

## Forde's editors have tampered with his text - 2

Gerhard Forde wrote two background papers for the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue IX on Scripture and Tradition.<sup>1</sup> They are: "Some Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition," and "*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*. Some Further Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition."

The second of these two papers is printed in *A More Radical Gospel. Gerhard O. Forde. Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*,<sup>2</sup> although it is **not** identified as the second of two papers.<sup>3</sup> Both the title and the content of the paper have been altered.

In fact, Forde's editors have made significant changes in style and substance. This is a grave disservice to Forde and to those who wish to follow his lead. The changes made introduce into Forde's essay **a bias toward inerrancy**, a bias he did not share and even fought against throughout his career.

**A cardinal rule of editing is: Do not rewrite anything; do not add anything.** Editors may not insert their own voice. They must remain firmly in the background. Any changes have to be noted in brackets or by "*sic*." The editors' job is to produce a text free of typographical errors.

But Steven Paulson, Forde's main editor, and Mark Mattes, his co-editor, have added words, phrases, and whole sentences. Below is a marked copy of Forde's paper as it appears in *A More Radical Gospel*. Words in black have not been altered. Words that the editors have deleted or moved are identified by ~~red strike through text~~. Words they have added to the original text appear in blue underlined text.

Comments about the changes they have made are identified by circled numbers, such as "①", and are found at the end of the marked text. Forde's paper as he wrote and delivered it in 1990 in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue is attached below as well as a copy of how the paper appears in *A More Radical Gospel*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Scripture and Tradition. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IX*. Eds. Harold C. Skillrud, J. Francis Stafford, and Daniel F. Martensen (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> *A More Radical Gospel. Gerhard O. Forde. Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 68-74.

<sup>3</sup> The *Lutheran Quarterly* has produced three volumes of articles, papers, and sermons by Gerhard O. Forde: 1) *A More Radical Gospel* (listed in footnote two); 2) *The Preached God. Gerhard O. Forde. Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*. Eds. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); and 3) *The Essential Forde. Gerhard O. Forde. Distinguishing Law and Gospel*. Eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019). In *The Essential Forde*, **no bibliographical information is given** for the essays, and **no information is given for the time and context** of the essays.

In the first two volumes, *A More Radical Gospel* and *The Preached God*, bibliographical information for some of the essays, but not others, is given in the introductory materials, but not with each article itself, thus making it a project for the reader to hunt for this material in the front of the book. A quick look in the Luther Seminary Library was all it took to identify the date and occasion of two Forde papers in the *Lutheran Quarterly* collection which lack bibliographical information: "Apocalyptic No and Eschatological Yes," (Barth Conference 1994, printed in *A More Radical Gospel*), and "Karl Barth on the Consequences of Lutheran Christology," (Barth Conference 1990, printed in *The Preached God*). See "*The Essential Forde is pseudo-Forde (2)*" and "*The Essential Forde is pseudo-Forde (2a)*." Bolding added for emphasis here and below.

## SCRIPTURA SACRA SUI IPSIUS INTERPRES:

### ~~Some Further~~ Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition

~~“Praeterea cum credamus Ecclesiam sanctam catholicam habere eundem spiritum fidei, quem in sui principio semel accepit, cur non liceat hodie aut solum aut primum sacris literis studere, sicut licuit primitivae Ecclesiae? Neque enim illi Augustinum aut Thomam legerunt. Aut dic, si potes, quo iudice finietur quaestio, si partum dicta sibi pugnaverint. Oportet enim scriptura iudice hic sententiam ferre, quod fieri non potest, nisi scripturae dederimus principem locum in omnibus quae tribuuntur patribus, hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans, sicut scriptum est psal. cxviii [119:130]. “Declaratio sui, ut hebraeus proprie habet. Apertum seu ostium verborum tuorum illuminat et intellectum dat parvulis.” Hic clare spiritus tribuit illuminationem et intellectum dari docet per sola vera dei, tanquam per ostium et apertum seu principium (quod dicunt) primum, a quo incipi oporteat, ingressurum ad lucem et intellectum.”~~

~~— Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X 1520. WA 7, 97, 16-29.~~

It will not be possible, at least from a Lutheran ~~vantage point at least~~stance, fruitfully to engage the question of scripture and tradition without some attention to what is today called hermeneutics. The ~~divergences in~~disagreements over relating scripture to the subsequent interpretative activity of the church arise because of some quite different ~~perceptions~~ ~~(sic)~~perceptions of the relationship between the text and the exegete (either as an individual or a collective). What I shall ~~attempt~~be attempted here is to ~~set forth~~offer for discussion what these different perceptions ~~appear to me to be~~are. It will not be possible in this short ~~exercise~~essay to do that in anything other than rather facile and broad generalizations, ~~but the hope~~. Nevertheless, my aim is ~~nevertheless~~ that ~~such setting forth might~~this presentation will move our discussion in a fruitful direction. ❶

Perhaps there is no clearer indication of these different perceptions than in the traditional antithetical assertions about where final authority resides in the interpretation of scripture: with the church and its magisterium; or rather with scripture itself—, especially as comprehended in the Luther’s audacious claim that the sacred scriptures interpret themselves (*scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*).<sup>1</sup> ~~Thereby, it seems to me, in this~~ hangs the hermeneutical divide we need to get at. In the one case, tradition, taken as something additional to scripture – whether as extra-canonical material, or as interpretation or extension of the canonical text – plays a prominent role, whereas in the other it comes under radical critique.

The differing attitudes toward tradition are engendered by basically different hermeneutical “models,” different perceptions of the relationship between exegete/interpreter and text. In the first and perhaps most universally assumed model, the exegete, as “subject,” stands over against the text understood as the “object” that is to be interpreted. The interpretation yields doctrine and practical mandates. Faith equals acceptance of such doctrine and practice. The problem immediately engendered by such a model is the ~~subjectivism~~subjectivity ❷ or potential arbitrariness of the exegete. How can one be assured that the interpretation or application or extension of the text is

“correct,” i.e., not distorted by the *spiritus proprius* of the individual exegete?<sup>2</sup> How is the subjectivism ② of the exegete to be transcended? By the historical method? ③

At this point tradition, in one form or another, enters the picture. The tradition stands as norm or guide to interpretation. But then what does one do if the tradition does not always agree with itself? The hermeneutic, it would seem, inevitably drives to an authoritative office to oversee the interpretive process, apply the tradition, and be the place “where the buck stops.” As Joseph Lortz put it, “...No religious objectivity is possible where it is not certified again and again, from case to case, by a living interpreter, i.e., through an infallible, living teaching office.”<sup>3</sup> The subjectivism ② of the individual exegete and even the ambiguities of the tradition can be transcended, therefore, only by the “~~objectivity~~ objectivism” ② of the “~~collective~~ the church and the magisterium,” culminating in the papal office. Those who persist in questioning the legitimacy of such claims to transcendence are usually suspected of subjective arbitrariness, i.e., disobedience to the church. This was the charge made against the Reformers – particularly Luther – and it persists down to the present.”<sup>4</sup>

*Sola scriptura* is in the first instance a reaction to claims made to such transcendence ~~in on~~ behalf of tradition and the magisterium, ~~and~~ especially the papal office. It should be noted, however, that the *sola scriptura* was not just a Reformation doctrine or concern. It was abroad in the church long before the Reformation. As such, it was most often a ~~sub-set~~ subset of the same basic hermeneutical model indicated above. The difference is only that it finds the claim that human subjectivism, ② the spiritus proprius, can be transcended by a collective spirit or the papal office to be dubious. They are still only human. Thus it counters such claims with the insistence that scripture alone as divinely inspired word, not human words, transcends individual subjectivism ② and is therefore the sole and ultimate authority.

