

Luther's Doctrine of Scripture: Hermeneutics



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It is often said that Luther's great exegetical breakthrough was his abandonment of the medieval system of interpretation we call allegory. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that much more important than that was the introduction of a Christ-centered hermeneutic which permeated his entire study of the Scriptures and his entire proclamation of the word of God. That is not to say that the abandonment of the allegorical method was not important. It indeed was, though it was not a complete abandonment of that method at all. But Luther came during the 1510s to reject that four-fold method of interpretation which sought on top of (or perhaps we could say under) the literal interpretation to find an allegorical or doctrinal meaning for a text, a tropological or a moral meaning for a text, and an anagogical or an eschatological sense of the text. Since the time of origin, in one form or another, as the allegorical method had aided in the interpretation of Scripture, we ought not from our modern perspective over-emphasize the importance of allegory for medieval interpretation, a good deal was still done with the literal sense of the text. And at least in theory, any allegorical or anagogical or tropological interpretation was supposed to be able to be confirmed by the literal rendering of another text. But nonetheless, we would also be mistaken to under-estimate the importance of this method because practically all medieval interpreters of the Scripture did try to find other levels of meaning. And very often in theological, polemical, doctrinal arguments, allegorical levels of interpretation did play a major role in Christians' understanding of the text and of what to do with the text in the practical life of parishioners and in the daily life of the church.

It is important for us to recognize that Luther did not cast off this part of his medieval heritage completely, he could use allegory to point his students and also their future hearers in the congregations to Christ if that served his purpose. When he was lecturing relatively late in his career on Genesis 6:16, he suggested that the application of the story of Noah to the body of Christ (that is, to the church) could be done in this manner: The church has an entrance, he told his students, this entrance is baptism through which the clean and the unclean enter without distinction. Even

though the church is small, it is nevertheless the ruler of the world, and the world is preserved on its account in the same way as the unclean animals were preserved in the ark. Others have applied these unclean animals to the body of Christ, which has a wound in its side just as the ark had a window. And in making such comments, Luther then concluded in the printed version of these Genesis lectures, these allegories, if not actually scholarly, are nevertheless harmless inasmuch as they contain no doctrinal errors. And one may use them except in disputation for the sake of embellishment. Luther's preaching could include allegory, it did not often but it could. But nonetheless, fundamental to his approach was the abandonment of the allegorical method and his movement toward his insistence on interpreting the text on the basis of their literal meaning.

For Luther, literal may not always have meant what it meant for us. What he meant by that literal meaning of the text was the text as it was intended to convey meaning by its author. He presumed, in the era of reader response theory we might suggest sometimes a little bit naively, but he presumed that a reader of a text could understand what the author intended, just as (although we can never read another person's mind in casual conversation) we presume that we understand one another fairly well. For Luther, this intended meaning (literal in that sense) meant, however, that all the biblical writers (Old Testament as well as New) recognized that God's completion of his revelation of himself in the Messiah, in Jesus, was the heart of the whole matter. So he believed that this presentation of the Gospel (and not just as a presentation of information but as a presentation of the very power of God) was what every biblical writer from Moses to John had in mind. So the study of the Scripture was searching for the individual author's best expressions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that was the aim of everything he did in biblical interpretation.

Again, he wanted not just to see what the meaning was on the page, but he wanted to search the Scriptures so that his people, his hearers, his readers could find in the pages of Scriptures, in the words of the biblical writers salvation and life. He believed that the study of the Scriptures, searching for the message of Christ, the proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection, was to come from that page and effect work the joyous exchange of the righteousness of Christ for the sinfulness of the sinner. He wanted to mine that biblical page so that it could be conveyed to hearers through preaching and teaching, and through that preaching and teaching the benefits of Christ would be lifted from the biblical page and placed in the hearts and minds of the hearers and readers.

So his approach is often called, instead of a literal approach to the text, a Christological approach. Sometimes it's even labeled a tropological approach. It really did the opposite of a good deal of tropological interpretation in the Middle Ages, which in its looking for the moral significance of the text was actually moralistic or legalistic in a kind of works righteous way. But his understanding of applying Christ to the person's life is tropological in that it lifts the biblical message from the page to be applied in daily life.

