

through this needle's eye that all the threads of the Reformation discovery run: justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), the preaching of God's Word alone (*sola scriptura*), and trust in God's grace alone (*sola gratia*).

Luther and Fundamentalism

We can encounter Luther only where he was convinced he stood and not where he approximates the temper of our time. And that, as he plainly says in the concluding remarks of his treatise against Erasmus, is in the recognition of man's powerlessness before God. Luther concedes that Erasmus more than any other opponent had realized that this, and not the indulgence controversy or purgatory, was the central question of the Christian faith. Yet to call it a central question" is already misleading; this is not a problem to be solved, since this issue in the Scriptures is crystal-clear.

In 1521 Luther had not been willing to recant before the emperor in Worms without factual refutation, but now his tone was even more strident, leaving no opportunity for a counterargument: "This is what the Scriptures teach . . . and so do I. Here I can yield to no one." He goes on even more pointedly: "Whoever teaches otherwise denies Christ and faith." So whoever contradicts the Reformer here rejects him totally. How inconceivably bold it was of Luther to venture such an assured, conclusive judgment on a problem the Greek philosophers and scholastic theologians before him—and many others after him—had tried in vain to solve. Who has ever succeeded in overcoming the basic conflict between God's omnipotence and man's freedom without opening an even greater abyss? Luther's answer is short but not immediately clear: the testimony of the Holy Scriptures is his legitimation.

For us in the twentieth century, his answer cannot be convincing, because application of the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, the Scriptures alone, has not brought the certainty he anticipated. It has in fact been responsible for a multiplicity of explanations and interpretations that seem to render absurd any dependence on the clarity of the Scriptures. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries post-Reformation Protestantism tried out many variants of "fundamentalism" to counter the trend, often declaring the letter of the Scriptures sacrosanct. But even desperate rescue missions cannot breathe new life into a motto that was once so persuasive: as God truly became incarnate in Jesus, so His spirit became inerrant truth in the Holy Scriptures.

That this motto had fallen into disuse would be no loss from Luther's point of view. He started from a different and, in fact, contradictory principle, which was to be ignored in the Protestant longing for a "paper pope": "God and the Scriptures are two different things, as different as Creator and creature."² This historically innovative principle forms the surprising basis of his response to Erasmus, in which we can also find a new and crucial point of departure for present-day theology. It is this principle that distinguishes Luther from the biblicism of both his own and later eras.

IN THE early days of the Reformation the principle of the Scriptures alone (*sola scriptura*) was such a convincing battle cry that it must be numbered among the factors that enable us to understand how a scholastically trained monk from a university at the edge of civilization could, despite these obstacles, find such enthusiastic acceptance. The thesis of the sufficiency of Scripture alone had the immediate ring of truth, quite different from the two more complicated, equally explosive concepts: by grace alone—by faith alone (*sola gratia—sola fide*). Even untrained readers of Reformation pamphlets in areas where Evangelical preaching was not yet permitted could immediately grasp that God's Scriptures were the decisive authority, which could liberate one from the shackles of tradition.

In villages and cities, inns and market squares, peasant leaders had long been speaking of a return to the "old law." Since Luther had appeared on the scene, there was an additional demand: the old law was to be interpreted and framed according to the Word of God. And it was not only in the country that the call for the law of God found a receptive ear. In the cities, too, people were demanding a reintroduction of the old laws; freed from clerical tutelage, citizens wanted to mold their lives according to Scripture. To the leaders of the urban Reformation, who had attended the only recently founded Latin schools and had been appointed to their newly established preaching posts by a city council—not a bishop!—the discovery of the Holy Scriptures as the sole Christian rule signified the great Evangelical turning point.

Many of the urban Reformers, from Luther's older Wittenberg colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt to John Calvin, a member of the second generation of the Evangelical movement, had legal training. They applied the new methods that accompanied the renaissance of jurisprudence to theology: the standard for every just judgment was the literal sense of the law; not traditions and learned interpretations, but the text alone was the final

arbiter. Analogously, the Scriptures, not the Church Fathers or scholastic doctors, constituted the norm in matters of Christian faith. The Bible, not the pope's canon law, should judge and regulate Christian life. For these legally trained reformers the heart of the discovery of the Gospel consisted in the principle that the teachings and preaching of the Church must prove themselves by Scripture and Scripture alone.

This does not, however, apply to Martin Luther, at least not in this form. The exclusive authority of the Holy Scriptures was not part of his Reformation discovery—a fact that gave rise to tensions in the sixteenth century and has caused misunderstanding to the present day. In his early works, which according to Luther himself belonged to his “papist” phase, he already presupposed the Scriptures to be the obvious sole source of faith. Later he explained this early insight: in 1518 he had successfully participated in the great academic disputation of his order, the Augustinian Hermits, in Heidelberg; there he had been allowed to introduce his new theology to members of the order and guests in a learned debate of thesis and criticism, question and answer.

