One popular picture in Protestant North America, at least in the 20th century, of the Middle Ages and the church in medieval Christendom is that the Middle Ages was a Bible-less age. We often see Luther depicted as monk standing before a chained Bible, and some of us have grown up thinking that the Bible was chained so that even the monks and the priests could not read it. It is not inaccurate to suggest that the church in the Middle Ages discouraged lay reading of the Scriptures, though illiteracy was so widespread that there were not a lot of lay people who could read the Scriptures, and there were in various parts of Europe lay groups devoted to prayer and the reading of the Scriptures, but in general, vernacular versions of the Scriptures were discouraged in the Middle Ages. That did not at all mean, however, that the people of God never heard portions of the Scriptures read, it does mean at all that priests and monks and theologians did not engage in the study of the Scriptures.

Luther’s whole career, in a sense, was engagement with the Scripture. He became a doctor in Bible, as the church called its highest title, in 1512AD. And he was required to swear an oath to give proper exposition to the biblical text. Luther later commented that this was why he reformed the church. He didn’t want to lead a movement, he didn’t want to cause a reformation, he simply had to carry out his oath which his superiors had imposed upon him when they made him take the highest degree that the medieval theological faculty could offer. And because he had to expose the biblical text properly, the Reformation happened.

Luther actually took his doctoral oath more seriously than many of his contemporaries, for he took advantage of that new movement called biblical humanism (which we have mentioned before). He moved into a study of the original languages, he was far from the greatest Hebrew scholar of his age, he mastered Greek fairly well. But he knew that he could not do his task without reading the latest scholarship, and he insisted on the importance of the original languages in every theologian’s, every pastor’s education.

Luther, of course, did not first encounter the text of the Scripture
when he went off to the monastery, when he began his formal study of theology. As a schoolboy in Mansfeld, the village where his father had his smelting operation, Luther began to learn the Scriptures by heart, at least in the simple form of the medieval catechism he had to memorize the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. As he progressed a little further in school and sang with the other boys in the liturgies of the local church he memorized psalms, for much of their singing was simply psalm singing. As we went even further in school, to what we might call the secondary level, the schoolboys heard the pericopes (that is, those appointed lessons for each Sunday of the church year) read regularly in services, and as he was a student at the University of Erfurt he heard Bible reading at mealtime in his dormitory. In 1505, as a monk, he received his first Bible in Latin, and he began, we can presume, to read it regularly and faithfully.

Luther’s engagement with the Scriptures took several forms. He is quite famous as a translator of the Scripture. He studied the original languages and he worked hard and he gathered a committee around him so that he could have correction, and he shaped the German language and he shaped the faith of much of central Europe through his translation of the Bible into German. His translation actually influenced other translations as well, several of the early English translators in the 16th century, for example, used Luther’s clues and keys to the translation of some key biblical passages.

Luther was engaged with the Scriptures as a lecturer, that was his, we might say, occupation. He spent much of his life on the Old Testament, he began (as we have already noted) by lecturing on the Psalms for two years, and he closed his career with ten years of lectures on the Book of Genesis. In between he lectured on a number of Old Testament books besides Psalms and Genesis, and he lectured on a number of New Testament books too, above all the Book of Galatians in 1519, and then later in 1531, 1532 his comment on Galatians really reinforced the movement of the Reformation at key points. These two lectures in particular, Galatians and Genesis were published, he oversaw the preparation of the manuscripts of both Galatians lectures and he oversaw the beginning of the publication of the Genesis lectures. Some scholars have suggested that we don’t really have what Luther said, but rather what his students heard, always a dangerous matter from the instructor’s point of view. But Luther was supervising the publication of the Galatians lectures and had the chance also to read at least the first of four volumes of his Genesis lectures as they were going to press.

