

# MARTIN LUTHER'S CHRISTOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS\*

DAVID S. DOCKERY

*The Sixteenth Century saw Martin Luther initiate a hermeneutical revolution which changed the course of human history. The Protestant Reformation would have been impossible apart from this change in hermeneutical theory. Since that day, Luther has been viewed by evangelicals and existentialists alike as their spiritual father. This article seeks to examine the claims of each group, as well to evaluate the hermeneutical principle on its own merits. The author also states the significance of Luther's christological principle for present day evangelical hermeneutics.*

\* \* \*

MARTIN Luther is one of the greatest men that Germany has ever produced, as well as one of the most important figures in human history. In his religious experience and theological standpoint, he strongly resembles the Apostle Paul. It was said by Melanchthon, the one who knew him best, that he was the Elijah of Protestantism and he compared him closely to the Apostle of the Gentiles. Luther roused the Church from her slumber, broke the yoke of papal tyranny, rediscovered Christian freedom, reopened the fountain of God's Holy Word to all the people, and was responsible for directing many to Christ as their Lord. When one thinks of the Reformation, he or she quickly reflects upon the titanic force of Luther; the sovereign good sense of Zwingli; and the remorseless logic of Calvin—and of these three, the greatest was Martin Luther.<sup>1</sup>

In the 16th century, Luther initiated and fostered a hermeneutical revolution which changed the course of history. The Protestant Reformation would have been impossible apart from this change in hermeneutics which was employed to interpret both the OT and the NT.<sup>2</sup> In

\*This article is written in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birthday.

<sup>1</sup>F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886) 323.

<sup>2</sup>R. F. Surburg, "The Presuppositions of the Historical-Grammatical Method as Employed by Historic Lutheranism," *The Springfielder* 38 (March 1975) 279.

a very real sense, Luther is the father of Protestant interpretation<sup>3</sup> and his influence is profound.

The burning desire in the heart of Luther to get the Word of God into the hands of the people was so great that he not only translated the Bible into the language of the people, but laid down certain principles concerning its interpretation.

#### LUTHER'S HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

##### *The Principles of 1521*

The first of these early principles was the supreme and final authority of Scripture itself, apart from all ecclesiastical authority or interference. He recognized that to present the Church as the way to Christ instead of presenting Christ as the way to the Church is the fountain of innumerable errors.

Second, he asserted not only the supreme authority of God's Word, but its sufficiency. Realizing that there was no unanimity among the Church Fathers except in the most basic doctrines, Luther preferred the Scriptures in contrast to the early writings of the Fathers.

Luther was in agreement with all of the other Reformers on his third principle. This was to set aside the dreary fiction of the fourfold exegesis of the medieval period.<sup>4</sup> He maintained that the historical/literal sense alone is the essence of faith and Christian theology. Luther observed that heresies and errors originated not from the simple words of Scripture but primarily from the neglect of those words.

His fourth principle logically followed his third. This principle was the total denial of allegory as a valid interpretational principle. He asserted that allegory must be avoided so that the interpreter does not wander in idle dreams.<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, Luther maintained the perspicuity of Scripture. This was his fundamental principle of exegesis. He revolted against anything which would distort the biblical picture of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, Luther insisted with all his force, and almost for the first time in centuries, upon the absolutely indefensible right of private

<sup>3</sup>A. Skevington Wood, "Luther as an Interpreter of Scripture," *Christianity Today* 3 (Nov 24, 1958) 7.

<sup>4</sup>This fourfold system was the major hermeneutical method of medieval exegesis. Its four steps were literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical.

<sup>5</sup>As much as Luther disliked allegories, even going as far as to refer to them as harlots and the dirt of the earth, he was not always true to his rules, nor was he always consistent.

