



Luther's Canon: Christ Against Scripture

TERRY C. THOMAS

Williams Bay Lutheran Church, Williams Bay, Wisconsin

Today's battle over the Bible continues to wage a perplexing dilemma for many serious and sincere-minded people of faith. This essay, however—not designed to interpret the modern predicament—attempts to clarify Luther's position in view of some of the current hermeneutical problems. What was Luther's canon of Scripture? What was authoritative for him? What did it mean for Luther to believe he was biblical?

It is well known that the heart of Scripture for Luther was Christ. In this light it has also been suggested that Luther used his doctrine of Christ and justification by faith to propagate a subjective reading of the Bible—that he missed its rich diversity.¹ In this regard Luther is out of step with modern times, where objectivity predominates.²

One passage particularly used in support of this position is from Luther's *Lectures on Galatians, 1535*, a passage which summarizes what has come to be known as Luther's Christ against Scripture principle. Taking another look at just what he was about in this noteworthy passage can help clarify his general understanding, and his position might even be found more relevant and helpful than is sometimes supposed.

From his classroom lecture on Galatians 3:14, Luther is quoted as saying:

¹For example, Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation: A Problem for Today* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1964) 135: "Luther's understanding of the full message of Scripture was defective not only because of his failure to incorporate all of Scripture into his teaching,...but [was] also an oversimplification in which some of the essential aspects of the message are left out." See also Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany* (2 vols.; London: Darton, Longman & Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 1:456: "Let us once more recall that one of the marks of Lutheran theology is its tendency to reduce Christianity from a multiplicity of precepts to a few essential points.... [Luther] did not listen to everything but chose what he wanted."

²Mark Ellingsen, "Luther as Narrative Exegete," *The Journal of Religion* 63 (1983) 394-413, discusses this problem.

Therefore if [Christ] Himself is the price of my redemption, if He Himself became sin and a curse in order to justify and bless me, I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and if you were to scream that Scripture contradicts itself. I have the Author and the Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you....Therefore see to it how you can reconcile Scripture, which as you say, contradicts itself. I for my part shall stay with the Author of Scripture.³

One thesis of this essay, as it attempts to build towards an understanding of this passage, is that Luther is not caught here slipping out with an offhanded, extreme remark, but rather that this statement captures the heart of his understanding of Scripture—an understanding that cannot be relegated to subjective interpretation.

I. LUTHER'S HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

The question of biblical authority was not a question for Luther. In his explanation to the Ninety-Five Theses, for example, he wrote:

First, I testify that I desire to say or maintain absolutely nothing except, first of all, what is in the Holy Scriptures and can be maintained from them.⁴

Sometimes overlooked in contemporary efforts to locate the source of Luther's theology, or at least its immediate cause, is the fact that he was constantly immersed in the Scriptures. Noted by friends and opponents early in his career was that he seemed able to recite Scripture from memory, a claim he did not refute, and later in his life he once made the comment that he had been reading the Bible through twice a year since first gaining access to it. For him, the Bible was inexhaustible.

Scripture was no place for a free-for-all contest. Grappling with it was no game. It is not to be broken,⁵ its message is unified,⁶ and the Holy Spirit speaks in the Scriptures.⁷

This is not to suggest that Luther did not work in a stream of medieval interpreters⁸ or that he was not also involved in sixteenth-century German life. Yet his God, he believed, was the God revealed exclusively in the Bible, which is the heart of what brought him to express his theology as a theology of the cross. Who God is in himself would take superlative adjectives beyond human speech, and those who seek the absolute, uncovered God are speculative dreamers, theologians of glory. To be a Christian is to humble oneself before God as he has chosen to make himself known—through the Scriptures. A Christian theologian

³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 26:295. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

⁴*LW* 31:83.

⁵*LW* 26:457.

⁶*LW* 26:276

⁷*LW* 26:266.

