# AN OVERVIEW OF LUTHERAN HERMENEUTICS IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Anybody familiar with essays I have written would know that I usually open a paper the same way: I start an argument with the title I have been given. Since I'm getting to be an old man, and it's hard to change my habits, I'll do the same here. First I might ask, "Is there really such a thing as Lutheran hermeneutics?" Then—if we could come to an agreement that there are some distinct "Lutheran" emphases in reading and understanding the Scriptures—one might ask, "Does the fact that we now live in the twenty-first century change anything?"

## What Is Hermeneutics?

Let's probe that first question a little bit. Hermeneutics is essentially the art (some say science) of understanding. At a very basic level, hermeneutics is something we practice all the time. We seek to understand one another. We interpret one another's words and actions. In this sense, proper hermeneutics is simply an application of the Eighth Commandment. You will recall how Luther explained God's will for us, that we "interpret everything [our neighbors] do [or say!] in the best possible light."[1] In other words, love teaches me to seek to understand my neighbor not according to my own biases and certainly not driven by any inner malice I may feel towards him, but in the best possible light—as he himself wants to be understood.

Permit me to illustrate. My wife is carrying some packages. She says to me, "These packages are very heavy." Now I could simply agree with her and say, "Yes, they are very heavy!" In a sense one could say I was interpreting her words. But am I really seeking to understand her in the way she means to be understood? I don't think so! You see, I have been married now for 31 years, and I have learned from experience that when my wife makes a statement like this, what she really means is, "Can you help me carry these packages, please?" It is not her manner to make a direct request. She prefers to make them indirectly. But her

[1]Robert Kolb et al., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 2nd ed. (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2001), 353.

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intention—what she means to say—is not merely to make an observation, but to make a polite request.

This illustration can be used to make another point. Shared context is one important key to understanding people as they mean to be understood. It took me quite some time to understand my wife's "language," or manner of expression even though she was speaking English the whole time we've been married. When we were newly married, I often misunderstood remarks like that—not because I was harboring any ill-will towards her, but simply because I was unfamiliar with her ways, her manner, you might even say, her culture. I lacked context. In a similar way, if I am unfamiliar with the ways, the manner, the language, the history, and the culture of a person to whom I am listening, it may prove very difficult and perhaps impossible for me to understand him in what he means to say. I lack background.

To sum up then, a loving heart and a shared context are both important for understanding one another. In this sense, really, all hermeneutics is the same. And in this sense, it would be wrong to speak of "Lutheran" hermeneutics, if by that we would mean a purely denominational, ideologically driven way of interpreting the Bible. The key questions must always be: am I understanding the text on its own terms, in the way it presents itself to me, and according to the intention of the author/Author? But if I would allow my own personal feelings, human biases, Lutheran ideology, or cultural worldview drive the interpretation, I would not so much be seeking to understand; rather I would be imposing my own meanings on the text.

In this connection I hasten to add that I am not trying to say that we can ever free ourselves completely of our biases or cultural perspectives. Even if that were possible, I don't think it is necessary. Nor am I saying that one can interpret the Bible correctly without some basic pre-understandings. What I am trying to say is that those basic pre-understandings dare not be formed at my own whim or because I belong to a society that has decided on its own to read the Bible in a certain way. They must rather be drawn from the text itself. How does this text present itself to us? What does it tell us about its nature? Its purpose? What does it *mean to say* to us? If there is such a thing as a Lutheran hermeneutic, and if there is something distinctive about a Lutheran approach to Scripture, its validity will stand or fall on whether or not that perspective and approach is drawn from the Scriptures themselves.