So also in the Old Testament, Luther saw Christ foreshadowed. We will return to the subject of Luther's hermeneutic of the Old Testament, but he did believe that the second person of the Trinity was active in all the activities of the Godhead, he believed that the pre-incarnate Christ made certain personal appearances in the Old Testament (to Abraham, for instance), but he also recognized a significant difference between the historical meaning of the text in its historical setting and its prophetic meaning as it looked forward to Christ. So, for instance, Luther suggested that Psalm 111 could be prayed by Christians, should be prayed by Christians, as a prayer of thanksgiving for the Lord's Supper, but he also insisted that in so doing believers remember that in its original setting it was a Passover song.

As he looked at the predictions of Old Testament prophets, he said they indeed might have predicted something that did not happen, and felt no sense of concern at all that their prediction of the future didn't come true because he understood all those predictions of the future as having a goal of bringing God's message of law or Gospel. And if a prediction of the future (as in the case of Jonah) did not come true, that did not mean that it was not a faithful and true word. For it had functioned as a message of law, it had brought people to repentance, and the function of biblical prophecy is to bring the message of law or Gospel to people, not simply to predict the future.

Indeed, what that reminds us of is that his focus on Christ as the key to his hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures meant above all understanding everything in the biblical text as a message of law or Gospel. That's not actually literally correct, there were things (as we have already noted) in the biblical text that did not function to place the burden on the human creature or to place the burden of the sinful human creature on Christ, there was just plain old information there from time to time. But the message that preachers were to lift from the page and drive into their people's hearts that was always a matter of law or Gospel.

For Luther, all the study of the Scripture was really aimed at proclamation, at application to the lives of parishioners. So he,

first of all, said that the study of the Scripture will produce an understanding of God's law, which will break the pride of sinners, which will call sinners to repentance.

Very important for Luther's orientation of his followers to the biblical message were the prefaces that he wrote to the Old Testament, to the New Testament, to the specific books which he was translating. So his version of the Bible continued in an older tradition, which provided these introductory orientations for the readers of the Scripture. In his preface to the Old Testament, he gave a lengthy definition of the law. He said, the law really comes in three forms. In the Old Testament God gave the Israelites a temporal law, a political law, positive law, as all nations have it. This temporal law or political law was aimed at prevention more than instruction, people know from their hearts what is right and wrong, he argued. Then God also gave a kind of church law, particularly to guide his people in their forms of worship, a ritual law. And finally, he gave a law of faith and love, a law that is summarized in the Ten Commandments, a law for basic human conduct.

Luther reflected on the fact that Moses mixed up these three kinds of law, kind of jumbling them all together. Luther explained that Moses was simply reflecting the reality of daily life. But Christians can tell, he believed, what Moses intended for the political life of Israel, what he intended only for the worship forms of the ancient people of God and what he intended as an expression of the law of God for all people, that law that is also written on human hearts. And that law for faith and love, as he called it, was the law that needed to be preached in the church of his day, needed to continue to call the people of God to repentance since it is that reflection of the basic structure of our humanity, and that structure of humanity apart from which we dare not try to live. For living apart from that structure draws down upon us the wrath of God.

So what the written law does, what the proclaimed law does is simply to draw out, Luther explained to his readers, what we already know about ourselves by nature. We all know that things are not right with us, we all know that there are serious problems in the way in which we are trying to live. And that law comes from the page of Scripture then through Christian conversation, through above all the proclamation of the pastor, to crush or to curb or even to provide information for ascertaining the will of God as believers try to live out their Christian lives. Whenever the word of Scripture crushes or curbs or guides, it's functioning as law. And it will slip from one of those functions to another, the preacher may try to be giving simple information for Christians

to use in their decision making, but some tender consciences will be crushed by that and other will feel only the force of the curb and behave well for the wrong reasons because they are afraid of the law and its condemnation or because they want to cozy up to God through that performance. But fundamentally, as the biblical message comes to God's people, as the texts of the Bible are preached and the burden falls upon the sinner, the law is the agent of God's wrath and it kills.

