comes close to recognizing tacitly that the church (his church) has standardized the interpretation of ninety-nine percent of Scripture by means of the church's long-standing doctrinal tradition. Luther fought this potential abuse in his church (a realized abuse in the Roman Catholic Church) by holding steadfastly to the right to private interpretation, a right in evidence in his translation of the Bible into the vernacular.

Explanatory notes three and four are quoted here together:

Note 3. No disagreement with this principle is implied in passages in which a certain word occurs only once, but which is to be referred to two or three words, in consequence of which a different meaning results from each relation.

Note 4. This principle does not exclude the fact that one and the same passage may be differently applied. This implies not a double sense of the words, but it permits the one sense to be applied to different persons, circumstances, and conditions.<sup>34</sup>

Both of these notes take contextual matters into consideration for determining the intended sense of words. They reflect the words "in any one place and in any one relation" found in Fuerbringer's phrasing of the sensus unus rule. His introduction of contextual matters at this point is indeed encouraging, but unfortunately he is inconsistent in following his own advice especially in the area of Messianic prophecy, where doctrinal matters are permitted to swallow up the native sense of

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

the text. In fact, Fuerbringer will soon be heard warning students about Messianic material that appears very suddenly in the Old Testament and that has nothing to do with its Old Testament context.

The "in any one place" qualification to the sensus unus is not backed up with any examples, but the point Fuerbringer is pressing seems clear: that double entendres or plays on words are not possible, because these figures involve assigning two meanings to one word in one occurrence of the word. Typological interpretations are also thereby eliminated-- thus, for example, the phrase "my son" in Hosea 11:1 must mean in this singular appearance either the nation of Israel or the Son of God, but not both. Since Matthew interprets this phrase for us, we must be careful to avoid the context of the phrase in Hosea. By contrast, the plays on words in Genesis 27, where there is a partitive  $\int \text{D}$  in verse twenty-eight ("some of the fatness") and a privative  $\int \text{D}$  in verse thirty-nine ("away from the fatness"), is acceptable because two occurrences of the  $\int \text{D}$  are involved. Needless to say, might one not ask: are not two occurrences of the phrase "my son" (Hos. 11:1 and Matt. 2:15) being discussed?

To explain the "in any one relation" qualifications to the sensus unus Fuerbringer produces the example of Joel 2:13, where the verb  $\text{Y7P}$  ("rend") means one thing when "your hearts" is the direct object, but something else when "your garments" is the object. Note four moves in a similar vein--Fuerbringer admits the possibility of one word in its one intended sense being applied to different targets. Again, we would ask for consistency and fairness: cannot also these exceptions be applied in the area of Messianic prophecy? It is not possible that the

singular sense of 'ָךָ in Hosea 11:1 is sufficiently broad in scope to include in its address both the immediate and remote contexts, both of which merge into the one Christ, the head of all history? Or, beyond that, does not a full examination of the Hosea context serve to build a greater understanding of the person and work of Matthew's Messiah? The Letter to the Hebrews, for example, would be virtually incomprehensible without a prior full appreciation of the Old Testament sacrifices. Although both Fuerbringer and Laetsch would answer the above questions in the negative, they have done a great service to typologists in at least one respect: they admit that there is a potential difference between the dictionary definition of a word ("my son" always means "my son") and a word's sensus, which includes the reality behind the word, a reality which encompasses historico-grammatical relationships. On the whole, Fuerbringer and Laetsch activate their severely restrictive interpretation of the sensus unus rule only when (they think) a doctrinal point on their predominant systematic agenda is in jeopardy.

Note 5. The so-called sensus mysticus or allegoricus of a passage is also to be considered as such an application. The allegorical sense is not a second sense of the words, but a second meaning of the contents of the words. Scripture alone can indicate where an allegory is to be accepted.<sup>35</sup>

As an acceptable example of allegory Fuerbringer lists Galatians 4:21-31, where the word ἀλλεγορέω is used. George Thomas penciled in at this point in the booklet the threefold sense of Origen to supplement the medieval fourfold sense (literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical), which Fuerbringer includes in the text.

It would be interesting to be able to go back in time and to

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

hear Fuerbringer's classroom comments on this note, because the text of his book as it stands appears to speak quite favorably and positively about allegory. This is surprising at first, but additional reflection does much to ease the initial shock. Allegory is, after all, "spiritual" truth manifested in physical, earthly phenomena, and a purely rectilinear approach to Messianic prophecy (of "divine origin") can become a specialized, Christological variety of this broader school of thought. Since practitioners of a purely rectilinear approach lift "divine" prophecy out of the realm of human history, they erect for themselves a bilevel world-view which makes them more prone to allegorizing than anyone else. Quite often the pure rectilinear approach becomes more and more pronouncedly allegorical as it moves farther and farther afield into the context of its perceived rectilinear prophecies. The problem is: once a rectilinear verse is identified, just how far into the context does the Messianic material extend? Where does the prophecy, dropped into human history from an external source, begin and where does it end? The use of allegory does much to extend the Messianic material far beyond what might appear possible at first. Consider, for example, how Theodore Laetsch sees every verse of Zechariah 9-14 as being messianic.<sup>36</sup> In this discussion Laetsch often goes beyond the surface meanings of words to postulate a more spiritual meaning. It is curious how the context is sometimes stretched to the breaking point by allegorization in the case of some passages; but on the other hand, when the context of a passage simply cannot be forced to conform to the messianic image even by the most astute allegorist, then

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<sup>36</sup>Theodore Laetsch, The Minor Prophets (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 449-506.

the context is totally ignored, and the context-less messianic morsel is turned into a "timeless" Messianic principle or truth.

Fuerbringer's mention of Origen introduces another very important point. Strangely enough, a Bible interpreter is often told by Fuerbringer to ignore the context of a Biblical verse under the auspices of a rule, the rigid interpretation of which ignores the context in which the rule itself was originally spoken. See, for examples, his treatment of Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 2:12, 13.<sup>36a</sup> In its first context the sensus unus (rule) spoke against the manifest enemy of the Reformation, namely, the multifold sense of Origen, along with his disciples in Reformation times who repeatedly used and abused Origen's technique in service of their own anti-Reformation theological agenda. Against Roman Catholic theologians, who repeatedly tried to foster Roman dogma with Scriptural interpretations wherein the interpreter was heard to say, "It may seem that the text says . . . but what it really says is . . .," Lutheran theologians persistently maintained that the "plain and natural meaning of the words" always pointed to the Gospel of God's grace. This Christological goal for the sensus unus dictum is also seen clearly on another front, namely, when the Real Presence was urged by pointing to the simple, singular meaning of the Words of Institution.<sup>37</sup> In practice the sensus unus rule was the practical expression of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, the teaching that the Scriptures are sufficiently clear to point to Jesus Christ. In summation, it was in oppo-

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<sup>36a</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup>Ralph Bohlmann, "Biblical Interpretation in the Confessions," in Aspects of Biblical Hermeneutics (St. Louis: Concordia Theological Monthly, 1966), p. 30.

sition to the exegesis of Origen that the sensus unus dictum was invoked with the goal in mind of safeguarding the pursuit of Christology in the Scriptures (in whatever form it may take) and of guarding against doctetic interpretations which remove Biblical truth, and even Christ himself, from the realm of human history. When one reads in Luther of how he found Christ in, with, and under a myriad of figures of speech, it becomes clear that the sensus unus dictum was never intended to be a rule that addressed the bald matters of language and grammar, not at least in the particularistic way that the rule was used by Fuerbringer and Laetsch.

In the circle that your present author traverses a form of the following question is often heard: is not the typological approach a mere allegorizing, a turning of accidental correspondences and similarities into vague Messianic symbols? Two answers might be marshalled at this point. First, whereas allegory intuits physical representations of fleshless ideals, typology resists bilevel Platonism and sees purposeful connections between points on only one level, God-directed history. Both history and the truths derived from it are as flesh-filled as the Incarnation itself. Secondly, similarities between the Old Testament and the New Testament are indeed "accidental" only if Old Testament history was completely out of God's control. But typologists, assuming that God is in charge of all history and acting within that history under the driving force of a singular, consistent, gracious disposition, are able to see in the Old Testament divinely planned, efficacious models which point dynamically toward the Son of God as the end and goal of all history. "Static" definitions of individual words may vary between the testaments, but the same dynamic is at work, a dynamic which

can be revealed in whatever form God himself wants to reveal it. God's gracious thoughts, his gracious words, and his gracious actions throughout history together constitute one gracious and dynamic whole. Along the very same contours as the earthly ministry of Christ, God the Father has always possessed what might be called "integrity of communication," where all his thoughts, word, and actions consistently match one another and communicate the very same thing.

To conclude the subject of allegory, a helpful though as yet unpublished article has been written by Glen Zweck of Westfield House in Cambridge, England.<sup>38</sup> He likens a Biblical type to a simile and an allegorical symbol to a metaphor. A simile, he says, denotes something real and actual, and it urges a formal comparison of the reality within the simile to a reality beyond it in order to impress the reader with a similarity. A metaphor, on the other hand, has no connection with historical reality; instead, the reader must automatically see in the metaphor a fictitious symbol of some other reality. Thus, for example, the bronze serpent in the wilderness is a type: it is a real, effective event and can stand on its own, but at the same time that Old Testament event invites a comparison to another real, effective event, the lifting up of Christ upon the cross. However, the statement that Israel is a "vine" is metaphorical: not being literally and actually true, we must look elsewhere for the implied reality of the statement. The upshot of the article is clear: the rectilinear approach to Messianic prophecy, or more accurately the purely rectilinear approach, has all the marks of allegory, but a type participates in the reality and dynamic of that

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<sup>38</sup>Glen Zweck, "New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament: Typology versus Allegory" (Unpublished, 1986), p. 1-12.

toward which it points. And, there is normally an escalation or transcending of the type by the antitype. The difference between "type" and "symbol" has already been observed, and more will be seen later regarding the ramifications for Old Testament interpretation. Is the Gospel real and active in the Old Testament, or is the Gospel reality only promised there by way of unreal, ineffective metaphors? More bluntly, is the Old Testament the working out of the Gospel dynamic, or is it, as Theodore Laetsch puts it, the "dispensation of the law?"<sup>39</sup> As helpful as Zweck's article is, it could be maintained that the article moves the debate to a different plane by merely using different terminology that will ultimately sway no one to his opinion.

Paragraphs twenty-three and twenty-four, which conclude Fuerbringer's discussion of the sensus unus, are quoted here together:

23. Unless there are cogent reasons to the contrary, the exegete must take it for granted that the author has used his words according to their real meaning, and that he wishes to have them so understood.

24. In establishing the sensus literalis, it may be necessary to abandon the sensus literarum because of the usus loquendi generalis or the usus specialis, or on account of the context, or on the presumption that the author surely would not have contradicted himself, or, finally, because of an "article of faith."<sup>40</sup>

Many of the factors introduced in these paragraphs will be discussed in succeeding sections; the usi generales et speciales have been previously treated. There are, however, two important issues that need to be addressed at this point.

These two paragraphs provide for us a glimpse at what is for the

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<sup>39</sup>Theodore Laetsch, (II Corinthians 4:3-6," Concordia Theological Monthly (1936): 30.

<sup>40</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 13.



Fuerbringer-Laetsch school the working model for the process or mechanics involved in the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures. Although Fuerbringer would theoretically allow room for "unwitting prophecies" on the part of the human spokesman, in actual practice Fuerbringer generally assumes that the author knew the full scope and import of everything he said (along with the prophet's audience as well.) In speaking of the "one intended sense," the question must always be asked: just whose intentions are we talking about? For Fuerbringer the answer is almost always the same: in a given passage the intention of God himself and the intention of his human instrument are identical. Beyond pointing to a mechanical, dictation theory for the process of inspiration, a theological concern is undoubtedly at work here. There appears to be a fear that, by removing from the prophets' mouths prophecies which bear the stamp of "unmistakable" regarding their Messianic thrust, the interpreter is also removing from the ears and the hearts of the Old Testament audiences their Messianic faith. Worse than that, if a prophet was unaware of the Messianic content of his words, there remains the grim possibility that the Inspirer himself (if he exists at all) had no Messianic intent in mind either. The door is hence left ajar for the denial of Messianic prophecy or for the denial of predictive prophecy altogether. Of course, no such inevitable denial is necessitated merely by posing the question of an author's intention or level of awareness; one's "findings" here depend upon one's presuppositions. But for Fuerbringer his highly systematical res tends to stop our mouths before the question of author awareness can ever be posed. To charge that the human author did not know what he was saying is

equivalent, in Fuerbringer's opinion, to charging the Holy Spirit himself with a similar ignorance.

There is another factor that makes the whole question of author intent somewhat irrelevant for both rectilinear and typological prophecy--the recognition of the Gospel, Christological res as being far more than the sum total of individual definitions, around which are built a whole catalog of doctrinal propositions. The res is a dynamic, a God-worked, purposeful, active, and effectual force that sweeps uniformly through both testaments, giving shape or a res-sensus, not only to individual vocables, but to historical events, personages, and institutions as well. With such a dynamic at work, the only thing that ultimately matters is that God himself knew what he was doing and saying, regardless of what lexicons were at the disposal of the Biblical authors.

Along with the above recognition comes also the realization that God, who knows the whole sweep of history, can "charge with the future"<sup>41</sup> events in the historical present. Fuerbringer's use of the sensus unus rule, by creating a false either-or alternative at the level of individual words, tends to neutralize the Gospel dynamic as it moves through history toward its ultimate goal. There is no possibility of a realized eschatology or prolepsis, where the dynamic is at work "even now, but not yet" as it presses toward its ultimate fulfillment; rather, for Fuerbringer a Scriptural verse addresses either the "even now" or the

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<sup>41</sup>Martin Franzmann, "The Hermeneutics of Fulfillment: Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23," found in A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics (Richard Jungkuntz, ed.), Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969, p. 19.

"not yet" but never both at the same time. The net result of this false alternative is a form of dispensationalism or millennialism that places any and all "even now" material into the "not yet" category: if an Old Testament passage talks about the future coming of Christ, then it cannot be talking about the contemporary scene. Since there can be no forgiveness apart from Jesus Christ, then the Old Covenant must have been a covenant of law. But how then were any people saved in Old Testament times? This is a quandary from which neither Fuerbringer nor Laetsch completely extricate themselves.

Leaving for the moment the sensus unus behind, Fuerbringer addresses the context of a passage in paragraph twenty-five:

We may speak of a close or more distant context, as well as of a context preceding or following a particular passage of Scripture.<sup>42</sup> Chapter and verse divisions, Fuerbringer warns, are not a proper judge of context. To this George Thomas adds in his notes a brief historical sketch of such divisions beginning with Stephen Langdon. Fuerbringer also states that the immediate context is more important than the remote context of "indirect relation." At no place in the booklet does he refer to the possible "telescopic vision" of a prophet, where contemporary events, the first coming of Christ, and his second coming nestle up to each other with no intervening space. Naturally, this paragraph is virtually cancelled in the case of Fuerbringer's rectilinear prophecies, where the context and any word definitions related to the context must be completely ignored. It seems clear that for Fuerbringer the "indirect" context is to be defined as the type-antitype relationship as opposed to "direct" (rectilinear) prophecy.

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<sup>42</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 13.

Paragraphs twenty-six and twenty-seven, both dealing with contextual matters, are quoted together:

26. Every exposition of a word or of an entire passage must agree with the context.

27. In considering the context, it is necessary to give careful attention to the rules of grammar, that is to say, to the manner in which words are connected with, or related to, each other. No interpretation is to be accepted which does not agree with the established rules of grammar.<sup>43</sup>

To explain paragraph twenty-six, George Thomas lists Colossians 2:21, where the prohibitions "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch" are clearly in reference to Old Testament ceremonial legislation. In three explanatory notes Fuerbringer stresses the closest grammatical connections, the use of Greek particles, and various methods whereby the author emphasizes a certain thought. It is good to hear Fuerbringer mentioning contextual matters; especially the immediate context, although sometimes the positing of rectilinear prophecies may be an overriding consideration due to their sudden appearance in Old Testament contexts.

Fuerbringer moves beyond the immediate context in paragraph twenty-eight:

The complete agreement of Scripture with itself must be accepted a priori as a basis in its interpretation. This claim must under no circumstances be surrendered, because the divine origin of the Scriptures makes impossible any inconsistency of thought or speech, any contradiction, or even the smallest error. Another point that must not be lost sight of in this connection is the fact that the Scriptures would not be suited to be the source and rule of all doctrine if we could not a priori assume their inerrancy and perfect harmony.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

An explanatory note beneath this paragraph mentions seeming contradictions and how to resolve them or live with them. This quote is of historical value, for it shows that the term inerrancy was already in vogue as far back as 1912 in synodical circles, although the term goes back considerably further than that.

In this paragraph Fuerbringer recognizes the full hermeneutical circle between the twin points of the verba and the res. To be sure, Scripture is to be the source of all doctrine, but doctrine in turn informs the verba. Which direction on the hermeneutical circle gets the most attention? Again, it is a matter of emphasis. In spite of the fact that this section has the Scriptures as its overt subject matter, Fuerbringer once more stresses the res-to-verba direction on the circle in somewhat covert fashion.

The announced subject of the paragraph is, of course, the Scriptures: having been inspired by one divine author, it is impossible for the Scriptures to contradict themselves. But at two points within the paragraph Fuerbringer attaches a priori statements about the Scriptures which must be upheld before the student can begin to look seriously at the Scriptures in the first place (although the a priori statements themselves can be said to be derived from the Bible): it must be maintained a priori that the Scriptures are in "complete agreement" with themselves and that they possess "inerrancy and complete harmony." There can be no argument with what Fuerbringer is saying here, since an interpreter ought not to arrive at interpretations which nullify one another. The Scriptures, after all, are comprised of one theology, not a collection of theologies. However, due care needs to be exercised,

lest the inherited res of the individual interpreter be permitted to provide all too facile solutions which spare him his own wrestlings with the text.

The difference in emphasis (again, it is a matter only of that) is reflected in Fuerbringer's phrase "source and rule." Here Fuerbringer echoes that standard Lutheran tenet that "the Scriptures are the source and norm of all doctrine." It would appear that the verba-to-res school devotes most of its energy to the source-role of the Scriptures: they are the fundamental source, the wellspring of any cognitive statements about God, which must be examined before any other word is heard. On the other hand, the res-to-verba school is more concerned with the rule/norm aspect of the Scriptural role: the Scriptures are the measuring stick for assessing whether or not our long-held dogma has been correct all along. The former emphasis tempts the exegete to imagine a purely tabula rasa approach to the Scriptures in an effort to allow them to "speak on their own terms;" but the latter emphasis tempts the interpreter in another direction, that is, to conform the bald verba to a systematic image that is already embedded and firmly in place. The former school is always checking to see that its confessions are honest;<sup>45</sup> the latter school is more inclined toward proof-texting, assuming for the most part the impeccability of its confession.

By consistently pressing for the "right of private interpretation" the Reformation is seen to highlight the verba-to-res direction.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Horace Hummel, "The Outside Limits of Confessionalism in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation," The Springfielder 35 (1971): 109.

<sup>46</sup>F. W. Bente, Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p. 62-3.

But with the establishment of the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school the opposite direction came to be pressed. This is seen particularly clearly in Fuerbringer's judgment (howbeit a positive judgment) that he declares upon the Scriptures: they are "suited," he says to their doctrinal role in the church. A verba-to-res devotee would probably be uncomfortable at such a decree. Does not the burden of suitability fall to man's words about God rather than to God's Word to man?

It is difficult to tell what Fuerbringer intended to say when he denies to the Scriptures any inconsistency of "speech." Perhaps, in moving beyond the anticipated confession of a thought (content)-consistency, Fuerbringer is trying to safeguard his vocable-based exegetical method with its termini technici of uniform definition. The idea expressed here appears to be: in view of the whole chorus of human instruments at work in the production of the Scriptures, a vast variety of human speech patterns are possible; nevertheless, there is still a "holy language," a speech pattern of "divine origin," which at different points overshadows or overrides the factor of human multiplicity. In fact, and particularly in the area of Messianic prophecy, it may be necessary to discount what is apparently being said on the surface, at the tainted "human" level, in order to get at the "real," "divine" sensus that is above and beyond it. This dissertation has often maintained that the rectilinear method is prone to allegorizing.

Paragraph twenty-nine continues Fuerbringer's treatment of Scripture's agreement with itself:

The inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures carries with it absolute assurance of the fact that all passages from both the Old and New

Testament which deal with the same matter, and to the extent in which they treat of the same matter, must be considered as being in full agreement with one another--analogia (the correct relation, agreement) Scripturae, parallelismus realis. Any exposition of a passage, therefore, which does not agree with all its parallels is untenable.<sup>47</sup>

Along with this paragraph it will be helpful to quote two attached explanatory notes:

Note 1. a distinction is to made between parallelismus verbalis and realis. A verbal parallelism is said to exist between two or more passages if the identical expressions occur either in the same or in a different sense. A real parallelism is said to exist if two or more passages of Scripture treat of the same matter either in identical or in different terms or words.

Note 2. This analogia Scripturae is founded upon the fact, previously stated, that the Holy Ghost, who is the Author of the whole Bible, can neither err nor contradict Himself. For this same reason also this rule holds true, that one can show proof, or argue, from a real parallelism. Parallelismus realis est argumentivus. It should, however, be noted that the cross-references to parallel passages as we find them in our Bible editions are not always reliable.<sup>48</sup>

Under note two student George Thomas paraphrases the Latin sentence: "A real parallelism furnishes us an argument or proof." This paragraph has been set up by Fuerbringer's mention of the Scriptures' singular "divine origin" in the previous paragraph, and also introduced here is the following paragraph, which enjoins interpreting dark passages in the light of clear ones.

This paragraph constitutes somewhat of a breakthrough, for by distinguishing between verbal and real parallelism Fuerbringer at least begins to acknowledge the difference between words as such and the doctrinal realities behind the words. Although both kinds of parallelisms are said to cross testamental lines, Fuerbringer offers only one

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<sup>47</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.



example that involves both testaments: in John 12:41 the evangelist recounts how Isaiah saw the glory of God, an event originally narrated in Isaiah 6:1. It is also very interesting that at a later point Fuerbringer will classify the prophecy-fulfillment relationship as being a real parallelism; ordinarily a rectilinear advocate prefers to stress how a word from the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New, while typologists like to emphasize that the New Testament "quotes" events, and not necessarily words, from the Old.<sup>49</sup> But lest we think that Fuerbringer is opening the door to typology, it would appear that he is saying: the prophecy-fulfillment relationship is truly real, as opposed to being lost in a dreamworld of imagined types and antitypes. Also, and as is seen from the above example from Isaiah, parallelisms are viewed as connections between two real entities; according to Fuerbringer's working definition of typology, a typological relationship is nothing more than a loose connection between a New Testament reality and an Old Testament symbolical illustration of a reality.

The vague associations intuited by typologists do not provide the "absolute assurance" necessary for the formation of doctrine. If no such guarantees can be given, then the Scriptures themselves would not be "suited" for their role as the "source and rule of all doctrine" (see Fuerbringer's paragraph 28.) As Fuerbringer himself says, only real parallels "can provide us an argument or proof."

In the final analysis what really counts for Fuerbringer, the concluding item on his program, is the proof-texting of convenient doctrinal formulations. The res-to-verba direction demands conclusive

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<sup>49</sup>Walter Roehrs, "The Typological Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," Concordia Journal 10 (1984): 205.

arguments to give assurance on points that one's church has long maintained, not just Biblical indications of what has been taught. In order to trap doctrinal enemies in an inescapable corner, the vocable must ultimately triumph over the somewhat slippery reality behind it, if, that is, we are going to be able to eliminate all doctrinal possibilities save one in scientific, syllogistic fashion. However, even though the Scriptures themselves may from time to time teach doctrinal realities by way of a variety of terms, systematics textbooks need to be written, and in these volumes decisions need to be made regarding which terms will be the most workable. Sometimes the systematician will have to opt for a term that is not even found in Scripture, such as the word "Trinity;" but if a Scriptural term is to be used for a point of doctrine, Fuerbringer's view of the Old Testament requires that the New Testament provide the lion's share of doctrinal terms. After all, New Testament terms capture the reality of the Gospel res, but the Old Testament furnishes only symbols and metaphors of the Gospel reality. According to the dictates of precision and clarity, it is felt that New Testament words, which capture or stop the action on Gospel realities, are to be preferred over the broad historical sweeps of the Old Testament, movements which are viewed as being parabolic of reality.<sup>50</sup>

These above thoughts lead directly into paragraph thirty:

This analogia Scripturae, however, does not imply that the Scriptures speak in the same and complete way of a certain matter in

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<sup>50</sup>Regarding the teaching of the Christian faith a tension is in evidence within Missouri Synod circles in the Concordia Catechism Series. The book, When God Chose Man, moves in a verba-to-res direction by inserting catechetical material after the telling of a Bible story. The second book, This is the Christian Faith, begins with catechetical material and concludes each section with prooftexts, thereby moving in the opposite direction.

all passages treating of this matter. In view of this fact the general rule results that we must consider the less clear or plain passages in the light of the clearer passages, which method of procedure must never be reversed. Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur. All doctrines of faith and all rules of life are revealed in clear terms.<sup>51</sup>

The two accompanying notes are particularly revealing:

Note 1. In accordance with this general rule we must expound the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, the New Testament being the clearer portion of Holy Writ.

Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet,  
Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet.

Note 2. In like manner figurative passages or metaphorical expressions touching upon a certain matter must be expounded in the light of such passages as speak of the same matter plainly and in proper terms.<sup>52</sup>

In this paragraph Fuerbringer asserts the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture along with the practical dictum, "Scripture is its own best interpreter," as a logical outcome flowing from it. While naturally both of these tenets are true, there are potentially serious problems with the manner in which Fuerbringer presents them.

The key problem is found in his bald statement that the New Testament is the "clearer portion of Holy Writ." If this statement is categorically true, then the question immediately follows: "Why should we trouble our laypeople, with whom our moments are so precious, by spending time going through with them the "dark side" of Holy Writ, when our time with them could be so much more profitably used by discussing the "clear portion?" The Lutheran Hymnal, a product of the Fuerbringer-Laetsch age, left the Old Testament lesson as optional in the worship service, a decision which was traditional, but probably did not help to

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<sup>51</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 15-6.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

keep the Old Testament in the forefront of peoples' attention.<sup>53</sup>

It is true that there is an accumulation of revealed knowledge evident as the Bible reader moves through the history of God's dealings with his people and thus also as the reader moves (chronologically) through the pages of Scripture. It is equally true that the New Testament is the final word, the fulfillment, and the culmination of revelation in the person of Christ the Word. But none of these factors have a direct bearing on the clarity, as such, of the Scriptures. The very passages which Fuerbringer marshals to prove the clarity of the Scriptures are nothing other than the New Testament's glowing testimony about the Old Testament. The Gospel dynamic is clearly at work in every page of the Old Testament, unless its reader chooses for external reasons to allow the "veil" to remain unlifted. More than that, the Old Testament provides revealed information that is assumed, but not spelled out, by its epilog, the New Testament. The saying is certainly true, that the listener can determine how much the homilician knows about the Old Testament by listening to his preaching on the New Testament! Indeed, the Bible student is "missing something" of revealed information and theological content if he ignores the Old Testament.

To move the presentation forward, the question is posed: for Fuerbringer what exactly is it that makes the New Testament clearer than the Old? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Fuerbringer has struck a strange parallelism of his own between notes one and two. That is to say, merging the two notes into one, he can be heard saying that the figurative and metaphorical Old Testament is less clear than the plain,

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<sup>53</sup>The Lutheran Hymnal (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), p. 54-94.

clear terms of the New. (Even if the parallelism perceived does not hold up, the underlying thought is still present in this booklet.) Fuerbringer's view of the Old Testament as symbol or metaphor, bereft of Gospel realities or one step removed from them, has often been maintained in this paper. It has also been pointed out that one's theological presuppositions help to determine in the first place which passages are clear and which are dark. To put all these things together, the unqualified assertion that the Old Testament is the less clear portion of Holy Writ is a systematical, and in a certain way philosophical, conclusion based upon presuppositions never specifically sanctioned in any place, including the Scriptures themselves.

The forceful role of one's presuppositions is especially apparent in Fuerbringer's use of the word "proper" in note two. If it be true that the Scriptures present doctrine sometimes in proper terms, then the counterpart of this statement must also be true, namely, that sometimes God himself was revealed to man improperly by his Spirit. Walter Roehrs well admonishes his readers in his article on typology not to adjudge one form of revelation as superior or inferior to another.<sup>54</sup> Secondly, presuppositions make their presence felt in this paragraph with Fuerbringer's repeated reference to doctrinal "matters." Systematic theology sets up lines of demarcation for the purpose of identifying one doctrinal "matter" in the presence of many others. However, and especially in the case of the Old Testament, problems develop with the utilization of the Scriptures for prooftexting one's

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<sup>54</sup>Roehrs, "The Typological Use," p. 214-5.

doctrine in those areas of Scripture that divide the body of doctrine along lines different from one's systematic textbooks.

Paragraph thirty-one focuses in on those portions of Holy Writ that are the clearest of all:

Every doctrine of Holy Scripture is set forth at some place or other very clearly, in proper terms, as the main theme of the discourse (sedes doctrinae, loci classici, dicta probantia). In all such cases the principles laid down in paragraph 30 apply. All passages dealing with a certain doctrine are to be understood and expounded according to the sedes doctrinae.<sup>55</sup>

In the margin George Thomas identifies the sedes doctrinae with the phrase "proof texts." It would seem that, if all the principles of paragraph thirty are to be applied in this paragraph, all the cautions about paragraph thirty should be heard again as well. Once more the word "proper" makes an appearance. Perhaps the more horrifying aspects of the word can be avoided if we see Fuerbringer's sensus literalis as being in the sense of the Latin proprium, that some Scriptural terms belong to, or are the property of, particular points of doctrine. But one unsettling aspect remains: the role of presuppositions is not eliminated entirely, because at the outset the interpreter must have identified an individual doctrinal "matter" before he can attach a Scriptural proprium to it.

The multiplication of sedes doctrinae on the part of the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school has already been noted. Of course, for reasons that should be obvious by now, the Old Testament is bound to suffer from lack of use in this area, especially in those areas where

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<sup>55</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 16.

historical narrative abounds and theological comment is minimal.<sup>56</sup>

The res-to-verba school faces a particularly strong temptation to formulate a "canon within a canon" for two reasons: not only does the identification of a doctrinal "matter" guide the school in the selection of sedes, but also a potent res-to-verba influence can create artificial sedes by forcing too much doctrinal content into a passage. For example, should the "Aaronic Benediction" of Numbers 6 be considered a sedes for the doctrine of the Trinity?

Paragraph thirty-two, which continues the discussion of verbal and real parallels, is here quoted along with accompanying notes:

Special care should be exercised by the exegete lest he make improper use of a verbal parallelism, or regard a passage as a true parallelism where this is not the case.

Note 1. An improper use of verbal parallelism is made when the Bible student accepts a certain word in one passage in the same sense which it has in some other passage. The context must always be carefully noted whenever parallel passages are to be considered.

Note 2. Simply because of the recurrence of identical or similar sentences two passages cannot with certainty be termed a parallelismus realis.

Note 3. It is especially important that we distinguish between real and seeming parallel passages in the exposition of shorter historical accounts, and in harmonizing them with passages that are, or are not, parallel.

Note 4. A parallelismus realis can be safely established only when Scripture itself testifies to that effect. For this reason it cannot be fully ascertained in some instances whether we have a real parallelism or not.<sup>57</sup>

As it stands this rule and its attached explanations are potentially neutral in the dialog between the two schools in Missouri. In fact it is encouraging to see a distinction made between word similarities and

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<sup>56</sup>The old synodical catechism does recognize to a certain extent the revelatory character of history when occasionally it lists Biblical "narratives" beneath its prooftexts for a doctrinal point.

<sup>57</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 16.

the realities toward which they point as well as to see the reintroduction of the context factor in interpretation. However, in Fuerbringer's implementation of the rule it ceases to be neutral. It appears that in Fuerbringer's gameplan this rule is intended to lead the reader toward a culmination in paragraph thirty-three, where prophecy-fulfillment (by his rectilinear definition) is listed as a real parallelism, and in Fuerbringer's extensive discussion in paragraph thirty-four, where the typological relationship will be pointedly lowered in status.

The message of note one is clear and can be of great service to the exegete. But in your present author's assessment there is something lacking in Fuerbringer's Biblical examples, which are presumably negative ones. In one example Galatians 3:16 and 3:29 are compared--in the first verse the phrase "Abraham's offspring" is to be interpreted as the singular Christ, while in the second verse the same phrase is intended to mean the members of his church in the plural. Fuerbringer is here implementing his own rule, that a word can have only one intended sense in any one location (paragraph 22). As far as surface meanings are concerned, naturally Fuerbringer is correct, but by establishing a rigid, mechanical either-or alternative under the auspices of the sensus unus dictum (as Fuerbringer defines and implements it,) Fuerbringer would gloss over in simplistic, cut-and-dried fashion some important theology that lies below the surface of bare dictionary definitions, namely, the identification of Christ the head with his body the Church and the ramifications that flow from it. Here is a case where a simplistic alternativism robs the interpreter of theological depth, a phenomenon that occurs in the interest of theology. This "deprivation of the alterna-



tive" is somewhat akin to a phenomenon in higher criticism, where any theological wrestling with twin Biblical statements is entirely eliminated simply by concluding that two different theologies are being discussed.

The second Biblical illustration of note one is even more mystifying. The word "Spirit" in Isaiah 44:3 ("I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants") is thought to mean something different from the same word in John 3:5 ("Unless one is born of water and the Spirit . . ."). It is impossible to say for sure exactly what Fuerbringer had in mind. If calculated guesses are permitted, he probably sees the Isaiah passage as having an Old Testament referent and the verse in John as referring to the New Testament kingdom of God.

Without belaboring the point, the Scriptural examples in notes two and three suffer from a similar over-simplicity. We press on to note four, where Fuerbringer's overall agenda becomes even more apparent. He supplies just one Scriptural example of his point, and the example itself is rather noncontroversial: he discusses the four Gospel accounts of a woman's anointing Jesus with oil and the possibilities of parallel accounts as opposed to narrations of separate events. In order to avoid a premature treatment of succeeding paragraphs, suffice it to say that to Fuerbringer typological relationships cannot be substantiated as real parallels.

The next two paragraphs clarify for us Fuerbringer's view of prophecy-fulfillment as well as the larger issue of the relationship between the testaments. Beyond that, these paragraphs are crucial to our understanding of Theodore Laetsch and his modus operandi in everything

he wrote. It would not be too far afield to suggest that Fuerbringer wrote this booklet with these items immediately below in his mind and that Laetsch, in the presence of other reputable commentaries, published his works on Jeremiah and the Minor Prophets under a similar motivation.

Paragraph thirty-three is introductory to the issue at stake:

A parallelismus realis indubitably exists in Holy Writ 1) between a parable and its explanation; 2) between a historical account and a reference made to it; 3) between a prophecy and an account of its fulfilment (sic); 4) between a quotation and the passage quoted.<sup>58</sup>

The first two kinds of real parallels are obvious enough as are the Biblical examples given for them. The third kind is treated in the next paragraph, and paragraph thirty-five amply covers the fourth. The word "indubitably" signals the need for "absolute assurance" required for the proper proof-texting of doctrine. Fuerbringer has already defined a parallelism as passages that "treat of the same matter" (paragraph 29), but as yet unanswered is the question: is a parallel passage identical in content to its mate, or can the parallel passage provide new information (on the same subject), that is not found in its mate, and thus provide a whole new perspective? The possibility suggested in the second member of this question would freely allow for a type-antitype connection, where there is a movement toward a culmination or an "escalation" as Zweck puts it.<sup>59</sup> However, if parallel passages are identical in content to each other, then the purely rectilinear approach to Messianic prophecy must prevail. The precise problem with a purely rectilinear view is that it sees a prophecy and its fulfillment as "parallels" (according to the narrower definition) in the first place.

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>59</sup>Zweck, "Typology versus Allegory," p. 6.

Then, indeed, the prophecy cannot and must not say one iota more or less than its New Testament fulfillment, even if the interpreter is thereby required to "narrow down" the Old Testament prophecy by whittling away at its original context.

Paragraph thirty-four homes in on the issue of prophecy and fulfillment. Because of its importance, the main body of the paragraph will be quoted first, and then each of five subpoints will be cited individually afterwards:

There is a close connection between the Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment (sic) in the New Testament. This relation has been fixed by God Himself, and therefore no one has the right to change it or ignore it. The same relation exists also between the prophecies and the inspired account of their fulfillment. For this reason the Christian exegete must always keep in mind that the divine record of the fulfillment of the prophecies plainly shows how God's foreordained plan has been carried out, and that the account of such fulfillment clearly points the way in which he must understand and expound the prophecies.<sup>60</sup>

It is notable that Fuerbringer avoids the word "parallel(ism)" in favor of speaking about the "relation" between prophecy and fulfillment; perhaps he himself senses the difficulty with the first term. The first and third sentences may appear to be identical to each other, but they are not. The first sentence deals with Old Testament prophecies that are specifically quoted in the New; the third sentence talks about prophecies that are fulfilled content-wise in the New Testament.