The problem with such a claim, however, is that as long as it remains simply a ~~sub-set~~ subset of the same hermeneutical model, *sola scriptura* becomes ~~more or less merely~~ a defensive position over against tradition and magisterium. To bolster its case it has to make additional formal claims to inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, sufficiency, etc. to claim divine warrant. As such a defensive position, however, *sola scriptura* is hard-pressed to hold its ground against the advances of critical study of the scriptures, the history of the church, and the growth of tradition. It is virtually platitudinous today to point out, for instance, that scripture is itself a product of “tradition,” written by human authors in differing ~~contexts, etc.~~ contexts. This ploy relativizes it, reduces it to the level of human words and tradition. ④ Within the presuppositions of the given hermeneutic, therefore, a kind of ~~stand-off~~ standoff develops between a scripture-~~and~~ tradition position and a *sola scriptura* position, each disagreeing with the other about how human subjectivism ② and arbitrariness is to be overcome and true objectivity ~~to be~~ achieved. Where does the divine Spirit enter the scene – in the books or in the office or both? To put it in its most extreme form, ~~one ends~~ we end with a ~~stand-off~~ standoff between ~~Papalism~~ papalism and ~~Biblicism~~ biblicism, each disputing what appear to be the exaggerated or inappropriate authoritarian claims of the other.

Even though the *sola scriptura* became one of the most prominent slogans of the ~~16<sup>th</sup>~~ sixteenth century reform movement, its significance is not fully grasped until one engages the hermeneutical question. One must advance beyond the merely formal statement of the *sola scriptura* to the understanding of scripture as *sui ipsius interpres*. This claim presupposes a quite

different hermeneutical model.<sup>5</sup> To make a long story short, it means that the roles of the text and the interpreter are essentially reversed. The interpreter does not remain standing simply as subject over against the text as object to be interpreted. Rather, in the engagement with scripture, it is the scripture that comes to interpret the exegete. It is the task of the exegete to allow the Spirit of the scripture, the matter itself, to speak. The exegete is put in the position of the hearer who is to let the Spirit speak through the scripture precisely by “getting out of the way,” i.e., setting aside the subjective *sensus proprius*. ~~The~~In short, the scripture, ~~that is,~~ is not to be understood merely as the object upon which the exegete works, but rather as the means through which the Spirit works on the hearer. The concern moves beyond the question of what scripture means to what the Word does. The movement in the direction of the oral and living Word in this is unmistakable. Intensive occupation with scripture results in scripture asserting itself as living and active on the exegete – the model is the fire and the hammer (Jer. 23), which is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword (Heb. 4). It clarifies itself and leads to, drives to, the proclamation. The means of transmission is proclamation – the Word as active. ⑤ The exegete is a hearer, who upon being addressed and exegeted by the Word, becomes in turn a speaker ~~(or preacher).~~

In this model ~~too~~, it is also recognized that the greatest obstacle to true interpretation is the subjectivism, ② the *sensus* or *spiritus proprius* of the interpreter, i.e., the attempt to make the biblical story conform to others, to make it fit our culture and world. But it is not believed that this subjectivism ② is overcome either by the collective weight or activity of church or tradition as such, nor is it overcome by merely formal declarations about biblical authority or inerrancy, nor, for that matter, by individual claims to possess the Spirit. Thus Luther, for instance, saw the claims both of the individual spiritualist and of the ~~Papacy~~papacy to be of the same order: subjectivism ② – i.e., the formal claim to possess the Spirit outside of the external Word and thus the claim to stand above the Word and be the ultimate interpreter.<sup>6</sup> The insistence that scripture be heard as *sui ipsius interpres*, however, means that the problem of the subjective *sensus proprius* can be handled only when one allows the Spirit itself speaking through the Word actually to do it: to end the claims and needs of the old dying subject and call to life a new one who hears the promise. That ~~Scripture~~scripture is *sui ipsius interpres* means that it establishes itself as authoritative over the hearer by claiming the hearer. In other words, scripture establishes itself as authoritative because it is a justifying, saving, and redeeming Word. “The authority, sufficiency, and revelational quality of the ~~Scripture~~scripture is due, according to Luther, quite unpolemically and ~~aposteriori~~a posteriori, to the experience that Scripture imparted to him life, salvation, comfort, freedom – i.e., a new being in faith.”<sup>7</sup> ⑥ *Sui ipsius interpres* is simply the hermeneutical correlate of justification by faith alone. The solus Christus is important because it denotes the only possible attitude to the Word as pro me. ⑦ In this light, formal claims made for extra-scriptural authority structures and/or formal declarations about biblical authority (inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) are constructs ~~which~~that in one way or another are simply a reflex of the needs of the subjective *sensus proprius*.<sup>8</sup>

What does this have to say about the question of scripture and tradition? First of all, as the ~~slogan~~formula itself asserts, the interpreter, whether as individual or as collective, is not accorded any independent or automatically privileged status as such. That scripture is *sui ipsius interpres* means that the problem of subjectivism ② in matters of interpretation cannot adequately be met simply by placing either the collective *spiritus proprius* or formal assertions of biblical authority between the individual subject and the text. If the subjectivism, ② the *spiritus proprius*, of the

interpreter is to be overcome, then it is the Holy Spirit speaking through the preached Word according to scripture who must do it. The Word of God, that is, must do it. To set an authoritative office or formal claim to biblical authority between the Word and the hearer is to introduce a foreign and legalistic element into the relation. It is the task of the interpreter to be a hearer of the Word, and having heard, to be one who speaks it again effectively.

Thus, *sui ipsius interpres* has to be seen as a critique of the place assigned to tradition in usual formulations. Tradition understood as an extra-scriptural ~~institute which~~ institution that is to preside over the process of interpretation and put a check on the *sensus proprius* of the interpreter really leaves that *sensus proprius* basically intact. Like the law, it may restrain sin but it does not cure it. As long as the fundamental relation between text and interpreter remains the same no real change can occur. For even if the individual *sensus proprius* as a matter of fact comes to agree with, or submits to, the traditional ~~institute~~ institution, all that happens is that the subjective *sensus proprius*, in concert with the collective *sensus proprius*, finds a “meaning” in the text convenient to its own concerns. The subject remains the interpreter of the text; the text is not allowed to become the interpreter of the subject.

