

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

## Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

---

Bachelor of Divinity

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

---

6-1-1954

### Luther and the Canon

Erwin Prange

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir\_prangee@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Prange, Erwin, "Luther and the Canon" (1954). *Bachelor of Divinity*. 423.  
<https://scholar.csl.edu/bdiv/423>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Divinity by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

LUTHER AND THE CANON

---

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Historical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

---

by

Erwin Prange

June 1954

Approved by:

*W. J. ...*  
Advisor

*... ..*  
Reader



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
The Historical Background . . . . .	1
The Problem . . . . .	3
II. LUTHER'S CHRISTOCENTRIC SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE . .	4
The Scriptures as a Whole . . . . .	4
Luther's Interpretation of the Scriptures . .	5
Christ as the Word of God for Luther . . . . .	6
III. LUTHER'S TREATMENT OF THE CANON . . . . .	11
The Entire Canon . . . . .	11
Luther's Attitude toward Individual Books . .	14
The Apochryphal Books . . . . .	22
IV. CONCLUSION . . . . .	24
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	29



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Historical Background

In order to gain the proper perspective it is necessary to briefly examine the historical and theological setting in which the Lutheran Reformation was born. From the very beginning one significant fact emerges, namely that it was not the intention of Luther to create a division in the Church or to promote radically new doctrinal principles.

Luther did not want to create a new Church, but simply to reestablish the original Catholic Church which was instituted by Christ and first represented by the Apostles.<sup>1</sup>

Reform was carried out in the name of the Biblical understanding of the Christian religion.<sup>2</sup> Luther's conception of the Reformation was determined by the fact that in objecting to Roman Catholic Christianity, in the name of the Biblical understanding of the Christian religion he preserved the sense of historical continuity with the Church. All of his teachings were then actually Biblical

---

<sup>1</sup> H. H. Kramm, The Theology of Martin Luther (London: James Clarke & Co., 1947), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, The Heritage of the Reformation (Glencoe Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), pp. 52 f.



corrections of teachings that had been developed down through the centuries. The reduction of the old faith of historical Christianity to its true nature in accordance with the "Word", brought about the introduction of a new cause from the Roman Church.

Although reform was carried out in accordance with the Biblical principle, Luther was not the first Biblicalist.<sup>3</sup> The Bible was law and authority for all of Luther's opponents. The medieval Occamites were the strictest of Biblical literalists. The difference lay rather in the authority or the sufficiency of Scripture. In the pre-Reformation period this authority of Scripture was recognized but as derived from the Church. Luther's doctrine of the independence and sufficiency of Biblical authority did not exclude the church as a witness. The primitive rather than the medieval church was regarded as one of the primary witnesses to the authenticity of the canon, so important for the concept of Scriptural authority. Other witnesses were the internal harmony of the books themselves and then finally the "Testimonium spiritus sancti internum". There was another and much more important difference which lay in the concept of "law" and "gospel". The doctrine of the gospel and of justification was for the reformers closely tied to the doctrine of the "Word". All

---

<sup>3</sup>Werner Elert, Morphologie des Luthertums (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931), I, 157 ff.



were bound up in the person of Christ. The certainty of the faith is bound up in the gospel and its proclamation. "Nihil nisi Christus Praedicandus", becomes the "Schriftprinzip" of the Lutheran Reformation.

### The Problem

The questions to be answered by the thesis are the following: What is Luther's attitude toward the Scriptural canon and what is the basis of or the key to his attitude? It will not be within the scope of the thesis to define or investigate Luther's doctrine of the "word" except where it may have direct and immediate bearing upon his treatment of the canon. His doctrines of inspiration and of the Holy Spirit will also not be considered separately but only in the immediate context of his attitude toward the canon.

Chapter II will endeavor to show that Luther's ultimate "Schriftprinzip" is Christocentricity. The Scriptures are the "Krippe" for Christ and Christ is the "Pruefstein" for the Scriptures. Although he also uses historical and internal considerations as the basis for his judgments, Christocentricity is the key, the transcendent principle, which stands above and outweighs all others. Chapter III will show that this principle governs Luther's attitude toward the entire Biblical canon.



## CHAPTER II

### LUTHER'S CHRISTOCENTRIC SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE

#### The Scriptures as a Whole

Therefore let your own thoughts and feelings go, and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines, which can never be worked out, so that you may find the wisdom of God that he lays before you in such foolish and simple guise, in order that he may quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. Simple and little are the swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, that lies in them.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the Scriptures are the cradle of Christ applies not only to the New Testament where He is mentioned by name but also to the Old Testament where Luther interprets everything in terms of Christ.

