

LUTHER AND THE WORD

Lectures for Queensland Lutheran Pastor's Conference April 1967.

1. THE WORD OF GOD AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE SINNER

"... whoever wants to understand the Scriptures wisely needs to understand all these things tropologically: truth, wisdom, salvation, justice, namely with which he makes us strong, saved, just, wise. So also the works of God and the ways of God, all of which things Christ is in the literal sense, and morally all these things are faith in him."¹

This somewhat mystifying text is set at the head of these papers for two related reasons: firstly, it is something to which to refer back, and so has pedagogical value; secondly, it reflects, it would seem,² the heart of what happened to Luther in the cloister and of what was to become the core and centre of all his preaching, teaching and practice, the doctrine of justification. And justification is more than a "motto" for a paper on Luther and the Word, more than a motif to which an occasional reference can be made, or which may even be found running right through. Justification, by way of antitheses, is the very matter itself. As Luther can often refer to the centrality and decisive nature and power of the article of justification,³ so on the other hand can the statement be maintained: "The doctrine of the Word of God constitutes the core of Luther's theology."⁴ The two are inseparable.

[p. 2] This introductory text, we may observe simply in passing (and looking back for the first time!), speaks of the Scriptures and of understanding their contents, it makes mention of Christ and of faith. As for time and place of its origin: Luther spoke these words as part of his lecture on Psalm 71, v.2: "Deliver me in Thy righteousness." He was the newly appointed (1512) professor of "Biblia" in Wittenberg, and was giving his first course of exegetical lectures, on the Psalms (1513-15).

¹ Transl. in G. Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, London 1953, p.135. The Latin text is found in the comprehensive Weimar edition of Luther's works (WA 3,458,8ff) and is reprinted in the handy selection of original Luther texts edited by O. Clemen (C1.V,156). The Latin reads: "Unde qui Apostolum et elias scripturas vult sapide intelligere, oportet ista omnia tropologice intelligere: Veritas, sapientia, virtus, salus iustitia, scilicet qua nos facit fortes, salvos iustos, sapientes etc. Sic opera dei, vie dei: que omnia Christus est literaliter. Et fides eius moraliter hec omnia."

² The date and dateability of Luther's so-called Reformation insight, and its genesis, have become the subject of renewed interest and controversy since the appearance of E. Bizer's book in 1958: *Fidos ex auditu*, in which he attempts to fix a later date than had commonly been accepted on good foundation. The early lectures of Luther are receiving renewed scrutiny. Reports from the third Luther Research Congress in Finland (1966) suggest that a consensus of informed opinion still favours the earlier date, i.e. during the first lectures on Psalms (1513-15). See F. Lau in *Lutherische Monatshafte* (LM), 1966, Nr.10, S.518, and Harding Meyer in *Kirche in der Zeit*, Nov. 1966, S.501,ftn.7.

³ "This article of justification is the chief doctrine. St. John expounded it especially ... He is a master in the doctrine of justification." (Luther's Works, new American ed., LW 23, 129). Not just St. Paul then! – "The article of justification is a master and prince of all sorts of teaching and rules conscience and the Church. Without it the world is stale and all dark." WA 39 I, 205 (my tr.). See esp. the Smalcald Articles, grouped, as they are, around the article of our salvation in Christ ("the first and chief article"): "Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth, and whatever else will not remain, should sink to ruin. *Book of Concord*, Concordia 1950, p.137. Cf. the Sachregister of the Cottingen ed. (1952) of the Bekenntnisschriften of the Lutheran Church, S.1202 (under "Rechtfertigung"), and Melancthon's assertion in the Apology (IV, Bk. of Concord p.32) that "This is the chief topic of Christian doctrine ... which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible ..." This is a leading statement for us in the sense that we shall try to follow its guidance in the ensuing pages.

⁴ John M. Headley: *Luther's View of Church History*, New Haven and London 1963, p.19.

Exegesis. Of the Psalms. Simple facts, but important. The Psalms were the spiritual and devotional daily bread of the Christians of the Middle Ages and were sung and prayed only more often than expounded!⁵ No exegesis is done without its pre-suppositions, but the situation in which Luther expressed what seems to be reflected in the words above was loaded, yes structured throughout by things which went before, – not only in the history and life of the Church, but also in Luther's own life lived with his Church.

It does not seem unfair to say that Luther's theology can scarcely be separated from his person and biography, and that in this sense at least it is existentialist rather than theoretical or speculative.⁶ What led Luther in to the monastery of the Augustinians at Erfurt was, it seems, a terrific momentary fright (the lightening at Stoternheim) – which was not over when it was gone; a fear had dramatically and inescapably been brought to view, which housed in his being and bones⁷ the fear of being confronted unavoidably and suddenly by the almighty Judge, confronted and judged as a sinner. That this final judgement could come upon him “[u]nhouse'l'd, ananointed, unanel'd” at any moment, – and that every moment was there with potentially laden with his eternal damnation, this lasting thing, I suspect, drove him to knock at the gate of the Cloister despite his own inclination and the will of his father and friends.⁸ To Melanchthon he wrote in 1521: “I was more overpowered than drawn. God wanted it this way.”⁹

[p. 3] In the cloister God's presence was of course not any the less fearfully near at hand,¹⁰ and to live at these close quarters with the question of his sin not finally answered became *the* problem of his existence within the vow. The more seriously and obediently he lived along the knife's edge of doing “the best that in his was”,¹¹ the more uncertain did he feel that he had managed to offer God anything which He could honour, the more unfathomed and subtle instead did the depths of his sinfulness appear. Luther lived now between grace and confession, trying to do justice to the two dimensions of his monk's life as the status of repentance and the status of perfection, but never finally assured that God's *last* word was one of grace and forgiveness for him.

We can safely resist any temptation to disqualify Luther's quest by asserting some acute form of personal difficulty, psychological abnormality of over-scrupulant *or* extraordinarily sinful condition. All have been attempted. I think that Joseph Lortz and the serious Catholic Luther scholars of our day happily represent the end of the old line of blatant or subtle vilification begun in an age of polemical zeal and strong language by Cohlaus and continuing into the works of Denifle and Grisar. The psychoanalytical researches of E. Erickson¹² may be useful¹³ as long as we do not reduce Luther's

⁵ That Luther's lecturing on the Bible began with the Psalter is seen by Martin Elze (“Züge spätmittelalterlicher Frömmigkeit in Luthers Theologie”, in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* (Zthk) 1965,S,382) to be connected with this fact. The Bible, out of which the message of the Gospel was about to sound anew, was not as unknown as Protestant polemic (though not without deeper right) has made popular belief.

⁶ So the Catholic bishop of Copenhagen, Hans Martensen, writing in *Lutherische Monatshefte*, 1967, Nr.1, S. 10. That more than a superficial generality is here indicated can be gauged from the article by A. Peters in the same journal, 1965, Nr. 10, s. 466ff: “Luther und die existentielle Interpretation.”

⁷ See H. Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, London 1957: “For Luther was one of those men who make decisions only after long and tenacious struggle but whose decisions are crystallized abruptly in a moment of tempestuous activity.” p.34.

⁸ Cf. R. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, London 1951, p.34ff. [The original paper reads “the Black Cloister”; corrected by the author, 10 January 2018.]

⁹ LW 48,301.

¹⁰ Witness the experience of Luther celebrating his first mass. Cf. Boehmer, p. 43.

¹¹ “Facere quod in se est”. For a discussion of the Nominalist and Pelagian tendencies in the theology of the latter Middle Ages as encountered by Luther, see esp. H.A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, Harvard 1963; cf. also *The Law and the Gospel in Luther*, by Th. McDonough, Oxford 1963, p.32ff.

¹² *Young Man Luther*, London 1958.