~~This means at~~ At the very least, this means that tradition as extra-scriptural ~~institute~~ institution claiming absolute or unquestioned authority over the interpretation would have to be rejected. The “and” in ~~Scripture~~ “scripture and ~~Tradition~~ tradition” cannot be a plus sign that elevates ~~Tradition~~ tradition to the same level as ~~Scripture~~ scripture or in actual practice, above it. If we are not permanently or irrevocably to install some particular instance of human or collective ~~subjectivity~~ subjectivism <sup>②</sup> over the ~~Scriptures~~ scriptures, or even between the ~~Scriptures~~ scriptures and us, then it would seem that we could best consider ourselves as the company of hearers of the Word, straining to hear what the Spirit has to say to us through the Babel of other voices – including our own discordant notes. The tradition, perhaps it could be said, is an account of what the company of hearers has ~~heard~~ diachronically heard, what we believe and confess, <sup>⑧</sup> the intent of which should be to summon us to the task of listening ever more carefully and exactly, asking: Is this not what it says? <sup>⑨</sup> As such it is to be taken seriously and even given a primary place in the discipline of listening. It is, you might say, a “hearing aid,” but not itself the source or judge. It may be a “normed norm” (norma normata-), but not a “norming norm” (norma normans-). It must always be open to better hearing, and must stand under the ~~Scriptures~~ scriptures.<sup>9</sup> Tradition properly understood, ~~that is,~~ does not exist to call attention to itself, or to insert itself between us and ~~the~~ scripture (or even to call attention to its own “development” and growth), but rather to clear the way, to point us toward a proper hearing of the text.

The fact that scripture is to be understood as self-interpreting in no way means therefore that the interpreter has nothing to do. On the contrary, it makes the task of interpreting much more demanding and exacting. “The intensity of the exegetical work is directly proportional to the acknowledgment that scripture is *sui ipsius interpres*.”<sup>10</sup> Luther could ~~put~~ specify it ~~this way in a passage from the~~ in *Assertions Against the Bull of Leo* ~~just preceding the one quoted at the outset:~~ “So we must therefore strive, not to set aside the scriptures and ~~to~~ norm ourselves by the human writings of the Fathers, but much more to set aside the writings of men and all the more persistently dedicate our sweat to the Holy Scriptures alone. The more present the danger that one might understand them by one’s own spirit (*proprio spiritu*) the more this must be done, until at last the

exercise of this constant effort conquers the danger and makes us certain of the Spirit of Scripture, which is simply not to be found outside of scripture.”<sup>11</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> ~~The quote from Luther’s “Assertio ...per Bullam Leonis X” above is a locus classicus for the *sui ipsius interpres* but the same can be found in other place: WA 14, 566, 26-29; WA 10 III, 238 10f, etc.~~ “Praeterea cum credamus Ecclesiam sanctam catholicam habere eundem spiritum fidei, quem in sui principio semel accepit, cur non liceat hodie aut solum aut primum sacris literis studere, sicut licuit primitivae Ecclesiae? Neque enim illi Augustinum aut Thomam legerunt. Aut dic, si potes, quo iudice finietur quaestio, si partum dicta sibi pugnaverint. Oportet enim scriptura iudice hic sententiam ferre, quod fieri non potest, nisi scripturae dederimus principem locum in omnibus quae tribuuntur patribus, hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans, sicut scriptum est psal.c.Xviii [119:130]. “Declaratio sui, ut hebraeus proprie habet. Apertum seu ostium verborum tuorum illuminat et intellectum dat parvulis.” Hic clare spiritus tribuit illuminationem et intellectum dari docet per sola vera dei, tanquam per ostium et apertum seu principium (quod dicunt) primum, a quo incipi oporteat, ingressurum ad lucem et intellectum. See *Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis x. novissimam damnatorum* (1520) WA 7, 97, 16-29. This quote from Luther is a *locus classicus* for the *sui ipsius interpres*, but the same can be found in other places: WA 14, 566, 26-39; WA 10 III, 238 10 f, etc.
- <sup>2</sup> Luther uses the term *spiritus proprius* (which is apparently interchangeable with *sensus proprius*) in the *Assertio* (WA 7, 96-5). It appears there in a quote, but no indication is given as to what he may have been quoting. The bull of Leo X does identify Luther with heretics who interpret scripture according to their own wisdom rather than that of the church and the fathers and that no doubt occasions Luther’s response in his *Assertio*.
- <sup>3</sup> Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*. ~~Vol. 1,~~ 3rd ed., vol. 1 1948. (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1948), p. 402.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Paul Hacker, *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion*. (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970). The book carries a commendatory preface by Joseph Ratzinger. The basic charge of subjectivism persists even in so positive an interpreter of the Reformation as Joseph Lortz. See Lortz, loc. cit. and also *Die Reformation als Religioeses Anliegen Heute*, (Trier: Paulus-Verlag, 1948), pp. 144ff.
- <sup>5</sup> For a more thorough explication of the issues raised briefly here, see the excellent article by Walter Mostert, “*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*,” *Lutherjahrbuch*, 46, ed. Helmar Junghans, ~~ed., 46:~~ (1979), pp. 60-96. Hereafter cited as Mostert.
- <sup>6</sup> See Luther’s *Smalcald Articles*, Pt. III, Art. VIII, *Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. ~~T. Tappert, Philadelphia~~ Kolb, Wengert, et. al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1959. 312-313, 2000), pp 321-23.
- <sup>7</sup> Mostert, p. 70.
- <sup>8</sup> ~~Ibid.~~ Mostert, p. 70.
- <sup>9</sup> Thus, even though Luther accepted the *homoousion* of the Nicene Creed without personal reservation, he could also say (in “*Against Latomus*”), “Even if my soul hated this word, *homoousion*, and I refused to use it [because it was not scriptural], still I would not be a heretic. For who compels me to use the word, providing I hold to the fact defined by the council on the basis of scripture?” (LW 32, 244).
- <sup>10</sup> “It is well known...that polemically Luther had in mind the *sensus proprius* in the form of the Roman Catholic and enthusiast concept of Spirit. What he criticized thereby was that a criterion was introduced into scriptural exegesis that was foreign to the concern of scripture. Now in the context of Luther’s theology as a whole the Roman concept of tradition and the enthusiast concept of Spirit are seen not just as isolated historical phenomena, but as historic appearances of the general human inclination towards *sensus proprius*, to enthusiasm. If Luther sets the self-asserting power of scripture against traditionalism and enthusiasm, one must see this in the overall view of his whole theology, which crystallizes around the self-seeking sinner after his own salvation versus the God who simply gives his salvation.” See Mostert, 74.
- <sup>11</sup> WA 7, 97-3-9.



- ① Some of the changes the editors made in this paragraph are stylistic, indicating the editors preferred their term or word order over Forde's. The editors have also changed Forde's active voice ("What I shall attempt here to set forth for discussion what these differing perceptions appear to me to be") to passive voice ("Nevertheless what shall be attempted here is to offer for discussion what these differing perceptions are."). This change to the passive voice introduces into the text a magisterial tone uncharacteristic of Forde.
- ② The editors have here replaced Forde's word "subjectivism" and with "subjectivity." In ten subsequent places they leave in "subjectivism," but in the second to the last paragraph they replace Forde's word "subjectivity," with "subjectivism"!

