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# Luther's Sola Scriptura

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Fifty gulden (about $470) to make Martin a doctor of theology was doubtless one of Elector Frederick's wisest investments — much wiser than the generous amount he spent for his prodigious collection of sacred relics. The payment of this fee guaranteed his Electoral Grace a tremendous benefit to his beloved University of Wittenberg. To obtain this sum of money for the promotion of his brilliant friar, Vicar John Staupitz had to assure the Elector that Luther would fill the chair of *lectura in Biblia* of the theological faculty for the remainder of his life. Frederick had every reason to congratulate himself on his investment as he beheld the enrollment at the university increase with students coming to Wittenberg from far and near in order to hear the lectures of the new doctor. Tired of the dry husks of scholasticism, they turned eagerly to feast on the Bread of Life served by Luther in his lectures on the Bible. For Luther his promotion later proved to be a source of comfort. By accepting the doctorate he had pledged himself to remain faithful to the Scriptures under all circumstances. No human authority could move him to relent.

Luther's road from a dual authority, Scripture and tradition, to the sole authority of Scripture was a long one. Already at the age of 14 he purchased a postil, probably containing 500 Biblical pericopes. At the same time, or shortly after entering the University of Erfurt, he saw a complete Latin Bible. In the "Georgenburse" at Erfurt, a hospice for students, in 1501, he daily heard a chapter from the Bible read and sometimes took his turn in reading a chapter at table. Upon entering the cloister in 1505 he received his own Latin Bible, a copy bound in red leather, which he eagerly read from day to day. When he was transferred to Wittenberg in 1508, he was obliged to leave his copy in the cloister in Erfurt, but found other copies in Wittenberg, which as an Augustinian he was obliged to use daily. Thus he was prepared for his task as a *Baccalaureus Biblicus*, which he assumed in 1509.[1] But all of this was merely preliminary; his life's task as an expositor of Scripture began with his promotion to the chair of *lectura in Biblia.*

It would have been strange indeed if the Occamist emphasis on the authority of Scripture had left no mark on Luther at the University of Erfurt. But Luther became more submissive to Biblical authority than Occam, who subordinated the authority of Scripture to that of the church. Luther rejected such ecclesiastical restrictions. His study of church history convinced him that councils and popes had erred. Replying to the *Dialogue Concerning the Powers of the Pope*, prepared by Silvester Prierias in 1518, Luther insisted that only the Holy Scriptures were without error. Cajetan at Augsburg and Eck at Leipzig compelled him to take his stand firmly on the Bible. There he stood before Emperor and Diet. He could not do otherwise. His heroic words still thrill the hearts of God's people: "Unless I am con-

[1] M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1944), pp. 7, 8.

vinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason *[ratione evidente]* [2] (for I believe neither in the pope nor councils alone, since it has been established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures adduced by me, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God, and I am neither able nor willing to recant, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen." [3]

In his heroic declaration Luther used both terms — "Scriptures" and "Word of God." For him the Scriptures were the Word of God, though he well knew that "Word of God" is a broader term than "Scriptures." He knew that not all of God's words were recorded in writing. He also knew that Christ is the Word. Critics of Luther, like Adolf Harnack, deplore the fact that Luther placed Scripture and the Word of God on the same level. Harnack complains that besides adhering to the Word of God there was for Luther an adherence to the outward authority of the written Word, though, he adds, this was occasionally disregarded by him in his prefaces to Holy Scripture and elsewhere as well. Equating Word of God and Holy Scripture is for Harnack a remnant of Roman Catholicism which, he holds, has had disastrous results for Protestantism. Harnack laments that the requirement of ascertaining the pure sense of Holy Scripture was simply deprived of its force by regarding Scripture as the verbally inspired canon.[4] According to Harnack, Luther was involved in a flagrant contradiction, for while Luther, he says, criticized Scripture itself, he certainly, on the other hand, set up the letter as the Word of God, insofar as he adopted without test the Rabbinic-Catholic idea of the verbal inspiration of Holy Scripture.[5]

Wilhelm Walther, professor of theology in Rostock, came to the defense of Luther against the criticism of Harnack and of others. In a scholarly essay, based on Luther's own writings, entitled "Der Glaube an das Wort Gottes," he insisted that Luther in his evaluation of Scripture never admitted any error in the divine Word. Therefore he challenged Lutherans and others: "Back to Luther!" [6] Others, like Karl Thimme,[7] have been persuaded by a few isolated expressions of Luther that the Reformer, despite his profound reverence for Scripture, did not regard it as inerrant in all its parts. In weighing these contradictory opinions one must keep in mind that Scripture was for Luther the written Word of the infallible God.