<sup>6</sup>I. D. K. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University, 1970) 225.

interpretation in accordance with the doctrine of the spiritual priesthood of all believers, a doctrine lying at the base of Protestantism.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Principles of 1528*

In accordance with the principles listed above, Luther provided his readers in several of his writings with what he believed to be the true rules for the interpretation of Scripture. Farrar summarizes these principles as follows:

He insisted (1) on the necessity for grammatical knowledge; (2) on the importance of taking into consideration times, circumstances, and conditions; (3) on the observance of the context; (4) on the need of faith and spiritual illumination; (5) on keeping what he called "the proportion of faith"; and (6) on the reference of all Scripture to Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Of the first of these, nothing needs to be said except that principles four and five often led Luther into serious hermeneutical problems. The last of these principles, the references of all Scripture to Christ (often referred to as the "christological principle"), is the subject of this article. To Luther, the function of all interpretation was to find Christ. The best way to understand what Luther meant by this principle is to evaluate his use of this principle in his exegesis. In this essay, both the strengths and the weaknesses of this principle are considered. It is claimed by some that this principle led Luther to an existential hermeneutic and a limited view of inspiration. This claim will be examined. Finally, the principle will be viewed in its relation to the grammatical-historical method of interpretation as held by evangelicals of the present day.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE IN HISTORY

Luther's interpretation of Scripture finds the christological principle at the center. It is primarily christological because Luther regarded Christ as the heart of the Bible. For Luther, there was nothing to find in Scripture outside of Christ. Scripture must be interpreted to mean only that humanity is nothing and Christ is all.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 325-30.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 232. Also see R. F. Surburg, "The Significance of Luther's Hermeneutics for the Protestant Reformation," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24 (April 1953) 241-61. For a combination of these two lists, see B. L. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 53-57.

<sup>9</sup>See the twenty-five articles of hermeneutical principles which were articulated at the International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy Summit II on Hermeneutics in Chicago, November, 1982, especially Article XV.

<sup>10</sup>Wood, "Luther as an Interpreter of Scripture," 9.

Even before Luther's dramatic conversion as a professor at Wittenberg, his interpretations began in a radically christological fashion. He believed that Christ was the literal content and meaning of the Psalms. Not only was this his early method of interpretation, but he believed that from this point, one should move to a personal application of the christological content in one's own life.<sup>11</sup> This method is quite similar to the moral principle of medieval exegesis. He gradually broke away from this principle, but it is possible that the foundation of his christological principle had its beginning in the earlier years of his career.<sup>12</sup>

Luther insisted that the correct use of Scripture is at once the plain sense and the sense which expounds Christ. He believed that there are not two senses of interpretation, but only one. This meant that he saw no difference between the christological principle and the grammatical-historical principle. The christological principle, according to Luther, was plainly stated by Scripture itself and is not an extra-biblical norm of interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

Theoretically, everything proclaimed in the OT looks forward to its fulfillment in Christ. Along with this, everything in the NT looks back to the Old. Everything is connected with Christ and points to him. Siggins explains Luther's view saying, "the New Testament is not more than a revelation of the Old, while the Old Testament is a letter of Christ."<sup>14</sup> The entirety of Scripture, if viewed properly, must lead to Christ. This is based on Christ's own words in the Gospel of John. "You diligently study the Scripture, because you think that by them you possess eternal life. Those are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39, *NIV*).

The second way of stating this principle is not theoretical or exegetical, but practical or theological. The great weakness of allegorical exegesis, which Luther despised, was that it imposed a too uniform christological sense and thus obliterated the historical setting of the text. Although he certainly was not free from this method, it was the practical outworking of the christological principle which often led Luther into hermeneutical difficulties. Though this is true, no one was more aware of the danger than Luther. It is this danger which led to Luther's painstaking exegesis. The ways in which he relates the literal sense to Christ are, however, extremely flexible.<sup>15</sup> Luther could exercise great freedom and flexibility in his interpretation

<sup>11</sup>J. S. Preus, "Luther on Christ and the Old Testament," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972) 490.

<sup>12</sup>See Gerhard Ebeling, "The New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," *Theology Today* 21 (1964) 34-46.

<sup>13</sup>Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*, 17.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

since for him the tension was between law and gospel and not between letter and spirit.<sup>16</sup> Thus, his theoretical rules were better than the outworking of them.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Weakness of the Christological Principle*

Practically, it may be concluded that Luther's rule is true; exegetically, it leads to difficulties. It is an exegetical fraud to read developed Christian dogmas in between the lines of Jewish narratives.<sup>18</sup> This practical use may be morally edifying, but it has a tendency to veil the historical content of a passage. When Luther reads the trinity and the work of Christ into OT events which happened thousands of years before the incarnation of Jesus, he is adopting a method which had been rejected hundreds of years earlier by the School of Antioch.<sup>19</sup> Luther criticized the Antioch School for its rigid stance just as he criticized allegorists for their opposite position. The Antiochians held to a typological rather than a christological interpretation. This meant that they saw shadowy anticipation of what was to come. This meant nothing to Luther. To him, the OT was not a figure of what would be, but a testimony to what always holds true between humankind and God.<sup>20</sup> To Luther, allegory eradicated the historicity of the OT and typology annulled the historical presence of Christ in the OT.<sup>21</sup> The weakness of the christological interpretation is that it veils the historicity of the OT.

