
Between
WITTENBERG
and GENEVA

**Lutheran
and Reformed Theology**
in Conversation

Robert Kolb
and Carl R. Trueman


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Contents

Preface ix

Abbreviations xv

1. Scripture and Its Interpretation 1
 2. Law and Gospel 31
 3. The Person and Work of Christ 59
 4. Election and the Bondage of the Will 87
 5. Justification and Sanctification 117
 6. Baptism 147
 7. The Lord's Supper 175
 8. Worship 207
- Conclusion 235
- Scripture Index 237
- Name Index 241
- Subject Index 245

Preface

CARL R. TRUEMAN

This book owes its origin to two independent conversations that Bob Kolb and I had with Dave Nelson at Baker Publishing Group some years ago. Each of us was concerned about a couple of related phenomena that we had noticed among seminary students. The first was the failure of many of them to understand the differences between being confessional and being Evangelical.¹ The second was a similar failure to understand the differences between Lutherans and Reformed. Indeed, I have lost count of the number of times over the years that I have heard students refer to Luther as “Reformed” and had to correct them by indicating that he was a Lutheran reformer, not Reformed. What both Bob and I wanted to do was to write a book that would explain the differences between our two communions.

Both of the problems we noted above with regard to our students derive from their not really understanding the Lutheran and Reformed confessional traditions. Neither tradition is really part of the broader movement of Evangelicalism, which has its roots in the revivals—and revivalism—of the eighteenth century. Evangelicalism tends to regard as matters of little importance those things that are vital to the confessional traditions of the Lutheran and Reformed churches. However, even many students from within Lutheran and Reformed churches have not been well catechized in their own tradition

1. Bob and I regard ourselves as “evangelical” in the small *e* Reformation sense: Protestants who hold to the gospel of justification by grace through faith. Here I am using Evangelical/Evangelicalism with a capital *E* to refer to the modern movement, rooted in the revivals of the eighteenth century, that draws much of its strength from Baptist and parachurch circles.

and have therefore been left vulnerable to more Evangelical streams of Protestant life. This weakens their confessional identity.

For example, Evangelicals tend to focus on soteriology and fail to grasp why sacraments—the major point of dispute between the two magisterial Reformation traditions—are of any great moment. Indeed, when they do take a strong stand on such, it is typically in the form of an odd antisacramentalism that rejects infant baptism, a point that decisively separates them from the confessional Lutherans and Reformed. Yet, perhaps attracted by the heroic stature of Luther or Calvin, many Evangelicals try to appropriate these figures for their own cause, selecting those doctrines they appreciate and unwittingly domesticating the Reformers and the Reformation in the process.

This problem is typically most evident in classes dealing with the Marburg Colloquy (1529), the famous face-to-face confrontation between Luther and Zwingli. When students hear that Luther was prepared to refuse to reach full agreement with the Reformed because of his insistence on the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, they are—to put it mildly—confused and sometimes distressed. That the sacrament would be a sufficient basis for such drastic action seems to them absurd or an act of willful pride or a vestige of medieval Roman Catholicism that Luther somehow failed to reject. In sum, instincts shaped by the antisacramental culture of modern Evangelicalism render Luther's stand incomprehensible.

It was this problem that led Bob and me to talk separately to Dave, with the idea that it might be helpful to produce a book outlining Lutheran and Reformed positions on various doctrines in a manner that would help students to see what is at stake both in the confessional disagreements between our two traditions and in the differences between the confessional Protestantism that finds its origin in the Reformation and the Evangelicalism that originates in the revivalism of the eighteenth century. But we also wanted to do so in a manner that, while not minimizing or relativizing those differences, avoided the bitterness that has often characterized such engagement in the past. The years since 1529 have seen more than their fair share of recrimination, bitterness, and mutual misrepresentation by both sides. We wanted to produce a book reflecting our commitment to the catholic faith of the Christian church and our respect and affection for each other as Christian brothers who serve the same Lord and Savior.

To accomplish this task, we chose a set of eight topics on which there is both considerable overlap and at times significant disagreement between our two traditions. Readers will see the latter most obviously in those chapters dealing with the person of Christ, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Christ and the Lord's Supper are, of course, interconnected topics and were the

primary historic points of conflict between Lutheran and Reformed. Indeed, they remain so today. But the reader will also see that, along with the sharp points of disagreement, there is significant commonality on many elements of the faith. For example, justification by grace through faith is crucial to both traditions. In fact, it is hard to imagine what the Reformed faith would look like if it had not borrowed this basic insight from Luther. On that point, all Reformation Protestants are the sons and daughters of Dr. Martin, and all should gratefully acknowledge that fact.

Bob and I wrote all the essays in order to present our confessional traditions in a consistent manner. Our contributions are paired in each chapter, with Bob's portion coming first, but they have not been written so as to be in direct, point-by-point dialogue with each other. Our hope is that they thus represent the starting point for future dialogue—in the classroom, in the local church context, perhaps even at the denominational level. Both Lutheran and Reformed traditions are churchly. While we appreciate some aspects of Evangelicalism, we believe that the only real way of engaging in true ecumenical discussion with a view to greater unity among Christians is to do so within the church itself and between denominational bodies.

The reader will also note certain methodological differences between Bob's essays and those I have written. The differences reflect not simply our own personalities as writers but also differences between our traditions. Lutherans have defined what it means to be "Lutheran" in several ways. Some claim the name on the basis of adherence to certain basic tenets represented by Luther and/or Lutherans over the centuries, such as "justification by faith alone" or "freedom." Some have done so with more recourse to confessional documents, such as the Augsburg Confession or Luther's catechisms, some with a nominal pledge to take those documents seriously. Another approach defines "Lutheran" as adherence to the confessions contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, or at least to the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism—some preferring to accept these documents *quatenus* (insofar as) they agree with Scripture, others *quia* (because) they agree with Scripture. Some have included not only a strict adherence to Scripture and the Lutheran confessions but also a general agreement with selected portions of the teachings of the great dogmaticians of the seventeenth century. Among those who wish to represent the historic Lutheran confession of the faith seriously are some who emphasize Luther's own writings, while others limit their definition of what is Lutheran to the teachings of the Book of Concord. Bob is committed to upholding the Book of Concord in a strict manner, but in this volume he reflects his belief that the writings of Luther present the best "Lutheran" offer for conversation in the whole household of faith; therefore to a large

degree his presentations focus on Luther's expression of the biblical message and ways it can function today.

The Reformed faith has also been defined in various ways. In recent years at a popular level, "Reformed" has come to mean little more than "broadly Calvinistic on the issue of divine grace" and thus functions as a virtual synonym for an Evangelicalism with anti-Pelagian tendencies. This bears little relationship to what has historically been known as the Reformed faith, because the latter was inextricably connected to particular forms of church life and worship as they were forged in the conflicts of the Reformation. In the academy, the term is often used to refer to theologians who operate within a specific denominational context, regardless of the specific content of their work. In this sense "Reformed" has a very broad reference, which on the surface is of little help in defining theological content.

I am a confessional Reformed Christian, a theological identity with a more specific and definite content. The term means that (like Bob) I take very seriously the formal confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a Presbyterian, this commitment is specifically to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Other Reformed believers, particularly those from Dutch or German traditions, look to the so-called Three Forms of Unity: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. The differences between Presbyterian and continental Reformed traditions are negligible, focused on technical details relative to church polity. On the essentials of the Reformed faith, there are both common origins and confessional consensus. Like confessional Lutheran believers, the confessional Reformed also look to the great ecumenical creeds of the ancient church. On that point of ecclesiastical outlook, we are both agreed.

Yet there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which Lutheranism and Reformed theology are defined. As noted above, Lutheranism always has to wrestle with the central and dominant figure of Luther. Not only did Luther write some of the fundamental parts of the Book of Concord; his personal theological commitments also exerted a decisive influence on the shape of Lutheran theology. Reformed theology by contrast was eclectic in origin, with no dominant figure fulfilling the same role within the tradition as Luther with his. The unfortunate prominence of the term "Calvinism" obscures this fact by implying that Calvin is the dominant influence. In fact, Calvin did not write any of the confessional standards adhered to by modern Reformed Christians, nor did he so dominate the tradition that his personal theological predilections stand out as unique. Numerous theologians shaped the Reformed tradition, and while Calvin was undoubtedly of great importance, the best we can say of him is that he was first among equals.

For this reason, the sections in this volume on the Reformed tradition are shaped less by Calvin and his biography than by the actual confessional documents of the Reformed tradition and the light shed by many great Reformed thinkers on the issues addressed in those documents. Certainly Calvin features heavily in the theological narrative. But others—for example, John Knox, Heinrich Bullinger, Zacharias Ursinus, Robert Bruce, John Owen, and Herman Bavinck—also play their part. Above all, it is the confessional material that dominates discussion of Reformed theology and church life. Thus, in contrast to Bob, who sees Luther as the best guide to Lutheran theology, I am convinced that the consensus underlying the confessional documents of the Reformed faith rather than any one figure offers the best Reformed contribution to these discussions in the household of faith.

It is in this spirit of friendship, catholicity, ecumenism, and love for our distinct traditions and for the great communion of saints transcending any denominational division that we offer this book to students of the Lutheran and the Reformed faiths in the hope that it will foster better understanding both of their own traditions and of their Christian brothers and sisters with whom they have principled differences on important issues and yet with whom they share a mighty Savior.