Fuerbringer spells out what is for him the main issue at stake in the summary words "God's foreordained plan." He believes that God the Father, who knew in advance the coming of his Son and who planned accordingly, was able to predict the coming of his Son pointedly,

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<sup>60</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 17.

accurately, and verbally. This statement is certainly true for any believing exegete, but one wonders if the restricted rectilinear view of prophecy must be maintained in order to make such a confession.

Fuerbringer speaks of this restrictive view of prophecy in terms of the singular "way" in which prophecies are to be understood and expounded. For Scriptural examples, conspicuous by its presence at the top of the list is Hosea 11:1--"Out of Egypt have I called my son"--along with its New Testament counterpart, Matthew 2:15. The reader could probably fill in the rest of the list by himself: Jeremiah 31:15--Rachel weeping for her children (Matthew 2:17), Isaiah 11:1--the Messiah's origins in Nazareth (Matthew 2:23), Numbers 21:8,9--the serpent on the pole (John 3:14,15), Genesis 22:18--the offspring of Abraham (Galatians 3:16), and Psalm 41:9--the betrayer lifting his heel (John 13:18). Although Fuerbringer intends his list of passages to convey a uniform point, it strikes us that no two passages in the list can be handled exactly the same way even by a rectilinear advocate. For example, Fuerbringer would deny that Israel's exodus from Egypt was mentioned in Hosea 11:1, but surely he would admit that in Numbers 21:8,9 there is an actual reference to the bronze serpent in the wilderness. The only uniformity to the list is that there is messianic material in all of the Old Testament references, a fact that no one in the Missouri Synod would deny. For this reason the five subpoints are absolutely necessary (to sustain Fuerbringer's point of view.) These subpoints are introduced with the words: "Besides, the following rules must be observed:--"

Subpoint one reads:

In the exposition of a prophetic verse or any passage of the Old Testament it is imperative closely to search the New Testament for a

passage which is expressly recorded as the fulfilment of this particular prophecy. If the exegete finds its fulfilment thus recorded, then he need investigate no further, but may rest assured that he has obtained the absolutely correct sense of the passage and even the meaning of each particular word. The usual parallel references given in the common editions of the Bible are very helpful aids in this work; however, independent investigation should always be made.<sup>61</sup>

This subpoint captures in one breath the spirit of the purely rectilinear view. It will be seen that Laetsch echoes the same thoughts almost verbatim in his explication of individual Messianic prophecies. We notice how even the correct sense of individual words is determined by the New Testament quotation; this is especially noteworthy, because precisely at this point in the argumentation an indissoluble bond is formed between the purely rectilinear approach and the sensus unus dictum.

The Biblical examples given here are again predictable: the "Immanuel" passage in Isaiah 7 and the Bethlehem reference in Micah 5. We need "go no further:" the New Testament identifies for us the islands of Messianicity found in the Old Testament sea. But here we are compelled to ask: if the pursuit of Christology is the ultimate goal of Biblical studies, and if the New Testament pinpoints for us those parts of the Old Testament that are Christological, cannot then Christian Biblical studies be safely reduced to a study of the New Testament alone, since the truly meaningful parts of the Old Testament are reiterated in the New anyway? Perhaps we should "go no further" than the final one-fourth of the Scriptures.

The determining of the meaning of individual Old Testament words on the basis of New Testament quotations may appear to the logical mind

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

to be a quantum leap over several logical steps of argumentation. If we could look into the rectilinear mind at this point, we might be able to reduce the amount of talking past one another that goes on in discussions of prophecy in the Missouri Synod. The best answer to give is that the rectilinear "leap of faith" involves several factors that have been named in this paper: an atomistic interpretation of the sensus unus dictum, which places the rule at the level of pure linguistics; a corresponding view that individual vocables are the locus of revelation, not the grammatico-historical movements which are deemed as circumstantial to revelation; a highly systematized Christological res which wants to inform the Bible student of Christological material in a pointed, specific, and spelled-out way; a felt need to ignore Old Testament contexts in the fear that historical considerations might lead to a denial of predictive, Messianic prophecy; an apologetical goal against those who do discount such prophecies; a mechanical view of the doctrine of inspiration, which sees divine communication as possible only through vocabulary and which sees holy language of "divine origin" dropped down upon the historical plane rather than a message that the Spirit causes to flow and issue from history; a psychological need for a black-and-white certainty which logically eliminates all interpretive options but one; and finally, an undercurrent of thought that in the final analysis views the Old Testament as alien soil for Christology, both theologically and from the standpoint of a "spirit" versus matter dichotomy. We might add to this another factor that has at least been hinted at: the tendency of systematics to compartmentalize separate points of doctrine carries along with it the tendency to compartmentalize Biblical material

into isolated doctrinal "matters" and thereby to lose sight of the pervasiveness of the Christ-dynamic as it continuously flows through the whole of Scripture and its history.

Subpoint two moves on to those Messianic prophecies which, though not directly quoted in the New Testament, are fulfilled at least in terms of content:

In case no passage can be found in which a particular prophecy is expressly recorded as having been fulfilled, an investigation should be made to find out whether in a particular person or a particular event all the essential parts of the prophecy are found to be fulfilled. If this is the case, the exegete is justified in considering the two passages as being related to each other, especially if no other historical person or event shows all the details of the respective prophecy.<sup>62</sup>

For his Biblical example of this point Fuerbringer shows how the description of the Antichrist in Daniel matches with the descriptions found in 1 Timothy, 2 Thessalonians, and the Apocalypse; no Christological example is given.

The perception of a New Testament fulfillment by the notice of similarity of content is freely used by Laetsch and even stretched to the breaking point by way of allegorizing, where New Testament information is read into the surface meaning of Old Testament verses. Such Old and New Testament counterparts can be confidently proclaimed as being "connected" to each other and "indubitably" so in a rectilinear spirit. Here neither Fuerbringer nor Laetsch hesitate to "read" Biblical persons and events with great assuredness, but why, we ask, is not a typologist accorded the same luxury? There is an inequity here: a rectilinearist grants himself a great deal of confidence and assurance

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 17-8.

when he himself reads Biblical history, but simultaneously the same rectilinearist will say that a typologist is overconfident when he pursues the identical activity. What is allowed for the one school must be allowed for the other. If there is any difference at all between the two schools, there is a difference in the direction of the activity. The rectilinear school makes connections by reading primarily New Testament persons and events; the typological school makes similar connections by starting with the reading of Old Testament persons and events. If all sixty-six books are God's revelation to man and they record God's actions in history, the interpreter should be permitted to read Old Testament history with the same freedom that New Testament history is read. If all Biblical history is read to find its meaning and impact, the interpreter will be increasingly impressed with the continuity between the testaments, but the rectilinear school emphasizes discontinuity, and its disjointed interpretations of Old Testament verses often pay fitting homage to that discontinuity.

This element of discontinuity is also in evidence in subpoint three:

A prophecy pointing directly to the New Testament is found where reference is made in the Old Testament to the discontinuation of the Levitic form of worship and to the abolition of the Old Covenant; also where it says that many heathen will participate in the salvation of Israel; or where a glorious reconstruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah is announced.<sup>63</sup>

Again, the word "directly" is the term for "rectilinear" in the era of Fuerbringer and Laetsch. The reader will undoubtedly be struck by the arbitrariness with which Fuerbringer selected his three signals of rectilinear prophecies.

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.



Although Laetsch himself will furnish the bulk of the testimony regarding this subpoint, two words of summary can be spoken already here. First of all, there are easily recognizable differences between the Old and New Testaments in matters of external forms, such as in the worship forms, which are mentioned by Fuerbringer, or in the fact that the "two kingdoms" were originally merged into one kingdom through the Old Testament period. But for Fuerbringer the difference between the testaments is far more profound than just these considerations; the Old Testament (apart from the Christological islands perceived to be rec-tilinear prophecy) winds up being treated as something fundamentally different in theological substance. The Old Testament (Fuerbringer's phrase for that body of literature comprised of thirty-nine books) is spoken of as the old covenant (his phrase for the theology of those books.) The old covenant is viewed as being essentially a covenant of law. From the perspective of the modern Bible student, who is living in the "Gospel era," the Old Testament/covenant serves as one gigantic object lesson designed to show him that the way of the law is not the way to go. In response we must agree in part that the Old Testament does sometimes serve de facto in that capacity in view of Israel's subsequent unbelief and misconstrual of the Sinai covenant, but Fuerbringer seems to go still farther. He appears to view the Old Testament as an anti-law object lesson in its original intent: that is to say, the Old Covenant was doomed to fail, because God himself designed it to fail. God is thought to have built into the Old Covenant a "planned obsolescence" in order that the Gospel, whose native soil is the New Testament, might shine forth with greater glory. Fuerbringer and

Laetsch would probably object to this assessment, but nevertheless and at the very least, this is the tacit assumption implicit in their interpretation of the New Testament and in their evaluation of its theology.

The second item to be considered under subpoint three is Fuerbringer's three signs of the New Covenant. The announced target of this subpoint is chiliasm, presumably on the grounds that his three signs call for the termination of the old order rather than a revitalization of it. But Fuerbringer might be adjudged guilty of a chiliasm of his own in his treatment of the Old Testament. Traditional chiliasm robs Christians of present, "even now" blessings of salvation by promising Christians that someday they will have these blessings, namely, in the millennium; Fuerbringer does basically the same disservice to the Old Testament faithful. Notice the Gospel thrust of all of his four signs, and then observe what he says about them: whenever the interpreter stumbles upon these positive, Gospel phenomena in the pages of the Old Testament, he can be assured that he has discovered a rectilinear promise of what will happen in the New Testament era. By turning all Old Testament Gospel statements into promises and remote potentialities for a completely different age, Fuerbringer sterilizes the Old Testament of the Gospel reality and dynamic. After Fuerbringer's purging process is complete, the poor Old Testament believer has left in his hands a legal document, and we can only hope that the person living in the "dispensation of the law" might be able to crack the code of a few salvation-metaphors or happen upon an occasional word of divine origin, a rectilinear tidbit of a substance totally alien to his time.

The fourth subpoint has the potential of making the Gospel dynamic in the Old Testament even more precarious:

The prophets of the Old Testament often speak of the blessedness of Christ's kingdom, both the Kingdom of Grace and the Kingdom of glory in terms that seem to refer to temporal blessedness and earthly glory; but such statements are to be considered and expounded as relating to spiritual blessedness.<sup>64</sup>

Seen here under the category of Messianic prophecy is the previously mentioned tendency toward dualistic thinking, a posture that results in an over-spiritualizing of theology and an over-allegorizing of the verba. Again, the heavily material Old Testament is thought to require the most concentrated efforts to convert physical metaphors into the more "meaningful" realm of intangibles. Messianic prophecy is not exempt from such a conversion to the spiritual.

Gone is the wholistic view of salvation so indispensable to the study of Christ's miracles, sacramentology, and Old Testament itself. When the Messiah is seen as the bestower of a "spiritual blessedness" a salvage operation needs to be performed on the materially minded Messianic prophecies. What results is what might be called a "backdoor Christology": first, the spiritualizing interpreter deems irrelevant or beside the point the material aspects of the prophecy; secondly, there is perceived a need to put back into the prophecy the cognitive content that disappeared when the material aspects became irrelevant; thirdly, what went out the front door is reintroduced via the back door of allegory. The only problem is that this spiritualizing methodology never can put back into the prophecy as much as it took away.

The fifth subpoint zeroes in on the historically visible oppo-

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

ment of the rectilinear school. It appears that this destination has been in mind through the whole of paragraph thirty-four, or, for that matter, the entire booklet:

Messianic prophecies occurring very abruptly in historical narratives should not confuse the exegete and keep him from gaining the true intended sense. Another common error of exegetes with regard to Messianic prophecies must be avoided; he must insist that these prophecies may have only one meaning, not two or more. Direct Messianic interpretation over against the so-called typical interpretation.<sup>65</sup>

Student George Thomas penciled in a very interesting addendum which is here reproduced verbatim in the student's own shorthand form:

There are many passages that can be called typical passages (story of flood-1 Pet. 3:24 type of Bapt.) We assume a typical interpretation only when we have to. A typical interpret. weakens (Pr. 22:1)<sup>66</sup>

It is impossible to see what Proverbs 22:1 ("A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches") has to do with the comparative value of typology, unless we are called upon to extract a spiritual truth from a mundane example.

According to the rules for outlining this is truly a subpoint, but thematically it may as well have been the title for the whole booklet.

Fuerbringer does well to warn Bible students about possible confusion. We notice in the first sentence of his fifth subpoint the juxtaposition of what is "Messianic" and what is "historical," the one "matter" having nothing to do with the other. In Fuerbringer's approach Messianic material of divine origin can drop down from above and superimpose itself upon an historical narrative, territory alien to the

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

Messianic morsel; on the human side the Bible interpreter faces the corresponding task of extracting from the narrative what has superimposed itself upon it. Such abruptness on the part of the divine Author puts the interpreter on guard and leads him to suspend temporarily the hermeneutical rules about the consideration of a text's context. The rectilinear approach places the Messianic material into a time capsule: the Messianic material is sealed off from contaminating influences and then transported off into the future, into the new covenant era, where Christological realities have their proper place.

The mention of Christological realities brings to our attention the driving force behind Fuerbringer's devaluation of typology, a devaluation that takes place in spite of the New Testament's own use of typology. The rectilinear approach sets out to locate in the Old Testament Messianic material that is truly "real" as opposed to the typological approach, where (according to the rectilinearist's own definition of a "type") the interpreter only finds symbols and metaphors that are one step removed from reality. At this point one would be right to question the ranking of one of the Holy Spirit's methods above another and the speaking of a "weakening" of Messianic force in an inspired verse of Scripture.

Fuerbringer introduces four passages where his caution regarding contextual matters is supposed to be heard: Isaiah 7:14, Micah 2:12,13, 2 Samuel 7:12-16, and Psalm 22. In connection with the last two passages he issues a specific warning against typology. These passages bring up the question of Scriptural verification of a type-antitype relationship: are we "justified" (subpoint 2) in seeing such a relationship only in those places where the Scriptures themselves expressly identified it, or

do the Scriptures suggest to the interpreter an overall approach that can be utilized elsewhere? In view of the fact that subpoint two requires no express verifications for rectilinear relationships, a spirit of fair play would lead us to elect the second option.

Paragraph thirty-five brings to our attention the various ways in which the New Testament quotes the Old:

Regarding quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament, it must be overlooked that such quotations are by no means all reproduced verbatim; (here a few Biblical examples are given.) on the contrary, they are often rendered very freely and with great variation. Such modification in form, however, does not stand as an argument against the doctrine of verbal inspiration, but rather confirms it. The only correct explanation is that the Holy Spirit, who is the Author of the entire Holy Scriptures, quote from his own writings.<sup>67</sup>

In an extensive explanatory note Fuerbringer lists the various methods of quotation employed by the Spirit in the Scriptures. In summation Fuerbringer states within this note:

Time and again, however, the Holy Ghost has not bound himself to the wording of either the Septuagint or the original text, but has alluded in a free way to a passage of the Old Testament.<sup>68</sup>

The general gist of this paragraph and its accompanying note is that the Holy Spirit can do with his own words anything he pleases, even if that means quoting the Old Testament ad sensum, thereby giving Old Testament words a whole new meaning. It should be noted here that those with typological leanings do not see this freedom of the Spirit as damaging to the doctrines of inspiration or inerrancy either.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 18-9.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>69</sup>James Voelz, for example, in an unpublished paper entitled, "Exploratory Thoughts on Inerrancy and its Contours", does not see in the free quotations of Scripture any questioning of the doctrine of inerrancy.

An underlying emphasis in this paragraph is that the Holy Spirit and he alone can exercise such freedom. The implication is that typologists, by exercising a certain measure of interpretive freedom, are treading upon holy ground and overstepping their bounds. Although Fuerbringer's wordless warning ought not go completely unheeded, the methods of the Spirit do suggest to us that the relationship between the testaments is far more vibrant, and living than the mechanical, one-for-one relationship perceived by the rectilinear school. It could even be argued that, since the work of the Holy Spirit is an absolute requirement for proper Biblical interpretation, it is not too far-fetched to conclude that the Spirit might lead the interpreter in some cases to employ methods similar to the Spirit himself.

Fuerbringer moves on to a different topic in paragraph thirty-six:

The divine inspiration of the entire Bible, as a matter of course, implies that all parts of the Scriptures are in harmony with each other. An exposition, therefore, which does not agree with any doctrine clearly revealed in its sedibus doctrinae cannot be regarded as tenable. No exposition must contradict the so-called analogia fidei, that is, the "certain and clear passages of Scripture."<sup>70</sup>

This paragraph and the remaining ones are anticlimactic, being simply further explanations of what has been previously said. This being the case, and since our treatment of Fuerbringer has already reached considerable length, additional commentary will be held to a minimum, and only new items of interest will be quoted.

In paragraph thirty-six Fuerbringer re-emphasizes his doctrinal res and the sedes doctrinae which pertain to the res. The overly active

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<sup>70</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 19.

role of his expanded, systematized res as well as the (over)abundance of doctrinal sedes have already been amply recorded. If we can make just one connection with what Fuerbringer has previously stated, we can see how his emphasis on doctrinal sedes could lead to a devaluation of typology; doctrines can be framed only on the basis of "real" Biblical statements, never on the basis of typological illustrations or metaphors of reality.

In explaining this paragraph Fuerbringer appears to denounce the role of his own systematic theology when he says that an interpreter does not necessarily have to bear in mind a "harmonizing whole" of doctrine. However, this is not the case. He is simply saying that if an interpreter cannot fit a passage into his theological system, he should let the passage stand alongside his system as a separate sedes; it does not mean that he should alter his system.

In a second explanatory note under this paragraph the power and influence of the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle reaches climactic proportions: Fuerbringer admits that in view of an "expressed article of faith" it may be necessary to abandon the sensus literae in favor of a sensus literalis that is more appropriate to the article of faith. It is one thing to permit one's doctrinal stance to assist in the selecting of a possible option of interpretation over another option, but it is another thing to abandon all of the possible natural interpretations of the literae. If doctrinal concerns are given such a free reign, they can lead to an unchecked unleashing of "doctrinaire" interpretations. But another prospect, perhaps more serious and pervasive, also looms on the horizon: a total abandonment of



the sensus literae sets the stage for the "spiritualized" sensus so characteristic of allegory, where the interpreter is heard to say: "It may appear that the literae say one thing, but I say to you . . ." This prospect becomes a reality in one of Fuerbringer's examples used to illustrate his point, Isaiah 11:6-9. Fuerbringer would have us reduce this vivid picture of Paradise Restored, with its natural harmony, to a rather bland, generalized spiritual sensus of an intangible peace or serenity.

This process of generalizing the vivid, pointed, and explicit words of Scripture by continually relating the words to overarching doctrinal principles has the potential of curtailing an interpreter's exegetical work before it has actually begun. His "Eureka!" at having found the proper doctrinal category can reduce to secondary importance the verbal garb in which the doctrinal point is dressed. Such generalizing is the very pitfall that teachers of traditional homiletics urge their students to avoid; instead, the student is directed to find, only after a close examination of the text, a "central thought," which answers the question: what is the unique contribution of this pericope?

This generalizing will be evident in the writings of Theodore Laetsch. Oftentimes your present author found himself at least wanting to skim over some of the material in his commentaries. After analyzing this desire, it was found that there is a quality of sameness in the material. It appears that once Laetsch had identified the appropriate doctrinal "pew" for a pericope he tended to expound the passage in the same way and with the same terminology that he had used to expound all other Biblical passages which fit into the same pew, and the distinctiveness of the passage under immediate scrutiny tended to be lost.

Detected was a phenomenon similar to that found in the preacher whose sermons all sound alike, regardless of what text is presumably under discussion, at least insofar as he is treating texts that touch upon the same general point. Again, the plea is heard to let the text speak "on its own terms," but instead, the preacher, expounding more a doctrine as such rather than the text (and context) which sets forth the doctrine, tends to lose the terminology native to the text in a sea of standard systematic terms. These terms remain as fixed as the doctrinal "matter" which they label, and they tend to transcend not only the verbal variety of the Scriptures but also the historical considerations, which are "circumstantial" to the doctrinal truth. Thus, sermons inevitably get clad in a systematical garb of the same pattern, and from a distance the Scriptural cloth used for the garment becomes indiscernible.

In paragraph thirty-seven, Fuerbringer states simply that truths must be derived from Scripture only by drawing proper, logical conclusions about a passage (by "inference or deduction," as George Thomas adds.)<sup>71</sup> Such conclusions are reached as the interpreter successfully identifies the sensus literalis of a passage. Although the use of proper logic is self-evident, Fuerbringer's use of this statement is open to much debate.

It has been said that the Fuerbringer-Laetsch school employs very much of a vocabulary-bound exegetical method: it is individual words that are the locus of meaning, and as such they are the bearers of divine, doctrinal realities. It has also been mentioned that the res-to-verba school tends to take the next small step, namely, to equate

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

Scriptural words with the realities behind the words and thereby to fear that the use of alternate vocabulary might lead to the disappearance of doctrine. It is against this backdrop that we must see how Fuerbringer defines and uses the sensus literalis. In the paragraph under discussion he logically deduces or infers from the sensus literalis every manner of doctrinal point: "dogmatic, catechetical, homiletic, and other theological principles." In the final analysis, when all the exegetical work is finished, the sensus literalis for Fuerbringer turns out to be a theological principle after all.

Now, add to the scenario described in the above paragraph what was said earlier in this paper: it was pointed out that the verba-to-res school sees the sensus unus dictum as being primarily a theological rule, while the res-to-verba school wants to reduce the dictum to the level of linguistics. If, when all is said and done, Fuerbringer sees the sensus unus rule as being theological in scope anyway, then wherein lay the difference between the two schools?

The verba-to-res school operates with the singular Reformation hermeneutic of justification by grace, a dynamic that was a reality long before there were any words to describe it. With such a dynamic pervading all of Scripture and spanning both testaments, and seeing that dynamic manifested not only in words but also in events, persons, and institutions, the verba-to-res advocate is far less likely to panic if there is a dispute over the dictionary definition of an individual word. On the other hand, the res-to-verba schools works from a hermeneutical posture comprised of a whole systematized code of doctrinal statements which in turn are based upon an extensive hierarchy of Biblical sedes. These sedes, and the words they contain, are the sole loci of doctrine;

any other possible mode of revelation has already been deemed sinking sand, too slippery to bear the weight of doctrine. Hence, within such an atmosphere a great deal more is at stake in a dispute over the dictionary definition of an isolated vocable. If the word-equals-reality frame of mind holds sway, the questioning of a single definition carries with it the fearsome prospect that an entire verbum-sedes-doctrine complex might crumble and collapse, and, for that matter, the whole doctrinal system might be weakened. As an illustration of the twin reactions of the two schools the reader may have observed the relative calmness or uneasiness with which the respective schools approach the defining of the word אֱלֹהִים in Isaiah 7:14.<sup>72</sup>

In view of the above discussion we can see the two different approaches to the sensus literalis unus rule can be seen. The verba-to-res school sees the rule as theological in essence and applicable in a variety of ways including at the level of linguistics. (Individual word meanings, after all, are never unimportant, but the influence of the Christ-sensus can be felt at the linguistic level in a variety of ways.) However, the res-to-verba school sees the rule as being linguistic in essence and applicable, out of a profound necessity, at the level of theology.

However, having said this, have not the directions on the hermeneutical circle as they are described in the names given to the two schools been reversed? A closer scrutiny evokes a negative response. In the former approach the verba ultimately reign supreme, because they can involve themselves in the pervasive Gospel dynamic in any way that

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<sup>72</sup>Such phenomena have been readily observed in discussions held in the exegetical department of Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne.

they choose (or is chosen for them by the Spirit). In the latter approach doctrine ultimately reigns supreme, because it leaves the verba no choice regarding how they can and must function.

Paragraph thirty-eight is a simple explanation of the rule: Scriptura Sacra est sui ipsius legitimus interpres.<sup>73</sup> Fuerbringer targets the rationalists by allowing for only the ministerial use of reason, even an enlightened reason. Of course, this paragraph and all others that are similarly noncontroversial from a Missouri Synod perspective must be examined within their context. It could be argued that Fuerbringer's hermeneutical particularism betrays an equally overextended use of reason in the interpretation of the Scriptures.

The Romanists are the target of paragraph thirty-nine: "The Church can in no wise act as judge with regard to the sense of Scripture."<sup>74</sup> At this point Fuerbringer confesses that the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions are in agreement by introducing the norma normans-norma normata distinction. Simple logic would tell us that if the Confessions are in agreement with the Scriptures we might expect that the Scriptures consistently uphold the statements of the Confessions. This is the classical Lutheran terminology used to describe the hermeneutical circle, and when rightly used it is of great value. But there is, however, the danger of abusing or misplacing the logic of this age-old Lutheran distinction, and this danger does not go away when it is emphasized that the Scriptures are on a higher plane than the Confessions. The logical error lay in thinking of the Scriptures and the

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<sup>73</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 21.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

Confessions as being coterminous with each other or as being equal to each other in quantitative extent rather than qualitative message. For example, the statement is incorrect which says: "All dogs are four-legged; therefore, all four-legged creatures are dogs." It is equally incorrect to say: "All Confessional statements are Scriptural; therefore, all Scriptural theology can be found in the Confessions."

Fuerbringer admits that some (a few) Scripture passages cannot be fit into the body of Confessional theology or the later systematization of it; however, Fuerbringer, by locating almost all Scriptural material into proper doctrinal categories or "matters," appears to assume that this misplaced logic almost universally prevails. The positing of an overabundance of Scriptural sedes is also a related problem. By illustration, the Old Testament can suffer from neglect when it is asserted that the New Testament quotations of the Old identify for us which portions of the Old Testament truly apply to modern man. In a similar fashion, a systematician's identification of doctrinal sedes, passages of great doctrinal value, can lead to a neglect of the remainder of both testaments. Fuerbringer would deny this possibility, but he comes very close to saying it anyway:

Just as certain as the doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions rests in all its parts on the Holy Scriptures as the norma normans, being taken directly from Scripture, just so sure will any deviation from this doctrine in the exposition (of Scripture) stand in opposition to the aforementioned principle.<sup>75</sup>

Such a comment is likely to be heard when an interpreter views the Confessions themselves as being a systematic presentation of a whole body of doctrine or when he equates the Confessions and later systematic

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

presentations, but he will be far less inclined to speak thusly if he sees the Confessions as presenting the ramifications of a singular Gospel hermeneutic, that of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith.

In paragraph forty Fuerbringer distinguishes between the meaning of a word and the content of a word, and he says that both aspects should be communicated to the student.<sup>76</sup> It is difficult to determine why Fuerbringer makes such a distinction, especially at such a late stage in his presentation. At first blush it appears that he is ready to make a word-versus-reality distinction, but a second examination reveals a different picture. The "meaning" of a word signifies its theological import, while a word's "content" is its outer dress and includes "Bible History, Biblical Archeology (sic), Biblical Geography, Biblical Natural History, Biblical Psychology, etc."<sup>77</sup> Significantly, Fuerbringer calls this list of considerations "preparatory and supplementary branches of exegetical theology." None of these items is considered part and parcel of the theological task; they prepare the interpreter for the doing of theology, and they provide information that supplements theology proper. Thus, the distinction between "meaning" and "content" becomes a method for eliminating, in the final analysis, the latter in the arrival at the theological goal. "Content" is circumstantial to "meaning;" it is the outer framework upon which "real" revelation or "meaning" is found.

Paragraph forty-one is a further explanation of the historico-

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 21-2.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

grammatical method as Fuerbringer defines it. After reminding his readers of the importance of the original languages, he tells them to "pay attention to a number of historical matters" as well.<sup>78</sup> His lengthy treatment of historical "circumstances" will not be examined in detail, because a heaping up of details does not lessen the fact that for Fuerbringer history is a matter of "form."

The remaining three paragraphs summarize what has gone before and add nothing new to the discussion. George Thomas includes a final reminder from the instructor (and Semler): "Bible is God's Word. Cannot be inter. [preted] like any other book."<sup>79</sup> To be sure, these words were well heeded by Ludwig Fuerbringer.

It is difficult to overestimate the influence which Ludwig Fuerbringer exerted upon Theodore Laetsch and his work. The influence felt in the student-professor relationship was perpetuated by means of Fuerbringer's hermeneutical handbook, which has now been thoroughly discussed. Long after Fuerbringer retired from classroom activity his book continued to be used in several classes at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and, as has been noted, it was used by Laetsch himself. The influence of Fuerbringer's book is still felt today: Walter A. Maier, Jr. of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, has stated that he continues to use the book in his own class on hermeneutics.

The res-to-verba emphasis of Fuerbringer, along with its attendant vocabulary-bound exegetical method, its relative ahistoricism, its

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 24.



either-or mindset, and its view of Messianic prophecy, was rigorously carried forward by Theodore Laetsch. Perhaps the one piece of evidence which best closes the circle of argumentation on this observation is the evidence that comes from an informal quarter: a conversation held with Richard Meyer, retired president of the Southern District of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, in May of 1990. Meyer stated that Theodore Laetsch was his professor in Hermeneutics class, and that the textbook for the class was Fuerbringer's Theological Hermeneutics. This now confirms that Laetsch used Fuerbringer's book in at least two different classes. Regarding the class Meyer said that the class was "all doctrine" and had very little to do with the actual exegesis of Biblical texts.

The remaining two chapters will show how the spirit of Ludwig Fuerbringer continued on in Theodore Laetsch.

## CHAPTER 5

### THEODORE LAETSCH: THEOLOGICAL EXEGETE

In the first two chapters in this dissertation Theodore Laetsch has been described in terms of his life, work, personality, and perceived role within the structures of the Missouri Synod. With the writings of Laetsch in view hermeneutical trends in the synod were outlined, and the focus was upon those influences that were the most likely to have had a direct bearing on the posture of Laetsch as he approached the Scriptures. The reading of all of Laetsch's writings had been accompanied by an openness to seeing any possible underlying assumptions that might be detected in those writings. The conclusions reached form the basis for the thesis of this paper.

The formal principle of the thesis is that Theodore Laetsch employed the hermeneutical principles of that school of thought in Missouri whose working assumptions and beliefs were summarized, codified, and preserved for posterity by Ludwig Fuerbringer, at least to the extent that Fuerbringer was understood or capable of being understood.<sup>1</sup>

The material principle of the thesis is that Theodore Laetsch was an exegete with a res-to-verba emphasis, that he, assuming a highly

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Walter Roehrs, when asked what people had the most influence on Laetsch, stated without hesitation, "Ludwig Fuerbringer." Roehrs, it will be remembered, was Laetsch's colleague for several years. A second person named by Roehrs was George Stoeckhardt.

systematized body of doctrine as a given, stresses that direction on the hermeneutical circle. As will be demonstrated, Laetsch tended to insure exegetical results through systematical givens rather than to discover doctrinal assurance through a linguistically, though not theologically, neutral approach to the Scriptures. To be sure, in no way would Laetsch want to disrupt the continuity of the hermeneutical circle, but one direction on the hermeneutical circle can receive a greater degree of emphasis and attention than the other.

The practical aspect of the thesis is that when one direction on the circle starts to monopolize the interpreter's attention, the other direction is apt to suffer neglect in the process. In the case of Theodore Laetsch and of those who would use his approach there is the danger of closing off the discussions of what are generally considered to be legitimate exegetical questions. For a reader who is steeped in the traditions of the Missouri Synod the experiential outcome of Laetsch's approach is that there are few if any surprises--for the most part such a reader can safely predict what Laetsch will say about a passage of Scripture prior to the actual reading of Laetsch's commentary on the passage. The only surprises there are occur when Laetsch appears to press forward beyond the native sense of the text because of his doctrinal interests or concerns. Often the textual arguments that Laetsch considers to be airtight in an absolute sense would hardly appear to be so to an interpreter from another Christian tradition.

This chapter will examine the general hermeneutical posture of Theodore Laetsch, while the final chapter will examine how that posture affects his view of Christology and Messianic prophecy. Of course, it

is recognized that there is considerable overlap between the two categories, and, it must be remembered, all the principles or presuppositions mentioned below have been deduced primarily from examples and not from quotations of principles, a practice that Laetsch was not wont to do. Because Laetsch's overall hermeneutical posture is being discussed and being compared with another overall posture (that of Ludwig Fuerbringer), the presentation will be given under larger categories and not necessarily contain a point-by-point comparison. Since Laetsch's writings cover literally thousands of pages, only representative examples can be treated.

One last point needs to be emphasized before the discussion proper begins. Most, if not all, of the citations or paraphrases from Laetsch will be those that are the most likely to spark comments and questions from the perspective of our day and age. Because of this, however, one is apt to get the impression that most of the Laetsch material is controversial in one degree or another. But the vast majority of Laetsch's writings is solid material which to this day can be of great help to homileticians and students. Apart from a few debatable life-applications made by Laetsch, his writings are doctrinally unassailable from the Lutheran point of view, and, considering Laetsch's overall hermeneutical posture, one would not expect anything different. Thus, there is no attempt in this paper to make Laetsch a scapegoat, nor is there any desire to do so; Laetsch is simply one example among many of a larger hermeneutical tradition that has always had wide acceptance in the Missouri Synod, and he is also an example that is indicative of where that tradition might possibly lead an individual interpreter in his own explication of Biblical pericopes.

The Res-to-Verba Emphasis

The task of proving satisfactorily that Theodore Laetsch, consciously or otherwise, emphasized the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle is indeed a difficult one. It is, after all, an emphasis that being discussed, and such an emphasis can be detected only as it impresses itself upon a reader who has surveyed Laetsch's work from start to finish; isolated quotes, then, do not necessarily prove such a thesis, and they are even potentially misleading. To posit that Laetsch pursues a res-to-verba emphasis does not mean that Laetsch is seen as totally disrupting the hermeneutical circle. His repeated urgings to clergy and laity alike to remain immersed in their Scripture studies and his own extensive use of Scriptural cross references indicate his sincere intent to preserve the hermeneutical circle intact. Laetsch describes the full circle in the language of systematic theology:

While Holy Scripture is the norma normans of Christian teaching, why not place the Confessions next to Scripture, alongside of it, as the norma normata, whereby Lutheran doctrine and practice are to be judged?<sup>2</sup>

The perception of an emphasis at once implies the establishment of artificial boundaries which set off standard exegetical procedure from a debatable creativity, and this is not an easy thing to do.

Another difficulty presents itself at the level of the interpretation on individual Scripture passages. When Laetsch arrives at a somewhat controversial conclusion about a Scripture verse, almost always there remains the nagging question: does Laetsch's interpretation

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<sup>2</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Foreword," Concordia Theological Monthly 6 (1935): 82-3.

betray a doctrinal emphasis or overemphasis, or is he simply misinterpreting or misapplying the passage? More than that, rarely is Laetsch ever seen to contradict the surface meaning of a passage, but at times Laetsch's reader is forced to ask: is Laetsch saying here far more than what was originally intended? Has Laetsch gone too far, for example, when he sees the Trinity in Hosea 2:19-20 (21-22), construing אֱלֹהֵינוּ as the everlasting Father, בְּרִיךְ as the Son, the Author of righteousness, and אֱלֹהֵי הַכֶּלֶם as the Spirit of Truth?<sup>3</sup> Laetsch compares the Hosea verse to the Aaronic Benediction (Num. 6:24-26), and, quite prophetically in the context of the present discussion, he himself poses the question: "Is it reading too much into the text if we say the Triune God is referred to here?"<sup>4</sup> Having posed the question, Laetsch assumes a negative answer to it in the ensuing discussion.

One final preliminary question deals with the distinction between the exegesis proper of a Bible passage and the application that is made of it to a modern audience. This distinction is sometimes difficult to bear in mind, especially with a writer like Laetsch, who has homiletical purposes in view, not only in his "sermon studies," but also in his commentaries. Applying this distinction to the example in the previous paragraph, several questions must be raised. Is the doctrine of the Trinity to be found in the Hosea passage? If it is not, is it still proper for "homiletical purposes" to bring up the subject of the Trinity in connection with the Hosea passage as an application of the

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<sup>3</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Studies in Hosea 1-3," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 195.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

original sense? Or, can the subject of the Trinity be introduced at a still later point, when the writer moves beyond homiletics into the devotional mode, a mode to be explained at a later point, as Laetsch himself often does? Or, should the discussion of the Hosea passage remain completely devoid of Trinitarian talk throughout, if the doctrine of the Trinity is an element alien to the text? (In a real sense the Trinity is implicated in every passage of Scripture.) Is it helpful to know that Laetsch, even with his doctrinal emphasis, comes out in the same place doctrinally as all other Lutheran exegetes when one totals up the sum of Laetsch's exegetical parts? If the drawing of the exegesis-application distinction permits the introduction of new material into the application section, is one's systematic body of doctrine the proper or only proper vehicle for doing so? Suffice it to say at this point that Laetsch tends to make the exegesis-application (confessional)-homiletics-devotional chronology into one large mass in which distinctions fade from view. This amalgamation is potentially problematic for Biblical exegesis when exegesis proper becomes colored or even swallowed up by the other three elements.

