

ARTICLE VI.

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE AND CRITICISM OF
SCRIPTURE.

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III.

THUS far, it will be noticed, no direct statements of Luther have been cited illustrative of his views of inspiration. This may seem to be an oversight. But it was intentional, and the explanation of it is simple. We have seen that, while the Bible as a formal authority in the strict sense of the term probably influenced Luther to some degree, yet its rôle as a formal authority in his development was a very subordinate one. The whole emphasis fell on the content of the Bible. The Bible was true for him because authenticated in his experience through the work of the Holy Spirit. The formal authority of Scripture was practically resolved into the *soie* authority of Scripture, not apart from, but including its content, as against all other external authorities. In the light of this peculiar attitude of Luther toward Scripture, determined by his historical development, his statements upon the canon and historical contents of Scripture have been examined. They have been found to be surprisingly free. Why? Because Luther was influenced by the religious content of Scripture far more than by its form. In other words, his religious experience, and not an inspiration theory, is the only key by which to explain Luther's criticism of the Bible. It was proper, therefore, to look at these criticisms from the point of view of his religious experience, rather than from the point of view

of a possible inspiration theory. If, on the other hand, the formal authority of Scripture, in the strict sense of the term, had received the chief emphasis in Luther's development, the method followed in this article would have been highly improper. If we start from the formal authority of Scripture as distinct from its content, and place the emphasis here, this necessarily involves an inspiration theory. The Scripture as *materia* is self-authenticating, but the Scripture as *forma* can scarcely be so. If Scripture is not primarily true because of the truth of its content, it must be true because of the truth of its origin, i. e. because it is divinely inspired.

The practical inference from these considerations is simply this, that, if the controlling fact in Luther's doctrine of Scripture is his religious experience of its content, we are to examine his inspiration theory in the light of his criticisms which are explicable only by this fact, and not *vice versa*. Hence it is that those statements which seem to express or imply a more or less rigid theory of inspiration have been reserved to the present point in the discussion.¹ But, as Luther nowhere elaborates a doctrine of inspiration, we must arrive at his views indirectly.

1. Since we have just seen that to the degree in which the formal authority of the Bible is recognized, to that degree its inspiration is implied, it will be best to begin with those statements which recognize the Bible as a formal authority.

Here again the historical conditions which confronted Luther must be remembered.

¹The order of treatment follows that of Scheel's monograph, Walther (Theologisches Literaturblatt, 1903, No. 19) unjustly criticises Scheel for first grouping together those experiences of Luther, which are for him "sympathisch," and then those which are "unsympathisch." But Scheel's treatment seems to me to be objectively justified in the peculiarity of the development of Luther's doctrine of Scripture.

(1) At the outset, his contest was with the formal authorities of the church. To these he opposed Scripture, not primarily as a formal authority, but as containing a great truth which he himself had experienced. At the same time Luther must show that his experience was not a mere subjective delusion. His experience by itself would have no weight with others unless he could show that it was objectively authenticated. We have seen him, therefore, in his contest with papacy, justifying his experience from the Scriptures. But the Scriptures were one of the several formal authorities of the church. Accordingly, when Luther used it against the church, of necessity he must use it in a measure as a formal authority. The objective authority, so necessary for him, easily becomes the formal authority, especially when it is the *sole* objective.

(2) Again, from within the Reformation movement itself there arose very unexpectedly though quite logically a necessity for emphasizing this formal side of scriptural authority. In his contest with Rome, Luther had asserted the right of the individual against the church. Excesses always accompany any movement of real significance to society. It is not surprising, therefore, that Luther's healthy subjectivity was exaggerated by many to an unwarranted degree. Groups of so-called "fanatics" arose, e. g. Carlstadt, the Zwickau Prophets, and the Anabaptists, who had visions and dreamed dreams, and often substituted their own revelations for the Scripture. These excesses Luther combatted most vigorously. As against this exaggerated subjectivism, Luther was again led to insist on the *objective* authority of Scripture.¹

Thus, from two exactly opposite points of departure, we see how the tendency would develop to emphasize the formal authority of Scripture. We have said that the Reformation

¹ Cf. Harnack, *Hist. of Dogma*, vii. 246.

was born in a religious experience. This experience must authenticate itself against Rome by an appeal to the external Scripture. On the other hand, it must guard itself against a dissolution into an uncontrolled and morbid mysticism, and thus again it is led to emphasize the external, which almost necessarily meant for Luther the formal authority of Scripture.