Abbreviations

- BC *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000)
- BSSELK *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014)
- Calvin, *Institutes* John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1845; repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.)
- CP *The Sermons of Martin Luther* [the Church Postil], ed. and trans. John Nicholas Lenker (1905; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983)
- CR *Corpus Reformatorum: Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil (Halle and Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1834–60)
- Dennison James T. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation, 1523–1693*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–14)
- DLGTT Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985)
- EA² *Dr. Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke*, Erlangen Ausgabe [Erlangen ed.], 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main and Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer, 1862–85)
- LW *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958–86)
- MSA *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl* [Studien-Ausgabe], ed. Robert Stupperich, 6 vols. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1955)
- PRRD Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003)
- RD Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8)

- Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992)
- WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe, 65 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993)
- WA BR *Briefwechsel [Correspondence]*, 18 vols. in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930–85)
- WA DB *Die Deutsche Bibel, 1522–46*, 12 vols. in 15 in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe (Weimar: Böhlau, 1906–61)
- WA TR *Tischreden [Table Talk]*, 6 vols. in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912–21)

1

Scripture and Its Interpretation

Protestants are people of the book. Both Lutherans and Reformed place the reading and preaching of Scripture at the very heart of the public ministry of the church. The medieval church saw the Mass as the point where God made himself savingly present with his people, but the Reformers saw that role fulfilled above all in the public proclamation of the Word. For them, it was the pulpit, not the altar, that became key to church life. Indeed, there could be no sacrament without the proclamation of the Word. And when the Word was read and preached, it was not merely for the sake of conveying information. In the proclamation of the Word, God really confronted people with his presence. Whether this was for judgment or salvation depended on whether the Word was received in faith or rejected in unbelief.

Since the Word preached is central to both Lutherans and Reformed, then a number of other questions must be addressed. First, there is the issue of what exactly Scripture is. Preaching as an act must be shaped by what the Bible is understood to be. Second, there is the issue of interpretation. A sermon is not simply a recitation of the biblical text. The movement from text to sermon is governed by rules of textual interpretation. Both what those rules are understood to be and also how they are to be applied are crucial to the action of preachers as they proclaim the Word to their congregations.

Both Lutheran and Reformed traditions have produced many great and faithful theologians and preachers, all of whom are marked by their high view of the Bible as the written Word of God, by the care with which they expound and apply the text, and of course by their love for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Holy Scripture in the Lutheran Tradition

Martin Luther encountered God's presence, power, and promise in the words of Holy Scripture. At first against his own desires but in obedience to his monastic superiors' direction, Luther took his assignment to prepare himself to teach Bible at the university level as a call from God and devoted himself to his studies with the energy and zeal of a young Augustinian friar who sought salvation in the performance of his vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. These studies contributed to the transformation of a man whose personality prepared him for taking what God has to say with utmost seriousness and for throwing himself totally into searching the Scriptures to find eternal life.¹

Luther's Encounter with Scripture

Increasingly, Luther recognized all his efforts to save himself from his sinfulness as insufficient. His personality easily sensed the lows and highs of life. This trait blended with his depiction of God as the almighty Lord and Creator of all that exists. His teachers, schooled in large part in the Ockhamist tradition delivered to them by Gabriel Biel, the foremost German theologian of the late fifteenth century, had bequeathed to him this image of the Author and Designer of all things, who had determined what the laws governing his universe were to be. Luther never abandoned this conviction, although he certainly refined it through his biblical study. His instructors also cultivated belief in the covenant or pact that this almighty God had created according to their schema of salvation. This covenant promised grace sufficient to perform the works that would prove the sinner's righteousness before God to all who did "what was in them," who performed their best "out of purely natural powers." Luther stumbled over this impossible requirement. Slowly, as he gave his first formal university lectures on the Psalms (1513–15) and then on Romans (1515–16) and Galatians (1516), he found a path to a different depiction of both God and what it means to be human. He redefined what it means to be a Christian: one who places absolute trust in this almighty God who longs to renew his conversation with his rebellious human creatures. It was through Luther's engagement with the biblical text that the structure bequeathed him by medieval scholastic thought, focused through Aristotelian lenses on human performance, began to crumble.

1. This essay stems in large part from Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016); and Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

The Bible was anything but absent from the world of medieval Christians. Indeed, the church discouraged the few literate laypeople of the late Middle Ages from reading Scripture without ecclesiastical guidance. Nevertheless, liturgical Scripture readings, other portions of the liturgy, visual images in altars and other pious art, and other media conveyed portions of Scripture to the faithful. Two problems, however, plagued this absorption of Bible stories. First, they were incorporated into the individual's worldview alongside and not always distinguished from the stories of the saints, handed down particularly in the *Legenda aurea*—literally, “golden things to be read”—of Jacob of Voragine, a thirteenth-century Dominican and archbishop of Genoa. Second, the biblical narratives or maxims were placed into a set of presuppositions forged in the era of the conversion of the pagan tribes to Christianity, which vitiated the message of the prophets and apostles. Insufficient personnel for delivering fundamental instruction in the faith resulted in a version of Christianity that used biblical language and narrative but presumed that divine power was available from many intermediaries capable of providing help for time and eternity. Christian saints assumed functions earlier performed by pagan gods and goddesses. Furthermore, the relationship between God and his human creatures was anchored in the performance of God-pleasing activities, particularly the performance of sacred or religious rituals—above all, the Mass. Its divine effects were mediated through a priestly hierarchy, made concrete for most Christians in the person of the local priest but with ultimate authority in the bishop of Rome, the pope. This framework for experiencing Scripture and constructing a worldview became increasingly unsatisfactory in the minds of many in the late Middle Ages. New forms of piety were invented, new reform movements launched. But all failed to develop, in Christopher Ocker's words, “a literary method for handling the narrative construction of the Bible as a whole.”² Precisely such a method Luther found in his redefinition of what it means to be Christian and in his distinguishing God's plan for human action and performance from God's gift of salvation through the pronouncement on believers of the forgiveness of sins and new life won by Christ.³

As he plunged into the Psalms and then Romans and Galatians for his first university lectures in the 1510s, Luther found that God takes the initiative in restoring the relationship lost when Adam and Eve doubted God's Word

2. Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21–22, 211.

3. Erik Herrmann, “‘Why Then the Law?': Salvation History and the Law in Martin Luther's Interpretation of Galatians, 1513–1522” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2005), esp. 236–47.

in Eden. He comes to human beings, in the flesh, to bestow forgiveness, life, and salvation. God does this as a person. Luther's apprehension of God was intensely personal; he was extremely sensitive to God's personality as a loving Father whose wrath burns against all that disturbs and destroys life as he designed it for his human children. As this person with deep emotions, God is a God of conversation and community. He speaks, and when he speaks, things still happen—come into being anew—just as in the beginning (Gen. 1). God created human beings to be his conversation partners. He immediately sought renewal of the conversation in Genesis 3:9, when Adam and Eve stopped listening to him. Luther believed that God has never stopped talking and calling rebellious human creatures back to himself, so that he may speak a re-creating Word of absolution, of the restoration of righteousness in his sight, through words that arise from Scripture. These words of God are delivered in a variety of oral, written, and sacramental forms.

Scripture and Tradition

Indeed, Luther did not believe that Scripture is the only source from which God's people hear his voice. Like Martin Chemnitz in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* (1565–73), Luther believed that the content of Scripture, not some magical use of its precise words, carries out God's will. Chemnitz saw the Holy Spirit at work as the church handed down God's Word in seven ways. This "tradition"—defined by Luther and Melancthon as not only the content but also the act of sharing the message with the next generation⁴—began with words from Jesus and his disciples recorded by their contemporaries. The second mode of tradition is the entire Scripture itself. The third expresses itself in the "rule of faith," summaries of the biblical message that believers prepare for purposes of evangelization or instruction. Fourth, the message of Scripture is passed down through those who interpret and teach its texts. The development of dogmatic terminology based on Scripture, such as "Trinity," constituted Chemnitz's fifth form of the handing down. "The catholic consensus of the fathers" could, sixth, repeat what was being handed down from former times in the faithful interpretation of the biblical message. Likewise, the ancient "rites and customs" of the church could convey that message. Chemnitz did not allow as valid or biblical an eighth use of the term "tradition," those teachings claiming to be true although they "cannot be proved with any testimony of Scripture but which the Synod of Trent nevertheless commands to be received and venerated with the same

4. Peter Franekel, "Revelation and Tradition: Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melancthon," *Studia Theologica* 13 (1959): 97–133.

reverence and devotion as Scripture itself.”⁵ Such “human commandments” Chemnitz rejected sharply.