In the fourth paragraph, they change Forde's "objectivity" to "objectivism"! These changes are not minor. Subjectivism is the theory that all knowledge is subjective and relative. Subjectivity refers to how someone's judgment is influenced by personal opinions and feelings.

- ③ The editors add the question: "By the historical method?" which functions as a swipe against historical criticism. This was not Forde's view. Forde affirmed the vital role of historical criticism, as shown by the examples below:

"Paul and Matthew are at irreconcilable odds."<sup>4</sup>

"Conservative Christology seeks to trace explicit 'proof' for the 'divinity' of Jesus directly back to the teaching of **an inerrant scripture**. There is direct continuity between the Christology of Jesus thus uncovered and their own. Today such a Christology can maintain itself only by ignoring **the development of careful historical investigation of the Scripture and the problematics that gave rise to that historical work**."<sup>5</sup>

"A definite discontinuity appears between the Jesus who preached and the Jesus who was preached in the New Testament. That is quite clear even without critical historical study. The discontinuity is most obvious in the Synoptic Gospels, but as we shall see, it is also evident in the writings of St. Paul, the earliest and most prolific New Testament author. **Historical criticism of the Gospels, particularly form criticism, did not invent the discontinuity**; it has served only to make this discontinuity inescapable for systematic theology."<sup>6</sup>

"So the question comes back to us again: Who do you say that I am? Why bother to speak of Jesus to others? In other words, when we turn to speak to others, we have to make the move from the implicit claim of Jesus' own preaching to explicit confession and proclamation of him. There is, then, on the formal level, **a necessary discontinuity between Jesus' own preaching and our preaching of him**. We are called upon to make explicit what was implicit in him. **We cannot simply repeat his words as though they were ours. Christology is our problem, not his**."<sup>7</sup>

"From this perspective one might well ask why there is **so much religious fury directed at historical criticism**. Will we be ashamed of the one we find thereby? To be sure, the historical

<sup>4</sup> Forde, "Justification and the World," *Christian Dogmatics*. Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 2:447.

<sup>5</sup> Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) 68.

<sup>6</sup> Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 64-65.

critical method is not theologically neutral; ambiguity surrounds its usage. It is highly questionable when used to establish continuity with 'the real Jesus' who is supposed no longer to be an offense or a threat. But resistance to the method can also be due to the stake we have in the titles that similarly protect from that offense. The controversy is about titles: 'Who do you say that I am?' The inclination of both sides in the debate is to seek titles that will protect them from the 'me and my words.' Being a theologian of the cross is the only way to escape both errors and to use the historical critical method properly. **Historical critical investigation uncovers a discontinuity that prevents every move but the drive to proclamation. The Scriptures cannot be used as a protection from the word of the cross and its circumstances.**"<sup>8</sup>

- ④ The editors add a derogatory sentence: "This play relativizes it, reduces it to the level of human words and tradition." This inserts a bias toward inerrancy and distorts Forde's view of scripture. Below are a few examples of Forde on scripture:

"Paul and Matthew are at irreconcilable odds."<sup>9</sup>

"I can only say that apparently God has used **quite human means** in transmitting his Word to us. I could wish, I suppose that he would have used some other means, but apparently he has not seen fit to do so. **God's Word comes 'in, with and under' the human words.** As St. Paul says, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that we may know that the transcendent glory belongs to God and not to us.'

"**First, God's Word is not confused with the words of men**, and through the law and the gospel men are placed under its authority more surely than they are in the verbal inspiration method. God's Word is seen as a living Word and men are called to a living faith. **Second**, this method is not embarrassed by human advancements in science, history or other disciplines. This method recognizes that the **Biblical writers were men of a particular time, limited by the knowledge of their time.** It is concerned only to maintain that we share the same basic faith as those ancients did regardless of a difference in worldly-views and thought forms. **Thirdly**, this method can allow the biblical exegete the freedom he needs in **using whatever method is practical in getting at the meaning of the text.**"<sup>10</sup>

"For over two hundred years now it [the verbal inspiration of scripture] has demonstrated its **inability to cope with truths established by scientific and historical research.** In the face of the mounting knowledge of the world, **the verbal inspiration method has had no constructive counsel to give, but can only advise one to retreat from the world** and refuse to face those things which one finds uncomfortable. One does not need to go outside the Bible itself to show the inability of this method to cope with the facts. Clearly the belief that there are no mistakes of any sort in scripture simply is not true. **The many discrepancies within the Bible itself – where the Bible disagrees with itself – demonstrate this fact.**"<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Forde, "Justification and the World," *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:447.

<sup>10</sup> Forde, "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," *A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Theology by Members of the Religion Department at Luther College* (Decorah, Iowa; Luther College Press, 1964) 65, 66.

<sup>11</sup> Forde, "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," 56.



- ⑤ The editors have added five lines of text here (over 50 words)! This added statement: “**intensive occupation** with scripture results in scripture asserting itself as living and active on the exegete,” implies that those who disagree lack “intensive occupation with scripture.” In other words, they are just not working hard enough with scripture. Forde would not say this. He knew Catholic scholars who are “intensively occupied” with scripture but did not convert to being Lutheran. He knew Jewish scholars who are “intensively occupied” with New Testament texts yet do not convert to Christianity. Moreover, the five added lines imply that Forde is proposing Lutherans do not have or need hermeneutics (“It [scripture] clarifies itself...The means is proclamation.”), because the scriptures “interpret” the exegete. **This was not Forde’s view.** To the contrary, he unquestionably affirmed the importance of historical criticism and other scholarly methods in interpreting scripture. See ③ and ④ above.
- ⑥ In Forde’s translation of Mostert’s text, he capitalizes the word “Scripture” in both places it appears. But the editors changed the text; they put the word “scripture” in lower case the first place it appears but leave it in upper case “Scripture” the second place it appears in the sentence.
- ⑦ The editors add the sentence on *solus Christus*, which has the effect of distracting the reader from Forde’s argument against inerrancy. Forde is making the case that “scripture interprets itself” does not mean that texts are self-evident and plain; it means justification by faith alone. The editors’ added sentence breaks both the line and logic of Forde’s argument.
- ⑧ Forde would not use the word “diacronically,” a term from structural linguistics. He avoided technical jargon because it does not communicate. But his editors use “diacronically” in their introduction to *The Preached God*, p. 22.
- ⑨ The editors add the question: “asking: Is this not what it says?” This added question implies that scripture is self-evident, plain, and clear. However, there is no clear or simple or non-hermeneutical approach to or understanding of historical materials. To use scripture as if it were not historical is a misuse of scripture.

See the next post in this series for a chart presenting major differences between Forde and Steven Paulson, his principle editor, on basic issues.

SCRIPTURA SACRA SUI IPSIUS INTERPRES

Some Further Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition.

