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# Introduction

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## **Transformative hermeneutics**

While “literacy” tends to be associated with the ability to read written texts, it is also helpful to look at it as a general ability to “read” texts and contexts that is, “reading” in a broader sense. On the one hand, “reading” is one’s ability to make sense and make the best of (maximize) one’s environment. “Misreading,” on the other, is the tendency to perceive inadequately. Reading plays a significant function in faith communities since they are endowed with sacred texts that must be read or made sense of in order to shape beliefs and model the community’s life. As such, churches have a pressing responsibility not only to read the Bible properly, but also to apply it to the shaping of the life of the believing community within itself and its relationship with those outside it. The challenge is how to read such fixed biblical texts in the rapidly changing contemporary contexts of the faith community. The difficulty not only lies in the fact the Holy Scriptures are the basis of life and faith, and hence are to be taken seriously, but how the churches, separated in space and time, can appropriate these texts for themselves without misreading them. Closely related to misreading biblical texts is also the misreading of the context in which these texts are being appropriated. There tend to be two extremes emanating from such a dilemma. The first is to assume that what is written in the biblical texts should be taken literally and applied directly to contemporary life. The second is to assume that, due to their antiquity, the sacred texts are too alien to be relied on for shaping contemporary faith and life. Maneuvering between these two extremes is one task of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) hermeneutics process of which this volume is the first product.

The Lutheran churches subscribing to the LWF have committed themselves to “confess the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service.”<sup>1</sup> These churches of the Reformation locate themselves within the ecumenical tradition going back to the early church. They therefore take the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian creeds) and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, particularly

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<sup>1</sup> “Constitution of the Lutheran World Federation,” Article II, in *From Winnipeg to Stuttgart 2003–2010, The Report of the General Secretary on Behalf of the Council* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), 146.

the unaltered Augsburg Confession and Martin Luther’s “Small Catechism,” as the lens through which appropriately to interpret the Holy Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> If the Holy Scriptures constitute the basis for “doctrine, life and service,” it becomes necessary that this function be clarified for each generation and in the specific local existence of the church. While such clarification will always at best be tentative, attempts should be made to establish some level of functional clarity of the relationship between the Bible, diversity of reading contexts and the unifying hermeneutical lens of a particular theological tradition in order to forge common action in the world today. This clarity will not only help to strengthen the unity of the churches belonging to the Reformation tradition, but also in their ongoing dialogue with other faith traditions and their shared witness to the world.

In a bid to move toward this clarity, the LWF has embarked on the hermeneutics program, conceived against the backdrop of tensions of biblical interpretation regarding various ethical issues, the obvious one being that of human sexuality. While this background is instructive, the deliberately chosen overarching background of this hermeneutics program is the envisaged commemoration and celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. The sixteenth-century Reformation was characterized by a new commitment to the Holy Scriptures. The relationship between God’s Word and religious, social, political and economic renewal is not unique, but also evident in God’s speaking to Moses and the giving of the law and the discovery of the book (scroll) during Josiah’s reforms (2 Kings 22–23). Another good example is the reestablishment of temple worship after the exile;

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law (Neh 8:8–9).

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus saw the establishment of God’s reign as founded on the promises in God’s Word,

and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:17–21).

Examples of hearing the Word of God afresh resulting in the renewal of religious and social institutions abound. In the context of the Reformation, we can see that the Holy Scriptures played a central role, not only in legitimizing that "new" thing which God was purported to be doing, but also as a means for a renewed appropriation of the early Christian traditions in a new context. As a catalyst for renewal, the Scriptures appear to have contributed to the process due to the widespread availability of the Bible in the vernacular and also by proposing new ways of interpretation. The previous period was characterized by only the Latin text in addition to a few German translations, based on inferior manuscripts and not on the original languages. Martin Luther managed to achieve much since he happened to have access to superior manuscripts and worked with the original languages in addition to Latin. Luther found the time to put his German translation together while he was in hiding at the Wartburg Castle between 1520 and 1522. Luther also took advantage of Johannes Gutenberg's newly inaugurated printing press to print many copies of the German Bible. In addition, the emphasis on the primacy of the Holy Scriptures over tradition and personal revelation called for an increased reading and study of the Bible. If God spoke primarily through the written word, one was obliged to commit to its reading and study.

The papers presented in this book seek to attend to three interpretive poles of the biblical text, the interpretation of the Bible in the Reformation tradition and the diversity of contexts informing the manifold interpretations. Some do not simply describe, but also propose, in a modest way, how these three interpretive poles might be fruitfully related so that reading the Bible becomes a transformative process. The basic biblical text used is the Gospel of John. In other words, the Gospel of John is being read in light of different contexts through the lens of the ecumenical, Lutheran and Reformation traditions. The aim is not to emphasize the variety of reading contexts, but to find shared reading practices, regulated by the common reading lens of the Lutheran and ecumenical traditions. It is this perspective of relating the three interpretive poles that the future volumes of this hermeneutics series will seek to deepen from various angles. In the following, we do not give a summary of the papers, which should be read in their individual integrity, but a broad overview of the relationship of these three hermeneutical poles.

## The biblical text

One of the major contributions of Martin Luther and the Reformation was the rediscovery and exaltation of the materiality and the historical nature of the text as the medium through which God would speak and give the Holy Spirit to human beings. God would only address individuals and communities from outside through the reading and hearing of the Word and the sacraments. In his context, Luther opposed other positions that either exalted individual, intuitive or internal spiritual revelation apart from the external Word. In emphasizing the written Word, Luther tried to subvert Rome’s claim to exclusive authority over the interpretation of the Word or to put the tradition of the church at the same level as the Word of God. This emphasis on the written word called for the Bible to be available in the vernacular. This would in no way undermine the necessity of rigorous study requiring mastery of the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. The translatability of the word into the vernacular was viewed as reminiscent of the incarnation, as has been pointed out by several African theologians such as Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh.

The fact that the Word of God is translatable differentiates the Bible from the sacred texts of other religions in a number of ways. From the onset, it becomes necessary to take seriously the distinction between the Bible, the Holy Scriptures and the Word of God, as shown in this volume by Hans-Peter Grosshans, according to whom, the “*Bible* is a book (like other religious books)” but “becomes *Holy Scripture* in its use in the church and which may become the *Word of God* when people are addressed by it in a salvific way” (Grosshans in this volume, emphasis added). This distinction of the physical book and its objective content from its subjective appropriation puts the responsibility on the reader without denying the Spirit behind the content. The appropriation of the Bible as the Holy Scriptures opens up the church to the opportunity of hearing the Word of God. Received with this positive attitude, the Holy Scripture unleashes the power from its contents, written in ordinary human language in the past, to move the church to the future. In order to acclimatize with its language and master its *habitus* beyond technical expertise, the biblical text must be read and studied regularly at home, in church, in private and in community. It must be critically studied, meditated upon, discussed, argued over, enacted, preached on and shared. In this way, it can shape belief and life. Read and lived in this attitude, the ordinary words of the Holy Scriptures become the “words of eternal life” (ῥήματα ζωῆς αἰωνίου Jn 6:68). It is through this diligent search of the Scriptures that the encounter with Christ, the Word of God and eternal life, is made possible.

Several essays seek to hear the address of the biblical text of the Gospel of John by looking at it as a whole but also through its themes or different sections. This approach comes from the recognition that the entire Gospel of John is composed of several traditions that go back to Jesus and the early Christian communities via several routes. But it is this single focus (Jesus Christ) of the traditions that gives the final text of the Gospel its wholeness, not only within itself, but also with the books of the Christian Old Testament and the rest of the New Testament. This single focus, “the nuclear event” to use Paul Ricoeur’s terminology, “possesses at once a historical significance and a kerygmatic dimension.”<sup>3</sup> While such early genealogy of the individual *pericopes* can only be identified with very little confidence, as Craig Koester shows in this publication, they provide the coherence characteristic of the Gospel of John. He singles out the notions of the “Word,” “life,” “actions or signs,” the “crucifixion and resurrection,” and the “Spirit.” Koester emphasizes that one way of reading a biblical text is to look at its overarching themes characterized by recurring ideas or motifs across the whole book. In so doing, one can discern, albeit only tentatively, the context from which the gospel itself emerges. Such a position that one could approximate the community behind the gospel based on its content has lately been challenged but nonetheless remains plausible to a certain extent.

Commendable reading practices emphasize the “otherness” of biblical texts, which must be allowed to speak both familiar and unfamiliar language to the contemporary reader. This can be achieved by creating both distance and proximity to the text. By creating proximity, one is open to what the biblical text has to say and willing to be “converted.” By creating distance, the readers allow the text to speak to its past audience while trying to eavesdrop on that conversation, fully aware of the limitation that they only eavesdrop on a small part of that past conversation.<sup>4</sup> If the text is to be honored as worthy of speaking today, the reader has the responsibility to take up this historical task of “journeying between” the “strangeness” of the past and the “familiarity” of the contemporary world.<sup>5</sup> Only such a committed and open engagement with the past is likely not only to confirm what the reader is familiar with, but also to bring some surprises.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, vol. II, transl. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 89.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds), *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Stefan Collini, et al (eds), *History, Religion and Culture: British Intellectual History 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15.