All acceptable traditions, for Chemnitz as for Luther, rested on and were in full agreement with God’s Word in Scripture, which alone had ultimate authority.⁶ Chemnitz and his fellow authors of the Formula of Concord (1577) affirmed that “the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments [are] the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated.”⁷

God Speaks from Scripture

God’s use of his Word as the instrument of his power and the expression of his promise becomes concrete through human use of Scripture alone. No other foundation exists for the proclamation of the church and for the life of every believer. The authority of Scripture rests on God’s very presence in its words. He had chosen written human language as the rendezvous point for continuing into later ages the conversation he had been conducting through the Old Testament prophets, through Jesus’s teaching, and through the apostles as they corresponded with the early congregations of believers. Though some scholars argue that Luther did not hold to *sola Scriptura*, “Scripture alone,” because he used the writings of ancient fathers and contemporaries to present his message, he found in Scripture the authority to judge all other presentations of God’s message. “Whatever does not have its origin in the Scriptures is surely from the devil himself. All God’s works, especially those having to do with salvation, are thoroughly set forth and attested in the Scriptures.”⁸ Failure to grasp this concept of the Almighty’s ability to take created human words as a place where he is present and through which he exercises his power makes Luther’s interaction with the Bible difficult to understand. William Graham points out that modern understanding is constrained by the gap between “our own modern, Western, post-Enlightenment world of the printed page and *all* past cultures.” Luther’s understanding that Scripture is “a manuscript with a voice—or still better, a manuscript that was the medium of God’s voice”—confounds most

5. *Examen Concilii Tridentini von Martinum Chemnicium*, ed. Eduard Preus (Berlin: Schlitz, 1861), 86; *Examination of the Council of Trent by Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586)*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971–86), 1:272–73, cf. 223–307.

6. *Examen*, 8–13; *Examination*, 1:49–63.

7. BSELK 1310/1311; BC 527.

8. WA 8:491.14–17; LW 36:144.

modern readers of the reformer's works. For Luther, in Graham's words, "it was the most natural thing in the world for him to talk . . . of God *speaking* in what he had *written*."⁹

Luther did not use the terminology of "inspiration" frequently, as subsequent generations of Lutheran theologians would.¹⁰ He translated the θεόπνευστος (God-breathed) of 2 Timothy 3:16 with *eingegeben* (literally, given into, poured into). For Luther, the words of Scripture are the Holy Spirit's gift to the writers and the readers. Scripture is "the Holy Spirit's own special book, writing, and word."¹¹ "Nowhere can the Spirit be found more present and more active than in the very holy letters which he wrote."¹² "God is everywhere, but he is really to be found in the Holy Scriptures, in his Word, more than anywhere else."¹³ Genesis comes from "the Holy Spirit himself," according to Luther.¹⁴

Luther was certain that "the Word is flawless, so that not an iota in the law or the divine promises is defective. Thus, we dare not yield to any sect, not in a single stroke of the pen in Scripture, no matter how much they may shout and slander us for destroying love by adhering strictly to the Word."¹⁵ This led him to insist: "It is necessary for us to preserve the phrasing of Holy Scripture and to remain with the words of the Holy Spirit."¹⁶ The authority of Scripture not only determined what the church confessed and proclaimed; it also prevented wandering off into vain speculation, for instance about details of daily life at the time of the patriarchs: "Because Holy Scripture is completely silent, we have no business affirming or denying anything here [in reference to Gen. 24:1–4]. What Scripture teaches, denies, or affirms, we can safely repeat and teach."¹⁷ Luther insisted that the Holy Spirit gave the prophets and apostles all their words, so that even details that seem no more than trifles, including information about the biblical figures' lives that seem to have no spiritual significance, should be regarded as gifts of the Holy Spirit. He noted that such trivialities as Abraham's wealth (Gen. 13:2) were written

9. William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7, 29, 63, 150; cf. Joachim Ringelien, *Gott im Wort: Luthers Theologie von der Sprache her* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 378–443; John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 12–16.

10. Robert D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957).

11. WA 54:474.4.

12. WA 7:97.2–3.

13. WA 12:413.32–34; CP 2:23.

14. WA 43:618.31–33; LW 5:275.

15. WA 40/2:531.30–34; LW 12:242.

16. WA 42:23.23–24; LW 1:30.

17. WA 43:301.9–12; LW 4:230.

“for our instruction, reproof, and comfort” (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16) against false definitions of holiness, such as those of the monks.¹⁸

In 1541 Luther stated, “The Holy Scripture is God’s Word, written and (in my way of speaking) spelled out, put down in letters. Just as Christ is God’s eternal Word wrapped in humanity, and just as people touched and had transactions with Christ in the world, so it is with the written Word of God.” By comparing the nature of Scripture with the nature of Christ’s person, in his divine and human natures, Luther so depicted Scripture that he could recognize certain characteristics—indeed, certain problems—of Scripture in the framework of his “theology of the cross,” part of which included insights gained from his distinction between God revealed and God hidden. Paul’s description of the cross of Christ as a *modus operandi* and a message with terms like “weak” and “foolish” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16) pointed to his working “under the appearances of the opposite [of what something seems to be]” (*sub contrario*). Thus, both the meaning and power of Scripture often cannot be perceived by human reason.¹⁹ Luther mused of the biblical text, “It is a worm [cf. Ps. 22:6] and no book, considered in comparison to other books.” He further declared that the Bible is either ignored or abused and crucified through misinterpretation.²⁰

Luther’s too-famous dictum labeling human reason “a whore” is misleading when not placed in the context of his larger perception of human reason as a creature and gift of God, bestowed on human beings for the exercise of their stewardship or dominion of God’s world. Luther regarded reason as a necessary and useful tool for managing the affairs of daily life in creation. He even found it useful as a tool and servant in theology, guiding the understanding of Scripture and its application. Only in reason’s presumption to judge God’s Word does it lure and seduce human beings into resisting God’s address to them.²¹

Satan, the father of lies, is always attacking God’s truth (John 8:44). Scripture is a strategic point of conflict on the eschatological battlefield, where the Holy Spirit and Satan contend for the allegiance of human beings. The devil deceives by placing the vital questions of life under the judgment of human reason, this gift of God that is neither intended nor designed for judging what God is saying to his people in Scripture.

18. WA 42:494.29–33; LW 2:325.

19. Lectures on Psalm 51, 1532, WA 40/2:329.17–330.32; LW 12:312–13; cf. WA 40/2:386.31–387.27; LW 12:352.

20. WA 48:31.4–17.

21. Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

The Holy Spirit, as Luther had experienced, acts in and through the biblical text. Just as the Spirit was present at the origin of the biblical text, he remains in and with the text to guide present interpretation. “Scripture is the kind of book which requires not only reading and preaching but also the true exegete, namely, the revelation of the Holy Spirit.”²² “The Holy Spirit himself must expound Scripture. Otherwise it remains unexpounded. Now if any one of the saintly fathers can show that his interpretation is based on Scripture, and if Scripture proves that this is the way it was to be interpreted, then the interpretation is right. If this is not the case, I dare not believe him.”²³ “To understand the meaning of Scripture, the Spirit of Christ is required. But we know that this same Spirit, who was present before all things, will remain to the end of the world. We glory in having the Spirit of God and through him we have faith, some understanding of the Scriptures and some knowledge of other things that are necessary for pious living.” The reformer’s confidence in the guidance of the Holy Spirit sustained him as a teacher of the Bible. “Therefore, we do not invent new ideas but follow the rule of Holy Scripture and the rule of faith.”²⁴ Luther did not address the theodical problem raised by contradictory interpretations apart from insisting that interpreters read the text with a knowledge of the usages of biblical language and customs and the history of the times for the proper understanding of what prophet or apostle, in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, meant. Why the Holy Spirit allowed false interpretations in his church was not a question Luther tried to answer apart from his insistence that God does not cause evil and that Satan is constantly warring with his deception against God’s truth. Luther simply proclaimed and defended the text as he read it.

Biblical Difficulties

Luther did not, however, claim perfect understanding of the precise meaning of every text, nor did he let himself be troubled by seeming contradictions because he was convinced that human reason cannot completely grasp God’s wisdom and way of speaking and that God’s reliability does not depend on the reader’s mastering every biblical passage. Genesis 11:27–28 appeared to him to be one of “the most obscure of the whole Old Testament” because the reckoning of the chronology did not agree with other passages. “Crosses of the grammarians” like this need not trouble interpreters: “In the Sacred Scriptures one should not stubbornly defend anything except what is true;

22. WA 21:230.21–23; LW 77:51.

23. Sermons on 2 Peter, 1523, WA 14:31.9–12; LW 30:166.

24. Lecture on Genesis 6:3, WA 42:272.37–273.2; LW 2:15–16.

about obscure and doubtful matters other people must be allowed their own judgment.” Paul, too, had found that the rabbis of his time were raising questions that did not need to be answered (1 Tim. 1:4).²⁵ Luther puzzled over the dating of Terah and Abraham in Genesis 11, concluding that one should not “imitate the audacious minds who immediately shout that an obvious error has been committed whenever such a difficulty arises and who unabashedly dare alter books that are not their own. As yet, I have no real answer for this question although I have diligently computed the years of the world. Therefore, I confess my ignorance appropriately and humbly (for only the Holy Spirit knows and understands everything).” Luther thought that God denied readers information about the precise time the world would end to prevent speculation.²⁶

Luther noted that the accounts of the apostle Andrew’s call to discipleship differ significantly in Matthew 4:18–20, Luke 5:1–11, and John 1:35–42.²⁷ He hazarded a possible explanation that he granted might or might not be correct.²⁸ Because he not only believed in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the text but also that the human authors had acted as the Spirit’s coauthors completely in their own personalities with their own experiences and perceptions, he found it only reasonable that the evangelists did not describe every single detail in the same way, “for no historical account is so precise that it is not told and described in a different way by others.”²⁹

This cooperation between the Holy Spirit and the human authors of Scripture imposes on the interpreters the necessity of knowing the human languages—their grammar, syntax, and vocabulary—well. The readers also need to recognize that the Holy Spirit developed his own grammar. “Grammar is necessary and proper, but it ought not govern the subject matter and should instead serve it,” he reminded students.³⁰ Luther noted that Christians needed to learn the Hebrew language from Jews just as one would want to learn German from Germans, Italian from Italians, “but their faith, their understanding of Scripture, which God condemns, we avoid,”³¹ precisely because the Holy Spirit has his own grammar.³² “Just as a philosopher employs his own terms, so the Holy Spirit, too employs his.” Astronomers speak of “spheres” and

25. WA 42:430.35–431.9; LW 2:237.

26. WA 42:431.40–432.9; LW 2:239.

27. Andrew is not explicitly mentioned in Luke’s account.

28. WA 52:563.33–564.19.

29. EA² 4:435–36. Cf. Luther’s resolution of the reports of Matthew and John on whether Jesus had disciples or not at his baptism, WA 46:694.33–697.17; LW 22:181–85.

