

Report
of the
Commission on Theology
and
Church Relations



Seven Theses
on
Reformation Hermeneutics

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The following paper by Dr. Martin H. Franzmann was heard and discussed by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations as part of the “comprehensive study of Biblical hermeneutics” called for by the 1965 convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (*Proceedings*, p. 95). The commission has adopted the paper as a statement of its own position and “commends it to the church for study and guidance.” (CTCR minutes, Feb. 11, 1969)

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THESIS I *Qui non intelligit res non potest ex verbis sensum elicere* (Luther).¹ Interpretation is a “circular” process (from *verba* to *res* to *verba*), and in this process the *res* is of crucial importance, since the question addressed to the text helps determine the answer to be gotten from the text.

Luther’s dictum on *res* and *verba* is a crisp summary of a widely recognized hermeneutical principle: Unless you know what a man is talking about, you will not make sense of his words. A man coming late into a conversation will ask, “What *are* you people talking about?” even though he knows the meaning (or *a* meaning at least) of every single word he hears; not knowing the *res* under discussion, he is at a loss concerning the *verba*. The lawyer, the printer, and the theologian all use the word “justify”; but unless one knows in advance a little something about the lawyer’s profession, the printer’s craft, or the theologian’s field, one will be at a loss concerning the intended sense of “justify” in the lawyer’s, printer’s, or theologian’s speech.

What holds of conversation and the spoken word, holds with especial force of the printed word, of texts, where the give-and-take of conversation is impossible and the eloquent context of known, physically present person, of inflection, and of gesture is absent. To interpret adequately any portion of a text, a man must therefore have formed some conception of the text as a whole: this conception of the whole guides him in the interpretation of the individual words and units and is in turn subject to correction, enrichment, and deepening by his study of the individual units. The process by which a genuine understanding of a text is gained is, therefore, “circular”; from *verba* to *res* to *verb.*, in continual and lively interaction.² In the case of ancient texts, chronologically and culturally remote from the interpreter’s own world and written in an ancient and alien tongue, the need of such an interpretive *res* is greater and its value proportionately higher.

In the case of Biblical interpretation, the situation is more complicated still. We have to do with the interpretation of a collection of 66 ancient writings, spanning a dozen centuries, composed in three languages, and exhibiting a rich variety in both form and substance. And this collection demands to be heard and understood as a unity. This demand is raised not only by the church, which asserts that unity in its liturgy,

¹ “Unless one understands the things under discussion, one cannot make sense of the words.” Hereafter *res* will be used for “subject matter,” *verba* for “words.”

² See Kurt Frör, *Biblische Hermeneutik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961), pp. 55—56.

proclamation, and dogma. It is raised also by the history of the texts, the formation of the canon which is mysteriously and persistently and actively *there*, however much historical rationalization may seek to strip the mystery and the power from it. More important even than these two factors is the fact that this demand is raised within the collection itself, implicitly within the Old Testament and very explicitly in the New Testament, whose use of the Old Testament (quotation, allusion, reminiscence, terminological indebtedness) forces the interpreter to consider the New Testament utterances within a larger context and in the light of one dominant divine purpose. And the New Testament likewise insists that the Old Testament must be read and understood in the light of the New Testament if it is to be profitably understood at all. The interpreter is literally driven into the hermeneutical circular process, compelled to search for the *res* that holds all the parts together and permits each part to be heard and appropriated in its intended sense as part of the whole.

There must, then, be an understood *res* if there is to be genuinely “understanding encounter with the text,” as Frör has put it.³ And a merely formal *res* will not serve to disclose that unity which the Church’s use of the texts, the history of the texts, and the assertion of the texts themselves claim for the collection. A formal designation like “Religious Documents of the Ancient Near East” is useless; and worse than useless, since its bland and reserved “objectivity” tends to shunt aside *the* question that must be asked of these documents. Even more specifically religious and committed statements of the *res*, such as “Word of God” or “Record of Revelation” (indispensable as they are in their place) will not of themselves open the door of the Bible, since they do not say enough. The fact that God talks and discloses is important enough, but it does not raise and does not help answer *the* great question: “*How* does He talk to me and *what* does He disclose to me?”