Luther also was engaged with the Scripture as a preacher. As a
preacher's preacher in his postils (that is, in those written sermon books which Luther prepared as a model for others to preach), there he did indeed model how he believed biblical interpretation ought to go on at the parish level for the people. And his postils made important reading for many of those early preachers of the Reformation, they were a kind of continuing education program for pastors who could read sermons even when they couldn't write them themselves because they were simply unprepared by their lack of theological education to do the tasks they wanted now to do because they had heard about Luther's Gospel and read his tracts. But Luther was also an important model for preaching as he proclaimed the Gospel in his, we might say, home church, the Church of Saint Mary in Wittenberg. He was not called to be pastor there, but his own pastor and his colleague at the university, Johannes Bugenhagen, traveled off in organizing the Reformation in other places. And even when Bugenhagen was resident, there were so many services during the week that Luther preached often. He provided a model for students; he also provided notes for them as they jotted down what he had preached. And many of them then took those notes and published his sermons later, serving again as models for other preachers throughout the coming decades.

Luther was prepared to take the Scriptures seriously because he was a theologian of the church. The whole medieval church took biblical authority seriously, and because he was an Ockhamist, he perhaps took biblical authority more seriously than some. For the Ockhamists had insisted on the sole authority of Scripture, and many of them had also insisted that the church as a whole and not just the pope was the authoritative interpreter of the authoritative Scriptures. Gabriel Biel indeed emphasized papal authority also, so Luther knew well that 15th century insistence on papal authority, he knew what he was talking about when he attacked, as one of the false walls of defense which the papacy had erected around it, its insistence to be the sole interpreter of Scripture. But he also was prepared by his Ockhamist background to be critical of the pope's claim to be the sole authoritative interpreter of Scripture, and he was certainly prepared to rest all the authority for faith and life in the church in the inspired words of the Scripture by his Ockhamist background.

Luther believed, as we have already observed, that the Scripture is indeed God's word in human language. He believed that it was human language, like all other human language, but he believed that it was the word of God placed in this authoritative form by the Holy Spirit through the holy writers. God had inspired the Scriptures, he speaks its words. In his precritical age, Luther took for granted that God had spoken the Scriptures, and he paid little
attention to how God might have done that. In the early 1530s, as he commented on the Psalms, he observed not only the words but even the diction used by the Holy Spirit in the Scripture is divine. Again, he said, the Holy Spirit has sown the seed of divine wisdom through Moses in such a manner that no reason or strength of human understanding can acknowledge or understand it apart from the support of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit was there, the Holy Spirit was present in the words of Scripture which He had once inspired and which He now took as His tools.

At the same time, Luther did not at all sell short the human side of Scripture. The writers who wrote the words of Scripture were real human creature using real human words, using language that people can understand. It has been pointed out that there is a kind of parallel between Luther’s view of the Scripture and his view of the two natures of Christ. Genuine human participation (the Gospel writers, for instance) shows different details and different approaches and different emphases, Luther observed, as they told the story of Jesus in different ways. And he believed that the biblical writers had used sources, they had used older accounts. Moses knew other law codes, other recorded law codes, as he pulled together the law code for Israel in an authoritative way. So Luther took very seriously the fact that these writers were human creatures and the biblical words are words of real human language, he had no doubt about that at all, he just didn’t know how the Holy Spirit had made it all work.

But he did believe that God and the human creature had come together here to produce the word of the Lord, the word (human word) of the Lord, the divine Lord, so that we might have life and have it more abundantly from these words originally proclaimed and then set down in authoritative fashion in the Scriptures.

That’s why Luther thought it so important to seek the real meaning, the intended meaning of the author. To seek the literal meaning, not in any wooden sense because Luther recognized that (he was such a poet himself) our language, our use of language uses all sorts of figures of speech and the like, but the intended meaning. And he insisted on using that literal interpretation whenever possible, even when human reason would be offended.

He took for granted that since the word of the Lord was there in the Scriptures, he would not be able to understand everything. But he could trust the truth, he could trust that the Holy Spirit was reliable in this word of Scripture, even when he, Martin Luther, couldn’t explain it all, couldn’t grasp it all with his own reason or mind. In 1526, as he commented on the Book of Jeremiah, he wrote, God’s word is not for jesting. If you are not
able to understand it, take your hat off before it. And in 1527, as he preached on Genesis, he recorded these words: If we do not grasp the reason for what is written, we honor the Holy Spirit and we trust He know better.

And thus, for Luther, the word of God in Scripture is the source of all other forms of the word in the church, all written and sacramental forms, for God has anchored His word in the Bible authoritatively for us.