Commenting on 1 Cor. 15:3-7, Luther exalts the written Word. He had his troubles with the enthusiasts, who despised Scripture and public preaching and looked for other, private revelations instead. He says: "Observe how he [Paul] again extols and exalts Scripture and the witness of the written Word by using and

[2] For Luther's concept of reason see Bernhard Lohse, *Ratio und Fides* (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958).

[3] W 7, 838. "W" and "W-T" refer to the Weimar edition of Luther's Works.

[4] *History of Dogma* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1899), VII, 246 f.

[5] Ibid., p. 235.

[6] *Das Erbe der Reformation im Kampfe der Gegenwart.* Erstes Heft (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Nachf. [Georg Böhme], 1903).

[7] Karl Thimme, *Luthers Stellung zur Heiligen Schrift* (Gütersloh: Druck und Verlag von C. Bertelsmann, 1903).

repeating the phrase 'according to the Scriptures' in this manner. . . . There you hear St. Paul adducing Scripture as his strongest witness and pointing out that there is nothing stable to support our doctrine and faith except the material or written Word, put down in letters and preached verbally by him and others; for it is clearly stated here: 'Scripture, Scripture' "[8]

Luther's *sola Scriptura* implies the divine authority, efficacy, perfection or sufficiency, and perspicuity of Holy Scripture, but above all Christ as the center of it all. For Luther there is no *sola Scriptura* without *solus Christus*. Werner Elert shows that for Luther the divine properties of Scripture are based on the fact that for him the Bible is Christocentric.[9]

Luther's appeal to the sole authority of Scripture at the Diet of Worms demonstrates how far he had advanced from the medieval position of Scripture and tradition.[10] Even his *ratione evidente* does not conflict with his complete reliance on the authority of Scripture, for Luther is here referring to the *usus rationis ministerialis*. In his "Open Letter to the Christian Nobility," doubtless one of the writings he was asked to retract, he had mentioned various grievances that were matters of the secular domain and therefore belonged to the realm of reason rather than to that of Scripture.[11] This distinction is stated clearly by Luther in these words: "Let the Holy Spirit Himself read this Book to His own if He desires to be understood. For it does not write about men or about making a living, as all the other books do, but about the fact that God's Son was obedient to His Father for us and fulfilled His will. Whoever does not need this wisdom should let this Book lie; it does not benefit him anyway. It teaches another and eternal life, of which reason knows nothing and is able to comprehend nothing."[12] More specifically, the reader should find the Cross of Christ in the Bible.[13]

Luther's emphasis on Christ and the Cross explains his comparative evaluation of the various books of the Bible. A book of the Bible is precious to him to the degree that it exalts Christ Crucified. This is another way of saying that he evaluates a book in the light of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. Accordingly James troubled him most, but he would not burden the conscience of others with his private opinion of this book. In placing Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end of the New Testament canon as books which were not quite on the same level with the other books, he was not manifesting a more liberal attitude towards the Bible but simply resorting to the church's practice of distinguishing between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena*. But even there he was rather conservative, for 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John he included in the number of protocanonical books.

[8] W 36, 500.

[9] *Morphologie des Luthertums* (München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Second Ed., 1952), I, 167.

[10] For a scholarly presentation of this position see George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers, c. 1959). In his chapter on Luther Father Tavard unfortunately departs from his scholarly objectivity.

[11] See n. 2, *supra*.

[12] W 48, 43.

[13] W 1, 52. See also Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie* (Erlangen: Verlag von Theodor Blaesing, 1862), I, 55 ff.