If, then you would interpret well and surely, set Christ before you for He is the man to whom it all applies. Make nothing else of the high priest Aaron than Christ alone, as is done by the Epistle to the Hebrews, which is almost enough, all by itself, to interpret all the figures of Moses. Likewise it is certain that Christ himself is both the sacrifice and the altar, for He sacrificed Himself, with His own blood; as the same Epistle announces. Now, as the Levitical high priest, by his sacrifice, took away only the artificial sins, which were in their nature no sins, so our high priest, Christ, by His own sacrifice and blood, has taken away the true sin, which is in its nature sin, and He has gone in once through the veil to God to make atonement for us.

---

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the Book of the Bible," Works of Martin Luther, translated by C. M. Jacobs. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1932), VI, 368.



Thus you should apply to Christ personally and to no one else, all that is written about the high priest.<sup>5</sup>

For all the prophets do the same thing; they teach and rebuke the people of their time, and they proclaim the coming and the Kingdom of Christ and direct and point the people to Him, as to the Savior both of those who have gone before and of those who are to come.<sup>6</sup>

Christocentricity is the touchstone, the norm, by which the Scriptures are judged. They are not judged by men but by their purpose itself, to present Christ. Apostolic validity is to be determined also by this principle.

For it is the duty of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and Resurrection and work of Christ, and thus lay the foundation of faith, as He Himself says in John xv, "Ye shall bear witness of me." All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with Him. That is the true test, by which to judge all books, when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ (Romans iii), and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ (I Corinthians xv). What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic, even though Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod did it.<sup>7</sup>

#### Luther's Interpretation of the Scriptures

In the same year Luther emphasized the principles, "Scripture is its own interpreter," a principle which, incidentally, is repeatedly applied by him in his first series of lectures on the Psalms, and which today has become flesh and blood to us. At the Leipzig Disputation he stated: "That is not the right way to interpret Scripture, to collect statements

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 379.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 405.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 478.



from different parts of the Bible without any regard for logical order or context. But that is the way it is commonly done, and it leads to nothing but errors. In order not to go wrong the theologian must, therefore, keep in mind the whole of Scriptures, compare the contradictory passages and as the two cherubim face one another find the harmony of their mutual diversity in the center of the propitiatorium, that is, in the true understanding of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

In his lectures on Romans, 1515-1515, and on Galatians, 1516-1517, this view becomes increasingly evident, and after 1519 his exposition is entirely controlled by the principle: Scripture has but one meaning, even though in his practical explanations of the Scriptures he still often times pays tribute to the allegorical sense. He now declares in his writing against Emser, "Scripture shall not have a double meaning but shall retain the one that accords with the meaning by the words," and again, "The Holy Ghost is the most simple author and speaker in heaven and earth, therefore his words cannot have more than one, the most simple meaning." In his Christmas Postil of 1522 he even writes, "If we concede that Scripture has more than one sense, it loses its fighting force."<sup>9</sup>

The content, the test and the meaning of the Scriptures are one. This is a beautifully consistent "Schriftprinzip" which gives to the Scriptures their full authority and honor as the primary witness to Christ. We shall see in the following that at times the line between the "Word" and the "Witness" are drawn very thin for Luther.

#### Christ as the Word of God for Luther

Christ and the Word are virtually interchangeable terms for Luther. At times, however, he appears to

---

<sup>8</sup>M. Reu, Luther and the Scriptures (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, c.1944), pp. 10 f.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 10.



identify the Word with the written word of Scripture or even with the spoken word of the Christian preacher. This is at first sight confusing; but it constitutes no real difficulty, if we consider what he understands by Scripture and by Christian preaching. "In the whole Scripture," Luther holds, "there is nothing else but Christ, either in plain words or involved words." Although there are passages that are obscure and difficult of exegesis, yet the content of Scripture as a whole is perfectly plain, and it is nothing else but the revelation of God in Christ. This is true no less of the Old Testament than of the New, though in a rather different way. The former must be interpreted in the light of the latter before we can see how "the entire Old Testament refers to Christ and agrees with Him:" and this is what ought to be done, for the law and the prophets are not rightly preached and understood, unless we find Christ wrapped in them.<sup>10</sup>

According to Wilhelm Pauck the Bible is the Word of God for Luther because it is the Word of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Luther did not consider the Bible as a legalistic and prescriptive norm. He read the Bible not as a book of rules and laws but as the written gospel of Christ. He also believed that the Bible was divinely inspired and therefore a divine source of truth. His use was determined by the conviction that it was the only reliable testimony of Christ and the authoritative norm of faith and life. The Bible is normative only in so far as it points and directs to Christ.