It never occurred to Luther, especially with his strong doctrine of the created order and his belief that the creator God is interested in hairs on human heads and sparrows that fall from roofs, his belief in the provident God that took all of His creation in His loving embrace, it never occurred to Luther to limit the concept of the word of God to those parts of Scripture that treat spiritual topics. He distinguished the nature of Scripture from its purpose; he recognized that not all parts of Scripture are equally important in their purpose. There are some parts of Scripture that provide historical details and observations about life in that time, or even laws for the ancient people of Israel, that are not particularly useful for a German audience in the 16th century, for instance. So their purpose may not have interested Luther a great deal anymore, but their nature still was that they were the word of God. He could not imagine dividing the words of Scripture into one part that was genuine word of God because it treated spiritual topics, and another part that wasn’t really word of God because it treated simply the details of Israel’s history or Israel’s law codes. It was all word of God, whatever its 16th century use might be.

The word of God then was the source from which preachers drew their preaching, it was the source from which the church drew the power of the sacramental word and that word of absolution. If Christians wanted to share the will and the word of the Lord with one another, they had to turn to the Scriptures, for there in authoritative form they could hear what God really wanted them to know. And if they could not read they had to listen to its reading and to its proper preaching. Therefore, the words of Scripture also test all other forms that His word takes. The words of Scripture provide the church with a self-correcting measure of its own proclamation.

That meant for Luther that the Scripture authenticates itself. We have just noted that he believed firmly that human reason can neither fathom its teaching nor appreciate its nature without the power and the help of the Holy Spirit. Luther understood the self-authentication of Scripture as revolving around the center point of God’s revelation in the Scripture, Jesus Christ. So the Scripture
comes as its own witness, focusing not on itself, not on its own nature (the Bible says relatively little about its own nature); instead the Scripture focuses on Christ. The Holy Spirit uses the Scripture to focus on Christ and thus, to convince the reader of its reliability and its truth through the reliability and the faithfulness of the God who speaks from its pages and reveals Himself there.

So Luther rejected the papal claim that common ordinary people reading the Scripture would not understand it. Difficult enough, Luther said, but the Holy Spirit is there to help guide the people of God into the plain understanding of the pages of Scripture. Indeed, the plain understanding is evident only to the eyes of faith, but no authoritative Vicar of Christ, no authoritative substitute for the Scriptures themselves can be placed between the believer and the word of God. For God cannot be mastered, and every human attempt to master the Scriptures, to stand over the Scriptures, to give a kind of authoritative interpretation that comes from outside their own words, is bound to fail for it is the substitute of an idol for the God who speaks from the words of the Bible. And, therefore, the Bible is authoritative in and of itself and it must be its own interpreter.

Luther was not naive about the difficulties of such a position; he operated with the presupposition of the theology of the cross. God has chosen, in His mysterious wisdom, to hide His word in weak and impotent forms. He has done that in the cross of Jesus Christ and He has done it in the mere words of Holy Scripture. But that lets God be God, that lets faith truly be faith, be trust in simply the promise of God.

So instead of seeing the papacy or the church in some other way, as needing to authenticate the Scripture, Luther taught that the Scripture creates the church by calling people (as a sovereign word of God), into the body of Christ, and the Scripture then authenticates the church as well. The teaching of the church must always be reviewed once again, according to the Scripture. And we might use Luther's admonition to the people of God in the first of the Ninety-Five Theses as one way in which he could explain also how the Scripture works in the life of the church. To paraphrase that first of the Ninety-Five Theses, the life of the church is a life of repentance. And the word of God is continually calling not only individuals but also the institution itself back to Him. That is the nature of the sovereign and creative word of the Lord as it is placed in the Scriptures.

Luther taught the clarity of Scripture, even though it is not evident to reason, even though reason will stumble in its effort to be lord of the word, the eyes of faith see the clarity of the revealed word
of God. This is a gift of the Spirit and it does not mean that every passage is clear to every believer. Indeed, many believers struggle their whole lives with certain passages of Scripture, and Luther never wearied of that struggle to come to a greater and deeper understanding of what God had inspired in the pages of holy writ. But the Scriptures were not a closed book; they were not closed to anyone who could understand the language into which they had been translated in this particular version. Luther wanted to open up the reading of God’s word in the Scriptures to all his German people and he urged that vernacular translations be made in other languages as well and supported those who were doing that in other languages in his day.