In Luther's mind there was no doubt regarding the efficacy of the Word. He declared: "Where the heart is idle and the Word does not ring out, the devil breaks in and has done damage before we are aware of it. On the other hand, such is the power of the Word if it is seriously contemplated, heard, and used that it is never without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion and purifies the heart and thoughts. For these are not inert or dead but active and living words." [14]

In view of Luther's *sola Scriptura* one may ask the question: Did Luther believe in the verbal or plenary inspiration of the Bible? Adolf Harnack believed that he did; others disagree. Karl F. A. Kahnis believed he had discovered in the course of the Reformation a movement from liberty to authority. Luther, he held, stood for liberty. Kahnis' understanding of that liberty rules out a plenary inspiration of the Bible. Kahnis named some instances which, he thought, confirmed his opinion, but offered no adequate collection to support it. He believed that the "'more liberal" attitude of the Reformers still influenced the second and third generations after them. Chemnitz, Selnecker, and Gerhard, he thought, were still somewhat reserved with regard to the doctrine of inspiration.[15]

Reinhold Seeberg gathered a larger collection of remarks by Luther which supposedly indicate a more liberal attitude toward Scripture. Some of these refer to the extent of the canon, others to passages in canonical books. Typical quotations from Luther's writings which are said to reveal Luther's critical attitude toward Scripture, like the following, do not prove what Seeberg and others try to prove with them. Luther is quoted as saying: The books of the Kings are more trustworthy than the Chronicles; the prophets often erred when they prophesied of worldly events; [16] the later prophets built hay, straw, wood, and not silver, gold, and precious stones; the allegorical explanation of the name Hagar, in Gal. 4:25, is too weak to prove the point.[17]

Taken out of the total context of Luther's profound respect for the authority and integrity of Scripture, these remarks could be interpreted, as these writers have done, in a manner reflecting a modern, liberal attitude toward Scripture. However, in view of Luther's respect for Scripture as the authoritative Word of God, who cannot err, it is more generous and in accord with charity here to apply to Luther his explanation of the Eighth Commandment, that we defend our neighbor, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything. If that is done, the passages quoted to prove Luther's more liberal attitude, to quote Luther, are too weak to prove the point.

Luther's opinion concerning the respective value of Kings and Chronicles should be quoted in full. He said: "The writer of Chronicles noted only the summary and chief stories and events. Whatever is less important and immaterial he passed by.

[14] W 30 I, 146.

[15] *System der Lutherischen Dogmatik* (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1868), III, 142 ff. For a careful study of the position of the 17th century Lutheran dogmaticians see Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1955).

[16] Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), II, 300 f.

[17] Kahnis, op. cit., p. 143.

For this reason the Books of Kings are more credible than the Chronicles."[18] Nothing is said here about errors in either. Regarding the "hay, straw, wood" statement writers have not been sure of their interpretation of Luther. Following Walther, Reu refers these remarks not to later prophets but to nonprophetic commentators. Thimme is quite certain that Walther is wrong.[19] Julius Koestlin, Thimme regrets, changed his opinion from the liberal view in his first edition of *Luther's Theology* to the opposite view in the second edition.[20] Regarding Seeberg's remark that Luther attributed errors to the prophets when they prophesied of worldly events, Luther should again be quoted. Commenting on Gen. 44 Luther said: "There is a common proverb among theologians which says, 'Spiritus Sanctus non semper tangit corda prophetarum,' 'The illuminations of the prophets were not continuous or perpetual.'"[21] Here one may think of Nathan, who on his own encouraged David to build a temple, but in the following night was instructed by God to tell David not to build one (2 Sam. 7: 1-17), or of Elisha, who did not know that the son of the Shunammite had died, because the Lord hid it from him (2 Kings 4:27). As to the argumentative value of allegory, would anyone today disagree with Luther, who held that allegory *in acie minus valet?*[22]

[18] W-T I, 364.

[19] Op. cit., pp. 59 ff.

[20] Ibid., 60. Actually, Luther distinguishes between ordinary students of Scripture and prophets who were inspired by the Holy Ghost. W 54, 3.

[21] W 44, 575.

[22] W 43, 12.