⁸Cf. Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 37 (1983) 229-39.

is a theologian of the cross. "We know God in the Scriptures," he says, "where He is revealed to us, and we ought to know about this God alone and withstand all adversaries."⁹

Interestingly, however, Scripture can be misused and exalted too highly. "This queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to, her."¹⁰ Queen, but not king! She serves God who is king. "Christ is Lord over Scripture and all works."¹¹

The Scriptures are also clear for Luther: "I would say of the whole Scripture, that I do not allow any part of it to be called obscure," he wrote.¹² Its clarity, however, was not manifested through a method of proof-texting, of extracting texts and piling them up one on top of another.¹³

In fact this is the very kind of thing to which Luther was opposed. The message of the whole explained the parts, so that while not every passage bristled with its own individual clarity, every passage can be understood in light of biblical wholeness.¹⁴

It was in the debate with Erasmus that Luther expressed himself most succinctly on Scripture's transparency. He challenged Erasmus' desire to erase difficult passages, remove them from the debate, and cloud the issue of the bondage of the human will:

For it should be settled as fundamental, and most firmly in the minds of Christians, that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light far brighter even than the sun, especially in what relates to salvation and all essential matters.¹⁵

The debate, Luther believed, essentially took the lines of hermeneutical conflict—conflict over human overlays and methodology. “You see, now,” he wrote to Erasmus, “that the conflict here concerns not the text itself, nor yet implications and similes, but ‘figures’ and ‘explanations’.”¹⁶ The authority and clarity of the Scriptures led Luther to allow Scripture to interpret itself, a point important to mention in approaching a careful understanding of Luther's Christ against Scripture idea.

Luther exalts the Bible so highly that he insists that it itself, as the servant of God, must instruct the reader how to read. It is here that Luther has been charged with reading his own ideas into the Bible. He placed *himself* and his experience into the Scriptures so fully that what is actually authoritative for him is himself. But Luther would have none of this kind of charge. For he looked

⁹LW 16:317f.

¹⁰LW 26:58.

¹¹LW 26:295.

¹²Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1957) 129.

¹³Cf. Ernst-Wilhelm Kohls, “Luther's Aussagen über die Mitte, Klarheit und selbsttätigkeit der Heiligen Schrift,” *Lutherjahrbuch 1973*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig, 1973) 46-75. See also Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 156.

¹⁴Cf. B. Lohse, *Martin Luther*, 156: “At this point, there is a basic difference between Luther and the later orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration. In the age of orthodoxy, theologians more and more understood the clarity of Scripture as meaning that doctrinal controversies could be decided by scriptural proofs.”

¹⁵M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 191. Cf. p. 125.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 191.

back upon his study of the Scriptures as a tutelage which led him out of what today would be called subjective experience and into the experience of faith, an experience ignited by the external Word. His Erfurt education in nominalism presented him with ready theological answers, but answers he questioned. Coming into contact with the Bible brought him into a process of desubjectivizing, i.e., of identifying his subjective stance—the common understandings of his day—and of attempting to allow the Scriptures to speak nakedly, for themselves.

Also, the idea of subjectivity-objectivity is a modern problem.¹⁷ The concept of subjectivity means that the stance of evaluation is from human experience, but its opposite,

objectivity, still finds its source of evaluation in the human, in reason and the human mind, and both responses can be collective.¹⁸ Objectivity, though, does try to take in a broader sweep of human experience and encounter a stranger's point of view.

Both ways of reading the text, however, are problematic from Luther's perspective. The response of the human mind alone (objectivity) misses life involvement with the story and therefore the fullness that Scripture presents, and the stance of experience alone (subjectivity) invites dangerous opportunities for picking and choosing only that which is agreeable with former experience.¹⁹ While some might think of objectivity and subjectivity as opposites, Luther would look from a further perspective and see the two approaches as siblings, and assert that both need to fall to the external object of faith:

But if one wants to treat our faith, that we carry our darkness forth into the Scripture and accordingly link it to ourselves and our own sense, and see it only that way, and play up to the darkness of the common crowd, then no article of faith remains.²⁰

Interestingly also, in the battle over Scripture's right to interpret itself—against those who might charge Luther as a subjective interpreter—he would in turn counter that his critics were not full hearers of the Word, and that they had not allowed the message to reach past the shields of reason and into the depth of human life, creating self-despair and trust in Christ alone.

¹⁷Richard E. Palmer, for example, modern scholar of hermeneutics, writes: "It should be said at the outset that the subject-object model of interpretation is a realist fiction.... There is no such thing as a non-positional subject, and therefore there is also no such thing as a non-positional understanding. Understanding is always positional; it stands at a given point in history. There is no privileged access to a work of literature, no access that stands outside of history and outside one's own horizon of understanding. Some interpreters apparently wish that this were so, but wishing will not make it so." Quoted from his *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1969) 223-4.