Perhaps Pauck has gone too far when he says that the Bible is the Word of God only in so far as it points and directs to Christ. In Luther these two ideas march side by

---

<sup>10</sup> Philip S. Watson, Let God be God (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), p. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, The Heritage of the Reformation (Glencoe Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), p. 29.



side, the Bible is authoritative because it is the Word of God and because it treats of Christ. According to Luther all of it treats of Christ anyhow.

Paul Althaus traces Luther's concept of the authority of Scripture in the tension between authority and freedom. He sees in Luther's doctrine of the authority of the Bible a basic contradiction. The thesis of Althaus is developed in the following manner: his question is: in what way is the Bible the Word of God and how do men become convinced of this fact? Here Luther appears to have given two entirely different answers. First of all, the Bible is the Word of God in so far as it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It has only the one content, Christ, and where it does not have this it is not from the Holy Spirit. Luther meant by "Christ the one content," not only the explicit New Testament references to Him but also the Old Testament's prefiguring of Christ. Christ as the Word introduces Himself without a priori without needing the support of any natural or human form. He who hears the witness of Christ knows that here he is standing before God Himself. The recognition of the Bible as the Word of God must come through inner conviction, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that this is God Himself speaking. The claim of a single canonical book to be the Word of God is judged by the one Word of God which has convinced the heart. This is the meaning of Luther's critical judgments over single books of the Bible.



The second pole of the tension is this: for Luther Word of God is also "that which is written." He takes for granted that the Psalter was written by the Holy Spirit without applying his Christocentric principle. The book which is the Bible comes to man with the claim that it was written by the Holy Spirit. It comes as many and varied Words of God put together as one complete whole. The formal fact of inclusion in the one whole constitutes a claim to divine inspiration. Instead of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit blind obedience and submission to the Word is the decisive factor. "One cannot play around with the Word of God, if you can't understand it, then take your hat off before it."<sup>12</sup>

Certain problems in Luther may be resolved in the light of this double view but it only serves to complicate the problem of the canon. By what process and what authority did all the various books of the Bible come under the protective covering of the Word of God? It was either a miracle of God or an accident of history, if miracle, then the second principle of obedience alone is in order, if accident, then the first principle must be applied. The forgoing evidence indicates that Christocentricity is Luther's highest principle and test yet his recognition

---

<sup>12</sup> Paul Althaus, Theologische Aufsätze (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1929), pp.140 ff.



of the second principle cannot be denied. In the following chapter we shall trace the application of both principles to the canon of the Scriptures as it existed at his time. It shall be the purpose of chapter three to determine if possible the normative criterion for Luther's treatment of the canon.

#### Toward the canon of the Scriptures

While the criticisms are directed primarily at the "outer canon" or the "Apokryphen" they are not necessarily restricted to these. His concern appears to extend both to the Christocentric principle and also to recognize the broad element involved.

In this connection, Luther's critical opinions concerning the Apokryphen are very significant. Thus, he asserts that the text of the prophecies had been fallen into confusion the Apokryphen were previously not considered as writing until afterwards, and then by redactors. The prophecies were given in other translations, when they prophesied of worldly events "and latterly been forgotten." The book of the Kings are more trustworthy

In this connection, Luther's critical opinions concerning the Apokryphen are very significant. Thus, he asserts that the text of the prophecies had been fallen into confusion the Apokryphen were previously not considered as writing until afterwards, and then by redactors. The prophecies were given in other translations, when they prophesied of worldly events "and latterly been forgotten." The book of the Kings are more trustworthy

<sup>15</sup>Wrich Becker, *Luther's Theology in His Writings* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1911), p. 100.



## CHAPTER III

### LUTHER'S TREATMENT OF THE CANON

#### The Entire Canon

Luther at times seems to adopt a rather free attitude toward the entire Scriptures.

Seine freien Urteile ueber einzelne Schriften nicht bloss des Alten - Moses hat viele Quellen gebraucht, und mancher Spruch der Propheten entstammt einem konkreten Anlass -, sondern auch des Neuen Testaments sind ja bekannt. Der Jakobusbrief ist ihm "die stroeharne Epistel." Die Offenbarung ist kein apostolisches, sondern ein "juedisches Buch;" der Hebraerbrief ist aus vielen kleinen Strichen zusammengesetzt usw. All diese Urteile zeigen uebrigens, wie der Genius auch im Voruebergehen Beobachtungen macht, die Entdeckung gleich kommen.<sup>13</sup>

While the criticisms are directed primarily at the "outer canon" or the "Antilegomena" they are not necessarily restricted to them. His remarks appear to embrace both the Christocentric principle and also to recognize the human element involved.