Regarding Old Testament interpretation, it appears to be generally true that Laetsch sees rectilinear ("direct") prophecies as being Christological in content by way of raw exegesis; but for Laetsch the remainder of the Old Testament is Christological only by way of the uniformitarian application of general, timeless principles unearthed by exegesis. In short, Christology in the Old Testament is for Laetsch primarily a homiletical endeavor.

Facing the larger issue of Biblical interpretation in general, it is recognized that the interpreter's doctrinal stance is bound to

surface at some point in his discussion of a pericope. But to what extent must that doctrine be explicit in the text (variations in terminology notwithstanding), and to what extent can it be implied by way of the interpreter's presuppositions so that the interpretive process can still be properly termed "exegesis?" At what point does a doctrinal stance that illuminates a text become a doctrinal bias that beclouds a text? In the case of Theodore Laetsch a good starting place for answering these questions is an article where he pays tribute to his recently deceased colleague George Mezger. There Laetsch provides his definition of a good "sermon study," the format in which much of Laetsch's own writing was undertaken:

Mezger's chief achievement during his editorship of the Magazin were (sic) undoubtedly his many "sermon studies" published by him during the twenty-five years. He was not the only one nor the first one to offer such studies. Especially Dr. Stoeckhardt had written quite a number of them during the years preceding Mezger's editorship. While Stoeckhardt in these studies dug deep and discovered rich veins of purest gold where other men would hardly have looked for them, his entire manner necessitated individual conscientious and sometimes difficult work in order to prepare this splendid material for pulpit use. Mezger's studies, like Stoeckhardt's, were based on close scholarly study of the text and a keen understanding of present-day conditions in the world, in the church at large, and in our Synod in particular. His studies hold a happy middle way between a completed sermon and a meatless skeleton of purely linguistic or exegetical annotations. They furnish food for thought and stimulate independent study. At the same time, many paragraphs are presented in so complete and polished a form that one can hardly resist the temptation of incorporating them verbatim in the Sunday's sermon. These studies have proved, and to this day prove, a real boon to the busy pastor who does not want merely to preach a sermon written for him by someone else, but at the same time because of the stress of his work must look for some help and aid in the preparation of a good sermon.<sup>5</sup>

Laetsch goes on to say that Mezger was an unashamedly avid student of Luther, whose interpretations Mezger frequently and freely quoted in his

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<sup>5</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "In Memory of Prof. George Mezger, D.D.," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 130.



studies. The above paragraph aptly summarizes the approach used by Laetsch in his writings, not only in his sermon studies but in his commentaries as well. The reader can sense here Laetsch's own struggle to find the "happy middle way" between exegetical "meatless skeletons" and made-to-order homilies, between the stimulation for a pastor's "independent study" and the supplying of verbatim quotes. If a res-versus-verba emphasis is a matter of degree, it would appear that Laetsch erred on the side of the production of preassembled homiletical material, thereby giving the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle an overbalanced share of his attention.

Did Laetsch succeed in finding for himself his "happy middle way" between bald linguistics and the temptation to provide all too big an assist to harried pastors so pressed for time? While some analysts might answer in the affirmative, an entirely different answer is possible. It could be said that Laetsch occupies a neutral territory, producing material that is too targeted to be called strictly exegesis on the one hand and yet too scanty and general to be called a sermon on the other hand.

The phrase, "a meatless skeleton of purely linguistic or exegetical annotations," is rather troublesome, although by it Laetsch appears to recognize the distinction between exegesis and applications or theological conclusions drawn from it. The phrase suggests that the Scriptures, in and of themselves, are not likely to produce through a careful study of them anything that is theologically relevant or meaningful unless the interpreter appends, not only a priori but ex post facto, his own doctrinal freight to the bald meaning of the words. However, a verba-to-res exegete, working with a singular a priori that

the Bible records God's revelation of his gracious dealings with men in history, would want to emphasize that a careful study of the ipsissima verba in their own right is bound to be a theologically fruitful enterprise. Here again are seen the two perspectives from which the hermeneutical circle is viewed. From a practical standpoint the question is: is Laetsch to present to would-be individual Bible interpreters an airtight hermeneutical circle that resists penetration at any point, or is the circle to be closed each and every week at the pastoral point of delivery by men armed with a thorough knowledge of both of the circle's foci? It does not fall only to men like Stoeckhardt to find "rich veins of purest gold where other men would hardly have looked for them."

As was stated earlier, Laetsch endeavors consistently to preserve intact the hermeneutical circle. On occasion he even cautions his readers about the possibility of a res-overbalance on the circle. In the same tribute to George Mezger Laetsch writes:

A study of Mezger's sermons will at once impress us with the fact that they are based on thorough exegetical study of the text and its immediate and farther context. Never does Mezger degrade the text to the position of a mere pretext. The text is expounded and applied, applied in a masterly manner, by a man who, from personal experience is a fifteen-year pastorate and from close observation knows his age, its peculiar dangers and temptations, the wonderful opportunities which our time offers.<sup>6</sup>

Laetsch also writes:

Placing one's trust in the possession of orthodoxy received by tradition from the fathers, or in the correctness of ritualistic forms, or in the prayers one speaks, or in the services attended, or in the offerings given, is in God's sight a form of idolatry, no matter whether committed in Judah or in America, by Jews or pagans

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 128-9.

or Lutherans, and is the same abomination to the Lord in the twentieth century after Christ that it was in 600 B.C., and will meet with the same judgment that came upon Israel and Judah.<sup>7</sup>

Such cautions from the mouth of Laetsch, as earnest and pointed as they are, are extremely rare. The above two quotes were the only such cautions that could be found in all of Laetsch's writings; nevertheless, they point out, as has been known all along, that Laetsch would not consciously or deliberately crowd out the native sense of the text with a preponderant res.

It also needs to be said that much of the time Laetsch puts his confessional stance to salutary, wholesome use in his explication of Scripture, especially when he is dealing with passages whose interpretation is difficult. Even the most ardent verba-to-res enthusiast must concede this helpful role to the Confessions, if he himself is to preserve the hermeneutical circle intact; his only concern must be with the overemphasis upon the informatory role of the Confessions in the face of Biblical texts. In the few paragraphs that follow there will be listed examples from Laetsch's writings where the Confessions are nobly used in a fashion to which probably no Lutheran exegete would object.

In the first article Theodore Laetsch ever wrote he set the tone for his entire literary career, when in his comments on the wisdom of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 he states that all Biblical interpretation must be conducted in accordance with the Gospel of the cross.<sup>8</sup> Although there is in the article a tendency toward dualistic thinking in

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<sup>7</sup>Theodore Laetsch, Jeremiah, (Concordia Publishing House 1952), p. 96.

<sup>8</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Predigtstudie ueber 1 Kor 2, 6-10," Concordia Theological Monthly 1 (1930): 53-63.

his distinguishing worldly phenomena from "goettlichen Dingen,"<sup>9</sup> Laetsch here attests to the singularity of the Gospel hermeneutic of the Reformation; by and large some of Laetsch's individual interpretations become problematic only when he brings to bear a vast systematical code upon a Scripture verse. Laetsch used the singular Gospel hermeneutic very well in explaining the hardening of pharaoh's heart in the Lutheran tradition, showing that God was not the root cause for the pharaoh's disposition.<sup>10</sup>

In connection with a discussion of 1 Corinthians 1:21-31 Laetsch underscores the singular character of the Gospel hermeneutic:

There is for Paul but one kerugma, one proclamation worthy of the name (Jesus Christ), that message which had been entrusted to him as the herald of God and Jesus Christ, that preaching which he has called the preaching of the Cross.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar vein Laetsch defines the "law of liberty" (James 2:12):

What a strange expression! The law's business is to demand, to constrain, to force, to condemn. Here is a law that liberates, sets free. That is the same law of which the apostle had spoken chap. 1,22 as bringing blessing to the doer. That is the law of faith, as Paul calls it, Rom. 3,27, the law of Jesus Christ, Gal. 6,2; the faith of Lord Jesus Christ, Jas. 2,1. That is the norm of the Gospel which proclaims the glorious fact of John 3,16.<sup>12</sup>

Laetsch speaks about the pastoral aspect of this singular hermeneutic:

The Bible is not merely a book of the history of an ancient people, of a man Jesus, who succeeded in changing the history of the world.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>10</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Die Schriftlehre von der Verstockung," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 7-11,108-113.

<sup>11</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Sermon Study on 1 Cor. 1, 21-31," Concordia Theological Monthly 2 (1931): 117.

<sup>12</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Jas. 2, 10-17," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 689.

Nor is it a manual of ethics or a text-book on church polity. The Bible of the Old and the New Testament was given for no other purpose than to give us eternal life, and that life through Jesus, and Jesus alone. Without Christ the Bible would be a beautiful piece of literature, a unique collection of moral sayings and wise observations but, after all, an empty shell that could not satisfy the hunger and thirst for pardon and forgiveness. Search the Scriptures, seek in its pages eternal life, but find this life in Christ, and Him crucified, as the Propitiation for our sins. That, and that alone, is a proper study of the Bible. Such study alone has the precious promise to save the reader and them that hear him.<sup>13</sup>

As was stated earlier, undoubtedly no Lutheran exegete or theologian would object to the above confessions on the centrality of the Gospel in the Scriptures. However, in spite of those confessions of the singular Gospel and in spite of Laetsch's own cautions against permitting one's doctrinal stance to override the clear sense of Scripture, there still appears to be in Laetsch an inclination to emphasize or overemphasize the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle.

The difficult art of preserving a balance of directional forces on the hermeneutical circle appears to involve the avoidance of the charges of "Gospel reductionism" on the one hand and shunning the use of Scripture as merely a platform for the interpreter's intricate doctrinal code on the other. This task of balancing is reflected in part by the dialog that was conducted between the old United Lutheran Church of America (ULCA) and the Missouri Synod in the mid-1930s. Theodore Laetsch refers to these discussions as one who evidently took part in them himself, either personally or from a distance. In a two-part "Foreword" on the subject of unionism Laetsch objects to the ULCA's brushing aside of major issues of doctrine and practice in the name of a very generalized confessional subscription. On the other side of the

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<sup>13</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "The Pastor's Professional Bible Study," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938): 83.

debate Laetsch quotes the ULCA as scolding the Missouri Synod for being preoccupied with isolationism due to "issues of endless doctrinal refinement."<sup>14</sup> The issues at stake between the two church bodies were by no means trivial and need to be dealt with today, but in the background of these discussions were two viewpoints on the degree of prominence to be assigned to the Lutheran Confessions on the hermeneutical circle. From the Missourian perspective the ULCA approach does indeed smack of "Gospel reductionism," but the question that remains is: does not perhaps Laetsch's rebuttal, apart from the final direction taken on specific practical issues, represent a movement all the way over to the opposite extreme, where confessional systematics overshadows the interpretation of individual passages? It would seem that it is possible to occupy a middle ground between the two extremes, in which the interpreter can remain firm on the issues and still keep lines of communication open when discussing individual pericopes with an opponent. Laetsch's approach tends to close off discussions before they can begin. If an interpreter has great difficulty being open to the discussion of individual exegetical points, even within the larger Lutheran tradition, one has to wonder whether or not the interpreter is ever thoroughly capable of hearing the verba in their own right. The interpreter may thereby be reduced to reiterating or reinforcing the interpretations of past exegetes within his own tradition.

#### The Res-to-Verba Emphasis in Laetsch's Writings

This section is devoted to the listing of representative examples from the writings of Theodore Laetsch in which the res-to-verba

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<sup>14</sup>Laetsch, "Foreword," p. 87.

emphasis appears to be at work or in the background of his discussions. The specific subjects of Christology, Messianic prophecy, and the relationship between the testaments will be reserved for the final chapter. Other specific subjects will be treated as they appear within the case studies which will follow, where some of Laetsch's own style and perspective will be uncovered.

Again it must be noted that an overall impression of a hermeneutical atmosphere is being presented here. Individual examples, though illustrative of the point being made, do not prove the point to be made when considered one at a time; rather, it is hoped that the cumulative effect of all the examples will be a demonstration of an overall tendency in Laetsch's writings. The reader is asked to bear in mind especially the practical side of this paper's thesis, namely, that an interpreter who is schooled in exegesis and who, at the same time, has been dubbed the "quintessence of the legacy of Pieper"<sup>15</sup> is apt at times to urge his doctrinal concerns at the expense of the original scope and intent of the Biblical words.

Commenting on Heb. 4:14, "Let us hold fast our profession (τῆς ὁμολογίας)" Laetsch speaks at length about the presence of the definite article. Although the use of the article instead of the possessive pronoun "our" may very well be a Hebraistic shorthand for demonstrating possession, Laetsch uses the presence of the article to preach the exclusive claims of Christ and that he is the only way to salvation. In view of the fact that the text does not say, "let us hold fast to Jesus Christ," Laetsch talks of the utter necessity of never slighting the

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<sup>15</sup>H. T. Mayer, "Foreword," Concordia Theological Monthly 34 (1963): 133.

confession in the presence of "anticonfessionalism, unionism, and modernism." This interpretation appears to go beyond the original intent of the passage, even though there is truth in the doctrinal statements made by Laetsch.<sup>16</sup>

Before this Hebrews passage is left behind, some analysis is in order. First of all, Laetsch's comments do not contradict what the passage says. Secondly, it could be maintained that his comments are an application of the original sense as opposed to the original sense itself; however, a reader of Laetsch is likely to perceive an overblown original sense simply by extrapolating from its application, and when that happens a clearcut example of a res-to-verba overemphasis has taken place. Furthermore, the intended application to the original Hebrew readers tends to fade all too quickly from view. Thirdly, the text of Heb. 4:14 is used against errorists who are contemporaries of Theodore Laetsch and not against opponents contemporary to the text itself (if indeed there are any opponents at all in view in that particular section of the Hebrews presentation.) It is appropriate to gauge the original sense of a text by determining that the words are designed to be a reaction against negative forces that are contemporary to the text; however, it is not entirely appropriate to gauge the original sense on the basis of the modern-day interpreter's reactions against his own theological milieu. To do so is to court the danger of theologizing on points about which the text is silent, and this caution is needed even though the generalization is made that theological errors are prone to repeating

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<sup>16</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Heb. 4, 14-16," Concordia Theological Monthly 1 (1930): 201.



themselves. It is one thing to argue against error on the basis of a Biblical text, but it is another thing to argue thusly on the occasion of hearing a text. Fourthly, Laetsch uses the Hebrews 4:14 passage and its context as a stepping-off point for a lengthy discourse on the systematical treatment of the person of Christ. In effect Laetsch winds up speaking about the doctrine(s) occasioned by the text instead of about the text itself. This treatment of the text, found repeatedly in Laetsch's writings, suggests to its readers that the text is merely a convenient aetiology for the main doctrinal items on Laetsch's agenda, a systematical program that has long since been finalized. The multitudinous Scriptural cross references included in Laetsch's doctrinal discussions often suggest a topical outline on which doctrinal points are the major headings and the Scripture references are the minor sub-points, the net effect being a dogmatics textbook rearranged to accommodate the chapter-and-verse chronology of the Scriptures.

A prime example of preaching on the doctrine of a text rather than on the text itself is a sermon by Laetsch on 2 Cor. 4:13, "We too believe, and so we speak," written in celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. This sermon, four pages in length, contains only four lines of comment on the text itself, and the rest of the manuscript is devoted to the subject of Reformation history.<sup>17</sup> Although the afflictions and persecutions in the apostle Paul's ministry are somewhat paralleled in the Reformation, so that it could be said that Laetsch adheres to the text in principle, the practice of using a text as a caption suggests a parochialism which places

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<sup>17</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Preaching on the Augsburg Confession," Concordia Theological Monthly 1 (1930): 280-5.

the text under the auspices of the synod rather than the other way around. Laetsch reinforces the idea of preaching on doctrine as such in the introduction to his sermon:

We therefore heartily endorse the suggestion of our Dr. L. Fuerbringer in the Lutheraner of January 14, that every pastor preach a series of doctrinal sermons on the twenty-one fundamental articles of our Augsburg Confession, including in these sermons the abuses mentioned in the concluding seven articles. In preparing this series, the pastor should make it a point to study not only the articles in the confession. He should not neglect to devote some time to a careful reading of the corresponding article of the Apology and in his sermon quote freely from both writings. In this manner the Augustana as well as the Apology will become better known to our people and be more highly appreciated by them. These services should be advertised quite extensively, and the unchurched should be invited to attend them in order that they may become acquainted with the doctrines and confessions of our Lutheran Church.<sup>18</sup>

A little further on, within the sermon proper, Laetsch adds:

The Augustana, together with the Ecumenical Creeds, is the basic confession of our Lutheran Church and therefore well worthy of our serious consideration and study. The congregation has decided that the pastor preach a series of sermons in order to acquaint its members with the contents and history of the Augsburg Confession.<sup>19</sup>

Nowhere in either the sermon or its introduction is any mention made of which Scriptural texts might be appropriate for this series of doctrinal sermons, unless even Scriptural captions were deemed unnecessary for this doctrinal undertaking. It is also possible that the preacher of such a series was supposed to take his cues from the Scriptural references found within the confessions, working under the assumption that confessional subscription includes full agreement on the exegesis on individual passages. It is also interesting to note that Laetsch urges a special effort to increase attendance for these doctrinal presentations. This, of course, is understandable, but one wonders if a similar

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

enthusiasm could not be generated for a simple explication of a bald Scriptural pericope, whereby the unchurched could be won on the common ground of the Scriptures themselves. Again, the chief doctrinal abuse to be targeted in these sermons was the evil of unionism.<sup>20</sup>

Laetsch also encouraged the use of George Mezger's series of outlines on the introduction and First Chief Part of the Synodical Catechism. These outlines Mezger dictated verbatim to his seminary classes, although the stated purpose for these outlines was the teaching of older Sunday School children.<sup>21</sup> Laetsch devoted two complete journal articles to the use of Luther's Small Catechism both in congregational services and in members' homes.<sup>22</sup> In his article, "The Catechism in Public Worship," he urged, following the example of Martin Luther, the regular preaching of the Catechism in worship services.<sup>23</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that Luther's catechetical sermons were normally accompanied by more strictly textual messages, but a second Word-based sermon does not appear to be a necessity in Laetsch's directions. Through the preaching of the Catechism, the "Laymen's Bible," the hearers are able to keep clear in their minds the whole, systematic body of doctrine, or, as Laetsch himself put it:

Preaching the Catechism does not mean being satisfied with a dry presentation of the doctrines or with shallow generalities. It does mean leading the congregation ever deeper into the knowledge of the

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>21</sup>Laetsch, "Mezger," p. 131.

<sup>22</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "The Catechism in Public Worship," Concordia Theological Monthly 5 (1934): 234-41; Theodore Laetsch, "The Catechism in the Christian Home," Concordia Theological Monthly 5 (1934): 596-604.

<sup>23</sup>Laetsch, "Catechism in Worship," p. 235.

truth by a vivid clear presentation, by pointing out the interrelation and mutual dependence of the various doctrines, their importance in God's plan of salvation, their practical value for the faith and life of the child of God.<sup>24</sup>

Surely, not one iota of Laetsch's concern for doctrine should be lost to the present day and age, but there remains the question regarding just how that concern is to be expressed and exercised. Is the starting place for exhibiting such concern over the Lutheran res the reexamination of the res itself or the careful scrutiny of the Biblical foundation of that res? Again, in view of Laetsch's reminders to study the Scriptures in other portions of his writings, the whole question of emphasis looms large. The cumulative impression given is that Laetsch majors in the systematical discipline of "pointing out the interrelation and mutual dependence of the various doctrines" and minors in the exegetical discipline of uncovering the face-value meaning of individual Biblical texts, that he is truly a theological exegete.

When a res-to-verba emphasis is at work in an interpreter's commentary on Scripture, it is not enough simply to say that the whole system of conservative Lutheran theology constitutes one gigantic hermeneutical presupposition, as is the case with Theodore Laetsch. The one all-encompassing hermeneutic can be subdivided in Laetsch's writings into individual points of doctrine which are doubly emphasized within the larger, prevalent emphasis of the Lutheran tradition. When single doctrinal distinctives become the object of one's exegesis, the force of the res-to-verba emphasis can be felt even more pointedly, as the interpreter's reactions to his own context begin to displace the text's reactions to its own context. These individual points of doctrine are

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 240-1.

brought to bear upon the Biblical text in both positive and negative ways in Laetsch's writings.

To take the negative side first, hardly a journal article or even a page goes by where Laetsch does not single out a doctrinal aberration, which stands out in contrast to the correct doctrine Laetsch is trying to teach in connection with the pericope at hand. Whether Laetsch's argumentations are based upon the text-at-hand or only occasioned by the text must be determined on an individual basis. Since the singling out of Lutheran enemies occurs literally hundreds of times, only representative documentation will be supplied in the paper.

Along with Francis Pieper and Ludwig Fuerbringer, Theodore Laetsch viewed unionism, the minimizing of differences in doctrine and practice for the sake of fellowship, as an archfoe of the Missouri Synod in his times. It is not an overestimation to say that Laetsch introduced this subject into at least one-fourth of all his sermon studies, and he also wrote a long, two-part article on this subject alone.<sup>25</sup> In another place Laetsch writes:

May we like our fathers staunchly, courageously, confess the faith of our hearts! Our day is a day of unionism. Without and within our Lutheran Church, union is demanded, and unions are effected. Any church standing aloof from such unionistic tendencies is scoffed at, denounced as bigoted, clannish, supercilious; as standing in the way of true progress, as veritable Ishmaels. Undaunted by such criticism, with malice toward none and charity to all, let us at the same time confess and speak and firmly reject any and every attempt at union without unity in the unchanging truths of the infallible Word of God.<sup>26</sup>

The subject of unionism is mentioned first, because under its umbrella

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<sup>25</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Foreword," Concordia Theological Monthly 6 (1935): 1-11, 81-92.

<sup>26</sup>Laetsch, "Augsburg Confession," p. 285.

so many other theological aberrations are named by Laetsch. It must also be remembered that in Missouri Synod circles a generation or so previous to the onset of Laetsch's career the regula fidei and resultant systematic theology had become more sharply defined and circumscribed through men like Bente and Pieper as the war against unionism was escalated. As Missouri Synod theology came to be more precisely identified, its ramifications also came into clearer focus as did its antitheses in surrounding church bodies. Various fronts of dispute could then be formed, and in the exegetical arena the battle was fought for the synod by men like Stoeckhardt, Fuerbringer, and finally Laetsch, "the last representative of a great tradition of theologians in the Lutheran Church: Missouri Synod."<sup>27</sup> The apparent fact that Laetsch has never attained to the great outward visibility of a Stoeckhardt or a Fuerbringer is a possible indication that the exegetical tradition of these men was gradually losing its vitality.

When an interpreter finds himself in the position described above, his exegetical approach can be characterized quite often by the word defense, a term that invites the use of other words like "staunchly," "courageously," "undaunted," and "firmly." The apologist needs to take care that his defense of doctrine, so often based upon what the Biblical text does not say, does not expel from the memory of his hearers the positive presentation of what the text in its native sense does say. Theodore Laetsch introduces the subject of unionism and its attendant heresies in connection with his discussions of a goodly number of pericopes. But in all these passages, and regardless of

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<sup>27</sup>Mayer, "Foreword," p. 133.

what theological topics are named, are there found irreducible exegetical elements that speak just as "staunchly" and "courageously" to an interpreter who does not currently feel particularly pressed by the ills of unionism?

Another target of Laetsch's comments is modernism, often identified by its near synonym, "worldliness." In commenting on the disobedience of Samaria as it is described in Amos 3:9-10 Laetsch writes:

Idolatry leads into darkness and ignorance of what is right, as Modernism with its questionable morality plainly shows. Samaria seemed to prosper. Huge palaces, stately mansions, were built in which the rich enjoyed every available comfort and convenience. Amos calls these riches "violence," wrong, cruelty, and "robbery," oppression (cp. Jer 22:13), because they were obtained by violence and oppression.<sup>28</sup>

Given the constant of man's sinful nature, it seems reasonable to equate many sins of the past with the sins of the present. Violence, pride, materialism, and debauchery are all subsumed under the term "Modernism" with a capital "M." But apart from Laetsch's assumption of Amos's prophetic posture, the process of Americanization, so wrestled with by Laetsch's predecessors, is also in the background of many of his comments. Not only does Laetsch use the Scriptures to target the typical vices of the American way of life; he also endeavors apparently to inculcate a general social conservatism, a resistance to any change, that tends to go beyond the morality factor at work in the Biblical texts. Consider, for example, Laetsch's summary disdain for modern-day "amusement temples" (whatever they might be.)<sup>29</sup> Although every

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<sup>28</sup>Theodore Laetsch, The Minor Prophets, (Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 151-2.

<sup>29</sup>Laetsch, Jeremiah, p. 107.

interpreter is at times bound to infuse a bit of himself into the explanation of a text by way of homiletical amplifications, care needs to be exercised that the interpreter does not translate personal attitudes into an ipse dixit (he has spoken) from God's Word.

Without elaborating at this point on other aspects of Laetsch's apologetic res, a few other targets of Laetsch, in terms of ideologies or personages, are: evolution,<sup>30</sup> Christian Science,<sup>31</sup> lodgery,<sup>32</sup> Calvinism,<sup>33</sup> Bible critics who "deliberately misinterpret,"<sup>34</sup> Roman Catholicism,<sup>35</sup> all Reformed churches who follow their own reason and conform to the world,<sup>36</sup> Theosophists,<sup>37</sup> prayer fellowship with heterodox churches,<sup>38</sup> the Documentary Hypothesis,<sup>39</sup> higher criticism in

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<sup>30</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "I Tim. 4:4-11," Concordia Theological Monthly 5 (1934): 777.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Foreword," Concordia Theological Monthly 6 (1935): 84.

<sup>33</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "I Pet. 2: 1-10," Concordia Theological Monthly 6 (1935): 34.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Laetsch, "I Pet. 2:1-10," p. 35.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Col. 3:1-4," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938): 369.

<sup>38</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "2 Thess, 3:6-14," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938): 615.

<sup>39</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "2 Tim. 4:5-8," Concordia Theological Monthly 10 (1939): 96.



general,<sup>40</sup> subordinationists,<sup>41</sup> Rationalism,<sup>42</sup> Communism,<sup>43</sup> Russellism,<sup>44</sup> "any other 'isms,'"<sup>45</sup> Gnosticism,<sup>46</sup> Arianism,<sup>47</sup> Islam,<sup>48</sup> atheism,<sup>49</sup> and human philosophy.<sup>50</sup>

It is hoped that this extensive listing demonstrates the negative approach that frequently surfaces in Laetsch's writings during the course of commenting on individual Biblical pericopes. To all these categories pertain the same caveats that were mentioned in connection with unionism and Modernism. As a man called to the practical department of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, it is not difficult to see how Laetsch's practical bent would lead him continually to draw bold connecting lines between the seminary's exegetical and systematics departments: bringing together all the theological disciplines to form a cohesive whole would tend, it seems, to place an interpreter on the

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<sup>40</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "The Prophets and Political and Social Problems," Concordia Theological Monthly 11 (1940): 250.

<sup>41</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Heb. 1:1-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1941): 918.

<sup>42</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Micah 5:2-8," Concordia Theological Monthly 19 (1948): 897.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Laetsch, Minor Prophets, p. 46.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 182.

cutting edge of pastoral practice. However, when one observes how Laetsch's exegesis is so imbued with doctrinal urgings and warnings, it is also easy to see how it might be a healthy thing to preserve a respectful distance between the departments.

As there is a negative side to the doctrinal res that Theodore Laetsch brings to bear upon the Scriptures, there is also a positive side, a list of separate doctrinal points within the Lutheran tradition that Laetsch regularly highlights and emphasizes. These individual doctrines can best be treated in the exegetical case studies that are to follow shortly, and in the context of those studies the question will be posed: is the doctrine being promulgated on the basis of the Biblical text or only on the occasion of hearing the text?

Before turning to these case studies, it would be helpful first to name in one place some of the leading figures in the Missouri Synod tradition to whom Laetsch looked for guidance with great admiration. Two quotes of Laetsch himself will sufficiently cover these figures as well as the high regard in which Laetsch held them. In his tribute to George Mezger, Laetsch writes of him with great admiration:

Side by side with those men who at that time constituted the faculty--Pieper, Stoeckhardt, Graebner, Bente, Fuerbringer, men whose names are so dear to us--he taught by word and deed, by precept and example, those sterling qualities of which, by the grace of God, he was so illustrious a model: unselfish faithfulness in the performance of duty, conscientious, prayerful preparation for the work that God has assigned, unflinching courage in professing and defending the trust of Holy Writ, and, above all, absolute submission at all times to the Word of God and childlike faith in our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Pastors and teachers are given by the Lord as precious gifts and by him removed. The Pauls, the Luthers, the Walthers, are sent by God

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<sup>51</sup>Laetsch, "Mezger," p. 127-8.

to do His will, to build His Church; and after they have finished their course, they are called home to their eternal reward. Men come, and men go. Yet through all the centuries, through all the many changes in the Church and in the world, God and His Word and His grace remain the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.<sup>52</sup>

### Exegetical Case Studies

Thus far in this chapter the examples illustrating Laetsch's overall res-to-verba emphasis have been those in which Laetsch has temporarily stepped outside the immediate range of individual texts to make comments of a more general nature; now the presentation turns, with all of the above material as background, to Laetsch's treatments of specific Biblical pericopes in which his overall thrust appears to make its presence felt. Again, exegetical examples that have a direct bearing upon Laetsch's view of the relationship between the testaments will be reserved for the final chapter. A Concordia Publishing House circular advertising the marketing of Laetsch's Jeremiah commentary promised that the reader of this volume would discover some "fresh exegetical thinking" in Laetsch's treatment of the text.<sup>53</sup> But does that freshness of thinking stem from new exegetical insights into the verba themselves, along with their contexts, as much as it arises from the drawing of bold, new lines of communication between Laetsch's massive systematic framework, the subject, and the isolated, somewhat hapless, Biblical object? Is the "treatment" of a Biblical text coterminous with the hearing of that text? To be permitted the use of a metaphor, is the

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<sup>52</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Acts 20:17-28," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 528.

<sup>53</sup>Concordia Historical Institute files.

fresh thinking of Laetsch more of a fanning of old systematical flames than it is the sparking of new and interesting exegetical brushfires?

1 Corinthians 1:21-31

The context of this pericope, a comparison of man's folly and God's wisdom, makes plain that the specific *σκάνδαλον* (v. 23) of the Gospel is that Christ has won the victory through crucifixion. Similarly, those who believe in him will be victors in spite of their apparent defeats (vv. 26-8). However, Laetsch broadens out the *σκάνδαλον* to include irreligion in general, proclaiming the folly of those who would doubt the Biblical account of creation and the possibility of Christ's bodily resurrection.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps it is more than coincidental that Laetsch, in the same journal issue, wrote a brief article on the death of Darwinism.<sup>55</sup> Although it would be difficult to maintain that Laetsch's comments stand in contradiction to the words of Paul, his comments do tend to becloud the issue of what man's true *μυρόν* (v. 25) ultimately is.

Psalm 17:15

In connection with a discussion of the holy status of the children of God based upon 1 Pet. 1:13-16, Laetsch talks about the ultimate, full restoration of the divine image of God's children, citing this Psalm verse as a proof-text.<sup>56</sup> Presumably the Psalm clause in

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<sup>54</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 Cor. 1:21-31," Concordia Theological Monthly 2 (1931): 121.

<sup>55</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "A Remarkable Concession," Concordia Theological Monthly 2 (1931): 137-8.

<sup>56</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 Pet. 1:13-16," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1931): 207.

question is: אֲנִי וְעַד אֲנִי אֲבַדְתִּי אֶתְּיָדְךָ אֲבַדְתִּי ("I, on my part, in righteousness shall behold your face.") The parallel clause in the verse, "I shall be satisfied in awakening with (beholding, cf. LXX) your form," suggests the possibility that the first clause has an eschatological vision in mind, because, for example, the Septuagint translates the word "form" (אֶתְּיָדְךָ אֲבַדְתִּי) with ὁμοῖα. Nevertheless, the choice between an eschatological vision and a contemporary faith-vision does not appear to be a clearcut one, and an "even now, not yet" posture would not rigidly require that such a choice be made. In view of the immediate context, where David issues imprecations against his contemporary enemies, perhaps both a penultimate vindication (see Lam. 3:23) and the ultimate deliverance are in view. In any event, it seems to be stretching a point to import the theology of the image of God into this Psalm (not to mention the 1 Peter pericope;) there is even the danger of losing some of the original tenor and import of the Psalm through such a process.

#### Hosea 1-3

The chief issue at stake here is concerning the marriage of Hosea to the woman of harlotry. Laetsch, shunning an allegorical interpretation, assumes that the marriage actually took place, and he even goes so far as to say that Gomer was a prostitute at the time of the marriage, not only a woman with a propensity toward harlotry.<sup>57</sup> But having said that much, Laetsch continues under the assumption that

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<sup>57</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Studies in Hosea 1-3," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 33-40. See also the parallel comments sub loco in The Minor Prophets.

the children born to Gomer were not fathered by Hosea, but that they were illegitimate children whom Hosea treated "as though they were his own."<sup>58</sup> Although a case of such a reconstruction might be made on the basis of "children of harlotry" (בְּנֵי זְנוּנִים 'בְּנֵי זְנוּנִים' in 1:2), there is also the clause in the next verse, וְיָלְדָה לְהוֹשֵׁעַ בֶּן ( "and she bore to him a son,") to contend with. Laetsch, without the benefit of any intervening explanation, interprets this clause as: "She presented to him a son."<sup>59</sup> It appears reasonable to interpret the "children of harlotry" phrase simply as referring to the children who were born to the harlot, but to translate the word בָּרָא as "present" does not seem to be a viable option, especially since the account of Hosea taking Gomer as his wife is recorded in the very same verse.

To resist the standard interpretation of the "conceived and bore" formula suggests that some factor other than the verba themselves is at work. There is in Laetsch somewhat of a moralistic hermeneutic which leads him to hold up Biblical personages as exemplars to such an extent that exceeds the expectations of the overarching Gospel hermeneutic. Just how this tendency can be subsumed under the systematical res of Theodore Laetsch is more than difficult to tell. Perhaps Laetsch is laboring under a "hermeneutic of application," where he, in an intense desire to "apply" each and every text to the everyday lies of potential hearers, will try to give concrete, meaningful directions for life in any possible way that the text might peripherally imply or somewhat feasibly suggest. The problem, however, is that the Gospel

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

hermeneutic could be overshadowed, distorted, or even totally preempted in the process. This application mode often assumes very specific contours and is frequently negative in thrust: consider, for example, how Laetsch links the harlot's pursuit of other "lovers" (2:5) with the Church's pursuit of "worldliness, unionism, conforming to modern ideas"<sup>60</sup> in the interest of increasing her numbers. This last allegorization shows how freely Laetsch can leave behind the Biblical context, in this case the idolatry of Israel at Hosea's time, and opt for a "timeless" principle.

#### Acts 20:17

This verse, the recounting of Paul's summoning the elders (πρεσβυτέρους) of Ephesus from nearby Miletus, is discussed in the context of Laetsch's exegesis of the larger pericope, Acts 20:17-38, and it is brought up here for two reasons: the fact that Laetsch uses this simple verse as the occasion for arguing against distinctions of rank among the clergy as well as his method of argumentation. The word πρεσβυτέρους, he says, should be construed as meaning ἐπισκόπους ("bishops,") and he cites as his authority in this matter Pieper's Dogmatik.<sup>61</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to contend for or against clergy distinctions, but it strikes one as being significant that Laetsch would be willing to take a possible liberty with the text, supplying even the alternate Greek term ἐπισκόπους, and to do so on the authority of a dogmatician. While this example may not be altogether

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<sup>60</sup>Laetsch, "Hos. 1-3," p. 123.

<sup>61</sup>Francis Pieper, Dogmatik, Vol. 3, p. 526, quoted in Theodore Laetsch, "Acts 20:17-38," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 519.

noteworthy standing by itself, it does serve as a part of the cumulative picture of a res-to-verba emphasis. It would seem preferable to quote at this point the occurrence of ἐπισκόποι in verse twenty-eight rather than to quote a secondary authority, and, of course, there remains the question of why the subject of clergy rankings was introduced in the first place.