Praeterea cum credamus Ecclesiam sanctam catholicam habere eundem spiritum fidei, quem in sui principio semel accepit, cur non liceat hodie aut solum aut primum sacris literis studere, sicut licuit primitivae Ecclesiae? Neque enim illi Augustinum aut Thomam legerunt. Aut dic, si potes, quo iudice finietur quaestio, si patrum dicta sibi pugnaverint. Oportet enim scriptura iudice hic sententiam ferre, quod fieri non potest, nisi scripturae dederimus principem locum in omnibus quae tribuuntur patribus, hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans, sicut scriptum est psal. c.xviii [119:130]. "Declaratio seu, ut hebraeus proprie habet, Apertum seu ostium verborum tuorum illuminat et intellectum dat parvulis." Hic clare spiritus tribuit illuminationem et intellectum dari docet per sola verba dei, tanquam per ostium et apertum seu principium (quod dicunt) primum, a quo incipi oporteat, ingressurum ad lucem et intellectum.

--Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per bullam Leonis X. 1520.  
WA 7, 97, 16-29.

It will not be possible, from a Lutheran vantage point at least, fruitfully to engage the question of scripture and tradition without some attention to what is today called hermeneutics. The divergences in relating scripture to the subsequent interpretative activity of the church arise because of some quite different preceptions of the relationship between the text and the exegete (either as an individual or a collective). What I shall attempt here is to set forth for discussion what these different perceptions appear to me to be. It will not be possible in this short exercise to do that in anything other than rather facile and broad generalizations, but the hope is nevertheless that such setting forth might move our discussion in a fruitful direction.

Perhaps there is no clearer indication of these different

perceptions than in antithetical assertions about where final authority resides in the interpretation of scripture: with the church and its magisterium; or with scripture itself--especially as comprehended in the audacious claim that the sacred scriptures interpret themselves (scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres).<sup>1</sup> Thereby, it seems to me, hangs the hermeneutical divide we need to get at. In the one case tradition, taken as something additional to scripture--whether as extra-canonical material, or as interpretation or extension of the canonical text--plays a prominent role, whereas in the other it comes under radical critique.

The differing attitudes toward tradition are engendered by basically different hermeneutical "models," different perceptions of the relationship between exegete/interpreter and text. In the first and perhaps most universally assumed model, the exegete, as "subject," stands over against the text understood as the "object" to be interpreted. The problem immediately engendered by such a model is the subjectivism or potential arbitrariness of the exegete. How can one be assured that the interpretation or application or extension of the text is "correct," i.e., not distorted by the spiritus proprius of the individual exegete?<sup>2</sup> How is the subjectivism of the exegete to be transcended? At this point tradition in one form or another enters the picture. The tradition stands as norm of or guide to interpretation. But then what does one do if the tradition does not always agree with itself? The hermeneutic, it would seem, inevitably drives to an authoritative office to oversee the interpretive process, apply the tradition, and be the place "where the buck stops." As Joseph Lortz could put it, "...No religious objectivity is possible where it is not certified again and again, from case to case, by a living interpreter, i.e., through an infallible, living teaching office."<sup>3</sup> The subjectivism of the individual exegete and even the ambiguities of the tradition can be transcended, therefore, only by the "objectivity" of the "collective": the church and the magisterium, culminating in the papal office. Those who persist in questioning the legitimacy of such claims to transcendence are usually suspected of subjective arbitrariness, i.e., disobedience to the church. This was the charge made against the Reformers--particularly Luther--and it persists down to the present.<sup>4</sup>

Sola scriptura is in the first instance a reaction to claims made to such transcendence in behalf of tradition and the magisterium, and especially the papal office. It should be noted, however, that the sola scriptura was not just a Reformation doctrine or concern. It was abroad in the church long before the Reformation. As such it was most often a sub-set of the same basic hermeneutical model indicated above. The difference is only that it finds the claim that human subjectivity can be transcended by a collective spirit or the papal office to be dubious. Thus it counters such claims with the insistence that scripture alone transcends individual subjectivism and is therefore the ultimate authority.

The problem with such a claim, however, is that as long as it remains simply a sub-set of the same hermeneutical model, sola scriptura becomes more or less merely a defensive position over against tradition and magisterium. To bolster its case it has to make additional formal claims to inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, sufficiency, etc. As such a defensive position, however, sola scriptura is hard pressed to hold its ground against the advances of critical study of the scriptures, the history of the church, and the growth of tradition. It is virtually platitudinous today to point out, for instance, that scripture is itself a product of "tradition," written by human authors in differing contexts, etc. Within the presuppositions of the given hermeneutic, therefore, a kind of stand-off develops between a scripture and tradition position and a sola scriptura position, each disagreeing with the other about how human subjectivism and arbitrariness is to be overcome and true objectivity to be achieved. To put it in its most extreme form, one ends with a stand-off between Papalism and Biblicism, each disputing what appear to be the exaggerated authoritarian claims of the other.

Even though the sola scriptura became one of the most prominent slogans of the 16th century reform movement, its significance is not fully grasped until one engages the hermeneutical question. One must advance beyond the merely formal statement of the sola scriptura to the understanding of scripture as sui ipsius interpres. This claim presupposes a quite different hermeneutical model.<sup>5</sup> To make a long story short, it means that the roles of the text and the interpreter are

essentially reversed. The interpreter does not remain standing simply as subject over against the text as object to be interpreted. Rather, in the engagement with scripture, it is the scripture that comes to interpret the exegete. It is the task of the exegete to allow the Spirit of the scripture, the matter itself, to speak. The exegete is put in the position of the hearer who is to let the Spirit speak through the scripture precisely by "getting out of the way," i.e., setting aside the subjective sensus proprius. The scripture, that is, is not to be understood merely as the object upon which the exegete works, but rather as the means through which the Spirit works on the hearer. The concern moves beyond the question of what scripture means to what the Word does. The movement in the direction of the oral and living Word in this is unmistakeable. The exegete is a hearer, who upon being addressed and exegeted by the Word becomes in turn a speaker (preacher).

In this model too, it is recognized that the greatest obstacle to true interpretation is the subjectivism, the sensus or spiritus proprius of the interpreter. But it is not believed that this subjectivism is overcome either by the collective weight or activity of church or tradition as such, nor is it overcome by merely formal declarations about biblical authority or inerrancy, nor, for that matter, by claims to possess the Spirit. Thus Luther, for instance, saw the claims both of the individual spiritualist and of the Papacy to be of the same order: subjectivism--i.e., the formal claim to possess the Spirit outside of the external Word and thus the claim to stand above the Word and be the ultimate interpreter.<sup>6</sup> The insistence that scripture be heard as sui ipsius interpres, however, means that the problem of the subjective sensus proprius can be handled only when one allows the Spirit itself speaking through the Word actually to do it: to end the claims and needs of the old dying subject and call to life a new one who hears the promise. That Scripture is sui ipsius interpres means that it establishes itself as authoritative over the hearer by claiming the hearer. In other words, Scripture establishes itself as authoritative because it is justifying Word. "The authority, sufficiency, and revelational quality of the Scripture is due, according to Luther, quite unpolemically and aposteriori, to the experience that Scripture imparted to him life, salvation, comfort, freedom--i.e., a new being in faith"<sup>7</sup>