(3) A third thing which led Luther to lay as much emphasis as he did upon the formal authority of Scripture was his unreasoning hostility to reason. Luther was a religious genius, but not a constructive philosopher, and in his attitude toward the "harlot," reason, his limitations become somewhat painfully apparent. In the sacramentarian controversies his hostility toward reason is especially manifest. This leads him again to insist on the wording of Scripture. He will listen to no arguments against his interpretation of the "words of institution," which appear to him to spring from human reason, but instead he takes his stand on the text of Scripture, and thus again is led to insist upon its formal authority.

In Luther's exposition of 1 Cor. xv. we meet with a passage which is worth giving *in extenso*, as it illustrates most of the points just made. He is speaking of the unreasonableness, from a human point of view, of a bodily resurrection, where a leg is in England, an arm in Germany, a skull in France, as is the case with the bones of the saints:—

'When one thinks of this, and judges by human reason, the whole thing is lost, just as one who feels his sin and does not hold to the word of forgiveness through Christ is lost. The same is true of heretics in the high article of Christ [his divinity] and of the Fanatics in their view of the sacrament, because they do not simply believe the word, but speculate with the reason, which can say nothing else than that bread is bread, and ask, how it can be Christ's body. . . . For they will not remain in the Word, or allow themselves to be taken by it, but they allow play to their wit, and will understand all about it. . . . In short, if you will not let God's

Word count for more than all your feeling, eyes, senses, and heart, then you will be lost. For example, I feel my sin and the devil around my neck, but shall I argue from my feeling? Then I would despair. If I would be helped, I must say, I feel indeed God's wrath, devils, death, and hell, but the Word says otherwise, that I have a gracious God. . . . I feel that I and all others must rot in the grave, but the Word says otherwise, that I will arise with great glory. But you will say, If you [Luther] confess that one does not feel, then your preaching is a dream. If there is anything in it, experience must show something of this. I reply, that one must first *believe beyond experience*. How then, if it is true, must not experience come also. . . . Indeed, yes, but I mean that feeling follows, faith must *precede* without and beyond feeling.'

In the same passage he points out the fact that Paul at 1 Cor. xv. 3ff. adduces two witnesses for the resurrection,— Scripture, and the experience of many others and himself:—

'See how he praises the testimony of Scripture by insisting upon this word "according to the Scripture." He does so, not without reason. In the first place, to warn all the mad spirits [the Fanatics] not to despise the Scripture and the external Word.¹ Instead of this, they seek mysterious revelations, . . . and look upon Scripture as a dead letter. But hear you, at this point, how St. Paul adduces Scripture for his strongest witness, and shows how it is impossible to preserve one doctrine except through the bodily and written word, through himself [Paul] or others orally preached. For it stands here Scripture! Scripture!'

As against the position of the Fanatics, that the Scripture is a dead letter, and cannot give life, Luther says again in the same context:—

'Although the letter in itself does not give life, yet it must be present and heard and received, and the Holy Spirit must work through it in the heart, and the heart must be preserved in faith through and in the Word, for the Holy Spirit has summed up his wisdom and counsels and all his mysteries in the Word, and revealed them in Scripture.'

He concludes by asserting that there are two witnesses, and as it were two touchstones, for the right teaching, namely Scripture and Experience.² In this passage we have the doc-

¹ Cf. especially the articles of Smalcaid, cited by Harnack, *op. cit.*, vii. 249, for the insistence on Scripture against the fanatics.

² E. A. ii. 88 ff. (1534).

trines of forgiveness, the bodily resurrection, and the sacrament, supported on the authority of Scripture, as distinct from and even opposed to human reason, feeling, and experience.