30. WA 42:599.6–8; LW 3:70–71.

31. *On Shem Hamphoras*, 1543, WA 53:646.13–18.

32. Maxfield, *Genesis*, 48–63; cf. on Psalm 2:5, WA 40/2:20–28; LW 12:32–33.

“epicycles” as part of the movement of heavenly bodies. “On the other hand, the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture know nothing about those designations and call the entire area above us ‘heaven.’ Nor should an astronomer find fault with this; let each of them speak in his own terminology.”³³ Thus, human reason encounters its limits when the Holy Spirit expresses divine wisdom and the mysteries of God. The Holy Spirit’s presentation of what God is doing is sometimes crystal clear, but at other times the glimpses or echoes of God’s will and ways defy and overpower human grammar and syntax. Luther used the term “mystery” relatively seldom, but he was ever aware that much of the heart of the biblical message does not make sense within categories established by human reason. The Holy Spirit must bestow faith. One example of this is the inability of the human mind to perceive the deep-rooted defiance of the Creator that Luther labeled original sin.³⁴ Other truths that surpass human reason include the doctrines of the Trinity and the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ.³⁵

Luther’s Canon

Some scholars who have assessed Luther’s view of Scripture on the basis of his attitude toward the canon have come to the conclusion that “for Luther the boundaries of the canon were not definitively set in stone and could not be.”³⁶ Such assessments ignore several factors. Luther gathered the “apocryphal” books or sections of the Old Testament together at the end of that Testament and labeled them “books that are not regarded as equal to the Holy Scripture and are nonetheless useful and good to read.” Not at all radical or new, this judgment reflected Jerome’s fourth-century appraisal of those parts of the Septuagint not found in the Hebrew Masoretic text and the opinion of many medieval scholars and some humanists, including Erasmus.³⁷ Furthermore, Luther’s doubts about the authorship of Hebrews because its language is

33. WA 42:35.40–36.6; LW 1:47–48.

34. Lecture on Psalm 51:5, WA 40/2:383.34–37; LW 12:350; cf. the Smalcald Articles, *BSELK* 746/747; BC 311.

35. On the Trinity, see WA 39/2:287–88, 290–300; on the two natures of Christ, see WA 39/2:3–33 and 39/2:93–121, both of them disputations on these doctrines.

36. Bernhard Lohse, “Die Entscheidung der lutherischen Reformation über den Umfang des alttestamentlichen Kanons,” in *Evangelium in der Geschichte: Studien zu Luther und der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 233. See instead Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther’s Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 124–38.

37. Henning Graf Reventlow, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, *From Late Antiquity to the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. James O. Duke (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 40–41.

“much more embellished speech than Saint Paul uses in other places” did not inhibit his use of it as “a strong, powerful, and lofty epistle, which soars high and promotes the lofty article of faith in the deity of Christ.”³⁸

More problematic for many is Luther’s evaluation of the Epistle of James. His 1522 preface to the New Testament regarded “John’s gospel and his first epistle, Saint Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and Saint Peter’s first epistle” as “books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salutary for you to know.” It was in the context of evaluating the book’s usefulness in proclaiming Jesus and the salvation he bestows that Luther characterized James’s epistle as “an epistle of straw.”³⁹ Those who try to see this passage as proof that Luther dealt with Scripture in a casual way that took its content but not its form or its nature as a place of God’s presence seriously ignore his statement within the same body of prefaces to New Testament books that he considered James “a good book because it sets up no human teaching but vigorously promulgates the law of God.” Luther recognized that many ancient authorities had not accepted the epistle’s canonicity and that it fails to teach justification, Christ’s passion and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit,⁴⁰ but he continued to preach on it occasionally.⁴¹ Furthermore, scholars who try to use the label “epistle of straw” as an indication of Luther’s operating with “a canon within a canon” fail to mention that this formulation from 1522 was not reprinted—the only omission—when this preface to the New Testament appeared in the complete translation of the Bible in 1534 and in subsequent editions. For reasons he did not mention, he seems to have believed that this passage did not represent his views clearly, and it is indeed true that this removal of the passage reflects “a conscious theological judgment.”⁴² Finally, Luther’s use of Scripture indicates that he paid little attention to questions of canonicity and simply preached on the received canon as he had learned it, following the pericopal system of the medieval church on Sunday mornings and seeking those texts that he

38. EA² 7:144; LW 75:256.

39. Preface to the New Testament (1522), WA DB 6:20.33–35; LW 35:362. Luther later told students how to rank the books of the Old Testament: Daniel and Isaiah were in his opinion the most excellent among the prophets, probably because of the former’s teaching on the end times and the latter’s prophecies of Christ, WA TR 2:410 §2286b; cf. 3:266–67 §3320a–b.

40. Preface to James (1522), WA DB 7:384.1/385.1–386.30/387.30; LW 35:395–97.

41. On James 1:16–17, WA 45:77–81 (1537); 47:742–48 (1539); James 1:17–21, WA 41:578–90 (1536); James 1:21–27, WA 41:69–73 (1535); 47:748–56 (1539). See Jason D. Lane, “The Lutheran Interpretation of the Epistle of James in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” (ThD diss., Universität Hamburg, 2015), 56–94.

42. Bernhard Rothen, *Die Klarheit der Schrift*, vol. 1, *Martin Luther: Die wieder entdeckten Grundlagen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 47.

found most clear and important for the central message of Scripture concerning salvation in Jesus Christ for his lectures and preaching in other services.

Scripture's Clarity, Sufficiency, and Power

Therefore Luther believed that Scripture alone governs all proclamation and use of God's Word and that it must be interpreted from within its own pages. Every attempt to evaluate its message or its authenticity according to any other standard subjects the speaking God to human appraisal and thus dethrones the Creator. Luther affirmed the clarity of Scripture on two levels. First, Scripture possesses an external clarity, for the biblical writers expressed the mysteries of God in ordinary human language. Obscure passages certainly challenge and humble readers, but in general readers can ascertain what the prophets and apostles were saying. Second, Scripture provides believers with an internal clarity. The Holy Spirit may leave faithful readers puzzled at points, but he guides them into the truth of Christ's redeeming work, Luther insisted.⁴³ He also found Scripture to be fully sufficient as a source for God's will and ways and a means for his exercise of his saving power. In Michael Horton's judgment, the sufficiency of the Bible as authority and as interpreter of its own message was the central issue governing Luther's affirmation of its ultimate authority for faith and life.⁴⁴ As John Headley observes, "One of the most significant features that distinguishes Luther's understanding of history from humanistic reflections on the past is his rejection of any historical period, person, or event as normative. His successful avoidance of the lure provided by historical norms arose from his belief in the authority of Scripture and the activity of the Word in history."⁴⁵ Vitor Westhelle summarizes Luther's view of Scripture's sufficiency: "Is scripture alone enough? It is more than enough. . . . First, it exceeds anything we can bargain for, and in fact leaves our bargaining as worthless and detrimental insofar as it conveys us Christ. . . . And, second, it also exceeds in providing us with a plethora of examples that pertain to different circumstances of how this works out in our everyday life with its challenges, limits, circumstances, and possibilities."⁴⁶

43. Friedrich Beisser, *Claritas scripturae bei Martin Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 9–37, 82–122; cf. Rothen, *Klarheit*, 55–69, 142–90; Ringleben, *Wort*, 252–71; Thompson, *Ground*, 191–247.

44. Michael Horton, "Theologies of Scripture in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 87; cf. Thompson, *Ground*, 249–82.

45. John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 163–64.

46. "Luther on the Authority of Scripture," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 389.

Because God is present and at work in and through his Word, Luther believed, the proclamation of this Word in its various forms actually is “the power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). The power of God’s Word serves his saving will, that all may “be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4).⁴⁷ The mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the faithful necessitated for Luther that the assurance of being God’s child rested in the promise of salvation on the basis of Christ’s work alone, delivered by the Holy Spirit through oral, written, and sacramental forms of the promise. Because this Word creates the reality that the Author of reality sees, believers have confidence that the almighty saving God has determined that they really are righteous.