¹³ E.g. A. Siirala, *The Voice of Illness. A study of Therapy and Prophecy*, Philadelphia 1964.

deeply theological question to psychoanalysis and alimentary difficulties.¹⁴

Luther was well aware of the unusual force in himself of the elemental question others too had asked:¹⁵ “How can I get a gracious God?” Was he unable to find rest because he was – perhaps predestined to damnation, and nothing which he or anyone else or the Church could do could alter the eternal decree?! The fact that he was beginning to hate the God who was possibly sending him to everlasting pain seemed to close the vicious circle of his “guilty” search.¹⁶

That all this is more than “subjectivity” should perhaps be stressed at this juncture. For, as H. Bornkamm has recently pointed out.¹⁷ Luther lived in dialogue, not merely with his fellow monks, superiors, teachers and students, but above all with the Bible. His struggles as a monk must be understood not as those of an introvert with too much time on his hands (Staupitz may have thought so for a while and set him to work on his doctorate and then in his own chair of Biblical Studies); his struggles were lived out right in his work as a young biblical scholar and monk [p. 4] lecturing and preparing to lecture to students. And although there seems to have been an early form of a solution to his quest which would appear to satisfy a serious mystic posing his sort of question, Luther moved on to an understanding of justification which could only come as an answer to exegetical studies upon the Bible. “The Lutheran Reformation, “writes Prof. Sasse, was born in the study and in the lecture room of a Biblical scholar”.¹⁸

A word to that early answer, in which Luther’s reading of Augustine, the spiritual help received from his prior, Staupitz, and the mysticism of the Middle Ages seem to have played more of a role than St. Paul:- Luther finds relief from his existential suspicion, that his fate has been sealed as one of the damned in an eternal decree, by, as it were, accepting, actively concurring in this judgement of God and thus justifying *Him* (iustificatio activa), and in this acceptance of his fate (if it were) finding himself accepted by God (iustificatio passiva). Resignation of our will to the point of accepting hell from God would mean that our will would be in harmony with God’s, - and this is *thought* of as equivalent to salvation!

This doctrine of justification, which Luther left behind, leaves the question of the real fulfillment of God’s demands unanswered, and has no hold in reality beyond itself, in this sense it is entirely “subjective”. “And Christ would have labored foolishly and uselessly by suffering for sin”, as Luther would himself soon formulate.¹⁹

The righteousness of God continued to hover over him with the threat of annihilating divine wrath. The original question lay in a different dimension than that of the mystic, transcending categories of subject and object. Hans Ruckert says: “The concept of subjectivity has no place in Luther’s theology because his theology is a *theology of the Word*. It is conceived in the dimension of person, and a person can never become an object, neither man’s person nor God’s.”²⁰

It seems clear from later statements of Luther²¹ (although these must be evaluated with care) that his fear of the righteousness of God was turned to joy in connection with exegetical preparation of Romans 1:17 (which appears to have entered into his lecture preparation of the Psalter). “The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith” – in the *Gospel!* (as Romans 1:17 stated); this

¹⁴ Cf. the play “Luther” by John Osborne, London 1961.

¹⁵ Prof H. Sasse has written of this as the deepest question of Western man from the Pastor Hermae to the Indulgence controversy of 1517: in the recently published collected essays, *In Statu Confessionis*, Berlin/Hamburg 1966, S.44.

¹⁶ See A. Peters, “Reformatorische Rechtfertigungslehre ...” in *Luther Jahrbuch*, Hamburg 1964, S.96.

¹⁷ *Luther als Schriftsteller*, Heidelberg 1965, S. 25f.

¹⁸ *This is my Body*, Augsburg Publ. 1959, p.352.

¹⁹ Church Postil, 1522, WA 10 1,1,468.

²⁰ In lecture notes. (my tr.)

²¹ See esp. the Preface of 1545 to his Latin Works LW 34,327ff, but also the account in the Table Talk quoted in the fell. paragraph.

was in a way the last straw for a man, who had begun (as the lectures or Psalms show) to hold onto the promises of God's sheer mercy and forgiveness, the Gospel. That even here God's distributive righteousness should come into its own seemed overwhelmingly depressing. Yet "the connection of the words", as Luther says, [p. 5] seemed worthy of careful attention, for the text went on (quoting Habacuc): "The just shall live by faith".

The "Reformation insight" was a rediscovery of the meaning of this "righteousness" as the Gift by which God makes those who believe righteous, not the Law to which one must measure up, but the Gospel God's creative forgiveness. In the Table Talk of 1540²² we hear the following:

"Iustitia Dei: Whenever I used to read in the Psalms and sing: In iustitia tua libera me! I would become terrified each time and was a foe of the words: Iustitia Dei, iudicium Dei, opus Dei, for I knew no differently than that Iustitia Dei meant God's strict judgement. And now He was to rescue me by His strict judgement? So then I would be eternally lost! But Misericordia Dei, adiutorium dei, I preferred those words. Praise God, once I understood the *res* I knew that iustitia Dei means a iustitia by which he justifies us through the iustitia given in Jesus Christ [qua nos iustificat per donatam iustitiam in Christo Ihesu]."

This time it was not mere dialectic thought; for the Gospel of God's creative forgiveness is nothing at all without the Christ of the Scriptures, who by His incarnation, death and resurrection has given God ground for declaring us sinners righteous. Christ did not only make satisfaction for us (Anselm), He died in our place, bearing the divine punishment of hell, which results from our sin and rebellion against God. This action of Christ lies *outside of us*, was done even before we appeared, it has an objectivity and validity which nothing we do or feel can touch, Christ in short is God's work, the opus dei. He is in this sense the Verbum externum, who, not contained in categories offered by mystic thought and speculation, yet makes His abode in us and covers us with His righteousness.²³

God offers us His Work and gives us faith to receive it. For Christ died "pro nobis", and by trusting the promise of the Gospel we are clothed with this "alien righteousness" while we are yet sinners! Our works achieve naught in appeasing God, the best of them are tainted with sin, even if only with the eudaemonistic aim of salvation. Just this pious goal is the typical expression of original sin in the religious man, which, according to Luther, is man's ingrown concern with himself. Man is "incurvatus in se" and filled full of "amor sui". The undertaking to preserve independence over against God is the primal sin, however, it may express itself in concrete. Man does not want God to be God, all his disobedience flows from a deep seated rejection of the demand of the first Commandment. Man is a self, and, to take up the dictum of Kierkegaard in "Sickness unto Death", "a self is a relationship which relates to itself." Incurvatus in se!

Luther's own driving question (the question of Western man in acute form): "How do I get a gracious God?" was in this very sense a crooked [p. 6] question, to which God gave a straight answer.²⁴ This

²² C1. VIII,S.280, in macronic Latin and German; I have translated the German bits! [In the original paper the following quotation concludes: "... I knew that: iustitiam in Christo Ihesu, then I understood the grammatical, and the Psalter took on its delectable taste." Corrected here by the author, 10 January 2018]

²³ Cf. L. Pinomaa, *Sieg des Glaubens, Grundlinien der Theologie Luthers*, Göttingen 1964,S.131: "Without the Word Christ cannot be mediated to the individual person as a gift. The Gospel, through which Christ is made present by the Spirit, possesses sacramental features because the written Word belongs to it as a visible sign. Who fails to acknowledge this makes an idea out of Christ. Without the outer Word, which is constitutive of the sacramental character of the Gospel, man would remain always only with himself, with his own thoughts and memories." (my tr.) Speaking in a Christmas sermon (1529) of the down to earth wonder of Christ in the manger, Luther says: "Thus this is to be preached against the enthusiasts who condemn the external word. You perceive that our heart must descend and not gape into heaven, but cling to the outer word of the angel. The external is the oral Word and it they (the shepherds) follow..." C1. VII,189 (WA 29.673).