In another sermon he expresses himself even more paradoxically in discussing the Trinity:—

'When I hear the Word sound as from above, I believe it, although I cannot grasp or understand it, as I can understand that 2 and 5 are 7. . . . Yet when He says from above, Nay, but they are 8, then I should believe it against my reason and feeling. . . . There you have the Word and Reason against each other. She [Reason] is not to assume the mastery or to be judge and doctor, but to take off the hat, and say, Two are one, though I do not see or understand. But I believe it. Why? Because of Him who spoke it from above.'¹

The whole tone and temper of these passages differs in a remarkable manner from those passages cited above, where Luther speaks of the axiomatic quality of the religious content of Scripture. They may perhaps be reconciled in a measure on the supposition that, in the first series of passages, Luther has in mind the axiomatic quality of Scripture only for the spiritually illuminated, while in those just cited he is thinking of persons who propose to judge Scripture by the human reason unaided by the Spirit.²

¹ E. A. xix. 8 ff. (1533).

² When Luther says that faith must precede feeling, he seems to be thinking of the feeling of the natural man. This new view is corroborated by E. A. xi. 218 ff., where he again discusses the same subject as E. A. li. 88 ff.: 'There are two things, feeling and faith. Faith is of this nature that it does not feel, but lets the reason go, shuts the eyes, and submits absolutely to the Word. . . . But feeling goes no further than what one can comprehend with the reason and the outward senses. . . . Hence feeling is opposed to faith, and faith to feeling.' That feeling is here the practical equivalent of reason, and not a spiritual experience, is also clear from the fact that a little further on (p. 221) Luther speaks of 'another feeling, seeing, hearing,' etc., which, according to the context, must be a spiritual feeling. Only when this distinction is kept in mind, can the statement just cited be harmonized with those passages cited above, where the axiomatic quality of biblical truths which *must be felt in the heart*, is insisted upon.

It may also be urged that these doctrines all stand very closely connected with Luther's peculiar experience. Thus Köstlin says:—

'But even that authority which he here attributes to the Word is by no means for him external or legalistic. Rather, the God whom one hears speak in the word of Christ is the Heavenly Father, who wins the heart with the revelation of his love, and by this means awakes in them the absolute confidence in the truth of his Word. While he believes on Christ's divinity or on the Trinity, because of the word of Scripture, nevertheless this is always with him a faith which originates neither merely nor chiefly under the impression of the majesty of Christ, who speaks to him there, or the God who talks to him in it, but rather in the inner experiences, in which he has come to experience the divine mercy.'

In proof of this, the interesting statement of Luther is cited from the "Table Talk": 'I have learned *through Scripture*, in the greatest agonies and trials, that Christ is God, and became incarnate, likewise the article of the Trinity.'¹

What Köstlin says here is very possibly true; but the way in which Luther expresses himself in the passages under discussion certainly suggests that he at times was led to emphasize the formal at the expense of the religious authority of Scripture. This comes out even more clearly in other passages, where Luther is discussing matters which really have no bearing upon his religious experience. On the difficulties in the first chapter of Genesis, he remarks, 'One must not take council of reason, but give honor to the Holy Spirit, that what he speaks is divine truth; and one must believe his words while he blinds the eyes of reason,'² and again, alluding to the strange conceptions involved in i. 4ff., he observes: 'What sort of water it is which is over the firmament, we cannot very well know. Hence we must give room to the Holy Spirit,

¹ Köstlin, II. 41.

² E. A. xlv. 301 (1537-38).

and say that he knows better than we do.'¹ Here the Bible has become an infallible text-book on geology. On Jonah he says: 'This history of the prophet Jonah is so great that it is absolutely incredible, yea it sounds false, and more unreasonable than any of the fables of the poets, and, *if it did not stand in the Bible*, I would laugh at it as a lie!'² Here the Bible has become an infallible historical text-book. The truth of the biblical content is no longer self-evident, but vouched for by the formal authority of the Bible. And this holds good not simply of religious truth, but of scientific and historical facts that are not directly connected with religious truth.

2. But we have said that, where the formal authority of the Bible is insisted upon, an inspiration theory is implied. The Bible is to be believed, not because it contains inherent truth, but because it is the inspired word of God. Now the pages of Luther are full of the most superlatively expressed praises of Scripture, which at first sight imply a very stringent conception of its divine origin, and thus agree with those statements which imply a formal authority of Scripture:—

'[It is] Christ's spiritual body,'³ 'the Holy Spirit's Proclamation,'⁴ 'We are to handle it as if God himself spoke it';⁵ 'Although it is written by men, it is, nevertheless, not from or out of men, but out of God';⁶ 'It is the Holy Spirit's own peculiar book, Scripture and word.'⁷ Luther insists upon the *harmony* of Scripture. 'The Scriptures cannot err';⁸ 'This is certain, that the Scripture cannot disagree with itself.'⁹ 'There are many passages of Scripture which are contradictory, according to the letter, but when the circumstances are considered, it is all right,'¹⁰ etc.