This historical task involves the investigation of the words, sentences and their combinations in the whole text in relationship to contemporaneous use of language. It is in this historical sense that the biblical text can speak afresh and renew doctrine for the life of the church.<sup>6</sup> This was one of Martin Luther’s major contributions. For Luther, the historical materiality of the biblical text was to be prized above the allegorical sophistications of creative interpretation. The historical distance of the biblical text will also reveal its continuity and discontinuity with previous religious traditions as Denis Olson shows in this publication. This is how the Word of God can renew. It is based on God’s past speaking in ways that address contemporary questions. It has been observed that renewal was possible in the Jewish faith because there was always a written and fixed text that governed the parameters within which interpretive creativity could take place.<sup>7</sup>

## Context

The fact that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14) is God’s recognition of context. The incarnation of the Word took place in first-century Palestine, that is, in space and time. The reason why God can speak to all people at all times is because God speaks to local situations as well as to human beings’ existential needs. The reason why God’s utterance awakens the hearers to new commitments and life is because it does not simply condone or condemn their context, but speaks to them in order to strengthen, renew and to spur them to their highest possible authenticity—God’s Word is creative; God’s utterance awakens. According to John, when Jesus says, “Lazarus, come out!” (Jn 11:43), Lazarus comes to life. But in this same understanding, this promise of life from God’s pronouncement is not only limited to the single case of Lazarus; Jesus says, “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:26). In this sense, abundance of life is both immanent and transcendent; the good news must address the local and immediate but also promise something more profound.

This immediate and transcendent potential of God’s communication becomes evident in the fact that biblical texts, written for specific audiences and local contexts, could, with the same effectiveness, be encountered in other contexts separated in space and time. In his essay, Vitor Westhelle distinguishes between different contexts that directly impact the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

<sup>6</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 233.

<sup>7</sup> See, Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The first is the context that occasioned the writing of the text itself but may also include the context for which the text was written in the first place. The second context is the context of reception, that is, how existential concerns of different eras have shaped the questions brought to the text. These two broad categories of contextual approaches to the Bible should be taken into consideration. We have already pointed out above that language and idioms used in the composition of the biblical text were comprehensible to the particular context in which the text emerged or the audience for whom it was initially written. We are also aware that while the biblical text was written with a specific context in mind, there is also a general assumption in much biblical literature that the text could also be read by those the text was not initially directed to.

The assumption of both the particular and general understanding of context is evident in John as, for example, in the confrontation of Thomas' doubt.

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (Jn 20:27–31).

In this example, we can observe an early situation in which belief was at stake as characterized by the ubiquitous presence of the notion of belief and unbelief in the whole fourth gospel. From the onset, the Gospel points out that John the Baptist was "a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him" (Jn 1:7) while the concluding part affirms that the Gospel was written so that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31).

While we may be uncertain as to whether believing is the "intention" of the "author," we can be certain that believing is the very important voice of the text in its early context of reception. In this early context of the Gospel of John, the community is confronted with the choice of publicly confessing its faith or losing its credibility by hiding its identity; "many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God" (Jn 12:42–43). In other words, the word of the Gospel of John confronts a confessional context, one in which one must make

a choice between faith in Jesus and losing one’s position in society, or hiding one’s identity and losing one’s place in the Father’s household (ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς) (Jn 14:2). It is this power and ingenuity of the biblical text to address immediate hearers with such broadness that make this text reach subsequent contexts of believing communities with singular power and influence.

The missiological implication here is that the written Word of God, which transformed lives in the past generations, has the power to do the same today and in different contexts. Transformative hermeneutics stimulate this critical engagement with the Word of God so that it transforms the lives of today’s readers. If it is contextual, then biblical interpretation seeks to move beyond the technical readings of the past while seeking to embody the transformation of the past into the present (Eve-Marie Becker in this volume). As Anni Hentschel shows, “one and the same text may be understood in a completely different way by different people, because reading and understanding depend on the reader’s context, especially in terms of historical situation, cultural assumptions, literal knowledge, age and gender.”

Another contextual question has to do with what the text means to contemporary society. This is one difficult aspect of interpretation because there are no clear rules as to how one moves from the message to the early recipients to applying the same message to contemporary situations. One must already decide *a priori* what aspects of the text correspond to contemporary questions. As will be shown below and throughout the essays in this volume, this *a priori* classification of corresponding issues from the biblical text to the contemporary context is shaped by one’s theological or even “ideological” orientation, whether one is aware of it or not. As such, an interpretation of the Bible that seeks to take context seriously is inherently ethical. As Monica Melanchthon shows in this book, “One cannot miss discerning the strong ethical component in contextual biblical interpretation.” But the shape of ethical questions emerges from questions arising from the text itself and also questions from one’s context. As has been pointed out above, as enough distance is created for the text to speak, it raises questions that the reader may not have had in the first place. But, also, as readers carefully look at their own context, they bring questions to the text which another person, who has made different experiences, could not bring. Is there a general way of categorizing these commonly shared existential questions?

Both Bernd Wannewetsch and Sarah Hinlicky Wilson underline the ethical dimension of contextual hermeneutics as they draw on Luther’s law and gospel categories. For Wannewetsch, this existential, ethical category belongs to a general understanding of citizenship participation in the economy,



politics and faith community (*oeconomia, politia, ecclesia*) characteristic of all societies. Wannewetsch points to the Johannine understanding of law as the “law of love,” which is the “ethic of belonging” that must govern the relationships of the whole human family but especially those of the household of faith. He criticizes ethics interested in identifying what often appears as the principled and infinite art of determining degrees of compatibility between distinct moral principles, or of weighing them up against each other according to circumstance; but if the basic question is about our belonging, the rivalry between various agencies and powers that claim our allegiance will be much more obvious, and hence the need to become clear about where we really belong. Our actions and overall conduct of life will then simply “tell the tale” of where we actually belong (Wannewetsch in this volume).

If one takes “belonging” as central to ethical living in the community, one also has to take “belonging” as central to the general quest for citizenship in the spheres of economics, politics and the faith community (*oeconomia, politia, ecclesia*), all of which are governed by the political function of the law (*usus politicus legis*) and the theological function of the law (*usus theologicus legis*). From this Lutheran understanding, these spheres of human existence (at least *oeconomia* and *politia*) are shared by all people separated in space and time, making it possible for biblical interpretation from a contextual perspective to prepare Christians for participation in the public space. In other words, at an existential level, the human quest for belonging underlies the possibility for relating contextual questions of the past to those of the present (Eve-Marie Becker in this volume).

We can observe that many contextual approaches to the Bible have tended to engage with the economy and politics, thereby emphasizing the political rather than the theological function of the law. In this volume, Monica Melanchthon refers to the context of human rights abuses in India for which she invites “organic intellectuals” to work with the local marginalized. These organic resource persons provide tools to “give a transformative or life giving impetus to biblical study and interpretation” since they are not only focusing on the text in its past, but are willing to engage with pressing issues today. These contextual theologians do not only “critique but also engage in constructive theological reflection that is public in nature,” says Monica Melanchthon.

There are a number of challenges to contextual hermeneutics. One such challenge has to do with its over-dependency on the political function of the law in which the Bible and theology become indistinguishable from any other secular discourse. It should be pointed out that good hermeneutics should equip God’s people appropriately to engage with Pontius Pilate, the Romans, tax

collectors as well as the priests, scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Yet, they should be able to do this on the basis of their own theological resources. Christians should, through reason, be able to engage in public space. They should be able to tackle the challenges of injustice, power and marginalization. The political function of the law (*usus politicus legis*) helps them in this regard. Nonetheless, in their engagement with one another, Christians should use the law as it draws attention to sin for the sake of repentance. For this reason, the law should be thought of in relationship to the gospel, the promise and gift of God. The interpretation of the Bible becomes transformative when law and the gospel are related as they function together as the Word of God. The danger of simply being driven by a political agenda is that one loses the theological dimension of humanity’s sinfulness, including the sinfulness of the poor and marginalized. This became evident during the struggle against apartheid when, during the day, black women and men would march together against racism and, during the night, some black men would rape black women.

The second criticism leveled against a contextual approach is related to the one above. It is the tendency to generalize that which constitutes context. If it is not every experience that has a direct implication on biblical interpretation, then what has? In other words, what experience constitutes effective context for hermeneutical purposes? Contextual hermeneutics usually does not provide methodological clarity on this, hence the need for Westhelle’s essay in this volume. What complicates this aspect of context is that contemporary context is always fluid. If there are several contextual issues, which issue is privileged as the basis for theological reflection? For Paul Tillich, context or “situation” “as one pole of all theological work, does not refer to the psychological or sociological state in which individuals or groups live.”<sup>8</sup> Rather, for him it refers to the “scientific and artistic, economic, political, and ethical forms in which they express their interpretation of existence.”<sup>9</sup> Tillich uses examples from politics and health to illustrate this point. He suggests that “theology is not concerned with the political split between East and West, but is concerned with the political interpretation of the split” and that theology “is not concerned with the spread of mental diseases or awareness of them, but it is concerned with the psychiatric interpretation of these trends.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Tillich sees context as the “totality” in which human beings find themselves in reading their situations. The context that is central for hermeneutics relates to human self-understanding in moments that

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951), 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

threaten their existence and well-being. Tillich's "situation" is the category which contextual approaches have labeled the "poor" and "marginalized" as their context for doing theology or reading the Bible. The question is how the contextual biblical interpretation of the "middle class" could be of any benefit to the poor or the "marginalized."