This re-creative Word exercises its power to forgive sins and thus create the new reality of the child of God in the form of God’s promise, made in human language and made on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection. The promise is not only the substance of things hoped for but also the—indeed unseen—reality of what God bestows through his gift of faith in Christ. “For many preach Christ, but in such a way that they do not understand or articulate the use and benefit [of the message]. . . . For it is not a Christian sermon, if you preach only of the events in Christ’s life, nor is it if you just preach the glory of God.” It becomes a God-pleasing sermon “if you teach the story of Christ in such a way that it makes it useful for us believers for our righteousness and salvation, so that . . . we may know that all things which are in Christ are ours. This faith and knowledge of the Lord makes us love, magnify, and glorify him.”⁴⁸

Luther’s Ockhamist background permitted him to view human language as a means or instrument through which God carries out his will. Just as God created through speaking in Genesis 1, so God has chosen to take biblical words and do more than point to a heavenly reality or describe from a neutral point what God has done or promised to do. The Holy Spirit places his Word in created vessels or instruments, delivering it to humankind in oral, written, and sacramental forms. Each “means of grace,” as later sixteenth-century Lutherans labeled these ways in which the Word comes to people, rests on and proceeds from Scripture. The means of grace, Luther taught, actually convey and deliver God’s grace and fashion a new reality in the person who hears

47. Although Luther translated 1 Tim. 2:4 “that all may have help” with the implication of earthly blessings being the meaning of the word also translated “saved,” he used this passage in his *De servo arbitrio*, e.g., to give assurance that everyone might know that Christ had died and risen for him or her, WA 18:686.5–6; LW 33:140.

48. WA 5:543.12–22. Luther repeated this point in a sermon of March 21, 1521, WA 9:630.28–30.

and is moved by the Holy Spirit to trust in the gospel of Christ. They do so in parallel fashion to the creative Word of Genesis 1. Luther often used the language of “new creation” in explaining how God’s Word actually reshapes reality, turning sinners into his faithful children from God’s perspective.⁴⁹

Although in a semiliterate society it is not surprising that oral and sacramental forms of God’s Word played a more prominent role than written forms, Luther nonetheless treasured the ability to read the Word on the biblical page. His program for personal study of Scripture emerged from the monastic practice of the *lectio*, the readings for the assembled monks or nuns, above all at mealtime, which was to evoke *oratio* (prayer) and *meditatio* (meditation). Luther presumed the reading of the text and on the basis of Psalm 119 prescribed simultaneous prayer and meditation within the framework of the spiritual trials and assaults from Satan, the world, and the Christian’s own desires that oppose God (*tentatio*; in German, *Anfechtung*).⁵⁰ These trials and satanic assaults Luther regarded as necessary for the formation of the Christian theologian. Engagement with God’s voice in the biblical text could not take place apart from the devil’s attempts to divert the believer’s trust from Christ to some false god. Commenting on Mary’s song of praise (Luke 1:46–55), Luther states: “No one can receive [a proper interpretation] from the Holy Spirit without experiencing, testing, and feeling it. In such experience the Holy Spirit instructs us in his own school, outside of which nothing is learned except empty words and idle fables.”⁵¹ Furthermore, Luther took the psychological process of reading seriously. Readers must caress the text and knead the words, by reading aloud and by connecting the passage at hand with the larger biblical context and with the challenges of daily life. Their minds must submit to the text. “Holy Scripture wants to have a humble heart [as reader], one who regards God’s Word with respect, love, and esteem, and who remains with it alone and holds fast to it.”⁵² God’s Word, faith in his Word, and the cross—the struggle with all that seeks to alienate from God

49. Among many examples, see WA 1:477.3–4; 2:430; 5:544.6, 672.7–15; 21:521.21–22; 36:327.22–328.11; 37:536.35–537.11; 45:173.21–22; 49:399.1–400.27. Cf. Johann Haar, *Initium creaturae Dei: Eine Untersuchung über Luthers Begriff der “neuen Creatur” im Zusammenhang mit seinem Verständnis von Jakobus 1,18 und mit seinem “Zeit”-Denken* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1939), 36–39.

50. WA 50:659.5–660.30; LW 34:285–86; cf. John Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008); Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 29–37; and Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 33–82.

51. WA 7:546.21–29; LW 21:299.

52. WA TR 4:617 §5017.

and the accompanying mortification of sinful desires—together constitute the Christian life, Luther concluded.⁵³

Luther's Methods of Biblical Exposition

Luther believed that Scripture tells God's story in straightforward human language. However, although he rejected the medieval allegorical system as the chief method of biblical interpretation, he occasionally turned to allegory as an instrument of conveying basic biblical teachings. His commentary on Deuteronomy (1525) contained allegories that the lecturer offered his hearers in order "to prevent inept efforts of forging allegories in the manner of Jerome."⁵⁴ At the same time he asserted that allegory most often is uncertain and unreliable in conveying biblical teaching, because it reveals flights of fancy in the interpreter's mind, not the intent of the divine and human authors of the text.⁵⁵ The Latin edition of his lectures on Jonah accepted Jesus's making Jonah's being swallowed by the fish into an allegory of his own time in the tomb (Matt. 12:39–40),⁵⁶ but the German version labeled it simply "a sign which bears resemblance to an experience of Jonah" and added, "No one would be authorized to interpret it as we do if Christ had not done so himself."⁵⁷ In this German version of the Jonah lectures, Luther did develop two more elaborate figural interpretations on the basis of Jonah's name and of his actions in the story. Jonah means "dove" and thus points to the Holy Spirit and his assignment as a proclaimer of the gospel. Nineveh means "beautiful"; it typifies the world, with its wealth, pleasures, wisdom, and strength that cover its sin. Nineveh's repentance points to the power of God's Word. Jonah's troubles represent the persecution and temptations of every believer. In a second "allegory," Luther elaborated on those afflictions of temptation and persecution as Jonah's life modeled and symbolized them.⁵⁸

Chiefly, however, Luther's exposition of texts began with knowing the linguistic devices used by the author and the historical circumstances in which the author had been bringing God's message to his people. Luther's students learned quickly that grammatical and syntactical usage were key to God's

53. WA 43:208.18–23; LW 4:101.

54. WA 14:500.10–20; LW 9:7; WA 14:561.26–564.25; LW 9:26–27; WA 14:650.19–654.19; LW 9:136–37; WA 14:659.25–660.32; LW 9:150–51; WA 14:672.12–673.15; LW 9:170–71; WA 14:676.29–678.19; LW 9:178–80; WA 14:689.18–691.3; LW 9:197–99; WA 14:693.23–695.9; LW 9:205–7; WA 40/2:548.22–551.32; LW 12:254–57.

55. WA 14:560.17–28; LW 9:24–25.

56. WA 13:257.40; LW 19:31.

57. WA 19:249.16–23; LW 19:102.

58. WA 19:245.1–251.2; LW 19:97–102.

communication of his truth⁵⁹ and that some knowledge of the historical setting of the text held the key to the author's precise application of his message to the original hearers.⁶⁰ His own linguistic abilities may have aided the Wittenberg professor in developing a high appreciation of God's gift of language as an integral part of his person and of every human creature shaped in his image.⁶¹ His sense of God as the Creator of historical sequence and the guide of the historical unfolding of the human story, which is also God's story, led Luther to insist on the historical nature of the biblical narrative.⁶² Each prophet and apostle wrote at a specific time in the course of history, and Scripture as a whole presents the account of God's critical actions in creation, redemption, and the recall of his people to himself. Thus, Scripture "contains the thread that is drawn from the first world to the middle and end of all things. . . . This knowledge the Holy Scriptures reveal to us. Those who do not have [this knowledge] live in error, confusion, and endless impiety."⁶³

Most of Luther's sermons and lectures, however, focused on placing the text at hand into hearers' or readers' lives as the message that God intends to be the tool for reclaiming them in repentance, re-creating them as his children, and guiding them through life. Thus, the largest part of his preaching and lecturing had a catechetical nature. He placed the message of the biblical authors into the lives of his contemporaries within the framework of God's gift of life through Christ and of the demands placed on human beings by the Creator's design—Luther's distinction between law and gospel. Luther's literary skill led him to enrich his historical and catechetical exposition of texts through the retelling of biblical stories, sometimes dramatized to have the biblical figures speak directly to his own hearers.⁶⁴ Finally, his mode of exposition included the frequent use of typological interpretation, which exhibited his belief that the Old Testament testifies through figural parallels to Christ's work and to the church's life.

Luther's reluctant response to the monastic command to teach Bible turned into a joyful, exuberant immersion in and interaction with the biblical text, in his sermons and lectures, in his letters and conversations. He treasured the book as God's means of being present with his people, addressing them out of

59. WA 44:135.24–137.19; LW 6:182–83.

60. WA 44:259.7–8; LW 6:346.

61. Johannes von Lüpke, "Luther's Use of Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–55.

62. Mark Thompson, "Luther on God and History," in Kolb, Dingel, and Batka, *Oxford Handbook*, 127–42; Headley, *History*.

63. WA 42:409.21–29; LW 2:209.

64. Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*.

the historic situations of the prophets and apostles with his truth, his instrument to battle the deceptions of Satan. In the human characters of Scripture, he found people much like himself, despite their differing historical situations. From their stories in the pages of Scripture, which are also the stories of God's abiding faithfulness, Luther found his true identity as a child of God.

Holy Scripture in the Reformed Tradition

The Reformation was among other things a revolution of the book. There was, of course, a sociological dimension to this: the fifteenth-century invention of the printing press made books more readily available and set the foundation for a society in which literacy was to become more and more important. Yet the Reformation was no mere social transformation. At its heart lay the Bible.

Now, the Bible had always been important to Christianity. The Middle Ages produced a number of excellent expositors and preachers, and no man was deemed qualified to be a professor of theology in medieval times until he had lectured through significant quantities of the Bible. But the Reformation gave a new importance to Scripture. For the Reformers, God was present in his church primarily through his Word—the Word read and the Word preached. Pulpits came to occupy the focal point of attention, as altars had done in the past. To be a Reformer was to be someone who placed the Bible, its exposition, and its proclamation at the center of church life and who made the Bible the normative criteria for all theological discussion.