The true work of the biblical message, the true work of God's word in the Scriptures, is to make alive. And that word of Gospel functions grammatically and theologically as a promise, a promise which cannot be tested and proved and mastered by human effort, a promise which simply must elicit faith and trust from us. And this proper function of the Scripture, to make us wise (as Paul writes) unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus is just that for Luther, it is the wisdom of God which bestows upon us an intimate knowledge, a communion with Jesus Christ, the bridegroom of his people, the church. It is a message that comes to us through faith, the faith which grabs onto Christ, which then experiences this joyous exchange which applies the forgiveness of sins to the broken and repentant sinner, as God imputes the sinner's sin to Christ, who takes it to his tomb to bury it there.

Luther emphasized that preachers at least ought to continually be thinking about the contrasts between law and Gospel as they approach specific texts. On the one hand, the law terrifies the conscience if it is read and understood correctly. On the other hand, the Gospel consoles and builds up and heals consciences. The law demands, it accuses, it condemns, the law brings death to the readers and the hearers of its message. The Gospel, in contrast, offers, it bestows, it promises, it gives, and it gives life rather than death. The law's goal is to demand a pure heart, the law's goal demands complete obedience, it operates in the realm of human performance and it evaluates human performance. The Gospel's goal is to announce the acceptance of the sinner by a gracious God, the Gospel's goal is to announce the justification of the sinner. And it does more than simply announce the information that God comes to love sinners through Jesus Christ, it pronounces God's promise of salvation, [and] it affects that word of promise. The law has the power to evaluate and then to condemn, it does not have the power to give life, only to evaluate how it's going with the gift of life that God has given. But the Gospel has the power to abrogate the law, to say no to the law, to cease the law's voice of condemnation, because the Gospel has the power actually to take away the sins of the sinner, to make that sinner alive in Jesus Christ, and to set that sinner on a new course of righteous obedience to God.

It is important for us to note that for Martin Luther the same words, the same sentence, can be law and can be Gospel, depending on how the hearer understands it. That makes the task of the preacher quite difficult, it makes the preacher rely on the Holy Spirit's power alone. To announce that Christ has come to die for sinners can be a sweet message of forgiveness and peace and life for the repentant sinner whom the Holy Spirit moves in faith, other sinners also in despair over their sin will hear that word that Jesus Christ has come to die on the cross and will wonder how seriously I must have sinned in order to make it necessary for God to come to the cross. And that message of the cross can focus my attention once again only on my sin and not on Christ. So preachers approach their task with prayer, Luther said, as they mine the Scriptures for its meaning and as they carry that meaning to their people.

There is an existential conflict that must be addressed in proclaiming the text of the Bible. And, therefore, law must precede Gospel and proclamation, law must prepare the ground, the sinner will not seek new life if he or she is not convinced that the old life is bad. So law must precede Gospel.

Luther is sometimes accused by people who haven't read him very well of being an Antinomian. But he fought contemporary Antinomians, for he knew that the sinner needs to hear the law and needs to be called back to repentance again and again and again. Because in the mystery of the way God works with fallen human creatures, he does not heal the sinfulness completely, but he lets that struggle continue until physical death. So Luther insisted that Christians also need to hear the law (although their lives are dominated and set by the Gospel), Christians continue to need that call for repentance, which focuses on their sinfulness, and they also need to know more about the will of God. They need to have that help which the law can give to sort out the options for Christian service and love in this world. But, Luther insisted, it is the Gospel which motivates good works, and the real task of preaching is to re-identify the sinners who sit in the pews before the preacher or who stand in the hall before the preacher, to move them to understand who they are now in God's sight. And that recognition of their status as God's children, inseparable from him through Jesus Christ, will move them then also, Luther taught, to do the good works that God has designed human life to live out.

As he then proceeded from this fundamental hermeneutic of law and Gospel centered on Jesus Christ, Luther used certain key concepts to elucidate the message. For instance, in looking at his favorite epistle, Paul's letter to the Romans, he set a hermeneutic in place which revolved around certain key biblical principles.