¹ E. A. xxxiii. 36 ff. (1527). Cf. also his criticism of Copernicus in the Table Talk (E. A. lxii. 319): 'The fool will upset the whole science of astronomy. But, *as the Holy Scripture shows*, Joshua commanded the sun, not the earth, to stand still.'

² E. A. lxii. 148. The same opinion is repeated on p. 151.

³ E. A. xxiv. 57 (1520).

⁴ E. A. xii. 300.

⁵ E. A. xxxiii. 31 ff. (1527).

⁶ E. A. xxviii. 343 (1522).

⁷ E. A. lxiii. 415 (1548).

⁸ E. A. xxviii. 33 (1522).

⁹ E. A. xxx. 52 (1527).

¹⁰ E. A. xxv. 263 (1539).

From such phrases we might argue to a very high inspiration theory, and if we read them in Quenstedt or John Owen we would have to do so. But these expressions are not found where Luther is elaborating a theory of inspiration. The remarkable thing is that he never elaborates such a theory. These statements are regularly the expression of Luther's esteem of the contents of Scripture. Luther probably does not intend to express by them a precise dogmatic theory of the origin of Scripture or the extent of their inspiration. His language is not the language of scientific precision, but simply the language of strong religious feeling, by which he expressed the conviction that God does speak to us in the Scriptures. It is noticeable also that where Luther speaks of the inerrancy of Scripture, he regularly (not always, *vide infra*) has the doctrinal content in mind. These expressions may therefore be as satisfactorily explained, if considered in the light of Luther's experience of the content of Scripture, as when viewed in the light of his emphasis of the formal authority of Scripture. It would not have been improper to group them with those passages which look at the *content* rather than the form of Scripture.

3. More important are those passages where he insists upon the wording and text of Scripture, or where he brings the thought of the inspiration into immediate connection with his insistence upon the authority of Scripture. Thus, for example, he doggedly insists upon the *ipsissima verba* in the 'words of Institution':—

'I am caught, I cannot escape, the *text* is too powerful for me';¹ 'For if they believed that it [the word of institution] was God's word, they would not call them miserable, poor words, but would hold a tittle or letter greater than the whole world, and tremble before them as before God himself.'²

¹ E. A. llii. 274 (1524).

² E. A. xxx. 305 ff. (1528).

After citing a number of texts to prove the Trinity, and blaming the Jews for not receiving them, he says: 'Here stands Text and Scripture, which are not to be thrown over by man's fancies.'¹ In such passages and many like them, where the words of Scripture are insisted upon, a very high inspiration theory is logically involved. It is logically involved, but we remember how Luther spoke of the prophets' studying in Moses (a very human activity), at the same time that he speaks of their thought as inspired by the Spirit.²

Two passages may be cited to illustrate the immediate connection between the formal authority of Scripture and its inspiration:—

'The Pope and his crowd know as well as we do that one can learn out of no book but the Holy Scripture, what church and bishop really mean. The Pope's decrees, the Turk's Alkoran, the Jew's Talmud, will not teach us and cannot teach us [Scripture the sole authority]. The Holy Scripture is the Book given by God the Holy Spirit to his church [the inspiration of the Scripture].'³

The most remarkable passage, however, is that cited by Walther from a work published in 1541. He is discussing what is to be done when differences arise between the Bible and profane historians. He will give the preference to the Bi-

¹ E. A. xxiii. 278 (1540).

² In this connection it is also worthy of note how Luther at times understood the written word as compared with the spoken word. 'It is not "neutestamentisch" to write books of Christian doctrine. . . . Before the apostles wrote they first preached to, and converted, the people with bodily voice, which was their *real* apostolic and New Testament work. . . . That books had to be written was a great *Abbruch und Gebrechen* in the Spirit, which was due to necessity, and not the manner of the New Testament. . . . The Epistles of Paul only preserve what he had first taught, and he will have preached much more fully (*reichlicher*) than he wrote' (E. A. x. 388 ff.). Such expressions should warn us from laying too much stress upon those statements which insist upon the letter of Scripture.

