

# CAPTIVE TO THE WORD

*Martin Luther: Doctor of  
Sacred Scripture*

by

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*"I am bound by the Scriptures . . .  
and my conscience is captive  
to the Word of God".*

Martin Luther



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## LUTHER AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

“THE REFORMATION INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE . . . was given classical expression by Martin Luther,” writes Robert M. Grant. “His contribution has permanent value. . . . Today the reviving theological interpretation of the Bible must look back to him.”<sup>1</sup> That judgment by a distinguished contemporary scholar carries considerable conviction. Its implications are being increasingly recognized. If the current dialogue about Scripture focuses on the question of its interpretation – and it does – then Luther’s hermeneutical approach has something to tell us still. Once the broader concept of revelation has been dealt with, those who seek to reassess the value of the Bible today are confronted with the problem of its interpretation. Even if its authority, inspiration and unity are recognized, how is it to be treated? That is a burning issue for us, as it was for Luther in his time.

He began by laying it down as axiomatic that the Scriptures are not to be pushed around at the whim of the commentator. He would have none of such cavalier methods. He repudiated the role of reason as the sole interpreter of God’s Word. The truths of revelation cannot be comprehended intellectually – that is to say, they cannot be arrived at by any ratiocinative process. This is not to imply that once the truth of Scripture has been disclosed that it is not intellectually satisfying. Luther’s strictures on “the devil’s bride, reason” must be understood in these terms.<sup>2</sup> They were directed against the abuse of reason in opposing, distorting and rejecting the Word, not against its proper use as it submits in faith to receive that Word. The right apprehension of Scripture, declared Luther, “does not arise from the human heart or mind,” since it is “a teaching revealed from heaven”.<sup>3</sup> Nor can it be grasped by the self-opinionated. The man who seeks to impose his own will on Scripture will find it closed and barred to him. “He will never smell or taste a spark or a tittle of the true meaning of a passage or a word of Scripture. He may make much noise and even imagine that he is improving on Holy Scripture, but he will never succeed.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (1954), pp. 116–17.

<sup>2</sup> LW. 51. 374. Luther also described reason as “Frau Hulda” – a capricious elfin creature in Germanic mythology – and as “the lovely whore” or “the devil’s prostitute” (LW. 40. 174; LW. 51. 374; WA. 51. 126).

LW. 12. 87.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 23. 230.

On this ground, Luther set aside the right of the pope or his priests, the Church or the councils, to interpret the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> His complaint was that too often they had been guilty of wilful misrepresentation. Luther's favourite phrase to describe such maltreatment roundly accused them of pulling it about "like a nose of wax".<sup>2</sup> "When some ascribe to the Scriptures the flexibility of a waxen nose, and say that it is like bending a reed, this is due to the work of those who misuse the Holy Word of God for their incompetent and unstable opinions and glosses. They reach the point where the Word of God, which is fitting for everything, fits nothing."<sup>3</sup> Luther, however, did not propose to succumb to them. "But we will be masters over these wiseacres, so that they cannot twist the nose of Holy Writ as they please; and if they do, it will be on their own head."<sup>4</sup>

The interpretation of Scripture is the prerogative of God and not of man. "If God does not open and explain Holy Writ, no one can understand it; it will remain a closed book, enveloped in darkness."<sup>5</sup> As Joseph realized, "interpretations belong to God" (Gen. 40:8). God gives His Word and the interpretation too.<sup>6</sup> This He does through the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke about the gatekeeper who opens the door (John 10:3): He is none other than the Interpreter Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Without Him there is no revelation nor any interpretation either.<sup>8</sup> "The Holy Spirit must be the Teacher and Guide."<sup>9</sup> It was "the work of the Holy Spirit alone" to illuminate the heart of Joseph so as to be able to explain Pharaoh's dreams: it is His function to expound the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup> The disclosures of God "require the Holy Spirit as an interpreter".<sup>11</sup> The "divine and heavenly doctrines" of "repentance, sin, grace, justification, worship to God" to be found in Scripture, cannot enter the heart of man "unless they be taught by the great Spirit".<sup>12</sup> The articles of faith are statements of such things as "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived" (I Cor. 2:9). "They can be taught and understood only by the Word and the Holy Spirit. It is characteristic of all the articles of faith that reason abhors them, as we see in the case of the heathen and the Jews. They cannot be understood without the Holy Spirit, for they are abysses of divine wisdom in which the reason is completely submerged and lost."<sup>13</sup>