Contextual Bible study scholars such as my former teachers, Gerald West and Jonathan Draper, have made valuable contributions to addressing this relationship between what West calls the "untrained" and "trained" readers of the Bible corresponding to the "middle class" scholars reading the Bible in solidarity with "marginalized" communities.<sup>11</sup> Draper has shown the close connection between the biblical text and the context by emphasizing the necessity for positioning oneself contextually. For Draper, the "Word of God is not to be found in the letter of the Scripture. Nor is it in the spirit of the hearing or reading community. It is precisely between these two, in the mutual, dynamic relationship, in a back-and-forth that is never perfectly objectifiable."<sup>12</sup> The challenge of the relationship between contextual "margins" and solidarity with their "socially engaged" or "organic intellectuals," to use West's language, remains a fruitful area for further exploration in contextual hermeneutics. This is especially true because most of the essays in this volume are written by trained theologians and can therefore be fully utilized by other theologians or students of theology at seminaries. Transformative hermeneutics seeks to find ways of linking the experiences and expertise of congregations and academic theologians, an effort demonstrated to an extent by some of the above mentioned scholars. This engagement comes from the realization that the Bible is read for different purposes by scholars who read it for their academic work and "ordinary" readers who read it for their devotional life. However, there is inexhaustible mutual fecundation in bringing these diverse purposes into deliberate dialogue.

One crucial contribution of contextual hermeneutics is in this "recognition of the validity of another *locus theologicus*: present human experience" that is, the experiences of the reading community. Contextual theology seeks to consider "culture, history, contemporary thought forms" together with "Scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression."<sup>13</sup> The question remains whether this foregrounding of human experience does not

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<sup>11</sup> Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation; Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995; originally published by Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 136, cited in Jonathan Draper, "'For the Kingdom is Inside You and it is Outside of You': Contextual Exegesis in South Africa," in Patrick J. Hartin and J. H. Petzer (eds), *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament* (Brill: Leiden, 1991), 243.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 4.

weaken efforts toward objectivity. Vitor Westhelle shows here the fruitfulness of Latin American contextual approaches in which the Exodus narrative gave hope of deliverance to the local Christian communities in times of political oppression. He demonstrates how similar texts were used by the oppressors in apartheid South Africa who contextually appropriated the same Exodus narrative to legitimate their own quest for the land of promise. The Book of Exodus became the basis of the white supremacists' domination of the black South Africans as they assumed to be Israelites in representing themselves in the narrative.

One significant challenge for contextualization lies in this subtle function of endorsing a particular earthly political establishment in the name of God. In other words, contextualization falls into the trap of being too concrete when proposing what the kingdom of God should look like on earth. This can be explained by the fact that most contextual approaches tend to employ a hermeneutical key from social, economic or political theories with clear proposals and then use the biblical text or theological reflection to legitimate such theories. This was the case in Latin American Liberation Theology's use of Marxist theory, with the result that some extreme theologians engaged in violent military activities with the hope of establishing the “classless” godly society.

The above critique was common among some Western theologians because of their sense of custodianship of the theological enterprise and hence trying to defend its traditional methods. This notwithstanding, the history of Western theological scholarship evinces a contextual commitment that has not continued with the same vigor in recent times. There is evidence that in nineteenth-century Germany, such scholars as Adolf von Harnack, Martin Rade and others were contextual theologians in that they sought to “confront” their “audience with the opportunities of the Christian faith in the social, political, and cultural challenges of their day.”<sup>14</sup> For them, theology was “founded in a historical way in the gospel as the origin for life and faith of Christianity.”<sup>15</sup> Even though contextual approaches to theology and the Bible largely flourished in the global South, they pointed out that this way of approaching theology and the Bible “is not an option, nor is it something that should only interest people from the Third World”<sup>16</sup> because the “old content of faith—the same yesterday, today, and forevermore is always received under the conditions of a new context of life.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Hans Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context: The Last Two Hundred* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 136.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Powers, *The Call of God: Women Doing Theology in Peru* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 2.

## Theological orientation

Words such as “confessional,” “dogmatic” and “theological” tend to be viewed with suspicion in biblical studies. They are associated with rigid orientation to studying the Bible in ways that only serve to buttress the hegemony of the hierarchy of the church, hence as curtailing the freedom of scholarship. From some postcolonial and postmodern perspectives, explicit confessional and theological orientations are seen as endorsing the oppressive ideology and the patriarchal *status quo*. Such views are not completely correct. What we know is that everyone has an entry point to the biblical text, which is shaped by their theological or what Gerald West calls “ideological-theological” or “ideo-theological” orientation.<sup>18</sup> Every reader has this orientation whether or not they are conscious of it. The greatest danger is to be unaware of it and when that orientation is oppressive and contradicts the broader witness of the gospel. It is for this reason that the transformative hermeneutics opted for here have a deliberate confessional or theological orientation of the Lutheran and Reformation tradition.<sup>19</sup>

An explicit confessional hermeneutical orientation recognizes that the

earliest creedal traditions preserved already in the Old and New Testaments served to unify the people of God, orient God’s people their identity in the history of God’s saving intervention, and clarify the faith of God’s people in the context of its challengers, so ecumenical creeds speak to the unity, identity, and integrity of Christian church and its faith.<sup>20</sup>

The principle of orientation has been acknowledged as an important perspective in hermeneutics. For example, Rudolf Bultmann used the same principle when he talked about “pre-understanding” (see Becker in this volume). As Bultmann put it, the reader’s orientation should not be understood in “terms of psychological introspection. Rather, it is essential to determine one’s own position, so that the exegete does not yield to an inappropriate identification

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<sup>18</sup> Gerald West, “Interpreting ‘the Exile’ in African Biblical Scholarship: An Ideotheological Dilemma in Postcolonial South Africa,” in Bob Becking and Dirk Human (eds), *Exile and Suffering*, *Old Testament Studies* 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 247–68.

<sup>19</sup> LWF member churches view the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian creeds) and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, particularly the unaltered Augsburg Confession and Martin Luther’s “Small Catechism” as true interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and hence as useful hermeneutical lenses through which these churches can read the Scriptures together.

<sup>20</sup> Joel Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 137.

between what the text says and the exegete’s predetermined expectations.”<sup>21</sup> In contextual hermeneutics, “pre-understanding” or “hermeneutical self-awareness,” is the recognition that readers have a “formation” that puts weight in their reading but also that this weight is impacted as they encounter the text in its “otherness.” For example, for Martin Luther, the hermeneutical key was Jesus Christ; it was that which “drove Christ” that shaped the evangelical reading of Scriptures. The same principle can also be observed at work in John. “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf” (Jn 5:39).

The question is whether confessional or theological orientation stifles exegetical creativity and hence theological renewal. One’s orientation affects interpretation whether one is aware of it or not. The greatest danger does not come from having an orientation but from being unaware of it. Hans-Peter Grosshans shows here that actually the challenge begins even before one starts reading. One must decide on the nature of the biblical text. One’s engagement with the text is determined by whether one is simply reading the “Bible,” the “Holy Scriptures” or encountering the “Word of God.” These distinctions are important within the Lutheran and Reformation traditions in which the Bible can be looked at like other religious books but “becomes Holy Scripture in its use in the church and ... may become the Word of God when people are addressed by it in a salvific way” (Grosshans in this volume). Our choices determine how we encounter the biblical text. If readers need to be explicit about their orientation, how does the confessional orientation affect efforts toward some objectivity regarding the Bible?

Bernd Wannewetsch encourages “reading Scripture as a sort of critical interlocutor of our tradition, so as eventually to trigger a fresh reading of both.” This is what it means to belong to a faith tradition, it means “taking seriously the traditional deposit for the present” (Wannewetsch in this volume). As Carl Braaten has pointed out, Christian tradition cannot be taken wholesale. “There is a lot of rotten stuff in the history of Christianity,” he asserts.<sup>22</sup> Communities,

in their struggle with their faith in their context come up with explanations that provide them with appropriate language to these situations; they pass on such explanations that may be useful for subsequent generations. But subsequent generations need to relate to these previous explanations in light of the

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<sup>21</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, III, 142-150 in Hans Conzelmann and Andreas Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament: An Introduction to the Principles and Methods of N.T. Exegesis* (Peabody: Hendricks Publishers, 1988), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Braaten, op. cit. (note 17), 3.

demands of their times. In bequeathing the tradition to the next generation and in the contextualization of such tradition, tradition becomes living. But in taking tradition in its fixed form with no efforts to relating it to contemporary questions, it becomes traditionalism that kills.<sup>23</sup>

Does identifying a shared hermeneutical framework remove plurality and conflicting interpretations? Not necessarily because readers' contexts remain different, so their appropriation of the Holy Scriptures will not be identical. However, clarifying theological starting points could move readers far closer to one another than if they remain ignorant of their theological positions or unwilling to engage with others. It is for this reason that members of the LWF must always find ways of orienting their hermeneutics to their shared theological traditions, i.e., the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian creeds) and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, particularly the unaltered Augsburg Confession and Martin Luther's "Small Catechism." One reason why these confessions are taken very seriously as the lens through which Scripture can be read is the recognition that contemporary Christian communities read the Bible in the community of past Christian traditions. This is done in the awareness that these confessions were responding to particular questions of the time so that no one should expect these confessions to "yield concretely binding directives for all concrete situations."<sup>24</sup> It is also accepted that there have been periods in which the "confessions and dogmatics were improperly placed above Scripture" for example in the era of Lutheran orthodoxy.<sup>25</sup> It is however possible for the rich deposit of the tradition of the faith community to be taken seriously in the contemporary interpretation of Scriptures, where tradition is renewed and Scripture is illuminated. As Jaroslav Pelikan said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."<sup>26</sup> This critical engagement between tradition and Scripture would contribute immensely to the unity of the church and to the church's public witness.

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<sup>23</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65, in Olson in this publication.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), xxi.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi–xxii.

<sup>26</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9.

## Way to the future

As Hans-Peter Grosshans points out,

the way in which we deal with the plurality of understandings of God's Word and address requires a methodological answer. The churches have to work out procedures of communicating the various understandings with each other and have to enable such cross-cultural and cross-contextual communication in various ways by creating possibilities for people from various contexts to communicate their respective understandings of biblical texts and to reflect theologically on this.