³ E. A. xxvi. 100 (1541).

ble, because, he says, 'I believe that in the Scripture God speaks, who is true, but in other history-books true men have exercised their best endeavor, but only as men.'¹ Here the syllogism referred to above² is practically adopted. The Bible is specifically differential from all other books,³ and is inerrant in matters of history, because God speaks in it. And yet it was only a year before that Luther admitted a 'perspicuous error' in Stephen's speech.

It is increasingly apparent that there are two different groups of statements to be found in Luther, and the citation last given makes it impossible to avoid any longer the question whether these groups are reconcilable. This is a burning question in Germany at the present time. Harnack maintains that no reconciliation is possible. According to him, Luther is guilty of a 'flagrant self-contradiction.'⁴ He retained what was really a remnant of the Middle-age dogma of scriptural infallibility, and yet developed a new conception of Scripture in his Prefaces which ignores its formal authority altogether. This view of Harnack, as might be expected, has aroused the greatest opposition in Germany. It is about as disconcerting to some of our German cousins to have a contradiction pointed out in Luther as in Scripture itself. Not being biassed by the politico-ecclesiastical situation which prevails in Germany, I cannot avoid the impression that Harnack is nearer to the truth in this particular than his opponents, though I realize more and more how easy it is to misunderstand and to do injustice to Luther on account of the emotional and homiletical, rather than scientific, way in which he expresses himself,

¹ Walther, 52.

² See p. 33.

³ Cf. also the following: 'If the Spirit has spoken in the Fathers, he has spoken all the more in his own Scripture' (E. A. xxvii. 244).

⁴ Hist. of Dogma, vii. 24 n.

especially if his critic is not perfectly familiar with his whole system of thought.

The question of reconciling Luther's varying statements with each other is largely a question of proper emphasis. A question of proper emphasis is always disputable, yet I think the following propositions are fairly demonstrable. (1) What Luther said as to the inspiration of the Bible was what the church had always maintained. His criticisms, however, were both in spirit and largely in matter an innovation.¹ (2) These criticisms sprang out of, and were made possible, by the pre-eminently religious conception which Luther had of the Bible. That his criticisms were carried on in the religious rather than in the historical interest cannot be too strongly insisted upon. (3) These criticisms meant a much more complete subordination of the formal authority of the Bible to the religious authority of its content than had ever before been recognized in the development of the doctrine of Scripture. (4) Luther does not seem to have been aware of this result himself. He did not distinguish between *forma and materia*. The authority of the Bible was for him, so to speak, *simultaneously* formal and self-authenticating.²

It is at this point that disputes arise. Does the subordination of the formal authority of the Bible to the religious authority of its content mean the eventual destruction of its formal authority, and is Luther, in holding to both without distinction, guilty of a logical impossibility? In answering this question the previous question of emphasis is raised, At what point shall we take our start? Shall we begin with Luther's inherited dogma of Scripture, lay all the emphasis on the fact that he asserted the final authority of Scripture, whose truth he had experienced, against the ecclesiastical authorities

¹ Köstlin, II. 8.

² Köstlin, II. 13, 43, 221.

of the papacy on the one hand, and the subjectivism of the "Fanatics" on the other, and seek to understand his criticisms in the light of this undoubted attitude of his toward Scripture? Or shall we begin with Luther's experience of the truth of the scriptural content as the determining factor in his attitude toward Scripture, lay the emphasis on his criticisms as the most remarkable illustrations of his attitude toward the religious content of Scripture, and, in view of these, examine those statements which imply a conception of the formal authority of the Bible and a high inspiration theory? In the former case the temptation will be very strong to tone down Luther's criticisms so as to bring them into harmony with the older dogma. In the latter case, impressed by the novelty of Luther's views, the temptation may arise to widen the breach unduly between the various *momenta* of Luther's doctrine. Nevertheless, as the preceding discussion suggests, I, for my part, must hold that the latter method is the only proper one. It starts from what is *original* in Luther's doctrine of Scripture, from what was the center of his entire reforming activity. If the method of this article is the correct one, whether there is an ultimate reconciliation possible between the two great tendencies in Luther's doctrine of Scripture or not, the *unarticulated* character of his doctrine must be admitted.¹