Yet it is clear that, for all this basic agreement, the issue of interpretation was one that ultimately divided the Lutherans and the Reformed, specifically as they came to focus on four little words, “This is my body.” Nevertheless, we should not allow this serious and important disagreement to blind us to the substantial areas of common belief between the two traditions. Both Reformed and Lutherans sought to allow Scripture to regulate their confessions of the faith.

The Importance, Sufficiency, and Clarity of the Word

Like Luther, the Reformed regarded the Word, specifically the Word preached, as central to all they did. The most dramatic confessional expression of this occurs in chapter 1 of Heinrich Bullinger's Second Helvetic Confession: “Therefore when this word of God is today proclaimed in the Church through preachers who have been legitimately called, we believe that it is the very word of God which is proclaimed and received by the faithful; and that

no other word of God is to be invented nor to be expected from heaven.”⁶⁵ This is powerful language, and it needs to be properly understood. Bullinger does not mean thereby to relativize the unique authority of Scripture as the revelation of God and as the norming norm of theological formulation. That would place him much closer to the Tridentine Roman Catholic camp. For him, preaching does not stand independent from God’s Word in Scripture or alongside it with some kind of equal and supplementary authority. The act of preaching is not some charismatic event whereby the preacher is inspired by the Spirit in some way that is separate from the Word. As with the Lutherans, the Reformed are adamant that Word and Spirit need to be kept together, and that separation of the two leads to spiritual fanaticism.⁶⁶ In fact, the Spirit works in and through the Word to accomplish God’s purposes. The two work together in a potent manner to convict of sin and to create faith in those who hear the Word proclaimed. There is to be no separation of the two. Preaching is therefore to start with the text of Scripture and to be regulated by that text and by the whole scope of scriptural teaching. It is not an act of liberal improvisation but an activity disciplined by God’s revelation of himself in the words of the Bible.

What Bullinger means by this audacious statement in the Second Helvetic Confession is that preaching, when done faithfully by a legitimately called pastor in accordance with what God has revealed in Scripture, is to be received as an authoritative word from God. If the conceptual content of the sermon is the same as that taught in the Bible, it is to be taken as God’s Word. Yes, we are to be like the Bereans and test all things by the standard of Scripture. But we are also to come to hear the preaching of the Word with a default position of trust in those who have been called to the teaching office, perhaps something we might characterize as a hermeneutic of trust and obedience.⁶⁷ This involves ecclesiological assumptions, that there is such a thing as the institutional church and that the church does have legitimate office-bearers who have ministerial authority, and also theological

65. My translation. The original reads: “Proinde cum hodie hoc Dei verbum per prædicatores legitime vocatos annunciat in Ecclesia, credimus ipsum Dei verbum annunciar et a fidelibus recipi, neque aliud Dei verbum vel fingendum, vel coelitus esse exspectandum.”

66. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* Lix.1.

67. In our present age, shaped as it is in its epistemological tastes by those masters of suspicion Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, a hermeneutic of trust is likely to appear to be a naive interpretive presupposition. Yet Christians, committed to the idea of a faithful and trustworthy God, are required to set their faces against such knee-jerk cynicism when it comes to the reading and the preaching of God’s Word. For a useful response to postmodern cynicism relative to Scripture from a Reformed perspective, see Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2009).

assumptions, that God has revealed himself clearly in Scripture and that persons trained with the right skills can expound Scripture in a manner that is accurate and faithful.

What this reflects is the general Reformed conviction that preaching is the central task of the church. Calvin makes this very clear when, in Luther-like fashion, he identifies the power of the keys with the proclamation of the Word:

When we treat of the keys, we must always beware of dreaming of any power apart from the preaching of the Gospel. . . . Whatever privilege of binding and loosing Christ has bestowed on his Church is annexed to the word. This is especially true with regard to the ministry of the keys, the whole power of which consists in this, that the grace of the Gospel is publicly and privately sealed on the minds of believers by means of those whom the Lord has appointed; and the only method in which this can be done is by preaching.⁶⁸

The Word both creates the church and regulates the church. God's speech through the preacher is the means by which the church is called into being and governed. The medieval church focused on the sacraments, since that was where God was present; the Reformed church focused on the preaching of his Word. This is why the preaching of the Word is regarded by the Reformed as one of the marks of the true church.⁶⁹

This is not to say that the Reformed believed written Scripture preceded the existence of the church. The Word is the speech of God addressing his people and calling them into existence as the church. It thus preexisted its written form and was inscripturated in order to preserve the divine truth in a more reliable and stable form than that provided by oral tradition.⁷⁰ While God reveals himself in numerous ways, in his works of creation and providence, and in the incarnation of his Son, Scripture provides the basic, stable noetic

68. Calvin, *Institutes* III.iv.14; cf. IV.xi–xii.

69. While the Reformed varied somewhat on the marks of the church—whether there were two or three marks, and whether the third mark was discipline or pure worship, all agreed (as did the Lutherans) that the preaching of the Word, along with the administration of the sacraments, were nonnegotiable marks of the church: see Calvin, *Institutes* IV.i.9 (word, sacraments); Scots Confession 18 (word, sacraments, discipline); Westminster Confession of Faith (word, sacraments, public worship).

70. “When length of life was shortened and the state of wickedness was increasing daily, and Satan by means of his misleading oracles and apparitions with which he imitated God and his appearance was deluding the human race throughout the world, it pleased God from then until the end of the world to establish his Church also by means of the Scriptures, to preserve the divine truth more reliably, to widen its extent, and to restore it more easily where it had fallen into ruin.” *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, disp. 2.4 (*Synopsis Purioris Theologiae/Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Latin Text and English Translation*, vol. 1, *Disputations 1–23*, ed. Dolf te Velde, trans. Riemer A. Faber [Leiden: Brill, 2015], p. 51); cf. Turretin, *Institutes* II.2.

foundation for understanding God. Hence, Calvin uses his famous analogy of Scripture to eyeglasses:

For as the aged, or those whose sight is defective, when any book however fair, is set before them, though they perceive that there is something written are scarcely able to make out two consecutive words, but, when aided by glasses, begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering together the impressions of Deity, which, till then, lay confused in our minds, dissipates the darkness, and shows us the true God clearly. God therefore bestows a gift of singular value, when, for the instruction of the Church, he employs not dumb teachers merely, but opens his own sacred mouth; when he not only proclaims that some God must be worshipped, but at the same time declares that He is the God to whom worship is due; when he not only teaches his elect to have respect to God, but manifests himself as the God to whom this respect should be paid.⁷¹

When we speak of interpreting Scripture, then, there is a certain sense in which we misspeak: Scripture actually interprets us and the world around us, because it provides the framework for understanding reality as the creation of a sovereign God.

To return to the emphasis on the Second Helvetic Confession, for the Reformed Scripture and interpretation must always be understood as terminating in the task of proclamation. That is the primary act of the church, the point at which God confronts his people. This connects to everything from the understanding of what Scripture is to the nature of theological education to the expectations of pastoral ministry to the shape of the church service and the regular Christian life. All are to be regulated by the Word and practically oriented to the preaching of the Word.

Reformed pedagogical practice therefore reflects this. The Zurich prophesying meetings—gatherings to train preachers—and Calvin’s company of pastors, as well as the Geneva Academy, all provide great examples of how preparing preachers and improving preaching were both high priorities in Reformed circles.⁷² To survive and flourish, the church needed preachers. The training of men for that task, and the constant improving of those called to preach, were thus priorities for the Reformed churches of the Reformation.

Concerning preaching and theology, the Reformed confessions are emphatic that the Bible is authoritative and the sole normative source of proclamation

71. Calvin, *Institutes* I.vi.1.

72. See Daniel Timmerman, *Heinrich Bullinger on Prophecy and the Prophetic Office (1523–1538)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

in the church. Thus the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England succinctly declare the following: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”⁷³ The point is clear and stands in obvious opposition to Roman Catholic claims regarding the supplementary nature of tradition as a source of revelation proper rather than merely an explication of its content. All theology, all proclamation, is to be regulated by the content of the canon of Scripture. Scripture is thus the norming norm of theological formulation. While it is necessary for the church to express its teaching in extrascriptural language in creeds, confessions, and sermons, all of these are to be regulated by the teaching of Scripture. As the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* says, “The authority of Holy Scripture is much greater than that of the Church” because “the Church is capable of erring while Scripture cannot.”⁷⁴

The authority and sufficiency of Scripture therefore places the teaching of Scripture in the position of being the criterion by which the tradition of church teaching is to be normed. Herman Bavinck captures the Reformation understanding of the relationship of Scripture and tradition well:

The Reformation recognizes only a tradition that is founded on and flows from Scripture. To the mind of the Reformation, Scripture was an organic principle from which the entire tradition, living on in preaching, confession, liturgy, worship, theology, devotional literature, etc., arises and is nurtured. It is a pure spring of living water from which all the currents and channels of the religious life are fed and maintained. Such a tradition is grounded in Scripture itself.⁷⁵

This is a very important point, because it separates the Reformed—and indeed the magisterial Reformation as a whole—from both Tridentine Roman Catholicism and evangelical biblicism. The former allows for an extrascriptural stream of authoritative revelation; the latter tends to ignore the tradition of church teaching when it is more convenient to do so.⁷⁶ By contrast, the

73. James T. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation, 1523–1693*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–14), 2:755. Hereafter Dennison.