"Proper understanding" of Scripture comes only through the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> It is not enough to possess the revelation of the Word: it is also necessary to have the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit so as to know its meaning.<sup>15</sup> Concerning the doctrine of the Logos in John 1, Luther stressed that "it is foreign and strange to reason, and particularly to the worldly-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. 105.<sup>4</sup> *LW.* 24. 96.<sup>7</sup> *LW.* 13. 16.<sup>9</sup> *LW.* 13. 87; cf. *LW.* 30. 230; *WA.* 13. 303.<sup>10</sup> *LW.* 7. 150.<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 284-5.<sup>2</sup> *PE.* 1. 367.<sup>3</sup> *LW.* 13. 17.<sup>8</sup> *LW.* 7. 112.<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.<sup>14</sup> *LW.* 24. 367.<sup>5</sup> *LW.* 14. 338.<sup>6</sup> *LW.* 7. 151.<sup>12</sup> *LW.* 12. 203.<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

wise. No man can accept it unless his heart has been touched and opened by the Holy Spirit. It is as impossible of comprehension by reason as it is inaccessible to the touch of the hand."<sup>1</sup> He concluded that "in the end only the Holy Spirit from heaven above can create listeners and pupils who accept this doctrine and believe that the Word is God, that God's Son is the Word, and that the Word became flesh, that He is also the Light who can illumine all men who come into the world, and that without this Light all is darkness."<sup>2</sup>

Luther inquired into the process involved as the Spirit acts as Interpreter. The Word of God in Scripture being spiritual, "excels reason and rises higher than reason can rise."<sup>3</sup> Hence "understanding of these words that I hear must be wrought in me by the Holy Spirit. He makes me spiritual too. The Word is spiritual and I also become spiritual: for He inscribes it in my heart, and then, in brief, all is spirit."<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit, Luther insisted, works only through the Word. "The Spirit is given to no one without and outside the Word; He is given only through the Word."<sup>5</sup> Without the Word, "the Holy Spirit does not operate."<sup>6</sup> The Spirit who originally spoke the Word and inspired the writers who recorded it, remains united with the Word, and when He interprets it to us today He recreates it to become once again a living, an oral Word.<sup>7</sup> As the divine interpreter, then, the Spirit without appeals to the Spirit within the sacred writings. Luther laid particular stress on this factor when he argued against the charismatic radicals, some of whom tended to dissociate the Spirit from the Word.

A further elaboration of the Spirit's hermeneutical role is to be found in Luther's axiom that Scripture is its own interpreter.<sup>8</sup> "One passage of Scripture must be clarified by other passages," was a rule which he often reiterated.<sup>9</sup> It was only another way of saying that the Holy Spirit is the true interpreter. To interpret Scripture by Scripture is simply to let the Holy Spirit do His own work. It is "better to read Scripture according to what is inside", Luther claimed, as over against the rabbinical exegetes who adhered to the maxim that "Holy Scripture cannot be understood without what is above and what is below", i.e., the upper and lower vowel points.<sup>10</sup> After shedding light on Deuteronomy 1:20 by reference to Numbers 13:2, Luther added: "Such is the way of the whole Scripture:

<sup>1</sup> LW. 22. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> LW. 23. 175.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> EA. 58. 163; cf. SL. 11. 1073.

<sup>6</sup> EA. 58. 164.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Cf. Pieper, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 315.

<sup>8</sup> *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (WA. 7. 97). On this axiom in Luther, cf. Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic", *New Frontiers in Theology*, Vol. II, *The New Hermeneutic* ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (1964), pp. 77-80.

<sup>9</sup> LW. 37. 177.

<sup>10</sup> LW. 8. 142. "He who does not pay attention to what is written both above and below in books perverts the words of the living God" - a rabbinical dictum quoted by Sebastian Münster cf. Ibid., 141. n. 47.

it wants to be interpreted by a comparison of passages from everywhere, and understood under its own direction. The safest of all methods for discerning the meaning of Scripture is to work for it by drawing together and scrutinizing passages."<sup>1</sup> "That is the true method of interpretation," he declared elsewhere, "which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way."<sup>2</sup> This comparative technique had been recommended by some of the fathers, including Origen, Jerome and Augustine.<sup>3</sup> Luther acknowledged his indebtedness to the past when he wrote: "The holy fathers explained Scripture by taking the clear, lucid passages and with them shed light on obscure and doubtful passages."<sup>4</sup> "In this manner," he declared, "Scripture is its own light. It is a fine thing when Scripture explains itself."<sup>5</sup> This self-interpreting factor in Scripture was related in Luther's mind to the basic perspicuity of the Word, of which mention was made in dealing with his view of revelation.<sup>6</sup>