The men of the Lutheran Reformation, on whose hermeneutical and exegetical production we live and thrive to this day, made great formal hermeneutical-exegetical decisions and assertions (*Sola Scriptura*, *sensus literalis*, *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, etc.), but they were not the first to make them and were not alone in making them; the great gift that was given them, the wisdom from on high that was vouchsafed them, was the ability to make a hermeneutical breakthrough which is intrinsically bound up with the theological breakthrough, to see the *res* of the Bible with charismatic clarity and to see it in its relation to the Biblical *verba*.⁴ This helps account for the fact that there is no explicit, distinct article *On Scripture* in the Lutheran Confessions, at least before the Formula of Concord. What the reformers had to say on Scripture could best be said obliquely, in the way in which they actually dealt with Scripture in given cases in their “Christocentric handling” of texts, their “total soteriological attitude,” as Werner Elert has put it.⁵

³ Frör, p. 61.

⁴ See G. Ebeling, “Hermeneutik,” RGG, 3d ed., Vol. III, col. 251: “The beginnings of Luther’s hermeneutics are most intimately connected with the genesis of his theology. The change in total theological understanding, on the one hand, and in the theory of understanding, on the other, here intermesh in a highly complicated fashion.” “One can grasp the epoch-making character of the effect of the Reformation in the history of hermeneutics only when one envisages not merely the technical questions of method but the whole sweep of the problem of understanding. . . .” (Translation my own.)

⁵ *Morphologie des Luthertums* (Munich: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931) I, 167.

THESIS II The *res* of the Lutheran Confessions is justification by grace through faith. (Apology IV, 2-4, German)

The significance of the statement made in the German version of Apology IV, 24, must therefore be assessed in the context of the Lutheran Confessions' actual "handling" of Scripture. In that context it appears as a crystallization of Reformation *res-verba* hermeneutics:

This dispute has to do with the highest and chief article of all Christian doctrine [Justification], so that much indeed depends on this article, which also serves preeminently to give a clear, correct understanding of the whole Sacred Scripture and alone points the way to the unutterable treasure and the true knowledge of Christ, and also alone opens the door to the whole Bible, without which article no poor conscience can have a constant, certain consolation or know the riches of the grace of Christ.

The theological health and wholeness of this hermeneutics is apparent in the way in which this passage unites hermeneutical-exegetical concerns with the whole soteriological, Christological, and pastoral ("poor conscience") concern of the Church.⁶

THESIS III "Justification by grace through faith" is Confessional shorthand for "radical Gospel"⁷: *God, to whom man can find no way, has in Christ creatively opened up the way which man may and must go.*

This thesis hardly needs to be documented at length. Herbert Bouman has in a recent article pointed up in detail "the almost bewildering variety" of synonyms for "justification" which the Lutheran Confessions employ to declare the Gospel.⁸ And surely it is not without significance that Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed, for all its succinct richness, contains no forensic imagery whatsoever: this is the Luther who could call the fourth evangelist (whose gospel does not contain any of the technical terms of justification and speaks of "righteousness" in a theologically pregnant sense just once) a "master in justification."

To avoid any narrowing down to strictly forensic imagery and to forestall the charge of Lutheran-bias selectivity, it may be well to state the radical Gospel of the Confessions in the broadest possible way: *God, to whom man can find no way, has in Christ (the hidden center of the Old Testament and the manifested center of the New) creatively opened up the way which man may and must go.*⁹ And we may claim Confessional warrant for even so broad a formulation: "As Paul says (Rom. 5:2), 'Through Christ we have obtained access to God by faith.' We stress this statement because it is so clear. It summarizes our case very well. (*Totius enim causae nostrae statum clarissime ostendit.*)"¹⁰

⁶ The hermeneutical concern itself is more explicitly stated in Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, V, 1: "The distinction between Law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly."

⁷ "Radical" is, of course, used in the sense of fundamental, basic, going to the root.

⁸ "Some Thoughts on the Theological Presuppositions for a Lutheran Approach to the Scriptures" in *Aspects of Biblical Hermeneutics*, CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY Occasional Papers No. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), pp. 10-14.

⁹ To avoid any possible misunderstanding, it may be noted that "may" signifies "is permitted and enabled by God" and "must" indicates that there is no second way.

¹⁰ Apology IV, 314.

THESIS IV This Gospel is radical in three respects: (1) In its recognition of the condemning law and wrath of God and the guilt and lostness of man; (2) in its recognition of the sole working of God in man's salvation; (3) in its recognition of the transformation of man's existence produced by the saving act of God.