For he believed that it was vital for the church, it was vital for the salvation of individual believers that the Scriptures be there. For they and they alone contain the word of life which had to be preached to the people of God. He believed in the sufficiency of Scripture, once God had said it all in Jesus Christ, once the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ had been recorded to guide the proclamation of the church, that living voice of the Gospel, there was no need for anymore revelation. And Luther believed that claims to new revelation beyond the revelation that was set down in the New Testament would obscure the word of God and would lead people astray. All we need now is the word of the Scriptures, proclaimed anew and afresh for the people of God.

A good deal has been said about Luther’s comments on specific books of the Bible, and some scholars have occasionally alleged that Luther had a very critical notion of biblical authority because he dismissed some of the books, for instance, of the New Testament as word of God. It is very important to recognize what was going on when, for instance, Luther called the Epistle of James an “epistle of straw”. As we have already noted, as a biblical scholar, Luther took the human authorship of the individual books very seriously. He took the role of specific human points of view very seriously; he saw these specific human points of view as tools in the hands of the Spirit, which the Holy Spirit then used to convey specific angles on what God had done in Jesus Christ to His people. And he did indeed suggest that there were differences between books that God had inspired.

In 1522, as he introduced his German translation of the New Testament, he confessed he had favorites. He liked the Gospel of John because it had more of the words, the theology of Jesus, in comparison to the synoptics that emphasized his actions more. And he loved the First Epistle of John because it conveyed John’s message more fully. And, of course, it is a commonplace that Luther loved Paul above all, though his theology is just as
dependent on John’s Gospel and John’s epistles. But he loved, particularly, the Book of Romans and the Book of Galatians and also Ephesians, and he was very fond of I Peter. And he singled these books out, these books do not merely describe many works and miracles of Christ, but rather masterfully they show how faith in Christ overcomes sin and death and Hell, and gives life and righteousness and blessedness. And that was Luther’s chief interest above all, to join Peter and Paul and John in showing how faith in Christ overcomes sin and death and Hell, how faith in Christ gives life righteousness and blessedness. Just as he had contemporaries in 16th century Germany among the theologians whom he liked better and those who he liked not quite so well as theologians, or so he had his favorites among the biblical writers too.

We must keep that in mind, that he saw the process of assembling the books of the Bible and of inspiring their writing as a matter that was very much caught up in the warp and woof of daily human life. So he came to James, particularly with its comment on justification through works. Luther said James’ intention was undoubtedly good; he had no doubt that James was probably a sincere believer, but he was just not equal to the task of producing an inspired book of the Bible. It is sometimes suggested that Luther expressed these doubts about James in the 1520s, but overcame them. And while he may occasionally have cited James (as he did apocryphal books from the Old Testament which he rejected as inspired), yet he continued to express his doubts about what he called “this epistle of straw”. He felt it was not an apostolic writing that James was not one of the apostles, whoever this James may have been, because his epistle contradicted Paul on the most vital topic of justification through faith. And because the arguments of the epistle beyond this single passage were focusing too much on the works of the Christian, and because although Christ is mentioned, the mention of our Lord is rather pro forma, and there is no deeper development of the significance of his Passion, of the resurrection, of the work of the Spirit. In other words, Luther found from its content that this book could not be apostolic because it teaches only the law and not the Gospel. And the Gospel is the word of life; the Gospel that lifts the burden from the human creature caught in sin and places the burden on Jesus Christ, on God. That’s why the books of the Bible were written. So a book that taught only law that placed the burden repeatedly and continually on the reader rather than on Christ, did not belong in Luther’s canon.

That observation is very important in our understanding of what Luther was about here. Luther did not suggest that there was an error in a book that belonged in the canon; he did not challenge
the Holy Spirit’s truthfulness in a book in which he felt the Holy Spirit had been involved in the production of the text. He was challenging the judgment of the church in constructing the canon; he was questioning the church’s judgment in recognizing this James as the apostle James who spoke through the Holy Spirit.