All the proposals in this publication cannot take the place of that constant communication among the churches. Such communication requires openness that recognizes the complexity of “reading” and of making sense of the Scriptures in our time (see Anni Hentschel in this volume). Such communication also requires humility that comes from the recognition of the work of Spirit who illuminates the reading of the Holy Scriptures. This Spirit is the wind that “blows where it chooses” (Jn 3:8). We can only see with hesitation where the Spirit is transforming lives and sometimes only in retrospect. For our part, we should be diligent in our task of reading our contexts and the Holy Scriptures in light of our own tradition. For the rest, it “is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63).



# Lutheran Hermeneutics: An Outline

Hans-Peter Grosshans

Do Lutherans have a distinctive hermeneutic on which they can draw in order to strengthen the internal bonds of the communion and to deepen the quality of their engagement with other Christians and the world? Can this hermeneutic be synthesized from the “effective” reading contexts, the Lutheran theological heritage and the Holy Scriptures into manageable texts about this hermeneutic, which can help the understanding and communication in the various situations biblical texts are read and used within the churches?

In order to arrive at an answer to these questions, some major paradigmatic contributions within the development of Lutheran hermeneutics—or what may be called “Lutheran” hermeneutics—spring to mind. Such retrospection may be helpful to establish whether there may be a specific Lutheran profile in hermeneutics—at least from a historical perspective. Even if Lutheran communities and theologians do not follow former Lutheran ways of reading and understanding biblical texts, they should be aware of the tradition they depart from or they try to update in light of today’s problems and understandings.

In the process of finding out what hermeneutics is about, it is helpful to remember the origin of the term “hermeneutic” in Greek (ἑρμηνευτική). As far as we know, this term was first used by Plato. According to the most ancient sources, hermeneutic means the interpretation of the signs of the gods—rather like the interpretation of dreams. Interpretation here is used in the double sense of “translating” and “giving meaning” to signs from elsewhere. In European philosophy, from Plato to Martin Heidegger, the origin of hermeneutic was connected with the god “Hermes.”<sup>1</sup> Hermes’s role was to interpret divine messages to human beings.<sup>2</sup> In later Greek antiquity, the god Hermes was seen as the mediator *per se*, as a magician and the inventor of language and scripture. All this shows that hermeneutics is seen as interpretation in the strict sense (as translating) and in a figurative sense. In the later history of Protestant hermeneutics we find these two sides, especially in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics at the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to Schleiermacher, in understanding texts

<sup>1</sup> Despite the similarity of the words this is etymologically questionable.

<sup>2</sup> According to Plato, Hermes especially had the competence of speech (περὶ λόγου δύνάμις – Platon, *Kratylos* 408 a2).

we have, on the one hand, a grammatical analysis and, on the other, a divination, a prophetic reconstruction of a given text or speech.<sup>3</sup>

## **Hermeneutical developments in the early church**

We have to remember two major developments in the early church in order to understand the peculiarity of Lutheran hermeneutics. In Christianity, hermeneutics, or what we call hermeneutics, is present from the beginning. We can already see processes of interpretation and understanding, mainly of texts of the Old Testament but also of texts produced within the new Christian communities in the texts of the New Testament. With Jesus Christ's ascent to heaven Christianity became a text-based religion. Two questions then became important: Which are the relevant texts? How should these texts be interpreted?

The first question was answered in the process of canonization. In an informal process a number of texts were selected for the canon of Holy Scripture. Canon is the Greek word for *norma* (norm). A set of texts was assigned the role of being the norm and the rule for deciding what was Christian.

The second question was addressed with the concept of the fourfold sense of Scripture, which was first proposed by Origen. In chapter two of the fourth book of his *De principiis*, Origen (185–254) answers the question regarding how we should read and understand divine writing. He believed that the reason for misunderstandings and wrong interpretations was that people understand Scripture literally and not in a spiritual way. According to Origen, the literal sense of biblical texts is for the simple-minded, while believers who are progressing in their faith should read the Bible according to its spiritual, allegorical sense. Furthermore, those who are perfect in faith should read the biblical text in its eschatological sense. This concept is a way of consistently interpreting the Holy Scripture as a whole, avoiding contradictions and making sense of passages in the Bible that at first may seem obscure. Therefore, one has to distinguish between the literal and spiritual meanings of the biblical text. Subsequently, the spiritual meaning was further refined as the allegorical, moral and anagogical (eschatological) sense. The idea was that beside or beyond or within the literal meaning, a biblical text can be read in an allegorical way, as an allegory of the human soul's spiritual life; or, the text can be read in a moral way, disclosing something about Christian life; or, the text can be read in an

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<sup>3</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, transl. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1994).

eschatological way, revealing something about Christian hope. It is obvious that the interpretation of the biblical text's spiritual sense emphasizes the role of the interpreter and is not controlled by the biblical text alone.

These two developments have to be borne in mind when we come to Martin Luther's understanding of Holy Scripture in general and to his hermeneutical principles in particular.

### **Bible—Holy Scripture—Word of God: Distinctions in Martin Luther's writings**

In the first instance, Luther considered Holy Scripture, in its role in the process of salvation, to be one of the divine media of salvation. In the second instance, this also became important for theological epistemology. For Luther, the Holy Scriptures were the source and norm of human knowledge of God.

God speaks to human beings and to God's people—the church—through the words of the Bible in various ways. God is present in the world through God's Word—and it is this subject that interests Luther as a theologian.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish three ways of understanding: The Bible—Holy Scripture—the Word of God. The Bible is a book (like other religious books) which becomes Holy Scripture in its use in the church and which may become the Word of God when people are addressed by it in a salvific way. Such address may happen in the way of a commanding divine law or in the way of the saving gospel. "No book may comfort except the Holy Scripture ...; because it includes the Word of God."<sup>4</sup>

But, for Luther, it was essential that the Holy Scripture, as source and norm of the church's teaching and God's saving Word, should not be separated from the literal biblical texts in their wholeness as one book. Therefore, the humanist motto of his time *ad fontes*, "back to the sources," became important for Luther. *Ad fontes* means going back to the original sources of the church's teaching and preaching, that is, to the original text of the Bible in Greek and Hebrew. Such humanists as Erasmus were convinced that Christianity could be renewed by returning to its roots. Luther shared this opinion and therefore translated the New Testament from the original Greek into German in 1521. Throughout his life, he cooperated with other scholars, such as his friend Philipp Melancthon, on translating the Old Testament from Hebrew into German. In order fully to grasp texts in a foreign language from historical,

<sup>4</sup> *WA* 10/1, 2, 75, 3–7 ("trosten mag keyn buch, denn die heyligen schrift...; denn sie fasset gottis wortt"). Author's own translation.

geographical, cultural, political and religious contexts other than one's own, one has to read them in their original language and translate them into one's own mother tongue. Christian communities need some people in their midst who are able to do this translation and interpretation. For most people who do not know the original languages of the biblical text, it is vital that they can rely on the linguistic competence of the translators and interpreters.

However, Luther was convinced that, on the basis of a true understanding of the biblical texts, the preaching of the Word of God was better done orally than in writing. Addressing people with the Word of God (commanding or comforting) is not like informing people with a learned book. For Luther, the fundamental form of the gospel was the oral message, which he did not regard as being inferior to the written or printed word: “Christ did not write his doctrine himself ... but transmitted it orally, and also commanded that it should be orally continued giving no command that it should be written.”<sup>5</sup>

In all places, there should be fine, goodly, learned, spiritual, diligent preachers without books, who extract the living word from the old Scripture and unceasingly inculcate it into the people, just as the apostles did. For before they wrote, they first of all preached to the people by word of mouth and converted them ... However, the need to write books was a serious decline and a lack of the Spirit which necessity forced upon us... For when heretics, false teachers, and all manner of errors arose in the place of pious preachers ..., then every last thing that could and needed to be done, had to be attempted ... So they began to write in order to lead the flock of Christ as much as possible by Scripture into Scripture. They wanted to ensure that the sheep could feed themselves and hence protect themselves against the wolves, if their shepherds failed to feed them or were in danger of becoming wolves too. <sup>6</sup>

Luther was fully aware of possible false interpretations of Holy Scripture; this necessitates theological discourse and the writing of theological books. But how can we discern which interpretations are true and which ones are false? From where do church leaders and theologians obtain their wisdom in order to ascertain which interpretations are true and which ones are false? In the quote above, Luther gives us only one hint, namely that these writing should lead the reader by Scripture into Scripture. But this is only a very general criterion for knowing which interpretation may be true and needs to be developed more fully.

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<sup>5</sup> *LW* 52, 205.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

With respect to the above mentioned canon of Holy Scripture, it is important that Luther did not understand every biblical text to be of relevance for Christians and to be of equal value. Crucial when reading a biblical text is whether or not it proclaims Christ who was crucified and rose from the dead for the salvation of all people. Luther believed this to be the Bible's own measure of the truth, which makes a critique of biblical texts possible. Luther claimed Christ to be the only content of the Holy Scripture, "Without doubt the entire Scripture is oriented toward Christ alone."<sup>7</sup>

With this criterion, Luther radically criticized entire biblical books. According to him, the Letter of James, the Letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation to John do not belong to the main books of the New Testament because these texts are not oriented toward Christ alone. Nevertheless, out of his respect for the tradition and its selection of the biblical canon, Luther did not eliminate these biblical books from the German Bible. He did, however, alter the sequence of the Scriptures in the New Testament and put those texts at the end of the Bible.

In dealing with the biblical texts critically, Luther did not judge biblical texts by external criteria, but in the context of the Bible as a whole. He claimed that,

Christ is the Lord, not the servant, the Lord of the Sabbath, of law and of all things.