## A Brief Survey of the Past

But before we develop these thoughts any further, I would like to return to the second question I asked above, "Does the fact that we

live in the twenty-first century change anything about the way we should read and understand the Scriptures?" One cannot argue against the thought that the interpretative scene today is extremely diverse and indeed highly fragmented. We are faced with such a great variety of interpretative approaches that one cannot hope to catalog them all. This marks a change from the way things were at the time of the Reformation and even from interpretative approaches that were dominant in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

At the risk of oversimplification, during the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras, the historical-grammatical method held sway among Protestant churches. Both Lutheran and Reformed churches agreed that the Bible was the inspired, inerrant Word of God, and its own best interpreter. Through a careful study of the language and a respectful attending to the historical context of each book, interpreters understood that what God meant to say was best derived from the text itself. They took the biblical narratives at face value. They believed in the spirit of prophecy and in the essential unity of the Old and New Testaments. They felt that they could grasp the author's intention, and they did not want to violate his intention in any of their interpretations. One might call this a biblical realism, an approach where a believer seeks to immerse himself first in the *world of the text,* seeing it as real and historical. Once he has accepted and understood it on its own terms, then and only then does he make applications to his own situation.

The age of Rationalism brought with it the dominance of the historical-*critical* method. While making advances in its historical and linguistic investigations of the ancient world, Rationalism's biggest failing was its willingness to discount or even deny the possibility of miracles or of divine intervention into human affairs. These were all given naturalistic explanations. The Bible was no longer regarded as inspired or inerrant. Just like any other human book, it was subject to error and its claims to historical truth needed to be verified before they could be accepted. Critics more and more looked to the Bible as a window to the historical *world behind the text.* Whatever theological truths it contained were timeless, moral truths about the human condition, the fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man. Essentially the Christ of faith was divorced from the Christ of history, and the vital connection between what the Bible says and what the church believes was severed.

In the first half of the twentieth century, men like Barth and Bultmann tried to reclaim the Bible's relevance for the church—Barth with his ideas of revelation and with his dialectical theology and Bultmann with his demythologizing and with his existentialism. But neither one was willing to take the Bible at face value. For Barth, the Bible and the Word of God were not one and the same thing. Only in

the "event" of revelation, could the Bible become God's Word to us.[2] Bultmann regarded as naïve and misguided any attempt to treat the language of Scripture as "real history," claiming that to do so actually worked against faith rather than proceeded from it. The Christ of history was, to him, unrecoverable.[3]

## The Postmodern Turn

What makes the present scene so different is that interpretation has largely now turned away from investigating the world behind the text to examining the *world in front of the text.* This, in turn, goes a long way towards accounting for the fact that the interpretative scene is so fragmented today. No single approach dominates. The advent of postmodernism has made that impossible. Let me explain.

While postmodern philosophers do not use the same language, their conclusions are much the same as ancient skeptics from the Greco-Roman world. Cornel West described postmodernism as "antifoundational, antitotalizing, and demystifying." A writer sympathetic to his views explains:

> Postmodernism is antifoundational in that it resolutely refuses to posit any one premise [e.g., 'I think, therefore I am': the Cartesian appeal to the thinking self] as the privileged and unassailable starting point for establishing claims to truth. It is antitotalizing because postmodern discourse suspects that any theory that claims to account for everything is suppressing counterexamples. . . . [It] is also demystifying; it resists attempts to claim that certain assumptions are "natural" and tries to show that these are in fact ideological projections.[4]

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[2]"The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be his Word, so far as God speaks through it. . . . The Bible therefore becomes God's Word in this event, and it is to its being in this becoming that the tiny word 'is' relates, in the statement that the Bible is God's Word. It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith, but, of course, because it becomes revelation to us." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: Volume 1—The Doctrine of the Word of God (Prolegomena to Church Dogmatics) Part 1—Introduction.* 2nd ed. (T & T Clark International, 2003), 123-124.

[3]"The meaning of the cross is not disclosed from the life of Jesus as a figure of past history, a life which needs to be reproduced by historical research . . . It would be wrong at this point to raise again the problem of how this preaching arose historically, as though that could vindicate its truth. That would be to tie our faith in the word of God to the results of historical research . . . But the historical problem is not of interest to Christian belief in the resurrection. For the historical event of the rise of the Easter faith means for us what it meant for the first disciples—namely, the self-attestation of the risen Lord, the act of God in which the redemptive event of the cross is completed." Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (HarperCollins (paper), 2000), 42, 44.

[4]As quoted in *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism,* A.K.M. Adam. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress), 1995, 5.