Luther also dated the Book of Hebrews later than apostolic times, judged it could not be apostolic and, therefore, was not inspired. He said it was a good book; he particularly liked the writer to the Hebrew’s development of the concept of the priesthood of Christ. And with his own love for the Old Testament he revealed in the richness of the Old Testament imagery and that writer to the Hebrew’s treatment of the prefiguring of Christ insomuch of Old Testament life. Luther lectured on the Epistle to the Hebrews early in his career, but he then found that there was a good deal of wood and straw and hay mixed in with the gold and silver and the gems. So again, Luther found that the Epistle to the Hebrews was not apostolic, was not written by Paul, and therefore was not inspired by the Holy Spirit. So he did not deny that it should be read by Christians, just as he found the Old Testament apocrypha (those books that had been added to the Septuagint within Greek circles but were not there in the Hebrew Bible itself), just as he included those in his translation, suggested they be read and supported their use even in citation of the church, but did not find them authoritative, did not find them inspired. So he placed James and Hebrews and Jude with Revelation at the end as a kind of New Testament apocrypha, though he didn’t call it that and he didn’t make the division so sharp, but he simply was not sure that these books belonged in the canon because, as he wrote of Revelation in 1522, he simply found no evidence of the Holy Spirit in that book.

Critical in his understanding of the whole of Scripture was Luther’s understanding of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. Luther believed that that word of law that puts the burden on the sinner is not to be found only in the Old Testament, it’s also to be found in the New. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the promise that God saves in Jesus Christ, is a word that is not just found in the New Testament, Luther taught, it’s found in the richness of the prefiguring and foreshadowing of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament as well. So the Old Testament is letter in being recorded and not that living application of the word, but it is also spirit because the Holy Spirit can take its words and use them in a lively way for the recreation of life through the promise of Christ. And at the same time, the Holy Spirit is there in the New Testament, but the letter is there too, as the apostles recorded the message. The difference between the Old Testament and the New then rests not in the difference between law and Gospel, it rests not in the difference between letter and spirit, the difference rests
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in the fact that the Old Testament is promise of Christ to come and the New Testament is the fulfillment of Christ’s coming.

Luther believed that the entire truth of the Gospel lies in the Old Testament, that the New Testament is simply the historical unfolding of what God had promised to His people, from Genesis 3:15 with the promise of the crushing of the serpent’s head. The problem is that in the Old Testament the truth is hidden, it is not easily understood. It was a foreshadowing, not a revelation in the clear light of the events of the New Testament. So to see the fullness of the Old Testament message, it must be read and viewed through New Testament eyes, as God’s plan unfolded to its completion, to its climax, in the birth of Jesus Christ in His Passion and death and resurrection.

Indeed, Luther took the Old Testament in its own right (and we will say more about that as we look at his principles of interpretation), but Luther did take seriously the Old Testament as the place where God was present with His people, where God was blessing His people, as well as promising them the future Messiah. And Luther derived a great deal of good from the mirror of life, as it has been called, which he found in the actions of God in behalf of His Old Testament people, and in the models for living a godly life which they projected.

At the same time, he saw the Old Testament book as a book for Israel. He saw the laws of the Old Testament as an expression of natural law for Israel. As I have already observed, I think Luther was a bit optimistic about natural law, but he believed that the content of the Old Testament law was found in his culture naturally as well. But in the development of natural law or the law of God for all people, in its specific Israelite usage there was a good deal of the Law and a good deal of the structure of society which was unique to Israel. Luther did not believe that it was part of God’s will for all people that the tide be practiced as it was practiced in the Old Testament, that there be a jubilee year. He said that other cultures developed different laws for divorce as accommodations for sin. There were peculiar expressions for Israel, the Sabbath Day itself was a custom reserved for Israel, so Luther changed the third commandment in his catechism from that honoring of the Sabbath Day to simply sanctifying the holy day, which no longer was that seventh Sabbath Day but was Sunday.

So Luther took the Old Testament as a special form of God’s revelation, one in which Christ was promised and in which the whole council of God was revealed, although in foreshadowing form. And he took the New Testament as the completion of that revelation of God, as that lively message which had to be taken
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from the page and driven, he said, as it drove Christ into the middle of the lives of the people of His day.