¹⁸Ibid., 243: For objectivity, "The verifying reason becomes the final court of appeals, and all truth finds its validation in the reflexive operations of the mind, that is, in subjectivity."

¹⁹Cf. S. Hendrix, "Luther against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," 236, who writes that, for Luther, "the power of the Scripture was such that it was not changed into the one who studied it but instead transformed its admirer into itself and into its own powers.... Scripture could indeed be called its own interpreter."

²⁰Translation from *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimarer Ausgabe; Weimar: H. Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 18:143, 16ff. Hereafter cited as *WA*.

To read correctly means that the reader is to attempt to identify his or her own presuppositions and open the page with a sense of expectation for newness:

But this is what happens to lazy readers and to those who super-impose their own ideas on the reading of Sacred Scripture. What they should do is to come to it empty, to derive their ideas from Sacred Scripture, then to pay careful attention to the words, to compare what precedes with what follows, and to make the effort of grasping the authentic meaning of a particular passage rather than attaching their own notions to words or phrases that they have torn out of context.²¹

Yet at the same time current hermeneutical methodologies could well serve to help understand the text. Luther utilized Erasmus' contributions to scholarship, for example, while at the same time he rejected his exegetical conclusions.

Concretely, Scripture's self-interpretative rule meant that the Scriptures were to be allowed to address the reader—to pose the question. The normal subject-object order of life is reversed. The Scriptures become the subject, and the reader becomes the object—the thing addressed, so that the Scriptures not only interpret themselves, but also human life, the life of the reader. In addition, although the Bible is the Word of God, God does not address every word to every person—or perhaps *because* it is the Word of God, God has the right to say whom he is addressing:

There are two kinds of words in the Bible: One is not for me and does not concern me. The other concerns me, and on this alone, that which is for me, I may boldly venture forth as on a strong rock. But if it does not concern me, then I should stand still. The false prophets pitch in and say: "Dear people, this is the word of God." It is true, we cannot deny it. But we are not the people to whom it speaks.²²

The question for Luther was not, "Is the Bible the Word of God," or even, "Is only part of the Bible the Word of God, and which part?" The entire Bible is the Word of God, but not everything in the Bible is universally addressed to every person. Not every passage carries authority for the church and into the world. The Bible itself makes this distinction, and it is in this sense that Luther is biblical.

How this works out is that the Scriptures, for Luther, speak both law and gospel. Furthermore, while the law is universal and should be preached to every person, its biblical purpose is to be distinguished carefully from the gospel. And not only does the law serve a theological purpose in drawing attention to universal human condemnation; it has a civil use for particular peoples at particular times and places. This civil use of the law in the Bible pertains especially to certain passages. Luther has in mind here those directives for Israel alone, directives which did not apply to his generation. The entire Bible is God's Word, but not all of it is what he called *pro me* (for me).²³

²¹LW 27:29.

²²WA 16:385.

²³Paul Althaus, "Autorität und Freiheit in Luthers Stellung zur Heiligen Schrift," *Luther* 33 (1962) 48.

Theologically, the law has its role to fulfill in bringing the human to faith:

It follows, therefore, that the Law with its function does contribute to justification—not because it justifies, but because it impels one to the promise of grace and makes it sweet and desirable. Therefore we do not abolish the Law; but we show its true function and use, namely, that it is a most useful servant impelling us to Christ.²⁴

His opponents, Luther feels, depend upon the many passages of Scripture which concern

works and rewards to support their opposition to justification through faith alone. By means of casting legal passages against the preaching of justification by faith, knowingly or unknowingly they attempt to negate the work and lordship of Christ.²⁵ The concoction of Luther's opponents is dangerous, for "even one passage in Scripture that presents some threats of the Law overwhelms and swamps any other comfort."²⁶

There are many passages in the Scriptures, both in the Old Testament and in the New, about works and rewards; our opponents depend on these and think that by means of these they can overthrow the doctrine of faith.²⁷

Even Moses, the law-giver, reveals how temporary the law really is. Moses points to "the coming Prophet who is to be raised up," who "will set up a new kingdom and a new ministry," and in so doing "abrogates" all law he had taught.²⁸