Luther certainly did not accept a mechanical inspiration theory; he recognized fully the human elements in Scripture. But he insists that the Holy Spirit speaks when Isaiah and Paul speak.[23] He says: "In this article of the [Nicene] Creed which treats of the Holy Ghost we say: 'Who spake by the Prophets.' Thus we ascribe the entire Holy Scripture to the Holy Spirit."[24] In view of these and countless similar statements, one must agree with Dr. Theo. Engelder, who says in his *Scripture Cannot Be Broken:* "It is one of the mysteries of the ages how theologians who claim to be conversant with Luther's writings can give credence to the myth that Luther did not teach Verbal, Plenary Inspiration."[25]

The sufficiency of the Bible, according to Luther, implies its perspicuity. He says: "No clearer book has been written on earth than the Holy Scripture. It compares with other books as the sun with other lights. . . . It is a horrible shame and crime against Holy Scripture and all Christendom to say that Holy Scripture is dark and not so clear that everybody may understand it in order to teach and prove his faith. . . . If faith only hears Scripture, it is clear and plain enough to enable it to say without the comments of all fathers and teachers: That is right. I, too, believe it."[26] Luther does not deny that there are dark passages in Scripture, but he says they contain nothing but precisely that which is found at other places in clear, open passages. Whoever cannot understand the

[23] W 48, 102.

[24] W 54, 35.

[25] (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 1944), p. 290.

[26] W 8, 236.

dark passages, he advises, should stay with the clear ones.[27] Lack of faith indeed makes the whole Bible a dark book. "To read Holy Writ without faith in Christ," he says, "is to walk in darkness."[28]

Luther has been credited with giving the people the open Bible. He gave them the Bible in their own language in a style very much improved over that of previous editions in the vernacular. But more important is the fact that he proved Glapion, the father confessor of Charles V, wrong, who said that the Bible was like a waxen nose. Nicholas Lyra's *quadriga sensuum Scripturae:*

*Littera gesta docet; quid credas allegoria; Moralis, quid agas; quo tendas, anagogia}* indeed gave Scripture a waxen appearance. Luther at one time thought highly of Lyra. It has been said: *Si Lyra non lyrasset, Lutherus non saltasset.* That is doubtless an overstatement. Be that as it may, Luther got away from the *quadriga,* and held that *sensus literalis unus est.*[29] Allegories merely adorn, says Luther, but prove nothing.[30] In his commentary on Deuteronomy he added brief allegories almost for every chapter. This he did, he said, not because he attached great importance to them, but he wanted to forestall the silly attempts at allegorical interpretation that some make.[31]

In conclusion we turn again to Luther's emphasis on *solus Christus.* Only in the light of that emphasis can his *sola Scriptura* be fully understood. Luther says: "For the sake of Messiah and God's Son Holy Scripture was written, and for His sake everything that happened took place."[32] He sums up the message of the Bible in these words: "The entire Bible does nothing else than give a person to understand what he was, what he now is, what behooves him, and what his works are. It informs him that he is completely undone. Secondly, it tells what God is, what pertains to Him, and what His works are, and especially the mercy in Christ. It leads us to understand Him, and through His incarnation it conducts us from earth to heaven, to the Godhead. May God the heavenly Father grant all of us His grace and mercy to this end, through Christ, our dear Lord and Savior. Amen. Amen. Amen."[33] There is no better way to conclude a study of Luther's *sola Scriptura.*

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[27] W 8, 237, 239.

[28] W 44, 790.

[29] David Löfgren, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), pp. 220 ff.

[30] In his lectures on Genesis, 1535—45, he said: *Postremo quaerendae erant hoc loco allegoriae. Sed ego iis non perinde delector, ac Origenes aut Hieronymus. Non curo eas, nisi quatenus ornant historicam sententiam, quae ex simplici historia colligitur. Atque ibi sunt veluti flores interspersi, sed nihil probant: id quod de figura Augustinus dixit.* W 43, 490.

[31] W XIV, 500. For an interpretation of Luther's use of allegory see Hans Wernle: *Allegorie und Erlebnis bei Luther* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1960).

[32] W 54, 247.

[33] W 48, 272.