The Scriptures must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason, they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

In his writing "On the Bondage of the Will" (*De Servo Arbitrio*), Luther developed his understanding of the Holy Scripture and its interpretation in discussion with the traditional Catholic understanding, the (so-called) Anabaptist movement, which became especially strong in 1525, and with Erasmus of Rotterdam.

## **Luther's main hermeneutical principle: Holy Scripture interprets itself**

What is the authority of the Holy Scripture and who guarantees its truth?

In his early disputes with the authorities of the Roman church, Luther had emphasized the authority of the Holy Scripture against other authorities within

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<sup>7</sup> *WA* 10/2, 73, 15.

<sup>8</sup>  *LW* 34, 112.

the church and some of the doctrines and practices of the Roman church. The church’s official claim was that the church and its representatives guarantee the authority of the Holy Scripture.

Luther, however, did not agree to this subordination of Scripture to the church and its tradition. Instead, he believed the Holy Scripture to be self-authenticating: Holy Scripture has and needs no guarantor other than itself.

Luther did not only base this insight on the New Testament’s claim to be inspired by God, such as 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is inspired by God.” Such a circular argument was far too weak. Luther’s position was that of a realist: the authority of Holy Scripture is wholly founded on its content, which refers to Jesus Christ and the divine process of human salvation. Therefore, the authority of the Holy Scripture depends on the truth of its central contents, namely God’s relationship to human beings—nobody and nothing else gives the Holy Scripture authority, not even an institution such as the church. Here, again, we see Luther’s emphasis on the truth—the Bible is not true simply because it says so. What makes the Bible true is that it truthfully records God’s work of salvation.

Therefore, the authority of the Holy Scripture does not depend on the fact that the church as a community of people has selected and combined the biblical texts as a Holy Scripture. Rather, it is the truth of the Holy Scripture on which the church depends for its authority.

Consequently, the true meaning of biblical texts is to be found in its reference to the loving and just God and God’s gracious relation to humanity. This, for Luther, is the same as the reference to Jesus Christ. Therefore, all former and present interpretations of biblical texts have to be evaluated in this light. Luther sums up his position by saying that Holy Scripture interprets itself. The Holy Scripture is, “totally certain ..., quite easy to understand, completely revealed, its own interpreter”<sup>9</sup> and “therefore Scripture is its own light. It is splendid when Scripture interprets itself.”<sup>10</sup>

This principle of Holy Scripture interpreting itself is used by Luther against the traditional position, which held that the church’s teaching office, guided by the Holy Spirit, has the authority and competence to give a true interpretation of Scripture.

Luther also opposed the understanding of Holy Scripture put forward by the then new, so-called Anabaptist movement.<sup>11</sup> The “radical wing” of the

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<sup>9</sup> *WA* 7, 97, 23

<sup>10</sup> *WA* 10/3, 238, 10

<sup>11</sup> Nowadays the Lutheran churches have come to the insight that the term “Anabaptist” is wrong.

Reformation, represented by such people as Andrew Carlstadt<sup>12</sup> or Thomas Müntzer,<sup>13</sup> was termed an Anabaptist movement because it rejected infant baptism, as a consequence of which adults had to be baptized again. They stressed the inward and spiritual side of Christian life and the Holy Spirit was set in opposition to the letter of Scripture. Within their religious communities, leadership fell to the spirit-filled, be they clergy or lay. This frequently led to the abolition of the professional ministry. To give an example, Thomas Müntzer clearly expressed this concentration on the divine spirit:

God does disclose himself in the inner word in the abyss of the soul. The man who has not received the living witness of God really knows nothing about God, though he may have swallowed 100000 Bibles. God comes in dreams to his beloved as he did to the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles... God pours out his Spirit upon all flesh, and now the Spirit reveals to the elect a mighty and irresistible reformation to come.<sup>14</sup>

Anabaptists claimed that the true interpretation of biblical texts needed a special spiritual talent, one which God bestows on particular people. Luther did not ignore the significance of the Holy Spirit for the interpretation of Scripture, but he considered that the spirit in which people are able to give a true interpretation of the Bible has to be the spirit of the Holy Scripture itself.

For Luther, the Catholics and the Anabaptists of his time were “enthusiasts” because, in their interpretations, they subjugated Scripture to external rules. It is for this reason that Luther was suspicious of the allegorical, pictorial interpretation of biblical texts (versus all forms of spiritual interpretation) and instead emphasized that they should be interpreted in a simple, literal sense.

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Carlstadt (1480–1541) was one of the inspiring figures for the “radical wing” of the Reformation. In 1522, Carlstadt and others introduced reforms such as the marriage of priests and the rejection of divine orders. They also destroyed all paintings in the churches and abolished church music because it was considered that the divine spirit could dispense with all external aids, whether art or music. Luther did not agree with all of these reforms. In particular, he himself loved church music and thought it had an important place in worship to which he contributed many hymns of his own composition.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Müntzer was another prominent figure of the “radical wing” of the Reformation. Ordinary people expected that, with the coming of the Reformation, their living conditions would improve. “Prophets” such as Müntzer preached the end of the world. In 1525, he proclaimed the kingdom of God was at hand and he formed a rebellion of peasants in Saxony.

In fact, all over Germany the peasants rebelled but their rebellions were crushed by the armies of the princes. Müntzer himself was caught and beheaded. In 1525, Martin Luther wrote two essays “Against the Heavenly Prophets” and “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes,” which were the starting signal for the princes with their armies to crush the peasants and radical Christians.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand. A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 204.

Luther assumes this to be possible in most cases because he considers the Bible to be clear in itself and its stories to have simple meanings that follow from their essential content which is Jesus Christ.

In 1525, the same year that Luther was involved in conflicts with the Anabaptists and the peasants, he wrote an extensive essay, “On the Bondage of the Will,” answering Erasmus’s substantial critique of his theological ideas, which had been published in 1524 with the title, “On the Freedom of the Will.” Luther’s essay deals with the understanding of the Holy Scripture and it is at this point that Luther introduced the new distinction between the external and internal clarity of Scripture.

To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are also two kinds of obscurity: one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart. If you speak of internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture ..., yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it... For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture... If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous.<sup>15</sup>

Erasmus had claimed that Scripture contains obscure parts which necessitate interpretation by the church authorities or interpretation according the tradition of the church. Responding to this, Luther put forward the following distinction: on the one hand the inner clarity (or obscurity) of the message of the biblical texts, located in the understanding of people’s hearts, on the other, external clarity (or obscurity) of the biblical texts, located in the understanding of the signs and meanings in the texts by human reason. While when reading biblical texts with an open mind nothing is obscure or ambiguous for human reason, the message of the text may be obscure for somebody’s heart.

Some philosophers acknowledge that the theologian Martin Luther defended the freedom of human reason to a greater extent than the philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam as well as his followers. This use of human reason for the interpretation of the Bible was further developed by the second-generation Lutheran Matthias Flacius Illyricus in his hermeneutical writing (in the *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*—*Key to Holy Scripture*). Flacius shared Luther’s interest that readers of a biblical text can by themselves reach a plausible and faithful

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<sup>15</sup> LW 33, 28.



understanding of the text by following generally acknowledged rules—rules for reading and interpretation that follow from the insights of human reason.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, when using biblical texts the limits of human reason also become clear. Human reason can grasp the meaning and insights of biblical texts but has no access to their inner clarity and cannot convince the human heart to trust in their message, especially in the promise of the gospel in the Old and New Testaments. With regard to the role of biblical texts in terms of creating trust in God, Luther believed that this could only be done by God. God creates trust in Godself when God speaks to people via the biblical texts.

Luther distinguished two ways in which God speaks to people: through commandments and promises. In Luther's terminology, God speaks to people in the way of the law and in the way of the gospel.

In dealing with Luther's hermeneutics we have to consider this Lutheran distinction, although it may not directly be part of Luther's hermeneutics. We cannot separate the question of the interpretation of biblical texts from its role as a means of God communicating Godself to human beings in order to save them and let them partake in God's life.

Luther considered himself to be following St Paul in his distinction between law and gospel. This distinction expresses a fundamental twofold experience with the Word of God: "There are two things that are presented to us in the Word of God: either the wrath of God or the grace of God, sin or righteousness, death or life, hell or heaven."<sup>17</sup>

Luther did not intend to separate the Word of God into two opposing parts or to divide the Bible into two parts: the texts of the law and the texts of the gospel. The distinction between law and gospel stands for different ways of interpreting God's relationship to human beings and two ways of God addressing people: demanding from and commanding people and making promises to people and comforting them.

With respect to the divine law, Luther distinguished at least two different uses. First, God's Word as law convicts people of their sins and, secondly, God's commandments are concerned with the proper ordering of human life—i.e., by framing rules helping to regulate and govern human society. Luther called the first function of the divine law its theological use, the second the political use of the law of God.

The first use of divine law refers to the experience of God's holiness and justice setting the standards for human life and opening the way for it to be-

<sup>16</sup> Jure Zovko, "Die Bibelinterpretation bei Flacius (1520-1575) und ihre Bedeutung für die moderne Hermeneutik," in *TbLZ*, 132. Jg. (Leipzig, 2007), 1169–80.

<sup>17</sup> *WA* 39/1, 361, 4–6

come holy and just. In God’s presence everyone, even a prophet, experiences their life as being unholy and worthless—a life that has to end and pass away. God’s holiness sets such a high standard that people feel unable to fulfill it. God’s Word as law, therefore, causes individuals to realize that their lives do not meet the demands of the true, divine life. God’s law convicts people as sinners. In this sense, it does not directly lead to righteousness but exposes human sin and with this uncovering of sin enables people to see themselves in their true state.