Luther's desire to see Christ everywhere in Scripture often led to a forced interpretation of the passage. Frequently he would read a NT meaning into an OT passage.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that Luther attempted to avoid such forced interpretations. In place of interpretations which distort the text, Luther allows for two kinds of historical applications.

The first of these are texts which Luther often quotes when preaching. In these texts, the christological application is permitted where the details of the grammar or subject matter could refer to Christ. In the second kind, the text is sufficiently general to permit a valid application in various contexts.<sup>23</sup> Although Luther attempted to

<sup>16</sup>M. Anderson, "Reformation Interpretation," *Hermeneutics* (ed. B. Ramm; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971) 84.

<sup>17</sup>L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950) 26.

<sup>18</sup>Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 333.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>20</sup>Preus, "Luther on Christ and the Old Testament," 493.

<sup>21</sup>H. Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (ed. by V. I. Gruhn; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 250.

<sup>22</sup>An example is given in the evaluation of Luther's interpretation of Psalm 117.

<sup>23</sup>Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*, 20.

avoid forced interpretations, an examination of his OT commentaries shows that he was basically unsuccessful. Though he stated that he was willing to recognize only the historical or literal sense, and scornfully spoke of the allegorical interpretation, he did not avoid entirely the despised method. As a result, he was often guilty of forced exegesis.

### *The Strength of the Christological Principle*

The christological principle, although admittedly prone to weaknesses, has many strengths as well. Luther's christological interpretation made him one of the most radical leaders of the Reformation. His attitude of critical independence caused him to be such a leader.<sup>24</sup> From a historical standpoint, blindness to salvation in Jesus Christ was alleviated through this principle. For him, it was Christ and his words which gave life that ultimately became the backbone of the Reformation.

The christological interpretation was the new element in Reformation interpretation. It rendered obsolete the fourfold sense of medieval exegesis. In its place appeared the centrality of Christ and the proclamation of faith in him for eternal life. It is interesting to see Luther finding Christ as law and gospel, in the Scriptures.<sup>25</sup>

Although the results do not justify the means, it was this principle which drastically set Luther apart from Roman Catholic medieval exegesis. When viewed historically, the strengths of this principle have decidedly influenced the course of history in the past 400 years. Luther's greatest achievement in the field of biblical interpretation was his distrust of allegory and the fourfold method employed in the medieval period.<sup>26</sup> This was primarily achieved through the outworking of his christological interpretive principle.

#### THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE EXAMINED

Luther's christological approach is determinative for his whole hermeneutical program.<sup>27</sup> It is with this in mind that Luther's hermeneutical principles are compared and contrasted to the hermeneutic of the existential school of theology, sometimes referred to as the "new hermeneutic." These theologians claim that Luther is the forerunner of their interpretive approach and it is fashionable to associate Luther with Bultmann and Bultmannian followers.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 335.

<sup>25</sup>M. Anderson, "Reformation Interpretation," *Hermeneutics*, 85.

<sup>26</sup>Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 249.

<sup>27</sup>Wood, "Luther as an Interpreter of Scripture," 9.

<sup>28</sup>For a survey and analysis of Bultmann, see R. C. Roberts, *Rudolph Bultmann's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

*Its Relation to the New Hermeneutic*

The post Bultmannian advocates of the new hermeneutic<sup>29</sup> have been especially vocal in claiming Luther as their spiritual father. These interpreters of Bultmann have consistently claimed that in him one can see unmistakably the outlines of Luther. The issue of Luther versus the new hermeneutic does not rest on his christological principle. The fact that Bultmann and Luther used this principle (and often over-used it) is not denied. But did this principle lead Luther to an existential hermeneutic?