Maybe a simpler way of putting this would be to say that postmodernists believe there is no underlying bedrock of truth anywhere on which to build a theory, nor can we be sure of the categories and generalizations we use to construct such edifices of thought. Any terms or categories we use—for example 'man' versus 'animal'—immediately assume what they cannot prove, namely, that there is a radical distinction to be made between humans and animals. What about dolphins? The higher primates? Why should they be excluded? Why should they, in effect, be marginalized? Finally, a postmodernist believes any claim to have found such a place to stand or to have constructed such a universally true idea can be shown to have been based on self-interest. "We are all biased," he reasons, "therefore one must be deeply suspicious towards all truth claims."

They say this because they believe that all our interpretations of reality are predetermined by our language and by the communal traditions our language expresses. Reality is therefore socially constructed. Words do not correspond to things "out there;" they merely relate to other words. Thus, any meaning words have is purely relational and subjective, not objective and certain. I say the word "male" and it conjures up the word "female." Every culture—bounded by its own language—sets up its own logical oppositions. Furthermore, my own understanding of what those words "mean" depends completely on my culture. When we come to a text, we ourselves are shaped by a [con]text, that is, by the social world in which we live and by the culture we come from. We're caught, so to speak, in this web of culture, and therefore any observations we make are predetermined by the linguistic architecture of our minds.

The conviction that we're "stuck" like this, however, leads (according to postmodernists) to a kind of freedom. "Because we've become aware of our biases and the fact that our cultural context has shaped us, we are now free—free to play with meaning, to subvert other peoples' meanings, to build our own 'mysteries,' and to reshape this web we live in any way we please." Strategies of deconstruction arise from notions like these. Then, too, if a person has come to believe that all is style and nothing is substance, why not be creative? And so postmodern interpreters will self-consciously adopt an interpretive position that reveals their own biases. They deliberately put themselves—their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences—inside their own 'interpretations.' The interpreter thus becomes more of a creative artist with the biblical text rather than someone who is trying to explain what it says.

Some postmodernists seek relief from this extremely personal and individualistic approach by joining themselves into communities that share the same commitments. No one community can claim a lock on truth. Which community we join is a matter of personal preference. So we

are free to join a group of "womanist" readers, pre-critical interpreters,[5] liberation theologians, or even confessional Lutherans, for that matter! So what if it's all subjective? Subjectivity shared is better than being alone! Reader-response strategies grow from notions like these.

The larger point to understand is that, in a postmodern context, there is no one dominant "way" of interpreting the Bible anymore. As we have observed, the interpretative focus has moved through three phases. First there was a careful consideration of the text itself (pre-modern). Then there was an attempt to reconstruct the history behind the text (modern). Finally, interpretation has made the world in front of the text its chief concern (postmodern). This means looking at the reader and how he responds to texts both individually and in community. Meaning "happens" as reader and text interact. What we are left with, then, are a number of interpretative strategies without any overarching, unifying method.

That's why in reading books on interpretation today one can become bewildered by the sheer complexity of it all. People subjectively combine postmodern approaches with modernist rationality. Interpreters seem to vie with one another in coming up with creative ways of "reading" the text. Medieval methods of interpretation flourish alongside more realistic approaches such as narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism.[6] In opening up a new commentary, one is never quite sure what one will find.

## The Impact of Postmodernism Upon Current Lutheran Interpretation: A Case Study

Perhaps a case study from the recent past may help to illustrate what effect this has on interpretation. We are all familiar with the

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[5]A pre-critical strategy is one that expresses the respect that some postmoderns have for the past and for tradition. Weary of the orientation of modernists to "what's new," they prefer "what's old." They point out that Origen on his worst days was better than most rationalistic critics on their best. And so they try to rehabilitate the allegorical (four-fold) method of interpretation. In some circles, much of what passes for homiletical exegesis nowadays is, unfortunately, nothing but sheer allegorizing. While we applaud the traditionalists' desire to find Christ in the Old Testament (and he surely is there: in prophecy and type, and as the focus and culmination of Israel's history), we can only stand aghast as they find the Lord's Supper prefigured in every meal, and Baptism in every pool of water.