²⁴ This has been recently pointed out by G. Gloege in an article: "Die Grundfrage der Reformation – heute", in *Kerygma and Dogma* (KD), Nr.1, 1966,S.1ff. this contribution opens perspectives: Is Luther's question necessary today, in how far must we be asking different and yet similar questions, do we live by the question –

straight answer is Gospel, the good news that man is no longer under a Law, God's Law, demanding man's best as a presupposition or core requisite for divine recognition, no longer bound even to heed the law of self, sin! For the fulfilling of God's Law *in Christ* is in itself the defeat of the selfish law of sin with its sinister comrades, death and the devil. And God's declaration of forgiveness is all of this, is our justification before his forum (*erga deum, forensic*), and, at the same time, since it is ours because of Christ's merit and in Him, it is *effective* as the new life lived here among men (*coram deo*), and also on this level is the conquest of the forces of evil working against us. God's declaration of forgiveness is the initiation of the new creation; forgiveness is God's Word, both declarative and creatively effective.

Thus justification and sanctification, "declaring righteous" and "making righteous", grace and power, belong inseparably together,²⁵ by virtue of the fact that this is all God's one great act brought to pass by His creative and redemptive Word and given us "sola gratia propter Christum", and therefore as certain as Christ and His action outside of us is certain. Justification is the last word.²⁶ Faith trust God at this point, believes Him to be "faithful" and so received His promise and certitude. "Jesus Christ alone is the certainty of faith".²⁷ In the life of the believer therefore God's promise is fulfilled, is being fulfilled and will be fulfilled.

In lectures on Galatians Luther was to express it in the following words:

"This is the reason for our theology having certainty: namely that it takes us away from ourselves and places us outside of ourselves (*quia rapit nos a nobis et ponit nos extra nos*), so that we rely not upon our own powers, conscience, feelings, person and works, but upon that which lies outside of ourselves (*extra nos*): i.e. upon the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive." WA 40 1,589.

What happens to a man in justification is therefore a radical thing (and involves more than a personal or existential act of decision),²⁸ necessarily, for if a new life is to flourish his very heart will have to be renewed. The crooked things which went before (the penultimate) must be superseded and overcome by the straight and final Word of God (the ultimate).²⁹ Through and through man is infected with sin, leaving *nothing* which he might do without taint before the absolute demands of the God of the Law. Unbelief dwells *in the heart*. Where sin is seen in this radical way (and *the* function of the Law will be to point it up!), there the depths become visible, into which grace must reach to work its new creation. Both the Law and the Gospel concern the "totus homo", not merely a part of man.³⁰

[p. 7] In the Bible Prologue to Romans.³¹ Luther speaks of the fallacy of those, who, hearing the Gospel, decide of themselves to give believing a go, as it were, but who, not noticing any appreciable change in their mode of living or in that of other so-called Christians, come to the false conclusion

or God's final answer?! For a similar probing attempt cf. E. Leppin: "Luthers Frage nach dem gnadigen Gott – heute", in ZThK, 61, 1964, 89ff.

²⁵ See e.g. B. Lohse in *Jahrbuch des Martin Luther Bundes*, Erlangen, 1967, S. 149. R. Bring writes in "How God speaks to us", Philadelphia 1962, p.25: "Those who receive God's revelation are not allowed to sit inactive and acquire a passive knowledge. The revelation of righteousness is making righteous. God is love, and that means that he gives man part of his love; for all that God has, he gives, And his love is an active, creating love, one that gives itself and takes man up into the life of love." For very relevant exegetical background to this fundament of Lutheran theology cf. G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Munchen 1958, Bd. 1, S. 368ff, and the remarkable essay by E. Kasemann: "Gottesgerechtigkeit bei Paulus", in his *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, Bd. 2, Gottingen 1964, S.181ff.

²⁶ Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, SCM London 1955, p. 79ff.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.80.

²⁸ Cf. A. Peters, *Reformatorsche Rechtfertigungsbotschaft*, *ibid*, p. 113f.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *ibid*.

³⁰ See H. Bornkamm, *Luthers geistige Welt*, Gutersloh 1960, p.85.

³¹ LW 35,365ff.

that “faith is not enough, one must do works as well if one wants to become holy and be saved. “To this “human figment and dream” Luther contrast the assertion: “Faith is a divine work in us, which changes us and brings our new birth of God”.³² God is the giver of faith and the works of faith are His works, arising now, as they do, out of our most inward self, out of the “transcendental I”, which is according to W. Elert,³³ the subject of faith. For faith, says Luther, “kills the old Adam, makes us quite different people in heart, feelings, senses and in all our powers and brings the Holy Spirit with It” (ibid.) It is, so to speak, the most “natural” thing, that this faith vigorously express itself in deeds – of faith!³⁴ Where these good works do not appear it is right to conclude that faith is absent. Again in that small compendium of his theology, the Romans Bible Prologue, we come across these famous words: “O it is a living, busy, active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever.”³⁵

Just because he is free, at peace, no longer under the Law, are the deed of the man of faith truly his deeds, and at the same time the glad fulfilling of God’s commandments. The justified man is the subject of his new existence although this existence is the creation of God, and God’s work (the opus dei in Christ). “I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal.2:20). “Christian life is the life of Christ!”³⁶ Righteousness is simultaneously fully given and something to be worked out and realized in concrete, and nevertheless remaining God’s gift in this concrete realization. “Such righteousness is not produced by nature, free will or inherent powers!” (ibid) “Fides facit omnia”.³⁷ Works done outside of the bracket of freely given faith, be they ever so great and noteworthy, amount to hypocrisy and sin!³⁸

[p. 8] So the sinner is justified and made righteous for Christ’s sake, through and through. But the sentence also remains true for Luther that the justified sinner remains a sinner as long as earthly life lasts, through and through. Luther’s concept of the “totus homo” holds good on both sides and forces him to the paradoxical statement that the Christian exists “simul iustus et peccator.” And this again reflects the eschatological direction of the Christian life. For the “totus homo” of the old Adam in us is doomed to death and defeat, the “totus homo” of the new creation, the new Adam, lives now and has the future. Thus, to use the words of Paul Althaus the Younger, “the righteousness of the Christian is a present reality and at the same time a reality only coming in its fullness ...”.³⁹ The healing work of the Good Samaritan (Christ) will be finally fully successful and in view of this healing, which has really begun, God declares the patient well, the sinner righteous.⁴⁰ The righteousness of the Christina has its reality not yet “in re” but “in spe”, and yet it is a righteousness which comes over us “realiter, non-speculative”.⁴¹ Or, in the exposition of John’s Gospel: “You must not judge by external appearance you must be guided by the Word, which promises and gives you everlasting life.

³² W. Joest, KD 9 (1963): “Die tridentinische Rechtfertigungslehre”, S. 65: “As the total-event (Totalvorgang) of self-surrender unto God’s promise, it (faith) receives unconditionally what God promises, and in this unconditional reception repentance, love, hope and obedience begin to flourish.” (my tr.)

³³ *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Concordia 1962, p.79.

³⁴ This because of Christ. For to Luther “a purely categorical definition of faith – a definition which loses sight of dependence on Christ as to content – seemed unthinkable.” W. Elert, *ibid*, p. 84.

³⁵ LW 35, 370.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *ibid*, p. 81.

³⁷ WA 40,1,368,8.

³⁸ In a Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life, 1532: “...the Word is the cause, foundation, ground, fountain and spring of love from the heart and of all good works, if they are to please God, for they cannot do so unless the heart first be pure.” LW 51,272.

³⁹ *Die Theologie Martin Luther’s*, Gutersich 1962, S. 206. (my tr.).

⁴⁰ Cf. Against Latomus, 1521, LW32, 232.

⁴¹ Lectures on Galatians, 1535, LW 26,357.

Then you truly have external life.”⁴² It is the Word alone which spans the gap between the “already now” and the “not yet”.