Sui ipsius interpretes is simply the hermeneutical correlate of justification by faith alone. In this light, formal claims made for extra-scriptural authority structures and/or formal declarations about biblical authority (inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) are constructs which in one way or another are simply a reflex of the needs of the subjective sensus proprius.<sup>8</sup>

What does this have to say about the question of scripture and tradition? First of all, as the slogan itself asserts, the interpreter, whether as individual or as collective, is not accorded any independent or automatically privileged status as such. That scripture is sui ipsius interpretes means that the problem of subjectivism in matters of interpretation cannot adequately be met simply by placing either the collective spiritus proprius or formal assertions of biblical authority between the individual subject and the text. If the subjectivism, the spiritus proprius, of the interpreter is to be overcome, then it is the Holy Spirit speaking through the preached Word according to Scripture who must do it. The Word of God, that is, must do it. To set an authoritative office or formal claim to biblical authority between the Word and the hearer is to introduce a foreign and legalistic element into the relation. It is the task of the interpreter to be a hearer of the Word, and having heard, to be one who speaks it again effectively.

Thus sui ipsius interpretes has to be seen as a critique of the place assigned to tradition in usual formulations. Tradition understood as extra-scriptural institute which is to preside over the process of interpretation and put a check on the sensus proprius of the interpreter really leaves that sensus proprius basically intact. Like the law, it may restrain sin but it does not cure it. As long as the fundamental relation between text and interpreter remains the same no real change can occur. For even if the individual sensus proprius as a matter of fact comes to agree with, or submits to the traditional institute, all that happens is that the subjective sensus proprius, in concert with the collective sensus proprius, finds a "meaning" in the text convenient to its own concerns. The subject remains the interpreter of the text, the text is not allowed to become the interpreter of the subject.

This means at the very least that tradition as extra-scriptural

institute claiming absolute or unquestioned authority over the interpretation would have to be rejected. The "and" in Scripture and Tradition cannot be a plus sign which elevates Tradition to the same level as Scripture or in actual practice, above it. If we are not permanently or irrevocably to install some particular instance of human or collective subjectivity over the Scriptures, or even between the Scriptures and us, then it would seem that we could best consider ourselves as the company of hearers of the Word, straining to hear what the Spirit has to say to us through the Babel of other voices--including our own discordant notes. The tradition, perhaps it could be said, is an account of what the company of hearers has heard, the intent of which should be to summon us to the task of listening ever more carefully and exactly. As such it is to be taken seriously and even given a primary place in the discipline of listening. It is, you might say, a "hearing aid," but not itself the source or judge. It may be a norma normata, but not a norma normans. It must always be open to better hearing, and must stand under the Scriptures.<sup>9</sup> Tradition properly understood, that is, does not exist to call attention to itself, or to insert itself between us and the scripture (or even to call attention to its own "development" and growth), but rather to clear the way, to point us toward a proper hearing of the text.

The fact that scripture is to be understood as self-interpreting in no way means therefore that the interpreter has nothing to do. On the contrary, it makes the task of interpreting much more demanding and exacting. "The intensity of the exegetical work is directly proportional to the acknowledgement that scripture is sui ipsius interpretes."<sup>10</sup> Luther could put it this way in a passage from the Assertions Against the Bull of Leo just preceding the one quoted at the outset: "So we must therefore strive, not to set aside the scriptures and <sup>to</sup> norm ourselves by the human writings of the Fathers, but much more to set aside the writings of men and all the more persistently dedicate our sweat to the Holy Scriptures alone. The more present the danger that one might understand them by one's own spirit (proprio spiritu) the more this must be done, until at last the exercise of this constant effort conquers the danger and makes us certain of the Spirit of Scripture, which is simply not to be found outside of scripture."<sup>11</sup>



## Notes:

1. The quote from Luther's "Assertio....per Bullam Leonis X" above is a locus classicus for the sui ipsius interpres but the same can be found in other places: WA 14, 566, 26-29; WA 10 III, 238 10f, etc.
2. Luther uses the term spiritus proprius (which is apparently interchangeable with sensus proprius) in the Assertio (WA 7, 96:5). It appears there in a quote, but no indication is given as to what he may have been quoting. The bull of Leo X does identify Luther with heretics who interpret scripture according to their own wisdom rather than that of the church and the fathers and that no doubt occasions Luther's response in his Assertio.
3. Joseph Lortz, Die Reformation in Deutschland. Vol. 1., 3rd ed. 1948. Freiburg: Verlag Herder. 402.
4. See, for instance, Paul Hacker, The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion. Franciscan Herald Press. 1970. The book carries a commendatory preface by Joseph Ratzinger. The basic charge of subjectivism persists even in so positive an interpreter of the Reformation as Joseph Lortz. See Lortz, loc. cit. and also Die Reformation als Religioeses Anliegen Heute, Trier: Paulus-Verlag. 1948. 144 et passim.
5. For a more thorough explication of the issues raised briefly here, see the excellent article by Walter Mostert, "Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres," Lutherjahrbuch, Helmar Junghans, ed., 46: 1979. 60-96. Hereafter cited as Mostert.
6. See Luther's Smalcald Articles, Pt. III, Art. VIII, Book of Concord, ed. and trans. T. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1959. 312-313.
7. Mostert, 70.
8. Ibid. 70.
9. Thus, even though Luther accepted the homoousion of the Nicene Creed without personal reservation, he could also say (in Against Latomus), "Even if my soul hated this word, homoousion, and I refused to use it [because it was not scriptural], still I would not be a heretic. For who compels me to use the word, providing I hold to the fact defined by the council on the basis of scripture?" LW 32, 244.
10. "It is well known...that polemically Luther had in mind the sensus proprius in the form of the Roman Catholic and enthusiast concept of

Spirit. What he criticized thereby was that a criterion was introduced into scriptural exegesis that was foreign to the concern of scripture. Now in the context of Luther's theology as a whole the Roman concept of tradition and the enthusiast concept of Spirit are seen not just as isolated historical phenomena, but as historic appearances of the general human inclination towards sensus proprius, to enthusiasm. If Luther sets the self-asserting power of scripture against traditionalism and enthusiasm, one must see this in the overall view of his whole theology, which crystallizes around the self-seeking sinner after his own salvation versus the God who simply gives his salvation." Mostert, 74.

11. WA 7, 97:3-9.

# A MORE RADICAL GOSPEL

*Essays on Eschatology, Authority,  
Atonement, and Ecumenism*

Gerhard O. Forde

*Edited by*

Mark C. Mattes & Steven D. Paulson

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## Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres: Reflections on the Question of Scripture and Tradition

It will not be possible, at least from a Lutheran stance, fruitfully to engage the question of scripture and tradition without some attention to what is today called hermeneutics. The disagreements over relating scripture to the subsequent interpretative activity of the church arise because of some quite different perceptions of the relationship between the text and the exegete (either as an individual or a collective). What shall be attempted here is to offer for discussion what these different perceptions are. It will not be possible in this short essay to do that in anything other than rather facile and broad generalizations. Nevertheless, my aim is that this presentation will move our discussion in a fruitful direction.