[6]I personally find narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism the most helpful of the many strategies that are out there, because they both focus the interpreter on the text itself. In reading a work by a narrative or rhetorical critic, however, one must exercise care to discern the individual's theological commitment to the inspiration of Scripture. Many narrative critics exalt the "art" of the author in "constructing" a biblical story. And to some of them, whether or not what is being said actually happened is a matter of no consequence. Similar things could be said about rhetorical criticism: the "art" of Paul's letters is exalted, at times, over the truth of what he is saying.

2009 decision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to open the pastoral ministry of the church to gays and lesbians. How could a church that claims the Bible as its authority make such a decision? What do they have to say about the passages in the Bible that condemn homosexuality? Allow me to summarize a background essay[7] written to justify the decision:

1. Passages in the Bible that seem to refer to homosexual practices must not be read in isolation, but as part of what God says everywhere in the Scriptures about ethics and moral behavior. In particular, the law of "loving one's neighbor as yourself" should be the overriding ethic, governing all interpretations of the specific positive and negative injunctions found in Scripture.
2. In Romans 1, Paul is not really talking about homosexual behavior as we know it today: the kind that rises out of orientation and that expresses itself in permanent, loving, non-abusive, committed relationships. This kind of homosexuality was not even a subject of discussion in Paul's day. He's talking about abusive, destructive sexual behavior: the kind of behavior that is not the result of committed love, but of a desire to dominate or commit sexual violence against others. So the passages are difficult to apply to the question at hand, "Can we honor same sex unions?"
3. There are many exegetical questions that make it difficult to determine what the "homosexuality" passages really mean: These are vexed questions that learned scholars debate over, and so it is very difficult for us to arrive at a simple, straight line application of their truths for today.
4. We must be guided also by a consideration of our social context. God provides insights through reason, imagination, the social and physical sciences, cultural understanding and the creative arts. All these help us understand how to apply biblical truth to our current context.

Let's examine these points, beginning with arguments (1) and (4). It is clearly a subjective strategy to appeal to love in a way that allows the interpreters to define their own version of it rather than be bound by the scriptural specifics. The problem is compounded when we derive our understanding of what love is "guided by reason, imagination, the social and physical sciences," etc.

In response to (2) and (3) I might just point out that with this kind of argumentation, you can make almost any plain passage go away. It is

[7] *"Background essay on Biblical Texts for Journey Together Faithfully, part two"* http://www.elca.org/~/media/Files/What%20We%20Believe/Social%20Issues/In%20Process/Human%20Sexuality/Resources/background.ashx, accessed September 4, 2010.

a common dodge to construct an extra-biblical historical scenario that limits what would otherwise appear to be a fairly straightforward biblical passage. For example, why couldn't you limit Paul's condemnation of idolatry in the same chapter by saying, "Actually, Paul doesn't mean idolatry here *per se,* but only that abusive and destructive kind of idolatry that confuses divine power with a merely immanent force in nature, and locates that immanent power in a particular place or image. He's not condemning a faithful, committed use of images. Many faithful, loving, God-fearing people may simply view the image as a kind of window to the divine and transcendent world, enabling the worshipper to focus his attention on the reality of God." To which I reply, "Yes, well, but maybe idolatry is still wrong because God says so!"

Faced with this kind of subjectivity, Christians might well despair of finding anything true, anything certain, anything definite in the Scriptures on which to rest their hearts and build their lives. As Luther once said to a skeptic of his own time:

> Peter, too, says in 2 Peter 1: "We have the very sure word of prophecy, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place." Here Peter makes the Word of God a shining lamp and all else darkness; and do we want to make obscurity and darkness of the Word? . . . [But] if Scripture is obscure or ambiguous, what point was there in God's giving it to us? Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough without having our obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness augmented for us from heaven?[8]

Truth was not a matter of idle speculation for Luther. In the agony of his soul, he once cried out, "Nothing is more miserable than uncertainty!" We are grateful the Lord led him, by the Scriptures, into that clear, bright space where he could say, "The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience."[9]

## Hearing God's Voice in Babel

This is precisely why I believe Lutherans have something distinctly different and wonderful to say in the twenty-first century, amid the stupefying clamor of all these conflicting and confused tongues. But we will only have something to say if we continue to humbly listen to God's voice. Then our voice will be distinctive not because it is Lutheran, but because it is true. Then our voice will help others and bring unity to the church, not because we are saying something different and new, but because we are echoing the ancient and all powerful Word of our God.