There remains this “interim”, in which not two souls live in the one breast (Goethe), but- much more radically – in which two men struggle in the one person,⁴³ the old Adam a ‘fighting and a ‘ dying of mortal wounds, but not yet finally dead, - and the new Man. This is the *life*, the everyday experience of the real Christian, and in this context Baptism attains a lasting indestructible significance, as Luther points out with emphasis in his references to Christian existence as s “crawling back into our baptism” and in the Small Catechism: Baptism “signifies that the old Adam in us should by *daily* contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and again, a new man *daily* come forth and arise, who *shall live* with God in righteousness and purity forever.”

[p. 9] Thus Luther’s concept of faith is not characterized by mystic calm and meditation, but is full of passionate movement and direction.⁴⁴ For we are both, the field of battle, and the fighters, on both sides! “...the whole man is himself both spirit and flesh, and he fights with himself until he becomes wholly spiritual.”⁴⁵ In this struggle to the death man is to look away from himself to Christ, to God and his faithfulness. “the intention of the doctrine of justification is not an analysis of man.”⁴⁶

The Cross and “Anfechtung” are the best weapons in this fight and they are given us by God in the proclamation of the humble Word and in the Word-laden Sacraments.⁴⁷ The Gospel has as its centre the Cross of Christ, and this Cross enters every Christian life.⁴⁸ Certainty of God’s faithfulness and so of our salvation (“what is more wretched than uncertainty?” Luther asked the Catholic Erasmus!) is given us in Christ, and the Cross, and differs therefore from any form of contented and self-sure “securitas”. In Christian certainty “it is not a matter of the psychological possibility of doubt in the believer – which Luther knew as long as he lived – but of the nature of faith itself. If faith does not have one’s own psyche as its basis and content but has Christ, it also has in Him the basis of its certainty.”⁴⁹ “The dear holy Cross” belongs to the gift of faith by virtue of what the Word is, and is the instrument, with which to gain fuller and final possession of the promised land of Canaan, in which there are still the remnants of the idolatrous Amorites, Jebusides and Canaanites.⁵⁰

⁴² LW 23,131.

⁴³ H. Bornkamm, *Luthers geistige Welt*, S. 85

⁴⁴ R. Hermann, *Gesammelte Studien zur Theologie Luthers und der Reformation*, Göttingen 1960, s.145.

⁴⁵ LW 35,377.

⁴⁶ R. Hermann, article “Rechtfertigung” in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3.Auf1. Tübingen 1961, Bd.V, Sp.845. Justification, as Luther teaches it, grounds in a “synthetic”, not an “analytical”, not even “proleptic-analytical” judgement, as K.Holl thought in his famous essay on Justification in Luther, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, I, Luther, Tübingen 1948, S 111ff.

⁴⁷ Relevant to all these considerations is the essay by H.E. Weber: “Der Flaubé und das Wort”, 1932, in: *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, München, 1965 S.30ff.

⁴⁸ Chr. Blumhardt, “Wer ins eigentliche Evangelium hineinkommt, wird ein Dulder und muss erdulden.” *Hausandachten*, Zurich/Stuttg. 1963.

⁴⁹ W. Elert, *ibid*, p.87

⁵⁰ Luther employ’s this picture in his refutation of Latomus, 1521, a work which perhaps comes closest to an unfulfilled plan of the Reformer to write a work entitled: “De Iustificatione.”

LUTHER AND THE WORD

II. THE GOSPEL AND THE TWO TESTAMENTS, MOSES AMONG THE EVANGELISTS.

[p. 10] We began with a text from the lectures on Psalms, and we have seen that although Luther's struggle in the monastery was intensely focused upon his person and existence, it was nevertheless fought out in the context of dialogue above all with the Bible and the God it reveals.⁵¹ His question though a crooked one and one which had the effect of making Martin Luther rather than God stand forth in naked question-ability was yet asked "erga deum". Thus for Luther the bible and the "viva vox" of God belong together, and his untiring exegesis, everywhere apparent also in his non-exegetical writings, flows from the beginning out of this dynamic conviction. The Bible is alive with the God who addresses men and has converse with them. It is God's Word in any case, but it wants to be heard as a Word of mercy, and, as such, as God's last Word.

We will not be surprised therefore that Luther, after his great and joyous discover, should have taken up his abode, as it were, in the Scriptures, - in the many wonderful mansions of the Father's house. His other rather Herculean tasks (some of them!) as a vicar general of his order, preacher and pastor of his congregation at Wittenberg, husband and father, and above all as the great Reformer never drew him away from his task of interpreting the Holy Bible. In and through it all, iconoclasm, Peasant's War, plague, shifting politics and threatening powers, he the outlawed heretic remained until his death Professor for the Bible in out of the way Wittenberg. Thus it was that "Luther thought almost always as an expositor of the Scriptures. If one seeks him out in his native setting, one meets him at explanation of the Bible. This, metaphorically speaking, is his idiom, his native dialect; to this one must tune to understand him."⁵²

How did Luther think as an expositor?

Having observed his deep biblical experience of justification, we have been shown the key with which Scripture,⁵³ yes Paradise itself was opened for him and with which, we may add, by grace it continues to be kept open. Looking back in 1545 (in the Preface to the first edition of his Latin works) Luther said significantly: "... that text of Paul (Rom.1:17) became for me the very door of Paradise."⁵⁴ This text is referred to in his exposition of Psalm 70 v.2 (1513-15); its mention as vital in Luther's own but late and telescopic account⁵⁵ of this development thus does not lessen the likelihood of Luther's enlightenment occurring during the 1513 lectures on Psalms. Rather, it can here serve to point us to the fundamental question of the relation of the two Testaments to each other in Luther's view. This question is thrown up also by the text quoted at the beginning of our Paper and stands forth in bold relief when we fact the odd fact that Luther, this great preacher of the NT doctrine of Justification (and the accusation of a narrow Paulinism is still alive!) should have spent only three to four years on the NT out of a total of thirty-two years of lecturing on the Bible. All the rest were given to the exposition of OT writings.⁵⁶

[p. 11] But for these facts the question of the relation of the two Testaments to each other could possibly seem formal and academic. Such danger however recedes even further when we read the

⁵¹ To go elsewhere than to the Bible (and to those who lived out of it, i.e. his fellow monks, his prior, order and Church) for a solution to his personal theological problem would not have occurred to Luther, not for that matter to anyone else of that age.

⁵² R. Hermann, *Gesammelte Studien*, *ibid.* S.428

⁵³ Cf. the quotation from Melanchthon's apology, *ftn.* 3 above.

⁵⁴ WA 54,186. LW34, 337: "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me."

⁵⁵ The historian's judgement of the type of reliability of such late references of Luther will be one of the factors influencing his position with regard to the dating of Luther's new insight.

⁵⁶ H. Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament*, Tübingen 1948, p.6.

two Bible prologues to the NT and OT (of 1522 and 1523 respectively; Luther began his translation of the Bible with the NT!). they were intended for the simple reader of the Bible. In that on the NT Luther centres his remarks upon the question of the Gospel and its meaning, in that to the OT he speaks about the Law. But by no means exclusively. OT and Law, NT and Gospel belong intimately together, however, a simple equation in pairs would undo the unity of the Bible and leave us with a marcionite dualism dividing the two parts of the Canon. This is not to be expected. On the contrary, Lutheranism, following the Reformer, has every reason for maintaining a vital interest in the OT, and that for the very reason that it is the Church, the creation of the pure Gospel proclaimed in the NT witness to Christ!

“Gospel (Euangelium) is a Greek word and means in Greek a good message, good tidings, good news, and a good report, which one sings and tells with gladness.”⁵⁷ Luther gives an example of what he means: the news of Goliath’s death at David’s hand burst upon Israel with the force of Gospel, as “a great good shout” of deliverance, “and they sang and danced and were glad for it” (ibid). Perhaps the reader of this preface will still be gently surprised that Luther, having in the previous paragraph “placed” Law and Gospel in their respective Old and New Testaments, should now immediately turn to the *OT* for his most striking visual and oral image of what the *Gospel* is!