#### Acts 16:9

Recorded here is the vision of Paul, whose missionary help is solicited by a Macedonian in a vision. Citing a group of anonymous commentators, who connect this verse with the appearance of the archangel Michael in Dan. 10:13, Laetsch speculates that the Macedonian was actually an angel dressed in the garb of that region.<sup>62</sup> More than that, this interpretation is adjudged as preferable to considering the Macedonian a mere man, in spite of the Acts phraseology, ἀνὴρ Μακεδών . Since Paul was seeing a vision, the whole question seems somewhat beside the point. Just how the Daniel and Acts verses relate to one another is never explained. Laetsch's interpretation of the Macedonian may simply be a possible misinterpretation, but yet the reader can sense a vague compulsion in Laetsch to identify the apparition as an angel, a compulsion that would lead Laetsch beyond the meaning of the word ἀνὴρ . Perhaps, as will be seen in the last chapter, Laetsch feels the need to see any revelatory act as other-worldly, of "divine origin," and not firmly grounded on the plane of human history.

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<sup>62</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Acts 16:9-15," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 605-6.



## Divorce and Remarriage

Just a couple of excerpts from this three-part topical presentation will be held forward as illustrations of the dynamics at work in Laetsch's res-to-verba emphasis, bearing in mind that the dictates of orderly arrangement at times require a movement in that direction. Laetsch, endeavoring to prove that by Biblical definition divorce is a complete dissolution that makes remarriage possible, cites three Old Testament passages to prove his point: Lev. 21:7,14, a code of behavior for sanctifying the tabernacle priests; Ezek. 44:22, directions in a similar vein for the priesthood in the eschatological temple; and Jer. 3:1, in which the prophet poses a question in the parabolic event that a divorce and remarriage should happen to occur.<sup>63</sup> The point of bringing up this example is that Laetsch draws from three totally disparate Bible passages in order to arrive at a general principle. The immediate contexts of the priesthood, eschatological times, parabolic language, and man's disobedience are passed over or pushed into the background so that only the "timeless truth" remains. In many other ways throughout his writings Laetsch follows a similar procedure, in which the old exegetical motto of "event plus interpretation" becomes raw interpretation regardless of the event. The static "concepts" of systematic theology, the line of reasoning seems to go, do not require the delving into human, historical contingencies and may in fact become confused by them.

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<sup>63</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Divorce and Malicious Desertion," Concordia Theological Monthly 4 (1933): 128.

The second excerpt is a conclusion drawn by Laetsch that does not directly involve any particular Biblical input. Laetsch maintains that the Church ought not stand in the way of the remarriage of divorced persons, no matter how the first marriages were dissolved, because the Church has no right to inflict temporal penalties.<sup>64</sup> The only reason for introducing this example at this time is to point out one distinctive doctrinal emphasis within Laetsch's larger systematic viewpoint, namely, the separation of Church and state. A long doctrinal article such as the one at hand, along with other topical presentations, is very well written and in some ways better written than his more specifically exegetical offerings. One is left with the impression of a man whose interest and expertise was a systematician first and an exegete second, who did the exegetical follow-up work, not the groundwork, for the dogmatics textbooks.

#### 2 Corinthians 4:4

Paul begins this chapter by speaking about how the Gospel is veiled to those who have been blinded by the "god of this world" (ὁ θεός τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, ) whom Laetsch identifies as Satan himself. The phrase could be interpreted to be a personification of the sinful world itself along with all its allurements, a phrase similar to μαμμωνῶς ("Mammon") in Matthew 6:24. However, Laetsch uses this phrase as an occasion for providing a lengthy description of Satan and his work.<sup>65</sup> The fact that the Devil is mentioned in virtually every one of Laetsch's

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p 131.

<sup>65</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "2 Cor. 4:3-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 7 (1936): 32.

sermon studies indicates that this is another of the doctrinal distinctives singled out from the greater systematical tradition. Laetsch may appear to be almost preoccupied with the subject, especially when the text in question makes no other specific mention of Satan, but Laetsch is in good company with Luther, and his repeated warnings are undoubtedly to be preferred over the common homiletical practice of never mentioning Satan at all.

The frequent references to Satan are used by Laetsch to show forth his defensive posture, and this article on 2 Corinthians provides a good example of it. The manifestations of Satan listed are: Christian Scientists, Bible critics who perceive Biblical inaccuracies in spite of the confirming evidence of archaeology, the pope and priests of Rome, the Reformed denominations, the failure to grasp new opportunities for mission work, the groping after new methods (notice the generalized conservatism), the "pandering to the Zeitgeist," the glorying in externals, and formalism.<sup>66</sup>

#### Acts 3:13

The general conservatism alluded to in the previous paragraph takes on a distinctly religious flavor in Laetsch's comment on the phrase, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," in this verse. In the context Paul is clearly testifying that the legitimacy of Christ's messiahship can be seen in the apostles' healing of the lame man; Laetsch, however, uses this phrase, set in the context of an all-or-nothing confrontation with the Jews, as an opportunity to argue for

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 34-5.

ridding the Church of radicals and liberals and for fostering conservatism, defined as "conserving the unity of faith as revealed by God Himself in His holy Word."<sup>67</sup> Although the homiletical task requires at some point a shift from the Biblical context to that of the speaker and audience, the shift in context can, as is true in this case, lead to a shift in the import of the Biblical words, especially in the presence of a strong res-to-verba emphasis. The verba in their original context do not change in meaning, but the interpreter's doctrine, put to work in a strong informatory role, encourages a "hermeneutic of general principles" where a shift in meaning is magnified in direct proportion to the further generalization of the principles.

1 John 4:10

Love, which according to Laetsch assumes its purest form in the defense of pure doctrine,<sup>68</sup> consists of God's sending his Son to be the *ἱλασμὸν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν* in this verse from the apostle John. Crucial in the understanding of Laetsch's hermeneutics is his definition of *ἱλασμός* as propitiation, "an appeasing of another person, a reconciling of a person to oneself."<sup>69</sup> His method of proving this definition suggests that Laetsch, armed with an idea he had espoused for a long time, was now out in search of Biblical proof for it. For the most part he bases his definition on Ezek. 44:27, the only time when the

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<sup>67</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Acts 3:1-16," Concordia Theological Monthly (1936): 517.

<sup>68</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 John 4:9-11," Concordia Theological Monthly 8 (1937): 273.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 277.

Septuagint uses the word *ἱλασμός* to translate *חַטָּאת* ("sin offering"). Although the Septuagint uses various words and phrases to translate "sin offering" in the book of Leviticus, Laetsch homes in on the Ezekiel verse "as giving the exact meaning conferred to the believing Israelite by the term *חַטָּאת*, viz., that of an appeasing of God's wrath, a reconciliation of God to the sinner."<sup>70</sup> Of course, propitiation is an important aspect of the atonement, but Laetsch tends to make propitiation the exclusive, all-encompassing definition by, bringing the propitiation idea into almost every Bible verse that speaks of God's removal of sin. Here also is an example of the systematician's drive for static, constant definitions where contextual matters need not become a factor. The Septuagint is used as a primary tool for preserving constancy of definition across testamental lines.

#### 1 John 3:1-5

Laetsch writes concerning this pericope:

In our text we hear the tolling of Christmas-bells, jubilantly proclaiming the blessings of the Nativity, solemnly admonishing all that hear to make proper use of these blessings, to accept them in adoring faith, to manifest them in our daily lives, to become even more closely united with, and ever more like, that Son of God who came into the world that all men might be made the sons of God. Though the birth of the Christ-child is not especially mentioned, the text breathes the true Christmas spirit, that of joyous faith, expectant hope, holy endeavor. This Christmas spirit must be reflected in the sermon.<sup>71</sup>

A quick perusal of 1 John 3:1-5 is all it takes to realize that this text has very little to do with Christmas, yet Laetsch, in a lengthy

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>71</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 John 3:1-5," Concordia Theological Monthly 8 (1937): 916-27.

introduction and in the treatment of every verse, speaks eloquently about the doctrine of the incarnation. Perhaps sensing a problem with his explanations and applications of the text, Laetsch adds the disclaimer in the quote above: "Though the birth of the Christ-child is not especially mentioned . . ." In the case of this article and a host of others the problem is not inherent in Laetsch's overall approach to the Scriptures; rather, it is an inherited problem. As Laetsch set out to write on this passage, he was confronted with the text itself and, not insignificantly, with the fact that this pericope was the appointed Eisenach epistle for Christmas Day. It was apparently on the basis of the word ἐφανερώθη -- "(he) appeared (to take away sins)" in verse five--that this pericope was so chosen. Thus, there is at work in Laetsch's interpretation what might be called a "hermeneutic by appointment," a liturgically supplied context which, though not at odds with the sense of John's words, is somewhat alien to the original context. Perhaps Laetsch was stretching a point to speak of the tolling of Christmas bells and the breathing of the Christmas spirit in this text, but liturgically speaking he was not actually out of line. It is rather ironic that the discipline of pericopal preaching is urged so that the pastor is not tempted to engage in the eisegetical practice of taking his ideas out in search of a text, and then, the whole pericopal system itself does the very thing that it prohibited to the would-be preacher.

To continue for a moment on the subject of homiletics, it was customary for Theodore Laetsch to provide at the end of his sermon studies a sampling of sermon outlines in major headings that might be used by his readers. It has been said that a res-to-verba exegete is often

found to foster the preaching on doctrines that have been brought to bear on the text more than a simple exposition of the text itself, and the suggestion here is that one cause for this phenomenon lay with the common and perpetually encouraged practice of sermon outlining. Of course, the aim of outlining is to produce a beneficial outcome, that is, the presentation of a clear, coherent, and logical message; however, there is also the danger of abusing this preparatory step.

Laetsch suggests for the 1 John 3:1-5 text the following title and major headings:

The Babe of Bethlehem is the Wisdom of God, for he is our Justification, our eternal Salvation, our Sanctification.<sup>72</sup>

Although many of the "concepts" Laetsch lists here are present in the text "in principle," the unique grammar, the logical relationships, the terminology, and the general tenor of the 1 John pericope have been lost. It would be practically impossible to retrace Laetsch's steps from this outline back to an unmistakably identifiable Scriptural basis for the outline. The task of outlining requires of the homiletician the categorization of the material at hand, the establishment of main theses with corresponding subpoints, and the determination of a thought progression that holds all of the topical points together. It is often very hard to do this with a Biblical text, especially with narrative material, but the job becomes infinitely easier for the interpreter when he abandons the effort to "get into" the text in favor of an outline which has already been thought out for him, namely, the legacy of a whole systematized body of doctrine, with all its main headings, subcategories, boundaries, preconceptions, and logical relationships.

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 927.

Doctrine becomes the topic or subject of the prospective message, not the Biblical text itself, as the doctrinal whole absorbs into itself the individual exegetical parts, each of which has a native sense and logic of its own. The problem of losing the uniqueness of a pericope can be magnified when a res-to-verba emphasis prevails, because then the systematic organization of doctrine can be, not only the end result of exegesis, but also the one large presupposition of exegesis, as the interpreter is preconditioned to think a certain way regardless of the text he is about to study. Even worse is the persistent imposing of one standard outline, such as "goal-malady-means," upon each and every Biblical text.

#### Hebrews 13:4

The phrase ἐν παντί in this verse is not seen by Laetsch as referring to persons (where a simple dative might be anticipated); instead he interprets the whole clause to be saying: "Marriage is to be held in honor in all respects."<sup>73</sup> With this as his textual basis, he embarks upon a lengthy summary of the Biblical teachings concerning marriage, pointing out all the "respects" in which marriage is to be honored. On the basis of "Gen. 2:28," (a typographical error probably representing Gen. 1:28,) Laetsch says that the divine commandment of this verse is violated, and the marriage bed defiled, by the "malicious destruction of the seed," presumably a reference to birth control, and other immoral activity that takes place between husband and wife.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Heb. 13:1-9," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938): 755.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.



This example is introduced to illustrate a statement of Laetsch's general conservatism, the interpretation of which statement depends to a certain extent upon the exegesis of Laetsch's own words. But there are two other reasons for quoting Laetsch at this point. First of all, Laetsch seems to reflect in his writing a concurrence with the popular piety of the Missouri Synod in his day, as one might well expect him to do. Secondly, there does not seem to be any direct link between Laetsch's exegesis of the passage and his application of the exegetical findings in terms of intent or presuppositions. Here is a case where the suggested distinction between exegesis and application might prove helpful: his exegesis is a straightforward presentation of a reasonable interpretive alternative, and it is only when his exegesis is a fait accompli that he presses perhaps a bit too far in his practical conclusions. In short, some may consider Laetsch's interpretation a trifle misdirected, but not misguided.

1 Corinthians 10:16,17

As one might well anticipate, given the nature of this passage, Laetsch's treatment of it is heavily imbued at every turn with what adds up to a full-blown doctrine of the Lord's Supper.<sup>75</sup> Because this pericope is considered to be a sedes doctrinae for the Eucharist and the Real Presence, it is not easy for a Lutheran interpreter to disassociate himself from all the previous discussions which have centered in this text, nor should he be expected to remain totally aloof from them. However, it is helpful to remember at some point that a good share of

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<sup>75</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 Cor. 10:16,17," Concordia Theological Monthly 10 (1939): 262-75.

such discussions have taken place only long after Paul set this text to writing, so that the text is not sterilized of its immediate context. For example, Laetsch declines to make any connection between the phrase τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας ("cup of blessing") and the historical roots of the Eucharist in the Passover; instead, on the basis of the following phrase ὃ εὐλογοῦμεν ("which we bless") Laetsch quotes the Formula of Concord on the public speaking of the words of institution as well as Luther on the priesthood of all believers, since, as Laetsch points out, the verb is cast in the first person plural.<sup>76</sup>

Exodus 4:14-17

In connection with a presentation on the administration of the sacraments Laetsch produces this Exodus passage as a demonstration of the pastoral role on behalf of the congregation. As Aaron was the spokesman for Moses, saying no more or no less than what Moses told him to say, so also the pastor speaks for the congregation, to whom belongs the Office of the Keys, and the pastor is authorized to say only what the congregation tells him to say. As Moses was God to Aaron, so the congregation is God to the pastor.<sup>77</sup> Again, the eloquence of the whole article which serves as the context for the treatment of the Exodus passage points to systematic theology as being the first love of Theodore Laetsch, a theology that is ostensibly and heavily Waltherian in its outlook on Church and ministry. Also, Laetsch's use of Exodus appears be one of the most clearcut examples of taking an interpretation

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., pp. 266-7.

<sup>77</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "The Administration of the Sacraments," Concordia Theological Monthly 10 (1939): 403-4.

out in search of a text, a technique that is most likely to be used in a topical presentation. Theology is the point being made, while the text is beside the point, a mere parable of it, and once the theological point to be made is clearly in focus the question of whether the pericope being used is a parable or an historical account can be deemed irrelevant. The subject of the Old Testament as parable will be more fully treated in the last chapter.

Psalm 50:16 and Isaiah 52:11

The mention of these two passages occurs within the same article on the administration of the sacraments. The point Laetsch is making is that, although the validity of the Lord's Supper does not depend upon the faith of the administrator, a pastor who is an unbeliever should have enough integrity to resign his post, and the Psalm and Isaiah verses are brought up to prove his point.<sup>78</sup> Psalm 50:16 is a general word of condemnation against all the wicked, set in the form of a question, which speaks against the empty recital of the covenant ד"ב"י ("decrees"). It appears that Laetsch produces this verse as a prooftext because of the general principle of hypocrisy. Having perceived the general principle, Laetsch apparently feels free largely to ignore the context of the Psalm, where David distinguishes in broad sweeps between the faithful and faithless in Israel, be they leader or follower.

The pushing of contextual matters into the background is even more evident in Laetsch's treatment of Is. 52:11, which he interprets as a word of condemnation against unclean men who presumptuously carry the

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 412.

sacred vessels of worship.<sup>79</sup> However, the original context of this verse clearly indicates that a joyful word of promise, not condemnation, is being spoken through Isaiah. The context is a prophecy of the glorious Second Exodus for which the priests and Levites were to prepare as they eagerly awaited a gracious theophany of Yahweh. Thus, not even in principle is Laetsch using this passage appropriately. In addition to the elevation of principles above contexts, demonstrated in the use of both passages, it can be noted in connection with the Isaiah passage that Laetsch freely draws parallels between Old Testament priests and New Testament pastors, between Old Testament sacrifices and New Testament sacraments. Most commentators, of course, would draw such lines of connection, but care must be taken lest the case for parallels be overdrawn through the "hermeneutic of general principles."

#### Proverbs 30:1-6

In his commentary on Heb. 1:1-6 Laetsch comes to the clause in the second verse, ἐλάλησεν ἡμῖν ἐν υἱῷ, "he [God] has spoken through (a, his) son." On the basis of the lack of the definite article with Laetsch comments on the uniqueness of the son, an interpretation that seems rather doctrinaire in view of the fact that the Greek, perhaps reflecting the thought patterns of the Hebrews, would not require the presence of the article in such a construction. The determination that the son is unique sets up for Laetsch what might be called a doctrinal chain reaction: the positing of the son's uniqueness leads to a discussion of his divinity, which in turn introduces a discussion

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

of the mystery of the Trinity.<sup>80</sup> Illustrated here is how a res-to-verba emphasis can transport the interpreter farther and farther afield from the text itself: first, the interpreter finds for his text an entry point into his whole systematic body of doctrine; then, once the text is situated within the systematic body, it can be transported along systematic lines of connection to virtually any other location within that body of doctrine. For example, Laetsch's exegetical discovery of the son's uniqueness could just as easily lead him from that point to the doctrine of the two natures to the doctrine of the incarnation, and once again the interpreter would be able to hear the tolling of Christmas bells. The problem here is that the interpreter's excursions through the systematic body have the potential of causing him to forget to elaborate upon the exegetical point of entry. The singular thrust of the text itself can easily be lost when each and every Biblical text reminds the interpreter of absolutely everything he believes.

Once Laetsch's logic arrives at the doctrine of the Trinity, Laetsch lists two proof passages for it, the latter of the two being the Proverbs passage in question. Laetsch sees in the pericope, and especially in the clause of verse four,  $\text{וְשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵינוּ}$  ("What is his name?"), the perplexity of Solomon over the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>81</sup> Chapter 30:1 introduces this section of Proverbs as being the words of "Agur," not Solomon; but apart from that, there is still a question about Laetsch's interpretation. It passes over the context in which the question was

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<sup>80</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Heb. 1:1-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1941): 916.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

originally posed, that is, a comparison of God's wisdom and man's folly in a manner similar to Job 38 and 39. Coupled with the rhetorical expression, וְיָדָע 'דָּ ("Surely you know,") which appears in Prov. 30:4 (see Job 38:21 for a similar thought), the conclusion must be reached that the tenor of Agur's question is far different from what Laetsch construes it to be. But even if the point of contact seen by Laetsch between the doctrine of the Trinity and Prov. 30:4 is granted, there is the further problem of seeing Agur thinking and speaking along the lines of systematic categories and definitions, the doctrine of inspiration notwithstanding. Systematics is a discipline that has come after the fact of the formation of the Scriptures and is not a presupposition of the Biblical writers, and this needs to be kept in mind in view of the idea of cumulative revelation, a phenomenon to which Laetsch himself attests earlier in this same article.<sup>82</sup> Surely, the fact of the Trinity has always been true, and it can even be maintained that the reality of the Trinity is in the background of Agur's words; yet, the passage hardly passes the test for being a Scriptural proof of the Trinity when the original intent of the Scripture is considered.

1 John 1:1-4

The sole reason for bringing up Laetsch's treatment of this pericope is to introduce by way of an example an intangible element that is always present in his treatment of individual Bible passages. Perhaps this element is not directly related to the specific exercise of exegesis, yet it is so pervasive in his writings that no coverage of Laetsch's exegesis would be complete without some mention of it. It is

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 914.

the mood or tone in which Laetsch writes, a personal dynamic found within the interpreter himself, which was bound to have an effect on his exegesis over the whole duration of his writing career and which would often provide the impetus for exploring far and wide into the remote reaches of systematic theology while explaining the sense of a single Biblical vocable. To explain this intangible, one example of it will be quoted out of hundreds of demonstrative examples which could be used. Regarding the final clause of this pericope, "that your joy may be full"

(πεπληρωμένη,) Laetsch writes:

The most glorious, most complete, and perfect joy of which the human heart is capable in this life is that of a Christian in his Savior and, through Jesus, in his God. That is a God-given, divinely created joy, the Lord Himself supplying the foundation on which it rests and creating this joy in the heart of His child. This joy lives not on uncertainties, on human hopes, on fleeting, vanishing things, only to die and be superceded by weeping and despairing sorrow. No; the Christian's joy lives on eternal realities, on eternal verities, on God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe, on Jesus Christ, through whom this Ruler has become the believer's reconciled, loving Father. It rests on the assurance of God's grace, on the certainty of the forgiveness of our sin, on the unwavering sureness of everlasting life--all blessings procured by Him who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word of Life. To make this joy the sun illuminating the path of every believer, to make this joy of the child of God on earth more and more conformable to the fullness of perfection of the joy in heaven, that is the purpose of John's speaking and writing. The preaching of the Word of Life is a power of God to gladden the heart of the Christian in the midst of the sorrows of this world. Reading the Bible, His Word, the Christians learn to know and love Him. There they see the manger and the cross and the empty tomb. There they accompany Him on His life's journey and learn to cherish Him as their Friend, their King, their God, their Redeemer, their one and all, of whom they confess, "For me to live is Christ," Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!<sup>83</sup>

In the modern age of comparative illiteracy the reader of this quote must be struck by its eloquence and grandeur. In the milieu of critical

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<sup>83</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 John 1:1-4," Concordia Theological Monthly 15 (1944): 837-8.

commentaries, often set in clinical tones and sterile verbiage, the reader must be struck by the heartfelt, uplifting tone of Laetsch's words and by a style that is not unlike that of a writer like Alfred Edersheim.

For lack of a better term, the intangible element mentioned above could best be designated as Laetsch's devotional style, a style that often transforms his "sermon studies" into veritable sermons in their own right. This devotional style could perhaps best be explained by way of an analogy with the phrase, *ψαλμοῖς, ὕμνοις, ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς* ("Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,") in Col. 3:16. According to Martin Scharlemann, in class notes derived from his lectures on Philippians and Colossians, the three terms represent respectively three different levels of hymnody: music which is a repetition of the Biblical text itself, music that is more or less directly based upon the Biblical text, and a third level of music where the emphasis moves over in the direction of the singer himself and his reactions to the Biblical text. To transport this scheme of things into the realm of exegesis, the *ψαλμοῖ* represent textual criticism and the *ὕμνοι* the interpretations and applications flowing directly from the Biblical text. But in his writings Laetsch often moves to the third level, now twice removed from the text, where he speaks as much about his own faith-reactions to the text as he does the text itself and the direct interpretation of it.

Though seemingly rather far afield from the subject at hand, this analogy is in another way crucial to the understanding of Laetsch's approach to the Scripture. On the hermeneutical circle, if the whole body of canonical verba are the subject matter itself and a systematized



res can be defined as the reasoned, corporate response of faithful disciples to the subject matter, then a driving force for the res-to-verba emphasis begins to emerge. Laetsch often prefers to move in his writing from the simple explanation of the Biblical text to the singing of "spiritual songs" about the text. However, much of the time Laetsch is somewhat hesitant to supply for his readers reactions to the text that are of a more personal, individual nature; his view of a professor as a synodical spokesman and perhaps also his general humility would require him, it seems, to maintain a somewhat low personal profile. When an interpreter likes to give reactions to a text and at the same time views himself as a corporate spokesman, there is only one way to turn, that is, to the corporate reaction of the faithful body for which he is a spokesman. Thus, Laetsch is often seen turning to the systematic body of doctrine of his synod, a system of theology that starts with the Reformation and ends with the most recent synodical refinements and clarifications voiced in response to current theological errors. Again, problems for exegesis can arise, not only when the corporate response is in the forefront of textual discussions, but especially when that corporate response is reacting, not to the text as such, but to the theological environment in which the faithful body finds itself. Then the interpreter's commentary on Scripture tends to become something designed "for Missourian ears only" and not an enlightening addition to the common stock of Scriptural knowledge embraced by all of Christendom.

Micah 7:16,17

This brief pericope is a part of Micah's glorious concluding picture of the ultimate deliverance of God's people. The "remnant" will

be spared through forgiveness (verses 18-20,) but the enemies of the kingdom of God will have removed from them any cause for rejoicing as they are finally destroyed (verses 8, 12-13.) In keeping with this picture the present pericope tells of how the heathen nations ( $\text{D}^{\prime}\lambda$ ) will be ashamed of all their strength ( $\text{D} \text{N} \text{G} \text{B} \text{G} \text{L} \text{S} \text{P} \text{B} \text{S}$ ), will put their hands to their mouths ( $\text{D} \text{S} \text{L} \text{D} \text{S} \text{S}$ ), and be stricken with deafness ( $\text{D} \text{S} \text{P} \text{S} \text{S} \text{S}$ ). In total humiliation the enemy will have no choice but to raise the white flag of surrender, as the next verse continues. Laetsch, however, reconstructs these two verses entirely differently. Summarizing the pericope, he writes:

This is the history of God's Church: a record of marvelous miracles performed by God. Savage nations as well as highly cultured peoples have become docile followers of the Redeemer. Mighty emperors and kings in the realms of art and science have cast their scepters and crowns before the throne of Jehovah, have brought into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.<sup>84</sup>

In short, Laetsch interprets these two verses to be the story of the conversion of the Gentiles. The covering of the mouths is seen as a reverential gesture whereby they cease from boasting about themselves and their own accomplishments and from blaspheming the Lord and His Church. Their deafness, Laetsch holds, means that they are now deaf "to the alluring voice of sin, self-righteousness, and self-indulgence."<sup>85</sup> Although there is a degree of accuracy to Laetsch's own description of the conversion process, considerable doubt must be raised as to whether or not this is the point of this particular text. It could be said that Laetsch's interpretation is simply one viable option among many, but one

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<sup>84</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Micah 7:14-20," Concordia Theological Monthly 18 (1947): 355.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 354.

senses that Laetsch's doctrinal res played a considerable part in helping him to make his choice. Even more, it seems possible that doctrinal considerations created the option for Laetsch in the first place. Through Laetsch's pen the  $\square \dot{\lambda}$ , when all has been said, are made to sound like confessing Missouri Synod Lutherans, and this is a long way to come from the poetic words of Micah. Here the distance between text and interpretation suggests that the interpreter did not bridge the chasm from the side of the text, but rather that he moved in the opposite direction, from a res-informed interpretation back to the text. This kind of exegesis is bound to fall upon deaf ears around the conference table of inter-Christian dialog.

#### Jeremiah 5:1

First, a word about Laetsch's commentaries is in order. In them the treatment of each verse of Scripture is considerably shorter because of apparent space limitations. Also, Laetsch's explanation in his commentaries have somewhat of a different character to them from those articles that are overtly "sermon studies." In places which might otherwise provide the opportunity for extended doctrinal discussions Laetsch tends simply to provide a very brief exegetical explanation; however, his res-to-verba emphasis still manages to surface at various points. Even when only the exegetical raw material is being discussed, one senses that Laetsch is providing the exegetical wherewithal for the reader's believing, or continuing to believe, the same things he has always held to be true. The differences in style and content between Laetsch's sermon studies and his commentaries again raises the question of the possible distinction to be made between exegesis proper and the

"applications" to be drawn from that exegesis. Can the would-be preacher speak of homiletical points to be made that are not, strictly speaking, valid exegetical conclusions? And, do the preacher's applications give his hearers false hints, suggesting that the Biblical text says far more than it says in actuality?

In Jer. 5:1 Yahweh commands the prophet to assume a role similar to Diogenes and his lantern, here searching in Jerusalem for a righteous man. The one Hebrew phrase in particular that attracts Laetsch's attention is  $\text{נִדְרָהּ וְשִׁיבֵהּ}$  (seeking "faith" or "faithfulness"), by which the righteous man is described. Although Laetsch recognizes that  $\text{נִדְרָהּ}$  often means "faithfulness," he opts for the  $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ -type definition, along with all the New Testament freight that  $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$  carried with it, on the basis of the apostle Paul's quotation of Hab. 2:4 in Rom. 1:17. Writes Laetsch:

To deny that the only correct translation of Hab. 2:4 is "faith," and not "faithfulness," i.e., faithful performance of one's duty, is to deny not only the correctness of Paul's translation of this term Rom. 1:17; it would undermine his entire argument for the doctrine of justification, not by any works of man, but solely through faith in the vicarious atonement effected by Christ Jesus. He would base his argument for this thesis on a Scripture passage which in fact teaches the exact opposite: Salvation by faithful performance of one's duty. The Holy Spirit speaking through Paul certainly knew what he meant by emunah when He spoke Hab. 2:4 through his prophet (cp. 1 Peter 1:10-11).<sup>86</sup>

The argument that the Holy Spirit knew what he himself was saying will be heard again in connection with Messianic prophecy. The logic used here seems to falter a little: Laetsch diverts from the most common meaning of  $\text{נִדְרָהּ}$  and accepts the translation for it in Jer. 5:1 that appears to be correct only in a minority of cases on the basis of Paul's

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<sup>86</sup>Laetsch, Jeremiah, p. 73.

using the minority translation in a completely different pericope, Hab. 2:4. An interpreter can go to such lengths only if a doctrinal issue is at stake, in this case the doctrine of justification. The proof-texting method of the res-to-verba school is in evidence here, but why Laetsch should happen to chose Jer. 5:1 as a battleground for justification is difficult to tell. If the doctrine of justification stands or falls depending upon the translation of  $\text{אֱלֹהֵינוּ}$  in Jer. 5:1, then the same could be said for virtually every occurrence of the term. A systematic body of doctrine is comprised of individual points of doctrine which are interrelated and dependent upon one another: if one point of doctrine is removed or shaken, there is the perceived danger that the whole doctrinal structure may collapse. Correspondingly, when the whole body of the Scriptures is made to conform to, and attach itself to, the systematic structure, there is then the parallel perceived danger that the questioning of a single Bible verse may lead to the collapse of its respective doctrine, and the whole doctrinal structure may consequently collapse along with it. Every verse in Scripture, then, tends to be treated as a sedes doctrinae, as proof positive, of a point of doctrine, regardless of what line of reasoning needs to be pressed into service.

When a systematic theology identifies individual points of doctrine, the individual doctrines are often lined up against their respective antitheses. Thus, in Jer. 5:1, for example, Laetsch lines up the righteousness of faith over against its opposite, the righteousness of works. However, it is entirely possible that the Biblical text, with its use of the word  $\text{אֱלֹהֵינוּ}$ , had no such doctrinal thesis and antithesis in mind. Laetsch establishes an either-or situation for

determining the proper definition of  $\text{עֵתָּוְיָוֶן}$ : the term is thought to mean either a faithfulness of a purely ethical nature or a faith that embodies the full-blown Pauline doctrine of  $\text{πίστις}$ . This appears to be a false alternative, a partitioning of reality along lines that the vocable itself does not draw. Rather than dividing up the faithful life with God into individual parts in atomistic fashion or setting up the choice of alternatives, the word "faith(fulness)" appears to be an all-inclusive both-and kind of term, which includes trust in Yahweh, faithfulness to the covenant, rejoicing in the right, and confessing the wrong. Laetsch's treatment of the vocable is somewhat reminiscent of the temptation in systematics and homiletics to treat justification and sanctification as wholly separate, isolated entities.

#### Jeremiah 6:27

The opening clause of this verse is difficult to interpret, and Laetsch readily admits this in a full-page grammatical note.<sup>87</sup> The words in question are:  $\text{אֶתְּבַחֵנִי כְּמִצְדָּה וְכִמְצֻדָּה אֶתְּבַחֵנִי}$ , "I have appointed you a tester (tower) among my people, an assayer (fortification.)" The word  $\text{בִּחְנִי}$  is a hapax legomenon whose root verb ordinarily means "to examine, to try," although the noun  $\text{בִּחְנִי}$  in Is. 32:14 is is commonly translated "watchtower."  $\text{מִצְדָּה}$  normally refers to some type of fortification, but Laetsch covers every option of interpretation for the word, connecting it with  $\text{מִצְדָּה}$  ("ore") and thus the smelting process, and he even repeats the speculation that  $\text{מִצְדָּה}$  is an explanatory gloss for  $\text{בִּחְנִי}$ . However, having puzzled at length over these matters, Laetsch swiftly leaves all puzzlement behind by opting for

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p. 89-90.

the testing/assaying alternative and then by explaining the verse as follows:

By preaching to them the Law of God in its fullest implications, its inexorable demands, its threats of destruction, death, and damnation for all transgressors, and by proclaiming the Gospel of the coming Messiah, the Lord our Righteousness, he was to purify, to renew the wicked nation, to cause it to return to God, to be re-established as the Lord's own. At the same time he was to separate from this holy nation all those who would refuse to accept His Word, reject the Law of the Lord of unalterable justice and righteousness, and despise the Gospel of the Lord of unchanging mercy and grace. Jeremiah finds no silver or gold; only worthless dross remains, to be cast away. That was to be the experience of Jeremiah as tester of the nation.<sup>88</sup>

There are several reasons for introduction Laetsch's discussion of this verse. Here is an example of how a res-to-verba exegete, in his eagerness to find material relevant to his doctrinal pursuits, can quickly, easily, and forthrightly arrive at firm exegetical decisions, no matter how difficult or even obscure the Biblical text is. In the quote cited above Laetsch has left behind all the exegetical questions that have so recently occupied his attention, and he has moved directly into assertive speech, the orations of a man who has no questions. Perhaps many would prefer Laetsch's approach over that of an interpreter who remains perpetually afraid to make any text-based assertions at all, but courage can be perceived as recklessness when there remains the possibility that the text is being misinterpreted. The courage of Laetsch seems to stem from a doctrinal assuredness: as long as the interpreter's presentation is doctrinally correct, other interpreters, especially orthodox ones, might hesitate to question the exegetical findings of a like-minded brother.

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

The above quotation also illustrates a second point, namely, the manner in which Laetsch expands outwardly the meaning of an individual Bible passage. Instead of relating his exegesis of the verse to the Biblical context of that verse, Laetsch expands the meaning into another context, his systematized res of law-Gospel and its implications. With only a few minor alterations, Laetsch's quote could easily be inserted into a commentary on Romans, since it is doctrine as such, not the text itself, that is being elaborated upon. There appears to be a propensity in res-to-verba exegetes to try to make each and every Scripture verse say everything: an interpreter who approaches a text with a whole body of doctrine in view tends to say exactly what is on his mind--the whole body of doctrine--and not limit himself to what either the divine or human author has on his mind.

Jeremiah 11:16

In the midst of an oracle of doom against the inhabitants of Jerusalem Jeremiah in this verse speaks in the fashion of Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard" in Is. 5:1-7, saying that Israel, "a flourishing olive tree laden with beautiful fruit" ( וְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּצִיִּיטוֹן מְפִיִּיט פְּרִי יָפֵה ), will be consumed in the fires of judgment. Concerning this verse Laetsch writes:

The oil of which the olive is the source is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and his gifts (Ps. 45:7; Acts 10:38). So the Church of God and its individual members became by the grace of God the source of spiritual life and blessing to their fellow men, their words and deeds testifying to the life-changing power of their God and Savior.<sup>89</sup>

This citation is noteworthy because of Laetsch's allegorizing, a method

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 128.



that will be useful in his pursuits of Old Testament Christology, as the next chapter will explain. In reality Laetsch speaks of an allegory twice-removed, since the oil itself is only obliquely referred to, and from this he constructs a rather curious flow of logic which appears to go beyond the point of comparison intended by the tree metaphor: since olive trees have olives, and olives produce oil, the oil must point to the Holy Spirit as it does in other places, at least presumably so; and, since the Holy Spirit is always found in the possession of the Church, where the Spirit directs his power toward the fulfillment of specific purposes, and one of those purposes is the mission task of the Church, therefore, this verse must be urging that the Church must be about the business of spreading of the Gospel! In its context the tree metaphor seems simply to indicate that Israel has abused the favors of Yahweh through her idolatry, her burning of incense to Baal (verse 17). But Laetsch often uses allegory as a portal through which he can introduce doctrine: by perceiving several points of comparison he is able to travel along several lines of communication within his body of doctrine. Exegesis of the original text then tends to become instead an after-the-fact exercise in doctrinal free association, by which the attempt is again made to have one Scripture verse say everything.