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[8]LW, Vol. 33, 93–94.

[9]LW, Vol. 33, 24.

## Scripture's Nature

I am convinced that we can only solve this hermeneutical dilemma in which we find ourselves—a barren historicism that removes Christ from the Scriptures or a gloomy postmodernism that reduces every truth to something culturally determined or a mere personal preference—if we approach biblical hermeneutics theologically.[10] By this I mean: let the Scriptures themselves tell us what their nature is. Let the Scriptures themselves tell us what their purpose is. Let the Scriptures, in other words, fuel our presuppositions. Let God be God and let God speak! The key difference between biblical interpretation and all other forms of hermeneutics is that this book comes to us claiming to be God's voice, speaking through the mouths of many human authors:

> In the past *God spoke* to our forefathers *through the prophets at many times and in various ways,* but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1:1–2, NIV).
>
> For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but *men spoke from God* as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21, NIV).

That is Scripture's nature. As he opens up the Scriptures, then, the only appropriate posture for an interpreter is to say, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:8). We come to this book expecting to hear God talking to us since he has inspired every one of these words. We want to understand what he means to say through his inspired prophets. That means that when we interpret the Bible, we need to keep in mind not only the Eighth Commandment, but the Second Commandment as well. We know that "the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name (=his self-revelation)." As the LORD says in another place, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The Lord declares'" (Jeremiah 23:31, NIV).

"But," someone might say, "what about culture? What about the antiquity of the Bible? What about language? What about human bias? Don't these affect how we interpret the Bible?" Of course they do! Lutherans have always emphasized the importance of understanding the historical background of the biblical books. We respect the fact that *men* spoke from God "at many times and in various ways." We

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[10]This insight is not unique to Lutherans. Thoughtful exegetes and theologians of many denominations have decried the sterility of exegesis that stops with historical or linguistic investigation and that refuses to "sit with unspeakable wonder in the presence of God." Similarly, there are still some that stand up for the importance of understanding the author's intent, despite what the postmodernists may say about the death of the author. See Gordon D. Fee, *To What End Exegesis?: Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), esp p 279 and 289.

have expended great effort in understanding the biblical languages. We work hard to understand the context of what is being said and the manner in which it is said. And while the cultural, historical, and linguistic gaps between us and the original texts are indeed matters that have to be dealt with, postmodernists have greatly exaggerated the difficulties in overcoming them—to the point where they believe any attempt to share meaning between cultures is impossible.

What this is about, in one sense, is whether or not you believe there is a God. If he exists, then he made us, and he gave us language, and he gave us our common origin, and what we say has meaning, and refers to a world God made. Does he mean to communicate with us, using our words, our human tongues? The answer Scripture gives is, "Yes, indeed! God has spoken and is not silent." There is one world, one God, one revelation: Jesus Christ the Righteous. To him all the ancient Scriptures of his people point. By him they are fulfilled (1 Ti 2:5; Acts 17:24-31; Luke 24:44). He came into our world from far above it. He embedded himself in the texture of our daily life (Col 2:9). Though God, he was fully human and spoke human words that were fully capable not only of adequately communicating God's meaning, but of shaping our world as he uttered them. "He is the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Ro 4:17). We conclude therefore that language is a capable and fit bearer of the Spirit's truth (1 Co 2:13).[11]

## Scripture's Purpose

The greatest gap, really, is neither historical, nor cultural, nor linguistic. Finally if God can bridge the ocean of distance between the Deity and humanity, then the gap between cultures for him is no bigger than a mud-puddle. No, the greatest chasm dividing us from God is our sinful, human, inbred bias of unbelief. And this blindness has overcome our race precisely with respect to the Scripture's central message, and the purpose for which God spoke through the prophets. As Paul says: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Co 2:14). Human beings by nature simply do not "get" grace; they do not comprehend the unconditional gospel of Jesus Christ.