The basis for the claim that Luther is the father of the new hermeneutic comes from Luther's statement, "the Word of God, experienced in the heart, is the foundation of the doctrine of biblical inspiration."<sup>30</sup> It may be granted that psychological or sociological conditions often led the sensitive Luther to an interest in certain passages of Holy Scripture, and on occasion his existential approach even colored his interpretation. But did his experience stand over his view of Scripture, which then became God's Word through his own experience, or did he believe that Scripture properly stood over his experience as an objective revelation proclaiming the truth of God?<sup>31</sup>

The Bultmannians claim that medieval exegesis is to Luther's exegesis as the grammatical-historical principle of orthodox hermeneutics is to an existential hermeneutic.<sup>32</sup> Thomas Parker agrees with this assessment:

In contrast to Calvin, Luther's interpretations tend to be subjective, directed toward the individual believer; accordingly Luther's hermeneutical principles can lead to an extreme—to a subjectivism (as in Bultmann) which stresses the religious feeling or the existential dimensions of subjective faith over against the object of faith, thus losing realism.<sup>33</sup>

The best way to evaluate the claims that Luther's hermeneutic led to existential interpretation is to allow Luther to speak for himself. He answers the assessment in his statement at Worms:

<sup>29</sup>Although the hermeneutical school of "demythologization" is technically associated with Bultmann, he also had a great influence on the "new hermeneutic" school as well. The fathers of the new hermeneutic are Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebling. See A. Thiselton, "The New Hermeneutic," *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 308–33.

<sup>30</sup>J. T. Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," *Inspiration and Interpretation* (ed. J. F. Walvoord; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 94.

<sup>31</sup>J. W. Montgomery, *In Defense of Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1970) 63.

<sup>32</sup>See W. J. Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (trans. J. Schmidt; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961). This work presents Luther's hermeneutic.

<sup>33</sup>T. D. Parker, "The Interpretation of Scripture. A Comparison of Calvin and Luther on Galatians," *Interpretation* 17 (1963) 68.

Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures or evident reason (for I believe in neither the Pope nor councils alone, since it has been established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures that I have adduced, and my conscience has been taken captive by the Word of God; and I am neither able nor willing to recant, since it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.<sup>34</sup>

This statement has been heard so often that its significance is often overlooked. Luther said his conscience or his existential life was taken captive by the Word. Not only here, but at all critical times in his career, his experience was in subjection to the Scriptures. This can be seen in all of Luther's great debates, whether with Erasmus, Zwingli or others. He always appeals, not to his experience but, to the objectivity of the Scriptures. In refuting the claims of the new hermeneutic, Montgomery diagrams Luther's true hermeneutic as follows:

Instead of

$$\frac{\text{Medieval exegesis}}{\text{Luther's exegesis}} = \frac{\text{Orthodox hermeneutics}}{\text{Contemporary hermeneutics}}$$

In reality it is

$$\frac{\text{Medieval exegesis}}{\text{Luther's exegesis}} = \frac{\text{Contemporary hermeneutics}^{35}}{\text{Orthodox heremeneutics}}$$

In contrast to the claims of Bultmann's followers, Luther's hermeneutic is the converse of their claim. It actually stands irreconcilably in opposition to the existential hermeneutic. Bultmannian exegesis is a repristination of the very approach to the Bible that Luther opposed throughout his exegetical career. Perhaps in the early career of the Reformer, the claims could be proven. However, the one thing that characterized the life of Luther as an interpreter was his victory over the fourfold medieval exegesis.

In other words, the claims of the Bultmannians are invalid charges without an objective base. To understand Luther's approach to Scripture, it must be remembered that the Reformer's mind was institutional and practical rather than academic and analytical. Mueller says, "This practical orientation had a large influence on his interpretation of Scripture, in which he saw from beginning to end, Christ and the divine revelation of salvation through Him whom he adored as the divine Savior of the World."<sup>36</sup> In addition to the assertions that

<sup>34</sup>G. Rupp, *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms* (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1964) 96.

<sup>35</sup>Montgomery, *In Defense of Martin Luther*, 67.

<sup>36</sup>Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," 89.



Luther's christological principle led to an existential hermeneutic, his christological approach to the Bible is supposed to have freed him from an orthodox view of inspiration.