In establishing the principle that one passage must be explained by another, Luther made his meaning explicit: "namely, a doubtful and obscure passage must be explained by a clear and certain passage."<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the clear passage needs no explanation, although, of course, it may be corroborated by other Scriptures. In his controversy with the *Schwärmer*, Luther had occasion to object to their habit of obscuring what was already sufficiently plain by further comparisons. Behind their spurious exegesis of John 6, for instance, there lay the misconception that even what is clear must be further elaborated. Luther repudiated such a work of exegetical supererogation. "The result of this method will be that no passage in Scripture will remain certain and clear, and the comparison of one passage with another will never end. . . . To demand that clear and certain passages be explained by drawing in other passages amounts to an iniquitous deriding of the truth and injection of fog into the light. If one set out to explain all passages by first comparing them with other passages, he would be reducing the whole of Scripture to a vast and uncertain chaos."<sup>8</sup>

But whilst it is unnecessary to pull in parallel passages to supplement what is amply clear and plain, yet it is advantageous to take note of complementary truths lest an imbalance should creep in. "Well known is the stupidity of the ostrich, which thinks it is totally covered when its head is covered with some branch. Thus a godless teacher seizes upon one particular saying of Scripture and thinks his notion is fine, not noticing

<sup>1</sup> LW. 9. 21.

<sup>2</sup> PE. 3. 334.

<sup>3</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*, 4; Jerome, *Epistolae*, 53. 6. 7; Augustine, *De Doctrina*, 2. ix. 14.

<sup>4</sup> SL. 20. 856.

<sup>5</sup> SL. 11. 2335.

<sup>6</sup> Above, p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> SL. 5. 335. In this and some subsequent paragraphs I am reproducing a certain amount of material which first appeared in my Tyndale Lecture, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 21-33, with the kind permission of the publishers.

<sup>8</sup> SL. 20. 325.

that he is maintaining his position as one who is bare and unarmed on every side."<sup>1</sup> It is such failure to envisage the wholeness of Scripture which leads to unbalanced presentation. On the other hand, it is equally dangerous to range over the biblical terrain in a comprehensive manner without paying due attention to context. All that can be produced by such a procedure is an unassorted pot-pourri of excerpts. "If it were fair to take a word or two out of context and to ignore what precedes or follows, or what Scripture says elsewhere, then I, too, could interpret and twist all Holy Writ . . . as I chose."<sup>2</sup>

The formula of Scripture as its own interpreter was closely linked by Luther with another: that all exposition should be in agreement with the analogy of faith. Everything must be "weighed according to the analogy of faith and the rule of Scripture".<sup>3</sup> The use of this term by Luther and the reformers generally was in fact a misapplication of its original occurrence in Romans 12:6. It proved useful nevertheless to delineate Luther's own attitude to Scripture. For him the *analogia fidei* was the Scripture itself. No extraneous canon was invoked. He found his sufficient criterion within the Word of God. Creeds and confessions were of value only in so far as they embodied the rule of Scripture – as Luther believed the great historical affirmations to do. He demanded, however, that reference should be made to the Scripture as a whole and not merely to selected parts of it.<sup>4</sup> The "abominable sophists . . . support themselves with Scripture, because they would look laughable if they tried to force only their own dreams on men; but they do not quote Scripture in its entirety. They always snatch up what appears to favour them; but what is against them they either cleverly conceal or corrupt with their cunning glosses."<sup>5</sup> That is why Luther could call the Bible a heresy book, because the mere citation of texts, without recourse to the rule of faith, may be so manipulated as to give the impression of vindicating the most extreme heterodoxy. What Luther means by *analogia fidei* is neatly expressed by James Wood when he said that "the interpretation has to be congruent with the general norm of the Word of God".<sup>6</sup>

This is something radically different, however, from Schleiermacher's *das Schriftganze* by which he claimed that the Christian articles of faith must not be drawn from those Scriptures which treat of separate doctrines, but only from the general scope and tenor of the Bible. He contended that "it is a most precarious procedure to quote Scripture passages in dogmatic treatises, and besides, in itself, quite inadequate".<sup>7</sup> Luther was equally