Is it imagery, or is it more? Luther goes on in the succeeding paragraph to use Gospel of God and NT in unqualified apposition and can yet, in the same sentence refer to *Christ* under the name of *David*! “thus the Gospel of God or New Testament is a good story or report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles, telling of a true David who strove with sin, death and the devil and overcame the, ...” (ibid). Truly, a deep connection seems to be emerging between the Gospel and the OT⁵⁸ which can yet, it seems, exist alongside of the apparent identification of Gospel and NT.

This connection and this “identification” of “the Gospel” with parts of the written Canon in Luther’s preface is however, not for a moment, allowed to interfere with the essential nature of the Gospel as oral proclamation. This aspect is emphatically and simultaneously worked out. Thus Luther is at pains to point out that “the Gospel is not a book of law, but really a preaching of the benefits of Christ”;⁵⁹ or again; “The Gospel, then, is nothing but the preaching about Christ, son of God and of David, true God and true man, who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us the sin, death, and hell of all men who believe in him. Thus the Gospel can be either a brief or a lengthy message;...”⁶⁰ and it is not a book of law because in essence it is not a book at all: that the NT (understood as the distribution in public proclamation of [p. 12] Christ’s treasures opened up by His death) had to be *written* actually represents an impoverishment, for with the Gospel goes immediacy. “it is to be ‘pushed’ (treiben) not with pens but with mouths.”⁶¹ (“therefore the Church is a mouth-house and not a pen-house”).⁶² The OT, strictly speaking, alone deserves the name of Scripture, for “metaphorically speaking, the law is pen or writing and the Gospel is tongue”.⁶³ Luther maintains the epistemological distinctiveness of hearing because of his insistence that the Word of God is alive, that faith comes from hearing (Gal. 3:2), and that the justification of the sinner is God’s last *Word*, not the Law and written letter of the OT. The letter and Law is as dead as Christ is alive.

And yet we are not given the straight out equation of dead Law with OT and living Gospel with NT. For one thing, the Gospel is something totally different than the wild shouting of the Enthusiasts or,

⁵⁷ Preface to the New Testament, 1522. LW 35,358.

⁵⁸ The report of Goliath’s defeat may serve to enlighten the reader on the meaning of the Greek word euangelion, but David comes in christologically loaded, a real Christophoros!

⁵⁹ LW 35,361.

⁶⁰ ibid. p360.

⁶¹ Introduction to the Christmas Postil, 1522, WA 10 I, 17,7-12.

⁶² Advent postil 1522, WA 10 I, 2, 48, 5ff.

⁶³ Headley, ibid, p.26. Cf. H. Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament*, S. 71f, also P. Brunner, “Schrift und Tradition”, in the collection *Pro Ecclesia*, vol.1, Berlin/Hambg 1962,S.33f, and E. Schlink, *Theologie der Ltherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, München, 1940, S.416.

on the other hand, the deep inward experiences, the “silence” of the mystic, it is the “verbum externum”, which alone gives faith its certain ground outside of the self and, as such had to be brought to writing as history passed. And more than this, it is never Gospel without relation to the OT, and that on two counts:

1) The prophecies of the OT are fulfilled in the Gospel, yes, they are in themselves the Gospel to the men of faith of the OT.

2) The Law always remains in a dialectic relation to the Gospel and makes the hearing of the Gospel as Gospel possible, a divine possibility alone, for God also is the God who speaks in Moses, the Law, the OT.

1) Prophecy and fulfillment in Christ (“and faith which trusts such Word of God”) link the two Testaments. In the preface to the NT Luther specifies a number of OT prophecies fulfilled in the NT, in the preface to the OT he mentions pointers of the NT to the witness to Christ contained in the Old.⁶⁴ Thus in respect to the Gospel there is a unity running through the Canon: Christ really stands at the centre of Scripture, and from this centre both parts are seen to correspond. The hermeneutical implications of such a view will only become clearer when we have seen how for Luther the Law itself finally points to the same centre, the Rex Scripture, Jesus Christ the Crucified. However, we may say at this juncture: the prolific growth of allegory throughout the Middle Ages (having the most illustrious forebears among the exegetes of ancient days in Origen and Jerome) withered away in Luther,⁶⁵ and Christ, the one and only Gospel, literally became the scope of every text as of the whole Bible.⁶⁶ The door of Paradise was open! The [p. 13] simple, often time’s queer stories of the OT are God’s Word for Luther, not because they happen somehow to have gotten into the Canon, but because they are “the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. Simple and lowly are these swaddling clothes, but dear the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.”⁶⁷

2) There remains the Law!

What we have said until now can only be understood upon the background of the Law. But although it embodies God’s first Word to every sinner, it does not remain His last Word to those who hear the Law rightly, i.e. to those who through it are brought to the point of listening only to God’s final Word, forgiveness.

This peculiar dialectic is meaningless in the abstract. But it is the reality of those whom God meets in His Word, and this Word has gone into history. That is why we are forced to speak of Luther’s personal life and way in order to understand his theology. And that is why the deep and differentiated exposition of the Law given in his Preface to the OT is read off from the *history* told in the Pentateuch. Moses is important not because he (for Luther) wrote the first five books of the Bible, but because he comes to represent the Word of God expressed in, with and under the history they tell.

“Know, then, that the Old Testament is a book of laws, which teaches what men are to do and not to do – and in addition gives examples and stories of how these laws are kept or broken – just as the

⁶⁴ John 5:39, II Tim.3:15, Rom.1:2, I Cor.15:3, Acts 17:11.

⁶⁵ See the thorough investigation of this question and of Luther’s Hermeneutics upon the background of the preceding tradition in G. Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung*, München 1942. The whole discussion has been advanced into another section (the Prophets) and deepened in G. Krause’s book: *Studien zu Luther’s Auslegung der Kleinen Propheten*, Tübingen 1962.

⁶⁶ Ebeling writes (ibid p.410): “...the first principle of Luther’s exposition remains: Jesus Christ is the Generalscopus of the Bible.” (my tr.)

⁶⁷ LW 35,236. H.J. Krause, *Geschichte der Historisch-Kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments...*, Neukirchen 1956 comments on this text: “The OT as a whole is thus one great testimony of the condescension of God, done in Jesus Christ. In the simple saying and stories of the old covenant the incarnation of the Word occurs. The appropriate attitude with which man should approach these texts is that of obeisance of humilitas.” S.17.

New Testament is gospel or book of grace, and teaches where one is to get the power to fulfil the law. Now in the New Testament there are also given, along with the teaching about grace, many other teachings that are laws and commandments for the control of the flesh – since in this life the Spirit is not perfected and grace alone cannot rule. Similarly in the Old Testament too there are, beside the laws, certain promises and words of grace, by which the holy fathers and prophets under the law were kept, like us, in the faith of Christ. Nevertheless just as the chief teaching of the New Testament is really the proclamation of grace and peace through the forgiveness of sins in Christ, so the chief teaching of the Old Testament is really the teaching of laws, the showing up of sin, and the demanding of good. You should expect this in the Old Testament.”⁶⁸

The following paragraph of the preface speaks about Genesis; it deals with the time before the coming of the Law of Moses, speaks of God’s promises, of faith and unbelief and their consequences and is – this first book of the OT! – “an exceedingly evangelical book”. (ibid).

But now to the Law itself.

The history of man beginning in Genesis is a dark story. The light is on the side of God, and the Law is God’s. Luther takes seriously the words of Paul (contrast Marcion!): “the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (ro.7:12).