The christological principle has been accused of leading Luther to a limited view of inspiration. This charge, made primarily by existential theologians, must be examined. It is the position of the Bultmannian school that the Bible bears witness to Christ and it points to him. This is supposedly based on Luther's christological principle.

Luther realized that Scripture is both human and divine. He would insist that just as the accepted doctrine of Christ's person requires us to believe in the two natures of our Lord without confusion, without mutation, without division, without separation, so the twofold nature of Scripture should be recognized in both its full humanity and its full divinity.<sup>37</sup> The new hermeneuticians would agree that the Bible shares in the glory of the divinity of Christ and the lowliness of his humanity. However, this is where the comparison ends.

It has been said that Bultmann's interpreters see in him unmistakable outlines of the shadow of Luther. For just as Luther saw the inadequacy of humanity's moral effects toward salvation, so Bultmann saw the inadequacy of humanity's intellectual efforts to justify itself by way of a verbally inspired Scripture. Bultmannians would posit that since the Scripture is a historical document written by men and, to that extent, also participates in the frailty of all that is human, it also contains the relativity of all that is historical.

Although both Luther and Bultmann start with similar suppositions, their conclusions are extremely different. Luther, in contrast to Bultmann, presses the analogy between the incarnation and the nature of Scripture to its logical limit in what is called his christological approach. The human element of Scripture is no more impervious to error than was the human nature of Christ.<sup>38</sup> But whether Luther's christological principle led him to a fallible view of the Bible is answered in the negative. On the contrary, the christological principle is derived on the basis of a verbally inspired text. In his lectures to Chicago Lutheran Seminary, Philip Watson states:

Luther's Christological reading of the Old Testament is defended by noting that an entire play can properly be read in terms of its final act. This is quite true, but it should be stressed that Luther could legitimately do this because he was fully convinced that the entire Bible is the work of a single Playwright, whose perspicuous composition warrants such an interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Wood, "Luther as an Interpreter of Scripture," 9.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>39</sup>Cited by Montgomery, *In Defense of Luther*, 75.

It was Luther's conviction that wherever Scripture speaks, it speaks with absolute authority and clarity.<sup>40</sup> Luther's belief in a reliable text can be seen from the above statements. However, his questionable view of canonicity has led others to continually charge that Luther did not hold to a position of verbal inspiration. This position of canonicity is the result of his refusal to accept tradition and his view that Christ must be seen in all Scripture. It is true that for Luther, the sign of canonicity was a book's apostolicity and christology. It is also true that on the basis of the above qualifications, he had trouble accepting the book of James. Although the author of Hebrews is unknown, Luther readily accepted it because of its Christ-centered emphasis.<sup>41</sup>

It is agreed that his christological principle opens doors for an attack against his view of inspiration. It must also be said that this view led to a mistaken understanding of canonicity, but it does not weaken his doctrine of inspiration. That Luther gave priority to certain sections of Scripture is not questioned, but it cannot be concluded from this practice that he held to a limited view of inspiration.

Scripture was Luther's sole authority. His preface to the Epistle of James does not prove otherwise. Scripture remained Luther's sole authority to the end of his life. Regardless of the assertions from the Bultmannian circles, Luther seemingly considered even those parts of the Bible which do not concern salvation to be inspired. Luther believed in a verbal plenary view of Scripture, but not a mechanical dictation theory. Luther's christological principle is a hermeneutical principle and does not negate his orthodox view of inspiration.<sup>42</sup>

#### THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE ILLUSTRATED

It has been previously stated that Luther insisted that the correct interpretation is the historical-grammatical sense. He said, "A text of Scripture has to be taken as it stands unless there are compelling reasons for taking it otherwise."<sup>43</sup> Luther saw no difference in consistency between the grammatical-historical principle and the christological principle.

The grammatical-historical principle tries to take Scripture at its plain sense. Every word is to be taken in its primary, ordinary, literal meaning within the immediate context. According to Terry, "This

<sup>40</sup>M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston; Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1957) 192.

<sup>41</sup>For a good account, see D. Carter, "Luther as an Exegete," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32 (1975) 517-25. Also see L. W. Spitz, Sr., "Luther's Sola Scriptura," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31 (1960) 740-45.

<sup>42</sup>Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," 102-3.