#### Jeremiah 15:19

In this chapter Jeremiah has been questioning his role as a prophet because of his hardships and the persecutions he faces. In this verse Yahweh seeks to confirm the prophet in his office with the words:  $\text{ךְיָגִי־שׁוֹבֵי־אֶרֶץ־יִשְׂרָאֵל} : \text{"if you will (re)turn, I shall bring you back (restore you)."} \text{The first occurrence of } \text{וְיָשׁוּב$  appears to be a summary

word for repentance or a change of heart, while the second occurrence in the hiphil is ordinarily a standard word for restoration to one's original status. Thus, in the context of the larger pericope the clause above is promising that as Jeremiah abandons his questionings and remains faithful to the message entrusted to him, Yahweh will confirm him in his initial call to be a prophet. Laetsch, however, in translating the clause, "If you turn I will turn you," uses his rendering of  $\text{נָשׁוּב}$ , and especially the hiphil form, as a catchword for introducing the doctrine of conversion, showing that conversion is entirely the work of God.<sup>90</sup> Although there is possibly a remote connection between this verse and the doctrine Laetsch teaches, he passes over the context as it relates to Jeremiah's prophetic role and in so doing makes a generalization applicable to the entire unbelieving world. In this example the force of Laetsch's doctrinal stance is targeted specifically toward the definition of one vocable: the standard definition is replaced by a rather skewed one, which might more effectively serve as a terminus technicus for the doctrine Laetsch has in mind.

#### Jeremiah 15

In summarizing this chapter Laetsch gives a one-page description of Jeremiah's prophetic role, concluding with the following words:

And from these battles with his flesh, from these controversies with his God, he rose by the grace and in the power of his God more than a conqueror; facing undauntedly and fearlessly the wicked kings, the lying prophets, the treacherous courtiers, the howling mobs; not a weeping prophet, not a sob sister, but a man's man, God's man, the one real man in an age of cruelty and cowardice and belly service and egotism. And as a man of God he penned not only his victories, his accomplishments, his bravery. With equal candor and rare truth-

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 152-3.

fulness he painted himself, as he was, his doubts, his human weakness, his sins. we thank him for his manlike honesty and seek to learn the lesson for which these words also are penned, for our admonition and warning (1 Cor. 10:11-13) and our comfort (Rom. 15:4).<sup>91</sup>

There is a two-fold reason for introducing these words from Laetsch's pen. First, the persistent use of a Gospel res might ordinarily lead the interpreter to place the heavy accent on the work of God in the life of the Biblical character; however, as Laetsch often does, the emphasis falls more on the character himself and in this case on Jeremiah's public valor in the midst of privately expresses doubts. Again, the "hermeneutic of application" leads Laetsch to establish Jeremiah as an exemplar of godly living. As an interpreter tends to highlight his own "spiritual song" of response to a text, he tends also to highlight the responses of Biblical characters under discussion.

Secondly, Laetsch juxtaposes a "sob sister" and a "man's man," who never shows signs of public weakness but yet displays a "manlike honesty." Of course, no reader of Laetsch should use the occasion of these words for launching a campaign for an equitable view of the sexes; nevertheless, the point to be made here is by no means trivial: in some way or another every interpreter is a product of his times, his cultural milieu, and Laetsch is certainly no exception to this. This needs to be remembered, especially by those who would read Laetsch's words as the definitive commentary on the Biblical subject.

#### Jeremiah 31:8

In the pericope of Jer. 31:7-9 the prophet promises the return of Jacob from his captivity in Babylon. In verse eight he describes the

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 154-5.

returning group as a  $\text{גִּיְתָא גְדוּלָה}$ , a "great congregation" of people. Laetsch, however, sees nothing of the Babylonian Captivity in these verses; instead he interprets the large company of people to be the New Testament Church on the grounds that the number of returning exiles was relatively small.<sup>92</sup> Since the return from exile is described by Jeremiah in vivid, almost surrealistic terms, and since Jeremiah's familiar "new covenant" pericope is part of this same chapter, it would undoubtedly be a mistake not to include the ultimate deliverance of the whole people of God in one's interpretation of these verses. But one is equally mistaken to posit the eschatological reference to the total exclusion of any contemporary, Babylonian reference. This example from Laetsch is presented here as an advance signal of what will be fully treated in the final chapter.

For Laetsch an Old Testament word of promise cannot have two referents at the same time: Jeremiah could be referring to Babylon or to the final deliverance but not to both at the same time. The result is that there is little "realized eschatology" in Laetsch's writings, especially in those cases that involve a good, beneficent prediction of the future. Also interesting about this example is the manner in which Laetsch assigns an exclusively eschatological meaning to this pericope, namely, by homing in on the phrase  $\text{גִּיְתָא גְדוּלָה}$ . Quite often an interpreter who perceives a double reference, both contemporary and eschatological, in a single pericope finds that the sum-total description of events in the text does not correspond exactly and in every detail to either reference. Such an interpreter is then obliged to take

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 246.

a step backward from the individual verba in order to take in the overall impression or impressions of the pericope as a whole. But an approach such as this is not exacting enough for a res-to-verba exegete, who is inclined toward a vocabulary-bound, pinpointed type of focus, and who assumes that every pericope is simply the sum of its vocabularic parts. As will be seen Laetsch's either-or approach to prophecy has great repercussions for Old Testament theology. In the Jeremiah pericope the informatory role of theology can be seen in Laetsch's apparently arbitrary decisions to render the phrase  $\text{רִיבֹן} \text{רִיבֹן}$  literalistically and in the same verse to render the  $\text{אֶרֶץ} \text{צָפוֹן}$  ("the land of the North") figuratively as the "farthest points of the earth."<sup>93</sup>

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Regarding the phrase "righteous branch" ( $\text{צֶדֶק} \text{עֵצ}$ ) in Jer. 23:5 Laetsch sees the promise of the coming Messiah, as one would naturally expect.<sup>94</sup> However, the phrase  $\text{עֵצ} \text{צְדָקָה}$  (branch of righteousness) in Jer. 33:15 is taken by Laetsch to be a designation for the New Testament Church.<sup>95</sup> The slight difference in phraseology could be accounted for simply by noting that in the latter phrase the common Hebrew aversion to adjectives led to Jeremiah's use of the construct chain, but Laetsch discovers a great deal of theology in this alteration of phrasing. The best way to explain Laetsch's position is to let his own words speak for themselves:

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

Vv. 14-16. At first reading this promise seems to be merely a repetition of ch. 23:5-6. Yet there are several omissions and changes, some of them of great significance, which stamp this prophetic utterance as differing from ch. 23:5-6.

1. Jer. 23:5 we read: "Behold, the days come"; Jer. 33:14: "In those days and at that time," referring to the time when the Lord shall have fulfilled His promise to send the Messiah (v.14).

2. Jeremiah 23 we read: "I will raise"; Jeremiah 33: "I will cause a branch to sprout"; the perfect there denotes an accomplished fact; the imperfect here a repeated act.

3. There we read: "a Righteous Branch"; here: "a branch of righteousness." These terms may be synonymous, but may just as well be chosen to denote a distinction.

4. The clause "A King shall reign and prosper," is omitted here.

5. Judah and Israel are named there, here Judah and Jerusalem.

In v. 14 "and" before "to the house of Judah" is the specifying "and," to be translated "namely," "in particular." Cp. Gen. 3:16, particularly thy conception; 1 Sam. 17:40, even (Hebrew, and = namely) in a scrip; Ps. 18:1, particularly from Saul; Is.2:1, in particular, Jerusalem; Zech. 9:9, namely, upon a foal; etc. See G.-K. 154a, note 1b.

6. There we read: "This is His name whereby," etc. Here: "And this is what one shall call," etc. Why the significant omission of "name," designating His very nature as He reveals it?

7. There we read: "His name," one shall call Him; here, one shall call "her," i.e., Judah-Jerusalem.

This last fact forces upon us the conclusion that ch. 33:15-16 is not a mere repetition of ch. 23:5-6, but that these are two separate and distinct prophecies, ch. 23:5-6 speaking of the Messiah, the Christ, ch. 33:14-15 of Judah and Jerusalem "in those days and at that time," i.e., the church of God in the era of the Messiah, the New Testament Church of God.

1. The Christian Church came into existence only after the Messiah had come.

2. The raising up of the Branch was a unique fact, complete in the coming of Christ, hence the perfect is used in the Hebrew text; the Church is constantly sprouting to the end of time, hence the imperfect.

3. The Messiah is the Righteous Branch, personally righteous in divine perfection; the Church is "a sprout of righteousness," because her righteousness is an imputed righteousness, and even her personal righteousness is accounted perfect righteousness only because of Christ's vicarious perfection.

4. In the Christian Church, Christ alone rules as a King; therefore this clause is omitted in ch. 33:15.

5. The Church is Christ's instrument through which He will establish "judgment," His norm, the Gospel, and "righteousness," procured by Him, and offered, conveyed, and sealed to mankind by this Gospel.

6. Jerusalem is named ch. 33:16b, instead of Israel, ch. 23:6, because Jerusalem is the Holy City, the dwelling place of God; and Judah-Jerusalem shall be called Jehovah Our Righteousness only because of the presence of Jehovah Our Righteousness in Jerusalem, the city of God.<sup>96</sup>

In the pages that immediately follow Laetsch gives a lengthy explanation of how the Church can be called Jehovah our Righteousness, reminding his readers that the Church is not essentially Jehovah or equal to him.<sup>97</sup>

It is difficult to determine why Laetsch would want to press for an ecclesiastical interpretation of Jeremiah 33, unless, of course, he actually does arrive at that interpretation strictly through an unbiased examination of the grammar. The first set of points contains purely grammatical evidence, while the second set infuses doctrinal considerations into the discussion, and it is easy to draw the conclusion that the second set of points exerted a great influence on the first set. Regarding the first set, it is hard to see in point one what kind of distinction Laetsch is trying to make, especially since Laetsch sees both time-formulas as referring to the era of the New Testament virtually without exception and since both formulas speak of "days" in the plural.

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 268-70.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 270-1.

The second point is even more mysterious, because both pericopes use throughout either the imperfect tense or the perfect plus waw consecutive. Laetsch rightly notes in point three that the phrases "Righteous Branch" and "Branch of Righteousness" may be synonymous, but it soon becomes clear that he opts for the perception of a distinction. Point four, in noting the absence of "King" in the second pericope, employs an argument from silence that is hardly conclusive. The reason why Laetsch pushes for an "epexegetical waw" in ch. 33:14 ("house of Israel, namely the house of Judah") is clarified, but only marginally so, in the last point of the second set. Here, such a conclusion does not appear to be justified at all, since the parallelism "house of Israel and house of Judah" is a common designation for the sum total of people in God's Old Testament nation, encompassing both the northern and southern kingdoms. In point six Laetsch uses another argument from silence, pointing out that Jeremiah 33 does not mention the divine "name." One is hard pressed to draw far-reaching conclusions from the impersonal expression in Jeremiah 33. Finally, point seven appears to provide the most concrete evidence of Laetsch's interpretation, because Jeremiah 33 does use the feminine expression "one shall call her," referring presumably to Judah-Jerusalem, since  $\pi\Omega\zeta$  is a masculine noun. There have been numerous variants to explain this difficulty, such as the Syriac's inclusion of  $\dot{\iota}\rho\psi$  ("his name"); but in any event Laetsch's argumentation hardly seems to supply conclusive proof for his interpretation.

To sum up these first seven points, all of Laetsch's supposed grammatical evidence for his ecclesiastical interpretation of Jeremiah



33 can just as easily be construed as occurrences of simple stylistic differences, which differences in no way alter the net effect or meaning of the pericope as a whole. However, Laetsch, presumably in the interest of the doctrine of the Church, pursues with Jeremiah 33 an atomistic approach toward the verba, overlooking the fact that both Jeremiah 23 and 33 add up to the very same result when one considers the sum totals of their constituent parts. An important lesson to be learned from this is that when an interpreter has a particular doctrinal goal in mind, he can make a Biblical pericope say what he wants it to say, even when he is rallying to his support commonly accepted rules of grammar. In the case at hand Laetsch perceives a grammatical precision that appears to go far beyond any precision of expression intended by the grammar of Jeremiah 33 itself. At the very least, in the presence of a firmly established res-to-verba direction it is possible even for grammatical rules to lose their status as neutral, face-value data.

When one considers the solidarity between Christ and his Church, as it is reflected, for example, between the individual and corporate "Servant" in Isaiah, one may not even consider it strictly necessary to make a decision one way or the other with Jeremiah 33. But to refrain from making such a decision would not be Laetsch's style, because an admission of a typological relationship would be involved. It is good, however, to see Laetsch looking so closely at the verba, and his interpretation of Jeremiah 33 cannot be ruled out.

#### Jeremiah 46:26

In the unit of thought that encompasses Jer. 46:25-26 the prophet speaks of the downfall of Amon of Thebes at the hands of Nebuchadrezzar

and of all Egypt along with this false deity. The battle for the kingdom of God, after all, is not only a contest between nations but also one waged between the true God and all false gods. In closing, however, Jeremiah speaks a word of hope for Egypt: "afterwards" (  $\text{ךֹּ־׳ֶןִּלְאֵ}$  ) Egypt will "dwell (securely)" (  $\text{ךֹּ־׳ֶןִּלְאֵ}$  ). This reference to a later point in time, similar to the promise of restoration for Ammon in 49:6, could refer to a general repopulation of the area or possibly even to the Israelite resettlement which takes shape already in Jeremiah's time. At the very least there is the suggestion here that Yahweh, in terms of his overall purposes for the world, simply is not yet finished with his dealings with Egypt. But Theodore Laetsch is able to get much more specific about the contours of this prophecy, pointing out that for several centuries Egypt was an early stronghold of the Christian Church, and in a vocable-bound fashion he does so primarily on the basis of the phrase  $\text{ךֹּ־׳ֶןִּלְאֵ}$ .<sup>98</sup> This example is illustrative of how any such future time reference is for Laetsch an unmistakable, exclusive indication of Messianic times. As will be shown, this treatment of the text has a bearing on Laetsch's whole view of the Old Testament and God's kingdom-directed activity in that time. Again, the force of individual words, apart from their contexts, makes its presence felt in Laetsch's exegesis.

#### Lamentations 2:9

Describing Yahweh's punishment of Judah and Jerusalem, Jeremiah says that her kings and princes will be found among the nations and that there will be no  $\text{ןֶןִּלְאֵ}$ . In the same verse this statement is paralleled by the promise that her prophets will find no vision (  $\text{ןֶןִּלְאֵ}$  ) from

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

Yahweh. This parallelism would ordinarily lead an interpreter to adopt the translation of "teaching" or "instruction" for the word  $\text{הַתּוֹרָה}$ . The verse then is seen as a pronouncement of punishment, that the Word of Yahweh, unappreciated by the people for so long, was finally being taken away from them. But Laetsch interprets  $\text{הַתּוֹרָה}$  as the "Jewish law" which regulated the sacrificial system of the temple.<sup>99</sup> Apart from the fact that Laetsch consistently assigns a purely legal definition to the word  $\text{הַתּוֹרָה}$ , a practice that tends to legalize the whole message of the Old Testament, this example also shows the tendency in Laetsch to adhere to a singular static definition for a term even when the context might dictate otherwise. This tendency appears to flow from the need in systematic theology to employ terms that are constant in definition for the building of a framework for a body of doctrine. Thus, systematic theology can be seen to inform the Biblical text, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of method.

#### The Song of Songs

In setting the stage for his discussion of the book of Hosea and the prophet's marriage to the prostitute Gomer, Laetsch mentions how the covenant relationship is often symbolized by the institution of marriage, where God is betrothed to Israel his bride. Laetsch says that this marriage symbol is "brought out in full detail in the Song of Songs."<sup>100</sup> Of course, this allegorical interpretation of the Song of Solomon is a rather common one, but it is not the only interpretation to be found,

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>100</sup>Laetsch, Minor Prophets, p. 19.

in the Lutheran Church or elsewhere. What is interesting about this example is that Laetsch assumes an interpretation that would otherwise be debatable; apparently he is adopting what is for him the standard interpretation which he shared with his exegetical peers. It would be interesting to see how the Song, according to Laetsch, presents the marriage imagery in "full detail." This example suggests the oft-found inclination in Laetsch to provide exegetical evidence for old interpretations and not exegetical groundwork for new insights. Systematic theology, after all, emphasizes that the insights have already been gained.

#### Hosea 9:16

In a lengthy section of judgment Hosea prophesies the coming destruction of the Northern Kingdom, a sentence well deserved because of her apostasy and Baal worship. The cutting off of the nation is aptly summarized in verse eleven: "no birth, no pregnancy, no conception!" Verse sixteen is in a similar vein: Israel will be a dried up, unproductive tree, and even the children born to the nation will be shortly slain. Laetsch writes about this verse:

Apostasy from God, particularly if connected with sins against the Sixth Commandment, fornication, abortions, the use of contraceptives, etc., will sap the vitality of a nation, amounts to national suicide. And even if they "bring forth" a child or two, the Lord Himself will slay these petted and pampered darlings, brought up not in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), but in disrespect of God and His Word. Epidemics, bloody wars are his dread instruments of death.<sup>101</sup>

In the immediate context of this Hosea verse no mention is made of sexual sin, although it is implied in the mention of Baal worship.

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

But, assuming for the moment that Laetsch's modern application of this verse is an acceptable one, there still appears to be a problem that needs addressing. In expanding this verse outward into the general principle, that of the prohibition of adultery and its many potential forms, Laetsch bypasses several issues that are contemporaneous to the text, such as the whole context of Baal idolatry and Yahweh's blessing of fertility upon those faithful to the covenant, a blessing now being taken away. Thus, the general principle is seen to displace the specific information that is germane to the text, and contextual matters are seen to fade from view at the point when the moral code of the passage has been deciphered. However, even Laetsch's application itself sounds like it is somewhat lacking: in divorcing it from its context of Yahweh worship versus idolatry Laetsch's words sound somewhat moralistic, for they divorce the sinful manifestations listed from the root cause of adultery and all other sins.

#### Hosea 14

In this final chapter of Hosea's book the prophet describes in poetry rich in agricultural imagery the blessings of Israel's returning in repentance to the Lord. The combination of similes and metaphors, taken together, total up to the grand picture of a restored Israel, who again is thriving and flourishing in the land, a people who has forsaken Assyria and other false objects of trust (verse 3, 4 in Heb.) and who again lives under the gracious shadow of Yahweh (verse 8). But Laetsch, apparently in an effort to make every Scriptural word count for something, takes each simile or metaphor in turn, locates a point of comparison, and builds all these comparisons into a complete picture of

the Christian Church.<sup>102</sup> In the Hebrew verse 8, for example, Laetsch takes the clause  $\int \lambda \overline{7} \cdot \int \text{h} \overline{7} \text{ } \acute{\text{c}}$  ("they shall grow grain") and turns it into a description of the Church's missionary efforts, "the rich harvest of souls gathered into the Christian Church and finally into the heavenly garner."<sup>103</sup>

Laetsch's treatment of this chapter is an interesting case in point. Early on in his discussion he refers to the possibility of the Northern Kingdom being restored to a healthy nation, but then, approximately halfway through his comments he shifts to the topic of man's repentance and God's propitiation in general. From that point onward the future prospects for the nation of Israel are abandoned entirely, and terms appropriate to the New Testament church begin to occupy the discussion. In other words, once Laetsch has identified the proper theological topics of the pericope, topics which sort out the existence of potential modern hearers, then the explanation of the historical contingencies touching the lives of Hosea's original audience is no longer necessary and even beside the point. With this approach and the framing of a theological, not historical, context the individual poetic elements of Hosea's composite picture of Israel's restoration come to be seen in an entirely different light: poetic images must now be fit into a whole new scheme of things, and they become instead carefully delineated and demarcated technical terms which pertain to life within the Christian Church, each term identifying a separate aspect of that life. Such a method tends to distill all Biblical material down to a singular theolog-

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., p. 109-11.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

ical common denominator, with the result that there emerges a "holy language," and with that one language view all Biblical material, be it prose or poetry, hymn or narrative, promise or recounting, tends to be treated exactly the same way. In the case of this chapter of Hosea a poetic, almost surrealistic vision for the future becomes a theological treatise through the process of spiritualizing the material images.

### Joel 2:23

Laetsch's discussion of this passage is a demonstration of how doctrinal considerations, and in this case the Messianic doctrine, can influence an interpreter's selection of definitions and textual critical options. Having prophesied the coming of the locust plague, Joel also predicts that God's gracious relief will shortly follow in the form of life-giving rains and the resultant abundant crops. In this particular verse the somewhat troublesome phrase is  $\text{הַרְבֵּי־צֶמֶחַ מִיְיָ הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־הַיַּיִן מִבְּרֵיתֵנוּ}$

. The majority translation of the clause appears to be: "He (Yahweh) has given you the (early) rain for vindication (or, moderately)." The  $\text{הַרְבֵּי־צֶמֶחַ}$  is admittedly difficult to interpret, especially in conjunction with  $\text{הַיַּיִן}$ , but for Laetsch the real bone of contention is the word  $\text{הַיְיָוִן}$  itself. The Septuagint (secondarily the Syriac)  $\text{\tauὰ βρώματα}$  attests to the difficulty of this phrase. It would seem that the context of this verse, the destruction of crops followed by their revivification, dictates the translation "rain" for  $\text{הַיְיָוִן}$ , and this translation is reinforced by the second appearance of the word later in the same verse, where it appears in parallel with  $\text{עוֹשֵׁי־לֶקֶט}$  ("abundant rain") and  $\text{עוֹשֵׁי־לֶקֶט}$  ("latter rain"). Presumably then, the term  $\text{הַיְיָוִן}$ , along with the related word  $\text{הַיְיָוִן}$ , stems from a homonym

of the more common verb  $\text{הָרָץ}$  in the sense of "to throw, shoot, or point."

Laetsch, however, sees  $\text{הָרָץ}$  as coming from the more common verb, thereby interpreting it in its first appearance in the verse as "teacher of righteousness," a designation for the Messiah. He reaches this conclusion after presenting a full-page discussion of the various options open to the interpreter.<sup>104</sup> How, then, does Laetsch deal with the agricultural context of the verse? He does so basically by spiritualizing the meaning of the surrounding verses, seeing the growth in the fields as a symbol of the new life breathed into the Church.<sup>105</sup>

, says Laetsch, simply must be Messianic because Christ is at the center of Joel's message too. Writes Laetsch:

The Messiah teaches a righteousness which He Himself has vicariously procured for mankind by His life, His suffering, His death. And since His words are spirit and life (John 6:63), He appropriates to men by His Gospel His righteousness, and thus unto us our Righteousness and Sanctification and Redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). "In the first month," literally, "as the first" (Deut. 17:7; 1 Kings 17:13; Is. 60:9; Zech. 12:7) of all the gifts enumerated vv. 24-26, all prophetic perfects of Righteousness, whose merits are retroactive (Heb. 9:15), even as Adam and Eve were given also temporal gifts (family, food, and drink) for the sake of the Messiah while living on the earth accursed for their sakes (Gen. 3:16-19).<sup>106</sup>

Laetsch does not try to account for the lamed affixed to  $\text{הָרָץ}$ ; nor does he account for the second appearance of  $\text{הָרָץ}$  in the same verse other than to speculate that a scribal error has taken place. It appears that even scribal errors may be posited if they serve in the interest of the interpreter's doctrinal pursuits. Even if the preacher on this text does eventually extrapolate on this verse outward into the

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid., p. 125-6.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., p. 126.



field of spiritual blessings, it does not seem right to speak only on the extrapolation and thereby to bypass the text's natural meaning within its setting, the very source upon which he is extrapolating.

Amos 9:6

In Amos 9:5-6 is found a hymn of praise to Yahweh of Hosts, who is in total control of all things. As part of this doxology Amos says that Yahweh builds in the heavens his  $\text{in}i\text{h}y\text{d}$  ("upper rooms, stairs?"). Although the word appears often to mean "stairs," the root verb  $\text{h}y\text{c}$ , especially in this hymnic context, could mean practically anything that goes or remains in an upward direction. But Laetsch sees more in this term than what might first meet the eye. Building upon passages in which  $\text{h}y\text{c}$  appears to mean "stairs," he embarks on a lengthy discussion of the whole Biblical teaching about heaven, drawing into the discussion the "heaven of heavens" phrase in Deut. 10:14, Paul's "third heaven" verse (2 Cor. 12:2), and the mention of Christ's "passing through the heavens" in Heb. 4:14.<sup>107</sup> When an interpreter taps the resource of his whole systematic body of doctrine, each Scriptural verse tends to function as a stepping-off point for a whole range of ideas suggested by the verse, ideas what have become closely associated to each other within his doctrinal corpus. Of course, this can sometimes be a very salutary exercise and a fitting tribute to the unity of Scripture; but such an approach can become problematic when the presentation of a full-blown doctrine preempts the discussion of what might have been the original intention in the mind of the Biblical author. There is somewhat of an inconsistency here: with a passage such as this

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<sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

Laetsch seems to dismiss the author's own intent as being a moot point; with Messianic passages, however, Laetsch will ordinarily insist that the author understood the full import of every word he was saying.

Jonah 1:11-15

This example is introduced into the discussion to indicate a matter of style on Laetsch's part, a style that seems to be greatly tinged by the doctrinal stance he brings to bear on the text. The pericope listed is the story of Jonah's being thrown overboard in the effort to spare the other occupants of the ship. Although some would say that Laetsch recounts accurately this sequence of events, the reader is not likely to feel as though he has been transported back into the eighth century B.C.; instead, there is in evidence a purely external point of view which will continually remind the reader that he is in the twentieth century Lutheran Church. As the res-to-verba direction takes hold, the focal point of interpretation tends to become the interpreter himself, not the text, as the doctrinally laden interpreter becomes the subject, and the Scriptures the object. To summarize Laetsch's recounting, Jonah's willingness to be thrown overboard is sufficient testimony to the sincerity of his confession, and Laetsch spares no superlatives in praising the heroism of Jonah's faith. The crew members in turn, feeling their own sinful human weakness at their unsuccessful attempts to rescue themselves, are hesitant to sacrifice Jonah because of their natural knowledge of the law, which makes killing repugnant to them. In a fashion similar to that of Pontius Pilate, the crew washes its hands of the whole affair, and as the men prayerfully submit to

God's will and beg to be spared in the name of Yahweh, it can be "seen" that a full-fledged conversion has taken place: the members of the crew are now converted children of God!<sup>108</sup> Interestingly enough, out of all the Christological cues that an interpreter might pick up on in this pericope, the idea of one man dying so that the many might be spared is left completely untouched by Laetsch.

It can thus be seen in the recounting above that Laetsch feels the most comfortable using categories and thought patterns of his time. In so doing he runs the risk of reading into the text more than what is there, as Laetsch has probably done by perceiving a forced conversion of the Gentiles.

As a postscript to the conversion of the crew members, Laetsch later maintains that the whole city of Nineveh was converted in the full systematic sense of the term. He reminds readers of the mass hysteria caused by the broadcast of Orson Welles' program, "War of the Worlds," as proof that such a phenomenon was possible.<sup>109</sup>

#### Micah 4:1

This verse is the opening statement in the vision of the heavenly Zion, which is also recorded in Isaiah 2. It contains a bit of "eschatological geography" in that it says Mount Zion will be lifted up as the  $\psi \chi \gamma$  ("highest, chief") of the mountains. Laetsch takes the time to debunk the theory that Zion will literally be the physically highest mountain in the world and sees  $\psi \chi \gamma$  as signifying rank or

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

importance.<sup>110</sup> Other Lutheran exegetes, it seems, would not consider the literal interpretation even to be a possibility. Laetsch also discredits the view that Zion will be the highest mountain in its vicinity, saying that such a view does not fit with the context of the verse nor concur with the evidence of Dan. 2:37-45, Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.<sup>111</sup> The question that immediately comes to mind is: how does the king's dream in Daniel inform or pertain to the reading of Mic. 4:1? Laetsch, simply listing Daniel as cross-reference, does not explain the connection. It is standard procedure for Laetsch to include in his comments a host of cross-references designed to prove the point he is currently making in connection with the passage at hand and then to assume that the reader will understand how all these verses are connected and related. It appears that Laetsch not only tries to substantiate exegetically what has become the standard interpretation of the passage under discussion, as has been pointed out before; he also assumes with his cross-references that his reader will adopt a standard interpretation for these secondary Schriftbeweisen as well. But as is the case with Dan. 2:37-45 one is left to take a calculated guess as to what interpretation Laetsch has in mind and then possibly to come up empty on exactly what the point of comparison is supposed to be. Perhaps Laetsch is assuming a completely different kind of context for the Daniel pericope, that is, a systematics context, in which Daniel has been previously used as a proof passage. Moreover, one will notice that Laetsch is working with two texts that are highly specialized in nature,

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<sup>110</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

a dream interpretation in Daniel and an eschatological vision in Micah. Such Scriptural differences in style and form tend to be glossed over when all the Biblical material is being used for one common purpose, the prooftexting of one's doctrinal points.

Micah 7:11

In a promise of the restoration of God's people Micah says that their walls can be rebuilt and that they will be reclaimed from Assyria and Egypt. As part of this promise of the "day" of deliverance, Micah issues the statement:  $\text{רָחֵק יְהִי יוֹם הַיְשׁוּעָה}$ . The repetition of the heth-qoph combination at the end of the line suggests a possible dittography, thus producing the simple translation: "The day is distant." The troublesome word in the clause is  $\text{רָחֵק}$ , a word which most commonly means an inscribed, (irreversible) decree. The context, on the other hand, suggests the meaning of a prescribed "boundary," since God's reclaiming efforts are seen to extend as far as Egypt and Mesopotamia. Thereby the verse is seen to read: "On that day (your) boundary will be extended." Laetsch, employing the more common definition of  $\text{רָחֵק}$ , arrives at the translation: "This is the day on which the decree will be removed." Then, on the basis of his translation of this most difficult verse, Laetsch makes a far-reaching theological point: the decree which said that Israel was to be God's specially favored people will be abrogated in the Messianic era in order that people of all nations might be included in the Christian Church.<sup>112</sup> In view of the difficulties presented by this clause, it is somewhat amazing how these difficulties disappear as soon as Laetsch starts to urge his doctrinal points. It

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<sup>112</sup>Ibid., p. 286.

seems that, when there are options of interpretation, an exegete like Laetsch will press into service whatever translation is most serviceable. In the case of Micah 7:11 the question for Laetsch does not appear to be which translation most closely concurs with Lutheran dogma or even which translation best fits into the pattern of Lutheran doctrine, but rather which translation has the potential of being the most theologically fruitful, at least in the viewpoint of Laetsch himself, or which can be most easily expanded upon.

Other exegetes might point out that the word  $\rho\tau\tau$ , even if it should be translated as "decree," is never used to designate Yahweh's covenant with Israel. Nor, if the original context is taken seriously, can it be proved that the whole pericope talks about the inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom at all: a case can be made for saying that the text is only talking about the recalling of Israelites from whatever region to which they have been exiled. Finally, another interpreter might be reminded that even in the "New Testament era" Christ himself still exhibited a faithfulness to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 15:24). However, with Laetsch's reading of the clause there can be seen, as it were, a proof-text for the kingdom of God in the making.

#### Habakkuk 2:1

In this verse Habakkuk, puzzling over the will of Yahweh because of the oppressive turn of events against God's people, stations himself upon a rampart ( $\gamma\iota\sigma\tau\eta$ ) to await Yahweh's answers to his questions. Laetsch's comment on this verse is that Habakkuk would not have to, and probably did not, literally stand upon any battlement; instead, Laetsch speculates that Habakkuk was simply consulting the word of God, either

in the form of a preexistent message or in the form of a new oracle. Laetsch cites as evidence for his opinion Prov. 18:10 and "Ps. 73:16f."<sup>113</sup> A quick perusal of these two Scripture verses makes Laetsch's reader wonder what possible connection there is between these two verses and Hab. 2:1. One is left to guess at the connection, as was the case with the connection between Dan. 2:37-45 and Mic. 4:1. In a fashion similar to his treatment of the Jonah story Laetsch seems to be inclined to picture the Biblical character as conducting himself according to the customs, traditions, and theological lore of modern Lutheranism and not according to the environment of the prophet himself. In short, Habakkuk is seen as a twentieth century man, who (at least in regions where political peace prevails) has no need to ponder the necessity of military defenses or physical props for the receiving of "spiritual" messages from God. Only by such a reconstruction of Laetsch's unspoken thoughts can one account for his proposed departure from what is obvious enough in the text itself. Both physical objects and physical activities tend to be dematerialized. In a sense the proof-texting role of the Scriptures is seen to be at stake in such a portrayal of Habakkuk: if, after all, an exegete wants to convince his readers of the Lutheran doctrinal perspective, the best way to have Habakkuk speak for the Lutheran position is to make a Lutheran out of Habakkuk himself. The interpreter, then, is not required to speak only for himself; he sees himself as being at the end of a long line of "Lutheran" witnesses. To a non-Lutheran exegete Laetsch's interpretation must smack of sectarianism.

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid.

## Zephaniah 3:11-12

In this chapter the prophet speaks of the glorious restoration of Israel which will involve not only the purging of foreign, pagan elements but also an internal cleansing, the removal of the proud and rebellious from Israel's own midst. Commenting on the banishment of these who are "exultantly proud" (  $\text{ךְנִיָּצַח אֲנִי־לְעֵלִי}$  ) Laetsch writes:

In the New Testament all "that rejoice in thy pride" (Gr.N.), that proudly rejoice in their own righteousness, that are haughty "because of" (Gr.N.), rather, on my holy mountain, shall be removed. Not only self-righteousness, but also every form of pride, such as boasting in one's Christian parentage, of the fact that one is baptized, confirmed, has joined the church, and making this external fact the basis of one's price and assurance of salvation, excludes from God's Church. (See Is. 1:10ff.; Jer. 7:2ff.; Rom. 2:17ff.; 2 Tim. 3:5.)<sup>114</sup>

In the above quote the designation "Gr.N." refers to Grammatical Notes within the commentary. The first note points out how the second person suffix governs the whole construct phrase, resulting in the rendering "your exultantly proud," while the second note explains that the beth prefix on  $\text{אֲנִי־לְעֵלִי}$  is used in the simple local sense.<sup>115</sup>

It should be noted first that Laetsch transports the whole sequence of events in Zephaniah 3 into the New Testament era, as he is accustomed to doing with any such prophecy. This practice will be seen to have ramifications for Messianic prophecy, as the last chapter will show. Earlier in his discussion of this chapter of Zephaniah Laetsch does hint at the possibility of Old Testament events serving as precur-

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<sup>114</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., p. 376.



sors to the ultimate victory of the kingdom of God,<sup>116</sup> but such preliminary events are mentioned only in passing, and in connection with verses 11 and 12 he focuses solely on the New Testament period. This, of course, might be expected because of the universal sweep of Zephaniah's words, but as to whether or not Old Testament events are completely supplanted is another question.

Secondly, it is interesting to find that Laetsch, in the effort to apply Zephaniah's message to the modern church, should happen to focus on the sin of formalism. Perhaps this sin is brought to Laetsch's attention by the second person references and the naming of God's "holy mountain," both of which bespeak an internal purging through God's judgment. However, Zephaniah never speaks specifically about this error in the rest of his book; if any particular sin is targeted at all, it is bald idolatry (ch.1) and possibly syncretism along with it. Nor would one expect Zephaniah to be talking about formalism, if the standard historical reconstruction of the book is correct: if Zephaniah prophesied during the reign and reforms of King Josiah, who sought to reintroduce the forms of public worship, it would not seem likely that Zephaniah would quell new-found enthusiasm for the ritual by pointing out possible abuses of the external forms. Furthermore, the verb in verse 11, ordinarily pointing to more overt sinful acts, does not seem to paint the usual picture of formalism.

Finally, even if Zephaniah were originally speaking against Judah's formalism, Laetsch's mention of baptism (with a small "b") might be considered suspect by some, especially since Laetsch hardly ever men-

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<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

tions the sacraments anywhere else in his writings. Although it would be easy to read more into Laetsch's comment than he intends to say, it does appear that Laetsch's emphasis upon the Word in his doctrinal res tends to minimize the impact of a sacramentology that glories in the externality of the "simple water" of Baptism. At the very least, it is poor phraseology to place the visible events of Baptism on the same level with confirmation and being listed on a church membership roster, for a Lutheran would hardly deem Baptism a false assurance of salvation.

#### Zechariah 1:8

This example is presented as an illustration of how Laetsch interprets visionary literature for his doctrinal purposes. In Zechariah's first vision in the night, that of the four horsemen, he beholds a man riding upon a red horse. The horse is said to be standing in a grove of myrtle trees that is located, as the Hebrew puts it,  $\text{בְּאֵרֶץ מַרְיָוִת}$ . In this particular form the word occurs only in this verse; in its more common spelling the word, stemming from the verb  $\text{מָרַו}$ , ordinarily refers to some sort of watery depth. In the context the word apparently designates a lowland area or marsh in or about the city of Jerusalem. But Laetsch, picking up on the idea of depth which seems to be a common element of  $\text{בְּאֵרֶץ מַרְיָוִת}$  and its related term in all their appearances, converts the depth-ness into the idea of distress or despair, and from there he moves on to talk about the trials and tribulations of the Church Militant.<sup>117</sup> The Church, he says, is represented by the myrtle trees as an island of comfort in the midst of an antagonistic world.