74. *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, disp. 2.31 (p. 71).

75. RD 1:493.

76. For Trent’s view, see Council of Trent, session 4, April 8, 1546: “The Decree on the Reception of the Sacred Books and Traditions,” in *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Heinrich Denzinger, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 1501 (p. 370).

Reformed were assiduous students of the doctrinal and exegetical traditions of the church. Indeed, even the prooftexts provided for a document like the Westminster Confession were not prooftexts in the modern sense of the word, to be taken in isolation as knockout blows against opposing positions. Rather, they function as exegetical markers, directing the interested student back to the interpretive tradition surrounding those texts.⁷⁷

In this context, it is also worth noting that the magisterial Protestants in general were committed readers of the commentary tradition on any given biblical book, and this was in no way restricted to Christian commentators only, as their extensive use of the rabbis demonstrated. Scripture alone did not function as cover for a narrow biblicism or a fundamentalist obscurantism. Quite the contrary. The unique authority of Scripture made it imperative that Protestants interpret it correctly, and a basic part of that task involved mastery of the biblical languages and a thorough acquaintance with the history of interpretation.⁷⁸

This also connects to a basic commitment on the part of the Reformed (as with Luther) to the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture. Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession expresses this neatly:

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. . . . 7. All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

The basics of the Reformed position are here: Scripture is sufficient; Scripture is also clear on the essentials of salvation, either by direct statement or by legitimate inference; and the most vital truths are so plainly stated that even the ignorant and the unlearned should be able to grasp them.⁷⁹ We might

77. See Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 70, 72.

78. See Katrin Ettenhuber, "The Preacher and Patristics," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, ed. Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington, and Emma Rhatigan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 34–53; also in the same volume, see Carl R. Trueman, "Preachers and Medieval and Renaissance Commentary," 54–71.

79. We do need to remember that in its teaching on scriptural clarity, the confession assumes a number of things that would require elaboration and defense today in the face of postmodern critiques: the existence of a clear canon, the possibility of producing accurate translations, and

add that interpretation, far from being the complicated matter that modern hermeneutical philosophers have sought to make it, was for the Reformed a rather straightforward affair. Doctrines such as the Trinity and the incarnation, as well as justification by grace through faith, were considered clearly evident to anyone with eyes to see. This connects to the development of lists of “fundamental articles” in Reformed orthodoxy—those doctrines that every Christian must come to believe because they are plainly taught by Scripture.⁸⁰

This rests on the doctrine of Scripture’s clarity, a necessary attribute of Scripture in the general Protestant polemic against Roman Catholic claims that the institutional church was necessary for correct interpretation. Instead, the Reformed asserted the basic clarity of Scripture in order to undermine papal claims and buttress their own emphasis on the ability and responsibility of all believers with respect to the Bible’s teaching.

Reformed understanding of perspicuity is twofold, like that of Luther. First, there is the external clarity of the Bible in terms of the public accessibility of its teaching. The unregenerate person, endowed with the relevant natural skills in language and intellect, is able to grasp many things that the Bible teaches. Yet only regenerate persons who have the Holy Spirit can understand the meaning of Scripture in a way that applies its teaching to themselves in a salutary, saving manner. Nevertheless, scriptural interpretation, in extracting the basic sense of what the Bible says, is not a complicated or arcane matter.⁸¹

The assumption of Scripture’s clarity also shapes the Reformed ideal for biblical commentary. In the preface to his commentary on Romans, Calvin (quietly reacting to the long-winded and therefore somewhat obfuscatory approach to commentating of his mentor and friend Martin Bucer) declares that “the chief excellency of an expounder consists in *lucid brevity*.”⁸² Commentators, like preachers, are to bring out the clear teaching of Scripture, not to hide it.

The Relationship between the Old and New Testaments

Perhaps the fundamental interpretive question for the Reformed—indeed, perhaps the fundamental interpretive question for the Christian church as a whole—is that of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

the congregation’s ability to test the fidelity of expositions being offered by preachers. A fine example of such a defense is provided by Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Leicester: Apollos, 2006).

80. See Turretin, *Institutes* I.xiv.

81. See *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, disp. 5 (pp. 128–49).

82. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. J. Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), xxiii.

Ever since Marcion attempted to construct a canon premised on the fundamental contradiction of the God of the Old and the God of (parts of) the New Testament, this matter has been central to discussions of the meaning of Scripture.

In book II of the *Institutes*, Calvin takes up this matter and outlines ways in which the two Testaments are similar and different. While Calvin and the confessional Reformed in general do hold to the law-gospel antithesis of Luther, this is not their fundamental principle for understanding Scripture. Instead, the Reformed approach is more oriented to a historical understanding of the unfolding of God's redemption purposes.⁸³

When Calvin addresses the issue of the similarity of the Testaments, his focus is on the covenants made first with the patriarchs and then with the New Testament church. Both pointed toward a blessing that was spiritual, not material. Second, both were based on grace, not on human merit. And third, both had Christ as Mediator of the covenant.⁸⁴

As to differences between the Testaments, Calvin notes five. In the Old Testament, the people of God receive a foretaste of their heavenly inheritance through earthly blessings.⁸⁵ Second, in the Old Testament the truth is taught by types, whereas in the New the full substance is revealed.⁸⁶ Third, the Old Testament was a dispensation of the letter, the New of the Spirit. The former has an external quality to it; the latter is written on the heart.⁸⁷ Fourth, the Old Testament is a dispensation characterized by bondage and by fear (because it is not spiritual, as the third difference indicates), while the New is characterized by the liberty that confidence and security bring because of the full revelation of the work of Christ.⁸⁸ And the fifth distinction refers to the peculiar role of ethnic Israel under the Old Testament, which has now been abolished through the inclusion of the gentiles into God's gracious plan.⁸⁹

Calvin's position on the relationship of the Old and New Testaments might therefore be summarized in terms of promise and fulfillment, which captures well the basic Reformed position. The Testaments are the same in substance—the grace of God—but that substance is administered differently under each, with the New presenting the fulfillment of the Old in the

83. For the Reformed position on the law-gospel antithesis, see chap. 2 below.

84. Calvin, *Institutes* II.x.2.

85. *Ibid.*, II.xi.1.

86. *Ibid.*, II.xi.4.

87. *Ibid.*, II.xi.7–8.

88. *Ibid.*, II.xi.9.

89. *Ibid.*, II.xi.11.

person and work of Jesus Christ and the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. It also indicates that, while the Reformed generally regard allegorical exegesis as inappropriate and lacking sufficient textual and theological controls, nevertheless typological exegesis is crucial to understanding Scripture and biblical history. This is reflected in its most practical form in the practice of infant baptism, which depends on the identity of the covenant of grace in the Old and New Testaments but also on a change in administration in the New (see chap. 6).

In this context, we should also note the Reformed commitment to the literal sense of Scripture, in reaction to the medieval notion of the *quadriga*, or fourfold sense. While there was a perennial problem in defining exactly what constituted the literal sense of Scripture, Richard Muller has noted that in Calvin's exegetical works there is an increased emphasis on the "literal, grammatical meaning and even on a genuinely historical reading of the Old Testament," which evidenced itself in Calvin being far more cautious than Luther in advancing direct christological interpretations of Old Testament passages. This does not mean that Calvin and the later Reformed do not see Christ in the Old Testament, but their use of typology, and even more of allegory, is typically extremely cautious.⁹⁰ This led Lutherans to allege that Calvin's approach to the Old Testament involved a level of Judaizing.⁹¹

The Analogy of Faith

As the Westminster Confession acknowledges, the Reformed understand that not all passages in Scripture are equally perspicuous and that the obscure passages are to be interpreted in light of those whose meaning is clear. Interpretation therefore involves comparison of various passages, but it also involves the analogy of faith, a concept with a number of facets.⁹² First, it assumes the coherence and consistency of the Bible's teaching, such that passages that appear to contradict each other should be understood as compatible. The failure to see how they cohere is a failure of interpretation or understanding, not a sign of a real problem resident in the text. As Turretin declares, after outlining what he considers to be inadequate responses to apparent contradictions in Scripture: "Finally others defend the integrity of

90. *PRRD* 2:469–72.

91. *Ibid.*, 2:471.