<sup>43</sup>M. Luther, *Luther's Works* (ed. J. Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), I, 126.

principle is the one which most fully commends itself to the judgment and to the conscience of Christian Scholars. . . . Its fundamental principle is to gather from Scripture itself the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey."<sup>44</sup>

It is in relation to the above guidelines that Luther's use of the christological principle will be examined. He made such comprehensive use of the christological principle in his exegesis that it is difficult to decide which passage to consider. Many passages could be cited, but for the purposes of this paper, only one passage will be examined.

### *Exegesis of Psalm 117*

Psalm 117 is a short and simple psalm. It is a particularly suitable example because the psalm almost provides a NT interpretation for Luther's exegesis without a forced interpretation. The psalm reads:

Praise the Lord, all you heathen!  
 Extol Him, all you peoples!  
 For His steadfast love  
 and faithfulness toward us prevails forever.  
 Hallelujah!<sup>45</sup>

Luther breaks the psalm into four parts: a prophecy, a revelation, a doctrine, and an admonition.

The prophecy is the promise of the gospel and of the kingdom of Christ, for if the heathen are called to proclaim God's praise, he must first have become their God. He must first be preached to them, and all idolatry must have been overcome through God's Word for them to believe in Him.<sup>46</sup> "Now see what an uproar this little Psalm caused in the whole world, how it raved and raged among the idols."<sup>47</sup>

The revelation concerns the kingdom of Christ. It will be a spiritual, heavenly one, and not a temporal, earthly kingdom, for the psalmist lets the heathen remain where they are and does not call them together in Jerusalem. Thus the law of Moses is mightily nullified and something higher is commanded. The command is to praise God in all of the nations. For this to happen, God must have let himself be heard in all the world. "And where is there a God whose Word has sounded so far into all the world . . . as the gospel of Christ?"<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup>M. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1883) 173. Also see E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967).

<sup>45</sup>Luther's translation (*Luther's Works*, 14. 3).

<sup>46</sup>Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 99.

<sup>47</sup>Luther, *Luther's Works*, 14. 10.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

The doctrine is that people can stand before God only in faith, for his goodness, his free grace, reigns over us and thus nullifies all of our own holiness under Jewish law, mass, monastic life, and good works. "Reigns over us" is in the mouth of the royal Psalmist, teaching how Jews and the heathen become one single people of God in faith, and the old law is completely annulled. Faith must grant the devil one small hour of divinity, and let him ascribe to our God devilhood. But this is not the final story. The last word is "His faithfulness and truth endure forever."<sup>49</sup>

The admonition is an instruction concerning service to the Lord. It urges praise and thanksgiving. "The sacrifices of the old covenant are overcome as much as the mass, the monastic vows, pilgrimages, and the cult of the saints with which one wants to bargain and horsetrade with God."<sup>50</sup> "Whatever is not based solely on Christ the cornerstone but on one's piety or pious work does not endure."<sup>51</sup>

Luther has taken this small psalm and brought the brilliance of the gospel out of it. It may be better to say that he has read the gospel message into the psalm. Not only has he read a NT rendering into the psalm, but also attacks on the papacy, the monastic system, and what he refers to as "the cult of the saints." Luther has clearly presupposed his meaning into this psalm. There is no question that the interpretation is consistent with his preaching and his Reformation teachings. However, it is difficult to see how this interpretation could be derived from and be consistent with the grammatical-historical method. Even though the interpretation may move and stimulate one to Christ, it must be maintained that it is inconsistent with the grammatical-historical principle. It is very difficult to fault Luther, but he is guilty of the problem which has beset many interpreters: weighting the text to one's present situation and thus veiling its historical context. It is important to see that Luther did see the two horizons of Scripture.<sup>52</sup> The interpreter must go to the historical context and back again,<sup>53</sup> but Luther often deemphasized the historical context.

Another example of Luther's christological interpretation is his understanding of the work of Moses. The essential secret work of Moses, if understood in faith, is leading men to Christ. He viewed the office of Moses as one which was to terrify sinners and, in an obscure way, to indicate redemption. The purpose of this was to humble the proud and console the humble.<sup>54</sup> Bornkamm explains this view saying,

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>52</sup>See A. Thiselton, *Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>53</sup>C. H. Dodd, *There and Back Again* (London: Hodder, 1932).

<sup>54</sup>Luther, *Luther's Works*, 13. 79.