And in one of the most beautiful summaries and expositions of his theology, in that preface to the Romans which he first wrote in 1522AD and which he tinkered with then later, he set forth a guide for reading this particular epistle, but in a sense the whole of Scriptures, by laying certain key presuppositions, by defining certain key concepts which the reader must keep in mind if the epistle is to be understood as Paul intended it to be understood.

It should not surprise us, I suppose, that the first of the concepts Luther wants to make clear for his readers is the concept of law. And again, he focuses (we might imagine by this time) on the law as the agent of God's wrath. The encounter with the law which Paul sets up for the readers of the Epistle to the Romans, that encounter produces a sense of how serious our sinfulness is and how mighty the wrath of God is against every sin. And Luther reminds his readers that the law increases our sin, that it demands more than we can do, and so we begin to hate it, we begin to resent it. And as we resent God's law, we resent God. So he emphasizes how important it is for Christians to recognize that doing the works of the law, piecemeal, is quite a different thing from fulfilling the law (that is, keeping it perfectly in a way that we might imagine is fully God-pleasing). So Luther writes, the Holy Spirit alone can put faith in the heart which can fulfill the whole of the Decalogue, which can fulfill the whole law of God beginning with his command for us to fear, love and trust in him above all things.

So faith is the second concept which Luther addresses in the preface to the Romans. That faith he directs to the merit of Christ, and he has us recognize that this faith is simply a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes our hearts glad and free, he writes, as he bestows upon us this gift of trust in Jesus Christ. The gift of faith is a divine work, wrought by the Holy Spirit, and it changes us, it gives us new birth, it kills what Luther calls the old Adam in us, that part of us that Paul designated the flesh that wants to hang on to all the self-centeredness that has controlled our lives as sinners. But faith makes us quite a different person, faith turns us into a child of God, faith returns us to Eden, we might say, so that we can fear and love and trust in God above all things. So Luther writes in this preface to the epistle that faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, faith is so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. A knowledge of God's grace, this confidence in God's grace, that what faith is, this knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes people glad and bold and happy in dealing with God, and then in dealing with all creatures. This faith then for Luther is that trust in God that permeates all of the Christian's life, and influences and determines all that a Christian does. And that means then

that faith produces good works, for it frees the believer up from every thought of oppression to want to serve the neighbor in the neighbor's need.

The next pair of words then is sin and righteousness. Sin, Luther begins, is doing that which we ought not to do. But all those deeds that Paul will talk about need to be understood as rooted in the heart. This hermeneutical principle of understanding sin is the principle that unbelief is the root and source of every evil deed. So Luther suggests that when we read the Scriptures, we understand sin not simply as the actions of the individual upon which the biblical writer happens to be focusing at this point, instead beneath that action we must see the attitude, the attitude of unfaith, of unbelief, which he calls the root and the sap and the chief power of every sinful action. He can be so bold as to write, unbelief alone commits sin. In contrast, righteousness is a gift of God. It is that fundamental attitude of faith that seizes or is given the gift of Christ himself. Again, although he doesn't use joyous exchange language, here the concept is there. Faith grasps Christ and through Christ is righteous.

Luther goes on then to give another point of grammatical theological orientation as he defines the concepts of flesh and spirit. Flesh is not simply the lusts of the heart, he defined flesh instead from a First Commandment perspective (no surprise there) as any concentration on the self or on the creaturely instead of God. So flesh includes for Luther any pious religion of good works, any acts of praise toward God that are given not simply to praise God but to earn his favor and merit. And, therefore, spirit is that self-sacrificing, that humble sense of knowing that we are children of God simply because he bestows upon us the status of being his children, because he gives us the gift of adoption as his sons and daughters, his heirs.

From prefaces such as the preface to the Romans, we get a glimpse then of how Luther was operating hermeneutically. He did not really lay down his rules of interpretation in any place in the way that a modern biblical scholar might do, but instead he's working from, we might call it, the analogy of faith Wittenberg style. He is working from the fundamental principles which he sees as revealed in the Scriptures as the very heart of what the Holy Spirit wanted to speak through the biblical writers. So his hermeneutic rests upon the proper distinction of law and Gospel and the centrality of Christ as that is fleshed out in concepts such as law and Gospel, sin and righteousness, flesh and spirit.