But as Paul also teaches, somewhat paradoxically, it is only the message of the gospel which can open our ears and give us under-

[11]Again, Lutherans are not alone in making the argument against the postmoderns that God not only can speak, but that he has spoken, and that meaning resides in the text of Scripture and not in the heads of the interpreters. See: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Zondervan, 1998).

standing. Through the gospel, the Spirit speaks to us and creates the life of faith in us (1 Co 1:21; Ro 1:17-18; see also 1 Pe 1:23-25). And so Paul, the believer, can say with supreme confidence, "We have received . . . the Spirit . . . that we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Co 2:12), and, "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Co 2:16). Through his gospel, God bridges the gap, removes the bias of unbelief, and gives us faith and understanding.

## The Lutheran "Distinctive"

This emphasis on the centrality of the unconditional gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ is what finally sets Lutheran hermeneutics apart. This notion did not come to us in a dream in the night. The Scriptures themselves declare that the gospel is the hermeneutical key that unlocks the Scripture for every believer. Only in Christ is the veil preventing a true understanding of Moses "taken away" (2 Co 3:14-16). When Christ "opened up" his disciples' minds so that they could understand the Scripture, he said, "This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:46-47).

When Luther rediscovered this truth, he said, "The whole Bible looked different to me."[12] Previously he had seen Jesus as his Judge and Lawgiver, prescribing the higher ethical righteousness demanded in the gospel. Now he saw righteousness as a gift of God's grace, won for him by Jesus, his loving Savior. Now he saw that everything in the Scriptures revolved around this understanding of Christ, "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what have you left?"[13]

This is more than simply an insight of Luther's. This scriptural truth is the clear testimony of our church:

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[12]As quoted in Herman Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith,* translated, with revisions and additions, from the second German edition, by Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), 62.

[13]WA XVIII, 606, 29. Lutherans down through the centuries have borne witness to this same truth. Hermann Sasse emphatically restates it, "But the Bible can only 'instruct us to salvation' because it contains the gospel, the message of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. Without this gospel, the Scriptures would be either an unintelligible, fragmentary document of a chaotic history of religions, or a revelation of the incomprehensible wrath of God. Only the witness to Christ makes a Bible out of the Bible, just as it is the sun which turns daytime into day. It is for this reason that the doctrine of justification . . . is truly the key to the whole Bible." From his book, *Here We Stand : Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith,* 115-116. Similarly, Martin Franzmann calls justification the "res" (essential subject matter) of the Scriptures. See "Scripture and Interpretation," (Springfield, IL: Concordia Seminary Print Shop, 1961), 337. And as Jaroslav Pelikan once wrote, "The church did not need a Luther to tell it that the Bible was true. But it did need a Luther to tell it what the truth of the Bible is."

> This controversy deals with the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and is especially useful for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible.[14]

Justification is the beating heart of the Scripture and God's last and final word to humanity. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

When Lutherans approach the Holy Scriptures, then, we expect to see—both in the Old and in the New Testament—the record of God's love for poor sinners. We interpret the Scriptures from the standpoint of the gospel.[15] Yes, God acts mightily in judgment, and his wrath over all impends (as we are by nature and as we are viewed apart from Christ). Yes, there are many moral lessons that Christians can draw from the examples and precepts we read in both the Old and New Testaments. But the law—whether in its condemning role or in its guiding role—is not God's final word to us. His mercy in Christ is—whether promised in the Old Testament through prophecy and type, or fulfilled in all its glory in the New. The entire Bible is the account of God's love come down to save us. This is the key hermeneutical insight of the Lutheran Church.

## Conclusion

The aged evangelist knew that he didn't have long to live. He knew that the time had come for his departure. Though he may never have married, he was writing to a younger man whom he regarded as his son. It was a time to speak of those things that were nearest and dearest to his heart. So Paul said to Timothy, "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Ti 3:15). This of course was of chief importance: to understand the Scriptures' central truth, the hinge around which everything revolves. Paul followed up by reasserting Scripture's nature, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Ti 3:16). We come to this book in humble awe and reverence, expecting to hear God speak. The interpreter who remembers these things will unleash the power of the Scriptures and prove their value "for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." (2 Ti 3:16). Let this be a Lutheran hermeneutic for the twenty-first century.

Let *God's* voice be heard.

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[14]Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV, 2-3 Kolb, et al., *The Book of Concord,* 120-121.

[15]Sasse, op.cit, 142.