In the Scriptures God does address every person of every generation, however, with the gospel concerning Jesus Christ. This is the gospel of justification through faith alone. It is in this sense that the Bible has a christological center, and for Luther this core runs through both Old Testament and New alike: "If you want to interpret properly, take Christ for yourself, for the whole thing is a matter of this man."²⁹

For the Bible to have a christological core and axis is, for Luther, for it to have a soteriological center.³⁰ His christology and soteriology are inseparable. The Bible, as Luther sees it, points to the specific thing about Christ, his suffering and death, and this work cannot be separated from its benefits for the people. Luther's opponents err. Not only do they misrepresent the doctrine of justification, either overtly or by implication, but in so doing they present a false Christ—a new lawgiver. All the so-called "facets" of salvation come through justification by faith alone, so that the Christ-justification doctrine is the pedestal that upholds the Bible and determines that it is holy.

Any sort of presentation of the Scriptures that merely quotes the Bible, therefore, as if the words themselves carry magical authority, is not being biblical for Luther. This kind of presentation assumes the role of authority to the words over and above the Word—of the gospel. "Yes, my dear fellow," Luther responds to this kind of preaching, "but not so." You have certainly quoted

²⁴*LW* 26:315.

²⁵*LW* 26:261.

²⁶*WA* 401:129-130.

²⁷*LW* 26:261.

²⁸*LW* 9:174.

²⁹*Deutsche Bibel, WA* 8:29, 32ff. See also *LW* 35:247.

³⁰Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982) 282ff.

God's Word, but, "The question is whether or not it was said *to you*" (italics mine).³¹

II. CHRIST AGAINST SCRIPTURE

Casting Christ against Scripture, for Luther, is what Scripture itself does. It reveals the exaltation of the Christ-justification doctrine over the law. When Luther concludes in his lecture

on Galatians (see text cited above), “I have the Author and the Lord of Scripture,” and “I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred,” he is surveying the whole picture. The landscape of the biblical story moves before his eyes, and on the horizon he sees a central character, the Christ, coming to redeem creation. He also sees and hears the law “up there,” lashing forth from atop Mt. Sinai with its lightning and thunder of condemnation, but he sees and hears its frightening power dissolve in the work of the central character.

The context of his remarks in the classroom as he exegetes Galatians 3:14 (“That we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith”) is both polemic and pastoral. The evangelical movement, which is the gospel cause, stands in the thick of battle. His students, he believes, are facing opposition to faith alone, and the ultimate in deception lurks when opponents quote Scripture.

Since the Spirit for Luther is “freedom from the Law, from sin, death the curse, hell and the wrath and judgment of God,”³² the Spirit is commensurate with justification by faith alone. The gospel alone brings genuine liberation, and using the Bible to further the cause of human bondage blasphemes the author of Scripture. This kind of preaching proclaims neither law nor gospel, for the whole message gets meshed into a kind of half-law, half-gospel. The evangelical gospel is therefore attacked on two fronts: against the reality of the curse of the law, and against genuine human liberation wrought through the gospel. Hence, Luther is cast into the role of a polemicist.

In order to identify opponents in this lecture, Luther lumps them together and calls them sophists. While one branch of opponents sprang from connection with the evangelical movement, papist opponents provided opposition of another kind. But from Luther’s perspective they are branches from the same root insofar as they both use the Bible, and both attack justification through faith alone. For both of these opponents, salvation and eternal life is earned, and hence “due him”³³:

The papists and the Anabaptists are harmoniously agreed today on this one proposition, over against the church of God, despite their verbal pretenses: namely, that a work of God is dependent on the worthiness of man....

These wolves are joined at the tail, even though they have different heads. They pretend to be fierce enemies publicly; but inwardly they actual-

³¹WA 16:388, 24ff.

³²LW 26:293.

³³LW 26:128.

ly believe, teach, and defend the same doctrine, in opposition to Christ, the only Savior, who is our only righteousness.³⁴

Polemically, therefore, in the Christ against Scripture passage cited at the beginning of this essay, Luther’s opponent, while called sophist, is actually any teaching that uses the Bible in opposition to the message it bears. And while his Christ against Scripture statement is in a polemical context, it is consistent with his general view.