[p. 14] The hybris and violence of sin (and how closely Luther observes the trend in Genesis 1-11 for instance) tower up and threaten utter ruin. In this situation the Law appears as God’s undertaking to protect sin-blinded man. “God brings Moses forward with the law and selects a special people, in order to enlighten the world again through them.” (ibid.237). Sin appears and God answers, not with instant judgement, - but with the Law! Paradoxically the latter thus comes to stand on the side of the gifts of grace. Similarly the priesthood and cult of Israel. God wants to help, regulate and guide His people at every point, wants His people right close to Him; this motif is seen *here* as the reason for the innumerable laws of the Pentateuch.

The Law and the many commandments however fail in this good purpose; brought in to prevent sin, sin seizes upon them and misuses the Law for its destructive purpose of working man’s ruin in death. Sin as it were grows and lives on the Law, the more commandments, the more transgressions; sin is provoked by negatives and uses the Law to pave its way of disobedience and death.

Not that the Law in itself is not good in its inner and original intention, but we are now looking at man, who refuses to be led by it to believe in God and to love his neighbor (the natural law, as Luther found it most conveniently summed up in the Ten Commandments). And so the helper becomes the deadly enemy. Moses is power-less to affect the good he intends, instead he triggers off sin, and where sin remains God’s judgement calls for the death of the sinner. Moses becomes an officer of death, the executioner, and his function is in actual fact to lead men down to despair and death.

Behind Moses however stands God, not Satan. The “provocation” of sin-via the multiplicity of OT rules and regulations⁶⁹ has the purpose of showing man how universal and all permeating is his

⁶⁸ LW 35, 236f.

⁶⁹ Luther thus looks at the Levitical, cultic and civic prescriptions (which fall outside of the natural law) from various points of view. Whether they represent for a man the gracious guidance of God for his life, or have the stern function of showing up, yes heaping up a man’s sin deepens upon him to whom they are spoken. For man in the cocksure blindness of his existence all these particular commands and prescriptions stand service (and are so meant) in the death dealing office of Moses. For the Christian they are not binding. Luther makes this quite clear in his “Instruction on how Christians ought to betake themselves with regard to Moses”. (1525, WA 16). We are completely free of the Mosaic ceremonies and national law, for the Law of Moses is just as bound to folk and national limits as any other body of law. We live in a different historical setting. “Moses is the Sachsen Spiegel of the Jews” (WA 16, 378). Moreover, Christians have been freed from the *whole* Law by Christ, for them also the Decalogue has been abrogated, as Luther explicates in our preface to the OT: “The

unwillingness to obey his God, how abysmal his assertion of self before his very Maker. The Law is to tear the scales from man's eyes, to [p. 15] uncover convincingly his sin, and to lead him to a radically honest recognition of himself, at which point he can only despair completely of his own possibilities as a saint.

At this hopeless point of no return the actual office of Moses is completed: it ends in death. "This is to be really cast into hell."⁷⁰ If there is going to be any further story to tell, a new divine Word must go forth capable of ushering in an event beyond Moses, beyond death. This new story has become history! It is the reality proclaimed by Gospel. For its sake, indeed "this office of sin and death is good and very necessary",⁷¹ for the overwhelming message of the end of the Law in Christ' is in fact finally significant only for such as have felt "the undertow of God's demand in the Law".⁷² Not until the sinner hears in the Law the last Word on his Old (his real) existence, can he understand that the Gospel is *the* last Word of God for him and is full of the future. *In Christ* a man may accept death, which was to be his hopeless end at the hand of the executioner, Law, as the end of the Law and sin. For *in Christ* sin and the Law have destroyed themselves by their own work, death! In this sense "Moses is dead!" "Not a jot in Moses concerns us!"⁷³ Thus in Christ our sins are forgiven, our death is overcome, and the Law is no longer our foe. For Christ is God's final Word for the sinner, who, having reached the end of his ways, cries out unto God for the Saviour.

"So the office of Moses carries a secret christocentric sense (meaning)".⁷⁴ Having turned from the Gospel to speak of the Law, we have been led back by Luther, via a deep-delving explanation of the Law, to the Gospel. God goes out of His way to bring man home. The Law, so Luther would seem to be saying, is really understood only in its coordination of the Gospel. Christ and Gospel – the ground-theme of the Bible! "Take Christ out of the Bible and what have you left." O the weight of that saying flung at Erasmus.

From an informed and reflecting Christian standpoint Christ as the centre of Holy Scripture may sound feasible. But what about the time of the OT itself? Could the Law exercise its final orientation of men toward Christ when those men were living at a time prior to His appearance? Luther answers: The Gospel (and it is only such when it is proclaimed and heard) is well on the scene within the OT and is indeed proclaimed – by Moses himself! And knowingly! Moses speaks of the Prophet who is to succeed him. This "other Moses" who "would teach something different from Moses."⁷⁵ was referred to by the prophets and proclaimed by the apostles. So the "change of office" (Amtswechsel) from Moses to Christ becomes the theme running through the whole sacred Canon. By announcing his "Successor" Moses himself has gone over into the number of the evangelists! "For Moses is, indeed, a well of all wisdom and understanding, out of which has sprung all that the prophets knew and said. Moreover even the New Testament flows out of it and is grounded in it,...."⁷⁶

Ten Commandments also cease, not in the sense that they are no longer to be kept or fulfilled, but in the sense that the office of Moses in them ceases; it no longer increases sin by the Ten Commandments, and sin is no longer the sting of death." LW 35,244.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 35,243.

⁷¹ Ibid. 35,242.

⁷² Paul Althaus, "Die Theologie Martin Luthers", *ibid.*S.128; my tr. For "...den Tiefgang der Forderung Gottes im Gesetz."

⁷³ WA 16: 373,12. 375,14.

⁷⁴ H. Bornkamm, "Luther und das Alte Testament", S. 126. Cf. Headley, P.28: "To the degree that the law is understood in the light of the Gospel, and not the reverse, the law becomes the Gospel. In His wrathful love, God crucifies us by His *alien work* as a preparation for resurrecting us by His *proper work*."

⁷⁵ LW. 35,246.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 35,247.

LUTHER AND THE WORD

III. CHRIST, THE CANON AND THE CHURCH.

[p. 16] Christ is the scope of the whole Bible and of every text; Luther's theology of Law and Gospel is the expression of this hermeneutical position. Toward the end of the preface to the OT Luther advises his reader: "If you would interpret well and confidently, set Christ before you, for he is the man to whom it all applies, every bit of it."⁷⁷ Following the typological exposition of Hebrews, Luther interprets the Levitical sacrifices as types of Christ, the sons of Aaron are referred to as Christians. "The office of slaughter and sacrifice signifies nothing else than the preaching to the Gospel(!), by which the old man is slain and offered to God, burned and consumed by the fire of love, in the Holy Spirit." And Luther concludes the whole preface with the sentence: "Let this suffice for the present as a brief suggestion for seeking Christ and the Gospel in the Old Testament."⁷⁸ That speaks volumes; it betrays his reason for writing prologues to Biblical books, and shows us what he thought was the real, the literal sense of Scripture, namely, as he had written in 1514 lecturing on the Psalter: "...the works of God and the ways of God, all of which things Christ is in the literal sense..." (above p.1!). God's righteousness as Law, in the Gospel it is Christ's righteousness in us. To go back and to read the Levitical prescriptions as anything else may be relevant for a comparison with the *Sachsen Spiegel*, but has nothing to do with the relevant historical literal sense of Scripture. Nor does a moralistic understanding of Christ as a teacher of virtue and a shining example. Furthermore, the "spiritual meaning" (= "the literal sense") of Luther is to be distinguished on the one hand from the allegorical exposition of Origen and Jerome, because it is grounded in the history of salvation,⁷⁹ and on the other hand it is not a flat and superficial literalism. The Word and the Spirit are bound to each other. On the one hand the Word is Spirit because the Word contains and yields the Spirit; on the other hand the Spirit is Word-bound and comes to man through external means.⁸⁰

"...and morally all these things are faith in him..." The "moral sense" (or the "topological sense") in the medieval "Quadrige" (the four-fold method of exposition) took care of the application of a text to the believer. That this should have required a special act of interpretation, as it were, over and above, and not at all necessarily given with the literal sense, seems strange to us and indicates that Luther has made a deep difference to interpretation, effective even when we are not consciously reflecting the principles of hermeneutics. What happened in Luther's case was that the old literal and moral senses of Scripture fused in his discovery and experience of justification through faith in *Christ* (extra nos, literaliter, Christus, / pro nobis, moraliter, fides). The two remaining senses, the allegorical (the meaning as applied to the Church) and the anagogical (or eschatological), were embraced in this fusion; the *Lord* of the *Church* is coming to save *His people*. There is only one sense in which Scripture wants to be understood: Christ meeting the sinner!