In this connection, Luther's critical opinions concerning the Scriptures are very significant. Thus, he asserts that the text of the prophecies has often fallen into confusion; the discourses were presumably not committed to writing until afterward, and then by redactors. The prophets were often in error (fehlten), when they prophesied of worldly events "von Weltlichen Laeuften." The book of the Kings are more trustworthy

---

<sup>13</sup>Erich Seeberg, Luther's Theologie in Ihren Grundzuegen (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1950), p. 140.



than the Chronicles. By whom Genesis was composed, is a matter of indifference. It would be better if the book of Esther were not in the canon. The composition of Ecclesiastes by Solomon is doubted. The reports of the synoptic gospels are not of uniform value. The Epistle of Jude is derived from the Second Epistle of Peter. The Epistle of Hebrews errs, in denying a second repentance, "and is apparently composed of many parts." James wrote a right strawy epistle . . . for it certainly has no evangelical character about it," i.e. "he teaches nothing" about Christ, and connects righteousness with works. He even says: "James talks wildly." Luther did not originally regard the Apocalypse as a prophetic or apostolic book, "because Christ is neither taught nor known in it." He remained in doubt as to its authorship. Great emphasis was laid by him upon the testimony borne to the various books by the ancient church. On this ground, Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Apocalypse are distinguished in the prefaces of A. D. 1522 from the "real certain chief books." But the inner canon is for him yet more important. The Gospel of John and Paul's epistles, especially Romans and First Peter, are the "real Kernel and marrow among all the books... For in these thou findest not much description of the work and miracles of Christ; but thou findest here portrayed in the most masterly way how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell and gives life, righteousness, and salvation - which is the real character of the gospel." In consistency with this view of the Scriptures, historical oversights and errors in the sacred writings disturbed Luther but little. They did not affect the real ground of his confidence. It is again in perfect consistency with the above, that Luther's acknowledgment of the authority of the Scriptures is not based upon their official recognition by the church, but upon the experience of their truth: "Everyone must believe only because it is God's Word and because he is satisfied in his heart that it is truth, i.e. a reality and not a mere idea."<sup>14</sup>

Reu takes the view, that in spite of his rather free attitude, Luther did not admit that the Scriptures contained

---

<sup>14</sup>Reinhold Seeberg, Textbook of the History of Doctrines, translated from the German by Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), pp.300 ff.



any error. He points out that many of Luther's critical statements are to be found in the "Tischreden" and in addition are often taken out of context.<sup>15</sup>

At this point the research student is given his choice of several conflicting and divergent views in the area of secondary sources. Reu builds a rather elaborate defense or apologia for Luther's statements as noted above. Sittler interprets Luther's critical statements in the light of his own a priori, i.e. that Luther's doctrine of the Word is always dynamic and never static.<sup>16</sup>

Seeberg thinks that one should not be too ready to overlook the critical statements of Luther or to write them off as enthusiasm since they often occur in carefully composed passages. To Seeberg these expressions represent the calculated application of Luther's Christocentric principle to the Scriptures.<sup>17</sup>

It is left to Althaus to resolve the difficulties in the dialectic of authority and freedom. Althaus says that Luther did not intend to develop a doctrine of Scriptural infallibility but meant to leave the way open for free

---

<sup>15</sup>M. Reu, Luther and the Scriptures (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, c.1944), pp.71 f.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Sittler, Jr. The Doctrine of the Word (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1948), pp.13 ff.

<sup>17</sup>Reinhold Seeberg, op. cit., pp.301 f.



criticism for no man may set the boundaries of the Word of God. Yet in the tension between authority and freedom it is the submission to the Bible word which is the way to enlightenment in the Holy Spirit. Just as no man can set the exact boundaries of the Word neither can mere man fathom its depths.<sup>18</sup>

#### Luther's Attitude toward Individual Books

In his attitude toward individual books Luther shows marked prejudice. Here his Christocentric principle shows up perhaps the best.

From all this you can now judge all the books and decide among them which are the best. John's Gospel and St. Paul's Epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought rightly to be the first books and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most, and by daily reading, make them as familiar as his daily bread... Now John writes very little about the works of Christ, but very much about his preaching, while the other Evangelists write much of his works and little of his preaching; therefore John's Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels, - Matthew, Mark and Luke. In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other books or doctrine. Therefore St. James Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel

---

<sup>18</sup> Paul Althaus, op. cit., pp.145 ff.



about it. But more of this in other prefaces.<sup>19</sup>

The Epistle to the Romans also seems to be his favorite.

This Epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel, and is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. It can never be read or pondered too much, and the more it is dealt with the more precious it becomes, and the better it tastes.<sup>20</sup>

Certain books he seems to judge quite harshly. In Luther's judgment of books like James, Hebrews and Revelation we can see the Christocentric principle predominate but there are other factors also to be considered. The books which Luther attacks so strongly are the historic "Antilegomena" which had always been looked on with some degree of suspicion by the church. Of the Epistle to the Hebrews Luther has the following to say:

Hitherto we have had the right certain chief books of the New Testament. The four following had, in ancient times, a different reputation. In the first place, that this Epistle is not St. Paul's, nor any other apostle's is proved by the fact that it says, in chapter ii, that this doctrine has come to us and remains among us through those who themselves heard it from the Lord. Thus it is clear that he speaks of the apostles as a disciple to whom this doctrine has come from the apostles, perhaps long after them. For St. Paul, in Galatians i, testifies mightily that he has his Gospel from no man, neither

---

<sup>19</sup>Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the Books of the Bible," Works of Martin Luther, translated by Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1943), VI, 443 f.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 447.



through men, but from God himself. Again there is a hard knot in the fact that in chapters vi and x it flatly denies and forbids to sinners repentance after baptism, and in chapter xii, it says that Esau sought repentance and did not find it. This seems, as it stands, to be against all the Gospels and St. Paul's epistles; and although one might make a gloss on it, the words are so clear that I do not know whether that would be sufficient. My opinion is that it is an epistle of many pieces put together, and it does not deal with any one subject in an orderly way. However that may be, it is a marvellously fine epistle. It discusses Christ's priesthood masterfully and thoroughly, out of the Scriptures, and interprets the Old Testament finely and richly. Thus it is plain that it is the work of an able and learned man, who was a disciple of the apostles, learned much from them, and was greatly experienced in faith and practiced in the Scriptures. And although, as he himself testifies in chapter vi, he does not lay the foundation of faith, which is the work of an apostle, nevertheless he does build finely thereon, gold, silver, precious stones, as St. Paul says in I Corinthians iii. Therefore we should not be hindered, even though wood, straw or hay be mixed in with them, but accept this fine teaching with all honor; though to be sure, we cannot put it on the same level with the apostolic epistles. Who wrote it is not known, and will not be known for a while; it makes no difference. We should be satisfied with the doctrine that he bases so constantly on the Scriptures, showing a right fine grasp upon the reading of the Scriptures and the proper way to deal with them.<sup>21</sup>

In 1522 Luther was very critical of the Apocalypse of St. John.

About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own ideas, and would bind no man to my opinion or judgment; I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic. First and foremost, the Apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear, plain words, as do Peter and Paul, and Christ in the Gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak of Christ and his

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 476 f.



deeds without figures and visions; but there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so out and out with visions and figures. And so I think of it almost as I do the Fourth Book of Esdras, and can nohow detect that the Holy Spirit produced it. Moreover, he seems to be going much too far when he commends his own book so highly, - more than any of the other sacred books do, though they are much more important, - and threatens that if anyone takes away anything from it, God will deal likewise with him. Again, they are to be blessed who keep what is written therein; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. It is just the same as if we had it not, and there are many far better books for us to keep. Many of the fathers, too, rejected this book of old, though St. Jerome, to be sure, praises it highly and says that it is above all praise and that there are as many mysteries in it as words; though he cannot prove this at all, and his praise is, at many points, too mild. Finally, let everyone think of it as his own spirit gives him to think. My spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it, - Christ is not taught or known in it; but to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle is bound, above all else, to do, as He says in Acts 1, "Ye shall be my witnesses." Therefore I stick to<sup>22</sup> the books which give me Christ, clearly and purely.

Although harmony, tradition and even evident reason certainly play a part in Luther's judgment, the Christocentric principle remains the final arbiter. Thus the Scriptures are not judged by mere man but by Christ himself. These criticisms are not, however, leveled at the Scriptures themselves but at the canonicity of the books involved. Here Luther can plainly be seen to be operating with two principles, the Christocentric one and the consciousness of an "inner" and an "outer" canon. These principles are most

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 488 f.



evident perhaps, in Luther's evaluations of the book of James. Just as the Gospel of John was Luther's favorite among all the biblical books so the book of James seems to be the one which he liked least of all.

Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and hold it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays stress upon God's law. But to state my own opinion about it, though without injury to anyone, I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows. First: flatly against St. Paul and the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works, and says that Abraham was justified by his works, in that he offered his son Isaac, though St. Paul, on the contrary, teaches, in Romans iv. that Abraham was justified without works, by faith alone, before he offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis xv. Now although this Epistle might be helped and a gloss be found for this work-righteousness, it cannot be defended against applying to works the saying of Moses in Genesis xv, which speaks only of Abraham's faith, and not of his works, as St. Paul shows in Romans iv. This fault, therefore, leads to the conclusion that it is not the work of any apostle. Second: its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times, but he teaches nothing about Him, and only speaks of common faith in God. For it is the duty of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and Resurrection and work of Christ, and thus lay the foundation of faith, as He himself says, in John xv, "Ye shall bear witness of me." All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with Him. That is the true test, by which to judge all books, when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all Scriptures show us Christ (Romans iii), and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ (I Corinthians xv). . . . But this James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works; and he mixes the two up in such disorderly fashion that it seems to me that he must have been some good, pious man, who took some sayings of the apostles' disciples and threw them thus on paper; or perhaps they were written down by someone else from his preaching. He calls the law a "law of liberty," though St. Paul calls