This is the exact opposite of God or Christ who needs the alien righteousness of wrath in accomplishing his own work, grace. Thus the office of Moses has a secret Christocentric meaning. It means that by driving man to the end of all his own possibilities, the office of Moses proves to him the impossibility of reaching God in this way and thus abrogates itself.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, according to Luther, Moses knew of the gospel. He recognized his office as one of leading men to Christ. In a certain sense, this may be correct, but historically it is doubtful that Moses knew the gospel or understood the work of Christ even though he knew the promise. Again it seems that Luther has avoided the historical event by reading the NT into the OT. There are many examples which could show that Luther veiled the historical interpretation, but went a step further to find Christ in the passage.

According to Luther, all the promises of the OT find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.<sup>56</sup> Luther's whole point simply is that in the interpretation of God's Word, the christological principle rules—everything must serve the central truth concerning the meritorious work of God's Son.<sup>57</sup>

Preus comments,

It is because of this that for Luther the hermeneutical divide was between the testaments. He saw no theological or spiritual help from the Old Testament without reading the New Testament and Christ into it. It seemed never to occur to Luther that all of the promises, laws and prophecies were not to Christ but to the people of Israel. His intensity in his hermeneutics to make Christ the text apparently blinded him from the historical significance of the Old Testament.<sup>58</sup>

For Luther, the cultural-historical setting of the OT was not necessary. He made an immediate direct and personal response to the OT world. He transferred the experiences of the OT into his own experience and cultural setting. The settings gave him valuable examples for his admonitions and exhortations.

The promises of the OT provided Luther with what he needed to bring his religion into experience or to transfer the theoretical to the practical. Granted the OT is full of life experiences, they must be read and interpreted in light of their cultural-historical background.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 148–49.

<sup>56</sup>Surburg, "The Presuppositions of the Historical-Grammatical Method as Employed by Lutheranism," 285.

<sup>57</sup>E. F. Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 49.

<sup>58</sup>J. S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969) 246.

<sup>59</sup>Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 11–45.

In response to the objection that Luther's christological interpretation was making a text something not originally intended by the author, Luther would reply that the NT fulfillment of the OT promise is a part of the larger historical context of the OT passages. This is because God, the author of all biblical books, can set forth what the true intended meaning of the OT passage was by means of the NT.<sup>60</sup> Thus he foreshadows the canonical approach to hermeneutics.<sup>61</sup>

The basis for this response comes from Christ's own words on the way to Emmaus after his resurrection:

O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scripture (Luke 24:25-27, *NASB*).

Surburg states,

When Luther finds Christ in the Old Testament he is not allegorizing as some might contend, but merely reading the Old Testament in the light of the New. In doing this he finds a deeper meaning than an exegete who ignores the New Testament.<sup>62</sup>

Even though Luther's practice was not always consistent with his rules of interpretation, his attitudes and goals are admirable. In Luther's interpretation (as in other areas of his life), he consistently sought to magnify the Lord Jesus Christ. However, it must be concluded that the christological principle is a theological principle that accompanies the grammatical-historical method of interpretation and therefore the two are not completely inconsistent.

### *Its Significance to Present Day Evangelical Hermeneutics*

Article III of the International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy hermeneutical principle states that "the person and works of Jesus Christ are the central focus of the entire Bible."<sup>63</sup> For the contemporary evangelical exegete, the validity of the christological principle must be questioned.

<sup>60</sup>Surburg, "The Presuppositions of the Historical-Grammatical Method as Employed by Historic Lutheranism," 285.

<sup>61</sup>See C. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 82. The view is also advocated by Childs, Sanders, and Waltke.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>"International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy Summit II: Hermeneutic Articles" (Chicago: 1982).

The christological principle is valid for today's interpreter as a canonical or theological principle. It is a second step beyond the grammatical-historical method. Thus it is proper to make christological interpretations regarding the experiences, promises, and prophecies of the OT. There is great spiritual insight to be gained from making this type of theological application. In doing so, one must remember not to divorce a passage from its cultic and historical background. A valid canonical interpretation will not stop at the grammatical-historical step but will seek the canonical and christological sense of the passage. With this in mind it can be concluded that the christological principle is valid as a theological principle of interpretation for evangelical exegetes and theologians.