But God’s commandments also serve a political purpose and contribute to the proper ordering of human life. God, as part of God’s creative activity, resists chaos in our social world. For one who knows the Bible it is obvious that this function of the divine law has to be further differentiated. There is a major difference between the Ten Commandments and, for example, the laws of political and civil life in old Israel, or the ordering of some procedures and rituals in the temple in Jerusalem. Thus Luther assumed that God’s law, expressly revealed to Moses, is a general law applicable not only to Jews but to all people. This divine law is also written into people’s hearts. Moreover, in the biblical texts there is also the law of the Jewish people, valid only for the ordering of the lives of the Jewish people.

God’s law, which God has written into people’s hearts, is known by all (cf. Rom 2:14–15) and is therefore older than Moses’ Ten Commandments. Luther considered that human beings know by nature that one has to worship God and love one’s neighbor. This living law in people’s hearts is identical to the law given by Moses and the ethical commandments of the New Testament (especially Mt 7:12, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”)

Therefore, there is one law which runs through all ages, is known to all men, is written in the hearts of people, and leaves no one from beginning to end with an excuse, although for the Jews ceremonies were added and the other nations had their own laws, which were not binding upon the whole world, but only this one, which the Holy Spirit dictates unceasingly in the hearts of all.<sup>18</sup>

This universal law defines human conscience. The law, which is written in the heart of human beings by nature, speaks to their conscience. In accordance with their conscience, individuals implicitly know the conditions that must be fulfilled for life to be worthy. Thus, conscience is a divine voice in the midst

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<sup>18</sup> LW 27, 355.

of human life, but it is God as a legislator and a severe judge who speaks in conscience. In that sense, the voice of conscience cannot be the final Word of God for Luther. By their conscience people are inexorably confronted with God's demands and accused and judged according to the measure of divine law—probably ending up in desperation and death.<sup>19</sup> God, the author of divine law, speaks in conscience and therefore conscience is part of the law to which human beings are subject. Conscience expresses the individual's high dignity as well as the fact that humans are not free. It is through failure to live up to one's conscience that one becomes aware of the need for God's grace.

But, what are the demands of the law God has written in human hearts? Surely, God not only makes demands on people by accusing and convicting them of sin but has introduced rules, such as the Ten Commandments, to lay down the principles for an ordered life. For Luther, one of the functions of the political use of divine law is to restrain crime in our sinful world, which is possessed by the devil, and thus to secure public peace. Such commandments as "You shall not kill," "You shall not commit adultery," or "You shall not steal" (Ex 20:13–15) are examples of that. Other functions of the political use of divine law are to order education and also, and most importantly, to enable the preaching of the gospel. Luther believed God to have installed authorities and institutions that have to transfer those fundamental laws into daily life and political order. These institutions and authorities are the governments of cities and countries, civil law and, especially, parents and teachers because it is in the education of young people that the foundations for the future are laid. With the help of these institutions and authorities human beings can fulfill God's fundamental requirements for a peaceful and just order in society because the alternative would be characterized by violence and chaos. For Luther, it was of great importance that God has provided a positive and beneficial order for human life in our fallen and sinful world. It is God's will that people should live peacefully and in harmony with their neighbors. Reason, conscience and the law in human hearts are given by God, the Creator, as the conditions necessary for an ordered, just and peaceful society.

Luther deemed it to be essential that people confront God's demands and the threat of God's judgment in their lives. This confrontation with the divine law highlights the fact that human beings are incapable of entering into a right relationship with God through their own efforts. Only when people come

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<sup>19</sup> Luther lived his own life based on conscience as the final and only judge—for example in his conduct before the Diet of Worms in 1521. Luther rendered the freedom of conscience a great service in the history of humankind. Like Thomas More (1477–1535), Luther took a stand on conscience in the consciousness that before God he could not act otherwise.

to realize the inadequacy of these efforts will they then be ready to receive the gospel. Only when an individual comes to despair and realizes that they cannot rely on their own strength does God give them everything that they themselves could not produce by their own efforts, that is, life in its fullness as proclaimed in the gospel.

In the gospel, God addresses human beings as a gracious and kind God. We have to notice that God has not set the gospel in opposition to the law as if God were saying, “My dear child, you do not manage to fulfill my law, but I forgive your failure and shall accept and love you as you are.” This would be a false understanding of Luther’s position. When offering forgiveness, justice and love in the gospel, God not only accepts people’s actual situation but wants to change it for the better. The gospel does not legitimate the present situation of life. Instead, in the gospel God sticks to the same aims he puts forward in his law:

Here, the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying, “If you wish to fulfill the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you. If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things.”<sup>20</sup>

The objectives of divine law and the gospel are justice, peace and freedom, which are important for a person’s life. But the gospel not only formulates these aims, it already includes the realization of these aims because they are realized in God. Once a person believes and trusts in God’s promise, then they will have everything God has promised because in faith they partake in divine life. The gospel therefore requires the response of faith, and it is faith alone that is needed to achieve the objectives. Luther held that in believing the gospel believers have the “spiritual” goods of peace, justice and freedom because they are made just, free and peaceful by God.

I have described Luther’s soteriological concept of God speaking in a two-fold way, law and gospel; this is part of Luther’s understanding of the Bible. It is through the message of the Bible—in reading or in preaching—that God speaks to human beings. There is nothing through which God speaks to people that is not witnessed in the Bible. Without keeping this soteriological dimension and role of the biblical texts in mind, we would end up with a technical understanding of Lutheran hermeneutics.

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<sup>20</sup> LW 31, 348–49.

Luther underlined the authority of the Holy Scripture for the life of the church and that of every single believer. But he also presented a very reflective and differentiated understanding of the Holy Scripture, its role within the church and the rules and processes of its interpretation. This has been the starting point for an ongoing discussion dealing with questions of hermeneutics and the processes of interpreting and understanding biblical texts. In order to identify the emphases of a specifically Lutheran hermeneutics, I shall look at a few paradigmatic contributions which Lutheran theologians have put forward.

### **Taking the literalness of the Bible seriously: The first complete modern hermeneutics by Matthias Flacius**

In 1567, the Croatian Lutheran theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575) published a hermeneutic with the title, *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae—Key to Holy Scripture*. According to the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, Flacius's truly Lutheran hermeneutic is the starting point of the history of modern hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup>

Luther's principle that Holy Scripture is its own interpreter increasingly came to be considered as a mainly polemical assertion rather than a helpful description of biblical interpretation. Therefore, Protestant scholars saw the need to develop a hermeneutical theory and to define the procedure of interpretation according to Luther's general hermeneutical principle. Since in Protestantism the interpretation of biblical texts could not rely on external authorities, such as the authority of inspired teachers or church leaders, but had to be done alone, it became necessary to clarify the process of interpretation academically. Therefore, Protestant scholars developed a scientific biblical hermeneutics. Matthias Flacius was the first to publish such a hermeneutics. His hermeneutic is faithful to the divine dignity of the Holy Scripture while taking the academic insights in other academic fields (mainly in philosophy) into account. In 1546, at the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church had attacked the Protestant principle of Holy Scripture being its own interpreter by teaching that Holy Scripture is hermeneutically insufficient and needs to be supplemented with the authority of tradition. Therefore, Protestant scholars had to show that Holy Scripture is sufficient and comprehensible. In order to do so they had to clarify the hermeneutical method and the means needed for the interpretation of biblical texts when presupposing the sufficiency and

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Einführung," in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gottfried Boehm (eds), *Seminar: Philosophische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 7–40.

comprehensibility of Holy Scripture. Flacius’s extensive work fulfilled exactly this. He answered his Roman Catholic critics by insisting that the reason for not understanding Holy Scripture (or parts of it) is not its incomprehensibility but the lack of linguistic skills of its interpreters and their questionable method of interpretation. On the basis of the coherence of Holy Scripture, Flacius highlighted the normative autonomy of Holy Scripture by showing all the elements of the process of exegesis and interpretation. In using philology, exegesis, rhetoric, logic and other academic insights every biblical text can be comprehensibly interpreted within the coherence of the whole Bible.

We cannot here go into the details of Flacius’s elaborate hermeneutics. Instead, I shall illustrate his general hermeneutical intention by referring to the debate he was involved in the 1550s and which can be considered as one of the reasons why he wrote his elaborate hermeneutics.

During the 1550s, Flacius engaged in an extensive controversy with Kaspar of Schwenckfeld (1489–1561), originally a follower of Luther, who developed what we may refer to as a “spiritualistic” theology after having been disappointed by the course of the Reformation.<sup>22</sup>

Schwenckfeld distinguished strictly between the Holy Scripture, which remains outside the faithful, and the Word of God, which is effective inside the faithful. For Schwenckfeld, the true and proper Word of God was Jesus Christ alone. He was convinced that only the born again human being is able to give in faith a proper and adequate interpretation of the Holy Scripture. In its written form as a text, even in preaching, Holy Scripture cannot get to the heart of human beings, where the fundamental decisions about life are made. For him, therefore, the central question was how human beings can come to believe in their hearts.

According to Schwenckfeld, biblical texts did not suffice for this. Only God and the Holy Spirit can reach people’s hearts in such a way that the heart is transformed and faith is called forth. Words, signs, symbols or fellow human beings (e.g., pastors) cannot do this but remain outside the heart. The Word of God is Jesus Christ himself, who communicates himself through the Holy Spirit to the very heart of human beings. This Word of God is effective inside the believing hearts without any outer means, instrument or medium.