With this hermeneutic in mind then, Luther insisted that the interpreter of the text will go to the text and recognize it for what

it is, God speaking in human language. So Luther insisted that his students pick up the necessary philological skills, they had to know the grammar and the vocabulary of the Greek and the Hebrew, and of the Latin translation which he still used a great deal, and also then of the German.

Syntax was important, and Luther as he worked as a translator worked very hard just on the right expression, the right diction, capturing the new language which the Holy Spirit would use for the proclamation of the word to Germans so that the meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew could be conveyed accurately and effectively. And so as he was working on his translation, Luther formed a committee of scholars to help him get just the right sense of the Hebrew and the Greek, and also of the German, and the oddhoke (should this be ad hoc- need to listen to tape) members of that committee who didn't actually attend the meetings in Luther's home, included all sorts of people in Wittenberg. The most famous story, I suppose, is the story of Luther's visits to the local butcher as he was translating Leviticus. So that the German peasant who was hearing or reading the text would know precisely what Moses had intended as he described the sacrifices which God was commanding for ancient Israel. This also reminds us of the importance of the historical setting for Luther. His understanding of the Scripture was deeply rooted in a recognition that God reveals himself in human history, and it was important to know what part of the body of the lamb was to do what in God's economy for ancient Israel.

Luther also knew a great deal about, what we would call, communication theory, about rhetorical theory, and he profited very much from having at his side Philipp Melancthon who was a pioneer in the advance of rhetoric and of dialectic in the sixteenth century. So he was sensitive to the way that words make their impact, not only sensitive to how they lie on the page in their grammatical and syntactical setting.

Luther was also very sensitive to matters of genre. He found that the vigorous and splendid language of the Book of Job betrayed the touch of a skilled dramatist, and he believed that Solomon had probably rewritten the story of Job's experiences so that they might be presented for highest effect. He observed that Isaiah expressed himself with more temperament than did Jeremiah. As he looked at the Psalms, he found the poetry ascribed to Asaph rather obscure. He thought Solomon's poetry was skillfully composed and rich in vocabulary. He compared David's poetry to the most delicate of the ancient Greeks.

Luther believed that the faithful interpretation of the Bible

rested on an accurate, sensitive, informed reading of the human language there, placed within the context of the analogy of faith, placed within the broader strokes of the biblical message, as the interpreter gains that from his own reading of the Bible and from the church's reading of the Bible.

A clear testing ground for some of these principles can be found in Luther's use of the Old Testament itself. I'd like to return then to observations about his interpretation of the Old Testament to shed light on his New Testament hermeneutic as well.

Luther consistently moved, as I have just said, from the analogy of faith and from the broader biblical picture of God's revelation of himself to the understanding of the specific text. And, therefore, while it is not true that in every case in every verse he found some dynamic of law-Gospel application, in every pericope, I think it's fair to say, he saw the word of God placing the burden either on the sinner or on Christ on behalf of the sinner, or he found passages in which hearers could understand that the burden would fall either here or there.

Alongside with finding the law-Gospel dynamic and dialectic throughout the biblical text, he was always on the lookout for Christ. And in the Old Testament he looked for those predictions in the prophets and psalms which would help him proclaim Christ to his own people. He believed that in every text the Holy Spirit was speaking and was speaking for the good of people not only in the days in which he originally inspired this text but also in the 16th century as well. So he appealed to examples of faith and daily godly living, so that he might use them to instruct his own people in the way God wanted them to be living in their day. And it is important to note that in the service of the delivering of the law-Gospel message, in the service of presenting Christ, in the service of letting the Holy Spirit speak to the faith and lives of his people, he sometimes consciously and intentionally used allegory, even though basically he was seeking this intention of the author in what he called the literal or the prophetic literal interpretation of a specific passage.