it a law of slavery, of wrath, of death and of sin (Galatians iii; Romans vii). . . . In a word, he wants to guard against those who relied on faith without works, and is unequal to the task (in spirit, thought, and words, and reads the Scriptures and thereby resists Paul and all Scripture), and would accomplish by insisting on the Law what the apostles accomplish by inciting men to love. Therefore, I cannot put him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting him where he pleases and estimating him as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in him.<sup>23</sup>

Luther seems to have held this rather low opinion of James throughout his entire life.

Since in later editions of his New Testament Luther did not repeat this section, some argued that in later years he changed his opinion concerning the Epistle of St. James. But this is not correct. . . . In the Table Talks we find this remark of the year 1532: "Many have tried hard to make James agree with Paul, as also Melancthon did in his Apology, but not seriously (serio: does that mean successfully?). These do not harmonize: faith justifies, and faith does not justify. To him who can make these two agree I will give my doctor's cap and I am willing to be called fool." The strongest remark is from the year 1540: "Only the Popists accept James on account of the righteousness by works, but my opinion is that it is not the writing of an apostle, especially because it calls faith body and the works, soul. This is apparently absurd and against Scripture. Some day I will use James to fire my stove. We can adorn and excuse it, but only with great difficulties." From the year 1542 we find this notation: "The Epistle of James we have thrown out from this school because it has no value. It has not one syllable about Christ. It does not even mention Christ once except in the beginning. I hold it is written by some Jew who heard only a dim sound concerning Christ but no clear distinct message; and because he had heard that the Christians put great emphasis on faith in Christ, he thought, I will oppose them and emphasize works. And this he did. Of the Passion and

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 478 f.



Resurrection of Christ, this heart of the preaching of all apostles, he does not say a word. Then, there is no order or method. Now he speaks of clothes, now of wrath, jumps from one thing to another. He uses this simile: As the body does not live without the soul, so faith is nothing without works. O Mary, Madonna! What a poor simile! He compares faith with the body while it should rather be compared with soul. Already the ancients saw this, therefore they did not number this Epistle with the Catholic Epistles." And again: "Here at Wittenberg we nearly thrust James out of the Bible." At a disputation in 1543 Luther refused to accept a quotation from James because this Epistle lacks the necessary authority.<sup>24</sup>

Luther considers Jude also to be outside of the "Inner Canon."

Concerning the Epistle of St. Jude, no one can deny that it is an extract or copy from St. Peter's second epistle, so very like it are all the words. He also speaks of the apostles as a disciple coming long after them, and quotes sayings and stories that are found nowhere in the Scriptures. Moreover, Jude, the Apostle, did not go to Greek-speaking lands, but to Persia, as it is said, so that he did not write Greek. Therefore, although I praise the book, it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books, which are to lay the foundation of faith.<sup>25</sup>

The book of Esther also comes in for some rather rough treatment in the "Table Talks." "Ich bin dem buch und Esther so feind, dass ich wollte, sie waeren gar nicht vorhanden; denn sie judenzen zu sehr, und haben viel heidnische Unart."<sup>26</sup>

So far we have presented the more or less negative side

---

<sup>24</sup>Reu, op. cit., p. 42 f.

<sup>25</sup>Luther, op. cit., 479.

<sup>26</sup>Martin Luther, Saemmtliche Werke (Frankfurt a. M. und Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer Co., 1854), 62, 131.



of Luther's attitude toward the canon. It would simplify the problem a great deal if we could simply say that Luther considers these books to be outside of the Scriptural canon. This, however, would leave unexplained many of the things which he has to say about the same books at other times. By 1545 Luther seems to have modified his view on Revelation quite a bit. He mentions that the fathers had expressed some doubt about the canonicity of the book and he himself considers that question to be still open. He also leaves it up to the reader whether he wishes to consider the book canonical or not. His main purpose in the Introduction of 1545 is to get at the real meaning of the book itself rather than to discuss the canonical issue.<sup>27</sup>

An examination of the register of Luther's sermons reveals another very interesting fact. In spite of what he said about the books in his introductions we find that Luther quotes and expounds passages from Hebrews in fourteen sermons, from James in six sermons and from Revelation in six sermons. Strangely enough he uses the books of Jesus Sirach and Second Macabees also in a total of eight sermons.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout his writings Luther uses many passages from

---

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 63, 158 ff.