<sup>1</sup> LW. 9. 135.<sup>2</sup> LW. 24. 104.<sup>3</sup> LW. 3. 168.<sup>4</sup> OL. 3. 185.<sup>5</sup> LW. 1. 107.<sup>6</sup> James D. Wood, *The Interpretation of the Bible: A Historical Introduction* (1958), p. 89.<sup>7</sup> Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Die Christliche Glaube den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche*, Bd. I (2nd edn. 1830), para. 30; Pieper, op. cit., Vol I, p. 201. *Das Schriftganze* – the general scope of Scripture.

conscious of the peril involved. He disapproved the indiscriminate concatenation of Bible verses without due respect to their meaning and context, as we have seen. "Heretofore I have held that where something was to be proved by the Scriptures, the Scripture quoted must really refer to the point at issue. I learn now that it is enough to throw many passages together helter-skelter whether they fit or not. If this is to be the way, then I can easily prove from the Scriptures that beer is better than wine."<sup>1</sup> But, as Mueller brings out, Schleiermacher's application of *das Schriftganze* was only a pretext to excuse his thoroughly unscriptural method of deriving theological truths from reason or the pious self-consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Theodor Kliefoth was surely justified in dismissing this alleged disparity between the part and the whole in Scripture, as represented in Schleiermacher (and in Hofmann and Ihmels after him), as an "inconceivable concept".<sup>3</sup>

This brings us to what is perhaps the most valuable of Luther's hermeneutical principles, namely, his insistence on the primacy of the literal or grammatico-historical sense. He resolutely set aside the verbal legerdemain involved in the multiple exegesis of the Schoolmen, and firmly took his stand on the plain and obvious meaning of the Word. It was through this that he came to his own illumination, and he made it the main plank in his interpretative platform. "The Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense, as they call it. For it alone is the whole substance of faith and Christian theology; it alone holds its ground in trouble and trial."<sup>4</sup> And again: "If we want to treat Holy Scripture skilfully, our effort must be concentrated on arriving at one simple, pertinent, and sure literal sense."<sup>5</sup> Those who are occupied with the exposition of Holy Writ "should take pains to have one definite and simple understanding of Scripture and not to be a wanderer and vagabond, like the rabbis, the Scholastic theologians, and the professors of law, who are always toiling with ambiguities".<sup>6</sup> It is with "the true and actual meaning" that commentators should be concerned.<sup>7</sup>

As we shall show later, Luther did not altogether set aside spiritual interpretation, but he emphatically urged the priority and superiority of the literal sense. For a thousand years the Church had buttressed its theological edifice by means of an authoritative exegesis which depended on allegory as its chief medium of interpretation. Luther struck a mortal blow at this vulnerable spot. From his own experience in the monastery he knew the futility of allegorization – and stigmatized it as "mere jugglery", "a

<sup>1</sup> WA. 6. 301.

<sup>2</sup> J. Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics: A Handbook of Doctrinal Theology* (1934), p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Kliefoth, *Der Schriftbeweis des Dr. J. C. K. von Hofmann* (1860), p. 32; J. C. K. von Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis: Ein theologischer Untersuchung*, Bd. I (1852), pp. 671–3; Ludwig Ihmels, *Zentralfragen der Dogmatik in der Gegenwart* (1911), pp. 88–89.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 9. 24.

<sup>5</sup> LW. 3. 27.

<sup>6</sup> LW. 8. 209.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



merry chase", "monkey tricks", "looney talk".<sup>1</sup> He had suffered much from that sort of pseudo-exposition of which John Lowe speaks so trenchantly, where "anything can mean anything".<sup>2</sup> "When I was a monk," Luther frankly acknowledged, "I was an adept at allegory. I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans, I came to have some knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is no allegory, and learned to know what Christ was."<sup>3</sup> His emancipation was only gradual, for there are occasions, especially in his *Operationes in Psalmos* (1518-21), when we catch him relapsing into his former style. "It was very difficult for me to break away from my habitual zeal for allegory," he confided. "And yet I was aware that allegories were empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures. It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine."<sup>4</sup>