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

As with other Old Testament literature Laetsch construes the content of visions as referring entirely to New Testament times. In a sense, the visions, replete with symbolic language, are an especially vulnerable target for the theological exegete, who would bring to bear upon the text the full weight of systematized dogma. Instead of grasping the scenario of the vision as a whole, Laetsch sees each and every word as a content-laden symbol in its own right. Thus, every word in the vision leads Laetsch's theological imagination unpredictably in every direction possible. By the end of Laetsch's commentary on Zechariah he has carefully delineated the fully developed doctrines of the Church, of Christ, and of the last things. Again, there is in evidence the tendency to treat all Biblical material the same way, regardless of what form the message takes.

#### Zechariah 11:1-3

This final example of Laetsch's res-to-verba emphasis displays how he employs the context of a pericope for his doctrinal goals. The pericope, which is a self-contained unit, speaks of the destruction of the cedars of Lebanon and the oaks of Bashan by the consuming fires of Yahweh's judgment. In this judgment of cosmic proportions the trees, shepherds, and animals in this "jungle of the Jordan" will be devastated.

Theodore Laetsch, however, perceives a different target in the prophet's words. He opines that these verses are actually speaking about a different geographical location, namely, the destruction of Jerusalem, and about a different historical period, namely, A.D. 70. His reason for this interpretation is a contextual one: since the whole context of the pericope is Messianic (as Laetsch perceives it,) then

these verses must be also Messianic. There is no awareness in Laetsch that the book of Zechariah might be a collection of separate oracles, each with its own distinct message. Furthermore, a cursory look at Laetsch's comments on the surrounding pericopes discovers that Laetsch has used the same approach toward the symbols in those oracles as he does with the oracle at hand. The net result is that Laetsch has set in motion what might be called Messianic chain reaction through which the whole book is seen as being ultimately and exclusively Messianic. But in order to arrive at an interpretation set in Messianic times in chapter 11:1-3 Laetsch is forced to become inconsistent in his handling of the Biblical symbols. In his treatment immediately above of the symbols in Zech. 1:8 he at least looked for ingredients found in the terms themselves, such as the "depths" of tribulation and the comfort of the "myrtle trees;" but here he abandons the symbols completely and forces upon them a new geography. The only reasonable conclusion that one can reach is that Laetsch will urge a consistency of doctrinal presentation, even if in the process he must thereby allow for inconsistencies in the handling of the text.

#### Conclusion

It is hoped that by this point there has emerged a perception of Theodore Laetsch's res-to-verba emphasis by way of the cumulative effect of the evidence. It can also be seen that there is not a trace of any calculated, deliberate attempts to bypass or override the native sense of the Scriptures; on the contrary, Laetsch's approach is spawned by an earnest and pastoral concern for the preservation of Lutheran doctrine

and, in the belief that confessional Lutheran theology entails the correct interpretation of the Scriptures, by a deep reverence for the Scriptures themselves. It would seem possible, however, to maintain such reverential concerns in such a way that speaks both to those who are convinced and to those as yet unconvinced of the Lutheran position in terms and approaches that are common to both.

## CHAPTER 6

### THEODORE LAETSCH AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

In order to uncover an interpreter's views regarding the proper interpretation of the Old Testament it is necessary to examine his understanding of the relationship between the Old Testament and its final chapter, the New Testament. To speak from the context of the Lutheran consensus, the bridge between the testaments is none other than the person of Jesus Christ, who is at the very heart of the Scriptural message as a whole. But how exactly does the Christ form or constitute that bridge? An interpreter's answer to this question is revealed by discovering his perception of the nature of Messianic prophecy and fulfillment. From the wellspring of this perception flow the answers to all other questions regarding his Old Testament views, if indeed Christ is also central to his hermeneutics.

From the beginning to the end of his career Theodore Laetsch espoused what he called the "direct" view of prophecy and fulfillment, championed by men like George Stoeckhardt and put into specific terms for seminary classrooms by Ludwig Fuerbringer. This view, of course, has come to be known as the "rectilinear" view, although it would perhaps be more accurate to call it the purely rectilinear view, since it appears that most Lutheran proponents of typology would place at least some Old Testament prophecies into the rectilinear category.

At various points in the discussion of Fuerbringer's hermeneutical principles, it was observed that he appeared to construct his whole set of statements around his rectilinear perspective and that perhaps the rectilinear view was foremost in his mind from the very outset of the production of his booklet. If the observation with which this present chapter begins turns out to be true--namely, that an interpreter's overall outlook on the Old Testament is shaped by his view of prophecy and fulfillment--then this approach toward hermeneutics perceived in Fuerbringer is certainly understandable and possibly even to be commended for its consistency. As will be seen in the presentation that follows, Laetsch himself possesses a similar consistency: his emphasis on individual vocables, his heavy accent on the informatory role of a systematized Christology, his views on what might be called non-prophetic Old Testament material, and the like, can all be connected in some fashion to his rectilinear approach. Even if another analyst of Laetsch should happen to see this cause-and-effect sequence as moving in the other direction, the lines of connection can still be detected.

It will be seen that Laetsch in his sermon studies and commentaries does not supply for his readers a step-by-step analysis of the rectilinear approach as does Fuerbringer. Such an analysis was considered to be beyond the scope and purpose of his writings, and thus Laetsch quotes virtually no hermeneutical principles of any kind; instead, Laetsch presents to his readers the final product of the principles, that is, the application of the text that is deemed most relevant to his prospective audience. However, what Laetsch lacks in hermeneutical analysis he makes up for by displaying the pastoral heart, as it were, of the rectilinear approach.

In a world that wanted to deny the possibility of Messianic prophecy or of any kind of predictive prophecy, the rectilinear approach provided what it considered irrefutable, unmistakable, and unambiguous evidence to the contrary. When the meaning of Biblical words themselves was historically or socially relativized, men like Fuerbringer and Laetsch could assign to the same words eternal meanings that remained firm and unaltered regardless of where they appeared in time and space. When Bible scholars saw in so-called Messianic prophecies only references and descriptions of phenomena contemporary to the prophecies themselves, men of rectilinear persuasion could retaliate with the diametrically opposite view: these prophecies speak only of the Messiah. If an interpreter accepts without question the rectilinear view, one would have to say that its pastoral role has been fulfilled: in no way whatever will he question the existence of Messianic prophecy nor the Messianic faith that goes along with it. But one question yet remains: in his zeal to impart pastoral comfort has the rectilinear interpreter been a trifle overzealous in presenting his counter-arguments to the skeptics? Has he perhaps overstated the Biblical case for Messianic prophecy by making the texts in question the chief protagonists in a debate which would surface only thousands of years after the first appearance of the Biblical texts?

The rectilinear approach must also be seen as it stands in opposition to its rival approach within the Missouri Synod, that is, the typological school. However, it is not an easy matter to draw straightforward comparisons between the two schools, because the typological school is not quite as monolithic as its opponent. To some within the Synod the word typology (in what is considered its legitimate sense)



signifies nothing more than a hierarchy of symbols and metaphors. To others the term points more toward a reality-versus-reality dynamic which touches upon the very soul of the Old Testament. The problem of arriving at a uniform definition of typology is demonstrated, for example, in a conversation conducted with Walter Roehrs, who has written extensively on the subject of typology. When he was asked to describe the significance of the Old Testament sacrifices in accordance with his view of typology, he responded by placing the sacrifices under the category of the "third use of the law." It would appear that many typologists within the Synod would not fully concur with this description. Meanwhile, even Theodore Laetsch uses the word "type" (as he must, for it is a Biblical term) and goes so far as to say that the Old Testament sacrifices were "means of grace."<sup>1</sup> In the light of these things one might be tempted to reduce the perceived fundamental differences between the rectilinear and typological schools down to the simpler matters of degrees and verifiability. Others, however, will continue to perceive far-reaching differences that touch upon every hermeneutical principle an interpreter might recognize or formulate.

Since it would be difficult indeed to subdivide an interpreter's overall approach to Messianic prophecy and fulfillment into categories and subcategories, and since Laetsch never discusses his hermeneutics in an orderly fashion, the presentation that follows will selectively reproduce the original format used in the quest for Laetsch's hermeneutics: the case study method will be employed, whereby the movement will be from the ad hoc treatment of Biblical texts to underlying assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore Laetsch, The Minor Prophets (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 121.

Every interpreter is bound at some point to infuse a little bit of himself into his interpretations, and in Laetsch's case he had almost three decades on his own in the parish ministry to "find himself" and to become a "self-taught theologian." Bearing these factors in mind, one should not expect Laetsch to be a simple mirror image of Ludwig Fuerbringer; but the rectilinear approach outlined by Fuerbringer will be in evidence at every turn nonetheless. It will be seen that the rectilinear approach amounts to a specialized usage of the res-to-verba emphasis, where particular accents in the doctrine of Christology and the inspiration of Scripture are brought to bear upon particular Bible passages, identified as Messianic prophecies or fulfillments, in order to formulate a conservative Lutheran answer to particular opponents within the Missouri Synod and without.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Theodore Laetsch often wrote about this epistle, which draws in bold strokes the connecting lines between the Old and New Testaments. In his introduction to this pericope, which calls Christ the great "high priest" (ἄρχιερέα), Laetsch writes concerning the Old Testament priesthood:

This Old Testament priesthood was typical, symbolical, pointing forward to the true High Priest, of whom the author of this epistle speaks, who actually accomplished that atonement, that reuniting of God and man, which was prefigured by the sacrifices of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

This quotation aptly summarizes many of the questions and difficulties encountered in the endeavor to arrive at a succinct description of

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<sup>2</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Hebrews 4:14-16," Concordia Theological Monthly 1 (1930): 200.

Laetsch's view of the relationship between the Testaments. It is indeed well nigh impossible to construct such a brief summary that does full justice to the variety of statements made by Laetsch during his career.

On the one hand, Laetsch does use the word "typical" without hesitation, since the Hebrews text itself forms a bridge between the Old Testament priesthood and the priestly office of Christ. On the other hand, it is a characteristic of Laetsch's writing style that he strings together appositional words and phrases, and thus, the words "symbolical" and "pointing forward" are seen as identifying the nature of the word "typical." (Into this family of words might also be added the word "prefigured" at the end of the quote.) Found here in one place are all of the favorite words used by Laetsch to designate the relationship between Old Testament events and New Testament counterparts.

The alignment of the words "typical" and "symbolical" suggests the definition of typology as a system of metaphors, where Old Testament illustrations are paired with New Testament realities; however, and at least in the context of the above quote, the word "symbolical" seems to cry for a much more substantial definition. Indeed, many questions would be answered if a consistent definition of the word "symbol" could be found in all of Laetsch's writings. In the statements immediately prior to this quote Laetsch speaks of a real, actual atonement effected by the high priests through the Old Testament sacrifices, and the reality of that atonement is not minimized, at least in the quote at hand, by the expressions of "pointing forward" or "prefigured." Moreover, neither a rectilinearist nor a typologist would deny that the "reuniting of God and man" was actually "accomplished" in the cross.

In spite of all this, other quotations will be seen where the "symbol" does not appear to participate in the reality which it signifies, where it is only a simple representation of a reality to be found elsewhere. This is especially true of that Old Testament material for which there are no "direct" references or allusions in the New Testament. Regarding the Old Testament sacrifices, Laetsch likes to speak of the retroactivity of the atonement wrought by Christ on the cross on the basis of Heb. 9:15.<sup>3</sup> Putting all things together in preliminary fashion, it appears that Laetsch views the Old Testament sacrifices as effecting an atonement (of sorts) that is one step removed from the atonement in Christ. Only through such a reconstruction of Laetsch's testimony is it possible to hear Laetsch speaking of how one genuine atonement symbolizes another, the ultimate, atonement; Laetsch would be hard pressed, it would seem, to say that the Old Testament sacrifices offered the atonement in Christ in an "even now, not yet" relationship to the cross.

To make such a distinction may seem to some to be only a mental gyration (since atonement is atonement, all the same;) but the ramifications of this distinction can be felt more forcefully when an interpreter moves beyond the sacrifices into the whole field of God-worked Old Testament history. There, on the whole, the metaphorical view of the Old Testament can be seen to hold sway, as it was permitted, if not advocated, by Ludwig Fuerbringer.

A second point to be gleaned from Laetsch's commentary on Hebrews 4 is his identification of Christ as Jehovah, "the great I AM

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Theodore Laetsch, "Hebrews 12:18-24," Concordia Theological Monthly 8 (1937): 687.

THAT I AM,"<sup>4</sup> in connection with the phrase *χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας* ("yet without sinning") in verse fifteen. From this rather common identification it would be a fairly simple matter to envision the Christ (and His Gospel) as being alive and fully active within the pages of the Old Testament, but ordinarily such a conclusion goes beyond what Laetsch intends to say. Here, as in other places, Laetsch is only expounding on the doctrine of the incarnation: if Christ is sinless, and only God himself is sinless, therefore Christ is God himself. In another place, by way of contrast, Laetsch states that the God of the Old Testament was Jehovah and the God of the New Testament is Christ.<sup>5</sup> Here and at every turn in the excursion through Laetsch's writings the question must be posed: to what extent is the Gospel dynamic there, alive and active, in the Old Testament, and to what extent is that Gospel only illustrated and promised? At what point does discontinuity between the Testaments end and continuity begin?

Deuteronomy 18:15-19

In his article on this pericope Laetsch exercises great care to show that Christ himself is the one and only fulfillment of this rectilinear prophecy by drawing from the corresponding testimony in the New Testament. His argumentation is summarized in seven points, here translated from the German:

1. He is a prophet. John 1:17; 4:19, 35, 36; Heb. 1:1
2. God places his Word in his mouth. He speaks nothing other than what God has said to him. John 5:38; 14:10, 24.

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<sup>4</sup>Laetsch, "Heb. 4:14-16," p. 204.

<sup>5</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Ephesians 1:3-14," Concordia Theological Monthly 16 (1945): 314.

3. He originates from the Jews, a man among men. Heb. 2:11
4. God has inspired him. How often Jesus immediately points out that he is an ambassador from God! John 3:34; 5:36-43; 6:29, 57; etc.
5. Jesus alone is like Moses and yet greater than Moses.
6. This God-man prophet is a prophet like we must have. As a man he knows our needs through his own experience; as God he has taken an active part in all the ways of the Lord and speaks from it of his own volition; as a mediator of grace he has given us through his Word life and happiness. Ps. 45:2; Luke 4:22; Mark 12:3; Is. 42:1-3; 50:4
7. Whoever does not obey this prophet, from him will God require an accounting. John 3:18, 36; 1 John 5:12; Mark 16:16; Acts 4:12.<sup>6</sup>

Laetsch's treatment of this text is illustrative of how he deals with many other Old Testament verses which are thought to be rectilinear prophecies: the New Testament is searched for a point-by-point corroboration of the content of the Old Testament prophecy. It is interesting how under point six Laetsch draws upon other Old Testament verses which themselves are viewed as rectilinear prophecies. Also noteworthy is how Laetsch recognizes the type-antitype relationship that is Scripturally verified (see Acts 3:22) and how he sees an escalation of the antitype over the type in accordance with the letter to the Hebrews.

What remains to be seen is how Laetsch treats other possible types and antitypes for which there is no direct, point-by-point corroboration, in a provable fashion, in the New Testament. Although it is hard to imagine anyone objecting to Laetsch's treatment of this Deuteronomy pericope, his discussion raises many additional questions: in what way, for example, were the figure of Moses and the events surrounding his life actively shaped by the Christ who was to come? In what way, if any, is it possible to recognize other possible type-

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<sup>6</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Wer ist der Prophet in Deut. 18,15-19?" Concordia Theological Monthly 2 (1931): 434-5.

antitype relationships where there is no direct, point-by-point corroboration in the New Testament? In every case do New Testament parallels exhaust every possibility of interpretation for passages like Deuteronomy 18, even if all such possibilities are found to be exhausted for that particular passage?

To be sure, many of the typological school might also see the Deuteronomy 18 passage as being exclusively Messianic, although one might see the prophetic office as such being described; but nevertheless, Laetsch's treatment of this pericope brings to mind a further question. In connection with verse eighteen Laetsch points out other names and pictures (Namen und Bildern) by which the Christ was known in the Old Testament,<sup>7</sup> including, for the first time in Laetsch's writing career, the "Angel of the Lord." By proving the Messianicity of the "Prophet" and other names and pictures found in the Old Testament, does Laetsch also, perhaps unwittingly, prove the lack of Messianicity in the intervening Biblical material? Is Laetsch's aim that of picking the Messianicity out of the Old Testament like, as Martin Naumann says, "a child picks raisins out of a cake?"<sup>8</sup> In what way, if any, is Christ to be found in those sections of the Old Testament for which there is no New Testament verification of a point-by-point typological relationship? These are questions with which every student of the rectilinear school must ponder, even though Laetsch probably did not mean to pose them himself.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 431.

<sup>8</sup>Martin Naumann, "Messianic Mountaintops," The Springfielder 39 (1975): 6.

Hosea 1:10 - 2:1 (2:1-3 in Hebrew)

This passage is on the cutting edge between the two schools of thought in the Missouri Synod, and Theodore Laetsch uses the discussion of this pericope to urge his rectilinear views. Laetsch's comments below are taken from his 1932 journal article, which is a much lengthier treatment than that found in his commentary twenty-five years later. In both places the conclusions reached are identical, a fact that clearly shows the consistency of Laetsch's approach.

To set the stage for the discussion, the marriage of Hosea to the prostitute Gomer has just taken place and has concluded with the birth of his third child, "Not my people" ( 'פֹּיֵן יִלְדָה ). In the pericope at hand, however, there follows a promise of restoration: Israel, numbering again like the sand of the sea, shall be gathered together again as one people with one head over them and with the title "Sons of the living God," a fact recognized by the renaming of Hosea's children with names that reflect God's mercy.

Although the context would seem to indicate that the nation of Israel is the subject under discussion, that Israel, the same people that is to be punished for her apostasy, will then be restored, Theodore Laetsch emphatically makes his case for concluding that this promise of restoration is a direct prophecy of the conversion of the Gentiles.<sup>9</sup>

The comments of Laetsch here cover several pages, but his train of thought is relatively easy to follow. Foremost in his mind is Rom. 9:25, 26, where the apostle Paul quotes Hos. 1:10 (Heb. 2:1) along

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<sup>9</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Hosea 1-3," Concordia Theological Monthly 3 (1932): 42-5.



with Hos. 2:23 (Heb. 2:21) in his argument for the incorporation of the Gentiles into the Christian Church.

Now if Paul could find the conversion of the Gentiles in these verses, any modern interpreter should certainly be able to do likewise. The grandeur of Paul's application of these verses is only magnified when one sees, as a typologist might see, an Old Testament type of the New Testament fulfillment in, for example, the restoration of the temple under Zerubbabel. However, on the basis of Paul's application, Laetsch wants to see only the more distant, Messianic fulfillment. In order to arrive at an exclusively New Testament Messianic interpretation, Laetsch needs to discount any references to the Old Testament period, and in order to do that, a goodly number of twists and turns in the historical context need to be sorted out. But this becomes unnecessary when Laetsch finds a safe haven elsewhere: in a vocabulary-bound method of exegesis where contextual matters can (for the moment) be permitted to fade from view. Picking up on the name "Not my people" in verse nine, Laetsch moves on to speak about people who had never been the people of God; namely, the Gentile nations:

Because of the admission and reception of these heathen into spiritual Israel, into the New Testament Church, God's promise given to Abraham shall indeed be fulfilled, Very clearly God here prophesies the admission of the heathen into the covenant relations with God.<sup>10</sup>

If the interpretation of the phrase 'בְּעַמֵּי אֲרָם is suitable for Laetsch's purpose, what then is to be done with the rest of Hosea's words and phrases? Laetsch provides two answers to this question. First of all, an expression such as, "and they shall appoint for themselves one head" ( וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ אֶת־רֹאשׁוֹ ,) which does not seem to fit the

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

Messianic picture, is left entirely alone. Secondly, there is another way of removing from consideration all the other tangible, historical references from the very outset. It is suggested by Laetsch's comment on Paul's interpretation of Hosea:

Is not the selfsame Spirit speaking through Paul that spoke through Hosea? And is not this Spirit the best interpreter of His words? Since the Spirit speaking through Paul says so, we believe that the Spirit speaking through Hosea here prophesied the calling of the Gentiles.<sup>11</sup>

Giving his own version of the motto, "Scripture interprets Scripture," Laetsch sees Paul's interpretation as having settled any possible questions about the Hosea text. More will be said about this at a later point, but for now it is important to see at work a largely unspoken hermeneutical rule: the Spirit pertains to things "spiritual" (Historical considerations do not fit this category). In the course of discussing this single pericope Laetsch uses a form of the word "spiritual" no less than ten times, as any promise that might be construed as a physical blessing is converted into a spiritual one. The question of just how far an interpreter can launch out into the context with this form of bi-level allegorizing receives a different answer with each text that is confronted.

By removing God's promised blessings from the realm of the physical Israel herself, both here and with other perceived rectilinear prophecies, there is a discernible tendency ultimately to strip the Old Testament of almost any messages of grace: any promise of restoration for the physical Israel is soon carried away into a distant Messianic future. It is interesting, however, that Laetsch does not exclude the

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 44-5.

physical Israel from the phrase "Not my people," and in that way at least he winds up in the same place as many typologists.

This last point introduces one final item about the Hosea passage. Laetsch quotes at length E. W. Hengstenberg, who is somewhat representative of typologists who see both a contemporary and future reference in such Messianic prophecies:

How can a declaration which according to the entire context can refer only to Israel be directly referred to the Gentiles? The answer is found as soon as we trace the prophecy back to its idea. This is nothing else than that of divine mercy, the execution of which may be hindered by apostasy and disloyalty, but which can never be extinguished, since it is based on the essence of God; cf. Jer. 31, 20. As this idea was realized in the reacceptance of the children of Israel, so it is realized in the acceptance of the Gentiles. Because God has promised to accept the children of Israel again, He must accept also the heathen. We are here speaking not of a mere application, but of a real proof. Because God has promised to reaccept the children of Israel, He must accept also the Gentiles. Else that divine counsel would rest on arbitrariness, which is inconceivable in God. Even if the Gentiles are not so near as Israel, still He must, just because He acknowledges the nearer claims, also satisfy the farther ones.<sup>12</sup>

From this quote it becomes clear that Laetsch is arguing, not only for his own rectilinear opinion, but also against another opinion that has now become visible. Laetsch quickly responds to Hengstenberg:

That is rationalism, pure and simple. God must because--we can see it no other way. Must God accept Gentiles because he has promised to accept apostate Israel? Is such a conclusion at all logical? Must I give apples to twenty Negroes because I have promised to give an apple to one white child? Moreover, is Hengstenberg's interpretation doing justice to Paul's own use of these words?<sup>13</sup>

Here follows Laetsch's words about the Spirit, as previously cited by footnote eleven. Laetsch is probably right in questioning the logic of

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<sup>12</sup>E. W. Hengstenberg, The Pulpit Commentary, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

Hengstenberg's words, but the real issue remains Hengstenberg's introduction of the historical context into the discussion. It would appear that no one in the Missouri Synod would dismiss out of hand the Messianic content in Hosea's words to which St. Paul gives testimony; the real question has to do with the historical context of Hosea's word. Can an immediate context and a remote Messianic context both be addressed through the same words? In what sense can both contexts be considered Messianic in the prospect that the Christ himself is active in both contexts, shaping history toward its ultimate purpose? Is it possible to describe the Messianic grace in terms that recognize Hosea's immediate context, in terms that are peculiar to the Old Testament?

Laetsch, according to his understanding of the sensus unus dictum, opts for the single application of Hosea to the Christian era and resists the admission of an "even now, not yet" dynamic. Noticeable in Laetsch's response to Hengstenberg is the everpresent association of typology with rationalism. There is an undercurrent of thought present here: if the logic of an interpreter is at best questionable, then what happens to the longed-for certainty that has been achieved so valiantly by the rectilinear method? Playing such logical games with the contingencies of history, it is thought, will leave students of Scripture "lost in the fog"; but when such contingencies are left behind for the moment, the sure, immovable verba remain unaffected. Does Laetsch actually achieve the certainty he desires? It would seem that he simply transports the element of doubt from one arena to another. Laetsch's original question was: "Are we to trust Hengstenberg's reconstruction of how God was directing history?" Now the question has

become: "Are we to trust Laetsch's rather imaginative reconstruction of the phrase 'הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ'?"

Hosea 2:16, 17 (2:18, 19 in Hebrew)

In Laetsch's discussion of these verses is found a relatively rare phenomenon: he cites a hermeneutical rule to convince the reader of his interpretation. The rule, a paraphrase of Fuerbringer's "Rule 16,"<sup>14</sup> states: "The common use of a word should be retained only so long as the context does not oblige us to deviate from this use."<sup>15</sup>

In verse 16 (Heb. 18) God directs his people no longer to refer to him as 'הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ ("my master/Baal") but rather as 'אֱשֶׁת־יְהוָה ("my husband") in view of the fact, indicated in the next verse, that he is eradicating the use of the names of the אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֵׁרָה among his people. The word in question is the word 'הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ in verse 16 (Heb. 18). Laetsch, applying his cited rule, says that contextual matters require the interpreter to depart from the common use of the word as a designation of the pagan deity in favor of the more generic meaning, "my master,"<sup>16</sup> and all this in spite of the fact that the god Baal is mentioned in both the prior and the following context and in spite of the fact that Laetsch himself suggests the possibility that Hosea is employing a play on words.<sup>17</sup>

Laetsch's argumentation is as follows:

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<sup>14</sup>Ludwig Fuerbringer, Theological Hermeneutics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), p. 10.

<sup>15</sup>Laetsch, "Hosea 1-3," p. 190.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

In the entire context the specific sin of Israel is not once declared to be that of calling Jehovah Baal, but that of seeking other lovers since she had ceased to regard God as a loving husband, merely regarding Him as a harsh taskmaster. In other words, the different light in which Israel viewed Jehovah (no longer as a loving husband, but as a commanding lord) is stressed, not the use of the word Baal for God.<sup>18</sup>

No one, Laetsch maintains, has ever proved beyond a doubt that Israel ever actually called Yahweh by the name of Baal, even though Israel was known to be syncretistic in Hosea's time. In this particular occurrence and grammatical relationship the word 'בַּלְעָזַר is said to have nothing to do with the name of the pagan god. While no one would deny that God wants to be known as a loving husband, and while there is no specific proof that Israel ever called Yahweh Baal, it is still difficult to avoid concluding that a both/and double entendre is operative for Hosea (and the One who inspired him), in view of the stigma connected with the name "Baal." This example illustrates the rigidity with which Laetsch implements Fuerbringer's "Rule 22":

Every word in the Holy Scriptures can have only one intended meaning in any one place and in any one relation. Sensus literalis unus est.<sup>19</sup>

What seals the argument for Laetsch, that 'בַּלְעָזַר carries no thought of the god Baal in Old Testament times, is this: at this point in Hosea's words, and at this particular point alone, the period of the Old Testament is not even the time frame under discussion!<sup>20</sup> Verse 16 (Heb. 18), he says, is a prophecy of the New Testament Church, in which all syncretism and idol worship shall cease. Here again is a case where

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>19</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup>Laetsch, "Hosea 1-3," p. 189.

contextual matters fade from view, where the focus instead is upon individual verba (here, a single word), and where any Gospel dynamic that might possibly be at work for ancient Israel is transported away into the distant future. Time considerations, especially the times of Hosea, give way to a timelessness as "time and eternity merge into one grand picture."<sup>21</sup>

Hosea 2:19, 20 (2:21, 22 in Hebrew)

The discussion of this passage, the famous betrothal passage of Hosea, is brought up at this point simply to introduce a very important question. With all of chapters 1-3 in Hosea, Laetsch has no trouble applying the faithlessness of the harlot to the apostasy of ancient Israel, but then does Laetsch see in this tripartite blessing a corresponding word of God's grace, forbearance, and forgiveness for ancient Israel? By now the reader of Laetsch can almost anticipate his answer. Although at various times in his writings Laetsch can be heard to say that some people in ancient Israel were saved by grace through the coming Messiah, here in his treatment of Hosea Laetsch immediately transports his readers into New Testament times, where grace prevails.<sup>22</sup>

Again, one sees a word of promise removed from its original context and transported away to another time. As Laetsch is seen doing this time and again, to the point that his readers learn to expect it, one question ultimately begs to be asked: when virtually all words of hope and promise have thereby been removed from the Old Testament, what

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

remains of grace for the Old Testament people of God after this purging process has been completed?

Certainly, from the pastoral angle the emphasis of the modern exegete must be upon the grace that avails for his modern audience, and there can be no turning back of the clock to change what has already happened in the Old Testament. Yet, when the Gospel is stripped from its pages, it would seem that the interpreter is left with a predominantly legal view of the Old Testament and that this overall outlook is bound to affect his judgment on the interpretation of individual Old Testament pericopes. How can the Gospel be communicated effectively today on the basis of a document toward which the interpreter himself maintains the point of view: "Nothing now, everything later?"

As was stated at the outset of this chapter, the rectilinear view of Messianic prophecy amounts to a specialized, Christological form of the res-to-verba emphasis. In diametrically opposed fashion it provides a conservative apology against liberal schools who would deny predictive, Messianic prophecy. It safeguards an Old Testament Christology by exactly and scientifically proving that the Messiah is unmistakably named in the Old Testament. It could be said that the rectilinear method accomplishes quite admirably what it has set out to do, but in running the risk of overstating the case for Christ in the Old Testament, it simultaneously runs the risk of understating the very same case. In pinpointing the very Old Testament loci where the Christ is to be found, there is the danger of taking the next logical step, that is, of determining that in the remainder of the Old Testament loci the Christ is not to be found. Unless great care is exercised, and unless the Lutheran interpreter is in constant remembrance of how Christ



is at the center of the Old Testament too, the rectilinear method can take away from the Old Testament considerably more Christology than it has safeguarded. The singular Lutheran hermeneutic of Christ, after all, does not mean to determine which parts of Scripture relate to Christ and which parts do not; instead, it confesses that the Scriptures as a whole are Christological.

Meanwhile, it may be observed how a rectilinearist tends to object when a typologist senses the presence of Christ in an Old Testament locus that does not fit the rectilinear mold. There appears to be an underlying fear: if everything in the Old Testament, its verba and the phenomena toward which they point, is seen somehow to relate to Christ, either immediately or remotely, then the distinctness of the specified rectilinear prophecies will be lost. In other words, if everything about the Old Testament is construed as ultimately pointing to Christ, then, in the final analysis, nothing does, at least with the certainty that is so much desired.

1 Timothy 4:7

Continuing the selective survey of Laetsch's literature, Laetsch comments on the phrase "old wives' fables" (γραιώδεις μύθους) in this verse as follows:

Modernists tell us that, in order to understand the Christian doctrine correctly, one must study it in the light of contemporaneous Jewish and rabbinical literature or that only a knowledge of pagan religions, Babylonian and Egyptian cults, Asiatic and Greek mysticism, etc., can shed light on the original and true meaning of the Christian religion. Paul holds otherwise. We grant that an acquaintance with these literatures and cults may throw a helpful light on some passage or incident of Scripture otherwise obscure, since thereby some historical or linguistic problem is solved. As far, however, as doctrine is concerned, they are absolutely valueless. The doctrines of Scripture are not a development, or evolution,

of ancient religious opinions, of pagan customs and Talmudic traditions. To look to these myths and fables for light to understand the hidden wisdom of God as revealed in the Bible, 1 Cor. 2:5-7, is an insult, an affront, to the Most High, a direct slap in the face of Him who through his apostles tells us to refuse profane and old wives' fables.<sup>23</sup>

This quote is important, because it shows the fears and misgivings of those who hesitate to delve too deeply into the historical persons, institutions, and events that form the setting for the verba of the Scriptures. When one sees what "modernists" have done to the Scriptures and the doctrines derived from them, such fears are justified, and thus no conservative would object to the substance of this statement. If, after all, historical criticism is perceived to be the force at work in Biblical interpretation, then an interpreter is entirely correct to speak only of "historical background" that does not address doctrinal questions.

However, it appears that it is an overreaction to deem historical considerations as being "absolutely valueless" for doctrine; perhaps it is possible to be premature in leaping for refuge to the isolated texta nuda of the Scriptures. The verba themselves indicate that into the midst of all the manifestations of the perverse human will, and often in reaction to that perversity, God has intervened through persons, institutions, and events, which through God's own verba-promptings shed light on God's will and purpose for mankind. With this in mind, history can shed light on doctrine, as a stable can shed light on the doctrine of the incarnation.

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<sup>23</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 Timothy 4:4-11," Concordia Theological Monthly 5 (1934): 776-7.

If theology and historical considerations are thought to be worlds apart, then the only bridge between the two worlds is the art of allegorizing, or a hermeneutical docetism, where all things material are transferred to the "spiritual" dimension; but if God reveals himself within history, then historical studies are bound to offer more to the theologian than an occasional assist to his propositional theological truths. And, if hermeneutical principles are able in any way to test interpretive "methods and results" (Fuerbringer Rule 4),<sup>24</sup> then these same principles should be able to test the appropriateness and correctness of satellite historical studies. It seems that a little confessional trust would be a healthy thing, a trust that a brother Lutheran who advocates typology is not trying to deny predictive Messianic prophecy, but that he is simply trying to put some flesh on that predictive word.

1 Timothy 2:6

The method of interpretation used by Theodore Laetsch in this verse is illustrative of what he does scores of times in his writings. In his explanation of the clause, "who (Christ) gave himself as a ransom for many," Laetsch endeavors to fill out the meaning of the word *λυτρίων* ("ransom") by appealing to the Septuagint, where *λύτρα* is used in Num. 3:45-51 for the occurrences of the Hebrew *קֶדֶשׁ*, and *λυτρί* in Num. 3:45 is used to translate *קָדְשׁוֹ*.<sup>25</sup> Although this portion of Numbers 3 has as its subject the redeeming of the firstborn of Israel

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<sup>24</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 Timothy 2:1-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 6 (1935): 363.

unaccounted for by the number of the Levites, it is still gratifying to see Laetsch forming such a bridge between the Testaments. The method outlined here promises to bear much fruit theologically because of all those times in the New Testament where one suspects that the author is rendering Hebrew thoughts in Greek clothing.

There is in Laetsch's method a second motivation at work which is particularly appropriate to the res-to-verba school. It has been said that a body of systematic theology can be built only if it is founded upon theological termini technici that remain constant in their definitions. If Scriptural terms are to function as these technical terms, it is important to find words whose meaning remains constant across both Testaments of Scripture. It is the Septuagint that forms the linguistic bridge between the Testaments, since it is written in the language of the New Testament.

The discovery of these word-bridges does not necessarily mean for Laetsch that theological bridges have been formed between the Testaments: an Old Testament word may simply be a metaphor of the substance found in the New Testament word, as is apparently the case with 1 Tim. 2:6. Furthermore, a discussion based upon such a word-bridge can tend to confine any argumentation therein to the purely linguistic plane: a Biblical word can be adjudged to have a uniform meaning in all its occurrences regardless of the historical setting in which it is found.

1 Peter 2:9, 10

The lines of connection between the Old and New Testaments are obvious enough with this passage, and Theodore Laetsch spares no words

in tracing the connections. He summarizes his findings in a manner that sheds further light upon his perception of the relationship between the Testaments:

In the Old Testament God had of all nations chosen one people to be His own, the seed of Abraham, the children of Israel. This people was to be the covenant nation, in which each member was to enjoy all the privileges enumerated in the passages quoted. Yet there were two restrictions to the universal and perfect enjoyment of these privileges. The first was that only such would be actually accepted as His people as kept His covenant, Ex. 19,5; the second, that the Old Testament believers were to be a royal priesthood, etc., largely by representation, by outward types and symbols. Their priesthood and royalty were manifest only in a special, representative priestly and royal family; the sacrifices to be offered were material offerings; their holiness, to a great extent, consisted in the observance of outward rituals. All this was to be a shadow of things to come, a prefigurement of the glory to be given by Christ to his believing followers, Col. 2,17; Heb. 8,5. In Christ the body has come; in Him all these types are fulfilled; through Him the believers of the New Testament, a generation no longer confined to any one nation, composed of Jews and Gentiles, are in spirit and truth, in fact and in deed, all that these titles imply and involve.<sup>26</sup>

Before commenting on these words, it would be fitting to hear some additional words of Laetsch just two pages later:

Politically, ethnographically, they [Israel] had been a people yet the highest honor that can possibly be bestowed on a nation had not been theirs--they had not been God's people.<sup>27</sup>

As one reads along in Laetsch's full coverage of the whole pericope, 1 Peter 2:1-10, he cannot help but be impressed with the thoroughness of Laetsch's treatment. As one hears Laetsch saying, "This word of Peter is found here in the Old Testament, and this phrase of Peter is found there in the Old Testament," he must be overwhelmed by the sheer number of correspondences between 1 Peter and the Old

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<sup>26</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 Peter 2:1-10," Concordia Theological Monthly 6 (1935): 762.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

Testament, and he must exclaim, "It all sounds so right." Yet there is something missing in Laetsch's discussion. The picture that begins to emerge in the above two quotes can be rounded out by introducing just one more quote, this being taken from Laetsch's discussion of 2 Corinthians 4:

They [Israel] were to wait patiently and bear the burden of ceremonial rituals until God Himself would end the dispensation of the law and inaugurate the greater, imperishable glory of the Gospel era.<sup>28</sup>

The outlook represented by these three quotes (and others to follow), if it is at all indicative of the prevailing outlook of the school of which Laetsch is a member, perhaps lay behind the persistent comment by laypeople steeped in Missouri Synod tradition--that the Old Testament is law and the New Testament is Gospel.