For the Scriptures had been alive throughout the history of the church. And how the biblical message was handed down, the tradition of the church, was also of a good deal of importance to Luther. It was in the tradition of the biblical message, the handing down of the understanding of how the Bible was to be preached that Luther found the work of Satan had run pell-mell in every direction but the direction of Calvary itself. And so Luther opposed the traditions of men, he argued against much of the tradition as it was understood in his day. He argued that much of the tradition was false because it had strayed from the intent of the biblical writers. Particularly in doctrines which focused on human works, he believed the tradition had betrayed the Gospel.

He also believed that many medieval writers had placed the traditions of men alongside the Scripture as equally authoritative or almost equally authoritative. So he criticized that tradition which claimed authority for itself in opposition to the biblical message. Luther was very positive on the tradition rightly handed down. He believed that the Bible alone is authority in the church, but he used ancient and modern witnesses to the biblical message where those witnesses helped explain and confirm the biblical message, but they never had authority in and of themselves. So he used the ancient fathers of the church and more recent theologians for exposition, but not as an independent authority.

Of course, no medieval theologian could practice theology without knowing the ancient fathers and knowing them well. Luther’s favorite was Augustine, he returned to Augustine again and again, not without a kind of critical stance. He explained that Augustine didn’t always understand Paul correctly, but Augustine's championship of the grace of God (particularly against Pelagius) was an inspiration to Luther, not only as source of his own expression of the biblical message but an inspiration in the battle against all works righteousness, all reliance on human works in any form. Augustine was Luther’s favorite, the relatively late Saint Bernard of Clairvaux was his second favorite theologian, I think. He cited Bernard a great deal, again critically at times, recognizing that there were elements of wood and straw and hay also in Bernard, but he reveled in Bernard's sweet expression of the love of God in Jesus Christ. It is important to note that Bernard and Augustine are two of Luther's authorities because we see there that Luther was no slave of a principle which some Christians embrace from time to time, that the older is the better. Luther instead evaluated every biblical commentator, not by their age or by their reputation but simply by their content. Scripture is
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Luther believed, and so the fathers and the decrees of church councils were only a help in commenting, in understanding, in teaching, in helping the church organize its public confession (in the case of the Nicene Creed, for instance, or other conciliar decrees), but nothing new could be found of worth in the fathers or the councils – yes new expressions of the biblical message, but no new revelation, no new extension of the word and the will of God. As he looked at the tradition, as he looked at the way the word of God had been handed down in the proclamation of the church, from the ancient patriarchs through the early church and into the medieval church which stood directly behind him, Luther perceived a continuing pattern of struggle over the word. That battle which began in the Garden of Eden when the serpent suggested to Eve that doubt was the proper human reaction to the word of the Lord, ever since Satan has been struggling with the people of God to convince them to doubt the word of the Lord, and the Holy Spirit has battled back, calling the people of God to trust in the word again.

So the word and the response of faith identify the church. And Luther could say, that’s all that identifies the church, no particular rights and usages, no political forms such as papal obedience identify the true church, only the word and only the response of faith. So while other Lutherans took comfort in the fact that they could construct a chain of witnesses from Paul through their own age, that there was always some presence of the word of God being passed from one generation to another, even if in certain periods of the church’s history they recognized there were precious few left in the remnant of faithful confessors. That kind of chain of witnesses that was important for Melanchthon and for many of Luther’s students was not important for Luther at all. He did not need a chain of witnesses in the tradition; he only needed the word of God itself. He believed that there is only one guarantee of the word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that is the Gospel itself. The power of the Scriptural message as it lies in the promise of Jesus Christ will not be guaranteed simply by the fact that there have always been witnesses to it. It receives its strength and its guarantee only in and of itself. For the power of the Scriptures, the power of the presence of the Holy Spirit who inspired it and who uses it today for His purposes of, yes, of killing the sinner through the word of the Law, but above all for the making alive of the elect people of God.

Luther’s theology is a theology of the word, and because that word has come in authoritative form in the Scriptures to us, his theology was only and alone a theology also derived from and tested by the Scriptures themselves. For therein lies the wisdom of God, though it seems foolishness to us, which makes alive and
makes alive forever.