<sup>28</sup>Luther, op. cit., 67, 363 ff.

is not historically consistent with Scripture. He speaks



the very books which he attacked, quoting them as Scripture. He also uses numerous quotations from apocryphal books often giving them the force of Scripture. In spite of this rather confusing situation it is possible at this point to break Luther's Scriptural categories into three primary classifications. First of all there are the "chief books", which correspond roughly to the historic "Homologoumena". Then there are "those which do not belong to the chief books," which correspond in a general way to the "Antilegomena." Finally, there are the Apocryphal books which will be discussed in the following sub-part.

#### The Apocryphal Books

It remained for Luther to take the hint that Jerome had dropped eleven hundred years before and separate these books from the rest in his German Bible of 1534. Luther was the first to take this step but soon afterward Coverdale and other English versions followed suit. There is little evidence of controversy surrounding these separations. They do not constitute an aspect of the canonical problem which concerns itself chiefly with what has been left in rather than with what has been taken out.

Luther has a number of things to say about these books also. Of Judith he says that it might well be included in the Bible except for the fact that its account is not historically consistent with Scripture. He speaks



of Tobias and Sirach in terms of high respect. They are, he says, valuable books, good reading for Christians and contain fine teaching and example. Of Baruch, he makes this terse comment: "seher geringe ist diess Buch, wer auch der gute Baruch ist." Concerning the books of Macabees Luther says that just as much as the first book ought to be included in the Bible, the second book ought to be excluded. He also comments tersely on the other Apochrypha including the fragments of Esther and Daniel.<sup>29</sup>

---

29

Luther, op. cit., pp. 63, 91 ff.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Martin Luther was a man of dynamic growth and aggressive expression. It is perhaps for this reason that his writings permit of a certain latitude of interpretation and are also exposed to the charge of inconsistency. The research for this thesis has disclosed that certain inconsistencies are undeniably present but it has at the same time uncovered a deep and powerful consistency in Luther's treatment of the Sacred Scriptures.

Basic to almost any approach to Luther is the fact that the Scriptures constituted the supreme authority for him. The Scriptures are Word of God for him in the dynamic as well as the static sense. Sometimes he calls Christ the "Word" and sometimes the Scriptures to the utter confusion of those who would claim his support for a partisan and one sided view. The line separating the written and the living Word becomes rather dim and vague at times.

The Scriptures are foremost and always for Luther the cradle for Christ. As the container for the divine content of the gospel of Christ they may lay claim to man's total obedience. Here we confront the seeming paradox, the dialectic of authority and freedom that is evident in Luther's approach to the Scriptures. This enables him to say that certain things are credible and must be believed because



they are found in the Bible and at the same time allows him to criticise other books on the basis of their content.

The solution to the problem does not lie in a double view of Luther but rather in his concept of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. The Christocentric principle is deeply involved in the activity of the Holy Spirit. The authority of the Scriptures is both a derived and a functional one, derived by inspiration of the Spirit and functional in bringing Christ. Thus the application of the Christocentric principle is less a human judgment than a witness to the work of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures. In the interest of preserving the truth of God Luther can ask himself, "does the Spirit confront me with Christ equally and in all portions of the sacred writings which the Church has preserved and handed down?" On the one hand the subjective human element is checked by obedience to and reverence for the Spirit while on the other hand the fallible aspect of human transmission is undergirded by God's own yes.

These appear to be the general concepts of Luther's attitude toward the canon. In pre-Reformation times when the Scriptures lay under the shadow of the Church and were seen only through its somewhat smoky glasses, this would no doubt have sufficed. However, with the rediscovery of the gospel and the ascendancy of Scripture to the sole source and norm of doctrine and life there came new responsibility and new problems. In its new position



of authority the Bible again occupies the center of the stage. Both in canon and text it is subjected to minute scrutiny since human hunger for security demands exact delineation of authority. One suspects that Luther's Christocentric principle was not fully prepared to cope with this literalism since it was not definitive enough. Luther saw a part of what was happening in the transition and certainly foresaw some of what was going to occur. Perhaps this explains his harking back at times to a kind of literalism characteristic of his medieval training.

In Luther's use of the Scriptures we are confronted with another seeming paradox. As we have seen he uses as proof texts and sermon material not only the books which he criticises so harshly but also the apocryphal books. Did he keep his exegesis and his isagogics in separate airtight compartments, or was not the issue of the canon at all important to him? The answer to this question is not an easy one. Whatever else might be involved one can certainly conclude from this that Luther was anything but a crass Biblical literalist. For him the written word constituted a means and not an end in itself.