Perhaps there is no clearer indication of these different perceptions than in the traditional antithetical assertions about where final authority resides in the interpretation of scripture: with the church and its magisterium or rather with scripture itself, especially as comprehended in Luther's audacious claim that the sacred scriptures interpret themselves (*scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*).<sup>1</sup> In this hangs the hermeneutical di-

1. "Praeterea cum credamus Ecclesiam sanctam catholicam habere eundem spiritum fidei, quem in sui principio semel accepit, cur non liceat hodie aut solum aut primum sacris literis studere, sicut licuit primitivae Ecclesiae? Neque enim illi Augustinum aut Thomam legerunt. Aut dic, si potes, quo iudice finietur quaestio, si patrum dicta sibi pugnaverint. Oportet enim scriptura iudice hic sententiam ferre, quod fieri non potest, nisi scripturae dederimus principem locum in omnibus quae tribuuntur patribus, hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et

vide we need to get at. In the one case, tradition, taken as something additional to scripture — whether as extra-canonical material or as interpretation or extension of the canonical text — plays a prominent role, whereas in the other it comes under radical critique.

The differing attitudes toward tradition are engendered by basically different hermeneutical "models," different perceptions of the relationship between exegete/interpreter and text. In the first and perhaps most universally assumed model, the exegete, as "subject," stands over against the text understood as the "object" that is to be interpreted. The interpretation yields doctrine and practical mandates. Faith equals acceptance of such doctrine and practice. The problem immediately engendered by such a model is the subjectivity or potential arbitrariness of the exegete. How can one be assured that the interpretation or application or extension of the text is "correct," i.e., not distorted by the *spiritus proprius* of the individual exegete?<sup>2</sup> How is the subjectivism of the exegete to be transcended? By the historical method?

At this point tradition, in one form or another, enters the picture. The tradition stands as norm of or guide to interpretation. But then what does one do if the tradition does not always agree with itself? The hermeneutic, it would seem, inevitably drives to an authoritative office to oversee the interpretive process, apply the tradition, and be the place "where the buck stops." As Joseph Lortz put it, "... No religious objectivity is possible where it is not certified again and again, from case to case, by a living interpreter, i.e., through an infallible, living teaching office."<sup>3</sup> The subjectivism

*illuminans, sicut scriptum est psal. c.xviii [119:130]. 'Declaratio seu, ut hebraeus proprie habet, Apertum seu ostium verborum tuorum illuminat et intellectum dat parvulis.' Hic clare spiritus tribuit illuminationem et intellectum dari docet per sola verba dei, tanquam per ostium et apertum seu principium (quod dicunt) primum, a quo incipi oporteat, ingressurum ad lucem et intellectum." See Assertio omnium articulorum M. Lutheri per Bullam Leonis x. novissimam damnatorum (1520), WA 7, 97, 16-29. This quote from Luther is a locus classicus for the sui ipsius interpres, but the same can be found in other places: WA 14, 566, 26-29; WA 10 III, 238 10 f, etc.*

2. Luther uses the term *spiritus proprius* (which is apparently interchangeable with *sensus proprius*) in the *Assertio* (WA 7, 96, 5). It appears there in a quote, but no indication is given as to what he may have been quoting. The bull of Leo X does identify Luther with heretics who interpret scripture according to their own wisdom rather than that of the church and the fathers, and that no doubt occasions Luther's response in his *Assertio*.

3. Joseph Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1948), p. 402.

of the individual exegete and even the ambiguities of the tradition can be transcended, therefore, only by the "objectivism" of the "collective," the church and the magisterium, culminating in the papal office. Those who persist in questioning the legitimacy of such claims to transcendence are usually suspected of subjective arbitrariness, i.e., disobedience to the church. This was the charge made against the Reformers — particularly Luther — and it persists down to the present.<sup>4</sup>

*Sola scriptura* is in the first instance a reaction to claims made to such transcendence on behalf of tradition and the magisterium, especially the papal office. It should be noted, however, that the *sola scriptura* was not just a Reformation doctrine or concern. It was abroad in the church long before the Reformation. As such, it was most often a subset of the same basic hermeneutical model indicated above. The difference is only that it finds the claim that human subjectivism, the *spiritus proprius*, can be transcended by a collective spirit or the papal office to be dubious. They are still only human. Thus it counters such claims with the insistence that scripture alone as divinely inspired word, not human words, transcends individual subjectivism and is therefore the sole and ultimate authority.

The problem with such a claim, however, is that as long as it remains simply a subset of the same hermeneutical model, *sola scriptura* becomes a defensive position over against tradition and magisterium. To bolster its case it has to make additional formal claims to inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, sufficiency, etc. to claim divine warrant. As such a defensive position, however, *sola scriptura* is hard-pressed to hold its ground against the advances of critical study of the scriptures, the history of the church, and the growth of tradition. It is virtually platitudinous today to point out, for instance, that scripture is itself a product of "tradition," written by human authors in differing contexts. This ploy relativizes it, reduces it to the level of human words and tradition. Within the presuppositions of the given hermeneutic, therefore, a kind of standoff develops between a scripture-and-tradition position and a *sola scriptura* position, each disagreeing with the other about how human subjectivism and arbitrariness is to be over-

4. See, for instance, Paul Hacker, *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970). The book carries a commendatory preface by Joseph Ratzinger. The basic charge of subjectivism persists even in so positive an interpreter of the Reformation as Joseph Lortz. See Lortz, loc. cit. and also *Die Reformation als Religiöses Anliegen Heute* (Trier: Paulus-Verlag, 1948), pp. 144ff.

come and true objectivity achieved. Where does the divine Spirit enter the scene — in the books or in the office or both? To put it in its most extreme form, we end with a standoff between papalism and biblicism, each disputing what appear to be the exaggerated or inappropriate authoritarian claims of the other.

Even though the *sola scriptura* became one of the most prominent slogans of the sixteenth-century reform movement, its significance is not fully grasped until one engages the hermeneutical question. One must advance beyond the merely formal statement of the *sola scriptura* to the understanding of scripture as *sui ipsius interpres*. This claim presupposes a quite different hermeneutical model.<sup>5</sup> To make a long story short, it means that the roles of the text and the interpreter are essentially reversed. The interpreter does not remain standing simply as subject over against the text as object to be interpreted. Rather, in the engagement with scripture, it is the scripture that comes to interpret the exegete. It is the task of the exegete to allow the Spirit of the scripture, the matter itself, to speak. The exegete is put in the position of the hearer who is to let the Spirit speak through the scripture precisely by "getting out of the way," i.e., setting aside the subjective *sensus proprius*. In short, the scripture is not to be understood merely as the object upon which the exegete works, but rather as the means through which the Spirit works on the hearer. The concern moves beyond the question of what scripture means to what the Word does. The movement in the direction of the oral and living Word in this is unmistakable. Intensive occupation with scripture results in scripture asserting itself as living and active on the exegete — the model is the fire and the hammer (Jer. 23), which is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword (Heb. 4). It clarifies itself and leads to, drives to, the proclamation. The means of transmission is proclamation — the Word as active. The exegete is a hearer, who upon being addressed and exegeted by the Word, becomes in turn a speaker or preacher.