For Schwenckfeld, a new hermeneutical constellation of Scripture and faith followed from these insights. True faith does not follow the Holy Scripture. Rather, it is the other way round: Scripture has to follow faith. The Holy

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<sup>22</sup> The writings of Caspar of Schwenckfeld are published in the 19 volumes of the “Corpus Schwenckfeldianorum” (publication started 1907 in Leipzig). Followers of Caspar of Schwenckfeld nowadays can be found in the US, see [www.centralschwenckfelder.com](http://www.centralschwenckfelder.com)

Scripture can only be interpreted adequately if a human being already believes; because only this trust in the heart has the proper reference to Holy Scripture. According to Schwenckfeld,

The proper vivid gospel is not the history of Christ, voice, sound, letter. It is also in its essence not an outer word, like the oral gospel is not God's power or Godself, but it is an inner word of faith, the vivid Word of God, the word of truth.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to Schwenckfeld, Matthias Flacius emphasized that there is no immediate knowledge of God and salvation, but that both are always mediated. For Flacius, these media, in which God communicates Godself, are determined by God.

Against all individual reinterpretations of the divine Word, which became flesh and language, Flacius insisted that "God will not act with us human beings except by his outer Word and sacrament. Everything that is praised by the spirit without this Word and sacrament is the devil."<sup>24</sup> God realizes God's goals, namely to save the world, not immediately but with outer, visible and graspable means.

Flacius's interpretation of Romans 10:17 is strict: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." God has devised a series of actions to bring forth eternal salvation such as Scripture, the sacraments, the preachers and listening with the ear. Flacius shows that "faith comes from the outer listening to the preached word" and not "from an inner revelation" by an immediate touching of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

For Flacius, also the Holy Spirit is at work when human beings believe in God and, thus, are true Christians: According to Galatians 4:6, it is the Holy Spirit who makes people say in their hearts, "Abba! Father!" But Flacius did not agree that God immediately gives God's Spirit into the heart of a human being. As he pointed out, "in these questions, concerning the outer word, we have to insist, that God gives his Spirit or grace to nobody without giving it through and with the preceding outer word."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> M. Flacius Illyricus, *Aus den Schmalkaldischen heubt artickeln wider den Schwenckfeld, in welchen die gelertesten Prediger aufs ganz Deutschlandt sich haben unterschriben* (Magdeburg, 1553), 3. Author's own translation.

<sup>24</sup> M. Flacius Illyricus, *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> M. Flacius Illyricus, "Vom fürnemlichem stücke, punct oder artickel der Schwenckfeldischen schwermercy" (Magdeburg 1553), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Flacius, *op. cit.* (note 23), 1.

In contrast, Schwenckfeld and his followers praised themselves for having the Spirit without and before the Word—with the consequence, according to Flacius, that they judge and interpret the Scripture and the spoken word as they like.

Thus, the Holy Scripture becomes the means for self-interpretation. If God gives faith to human beings without the means of written or spoken word and, therefore, faith is not the result of the preached Holy Scripture and its teaching of Christ, then, according to Flacius, we no longer have the possibility to verify and identify the Christian faith. Rather, we would then have to presuppose that people of other faiths, who do not know about the preaching of the Word of God and the sacraments, can be saved like Christians. If the human heart is prepared for the knowledge of God and salvation and transformed by inner revelation, then the Holy Scripture as well as the preachers are unnecessary and in vain. We are then no longer able to identify Christian faith because we lack set criteria.

If we identify with the debate between Flacius and Schwenckfeld regarding the difference between letter and spirit (2 Cor 3:6: “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”) and the talk of the new heart and spirit (Ez 11:19), then, in the one instance, neither the Holy Scripture (“letter”), the sacraments nor anything else created can reach people’s hearts. All this only touches the outer senses not the heart. Therefore, Holy Scripture itself has to be understood as a “dead letter” which kills rather than saves. The Holy Scripture, according to this understanding, is an uncertain thing: it is subject to human discussion and interpretation and therefore not really reliable. Faith therefore cannot be founded in and justified by Holy Scripture. Rather, it is the other way round: Scripture has to be directed and oriented toward faith—faith, which is immediately called forth by God.

For Flacius, such an understanding clearly did not respect Holy Scripture and the consequences are dramatic for the principles of Christian faith and life. In the last instance, this implies that it is impossible to identify the Christian life and church because there is no public and reasonable criterion and norm for being a Christian and a church and by that to distinguish Christians from non-Christians.

Today we can observe that the position opposed by Flacius is very popular in all Christian churches. Putting faith first and the literal and preached Holy Scripture second is popular because it allows for a greater openness of the Christian faith toward other religions. The intuitive and immediate self-certainty of the hearts of the followers of other religions can be interpreted as being the result of God’s immediate work. Moreover, this understanding



seems to respect the autonomy of every single believer to a greater extent than the truly Lutheran position of putting Holy Scripture first.

In today's interpretation of the Holy Scripture we can also observe a lack of respect for Scripture's concrete materiality. Texts are frequently subjected to eisegesis rather than exegesis. Contextual and culture related interpretations subjugate biblical texts to recent cultural conditions. Ideologies as well as doctrinal theories use the biblical text to justify their own position and Scripture is used rather like a self-service cafeteria, where one picks and chooses those parts and elements that one likes and that seem useful. Holy Scripture is subordinated to people's and communities' inner self-understandings and used to confirm one's certainties of life and self-interest as well as old traditions. Texts that do not fit are ignored or denied.

This is even the case with the very popular endeavor to look for the centre of Holy Scripture. In faith people claim to know the essential and central message of the Holy Scripture, which sets the criteria for all interpretation. In a strict hermeneutical sense, however, the centre of the Holy Scripture has to be worked out through the interpretation of all the texts of the Holy Scripture. Flacius spoke of the *scopus* of the whole Holy Scripture, which is the goal envisaged in the entire Bible and the red line running through all its texts. This is not a dogmatic construction of the Bible's central message, but the result of the interpretation of all the texts. Precisely this creates the first circle of hermeneutics: between interpretation of the single biblical text and the *scopus*, the goal taken into sight in the whole Bible. Both have to be related to each other and both may change in this process of interpretation. Then a second moment becomes important: the coherence between all the various texts of the Bible. Therefore, the Bible in its literal form becomes important. For Schwenckfeld (and according to Flacius as well as the Roman Catholic Church) the service of Holy Scripture was to create a reference to Jesus Christ, who then communicates himself—beyond the texts—to human beings (for example in tradition or in an immediate way). But if we distinguish Jesus Christ from the biblical texts, then we cannot control whether we are really referring to Jesus Christ or to the Triune God when reading the biblical texts. Therefore, Schwenckfeld's concept needs an inspired interpreter, who relates the readers and listeners beyond the interpretation of the texts to the reality witnessed to in the texts. Flacius, on the other hand, insists on the lingual unity of form and content. According to his understanding, biblical texts—like other texts—already include their own spirit and the reality they are talking about. Therefore, Flacius does not need a problematic spiritual interpretation of the biblical texts because the interpretation of their literal sense is superior. With

the literal meaning of biblical texts comes external as well as internal clarity in the heart. For Flacius, internal clarity about the message of the biblical texts cannot be called forth, except through interpretation on the basis of the literal meaning of the text.

This understanding of the Holy Scripture was supported by the doctrine of inspiration (even literal inspiration)—making clear that the author of the Holy Scripture was God, using human beings as a means to communicate Godself.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, theologians became increasingly aware that there were further aspects in the process of understanding Holy Scripture that had to be considered.

### **From the Reformation to today: Awareness of contexts and historical-critical understanding**

Johann Conrad Dannhauer’s work, *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum*, published in 1654, marked a further major step in the development of hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation. For the first time, hermeneutics appeared in the title of a book. Dannhauer applied hermeneutics to all texts, which at his time meant biblical, theological as well as legal texts. Dannhauer was writing at the end of the long-drawn-out religious wars in Europe, and some people regard his hermeneutics as a result of the reflection on the religious wars in Europe. A methodologically developed theory of interpretation produced many possible meanings of texts where before there had been only the one, absolute meaning of the Holy Scriptures and laws for which people had taken up arms.

The discussion of the learned replaced the fighting on the battlefield. We can learn from this period that hermeneutics is developed further and becomes important when a tradition loses its reliability and when people seek to correct it or to begin anew. This already applied to the time when the doctrine of the fourfold sense of biblical texts was further developed to make use of old texts in the new (Christian) tradition. Furthermore, during the Reformation a new methodology was developed which could be used to free oneself from oppressive traditions and to bring forth a general understanding of reason, which enabled all those able to read to interpret biblical texts.

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<sup>27</sup> Because God is the author it makes no sense to ask for the author’s intentions in the interpretation of biblical texts. This only becomes relevant when the writers of biblical texts are not seen as mere instruments of God, but rather as media through which God communicates Godself and God’s teaching.

A significant development in hermeneutics came from one of the heterodox sidelines of the Lutheran churches, from Pietism, especially from the Pietism of Halle. For people such as August Hermann Francke and his followers, Lutheran dogmatics had become an inflexible system which had lost its vitality. Therefore, the interpretation of biblical texts not only had to satisfy the academic standards of the learned and well-educated, but also needed to contribute to the deepening of the piety and spirituality of the people reading the Bible. According to Johann Jakob Rambach (1693–1735), who developed a hermeneutic in the eighteenth century, hermeneutics is a practical habit with which a theologian learns to discover the meaning of Scripture, to interpret it for others and to use it intelligently. Rambach included a theory of human emotions and affections in his hermeneutics in order to probe more deeply into the spiritual movement of the biblical authors' emotions so as to experience in this way the effects of the Holy Spirit. The context of the reader and listener became important in Pietist hermeneutics. Fully to understand biblical texts means that people, who read or listen, are affected at the level of their emotions as well as their concrete existence. Reflection on the processes of understanding had to take into account the situation of the readers and listeners in their respective contexts.