Important also is the fact that Luther teaches Christ against Scripture in the classroom

from a pastoral heart. His concern is for the someone “*not sufficiently educated* to be able to reconcile or resolve such passages of Scripture about works and is obliged nevertheless to listen to the insistence of our opponents as they vigorously press such passages”³⁵ (italics mine). Luther himself will face them, as he faced Erasmus, line by line, because he is equipped. Stepping into the shoes of a student, or the future students and/or parishioners of his students, he said:

Moreover, even if the sophists are more clever than I and so overwhelm and entangle me with their arguments in favor of works and against faith that I simply cannot untangle myself—although they cannot actually do this—....³⁶

What is that one clear, simple response which someone “not sufficiently educated” can make when a sophist knocks on the door, presents himself or herself, and begins to unroll biblical quotations about the human spiritual endeavor? A believer unable to counter the biblical quotations presented, Luther would advise, should know that the king and author of Scripture is on his or her side. Just as his catechisms were designed to assist the uneducated in faith, so is Luther’s Christ against Scripture response. Tell them this, he says:

“You are stressing the servant, that is, Scripture—and not all of it at that or even its most powerful part, but only a few passages concerning works. I leave this servant to you. I for my part stress the Lord, who is the King of Scripture. He has become my merit and the price of my righteousness and salvation. I hold to Him, I cling to Him, and I leave to you the works that you have never performed anyway.”³⁷

The parishioner, then, can close the door and rest in faith with the knowledge that his or her faith is based upon the truth.

In writing theses for defense at the doctoral examinations of Heironymus Weller and Nikolaus Medler on 11 September 1535, Luther wrote on the same theme:

40. Briefly, Christ is the Lord, not the servant, the Lord of the Sabbath, of law, and of all things.

41. The Scriptures must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures.

³⁴LW 27:148f.

³⁵LW 26:295.

³⁶Ibid., 294.

³⁷Ibid., 295.

And he went on eight theses later:

49. Therefore, if the adversaries press the Scriptures against Christ, we urge Christ against the Scriptures.

50. We have the Lord, they the servants; we have the Head, they the feet or

members, over which the Head necessarily dominates and takes precedence.³⁸

With the “stellar cast” of examiners gathered around the two doctoral candidates, including such figures as Melancthon, Bugenhagen, Amsdorf, Roerer, and even Robert Barnes, it is obvious that this issue had been discussed among the theologians in Wittenberg.³⁹

Luther did not create a new canon of books. The argument over which books were to be canonical happened after Luther’s death, as has been adequately shown.⁴⁰ When Luther suggested that John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and I Peter were the chief books of the New Testament, it was because they “show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know.”⁴¹ Each book of the Bible has value, but in these books in particular, Luther *suggested* (for he left it to the “pious” reader to evaluate), the central message is clearly portrayed. Romans, for example, is a book for Luther which interprets the whole of the Bible. He did know something about biblical diversity, and Romans serves to reveal how the entire range of writings serve together. Hence, Luther’s canon, his rule for authority, comes through the sacred books, but the rule the books portray is a higher *regula* (canon), Christ and his gospel.

It has been suggested that Luther’s Christ against Scripture principle be considered as a primary locus for today’s biblical theology, and that other options for canonical authority present more serious problems:

What is [the] alternative? Will it be relativism? Or John? Or James? Or Matthew? Or Luke? Or will it be a hollow vessel labeled “Jesus” or “kingdom”? Or will it be an abstract idea, such as “grace”? Or will the “church” decide, so that Christology is made subordinate to ecclesiology?⁴²

Those who use Scripture’s revelation of law to promote human endeavor in some kind of partnership with God’s salvation process, for Luther, are pretending that the king of Scripture can be dethroned. God himself will justify the human being, and he will justify the one who is a sinner.

When it comes to biblical theology and study, Luther’s ultimate question is, What does this have to do *pro me*, for us, here, this day? Does this study present only interesting information, or does it lead to a specific message from God *to us*, pertaining to our justification through faith in the Christ? Does this writer in some way present the gospel, or even the law (as James does so well, Luther believed), or is this passage, or this book, a shadow on the biblical landscape? Each study, for Luther, would require an answer.

³⁸LW 34:112.

³⁹LW 34:108.

⁴⁰Inge Lønning, *Kanon im Kanon* (Oslo: Universitets Forlaget; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1972).

⁴¹LW 35:362.

⁴²Joseph A. Burgess, “Confessional Propria in Relation to New Testament Texts,” *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 267.