He did take the historicity of the Old Testament very seriously, on the other hand. For him, faith rested upon history, God had intervened in human history as Jesus of Nazareth, God had shown his mighty arm and his strong hand in any number of ways throughout the Old Testament history of the people of Israel, and so he was very much interested in the historical setting and the historical text. And while he could allegorize, he rejected false allegorizing, he wanted nothing that would depart from the intention of the biblical writers.

The contemporary German scholar of Luther has called his use of the Old Testament in part a construction of a mirror of life. And this mirror of life, Luther then used to reflect the reality of life in a sinful world, with God's message alongside that reality, into the daily lives of his people. Bornkamm noted that because Old Testament society was fundamentally a peasant society, and because Luther had grown up in a peasant society, he was able to catch the rhythms of God's presence with the Old Testament people extremely effectively and convey that to his own contemporaries with amazing skill.

Luther found occasion in the Old Testament comments on the political actions of the people of that period, he found there a good platform for making comments on life in Europe in the sixteenth century. He was convinced that God acts in the rise and fall of nations, God punishes and blesses so that nations may experience his word and be guided along his paths.

God used individuals in the Old Testament, like David, a man of faith who Luther said not only trusted God but also had the miraculous virtue of minding his own business. A model, Luther thought, which all rulers could profit from. David was, of course, a man of faith, but he was also a man of sin' a man who had to repent, who was called to repentance whom God gave through Nathan the gift of repentance. And that too is a model with which preachers may console the disconsolate who believe their sins are too great to be forgiven. Luther praised the wise rule of Solomon, and he took many occasions in treating the Old Testament to warn against wicked counselors and to tell the princes of his day that they must take special care in avoiding the kind of counselors that certain of the Old Testament rulers had around them.

Luther used Old Testament examples to warn against putting faith in arms, putting faith in political alliances. He used the examples of the breakdown of political stability in the Old Testament to remind his contemporaries of the weakness of human law and how important it was that rulers and subjects alike try to preserve the rule of law.

He also found many comments on social life. And as we look at his commentary on Genesis, we see many examples of his treatment of the Christian callings in family life and in occupation, as well as in state and in church there. He found the Book of Ecclesiastes an anti-monastic diatribe because it teaches so well how believers are to live in the world according to the proper kind of godly wisdom for life in the horizontal relationship.

But above all, he found the message of law and Gospel, the

message of faith for faith in the Old Testament. There were so many good examples of the struggle between faith and doubt, especially for the prophets, for the proclaimers of the word. He found in the spiritual arrogance of the Jews a warning for his own time because he recognized the same kind of spiritual arrogance in the church of his own day. And he never tried to hide the flaws and the sins of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, for in the sinfulness of even the faithful people of God, Luther saw the larger picture of God's faithfulness. On the other hand, he did not always see those instances of sin in Abraham, for instance, or other patriarchs and prophets as things that were actually against the will of God. In Abraham's lie about Sarah, he saw the Holy Spirit's provision for preserving Sarah and Abraham's life, he saw the inspiration of the Spirit in this preservation of the people of the promise. And so Abraham's ability to do what was wrong, to lie in order to preserve the promise, was actually a sign of faith. And so in the fraud that Rebekah and Jacob perpetrated to win Jacob the blessing and the promise, Luther saw God's way of working under contraries, working in apparent contradiction with himself. He maintained that sin was sin, but he saw that God could use evil for his purpose.

Throughout his use of the Old Testament, he saw in it a source of all doctrine. Above all, in its presentation of God's claim to be the God of his people, and in its rejection and condemnation of all forms of idolatry, also the idolatry of self-reliance. He saw throughout the Old Testament God's creative power and his providence in nature and in history as that model in the earthly realm for the saving power which God brings to deliver his people from their sins. And, of course, particularly important here were the Christological prophecies, both direct prophecies (as in Isaiah 53) and typological prophecies of all kinds (in the priesthood, in the sacrificial lamb, and other Old Testament rituals, and the like). For in his treatment of the Old Testament, Luther always returned to Christ, for Christ was the center of his hermeneutic, it was the point of the whole Scripture, it was the point of Luther's theology, in the cross of the foolish and impotent Messiah, who is the very wisdom and power of God, and who gives to his people this wisdom and power through faith.