It has been previously pointed out that there is a danger with the rectilinear method: by identifying certain loci in the Old Testament as pertaining to Christ, an interpreter runs the risk of being heard to say that the rest of the Old Testament does not pertain to Christ. It has also been said that there is a second danger: if every Gospel word in the Old Testament is transported immediately by way of application to the remote future, the Old Testament can be stripped bare of any Gospel. From these three quotes one might gather that these dangers are more real than imaginary.

Honesty requires the admission that it is truly difficult, even after a careful reading of all of Laetsch's works, to determine what Laetsch's final word would be on the nature of the Old Testament and the

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<sup>28</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "2 Corinthians 4:3-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 7 (1936): 30.

Old Covenant it contains. Any attempt to piece together such a final answer is bound to involve a measure of oversimplifying, but the effort needs to be undertaken, since the interpretation of every Old Testament verse is affected by one's overall outlook.

It would be unfair not to mention at the outset that Laetsch does speak about grace and forgiveness in the Old Testament from time to time, although it is not ordinarily the main item on his agenda. Laetsch appears to say that the Old Testament does contain Gospel--New Testament Gospel. It is a Gospel that the interpreter, living in the "Gospel era," imports into the Old Testament by way of rectilinear prophecy. But setting aside for the moment these rectilinear pockets of future grace and restoration, what remains of the Gospel in the Old Testament? There remain illustrations or object lessons of the Gospel --types, symbols, representations, prefigurements, pointings forward, material signs of what is to be spiritual--all things that show Gospel potentialities, but not the Gospel itself. Now, what is left of the Gospel in the Old Testament when all the rectilinear prophecies and all things illustrative of the Gospel are temporarily set aside? What remains is a covenant that in and of itself is inherently a legal one, a covenant that is an object lesson in its own right, teaching those living in the Gospel era that the "dispensation of the law" was never intended to succeed. In such a way the Gospel in the Old Testament always seems to be one step removed from reality, like an empty container--visible, tangible, physical--that only the New Testament can fill with what is "spirit and truth." It is certainly possible that Laetsch himself would not arrive at such a reconstruction, but at the

very least, this reconstruction is one consistent way of putting together the evidence that Laetsch himself supplies.

With this possible scenario in mind, other potential conclusions can be drawn, bearing in mind perceived differences between the rectilinear and typological schools. If Christ is seen as the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, then the coming of Christ, according to the reconstruction above, must be seen as antithetical to what has preceded it, except for those isolated pockets where his coming is anticipated by way of prediction. The law has been displaced by the Gospel, the form by the substance, the outward signs by the inner ideals signified. Typologists, on the other hand, usually prefer to see the coming of Christ as the epitome of what has preceded it, seeing the grace shown in Christ as "more of the same" grace that was present and operative all along. Thus, the former stresses the discontinuity between the Testaments, and the latter continuity.

If grace comes only through Christ, the ultimate question is: was Christ "there" in the Old Testament, really present and at work? Typologists prefer speaking in terms of the "even now, not yet" dialectic, where the relationship of the New Testament people of God to the second coming of Christ is seen as being essentially the same as the relationship of the Old Testament people of God to the first (and second) coming of Christ. But for the rectilinear school the presence of Christ is chiefly anticipated through external suggestions. Thus, typologists are comfortable speaking of Christ being incarnate "in, with, and under" the Old Testament phenomena, while rectilinearists prefer to see the same phenomena as symbolizing the Christ who was to come.



Acts 3:1-16

Laetsch comments on this message preached by Peter at Solomon's portico in a manner that appears to negate what was said and concluded in the previous section of this paper:

Far from preaching a new doctrine, unheard of in Israel, Peter simply proclaimed the fulfillment of God's well known promises to Israel in the very words of that ancient prophecy (Is. 52). His preaching is saturated with Old Testament phraseology.<sup>29</sup>

Like Peter's sermon, Laetsch's sermons are filled with Old Testament references and phraseology, and from this fact one might gather that Laetsch does admit to the "real presence" of Christ in the Old Testament. But this is not necessarily so. It will be noticed that Laetsch is speaking on the level of doctrine, propositional statements about God, for which there is a proper "phraseology." In short, Laetsch is operating on the level of words, words of promise in the Old Testament and words of fulfillment in the New. Hence, when Laetsch repeatedly quotes the phraseology of the Old Testament and goes on to make stirring Gospel presentations on the basis of those very words, the reader of Laetsch is led to exclaim: "It all sounds so right!"

However, one is not making an artificial distinction in the least when he asks of Laetsch: "What exactly was going on between God and man in the Old Testament setting in which the phraseology appropriate to the Gospel originally appeared? Or, in the terms of the above quote, would Laetsch feel safe in saying about Peter's sermon: "His preaching is saturated with the operative theology of the Old Testament?" Moreover, that Gospel phraseology in the Old Testament is primarily

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<sup>29</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Acts 3:1-16," Concordia Theological Monthly 7 (1936): 518.

construed as prophecy, as predictive of what will eventually become true and real.

What is being said here is simply a matter of approaching from a different angle what has been said before, namely, that the res-to-verba emphasis, with a whole body of doctrine in the forefront of its attention, prefers the vocabulary-bound exegetical method. The seat of theology is words as such, apart from the consideration of the orbit of history in which they occur: both testaments, then, can be heard verbalizing the Gospel which is symbolized in the Old and acted out in the New. Of course, Laetsch does mention gracious acts of God in the Old Testament. This fact reintroduces the whole matter of degrees of emphasis and what perspective occupies the majority of the interpreter's attention. This is also what underscores and compounds the problem of piecing together Laetsch's overall outlook on the Old Testament.

#### Hebrews 12:18-24

The writer to the Hebrews contrasts Mount Sinai, with its terrifying manifestations of the law, and Mount Zion, the picture of Christ and his Church. These verses appear to give Laetsch all the material he needs for his contention that the Old Covenant was by nature a covenant of law and the New Covenant one of grace. Laetsch writes:

They [New Testament believers] did not enter a covenant which has to do with tangible, visible, material, external matters; not to a covenant characterized by such terrifying manifestations of God's majesty as accompanied the establishment of Sinai's covenant; not to a covenant which demands, and threatens, and accuses, and condemns, and points out no hope of escaping its dreadful curse except by perfect obedience to its every detail; not to a covenant which gives neither strength nor willingness to fulfil (sic) its demands, which arouses only antagonism and despair. Such is not the nature of the

covenant into which the believers of the New Testament have entered, as the writer now proceeds to show.<sup>30</sup>

This quotation exhibits how a member of the rectilinear school prefers to emphasize the discontinuity between the testaments. By emphasizing the legal aspects of the Sinai covenant his perceived rectilinear prophecies of grace will shine forth yet more brightly in contrast to their terrifying legal backdrop. Laetsch is most certainly correct in his description of Sinai's terrors, and he is even correct in capturing the theological intent of the pericope, whereby the terrors of the law drive the reader to the refuge of the Gospel.

It is one thing, however, to say that the Sinai covenant underscored the curse of the law, and it is another thing to suggest that the entire Old Covenant, from beginning to end, was entirely law, as Laetsch can be heard to say. Although the pericope at hand may not be the best occasion for doing it, Laetsch never seems to devote much time to pointing out the elements of continuity between the covenants. It might be mentioned, for example, that the Sinai covenant did not abrogate the unilateral covenant of grace made with Abraham (Gal. 3:17), that God's gracious choice of Israel as his covenant people had already occurred and was not contingent upon perfect obedience to the commandments, that the giving of the commandments set the stage for the building of an altar through which they received forgiveness for all their sins, that the covenant was made possible in the first place through the blood of a lamb, and that it was also sealed with atoning blood. It might also be mentioned that the Sermon the Mount enhances the demands of the law and

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<sup>30</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Hebrews 12:18-24," Concordia Theological Monthly 8 (1937): 685.

preserves its last "jot and tittle" (Matt. 5:17,18) for the believers under the New Covenant. To be sure, Laetsch would not deny these things, but the question remains as to what aspects get the most attention. As was mentioned, rectilinear prophecies of grace stand out more clearly in contrast to the law, but usually the typologist, who sees grace as the prevailing force also in the Old Testament, freely enters into the historical context, not necessarily seeing that context as alien or inimicable to the Gospel.

The suggestion that Laetsch sees the Old Covenant as consisting entirely of law is illustrated when Laetsch poses the question: how was it possible for any of the people of Israel to muster any response of allegiance to the Sinai covenant? Laetsch's answer:

Undoubtedly Moses had told them of God's promise that another Prophet, with a different message, would be sent, which promise God had given to Moses at this time, Deut. 18, 15-19.<sup>31</sup>

Here again looms the contention that the only Gospel to be found in the Old Testament is that which is imported from the New Testament.

Finally, it will be noted in the quote of Laetsch how he contrasts the New Covenant with the "tangible, visible, material, external matters" of the Old Covenant. The Hebrews pericope itself does not call for the drawing of such a dichotomy, which many would contend is a false one. Throughout his writings Laetsch moves in the direction of a dualism, the denigration of the material and the elevation of the immaterial or the "spiritual." With this philosophical stance at work, it becomes imperative to view the heavily material Old Testament as being largely symbolic of the Gospel. Conversely, the sacramentology of the New

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 687.

Testament and the tangibility of its covenant tends to be minimized in the other direction. In the hundreds of pages Laetsch wrote, apart from those Biblical texts which specifically name the sacraments, the number of instances where Laetsch even mentions the sacraments can be counted on one hand. Nor is it an accident that the Gospel mountain in Hebrews, simply called "Mount Zion," is referred to in Laetsch's comments as the "spiritual Zion," adding a word that is nowhere mentioned in the Hebrews text.<sup>32</sup> One last quote here might demonstrate the dualism found to be at work:

Through such sprinkling of sacrificial blood (Ex. 24) a union between God and man was effected, a union, however, not spiritual, but altogether external, ceremonial, ritual. The blood cleansed the Israelite from ceremonial defilement, which excluded from outward communion with God and participation in His worship; it pronounced him once more a member in good standing with that civic commonwealth, the people of Israel, to whom God had revealed himself.<sup>33</sup>

1 Peter 1:3-9

The vast majority of Laetsch's treatment of this passage is solid material and very pastoral toward his audience, and there is just one reason for introducing it here. It has been shown that Laetsch, in the endeavor to form bridges between the testaments, likes to perceive word-bridges and similarities in phraseology, often looking to the Septuagint for his cues. In the article at hand the preponderance of quotes from the Old Testament come from the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and some scattered reference to the major and minor prophets.<sup>34</sup> Although

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 689.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 693.

<sup>34</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "1 Peter 1:3-9," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938): 279-90.

the concentration of prooftexts from these books is perhaps somewhat exaggerated in this article, it exemplifies a tendency found throughout Laetsch's writings.

First, there is a tendency on the part of Laetsch to quote from the poetical books of the Old Testament or from poetical sections of prophetic books. It appears that these portions of the Old Testament lend themselves best to the formation of word-bridges, because in these portions one can focus more closely upon the actual vocabulary used, upon the author's decisions about how something is to be phrased or worded, and not necessarily upon who is doing what activity. Often, in fact, it is difficult to determine the historical referent about which the Biblical author is making his comments; instead he can be heard to be making only general comments about the nature of God and man.

Secondly, and this point is simply looking at the first point from a different angle, Laetsch prefers to quote from non-narrative Old Testament material, from theological commentary upon Old Testament events, rather than to draw conclusions from the events themselves. According to the vocabulary-bound method of exegesis, words communicate theological content a lot more effectively than events do, even though those events are described from the point of view of God himself, the primary actor in those events. When vocabulary as such is thrust into the foreground and historical events into the background, then the interpreter can pull together "timeless" theological principles and formulate theological statements laden with key words and bywords for the present-day theological community. Building upon key words, he can make generic theological assertions, and the historical contexts in which

those key words first resided can be considered to be in conflict with the key words at the worst, not in conflict at best, or a moot point in any event.

When such a technique is fully operative, the interpreter is apt to miss important lines of connection between the testaments. Laetsch, for example, is silent about the Old Testament ramifications of the "inheritance" (κληρονομία) in 1 Peter 1:4. Also, such a procedure can elevate the Old Testament vocables to a higher plane: when words transcend history in the form of timeless principles, then it is only the Old Testament vocables that can be considered teleological, or "charged with the future." In this spirit the exegete painstakingly scrutinizes the individual vocables, isolated from their context, in his rectilinear prophecies.

#### Hebrews 13:8

As this survey of case studies from Laetsch's work continues from this point, only those examples which materially amplify previous points or those that provide new perspectives will be highlighted.

The words of this verse, Ἰησοῦς χριστὸς ἐχθὲς καὶ σήμερον ὁ αὐτός καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας ("Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever"), provide Theodore Laetsch with a golden opportunity to address the question of the real presence of Christ in the Old Testament. After declining to reserve the term ἐχθὲς for Old Testament times and after equating all three adverbial expressions, taken together, as a synonym for ἀεὶ (always), Laetsch has this to say:

The same Jesus Christ is found in the Old Testament. Of Him did all the prophets bear witness, Luke 24:44-48; Acts 10:43. To him did

all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant point forward, as the writer has so authoritatively and conclusively pointed out in his letter.<sup>35</sup>

It will be noticed that this quote starts out with the testimony that Christ is to be found in the Old Testament, but then exactly in what form is he to be found there? In short, he is to be found in the form of the predictive word of the prophets and by way of illustration. The Old Testament faith is viewed as a clinging to a collection of verbal Messianic predictions, but there does not seem to be a sense, at least very strong sense, of the predictive word being reinforced by activity of the Messiah himself, unless symbology is thought to be sufficient reinforcement. Laetsch could have done much to clarify his point of view if he had further expounded upon a verse which he himself quotes, Rev. 13:8: "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."<sup>36</sup>

Hebrews 10:20

The words in question here are "the new and living Way" (ὁδὸν πρόσφατον καὶ ζῶσαν), opened by Christ through the curtain of his flesh. For Laetsch the pivotal words are πρόσφατον ("new") and ὁδὸν ("way"), and he amplifies them by means of two rectilinear Old Testament prophecies.

Picking up on the newness explicit in the term πρόσφατον, Laetsch scours the Old Testament for the "concept" of newness and settles upon Is. 40:30,31. In those verses the waiters for the Lord (for deliverance from captivity) will cause to change, or "renew" (יִשְׁבְּרוּ כֹחַ) their strength.

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<sup>35</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Hebrews 13:1-8," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938): 761.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 762.



Similarly, Laetsch picks up on the "concept" of a way, a means of getting from one place to another, explicit in the term  $\delta\delta\acute{o}\varsigma$ , and settles upon the words of Isaiah 35:8-10, where the words "highway" ( $\text{הַיָּשָׁרִים}$ ) and "holy way" ( $\text{וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה וַיִּבְרָא}$ ) appear.<sup>37</sup> In the original context of Isaiah, the highway spoken about is the way across the Arabian desert from Babylon back to the Promised Land, although the ultimate way of salvation for the people of God is not thereby and necessarily excluded.

What can be observed in Laetsch's discussion is what might be called "rectilinear prophecies in the making." It will also be noticed that the establishment of the rectilinear prophecies takes place at the level of individual words ( $\delta\delta\acute{o}\varsigma$  by way of the Septuagint of Is. 35:8) or, if not via similarity of vocabulary, similarity of ideas, such as with the idea of newness. Once the concepts of a "way" and of "newness" have been identified and isolated in Isaiah, then Isaiah's words can be transported into the future, namely, the time of the writer to the Hebrews, and the interpreter no longer has to ponder the prospect of a "new way" for the people of ancient Judah. The technique employed here resembles the rabbinic method where two passages utilizing the same vocable are thought to inform each other to a great degree.

When the interpreter has narrowed his field of vision down to individual vocables, or concepts contained therein, he no longer has to be unduly aware of the historical circumstances surrounding the Old Testament counterparts to the New Testament words. He does not have to be unduly concerned if the corresponding Old and New Testament contexts

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<sup>37</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Hebrews 10:19-25," Concordia Theological Monthly 9 (1938): 837.

do not happen to match, as long as a vocabularic or conceptual match can be found. Thus, in the above example from Laetsch, it is not particularly problematic for him that the "way" in Hebrews denotes access into the Holy of holies, and that the "way" in Isaiah describes God's leading of his people across the Arabian desert. While such a clearcut mixing of metaphors is frowned upon by people of letters, it is only an excusable faux pas when the one-and-the-same Spirit is doing the talking.

Hebrews 10:22

Laetsch's commentary on this verse is a continuation of the same journal article from which the material in the preceding section was drawn, but with this particular verse a different point, previously introduced, is further explained. The phrase in question in this verse is where the New Testament believer is sprinkled (ῥεραντισμένοι) and washed clean (λελουσμένοι).

Laetsch describes at length the ceremonial washings prescribed for the Old Testament priests and goes on to make the following comment:

In the Old Testament the body was sprinkled, symbolizing the inward sprinkling to be effected by the blood of Jesus, Heb. 9:12-15; 12:24. The New Testament sprinkling makes us not only ceremonially clean, as the Israelite was after being sprinkled a member of the visible congregation of Israel and the priest was, after being sprinkled, permitted to function in the sacerdotal office, irrespective of their inner relation to God. Christians have received a better sprinkling, a sprinkling of the heart, of their inner life, a sprinkling "from an evil conscience."<sup>38</sup>

Laetsch goes on to speak in rather systematic terms about the sacrament of Baptism in connection with the word λελουσμένοι. This is one of those very few times where the sacraments occupy his attention.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 841.

In evidence in the quote above is the tendency to speak in terms of a dualism that juxtaposes the physical and the spiritual, the external and the internal, the form and the substance, in such a way as to set the stage for a symbolic view of the Old Testament. While what Laetsch says might have been true phenomenologically, that the priesthood perceived only externalities and resisted any change of the heart, it should be remembered that the New Testament sacraments are susceptible to the same abuses of unbelief. If Laetsch's point is overdrawn, he can be seen to perpetuate for Old Testament exegesis the very formalism that was so persistently denounced by the Old Testament prophets, that of "holding the form of religion but denying its power" (2 Tim. 3:5).

#### The Old Testament Prophets

Material for this section comes from a two-part article on the call and role of the Old Testament prophets. It is a topical article and hence not attached to any single Biblical pericope.<sup>39</sup>

No presentation of Laetsch's outlook on the Old Testament would be complete without some word on this subject, although there is nothing in the article that would be considered controversial or in disagreement of the Missouri Synod consensus. The prophets, says Laetsch, were called immediately by God himself to specific areas of responsibility. Because of their direct call from God, the words they spoke equal the Word of God and are not merely testimony about the Word. They were not absorbed into the Deity in mystical fashion, but on the

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<sup>39</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "The Prophets and Political and Social Problems," Concordia Theological Monthly 11 (1940): 241-58, 337-51.

other hand their words do not reflect a mere personal idealism or intuition of their own.<sup>40</sup>

In recognition of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the prophets did not spell out specific social or reform programs; as men loyal to their Lord they simply repeated the Torah of God to differing circumstances and exposed abuses when the Word itself called for it. It was up to the monarchs and other God-appointed political leaders in Israel to specify procedures for correcting social ills.<sup>41</sup> Throughout his article Laetsch is careful to point out similarities between the prophets and the New Testament pastorate, but at the same time he makes clear that the prophets were unique in their position as spokesmen of God.

As to the actual process by which God inspired the prophets and their words, Laetsch basically, and undoubtedly correctly, describes what the process is not. In an earlier article he admits to the mystery that the prophets retained their individual personalities even though they set down the words of God.<sup>42</sup> This fact assuredly is behind Fuerbringer's allowance for an usus specialis for a vocable within an individual Biblical book.<sup>43</sup> Thus, when Laetsch treats Biblical vocables as having uniform definitions, even across the testaments, he appears to be presupposing a consistent "holy language" that is at odds with the observed variety found among the human instruments.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>42</sup>Laetsch, "Hosea 1-3," p. 918.

<sup>43</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 10-1.

Laetsch maintains that the prophets knew of a certainty when it was God himself who was speaking through them. From this, however, it does not necessarily follow that the prophets knew exactly what God was trying to say, at least the full scope of God's intent, at each and every point. Although the assumption that a prophet was fully aware of the content of his oracles can be pressed into service when defining vocables in a rectilinear prophecy, it strikes one as being inconsistent to confess the mystery of inspiration and to pretend to have solved the process simultaneously.

2 Corinthians 5:21

Theodore Laetsch sheds further light on his view of typology with his discussion of this passage, Paul's statement about Christ being made "sin for us." Laetsch speaks of how the sins of Israel were transferred to the designated sacrificial animal in the Old Testament and then states:

In Christ these types were literally fulfilled. The Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all, Is. 56:6. So completely did God make the sins of mankind Christ's own that he numbered His Son, the obedient, righteous Servant, Is. 53:9b, 11b, with the transgressors, v 12, Mark 15:28; that God looked upon His well-beloved Son as sin, seeing in Him no longer the spotless God-man, seeing only the sin of the world, sin which He hated and on account of which the fierceness of God's wrath and anger centered upon Him, who, being made sin was made a curse, Gal. 3:13, whom He forsook, Ps. 22:1, turning Him over to the torments of hell and the diabolical fury of Satan.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to speaking very eloquently about the atoning work of Christ, Laetsch has here a very interesting way of perceiving a typological relationship, even though the word "type" is found nowhere in

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<sup>44</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "2 Corinthians 5:14-21," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1941): 284.

this pericope. Usually, according to the rectilinearist's own version of typology, the type-antitype relationship must be specifically identified by Scripture itself in a quid pro quo, verse-for-verse manner; but here Laetsch abandons that approach, comparing whole families of Bible verses and comparing Old Testament sacrificial practices in general with the atonement of the cross. The parallels between the testaments are seen at the level of individual words and actions, and by not attaching the New Testament statement to any one singular Old Testament verse Laetsch exhibits a much more imaginative approach than one might anticipate. He also points to a real atonement being effected in Old Testament times. All things considered, with this pericope Laetsch is not far from a working definition of typology that typologists themselves could live with.

As a balance to all this, it must be remembered that there are a host of New Testament pericopes, most notably in Hebrews, which Laetsch can use as confirmations of the relationship between the Old Testament sacrifices and the sacrifice of the cross, confirmations which satisfy the requirement laid down by W. F. Arndt:

In later centuries the tendency prevailed for a while to stress typological interpretation, that is, to find types and symbols in nearly everything that the Old Testament relates; the principle that we can with certainty speak of persons or events as being types, that is, as prefiguring persons or events in the New Testament, only where the Bible itself give us indications to that effect, was disregarded.<sup>45</sup> (emphasis mine)

It should furthermore be observed that Laetsch, following the word-bound inclination, still pursues a quid pro quo style at the level

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<sup>45</sup>W. F. Arndt in Lutheran Cyclopedia, Erwin Lueker, ed., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 361.

of individual words and phrases, a style that would be considered by many typologists to be too restrictive an approach. And, there is the additional question about the nature of that Old Testament atonement of which Laetsch speaks, a real atonement that can still be seen as symbolical of the atonement of the cross.

Psalm 40:12-15

In the discussion of the previous pericope Laetsch introduces these Psalm verses, where David is praying for deliverance from those who were persecuting and deriding him. Laetsch concludes that these verses are an advance quote of Christ himself. Since the superscription of the Psalm names David as its author (if the "lamed of authorship" is to trusted), it may appear that Laetsch is here opting for a typological understanding, namely, that these first-person words of David himself are simultaneously also the words of Christ himself.<sup>46</sup>

While it is gratifying to see the perception of Christ himself playing an active role within the history of the Old Testament, an examination of Laetsch's interpretation in the light of Laetsch's overall approach to Messianic prophecy reveals that he is arriving at a different conclusion: that the words of Ps. 40:12-15 originate only from the mouth of Christ, and that these words bear no connection to the life of King David. If this be so, the questions remains: does this mean that the Son of David is the exclusive actor and speaker throughout the whole of Psalm 40? Laetsch does not answer that question in this article, but one suspects that his reply would be in the affirmative.

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<sup>46</sup>Laetsch, "2 Cor. 5:14-21," p. 284.

Acts 4:11,12

These words are the concluding statements in Peter's defense before the Jewish leaders, who questioned his healing of the lame man. Laetsch writes regarding Peter's quoting of Ps. 118:22 and the rejected cornerstone:

In the original meaning of the Psalm the stone rejected is not Israel, as the Expositor's Greek Testament holds; nor does the Psalmist think primarily of "the small beginning of a new era" in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra 3:10ff. It is a direct prophecy concerning the promised Messiah; cp. Is. 53:2,3.<sup>47</sup>

Laetsch assigns to the Psalm verse an exclusively Messianic meaning, and that meaning was the full, original intent of the words (and the Psalmist himself.) This example reinforces many points that have been previously made.

Laetsch's interpretation gives evidence of the either-or alternative insisted upon by his viewpoint on the sensus unus dictum, and his selection of the Messianic alternative is certainly not hindered by the fact that it is ultimately impossible to tell what Old Testament reference the Psalmist could have had in mind. In Acts 4:11 as well as in Jesus' own quotation of this Psalm verse (Matt. 21:42 and parallels) the Spirit has told Laetsch the singular interpretation of the Psalm, and that settles the case.

If this evidence were not enough, Laetsch makes an additional appeal by forming a word-bridge between the Old and New Testament verses with an assist from the Septuagint. The Hebrew word for "reject" in the Psalm verse is  $\cdot\text{רָדַף}$ , a word translated in Matthew 21 with the Greek  $\text{\textit{\textepsilon}\text{\textrho}\text{\textdelta}\text{\textnu}\text{\textmu}\text{\textsigma}\text{\textomega}}$  and with the somewhat stronger verb,  $\text{\textit{\textepsilon}\text{\textxi}\text{\textsigma}\text{\texttheta}\text{\textepsilon}\text{\textnu}\text{\textacute}\text{\textepsilon}\text{\textomega}}$ , in Acts

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<sup>47</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Acts 4:1-12," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1941): 518.



4:11. An unmistakable word-bridge is perceived when it is noticed that the Septuagint also uses the word ἀποδοκιμάζω to translate יָדָה.<sup>48</sup> With this verbal parallelism established Laetsch broadens the field of inquiry out to the whole concept of "rejection" (as Peter apparently also does) and thereby introduces Isaiah 53, where rejection is expressed by לָטַן in the Hebrew and by ἐκλείπω in the Greek. Laetsch is free to use the above procedure under the auspices of Fuerbringer Rule number 29, where Fuerbringer distinguishes between verbal and real parallelisms.<sup>49</sup> It is interesting, however, that Laetsch mentions the verbal parallelism between Psalm 118 and Matthew 21 anyway, when the mention of the real parallel between Psalm 118 and Acts 4 would have sufficed. Apparently the vocabulary-bound exegetical method, while accepting the admissibility of real parallelisms as evidence, still sees verbal parallelisms as being the superior evidence.

Commenting on Acts 4:12, Laetsch remarks about the presence of the definite article with σωτηρία ("the salvation") and contrasts the salvation in Christ with all the other "saviors" and "salvations" found in the Old Testament.<sup>50</sup> In the earlier section on 2 Cor. 5:21, a real parallel was found even though a verbal parallel was not always present; in the present section, verbal parallels between the Septuagint and the New Testament are deemed not to be real parallels. Ultimately theology determines which parallels are deemed real and which are only verbal.

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup>Laetsch, "Acts 4:1-12," p. 520.

While Laetsch and those in the same school see the various "salvations" in the Old Testament as being totally apart from Christ's salvation and at best an illustrative of the salvation, a typologist might be more inclined to think of the Old Testament salvations as participating in the salvation won by Christ for people of all time.

1 Corinthians 14:40

This statement of Paul on the "decency and order" (εὐσχημόνως καὶ κατὰ τάξιν ) that is to be found in the Church is Laetsch's favorite Bible passage on how the Church in New Testament times is to conduct her business. His repeated use of this verse reflects its prominence in the Missouri Synod tradition as a justification for all forms of church polity, including the Synod herself, and hence it was fitting that Laetsch should bring up this passage in his address to the 1941 synodical convention held in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The specific subject matter of his speech was the role of the synod, and commenting on the Corinthians verse, Laetsch writes:

God might have laid down certain rules and regulations to be observed within His Christian congregation, as He did in the Old Testament for His chosen people. God, however, deals with His New Testament Christians not as with minors who, while they possess all the rich blessings of God, yet are under tutors and governors, appointed by the Lord Himself, from whom they must take their orders just like the servants in the home. God rather deals with us as being of age, as with free men, and trusts us to find proper ways and means to carry on His work in the most efficient manner possible. What a marvelous trust does our heavenly Father place in His children on earth!<sup>51</sup>

Although this quote is found under the heading of the 1 Corinthians verse, Laetsch seems to have in mind also Gal. 3:23 to 4:7.

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<sup>51</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Privileges and Obligations," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1941): 724-5.

Having here denied that God has laid down rules and regulations for Christian congregation, Laetsch writes later in the same speech:

While Christ has assigned certain duties and obligations to His Church and has laid down a number of rules and regulations governing the administration of His Church on earth, He has entrusted the regulation and control of many matters of vital importance to the liberty, the wisdom, and the intelligence of His Christians. In the management of the business of the church, in the arrangement of their services, they may exercise to the full their glorious rights and privileges which their royal priesthood has bestowed upon them.<sup>52</sup> (emphasis mine)

In the first quote the point of comparison between the testaments is in the area of rules and regulations: God laid them down for the Old Testament people but not for the New Testament people. In the second quote the point of comparison lay in the manner in which rules and regulations are carried out: in the Old Testament the people simply had to "take their orders," while in the New Testament the people work with their own "liberty, wisdom, and intelligence." Laetsch's heavily "Waltherian" view of the Church leads him to make a distinction that lay in the area of practice: in the Old Testament the leaders told the people what to do, and in the New Testament the individual laypeople, to whom pertain the "rights and privileges," tell the leadership what to do.

It is understandable that Laetsch would want to emphasize points of discontinuity between the testaments, in this case under the aegis of his doctrine of the church, and every exegete should be willing to hear the New Testament on that discontinuity. But the points of continuity should also be heard, even in the explanation of those passages which might stress discontinuity. Although certainly not every point of

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 736-7.

doctrine can be covered in the course of interpreting each and every Biblical pericope, it would be helpful to remember, for example, that the Old Testament people also had a measure of space for the exercise of "liberty, wisdom, and intelligence" within the parameters of the prescribed ritual. Laetsch himself must admit to such points of continuity; otherwise he could not, as he frequently does, apply Old Testament directions pertaining to prophets and priests to the New Testament pastorate. In this same article, for example, Laetsch argues against the maltreatment of pastors on the basis of Ps. 105:15, a word about the protection of God's anointed prophets.<sup>53</sup> Again, a question of emphasis is at work, and for Laetsch the byword is discontinuity, a factor that needs persistent scrutiny particularly in the area of Messianic prophecy.

#### Hebrews 1:5

This passage, which quotes Ps. 2:7, is treated at length by Theodore Laetsch and is presented here as a classic example of Laetsch's preference for the rectilinear mode of prophecy over against typology.

The very word "hermeneutics" is used in his discussion:

It has become quite customary to interpret this Psalm as referring primarily to David and only typically to Christ and v. 7 as designating "the begetting into a royal existence, which takes place in and by the act of anointing." Delitzsch. This interpretation is a violation of sound hermeneutics; it is charging the New Testament writers and the Holy Ghost, who spoke through them, with not knowing what they are saying. There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit Himself clearly refers the entire Psalm to Christ directly. Read Acts 4:25-28, where in v. 26 the Lord's Christ of Ps. 2:2 is identified with "Thy holy Child Jesus, whom Thou hast anointed." In Acts 13:33 and Heb. 5:5 the words of Ps. 2:7 are said to have been spoken directly to Christ. And the entire context of our passage leaves no doubt that the author was thinking of these words as being directed to Christ exclusively. The author means to prove that the

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 733.

name given to Jesus is more excellent than that given to the angels. Would Ps. 2:7 prove the greater excellency of Jesus' name if that decree had been addressed to David? Certainly not.<sup>54</sup>

The earnestness and concern of Laetsch cannot be denied nor questioned about consistency of approach. Most of what is said here has been said before, but there are two points previously made for which Laetsch provides reinforcement under the unspecified guidelines of "sound hermeneutics."

First, there is the direct linking of the rectilinear ("direct") approach with the activity of the Holy Spirit as he inspired the words of Scripture. Such an identification seems to suggest that Laetsch has solved the process of the inspiration of the Scriptures, that the Holy Spirit must have prophesied the coming of the Messiah in precisely the way that Laetsch reconstructed it and in no other way. One might counter this contention simply by saying that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, could prophesy the coming of the Messiah, the second person, in any manner that he wanted to. Walter Roehrs' admonition is also appropriate: if the Holy Spirit himself speaks of types in the Scriptures, it ill behooves an interpreter to deem typology to be an inferior form of prophecy.<sup>55</sup> It will be noticed that for Laetsch the rectilinear mode is superior, because it proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that Psalm 2 refers directly and exclusively to Christ, and in so

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<sup>54</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Hebrews 1:1-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1941): 924-5.

<sup>55</sup>Walter Roehrs, "The Typological Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," Concordia Theological Monthly 10 (1984):204-16. This is an updated version of the article appearing in A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics (Richard Jungkuntz, ed.), Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1969, p. 39-53.

doing it serves as a frontal apologetic against those who would question the existence of predictive, Messianic prophecy. The achievement of such an apologetic end, however, does not necessarily justify the hermeneutical means by which the goal is reached, no matter how reassuring the "assured results" may be.

The second item to be addressed regarding this paragraph is Laetsch's conclusion that the whole of Psalm 2 speaks exclusively of Christ. Although some rectilinear prophecies, such as in Hos. 11:2, are seen to erupt instantaneously from their Old Testament contexts and then to move out of the Messianic realm equally as fast, other rectilinear prophecies are thought to linger in the Messianic realm far into their contexts. For the most part Laetsch views the Psalms as units of thought; thus, if one verse in a Psalm is found to be a rectilinear prophecy, then the whole Psalm is construed as being exclusively Messianic. It is not difficult to maintain that all of Psalm 2 refers to the Messiah (exclusively or otherwise), but with other Psalms an amount of allegorizing is needed in order to come to the same conclusion.

#### 2 Samuel 7:14

Laetsch also names this verse in the same article as above, since this passage is also quoted in Heb. 1:5. Concerning Nathan's words about the house of David Laetsch writes:

The second passage is taken from 2 Sam. 7:14, part of the prophecy in which David was told that the promised Messiah was to be a descendant of the house of David. "I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to me a Son." Speaking through the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, the Holy Spirit assures us that this prophecy given to David referred directly to one greater than Solomon, to great David's greater Son, who was at the same time David's Lord and God,

yet truly according to His human nature David's Seed. It is to this offspring of the house of David that God said: "I will be to Him a Father," etc. Why? Because that Son born of Mary, a virgin of the lineage of David, was the Son of the Most High, God Incarnate, and because that human nature conceived in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit was received from the very moment of its conception into personal union by the Son of God, so that God became the Father of this God-man according to his human nature not only by creation nor by adoption nor only by regarding it as an object of fatherly love and care and protection, but in a unique sense the Father of that human nature which was from its very existence intimately, personally, united with the Son of God.<sup>56</sup>

It is noteworthy how much one can say about his interpretation of a passage simply through the capitalization of select words such as "Father," "Son," and their respective pronouns. What can also be seen in the quote above is how a res-to-verba emphasis can shine through so clearly in its specifically Christological form, rectilinear prophecy. After determining on the basis of Heb. 1:5 that the Holy Spirit intended to speak "directly" and exclusively about Christ in 2 Sam. 7:14, Laetsch uses the Samuel verse to prove the mystical union of the two natures of Christ as well as to discount every variety of adoptionist and subordinationist heresy. To Laetsch it is entirely legitimate to draw such far-reaching conclusions because of the unifying aspect of the singular witness, the Spirit of God; however, even though the Spirit is ultimately the source of all theology, one has to wonder whether or not Laetsch has moved beyond the original intent of the Author himself. It may be deemed possible, for example, to extrapolate upon a one-sentence quote of Martin Luther to the point that a complete theology of Luther is eventually written, but meanwhile, the unique intent and scope of the singular sentence may become lost in the process.