However this question may be decided, there is a fifth proposition, which I think must be admitted, and which serves to point the lesson of the whole discussion for us of the present time. (5) In centering his attention upon the religious content of the Bible, and finding its authority in that content, Luther placed its authority on the securest of all bases. It is only when this fact is remembered that we can explain the apparent anomaly of Luther's readiness to criticise Scripture at the

¹ Cf. Köstlin, II. 8, 15, 39.

very time that he was at the height of his conflict with Rome as to the sole authority of Scripture.¹ At the Leipzig Disputation, when his doctrine of the sole authority of Scripture reached its culmination, he took his stand squarely on the religious content of Scripture as the final test of canonicity, as is clear in what he says of Second Maccabees, and only three years after this his prefaces to the New Testament were written. This astonishing freedom in criticism at the very moment when he was asserting the sole authority of Scripture can be explained only on the supposition that Scripture possessed for Luther *fundamentally* the authority of a religious axiom rather than a formal authority. But we have observed a tendency in Luther to emphasize also the formal authority of the Bible. This tendency seems to have become stronger in Luther's later years, particularly in his contest with the "Fanatics." The more conservative attitude adopted by Luther in the last edition of his prefaces, to which attention was called above,² is strong evidence of this.

This tendency to emphasize the formal side of biblical authority passed over into the subsequent history of Protestant dogmatics with ever increasing power. It was a natural, perhaps under the historical conditions an almost inevitable, development. The admission of a human element in Scripture, which Luther's criticisms logically involved, put Protestantism undoubtedly at a tactical disadvantage in its contests with Rome and the "Fanatics." Hence, more and more the Bible became, in the hands of the post-Reformation theologians, a "paper pope." These theologians scored a temporary victory, perhaps, but they left to the Protestant church a direful legacy.

¹ This singular fact is especially insisted upon by Harnack, *Hist. of Dogma* vii. 224; Köstlin, i. 244; Scheel, 52.

² See p. 20 ff.

In proportion as the formal authority of Scripture is emphasized, it becomes impossible or unnecessary to utilize the *Testimonium Spiritus Sancti* successfully. The witness of the Spirit can be properly employed only with respect to the religious content of the Bible. The Spirit does not witness to the correctness of the biblical account of creation or the chronology of the Books of Kings. Accordingly it became customary to believe these things because '*they are in the Bible.*' But this formal authority was held to guarantee the religious content also. Witness the popular Sunday-school couplet, which may be regarded as typical of the post-Reformation development:—

"Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so."

There is no need for the witness of the Spirit here. But where the witness of the Spirit was illegitimately utilized to support historical and scientific matters, and no longer needed to support religious truths, it would gradually become ignored. This is what actually happened. The whole burden of apologetics was laid upon the Formal Reformation Principle. "The Bible became the religion of Protestants" in an unfortunately exclusive sense. The laity became accustomed to this scholastic idea of the Bible and this one-sided apologetic. The consequence is that in our day, when the biblical problem has been raised in a new and acute form by the historical study of the Bible, Apologetics, which had so largely surrendered the subjective element of spiritual experience of the saving religious content of Scripture, found itself helpless, and the laity have become confused in a most unfortunate way as to the real grounds of their faith. Under these circumstances I have hoped that it might be of some profit to consider once again the peculiar attitude of Luther toward the Bible, which per-

mitted freedom of criticism without endangering its religious authority. Luther enables us to see that it is the religious content of Scripture that is the all-important thing. Modern Criticism in an historical and scientific interest has challenged the formal authority of Scripture, and has dealt a fatal blow at the post-Reformation doctrine of Scripture. But, in doing this, is it not in reality compelling a misled church to return to the religious content of Scripture as its final authority? Luther, in his religious criticism of the Bible, together with his enunciation of the grammatico-historical principle of exegesis, laid the foundation for the modern Historical Criticism of Scripture. Historical Criticism would now seem to be on the point of paying its debt back to Luther by compelling the Protestant churches to adopt his emphasis upon the religious content of Scripture, which is axiomatic for the spiritually illuminated man.