[p. 17] "Christus est Dominus ac Rex Scripturae".⁸¹ He is alive in the Word, which, primarily, is the proclaimed Word. "Fides ex auditu". Christ wrote nothing.⁸² The NT is essentially the herald's shout of the Gospel. This only saving Gospel determines the boundaries of the Canon and by its very character as proclamation is critical of the letter.⁸³ It is invitation and promise, more than a mere

⁷⁷ LW 35,247.

⁷⁸ LW 35,248.

⁷⁹ Althaus, *ibid.* S. 90f.

⁸⁰ Cf. H. Bornkamm, *Das Wort Gottes bei Luther*, München 1933, p.9f.

⁸¹ WA 40 1, 458, Cf. also 39 1, 47,19:"Quod si adversarii scripturam urserint contra Christum, urgemus Christum contra scripturam." The Lord is the Head of Holy Scripture, individual passages are the members and serve Him. The Head must rule and be preferred to His servants. Cf. WA 29 1,47,5.

⁸² Cf. K.E. Skydsgaard's contribution to the volume *Wir sind gefragt*, Gottingen 1966, esp. pp.510- 61.

⁸³ K.H Miskotte: "Wenn die Gotter schweigen", München 1964, S. 337: "Never were nor are the Scriptures conceived as a book to read (for oneself), but always as a book from which to read to others and for oral

recitation of “bruta facta”, it involves the “pro me” requiring more than a “fides historica”.⁸⁴ Under this criterion differences significant for Luther emerge within the NT Canon itself, not all books are of equal value from the point of view of the Gospel. And what other point of view could be relevant? Luther would ask. Thus he tells his NT readers of 1522 “which are the true and noblest books of the NT.” “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.” John is nearer to “preaching” than the Gospel-writers. In the well-known prologue to James we hear: “All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate (treiben) Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ.”⁸⁵ Here James is weighed by that which is central in Scripture and found wanting. “Insofar Scripture itself is the subject of this critique of the Canon.”⁸⁶ James however is not removed from the Canon but placed at the end with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation, all of which books also come in for related criticism.

For Luther the Bible is the Word of God, and Christ is *the* Word, God’s last Word, spoken to man so that man could hear it and live, the “verbum abbreviatum et consummatum” (WA 1,24,12). The divine Word is thus human word, and the fact that Luther retained James in the Canon may serve to show how thoroughly Luther was convinced of this polarity. Just because Christ, the risen Lord, is the centre of Scripture and it’s King can it conclude a diversity of writings and viewpoints which any logical or systematic principle could not embrace. “It is not incorrect to say that Luther’s view of the Bible has closer bonds with his [p. 18] doctrine of the incarnation than with any theory of inspiration. Behind his concept of scripture stands his doctrine of the descent of God in the flesh.”⁸⁷ “It is therefore consistent with Luther’s view to study the Bible with the help of philological and historical methods and make clear its temporal and historical context.”⁸⁸

The authority of the Bible is therefore vested in Him who speaks through it and is its centre and Lord.⁸⁹ Luther did not replace the Roman pope with a paper one, but allowed the Bible to speak for itself, i.e. christocentrically. “Sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres”. (Sacred Scripture is its own interpreter). The Bible as the living Word lives in Christ, or it is the dead letter of the Law which kills and which man runs into everywhere outside of the Bible as well. The Gospel is found only in Christ, and He reveals Himself only in the Scriptures through the Spirit. Herein lies the force of Luther’s “sola scriptura”, a doctrine which in a legalistic sense (and therefore with totally different implications) had been formulated before him, e.g. by Wiclif. “Sola scriptura” is not a

application. Never will the loss quite be made good, which (alongside of the gain) was inflicted upon the fundamental import of the Word in its function as address, as encounter, by the act of printing.” (my tr. Ff. the Germ., orig., in Dutch, an amazing work, available in English).

⁸⁴ This is not to say that the facts of history are of minor import. Like the “verbum externum” they are constitutive for faith. “Ex historia aedificanda est fides”. WA 31,11,242.

⁸⁵ LW 35,396.

⁸⁶ “Insofar Scripture itself is the subject of this critique of the Canon” Althaus, *ibid.* p.81. (mytr.).

⁸⁷ W.J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, Muhlenberg Press 1961, p.237. Luther writes: “The Holy Scripture is God’s Word, written, and so to say, ‘in-lettered’, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God incarnate in the world, as he is viewed and dealt with, so it is also with the written Word of God. It is a worm and no book, compared with other books.” (tr. In Kooiman, *ibid.* WA 48,31.) R. Bring in a chapter on the written Word in “How God’s incarnation in Christ, divinity is concealed under humanity; in Holy Communion Christ’s presence is under the bread and wine; in the Bible God speaks through words written in a specific human language.” Cf. finally the statement of W. Quanbeck in *Marburg Revisited*, ed. by P. Empie and J. McCord, Augsburg Publ. p.20: “The Church has learned in its Christological reflection to reject all Ebionite, Docetic, Apollinarian, Nestorian and Eutychian misunderstanding. In the present century it is learning that each of these Christological errors has a parallel in the approach to Scripture. Any doctrine of Scripture which denies or abridges the fully human character of the Bible is a danger to the gospel and the church, even though it may be motivated by opposition to liberal theology.”

⁸⁸ R. Bring, *How God speaks to us*, p.31.

⁸⁹ “...the reason for the authority of the Bible is a posteriori, growing out of its substance, and is not a priori to its substance.” E. Kinder, lectures read at Immanuel Seminary, 1961.

“Formalprinzip”, but is expressive of the very “res”.⁹⁰ In Christ the one salutary sense of Sacred Scripture is revealed in this sense it is self-interpreting. The “clarity of Scripture” is given only in Christ in faith, the work of the Spirit.⁹¹

In Christ God speaks His living and last Word to the sinner, and a saint is made, a new creature is born. Faith and life by hearing. But faith is never finished in this existence, the struggle goes on within us, and so the Gospel must be proclaimed and humbly heard again and again.