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<sup>56</sup>Laetsch, "Heb. 1:1-6," Concordia Theological Monthly 12 (1941): 925-6.

As the exclusively Christological outlook of the rectilinear approach provides a prime opportunity for res-to-verba theologizing, similarly the res-to-verba emphasis reinforces the rectilinear outlook in a reciprocal relationship. In other words, as Laetsch branches out farther and farther into all the particularities of the doctrine of Christ, the more and more absurd and needless it appears (at least it is hoped) to delve into the context of 2 Samuel 7. It is as though Laetsch is burning his interpretive bridges behind him (and behind his readers) by moving into the Christological realm and permanently remaining there.

Romans 8:32

In his discussion of this verse Laetsch picks up on the phrase "that spareth not His own Son" (ὅς γε τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ οὐκ ἐφείσατο ) and relates it to Abraham's offering of Isaac in Genesis 22. Not only is it interesting that Laetsch connects the two pericopes; what is especially noteworthy is that manner in which he does so. Once again it is the Septuagint that forms the bridge between the testaments, because it is observed that the Greek translation of Gen. 22:12 also uses the word *φείδομαι* to describe Abraham's proposed action toward his son.<sup>57</sup>

Here again the strong orientation toward individual vocables can be seen, although many might find a certain gratification in the fact that Laetsch finds any connection at all between the two pericopes. As to just how they are connected Laetsch simply says that Paul "evidently thinks of God's word of commendation addressed to Abraham,"<sup>58</sup> and

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<sup>57</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Romans 8:29-32," Concordia Theological Monthly 13 (1942): 48.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 49.



nothing more is said about it. In terms of application Laetsch only states that God the Father was not under the obligation to a command as was Abraham. For Laetsch it appears that the parallelism between Genesis and Romans was drawn only from the New Testament side, as Paul searched for an example befitting the point he was trying to make; there does not seem to be any sensitivity to the possibility that God, directing by his own hand both the events in Genesis and the words used to describe them, was already setting the stage for the parallelism from the Old Testament side during the time of Abraham.

Deuteronomy 30:12-14

The Apostle Paul quotes from these familiar words about the nearness of the Word of God in Rom. 10:8, singling out the expression, "the word is near you" (Ἐγγυς σου τὸ ῥῆμα ἐστίν). Laetsch comments on Paul's application of Deuteronomy:

The righteousness of faith clothes her definition in words which at once remind the reader of another passage found in Moses, Deut. 30:12-14; but she changes the original words both as to form and application to suit her purpose. . . These words Paul uses as far as they serve his purpose and puts them into the mouth of the righteousness of faith in order to show that it was at no disadvantage over against the righteousness of the Law.<sup>59</sup>

In this quote is found a very curious phenomenon in which the rectilinearist and the typologist appear temporarily to trade places. Apart from the fact that Paul does not specifically indicate a fulfillment of the word of Deuteronomy 30, one might expect that Laetsch would comment on the Romans verse: "The Holy Spirit leaves us no choice. He interprets the words of Deuteronomy for us by the mouth of Paul, and the

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<sup>59</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Romans 10:1-15," Concordia Theological Monthly 13 (1942): 447.

issue is settled: Deuteronomy 30 speaks exclusively about the Gospel of the New Testament era." But instead Laetsch says that the Deuteronomy passage remains a law passage and that Paul is only using the words to suit his later Gospel purpose. As Laetsch relegates Deuteronomy 30 to the law, it remains for the typologist to do what Laetsch left undone, to perceive the Christological sensus in Deuteronomy. He might do so, for example, by drawing attention to the preceding context, where Israel is circumcized in heart to love the Lord with all her heart (Deut. 30:6).

It remains somewhat of a mystery why Laetsch would here resist the customary rectilinear procedure. The answer is probably found in the fact that the Deuteronomy passage, as God's own interpretation of Israel's history, is a theological statement in its own right, a commentary on what Israel herself has already experienced. As such it is virtually impossible even for Laetsch to divorce the words of Deuteronomy from their context, a context which Laetsch views as being primarily legal. Thus, words spoken in a legal context must themselves be legal in nature, and the best Paul can do is to adapt the words for his own purposes.

A typologist, on the other hand, cannot resist the chance to make a case for an active Gospel dynamic even for those under the Old Covenant. He is more than willing to perceive Gospel words in a Gospel context, especially when his hermeneutical opponent, the rectilinear advocate, cannot muster the wherewithal to transport the Gospel content to another, later era.

The remainder of the current article under discussion continues the pattern that Laetsch has established for himself with the

Deuteronomy passage, as Paul is viewed as adapting several other Old Testament verses for his Gospel purposes.

Ephesians 1:10

Laetsch understands the whole pericope of Eph. 1:3-14 to be a sedes for the doctrine of election.<sup>60</sup> He speaks in connection with verse 10 about Christ as summing up the expression, "the fullness of time" (τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν), and then says:

In the Old Testament it was Jehovah who was the God of the Covenant. In the New Testament it is pre-eminently Christ, the Anointed One, our brother according to the flesh, the God-man, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the Ending, with respect to the New Testament Church of God; cp. 1 Cor. 15:22-28.<sup>61</sup>

It would certainly be easy enough to read into this statement more than what Laetsch intends to say, but in view of what he says in other places about the nature of the Old Testament Covenant, this statement deserves further scrutiny. It must be assumed that Laetsch is speaking on the level of names and titles given to the first and second persons of the Trinity and not necessarily on the level of contravening wills and purposes that are being assigned to each person. On the whole, however, Laetsch tends to be somewhat unguarded in his comments about the perceived discontinuity between the testaments. This statement could be construed as being Marcionistic, since no further word of explanation is attached. At the very least Laetsch's comment reinforces suspicions that God went through a fundamental attitude change with the arrival of New Testament times.

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<sup>60</sup>Laetsch, "Eph. 1:3-14," Concordia Theological Monthly 16 (1945): 306.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 314.

Isaiah 49:24-26

In vivid language the prophet here promises the rescue of God's Old Testament people from the Babylonian exile. Laetsch likens this release from captivity to the exodus from Egypt and then goes on to say:

It is this God who already in ch. 49:24-26 had promised to deliver his people out of exile in token of the still greater spiritual deliverance, the actual at-one-ment of God and man, by which all flesh was to know him as the Lord, our Savior and Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.<sup>62</sup>

This quotation is significant because it ties together several things that have been already mentioned: the word "spiritual" establishes a dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, and the resultant bi-level world view opens the door to allegorizing. However, at this point an inconsistency can be perceived in Laetsch, especially when one notes that the Isaiah 49 verses contain no specific geographical or historical references to the exodus from Babylon.

In some old Testament pericopes Laetsch uses a purely rec-tilinear approach in which all references to the pericopal context are displaced by an exclusively Messianic interpretation. In other passages, such as the one at hand, Laetsch recognizes the historical content of the words and then by means of allegory transports the historical events to a higher, spiritual plane. As an example of the first alternative, Laetsch sees only Messianic content in Hos. 11:1, even though this passage refers specifically to Egypt.<sup>63</sup>

A quick review of Isaiah 49 and Hosea 11 reveals the only apparent factor that determines for Laetsch which of the two above

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<sup>62</sup>Theodore Laetsch, "Isaiah 50:4-10," Concordia Theological Monthly 20 (1949): 102.

<sup>63</sup>Laetsch, Minor Prophets, p. 88.

alternatives of interpretation is to be pursued: the Messianic import of Hosea 11 (for Laetsch the exclusive import) is confirmed by the New Testament words of Matt. 2:15, but for Isaiah 49 Laetsch finds no such New Testament word of confirmation. Since no Messianic content is confirmed for Laetsch in Isaiah 49, then there is no Messianicity which would require the displacement of the historical context, the exodus from Babylon, and there remains the freedom to allegorize upon the historical event.

In practical terms, then, Laetsch's purely rectilinear approach can be seen to place him into somewhat of a quandary: the New Testament confirmation of Messianic content forces Laetsch to abandon entirely an interpretation of an Old Testament verse that he would otherwise, almost automatically discern: a reference to Old Testament history. For this reason Fuerbringer cautions his readers about "Messianic prophecies occurring very abruptly in historical narratives."<sup>64</sup> The only question that remains is: if no Messianic import is confirmed for a passage like Isaiah 49, then where does an interpreter like Laetsch find his freedom even to discover a Christological allegory? One possible answer is that Laetsch sees in Isaiah 49 a word of restoration nonetheless, and if a word of restoration is found within the context of the "dispensation of the law," then for Laetsch that restoration must somehow point forward to the "Gospel era" of the New Testament, even if a spiritualizing purification is necessary.

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<sup>64</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 18.

Jeremiah 3:16,17

Laetsch's commentaries, which of course deal exclusively with Old Testament texts, will be quoted only to the extent that they provide additional perspectives on Laetsch's perceived relationship between the testaments. Large portions of the material he covers, such as Jeremiah 37-44, are viewed as having no Messianic content, and this is in and of itself significant in view of what has been previously been said about the rectilinear prophecy,<sup>65</sup> namely, that the rectilinear approach identifies which Old Testament passages are Christological and which passages are not.

The text at hand, seen as a Messianic prophecy in its entirety, reads as follows in the Revised Standard Version:

And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the Lord, they shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the Lord." It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; it shall not be made again. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.<sup>66</sup>

The concept of "increase," captured by the words רבב and כלה, is seen as a watchword for the New Testament era, as is the expression "in those days (הַיָּמִים הַהֵלֵךְ אֵלֶיךָ)".<sup>67</sup>

Beyond this focus upon individual words and phrases Laetsch has two other interesting points to make in connection with this pericope, the first being a statement about the real essence of the Old Covenant:

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<sup>65</sup>Theodore Laetsch, Jeremiah (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), p. 14.

<sup>66</sup>The Revised Standard Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1952).

<sup>67</sup>Laetsch, Jeremiah, p. 56.

But while the outer form which characterized the Old Covenant and was essential to it gradually disintegrated and was finally annihilated, this annihilation of the outer form at the same time according to the eternal counsel of God served to bring to its highest culmination the real essence of the Old Testament Covenant, God's plan of salvation through his Son. The death of the Old Covenant was like that of a seed which dies only to bring forth much fruit; like the passing away of the shadow to make place for the body; like the death of our body, which is sown in corruption and weakness to be raised in power and incorruption (Hengstenberg).<sup>68</sup>

While this quote is one of very few places where Laetsch attests to the presence of the Gospel within the pages of the Old Testament, a sense of fairness requires that this statement be quoted. How is this statement to be reconciled with Laetsch's identification of the Old Covenant as the "dispensation of the law?" Two possible answers are to be found within the quote itself. First, there is the reference to the "plan of salvation," a phrase that can be understood correctly but can also be misconstrued. The word "plan" denotes the groundwork for a project that is to become a reality at a later point in time, but not the project itself. Thus, one might ask: is the essence of the Old Testament or Covenant only the planning stage for salvation, or would one be equally safe to say straightforwardly that salvation as such is the essence of the Old Covenant? From an interpreter's point of view the question might be phrased: would it be possible to perceive in the Old Testament a modus operandi of grace if one were ignorant of the existence of the New Testament? Secondly, one can see in the above quote the juxtaposition of "essence" and "outer form." According to Laetsch the Israelites, often termed the "Jews," went astray by substituting the outer forms of the Old Testament cultus for the essence of the Covenant.<sup>69</sup> By contrast,

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<sup>68</sup>E. W. Hengstenberg, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*

it would appear that the perception of a grace/salvation modus operandi for the Old Covenant would lead an interpreter to a sacramental outlook, an outlook that affirms a both-and posture toward "form" and "essence," where the interpreter sees the grace/salvation dynamic at work "in, with, and under" the visible form.

The second observation about this Jeremiah pericope is regarding Laetsch's view of the ark of the covenant. On the one hand, Laetsch says that the ark was "God's dwelling place, where he dwelt between the cherubim"; on the other hand, he states that "every idea of a physical or material local presence" is to be rejected.<sup>70</sup> On the basis of this point Laetsch moves on to speak of the "spiritual Jerusalem," which is the true dwelling place of God. It is difficult to determine why Laetsch feels constrained to introduce the immanence vis-a-vis transcendence question into his discussion of Jeremiah and the ark, but it does serve as an object lesson for Laetsch's tendency to view the Gospel dynamic as being one step removed from reality in the Old Covenant. A consistent Lutheran hermeneutic, it appears, would affirm that finiti capax infiniti throughout the Scriptures.

Jeremiah 23:5,6 and 33:14,15

The second pericope is a very close paraphrase of the first passage, both of them sharing the identical list of component parts including references to the "Righteous Branch" and "Yahweh is our righteousness." Laetsch concludes that Jeremiah 23 refers to the Messiah while Jeremiah 33 refers to the church of the New Testament.

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 55,57.



The argumentation is too extensive to reproduce here, but one example will suffice to demonstrate Laetsch's methodology. Although both passages contain the very same phrase  $\text{יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ צְדִיקֵינוּ}$  ("Yahweh, our righteousness") Laetsch finds that the first occurrence of the phrase points to the inherent righteousness of the Messiah, but that the second occurrence denotes the righteousness imputed to the members of the church of Christ.<sup>71</sup> To be sure, at various points it is difficult to decide if a verse is talking about the Christ or those who belong to him (see Is. 42:5-9); nevertheless it appears that Laetsch's interpretation of Jeremiah 33 runs counter to a common sense interpretation.

The point to be made here is that Laetsch's vocabulary-bound exegetical method, seen so often in his readings of rectilinear prophecies, leads him to view a given passage atomistically. He tends to focus so sharply on the constituent parts of a prophecy that he is inclined to miss the overall impression, the big picture, left by the prophecy as a whole. If a metaphor may be permitted, Laetsch examines so minutely the individual trees that he forgets to see the forest. With other passages this atomism provides a fitting occasion for bypassing the context of a rectilinear prophecy. When the constituent parts are not seen simply to contribute to the bigger picture, there is the danger of being lead astray by forcing each and every part to speak for the whole, or, as has been said before, to make one word say everything. Consider, for example, how individual verses in the Song of Songs can be given strange interpretations when every single verse is seen as making a material contribution to the theme of Christ's love for the Church.

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 268-71.

Jeremiah 30:1-3

These verses form the introduction to the so-called "book of Consolations," comprised of chapters 30-33. The prophet was commissioned to write of the  $\text{נִגְזַרְשׁוֹ} \text{ גְּוָשׁ}$ , "the turn of the returning (captivity)," of Israel and Judah. Does this passage refer to the return of Israel and Judah from the Babylonian exile, the ultimate Messianic deliverance, or both? Laetsch answers, not with his own words, but through the mouth of Abraham Calov, whom he quotes without further comment. Laetsch's quote of Calov is quite extensive, but it is aptly summarized with the following excerpt:

Naturally one and the same prophecy does not speak in the literal sense of the type (the deliverance from the Babylonian Captivity) and in a mystical sense of the antitype (a spiritual deliverance). That would be contrary to sound hermeneutics.<sup>72</sup>

This quote of Calov is interesting in that it shows how the prooftexting method of Lutheran orthodoxy had already sown the seeds for the application of the sensus unus dictum that is so familiar to Laetsch, since proofs cannot be built upon possible ambiguities.

Jeremiah 30-33

This section telescopes from the previous section. Regarding Jeremiah 30:4-8 Laetsch sides with Calov in seeing the Babylonian Captivity as being the exclusive subject under discussion. Laetsch's whole argumentation, however, takes a different turn at Jer. 30:9 and throughout the remainder of the "Book of Consolations." His train of thought, which goes on for several pages,<sup>73</sup> will be outlined here.

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<sup>72</sup>Abraham Calov, Biblia Illustrata, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 239-40.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 239-73.

In Jer. 30:9 it is mentioned that the people of God will serve "David their King," a phrase which Laetsch identifies as the Messiah. Upon the basis of this verse, and through the reinforcement provided by other recognized rectilinear prophecies, such as Jer. 31:15 (Rachel weeping") and Jer. 33:14,15 ("the Lord our righteousness"), Laetsch concludes that Jer. 30:9 through chapter 33 is one vast rectilinear prophecy that refers exclusively to the Messiah and the church of the Gospel era.

Working under the assumption that virtually the whole of the Book of Consolations is one rectilinear prophecy, Laetsch finds himself resorting to various techniques, principally allegorical, in order to make the constituent parts of the Consolations, the individual verses, to conform to the Messianic image. As Laetsch does with the Psalms, the whole Scriptural section is deemed to be a rectilinear prophecy if one verse within the section can be proved on the basis of the New Testament evidence to be a rectilinear prophecy. The other prime example of this methodology is found in Laetsch's treatment of Zechariah 9 to 14, which is also considered to be one gigantic rectilinear prophecy.

A few examples of Laetsch's technique will suffice here. All the references to Ephraim, Israel, and Judah are said to represent the New Testament Church, which is the True Israel.<sup>74</sup> The expression "the latter days" ( ׀ ׀ ׀ ׀ ׀ ׀ ) in 30:24 is described as dividing all of time into the Old Covenant and New Covenant periods.<sup>75</sup> The grain,

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

wine, and oil named in 31:12 are said to represent the Bread of Life, the wine of the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit respectively.<sup>76</sup> Regarding 31:15, the famous Rachel passage, Laetsch argues rather vehemently against C. F. Keil, who envisions a causal connection between the deportation Innocents of Bethlehem by way of a "far-fetched typical explanation"; Laetsch counters basically by saying that this verse must refer exclusively to Bethlehem because the whole section is exclusively Messianic.<sup>77</sup> The figure of a women surrounding a man in 31:22 is deemed to be a representation of the Church lovingly adhering to Christ.<sup>78</sup> In a fashion now thoroughly familiar to his readers, Laetsch compares the new covenant mentioned in 31:31 with the Old Covenant: the Old Covenant was for ancient Israel only, and it demanded perfect obedience to decrees carved in stone; the New Covenant, which includes the Gentiles, is characterized by forgiveness and obedience from the heart.<sup>79</sup>

The whole discussion of Laetsch on the Book of Consolations reintroduces the question: when a Messianic element has been discerned within a rectilinear prophecy, just how far into the context of that prophecy does that Messianic element exert its influence? The answers Laetsch gives to that question cover the whole spectrum of possibilities: for example, here with Jeremiah that Messianic influence extends outward to include a whole section of the book; with Hos. 11:1, however,

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 256,7.

the influence of the Messianic element does not even extend outward to include the whole verse.

The technique used by Laetsch is a classic example of what might be called a "back door Christology." An interpreter of a typological bent, grasping the overall effect of the Book of Consolations in the sum of its constituent parts, seems to have little difficulty identifying the Christological element in the ebb and flow of the book's historical element, a history that is charged with the future. A rectilinear advocate, however, faces a different sort of dilemma. By identifying Jer. 30:9, 31:15, 33:14,15, and other individual verses as being rectilinear prophecies, Laetsch can speak with assurance of having found the Messianic element in the Book of Consolations. However, having thus isolated the Messianic element from its historical context, Laetsch does not want to be found saying that the material surrounding his rectilinear prophecies is not Messianic. The only alternative left for Laetsch is to remove the surrounding material from the realm of Old Testament history by means of allegory. Thus, the net effect is that Laetsch attempts to put back into the text through the "back door" the Christological element which, in the view of a typologist, he has allowed to escape through the front door.

#### Hosea 11:1

This verse, of course, has often been discussed within Missouri Synod circles, perhaps because it is somewhat problematic especially for the rectilinear school. While some of Laetsch's own hermeneutical compatriots might be seen to abandon a purely rectilinear approach to this passage, Laetsch holds his ground with an admirable consistency.

Laetsch's own words speak for themselves and hardly require further explanation:

Read in this context (deliverance from Egyptian bondage) without taking into account Matt. 2:15, it seems certain, indeed, that the clause "and called my son out of Egypt" refers to Israel and its deliverance from Egypt. Yet this interpretation, plausible as it seems, runs counter to the Lord's own interpretation as recorded by His inspired penman, who very definitely states that the words "I have called My Son out of Egypt" refer to the Christ Child. . .

Various efforts have been made to solve this difficulty. The literal sense, some say, speaks of Israel; the mystical sense, of Christ. This solution is contrary to the ancient principle of sound Biblical hermeneutics, that every passage of Scripture has but one intended sense. To deny this principle would undermine the very foundation of Scriptural interpretation and open wide the doors to fanciful speculations and to uncertainty. In our day the typical mode of interpretation is favored generally. Israel's history is regarded as the type of Christ's life, and therefore, as Israel took refuge in Egypt and later was brought back to the Promised Land, so Christ fled to Egypt and later returned to his own country. Yet Matthew does not say that a type was fulfilled. He says that what was spoken by the prophet was fulfilled by Christ's sojourn in Egypt. He speaks of the fulfillment of a historical fact prophesied by Hosea, the historical fact: Out of Egypt have I called my Son. . . Since the Holy Spirit calls the return of Christ out of Egypt a fulfillment of what the prophet foretold, we accept His interpretation as authentic. The eternal God speaking of His love toward Israel in the distant past, foretells in the same breath an act of love in the distant future, calling His Son, an Israelite concerning the flesh (Rom. 9:5), out of Egypt. To the Eternal past and future is today (Ps. 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8). Whether the prophet himself or his hearers and readers in the Old Testament grasped and understood the meaning of the Lord, is quite a different question.<sup>80</sup>

This extensive quotation aptly summarized Laetsch's view of the sensus unus dictum, his rectilinear application of it, and the certainty of the Spirit's testimony, an issue which Laetsch considers to be at stake. There is also present an emphasis on words or vocables rather than events, and this emphasis reinforces Laetsch in his quest for certainty even in the face of what others might see as implausibility. In

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<sup>80</sup>Laetsch, Minor Prophets, p. 88-9.

view of the difficulty of this passage, Laetsch does make one concession that he does not ordinarily make, that is, his speculation that Hosea and his audience may not have been fully aware of the Holy Spirit's intent. But nonetheless, the Spirit's intent remains singular, regardless of the opinions of man.

#### Hosea 14

This concluding chapter of Hosea is a beautiful picture of Israel's restoration as she returns in repentance to Yahweh. Through the heavy use of allegory Laetsch transports the whole chapter into the era of the New Testament.<sup>81</sup> His interpretation goes one step farther than the technique that was used in Jeremiah's Book of Consolations, because the chapter itself contains no confirmed rectilinear prophecy which would allow Laetsch to make the shift from one time period to another. Although Laetsch may still be extending outward the Messianic thrust of Hos. 13:14, the resurrection prophecy, another motivation for his allegorizing may be perceived. It was pointed out earlier that Laetsch tends to thrust any words of grace into the Gospel era. It would appear that the impetus of this tendency provides for Laetsch sufficient grounds for his allegorical interpretation.

#### The Book of Joel

In his discussion of this book Theodore Laetsch gives his readers perhaps his clearest testimony to the reality of God's modus operandi of Gospel in the Old Testament.<sup>82</sup> Although some of his state-

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 108-11.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 112-35.

ments are rather hard to reconcile with other statements he makes about the legal nature of the Old Covenant, his Gospel statements must be heard nonetheless. In connection with Joel 2:26,27, Laetsch confesses that "the Messiah is in the very center, is the heart, the life, of God's Church in the Old and New Testament."<sup>83</sup> Regarding Joel 2:12-14 he makes the assertion that the Old Testament sacrifices were means of grace, although he qualifies somewhat his definition of the means of grace by describing the sacrifices as a means whereby man can communicate with God.<sup>84</sup>

One possible key to understanding these Gospel statements of Laetsch is to distinguish the Old Testament corpus from the Old Covenant contained within its pages. In general terms, Laetsch seems to picture the legal ramifications of the Old Covenant as being on the wane already as early as the time of Joel, while grace is seen as coming to the forefront more and more as the era of the New Covenant approaches.

To describe the presence of Christ's blessings in the Old Testament period Laetsch repeatedly cites without comment Heb. 9:15, saying only that the merits of Christ were "retroactive."<sup>85</sup> The Hebrews verse says that the death of the mediator of the New Covenant works redemption from transgressions under the Old Covenant. Nevertheless, taking all of Laetsch's writings together, this Gospel thought does not receive the lion's share of emphasis and attention. It might be best to leave both Laetsch's law statements and his Gospel statements

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 121-2.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., p. 126.



stand as they are side-by-side on the grounds that, doctrinally speaking, law and Gospel statements are by their very nature irreconcilable. It must still be remembered, however, that Laetsch prefers to stress discontinuity between the testaments as did his exegetical forbears.

Regarding chapter three of Joel's book (ch. 4 in Hebrew) Laetsch again uses the expression "In those days" (  $\text{בְּיָמֵינוּ} \text{ וְבְיָמֵי בָנֵינוּ}$  ) to transport the content of the whole chapter into the New Testament era. Having transported the chapter's content centuries into the future, Laetsch again uses allegory to conform the individual verses to the Messianic image. For example, the valley of Shittim in verse 17 (English v. 18) represents for him the whole earth awaiting eternal life.<sup>86</sup> When one sees the extent to which Laetsch employs allegory in his interpretations, it becomes understandable how Fuerbringer can speak of allegory in such neutral, noncommittal terms.<sup>87</sup> Also, Laetsch understands the names "Egypt" and "Edom" in verse 18 (English v. 19) to be types of the future enemies of the Christian Church.<sup>88</sup> It is interesting how he places allegorical symbols and types on a par with each other and how he can speak of types at all when there is no New Testament confirmation of the type-antitype relationship, thereby parting company with his associates in the rectilinear school. Apparently, the initial phrase of the vision, "In those days," provides for Laetsch sufficient reason for positing such a type. The equation of types and symbols serves to devoid the Old Testament terms of their

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>87</sup>Fuerbringer, Hermeneutics, p. 12,13.

<sup>88</sup>Laetsch, Minor Prophets, p. 135.

historical import while at the same time to permit the very same terms to be conveyors of a Messianic meaning.

Amos 9:13

Laetsch places the whole of the last three chapters of Amos solidly into the time frame of the Messianic era, again using allegory as the chief means of transporting the readers of Amos into the future. Amos 9:13 is brought forward here as a clearcut example of Laetsch's technique. The verse paints a picture of agricultural plenty, in which the reapers of a new crop will be unable to stay ahead of the plowers who are preparing the soil for yet another crop. Laetsch finds himself in the perpetual position of making an either-or decision about the text because of his view of the sensus unus rule. Since he has already made his decision, that is, that this whole section of Amos pertains to Messianic times, Laetsch is constrained to avoid the subject of an actual agricultural blessing. Instead, he perceives the verse to be speaking of the future harvest of souls, the successful mission efforts of the New Testament Church.<sup>89</sup> The subject of the Church's mission is simply introduced with Laetsch's phrase, "In other words . . .," a phrase so well suited to the allegorical task. As Laetsch so carefully dissects each word, phrase, and verse of Amos' visions, it is noteworthy that he grants himself the ability to speak about the New Testament era in far greater detail than would any typologist, who is more inclined to sense the overall effect of such visionary literature.

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

Theology of "The Day" in Obadiah

It has been pointed out that the sensus unus rule, as Laetsch understands it, normally prohibits him from perceiving the eschatological "even now, not yet" dynamic in the Old Testament material. In his comments on "the Day" in Obadiah 15, however, he comes very close to such a perception. From God's visitations upon Israel's enemies, most notably Edom, down to World War II, he speaks of such events as being harbingers, heralds, and forerunners that presage and even guarantee God's final judgment on the Last Day.<sup>90</sup> Laetsch uses the illustration of how volcanoes of all times and places draw their power from the singular sea of judgmental fire. As one hears him addressing the judgment of God in terms that at least approach a proleptic eschatology, one could only wish that he would have addressed the grace that flows from the cross in equally eloquent terms.

Micah 5:2 (5:1 in Hebrew)

Theodore Laetsch supplies for his readers what might be called a standard Missouri Synod interpretation of this famous prophecy of Christ's birth in Bethlehem,<sup>91</sup> including the connection made between Bethlehem, construed as the "House of Bread," and Christ as the Bread of life. His discussion becomes more interesting, however, as he embarks upon a treatment of the remainder of chapter five.

On the basis of this one confirmed rectilinear prophecy, Laetsch goes on to treat the rest of the chapter, and indeed the rest of the

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., p. 203-4.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 271-2.

whole book, as pertaining to New Testament times. Micah's words of judgment against Assyria are no longer seen as speaking of the pagan Mesopotamian enemy, but are construed as a picture of Christ purging his Church of all her enemies. Even Nimrod in Mic. 5:6 (Hebrew 5:7) is said to stand for Satan.<sup>92</sup> When all is said and done, Laetsch provides on the basis of Micah a more complete, comprehensive picture of the New Testament Church than the New Testament itself could ever provide. Again, one can only be amazed at the details Laetsch is able to describe, but the question must be posed: by what criteria does an interpreter determine the points at which a rectilinear prophecy begin and end?

#### Habakkuk 2:4

The Lutheran Church is indebted to Luther himself for making this verse one of the most famous Gospel words in the Old Testament, and the use of Habakkuk's words in the New Testament provides Laetsch with a prime opportunity for proclaiming his rectilinear views. In view of the lengths to which Laetsch goes in his treatment of other pivotal Old Testament passages, one might expect that he would discourse on this passage for three or four pages at least. But the reader of Laetsch is surprised to find that he spends no more than three-quarters of one page on the verse! He mentions none of the New Testament quotations and actually devotes more space to the relatively unfamiliar words of Hab. 2:5.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 332-3.

To what might this phenomenon be attributed? The answer most readily available is that Hab. 2:4 simply was not an issue in Laetsch's day. This possibility suggests that the degree of particularity with which Laetsch (is able to) expound a text tends to rise in direct proportion to the quantity and vehemence of his exegetical opponents. If this observation holds true, an analyst of Laetsch can backtrack from Laetsch's writings to ascertain his exegetical milieu with some measure of assurance. Conversely, speculations might abound as to why he never accepted the challenge to give a detailed explanation of Is. 7:14 throughout his whole writing career.

#### The Gospel of the Old Testament

The remainder of Laetsch's writings simply serves to reinforce what has already been discovered about Theodore Laetsch, especially in the area of visionary literature and his allegorical treatment of it. His commentary on the Minor Prophets, which postdates his last journal article by six years, comes at the very end of his writing career. If it is at all correct and accurate to look to the very end of his last published work for some summary thoughts, one might expect to find a last word, his final answer, on what has turned out to be perhaps the most burning question of all, namely, the reality of the Gospel dynamic within the pages of the Old Testament.

One searches in vain, however, for a definitive answer to this question; instead, one finds a heightening of the tension between the two possible answers that can be given. This tension can best be seen by juxtaposing two separate quotes of Laetsch. Inclining toward a positive answer are Laetsch's words about the prayer of Habakkuk:

In this remarkable vision the prophet sees the New Testament realities in the mold of Old Testament types and figures. The New Testament Church is Israel, Judah; its enemies the Chaldeans and their allies, the Edomites, Midianites, etc. Moreover, God grants His prophet the gift of seeing history in a manner similar to that of the eternal God, who is not bound by any restrictions of time and space (Ps. 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8; Ps. 139:3-12; Jer, 23:23f.). The prophet sees in one brief moment, as if they were closely connected, events which lie centuries and milleniums (sic) apart. All divine deliverances through time and eternity, from every evil of body and soul, property and honor--all these he sees as one deliverance, the result of that great battle of God's Anointed on Calvary, at the end of which he cried, It is finished! (Ps. 22, particularly v. 31, "He hath done [it]!") In fact, all deliverances of God's people prior to Calvary are not only foreshadowings and prophecies of this great redemption; and all deliverances following it in time and eternity are not only reminders of it. They owe their very reality to the victory of God's Anointed on Golgotha.<sup>94</sup>

On the other hand, the rebuilding of the temple leads Laetsch to make the following statement:

In the Old Testament, God's Temple was built of stone and wood and metal, dead material, however precious. God's temple in the New Testament is built up of living stones, fitly framed together to be a habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph. 1:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-8). In the Old Covenant, God's dwelling place was confined to one nation, the people of Israel; in the New Covenant it will include members of every nation and kindred and tongue and people (Rev. 14:6; Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8). In the Old Testament the nation whom God had chosen to be a particular treasure to Him (Ex. 19:5,6; Amos 3:2a), in whose midst He dwelt (Ex. 25:8; 29:45f.), was composed of believers and unbelievers (Ps. 95:7-11; 1 Cor. 10:1-5). The glory of the New Testament temple, or Church, of God is that it is a holy Church, all its members washed, all sanctified, all justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 6:11), a communion of saints. Other items of this greater glory are the difference of types and reality, prophecy and fulfillment (Col. 2:16f.), of nonage and bondage, and full manhood and liberty (Gal. 4:1ff.), of royal priesthood by representation (Ex. 28:1ff.; Deut. 17:8-15), and universal (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; see also Heb. 7-10).<sup>95</sup>

In recognition of the fact of Laetsch's heavy use of Scriptural phraseology, it is also recognized that the question of the Real

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 396.

Presence of the Gospel in the Old Testament remains to a certain extent a question of degree or emphasis, of whether continuity or discontinuity between the testaments receives the most attention. In the second quote the interchangeability of the expressions "Old Testament" and "Old Covenant" seems to belie the possibility that Laetsch is making a distinction between the two terms. His use of Scriptural terminology does not necessarily minimize the potential for approaching the very same words from an entirely different perspective from that of other exegetes.

If one can detect in Theodore Laetsch any trend or development at all, references to the presence of the Gospel dynamic in the Old Testament tend to appear with greater frequency at the end of his career than at the beginning. The "not yet" of the Bethlehem perspective, which is stressed almost to the exclusion of an eschatological "even now" in his early writings, gives place to occasional "even now" statements at the end of his career. And yet, there is heard from Missouri Synod laypeople the frequent comment that the "law is in the Old Testament, and the Gospel in the New." This phenomenon suggests that interpreters such as Laetsch have been more than capable of being so understood.

## CONCLUSION

Theodore Laetsch was an exegetical spokesman for the Missouri Synod, and from that position he endeavored faithfully to represent the church he so dearly loved. Although a good share of his career was spent in a teaching position, he never lost the desire to afford truly pastoral care for those who would listen.

As a spokesman for the synod Laetsch tried to represent what he considered to be the majority hermeneutical opinion of the synod and to give that opinion a firm exegetical footing. In doing so his watchwords were certainty and application: the providing of sure, unequivocal Scriptural evidence for the doctrinal tenets of the synod and the application of those doctrines to the everyday lives of his hearers. In his quest for certainty Laetsch's explanations of Biblical texts have an aura of semi-officiality, containing the suggestion that the synod has spoken the final, definitive interpretation of Scripture, an interpretation that might render future commentaries unnecessary.

The majority hermeneutical opinion Laetsch represented has been referred to in this paper as the res-to-verba school of thought. In answer to heterodoxy and questionable practices within American Lutheranism, and the potential for unionism attendant to them, this school brought to bear upon the Scriptures a highly organized and extensive system of theology and emphasized the res-to-verba direction on the hermeneutical circle. The possible pitfalls of such an approach, such as the danger of not hearing the Biblical text in its own right, have



been treated extensively in this paper. The chief systematical spokesman of the movement was Francis Pieper, while its hermeneutical codifier was Ludwig Fuerbringer. These two men, if one is to speak at least of culminating influences, constituted, as it were, the material and formal principles of Laetsch's hermeneutics.

The res-to-verba hermeneutical school was a conservative Lutheran response to the first wave of higher criticism in the church-at-large. While other interpreters were seen to relativize the meaning of Scripture by focusing upon the contingencies of historical studies, the movement of which Laetsch was a part found its certainty in the immovable definitions of individual words, which remained constant in meaning regardless of the historical setting in which they were found.

When higher criticism found particular expression in the denial of predictive, Messianic prophecy, Laetsch's movement found a counter to this attack in a particular expression of its own, namely, the rectilinear approach. To those who said that so-called prophecies were only references to phenomena contemporary to the prophet, the rectilinear school saw only references to Christ. However, by identifying certain points within the Old Testament as being unmistakably Messianic, the rectilinear school could be heard to say that the remainder of the Old Testament was not Messianic. By stressing the legal aspects of the Old Testament and by emphasizing discontinuity between the testaments, the school sought to make its rectilinear prophecies stand out in bolder relief, but in so doing it ran the risk of removing from the Old Testament more Christology than it ensured. The sensus unus rule, originally designed to safeguard the pursuit of Christology, could be seen instead as imposing limitations upon the same pursuit.

The school of Theodore Laetsch tended to obviate the necessity of original exegesis and to parochialize the study of Scripture, but at the same time its unwavering faith and pastoral heart did much to keep the Missouri Synod on the narrow way through many troublesome times.

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