Luther did not altogether abandon allegory, for in the passage quoted above (which is from his late lectures on Genesis) he added: "After this (i.e., the literal sense) has been treated and correctly understood, the one may employ allegories as an adornment and flowers to embellish or illuminate the account. The bare allegories, which stand in no relation to the account, and do not illuminate it, should simply be disapproved as empty dreams. . . . Therefore let those who want to make use of allegories base them on the historical account itself. The historical account is like logic in that it teaches what is certainly true; the allegory, on the other hand, is like rhetoric in that it ought to illustrate the historical account but has no value at all for giving proof."<sup>5</sup> Commenting on a different chapter in Genesis, Luther wrote: "But now that the foundation has been laid on the basis of other sure and clear passages of Scripture, what is there to prevent the additional use of an allegory, not only for the sake of adorning but also for the sake of teaching, in order that the subject may become clearer?"<sup>6</sup>

Luther's chief objection to the heavenly prophets at Zwickau was that they spiritualized away the literal sense of Scripture. "Brother" - so he addressed Karlstadt - "the natural meaning of the words is queen, transcending all subtle, acute, sophisticated fancy. From it we may not deviate unless compelled by a clear article of the faith. Otherwise the spiritual jugglers would not have a single letter in Scripture. Therefore, interpretations of God's Word must be lucid and definite, having a firm, sure,

<sup>1</sup> PE. 3. 334; LW. 9. 7; cf. Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (1886), p. 328.

<sup>2</sup> John Lowe, in *The Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Clifford Dugmore (1944), p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> WA. 1. 136.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 1. 283.

<sup>5</sup> LW. 3. 192; cf. LW. 9. 24-25 - "Not as though the allegorical meaning proved or supported the statement of doctrine; but it is proved and supported by the statement just as a house does not hold up the foundation but is held up by the foundation."

<sup>6</sup> LW. 3. 192; cf. LW. 8. 269; LW. 9. 8, where Luther speaks of "a proper allegory".

and true foundation on which one may confidently rely.”<sup>1</sup> Erasmus was rebuked for the same tendency. “When then shall we ever have any plain and pure text, without tropes and conclusions, either for or against free will? Has the Scripture no such texts anywhere? And shall the cause of free will remain for ever in doubt, like a reed shaken with the wind, as being that which can be supported by no certain text, but which stands upon conclusions and tropes only, introduced by men mutually disagreeing with each other? But let our sentiment rather be this: that neither conclusion nor trope is to be admitted into the Scriptures, unless the evident state of the particulars, or the absurdity of any particular as militating against an article of faith, require it: but, that the simple, pure and natural meaning of the words is to be adhered to, which is according to the rules of grammar and to that common use of speech which God has given to men. For if everyone be allowed, according to his own desire, to invent conclusions and tropes in the Scriptures, what will the whole Scripture together be, but a reed shaken with the wind, or a kind of Vertumnus?”<sup>2</sup> This too was the offence of the Romanists who, according to Luther, tossed the words of God to and fro, as gamblers throw their dice, and took “from the Scripture its single, simple and stable meaning”.<sup>3</sup>

Luther apparently preferred to speak of the grammatical and historical rather than the literal sense, although it is evident that the three are intimately related. “No violence is to be done to the words of God, whether by man or angel. They are to be retained in their simplest meaning as far as possible. Unless the context manifestly compels it, they are not to be understood apart from their grammatical and proper sense, lest we give our adversaries occasion to make a mockery of all the Scriptures.”<sup>4</sup> This is “not well named the literal sense”, for by the letter the Bible means something quite different, as Augustine recognized.<sup>5</sup> “They do much better who call it the grammatical, historical sense. It would be well to call it the speaking or language sense, as St. Paul does in I Corinthians 14, because it is understood by everybody in the sense of the spoken language.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Pelikan, the basic hermeneutical principle which Luther sought to defend might be expressed thus: “A text of the Scriptures had to be taken as it stood unless there were compelling reasons for taking it otherwise.”<sup>7</sup> Anyone who took it upon himself to interpret the words in any other sense than as read had the obligation to prove that such a departure was justifiable.<sup>8</sup> It seems that Luther allowed for three possible

<sup>1</sup> LW. 40. 190.

<sup>2</sup> BW. 205. Vertumnus was a god who changed or metamorphosed himself. The Romans connected him with the change of seasons, the ebb and flow of tides, and the purchase and sale of goods or land. (Propertius, 4. 2. 6; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 14. 642.)

<sup>3</sup> LW. 32. 26.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 36. 30.

<sup>5</sup> PE. 3. 352.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 352-3.

<sup>7</sup> LW. Companion Volume, 126.