The “viva vox evangelii” is the news that the inapproachable and righteous God has met man on man’s own ground in Christ. The “deus absconditus” is in Christ the “deus revelatus”.⁹² The Word became flesh and He who knew no sin was made sin for us. Everywhere in the Bible Luther saw signs of this amazing condescension of God, - a condescension which, in the “small weak miserable Word stronger than the evil and the gates of hell”, reaches right down to contemporary man.⁹³ And the Sacraments, their ordinary earthly elements are reminders of [p. 19] this “kenosis”. They are means whereby Christ, the justification of the ungodly, wants, as the Word, to communicate Himself to sinners as their friend and benefactor. The sacraments are therefore correctly described as the “verbum visibile.” Yet here too faith alone received Christ’s benefits, there is nothing automatic or magic about them, though in them with certainty, the same Spirit is effectively at work as in the preached Word. There is no sacrament without the Word for this reason. Yet the simplicity of the elements and the breath-thin Word both hide and bring the power of God,⁹⁴ the Word which created the heavens, the Word which was in the world as its light but not known, not received, when it came, among its own. “But as many as received Him...” (John 1:12). This miracle happens because the Word does not return void; Jes.55:11 is one of Luther’s most lived texts. This miracle, that in Christ sinners everywhere receive and respond to their judge as their Saviour, is the miracle that is the Church. She is the “creatura evangelii” “Faith cannot be without the Word; and again, where the Word is, there must be faith.”⁹⁵ In her midst stands Christ. “Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia.” “For since the church owes its birth to the Word, is nourished, aided and strengthened by it, it is obvious that it cannot be without the Word. If it is without the Word it ceases to be a Church. A Christian, thus, is born to the ministry of the Word in baptism,...”.⁹⁶ “Tota vita et substantia Ecclesiae est in Verbo Dei.”⁹⁷ That the Church therefore has a history and – despite schisms and heresy, and despite the Reformation! – a lasting continuity is due to God’s condescending grace in accompanying rebel man through time with the continuing proclamation of His Word.⁹⁸

“Church History is the history of the Gospel in its effects in the world”,⁹⁹ or, according to G. Ebeling, the history of the exposition of Holy Scripture.¹⁰⁰ I like the first definition better, it leaves room [p.

⁹⁰ Cf. G. Ebeling, “Sola Scriptura’ und das Problem der Tradition”, in: *Wort Gottes und Tradition*, Göttingen 1964, S.91ff.

⁹¹ Cf. R. Hermann, *Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift*, Berlin 1958, also a new book (coming!) by F. Beisser, *Claritas scripturae bei Martin Luther*.

⁹² For the relation of this terminology with the “theologia crucis” see G. Ebeling, *Luther. Einführung in sein Denken*, Tübingen 1964, S.259ff.

⁹³ LW 51,207. Cf. H. von Campenhausen: “Reformatorisches Selbstbewusstsein und Geschichtsbewusstsein bei Luther”, in the coll. *Essays, Tradition und Leben*, Tübingen 1960, p.318ff.

⁹⁴ From the exposition of John: “He did not want to give us His divinity unconcealed; this was impossible....He must disguise Himself in flesh and blood, in the word, in the external ministry, in Baptism, in the Sacrament and Lord’s Supper, where He gives us His body in the bread and His blood in the wine, to eat and to drink. He must conceal Himself in forms to which He adds His Word, in order that we may recognize Him.” LW 23,121.

⁹⁵ EA 6,331.

⁹⁶ Concerning the Ministry, 1523, LW 40,37.

⁹⁷ WA 7,729,9.

⁹⁸ WA 39, II, 176. Cfr. W. Hohne: “Die Kontinuität der Kirche ist durch die Kontinuität des Wortes Begründet.” in: *Luthers Anschauungen über die Kontinuität der Kirche*, Berlin/Hamb. 1963, p.16

⁹⁹ H. Bornkamm, *Grundriss zum Studium der Kirchengeschichte*, Gutersloh 1949, S. 17 (my tr.)

¹⁰⁰ “Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift”, in: *Wort Gottes und Tradition*,

20] for Luther's conviction that the Church goes back to Genesis; since the Fall the promise, the Gospel has been proclaimed and men have believed, since the Fall the Church has lived by grace. And the Bible (this motif is repeated in many of the Prologues) is full of examples of – not good works!, but, as Luther says throughout (and this is what good works are), examples of *faith*,¹⁰¹ and of unbelief. For where God erects His Church, there and then the devil builds his chapel also. A struggle must be fought out and expected also on this level.¹⁰² In the Word God enters into history and causes a mighty commotion, necessary, for natural man, still trusting in his works cannot put up with the humiliating Word of the Cross but will rather persecute it, Heatley writes:

“Faith and unbelief – these are the great these of Church History. And at the vortex is the Word, this veritable attach of God upon world history. The Word that constitutes the Church as a community of believers is the same Word that impels this terrible struggle. The arena of its redemptive action is the entire world; the fruit of its redemptive action is the Church – neither physically demonstrable nor triumphant, but crucified, dispossessed, hidden.”¹⁰³

Church history is of course interwoven with world history, - a seeming platitude, which, however, Luther's doctrine of the Word fills with a deep and eschatological dimension.¹⁰⁴ “For,” as Peter Brunner writes,¹⁰⁵ “The meaning of history according to Luther lies in the fact that it is the field upon which the Word of God performs the work of Salvation, builds up the Body of Christ and so ushers in the Kingdom of God...the saving work of the Gospel is the continually present eschatological qualification of history.”

Jerome coined the saying which Vatican II reaffirmed in the Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), and with which Luther could not agree more fully: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” In 1546 Luther wrote in a Bible: “Could we but believe that God himself speaks with us in the Bible, we would read therein with diligence and would consider it our workshop.” Luther's conviction that the gracious Word of God is really bound into the Bible implied for Him unceasing effort to get, ever again and anew, at the meaning of these words, and his emphasis on the languages in this connection is quite conspicuous! Indeed, we would do well to heed it – in an age in which our time-tables seem to leave absolutely no room for a day spent on exacting preparation of the text we are to preach, when so-called practical, administrative, sociological and psychological subjects are pushing out exegetical disciplines and making them seem irrelevant on the theological curriculum, an age in which anyone interested in Latin, Greek, [p. 21] or even Hebrew (!) comes easily to be regarded as a rare *old* fossil, not to say a homo heidelbergensis! Luther says straight out: we are juggling the Gospel and will lose it:

“We shall not preserve the Gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which is stuck this sword of the Spirit, they are the shrine in which one carries this jewel, the chalice in which this drink is held, the pantry in which this food is kept.” (WA 15,38,7ff). “But where the languages are kept alive, there it remains fresh and strong, Scripture is diligently cherished, and faith is born through ever new Words and Works.” (ibid, p15,42,9-11). (my tr.)

Luther's positive emphasis on education through all levels flows out of his doctrine of the Word; the

Gottingen 1964, S.9ff

¹⁰¹ “In his reading of the events of Scripture as well as the events in the past of the Church, he transmutes what had been examples of works into examples of faith. It is not the external act which is to be repeated, but an inner event which is to be appropriated.” Headley, P.50.

¹⁰² In a letter to Spalatin in 1520: “God's Word can never be handled with advancing Christ's cause on earth in peace and pleasantness, since you can see that Christ has fought with his own blood, and all the martyrs after him.”

¹⁰³ Headley, p.55.

¹⁰⁴ See Luther's Preface to Galeatus Capella's History, LW 34,275ff: “...histories describe nothing else than God's work, that is, grace and wrath...” (277).

¹⁰⁵ *Luther und die Welt des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 1961, S.21f.

passages quoted come from his writing of 1524: "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that they establish and maintain Christian Schools." Bound in his conscience to the Word Luther stood fast at Worms. The Reformation which followed could in so far be cited by a man of faith as a grand example of the efficacy of the Word, transmitting to us the mercy of God in earthen vessels. The written Word became again what it was before, the preached Word, and this it always wants to become. And this movement of the Word embraces the missionary movement of the Church into the world.

Every aspect of Luther's theology is as a petal growing out of the centre of the rose,¹⁰⁶ the doctrine of the Word, and is thus related to all other aspects. In this connection the popular adage that Luther was no systematician reveals its *very* limited validity: his theology is a colossal organic unity, and to be eclectic in the case of Luther is a risky undertaking which may betray only that the history of a misunderstood Luther is not concluded. With Luther we can well remain modest and ready to learn, to rethink, and to give thanks for a gift which bears the signs that in it some of the overwhelming riches of God's grace have again impinged upon history, and that, in a manner befitting the Gospel of the Word made flesh, in a very down to earth man and his rich and thoroughly human mode of expression.

"Christus venit in hunc mundum,
Ut faceret nos certissimos".
(WA 43,458,21ff).

¹⁰⁶ Cf Einar Billing, *Our Calling*, Augustana 1952, p.7.