92. See *ibid.*, 2:493–97, where he demonstrates that there were some minor variations in the understanding of exactly what constituted the analogy of faith. In this chapter, I give a synthesis of its various aspects.

the Scriptures and say that these various contradictions are only apparent, not real and true; that certain passages are hard to be understood but not altogether inexplicable. This is the more common opinion of the orthodox, which we follow as safer and truer.”⁹³

Second, the analogy of faith assumes the essential clarity of Scripture relative to the basic elements of Christian catechesis: the Decalogue, the Lord’s Prayer, and the articles of the ancient creeds. This is one reason why the Reformed were so concerned to produce catechisms: to provide the ordinary believer with the basic tools necessary for a correct understanding of Scripture. Catechizing, far from being an attempt to brainwash children or to impose a dogmatic grid on the reading of Scripture, was in fact designed to give believers the ability to read and interpret Scripture correctly. This point is made with some force by Ursinus, in the introduction to his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism:

There is a necessity that all persons should be made acquainted with the rule and standard according to which we are to judge and decide, in relation to the various opinions and dogmas of men, that we may not be led into error, and be seduced thereby, according to the commandment which is given in relation to this subject, “Beware of false prophets.” “Prove all things.” “Try the spirits whether they are of God.” (Matt. 7:15. 1 Thess. 5:21. 1 John 4:1.) But the law and the Apostles’ Creed, which are the chief parts of the catechism, constitute the rule and standard according to which we are to judge of the opinions of men, from which we may see the great importance of a familiar acquaintance with them. . . . Those who have properly studied and learned the Catechism, are generally better prepared to understand and appreciate the sermons which they hear from time to time, inasmuch as they can easily refer and reduce those things which they hear out of the word of God, to the different heads of the catechism to which they appropriately belong, whilst, on the other hand, those who have not enjoyed this preparatory training, hear sermons, for the most part, with but little profit to themselves.⁹⁴

This is an important point, because it connects to the Reformed (and indeed also the Lutheran) understanding of the nature of creeds and confessions. These are ecclesiastical documents whose teaching is both drawn from Scripture and then used as a framework for interpreting Scripture. Therefore, they are neither separate forms of revelation that compromise the principle of Scripture alone nor are they dispensable by the church. Rather, they state

93. Turretin, *Institutes* II.v.3.

94. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Willard (Cincinnati: Elm Street, 1888), 15.

publicly what the church believes Scripture to teach and the assumptions by which the church believes Scripture should be interpreted.⁹⁵

Third, the analogy of faith also assumes the legitimacy of drawing out doctrinal conclusions by good and necessary consequence from those passages that are deemed clear in order to provide interpretive insight into those that are obscure. Thus, the analogy of faith is not simply applied by interpreting one passage of Scripture in light of another; it can also involve interpreting one passage of Scripture in light of doctrinal conclusions drawn from another passage of Scripture.⁹⁶

The most obvious example of this in the context of Lutheran-Reformed interaction is, of course, the question of the meaning of the words of eucharistic institution: “This is my body.” When Calvin addresses this issue in the *Institutes*, he rests part of his argument for the rejection of the Lutheran position on the nature of Christ’s body, which is, he argues, necessarily a claim for a localized body. If it were not so, he argues, it would not be a true body. Then, anticipating the objection that Christ’s glorified flesh is not subject to the same limitations as our bodies, Calvin points out that Scripture indicates that the Lord’s Supper took place prior to Christ’s death and resurrection. Finally, preempting the fourth objection that Christ’s preresurrection body also showed signs of its later glorification in the transfiguration, Calvin argues that that was simply to give the disciples a foretaste of glory and does not legitimate the far-reaching christological conclusions that the Lutherans wish to draw.⁹⁷ This is an excellent example of the Reformed use of both Scripture and logical reasoning.⁹⁸

In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus addresses the same issue, that of the words of institution, and rejects both transubstantiation

95. See Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012). Cf. *RD* 1:480. In his classic explication of the nature and method of preaching, William Perkins (*The Arte of Prophecy* [London: Felix Kyngston, 1607]) advises those seeking to interpret Scripture to grasp first of all the basic categories and divisions of theology (*Arte*, 26). In the same passage, Perkins also recommends reading the Scriptures in a certain order, beginning with the Letters of Paul, as the best means of grasping the basic structure of biblical teaching. Perkins’s original work is available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A09449.0001.001>. For a modern reprint edition, see William Perkins, *The Art of Prophecy; with, The Calling of the Ministry*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, rev. ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996).

96. For a good introduction to the Reformed use of consequences, see Ryan M. McGraw, *By Good and Necessary Consequence* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012).

97. Calvin, *Institutes* IV.xvii.17.

98. Of course, the Lutherans would argue that extrapolating from the limitations of our bodies to those of Christ’s body is a rationalist move without biblical sanction. That response goes to the heart of the hermeneutical issues that connect to the christological difference between the two traditions.

and consubstantiation on four grounds: the teaching of the text itself, the nature of sacraments in general, the implications for the text of other established elements of the faith, and the significance of parallel scriptural texts that shed light on the specific passage.⁹⁹ Of course, the question of which passages teach clearly and which are more obscure might itself be an issue that depends on one's doctrinal commitments, and that is again where the analogy of faith comes into play, as shaping such interpretive decisions. For Ursinus, the teaching that Christ's flesh is like ours in all things, sin excepted, is crucial for repudiating any idea that it might be infinite, omnipresent, or simply not localized in one place at any given moment.¹⁰⁰

Fourth, and in connection with the third point, the analogy of faith assumes the basic interpretive dynamics of Scripture: the distinction between law and gospel and the overall redemptive scheme of biblical history as it culminates in Jesus Christ and the giving of the Spirit to the church.¹⁰¹ These architectonic principles give Scripture its coherence and its fundamental message.

The Word Preached

As noted at the start of this section, for the Reformed the primary act of the Christian church is the preaching of the Word. Therefore, all biblical interpretation is tailored toward the goal of pressing the reality of God and the significance of Christ on those who hear.

The Reformed have typically adopted two basic approaches to preaching: consistent exposition of whole books of the Bible and catechetically framed sermons that follow a more topical ordering. The latter is exemplified by Bullinger's *Decades*, a cycle of sermons later published as a basic textbook of theology. More significantly for the long-term shape of Reformed homiletics was the decision to divide the Heidelberg Catechism into fifty-two Lord's Days and then to make it a practice in the continental Reformed churches to dedicate the afternoon or evening Lord's Day service to preaching on the specified section of the catechism for the day. This practice ensured that the basic doctrinal points of the catechism were reinforced on an annual basis.¹⁰²

99. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 390–403.

100. *Ibid.*, 396; cf. Perkins, *Arte*, 47.

101. See Ursinus, *Commentary*, 2–3; see also chap. 2 below.

102. This practice was stipulated by the Synod of the Hague in 1586 and reaffirmed at the Synod of Dort in 1618–19; the latter also stated that “the catechism sermons should be very brief and as intelligible as possible for the simple-minded people.” Arie Baars, “The Simple Heidelberg Catechism . . . : A Brief History of the Catechism Sermon in the Netherlands,” in *Power of Faith: 450 Years of the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Karla Apperloo-Boersma and Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 159–67 (quote from 159).

Although fine in theory, it was not without its problems: some pastors proved unable to preach this way, and congregants sometimes complained that it made preachers lazy, since they could reuse the same sermons year after year.¹⁰³

Preaching is also intended to be clear and practical, a point connecting to the Reformed commitment to the third use of the law (see chap. 2 below). In his classic handbook on preaching, *The Arte of Prophecyng*, the Elizabethan Puritan William Perkins laid out a set of basic principles for the preacher to observe in any sermon. The preacher must not make a show of his learning but rather hide that in the pulpit. This is not for the purpose of preaching in an ignorant or unlearned manner—far from it—but in order to make the truth of God shine more clearly, unencumbered by human ostentation. He is to demonstrate the Spirit by his serious demeanor and to speak in a manner clear and easy to understand by ordinary people. This means that Latin and Greek words must be avoided, as well as the “telling of tales, and all profane and ridiculous speeches.”¹⁰⁴

For Perkins, true preaching involves “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), which consists of two parts: resolution or partition, and application. Resolution is proclaiming the doctrine that is either explicitly stated in the text or that can be legitimately derived therefrom.¹⁰⁵ Application is, in the words of Perkins, “that wherby the doctrine, rightlie collected, is diverslly fitted according as place, time, and person do require.”¹⁰⁶ In short, if the doctrine is drawn from the text in a way determined by the objectivity of the text itself, application involves bringing that doctrine to bear on the specifics of the situation in which the preacher finds himself. Application can also be mental (i.e., teaching the mind doctrine is a form of application) or practical, referring to manner of life and behavior.¹⁰⁷ Again, this latter point really picks up on the Reformed commitment to the idea of the third use of the law as a positive, practical guide for Christian living in the present.

Perkins’s treatise is one of the classics on Reformed preaching and is still in print today. This is because it captures so brilliantly the basic Reformed concern for preaching: the preacher is to move from the biblical text by correct principles of interpretation to a clear proclamation of the doctrine that the text teaches and thence to a practical application to the congregation, either in terms of aiding Christians to better understand the text and the doctrine or in terms of practical implications for life.

103. Baars, “Simple Heidelberg Catechism,” 160–61.

104. Perkins, *Arte*, 132–36.

105. *Ibid.*, 90–92.

106. *Ibid.*, 99.

107. *Ibid.*, 122–23.

Conclusion

The Reformed commitment to correct biblical interpretation arises out of the belief that the Bible is the Word of God in written form and is the basis for God's saving action in the world. The basic means by which God acts through this Word is its proclamation in the church, a proclamation that, when done in a manner faithful to God's scriptural revelation, is used by the Holy Spirit to convict of sin, to inculcate faith, and to edify the body.

This has certain practical implications for church life. Believers are to be taught the basic catechetical categories of the faith so that they themselves will learn how to rightly handle the Word of truth and to be able to listen with discernment to what they hear from the pulpit. Preaching is to be central in the gathered worship of the church. Ministers who are called to this task are to be properly trained to handle the Word of God, which normally requires both linguistic and theological skills. Preaching is to draw attention not to the preachers themselves but to the God who speaks clearly through the preachers. Sermons are therefore to aid the believer in understanding Scripture better. But more than that: the Word preached is the Word of God and confronts individuals with the glorious Lord who saves, calling forth a response of faith and adoration.