On his way back from Heidelberg he stopped in Erfurt, where he had spent his first university and monastery years. He wanted to visit his revered teacher Jodokus Trutfetter and explain in person the program for theological and Church reform that actuated him. But in vain. He was denied access to the house; Trutfetter's servant dismissed Luther with the excuse that the professor was indisposed.

As soon as Luther reached the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, where he was staying the night, he wrote his former teacher a moving letter, pleading for understanding and reminding him that Trutfetter himself had been the one to teach his students to have faith only in the Holy Scriptures and to judge all other authors critically, as not only Augustine but even St. Paul and St. John had demanded.³

To name Trutfetter was not a tactical apology. As a student Luther had indeed been helped by Trutfetter to find this crucial key and made his professor's scriptural principle his own. In Luther's earliest known works the normative authority of the Bible is never called into question; it is put to use against speculative scholastic teachings not determined by the Scriptures and where necessary even against the Church Father and founder of his own order, Augustine. His quest did not concern the authority of the Bible, which was self-evident to him; he wanted to know how this authority could be properly expressed, how the Word of God could be ascertained among the wealth of scriptural testimony.

The term *authority* as a description of Luther's understanding of the Bible could be misleading if—as happened before and after him—the Scriptures were taken for a collection of objective truths that had to be compared and rearranged in ever new systems, depending on the issue in question. The principle Luther dictated to his students in his first lecture series on the Psalms already leads beyond this “scholastic” use of Scripture. The exegete should treat a difficult scriptural passage no differently than Moses did the rock in the desert, which he smote with his rod until water gushed out for his thirsty people (Exod. 17.1–7). The rod is faith, under which Scripture unfolds, and faith is the confident hope of hearing the voice of God from the pages of this book and of being addressed directly. But for a biblical text to be really penetrated by it, the rod of faith must be wielded with the help of scholarly aids, particularly of linguistic research. Conceptual and grammatical clarity are and remain the basis and the regulating mechanism of theological exegesis.

The development of young man Luther's theology can indeed be traced by the way he spurns the centuries-old symbolic interpretation of Scripture in his own works, for otherwise the text threatens to become intellectually inflated and the spirit of God is put at the mercy of the ingenious exegete.⁴

Once Scripture has been dealt with down to its language and grammar, what does it reveal to man in his yearning for knowledge of himself and the world? The diagnosis is frightening: man cannot redeem himself; he is only a heartbeat away from death and on the way to nothingness. Where it is a question of salvation, decisions lie not with the free will but with God alone, on whom man is dependent from his first sigh to his final breath. Man must be driven forward by the Word and grace of God and held fast in his faith to the very last moment; without divine mercy he collapses into himself and back into nothingness.

But where it is a matter of shaping the world, man, even the wicked, godless man, has the duty and the ability to use his reason and good judgment to act freely and steer the course he chooses.⁵ This distinction between man and world, between person and achievement, is undoubtedly less than what “Erasmians” and “fundamentalists” expect from the Scriptures. What they are seeking there—whether in the laws of the Old Testament or the Sermon on the Mount—are specific instructions that enable the new man to enforce God's supremacy on earth.

“GOD AND the Scriptures are two different things”—Luther's distinction sounds as alien and bold to the medieval man as to his descendants in the age of the Renaissance and Reformation. Reform and renewal, the best any

age has to offer, was always—whether for Bernard of Clairvaux, Desiderius Erasmus, or John Calvin—inspired by the Holy Scriptures and directed toward enforcing God's law in Church and society, in monastery, study, and town hall. Luther, on the other hand, dared to stress the distance: two different things—like creator and creature. The clarity of the Scriptures leads to the recognition of man and his indestructible dependence either on God the Redeemer or Satan the corrupter. There is no third alternative. But the Scriptures do not lead to a disclosure of the majesty of God's dominion, and they do not reveal His plan for the history of the world, in which the new man can simply take his place as the vanguard of freedom and progress.

The Bondage of the Will of the year 1525 is directed against the most important representatives of the Renaissance north of the Alps—but not only against them and their followers then and now. It is aimed equally at the fundamentalists, who have taken up the cause of the Reformation and promoted it under the motto of *sola scriptura*.

It is a very narrow path Luther is walking. Following him means being initiated into life between God and the Devil, the vital problem of his theology, where Scripture, grace, and faith—the three basic Reformation concepts—interpret and clarify one another.