In this model, it is also recognized that the greatest obstacle to true interpretation is the subjectivism, the *sensus* or *spiritus proprius* of the interpreter, i.e., the attempt to make the biblical story conform to others, to make it fit our culture and world. But it is not believed that this subjectiv-

5. For a more thorough explication of the issues raised briefly here, see the excellent article by Walter Mostert, "Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres," chapter in *Lutherjahrbuch* 46, ed. Helmar Junghans (1979), pp. 60-96. Hereafter cited as Mostert.

ism is overcome either by the collective weight or activity of church or tradition as such, nor is it overcome by merely formal declarations about biblical authority or inerrancy nor, for that matter, by individual claims to possess the Spirit. Thus Luther, for instance, saw the claims both of the individual spiritualist and of the papacy to be of the same order: subjectivism — i.e., the formal claim to possess the Spirit outside of the external Word and thus the claim to stand above the Word and be the ultimate interpreter.<sup>6</sup> The insistence that scripture be heard as *sui ipsius interpret*, however, means that the problem of the subjective *sensus proprius* can be handled only when one allows the Spirit itself speaking through the Word actually to do it: to end the claims and needs of the old dying subject and call to life a new one who hears the promise. That scripture is *sui ipsius interpret* means that it establishes itself as authoritative over the hearer by *claiming* the hearer. In other words, scripture establishes itself as authoritative because it is a justifying, saving, and redeeming Word. “The authority, sufficiency, and revelational quality of the scripture is due, according to Luther, quite unpolemically and *a posteriori*, to the experience that Scripture imparted to him life, salvation, comfort, freedom — i.e., a new being in faith”<sup>7</sup> *Sui ipsius interpret* is simply the hermeneutical correlate of justification by faith alone. The *solus Christus* is important because it denotes the only possible attitude to the Word as *pro me*. In this light, formal claims made for extra-scriptural authority structures and/or formal declarations about biblical authority (inerrancy, infallibility, etc.) are constructs that in one way or another are simply a reflex of the needs of the subjective *sensus proprius*.<sup>8</sup>

What does this have to say about the question of scripture and tradition? First of all, as the formula itself asserts, the interpreter, whether as individual or as collective, is not accorded any independent or automatically privileged status as such. That scripture is *sui ipsius interpret* means that the problem of subjectivism in matters of interpretation cannot adequately be met simply by placing either the collective *spiritus proprius* or formal assertions of biblical authority between the individual subject and the text. If the subjectivism, the *spiritus proprius* of the inter-

preter is to be overcome, then it is the Holy Spirit speaking through the preached Word according to scripture who must do it. The Word of God, that is, must do it. To set an authoritative office or formal claim to biblical authority between the Word and the hearer is to introduce a foreign and legalistic element into the relation. It is the task of the interpreter to be a hearer of the Word, and having heard, to be one who speaks it again effectively.

Thus, *sui ipsius interpret* has to be seen as a critique of the place assigned to tradition in usual formulations. Tradition understood as an extra-scriptural institution that is to preside over the process of interpretation and put a check on the *sensus proprius* of the interpreter really leaves that *sensus proprius* basically intact. Like the law, it may restrain sin but it does not cure it. As long as the fundamental relation between text and interpreter remains the same no real change can occur. For even if the individual *sensus proprius* as a matter of fact comes to agree with, or submits to, the traditional institution, all that happens is that the subjective *sensus proprius*, in concert with the collective *sensus proprius*, finds a “meaning” in the text convenient to its own concerns. The subject remains the interpreter of the text; the text is not allowed to become the interpreter of the subject.

At the very least, this means that tradition as extra-scriptural institution claiming absolute or unquestioned authority over the interpretation would have to be rejected. The “and” in “scripture and tradition” cannot be a plus sign that elevates tradition to the same level as scripture or in actual practice, above it. If we are not permanently or irrevocably to install some particular instance of human or collective subjectivism over the scriptures, or even between the scriptures and us, then it would seem that we could best consider ourselves as the company of hearers of the Word, straining to hear what the Spirit has to say to us through the Babel of other voices — including our own discordant notes. The tradition, perhaps it could be said, is an account of what the company of hearers has diachronically heard, what we believe and confess, the intent of which should be to summon us to the task of listening ever more carefully and exactly, asking: Is this not what it says? As such it is to be taken seriously and even given a primary place in the discipline of listening. It is, you might say, a “hearing aid,” but not itself the source or judge. It may be a “normed norm” (*norma normata*), but not a “norming norm” (*norma normans*). It must always be open to better hearing, and must stand under

6. See Luther's *Smalcald Articles*, Pt. III, Art. VIII, *Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. Kolb, Wengert, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), pp. 321-23.

7. Mostert, p. 70.

8. Mostert, p. 70.

the scriptures.<sup>9</sup> Tradition properly understood does not exist to call attention to itself, or to insert itself between us and scripture (or even to call attention to its own “development” and growth), but rather to clear the way, to point us toward a proper hearing of the text.

The fact that scripture is to be understood as self-interpreting in no way means therefore that the interpreter has nothing to do. On the contrary, it makes the task of interpreting much more demanding and exacting. “The intensity of the exegetical work is directly proportional to the acknowledgment that scripture is *sui ipsius interpretes*.”<sup>10</sup> Luther could specify it in *Assertions Against the Bull of Leo*: “So we must therefore strive, not to set aside the scriptures and norm ourselves by the human writings of the Fathers, but much more to set aside the writings of men and all the more persistently dedicate our sweat to the Holy Scriptures alone. The more present the danger that one might understand them by one’s own spirit (*proprio spiritu*) the more this must be done, until at last the exercise of this constant effort conquers the danger and makes us certain of the Spirit of Scripture, which is simply not to be found outside of scripture.”<sup>11</sup>

9. Thus, even though Luther accepted the *homoousion* of the Nicene Creed without personal reservation, he could also say (in “Against Latomus”), “Even if my soul hated this word, *homoousion*, and I refused to use it [because it was not scriptural], still I would not be a heretic. For who compels me to use the word, providing I hold to the fact defined by the council on the basis of scripture?” (LW 32, 244).

10. “It is well known . . . that polemically Luther had in mind the *sensus proprius* in the form of the Roman Catholic and enthusiast concept of Spirit. What he criticized thereby was that a criterion was introduced into scriptural exegesis that was foreign to the concern of scripture. Now in the context of Luther’s theology as a whole the Roman concept of tradition and the enthusiast concept of Spirit are seen not just as isolated historical phenomena, but as historic appearances of the general human inclination towards *sensus proprius*, to enthusiasm. If Luther sets the self-asserting power of scripture against traditionalism and enthusiasm, one must see this in the overall view of his whole theology, which crystallizes around the self-seeking sinner after his own salvation versus the God who simply gives his salvation.” See Mostert, 74.

11. WA 7, 97, 3-9.