Did Luther have an exactly defined canon and if so what did it include? This question can perhaps be best answered by operating with the terms "inner" and "outer" canon. His "outer" canon would probably include: James, Jude, Hebrews, Revelation and perhaps Esther. The rest



of the books of the A. V. would then comprise his "inner" canon. The apocryphal books are in a class by themselves and do not constitute an important aspect of the canonical problem in Luther.

Another important question to be answered is, how did Luther happen to choose just these particular books for his "outer canon?" He was certainly influenced by the tradition of the church and by the writings of the Fathers and although his "outer canon" resembles the historic "Antilegomena" there are some very basic differences.

We find that the canon reported by Eusebius in A. D. 316 and later confirmed by the Third Council of Carthage in 397 lists as "disputed" James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude.<sup>30</sup>

Luther's objections to the book of Esther seem to have been internal and private yet Edersheim states that in the Rabbinic writings Esther was strongly objected to and considered to be outside the canon.<sup>31</sup>

Although Luther certainly was influenced by these patristic and traditional sources we can see that they

<sup>30</sup>G. T. Manley, The new Bible Handbook (Rochester England: Staples Press Limited, 1949), p. 37.

<sup>31</sup>Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), II, 688 f.



were'n't normative for him in his screening of the canon. At least insofar as the rejected books are concerned the Christocentric principle may be regarded as decisive and final.

- Luther, Martin. "Tischreden Deut. Kap. 1. Luthers und seiner Zeitgenossen." In: Martin Luthers Tischreden. Vol. 63. Erlangen: Verlag von Carl Neumann, 1841. Pp. 1-170.
- Luther, Martin. "Tischreden Deut. Kap. 1. Luthers und seiner Zeitgenossen." In: Martin Luthers Tischreden. Vol. 62. Erlangen: Verlag von Carl Neumann, 1841. P. 131.
- H. Secondary Sources
- Luther, Martin. "Prefaces to the Books of the Bible." Writings of Martin Luther. VI. Translated from the German by G. H. Jorgensen. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1932. Pp. 387-389.
- Maier, Werner. "Die Heilige Schrift." Neuherausgabe der Lutherbibel. I. Heft. C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, c.1931.
- Watson, Philip. Let God be True! Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949.
- Wesberg, Reichold. Textbook of the History of Doctrine. Translated from the German by Charles A. May. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1952. Pp. 294-306.
- Althaus, Paul. "Gehorsam und Freiheit in Luthers Stellung zur Bibel." Theologische Aufsätze. Gutersloher Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1929. Pp. 140-151.
- Wesberg, Reich. Luther's Theology in its Development. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1950.
- Reu, Michael. Luther and the Scriptures. Columbus, Ohio: The Hartberg Press, c.1944.
- Prenter, Reginald. Positive Precept. Translated from the Danish by John E. Jorgensen. Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, c. 1933.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### A. Primary Sources

- Luther, Martin. "Vorreden zur deutschen Bibeluebersetzung. 1545." Dr. Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Werke. Vol. 63. Erlangen: Verlag von Carl Heyden, 1841. Pp. 1-170.
- Luther, Martin. "Tischreden Doct. Mart. Luthers von Schultheologen." Dr. Martin Luther's Saemmtliche Werke. Vol. 62. Erlangen: Verlag von Carl Heyden, 1841. P. 131.

### B. Secondary Sources

- Luther, Martin. "Prefaces to the Books of the Bible." Works of Martin Luther. VI. Translated from the German by C. M. Jacobs. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1932. Pp. 367-489.
- Elert, Werner. "Die Heilige Schrift." Morphologie des Luthertums. I. Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, c.1931.
- Watson, Philip. Let God be God! Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949.
- Seeberg, Reinhold. Textbook of the History of Doctrines. Translated from the German by Charles E. Hay. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1952. Pp. 296-306.
- Althaus, Paul. "Gehorsam und Freiheit in Luther's Stellung zur Bibel." Theologische Aufsätze. Guetersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1929. Pp. 140-152.
- Seeberg, Erich. Luther's Theologie in ihren Grundzuegen. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1950.
- Reu, Michael. Luther and the Scriptures. Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, c.1944.
- Prenter, Regin. Spiritus Creator. Translated from the Danish by John M. Jensen. Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, c. 1953.



- Pauck, Wilhelm. The Heritage of the Reformation.  
Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press (Library Edition),  
c.1950.
- Kramm, H. H. The Theology of Martin Luther. London:  
James Clarke and Co., Ltd., 1947.
- Sittler, Joseph Jr. The Doctrine of the Word. Philadelphia:  
Muhlenberg Press, c.1948.
- Edersheim, Alfred. The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah. II.  
Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,  
1953. Pp. 688 f.
- Manley, G. T. The New Bible Handbook. Rochester, England:  
Staples Press Limited, 1949. P. 26 ff.