As a result of the Lutheran insistence that Holy Scripture was one of God's worldly means to communicate Godself to human beings, the Bible increasingly became the object of historical interest. How did God really communicate Godself and God's will into these texts? What do we learn about God when we perceive how God communicated Godself in our understanding and communication?

The development of the historical-critical method was and remains the major challenge for reading and listening to the Bible within the church. The differences between historical-critical exegesis and the Reformers' biblical interpretation seem to be radical. The following survey will call to mind the major insights of the development.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the awareness for the historical character of the Bible increased considerably. The Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) showed the historical character of the Old Testament, whose texts were not the timeless sayings of God but reflected history.

Johann Martin Chladenius (1710–1759) followed this insight into the historical character of all writings, emphasizing the perspectives of the interpreter and the writer of a text. Interpreters have their own individual, specific perspective, which is subject to their concrete place in space and time. The writer of a historical text has already looked at a certain object from a specific vantage point from which they conceived what they were writing about.

Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777) emphasized the self-interpretation of the author of a text which, for them, is the authentic interpretation. In further defining the historical situation of both interpreter and author the interest shifted from a purely hermeneutical to a historical one.

There was an increasing awareness that God communicated Godself not only into a text (the Bible) but also into history, that is, into a concrete time and place which we have to understand in our interpretation in order to understand God’s message for our own time. This is the starting point of the historical-critical method in the interpretation of the Bible.

This critical interest in interpretation went hand in hand with other issues. By knowing the historical setting, interests and perspectives of the biblical texts, one could critically distinguish between that which seems to be historical and that which seems to be the timeless meaning and message of these texts. In this sense, Spinoza had critically examined the Old Testament by distinguishing between the general purpose of the Bible (in his opinion, the teaching of morals) and the historical meaning of individual biblical texts. Many others followed him in this attempt critically to assess the timeless message of the Triune God to humankind (which most of the time was an ethical message and seemed to be identical with those morals that were considered to be reasonable at the time).

The hermeneutical problem with such a procedure is obvious: the general purpose of the Bible was identified from the perspective of reason, but people disagreed as to what was deemed reasonable. So the timeless message of the Bible varied considerably in the various critical interpretations. Thus it became indispensable further to reflect on the multidimensional relationship between history and hermeneutics. This relationship is multidimensional. First, biblical texts have to be conceived as historical texts, written at a certain point in history in a certain part of the world. Therefore, one has to understand the historical conditions under which these texts were produced. Second, the text is given to an interpreter with a tradition of interpretations. An interpreter is not free from this history of interpretation. Third, the interpreter is located at a certain point in history in a certain part of the world. Their interpretation is influenced by the conditions of the context in which they live.

Because of these dimensions of the relationship between history and hermeneutics it became the primary task of hermeneutics to acquire that which has been experienced as truth in the given tradition. With this shift in emphasis, the definition of hermeneutics as a method of interpretation and explication became secondary. Hermeneutics were confronted with the task to bridge the historical gap of 2000 years in order to enable an understanding of the

old texts, including the acquiring of the meaning and the truth of the text in the personal existence of the reader and believer. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) and the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) are well known proponents of this hermeneutical concept.

Their position was generalized. Hermeneutics became a theory of understanding all written and fixed articulations of life.<sup>28</sup> Hermeneutics has to explain how it is possible objectively to understand (written) articulations of life from other and foreign individuals from former times or foreign cultures. To understand means to comprehend them as possibilities for one's own self-understanding and one's own life (so one has to relate everything one is interpreting to one's own life as the Pietist Johann Jakob Rambach proposed).

The entire history of modern hermeneutics has been summed up excellently by the Lutheran New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) in a seminal essay first published in 1950.<sup>29</sup> While numerous articles deal with more recent contributions to Lutheran hermeneutics, I shall finish my reflections on the development of Lutheran hermeneutics with the presentation Rudolf Bultmann's essay, which I believe better describes the hermeneutical problems and processes than many later hermeneutical writings.

In his essay, "The Problem of Hermeneutics," Bultmann recalls the rules of hermeneutics for the interpretation of texts in general, and especially of biblical texts. Every interpretation—be it brief or lengthy—has to start with a formal analysis of composition and style. In the composition of the text, individual phrases and parts have to be understood in the context of the whole, but the entire text also has to be understood in the light of individual phrases.

This insight creates the first hermeneutical circle of every interpretation. Understanding is progressing in a circle: the more I study a work in its entirety, the more I understand single phrases in and parts of the text; the deeper I go into the analysis of phrases and parts of a text, the better I understand the whole and so on.

The interpretation of texts in a foreign or classical languages has to follow the rules of the respective grammar, which has to be complemented by the knowledge of the individual use of these languages by the author (e.g., to understand a text in the Gospel of John one has to know ancient Greek as well the peculiarities of John's use of Greek). This then may be extended to

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<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey defined hermeneutics as the theory of interpretation that relates to all human objectifications. See Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics (1900)," in Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works, Volume 4: Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton University Press) 2010, 235–60). Cf. Rudolf Makkreel, "Wilhelm Dilthey," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dilthey/>.

<sup>29</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," in *ZThK* 47 (1950), 47–69.

the knowledge of the use of the respective language at the time the text was written. This insight into the historical development of a language then has to be combined with the knowledge of the history of the time.

This insight into the process of interpretation creates another hermeneutical circle: the circle between a text and its time (or context). Part of this hermeneutical circle is the circle between our knowledge of a language and our knowledge of history.

Already Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) saw that the methodology described above may be too formal for many texts. We may not come to a true understanding of a text or writing by following the hermeneutical rules alone. Therefore, we cannot only look at the literal reality but have to consider the author as well as the interpreter. The formal, grammatical and historical interpretation needs to be supplemented by—as Schleiermacher calls it—a psychological interpretation. One has to understand a text as a moment in the life of a precise person (the author) or a group of people (the author belongs to). To understand this one needs not an objective but a subjective interpretation, in which the interpreter has to reproduce the original production of the text. The interpreter has to empathize with the author of the text for such a reproduction.

In the case of biblical texts, this psychological interpretation differs from the interpretation of a poem where the inner state of the author may be of interest. With regard to interpreting biblical texts, understanding the relationship between author and the object or event, that is, to the content they are writing about is vital. As Bultmann shows, here again we have another dimension of the hermeneutical circle, namely the circle between preconception and understanding. The interpreter of a text has certain preconceived ideas regarding the content of the text they are interpreting because they already have an established relationship with that which the text is talking about. In this relationship we can also find the interest of the interpreter in respect of the text and its content.

This insight creates a further hermeneutical circle between author and interpreter in their respective contexts. In more recent contributions to hermeneutics we find a difference whether this is already a full description of the circle between author and interpreter within their respective contexts or whether this circle is concentrated on the content of the text. (The one position is outlined by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer in his famous book *Truth and Method* published in 1960).<sup>30</sup> This position concentrates on understanding each other in communication (be it orally or literally, be it

<sup>30</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edition, transl. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

with people present or absent, e.g., in a different place or time). The second position that emphasized the content, which is what our communication and understanding are about, is best represented by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.<sup>31</sup> It presupposes that we refer to a reality that is not identical to our individual perceptions and understandings when we communicate with each other and that we may reach a consensus regarding the realities we are communicating (literally or orally).

In a circle of interpretation, the interpreter has to establish what the text really wants to express. This process of interpretation is successful when the text reveals to the reader and interpreter human existence in its various manifestations, and questions the reader and interpreter if these possibilities could be their own. According to Bultmann, we come to a true interpretation and understanding of biblical texts when we hear the question the text is posing and discover what the text demands of us. Then the text opens up my own possibilities in life by calling me away from myself.

According to Bultmann, the whole hermeneutical process is a critical one: I (we) have to analyze and interpret the biblical text critically in order to critique ourselves. The main interest of modern Lutheran hermeneutics then is to interpret biblical texts not so as to find self-affirmation and self-reassurance but critically to listen to and hear what the biblical text has to tell us as the Word of God with respect to our lives in the various contexts and situations we live in.

The last part of the hermeneutical process may be the point where people from various contexts and situations share the results of their listening to and hearing the Word of God. It is an empirical experience that has been described frequently over the last decades. Results are not the same in all contexts. Therefore, the awareness of the contextual differences in God communicating Godself to people increased significantly over the last decades. There has been considerable discussion on how we should interpret this contextual plurality and the way in which the churches should deal with it. In my opinion, the first question has to be answered theologically and the second methodologically.

The theological interpretation of the plurality of contextual understandings of God's Word is in fact simple. It witnesses to the vividness and concreteness of God communicating Godself to God's people. The Triune God is not an imperialistic emperor who has only one message for everybody in the world and wants everybody to live their lives in the same way. The life of people

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<sup>31</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, "The Conflict of Interpretations" in Don Ihde (ed.), *Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory. Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Press, 1976); Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics II*, transl. K. Blamey and J. B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

varies and God addresses the concrete lives of individuals and communities in their peculiarity. Lutheran churches should deal with this plurality of life accordingly. The church tentatively depicts and realizes what Christians hope for: a full, true and eternal life in the kingdom of God, in which we celebrate the full communion of humankind with God and with one another. Such an eschatological communion is possible only when those who are together are not dissolved in an undifferentiated unity or usurped by a few.

The way in which we deal with the plurality of understandings of God's Word and address requires a methodological answer. The churches have to work out procedures of communicating the various understandings with each other and have to enable such cross-cultural and cross-contextual communication in various ways by creating possibilities for people from various contexts to communicate their respective understandings of biblical texts and to reflect theologically on this.