<sup>8</sup> LW. 37. 34; cf. 174, 177.

grounds: the statement of the text itself that it was not to be interpreted literally, the evidence of another passage Scripture to this same effect, and the application of the *analogia fidei*.<sup>1</sup> It has to be admitted that in practice this axiom involved the expositor in something of a difficulty. Who was to decide the relative weight of the evidence, and which text was to interpret which? Luther's own exegesis at times reflected this dilemma.

Even though Luther, then, placed unusual emphasis on the literal sense, he did not refuse to permit any other. It can hardly be said that to *sola Scriptura* he allied the further principle *sola historica sententia*, as Gerrish claims.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the latter went on to admit that Luther even allowed a legitimate use of allegory. In effect, as Kurt Aland brings out, Luther did concede a dual meaning in Scripture – or at least two aspects of the same meaning.<sup>3</sup> There is the outward meaning obtained by the help of the Word, and another which lies in the knowledge of the heart. That is why Luther talked so much about the understanding of Scripture by faith. To read without faith is to walk in darkness.<sup>4</sup> Nothing but faith can comprehend the truth.<sup>5</sup> Through faith we have all we need to grasp the Word of God.<sup>6</sup> We must moreover feel the words of Scripture in the heart if we are to arrive at their deepest meaning. "Experience is necessary for the understanding of the Word. It is not merely to be repeated or known, but to be lived and felt."<sup>7</sup> Thus, although Luther was staunchly opposed to unbridled allegorization, he nevertheless admitted a significance in Scripture which went beyond the strictly literal.<sup>8</sup>

The Lutheran dogmaticians elaborated this unsystematized insight into a distinction between the external and internal *forma* of Scripture. The external *forma* is the idiom and style of writing. The internal *forma* is its inspired meaning, "the thoughts of the divine mind concerning divine mysteries, thoughts which were conceived in eternity for our salvation, revealed in time and communicated to us in Scripture," so Robert Preus explains.<sup>9</sup> The internal *forma*, then, is that which makes the Scripture what it is, and distinguishes the Bible from any other book. Quenstedt defined it thus: "We must distinguish between the grammatical and outer meaning of the divine Word and the spiritual, inner and divine meaning of the divine Word. The first is the *forma* of the Word of God in so far as it is a word, the latter is its *forma* in so far as it is a divine Word. The first can be grasped even by any unregenerate man, the latter, however, cannot be

<sup>1</sup> LW. Companion Volume, 126-7; LW. 37. 186, 262; LW. 40. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Gerrish, "Biblical Authority and the Reformation", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. X (1957), p. 346.

<sup>3</sup> Kurt Aland, "Luther as Exegete", *Expository Times*, Vol. LXIX (1957), p. 46.

<sup>4</sup> LW. 8. 287.

<sup>5</sup> LW. 22. 8.

<sup>6</sup> LW. 30. 69.

<sup>7</sup> WA. 42. 195.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. Skevington Wood, *The Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>9</sup> R. Preus, op. cit., p. 14.

received except by a mind which has been enlightened."<sup>1</sup> As we shall be demonstrating in the next chapter, this tension is only resolved when the outer and inner meaning of Scripture are seen to cohere in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

One of the features of current hermeneutical discussion is the interest being shown in what is identified as the plenary sense of Scripture. One of its outstanding advocates is Joseph Coppens of Louvain.<sup>3</sup> He defines it as the deeper sense intended by the Holy Spirit which is included along with the literal meaning. It may go beyond what the writer himself originally had in mind. This *sensus plenior* is "related to, homogenous with, and derived from, the literal sense".<sup>4</sup> It becomes explicit through the text itself, through the rest of Scripture, and through the illumination of the Spirit. Another Roman Catholic scholar, Reginald Fuller, thinks that, though "the concept of the plenary sense is still in the process of elucidation and is far from being universally accepted", it is nevertheless "surely very reasonable".<sup>5</sup> Now, without hailing Luther as the progenitor of modern theories which he might well have repudiated, it would appear that it was along such lines that his fertile mind was working. What a strange circumstance it is that this interpretational clue should be nowadays attracting the attention primarily of Roman exegetes!

<sup>1</sup> Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica* (3rd. edn., 1696), Vol. I, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Below, pp. 176-180.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Joseph Coppens, *The Old Testament and the Critics* (E.T. 1942) and *Von Christlichen Verständnis des Alten Testaments* (1952). Also Raymond E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (1964).

<sup>4</sup> J. D. Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>5</sup> *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard, Edmund F. Sutcliffe, Reginald C. Fuller, Ralph Russell (1953), p. 55 39k.