One need read no farther than the Second Article of the Augsburg Confession to realize how seriously the Confessions take the first element in this formulation of the radical Gospel: Man as he is in Adam is *sine metu Dei, sine fiducia erga Deum, and cum concupiscentia*—this is the gate of triple brass that bars his way to God: he does not fear, he cannot trust the God who made him, and so must needs play God himself and get what he wants when he wants it, without God, against God. He is the “lost and *condemned* creature.” The necessary correlative to this element of the proclamation is faith as unconditional surrender to God, the faith of Abraham as Paul pictures it in Rom. 4:19, the faith of the publican in the parable, the faith of Peter when he said, “Depart from me, O Lord.”

All three of the Reformation *solas* underscore, each in its way, the second element in this formulation of the radical Gospel: the possibility and the fact of the Gospel, the effectual communication of the Gospel, the salutary reception of the Gospel—these are all possibilities which begin where all human possibilities end, possibilities of the Creator God, “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). The necessary correlative to this is faith as “the worship which receives God's offered blessing.” (Ap. IV, 49)

We must seriously ask ourselves whether we Lutherans have always heard and obeyed the voice of our Confessions as we ought in their proclamation of the third element of the radical Gospel. If we have not, the fault is our own. The voice of the Confessions is loud and clear. Edmund Schlink's summary is also loud and clear:

Justification, renewal, and good works are [in the Confessions] bracketed in the same way as faith, renewal, and good works. If it is true that the believing sinner receives forgiveness and that faith does not sin, then, similarly, justification is effected not only without works by grace alone, but it is also taught that justification cannot be without renewal and good works. . . .

But if justification is not without renewal, it is also not without the good works of new obedience. In ever-new formulations, justification and new obedience are joined together. Justification cannot be separated from new obedience, if we really take the statement regarding justifying faith seriously: “When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works” (A. C. XX, 29). The justifying word of forgiveness and the new obedience are joined together especially in the relation of cause and effect: “. . . love certainly follows faith, because those who believe receive the Holy Spirit; therefore they begin to become friendly to the law and to obey it” (Ap. XII, 82). This ‘follows’ which connects justification and new obedience is not merely a possible, but a necessary result. Faith, forgiveness, the reception of the Spirit are “*certainly*” followed by love, by pleasure in the law, and by the new obedience. “Certain,” “necessary,” “should,” “must,” (*certe, necesse est, debet, oportet*) are the concepts which make this connection inseparable.¹¹

The necessary correlative to this is faith as lively response, faith as “a living, busy,

¹¹ *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, tr. P. F. Koehneke and H. J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), pp. 106—7.

active, mighty thing” as it appears in Luther’s classic (and highly “Jacobean”) definition of it in his Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, quoted in the Formula of Concord (SD IV, 10-12).

THESIS V The validity of this confessional *res* as a heuristic-hermeneutical principle can be documented from Scripture itself: it is the *cantus firmus* to which all the prodigal variety of the Scriptural voices stand in contrapuntal relationship.

This “radical Gospel” is, of course, a monumental simplification of the varied and complex witness of the Scriptures. The men of the Reformation were convinced that it is just that, a simplification of the message of the Scriptures, a true and valid concentration of their essential message. If it is that, the very statement of it is a great act of interpretation, since all interpretation is simplification, as Jowett has said. If it is not that, but an abridgement or a distortion or even merely an over-simplification (with something essential left out), then the hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions is sectarian hermeneutics—or, since Lutheranism has always rejected the idea of being a sect among sects, there is no such thing as a Lutheran hermeneutics.

There is only one way of deciding between these alternatives: only in going the way which the Reformers went, from the whole of the Scriptures to the radical-Gospel summary and then back again to the whole, can we determine whether “radical Gospel” is something imposed on the Scriptures from without or whether the men of the Reformation were really letting Scripture interpret Scripture when they employed this principle. The following not-too-systematic sampling is intended merely to indicate how such an exploration of the Scriptures, with the aid of the Reformation compass, might proceed.¹²

To begin at the beginning of the canon: In the first 11 chapters of Genesis there is a terrifying record of how the sinful will of man repeatedly blocks man’s way to God: the *sicut-Deus* will of Adam; the brutally individualistic will of Cain (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”); the heroic will of Lamech, who will take vengeance out of the hand of God Almighty and execute it for himself more rigorously than He; the will of the generation of Noah, men with *every* imagination of the thoughts of their hearts *only evil continually*—“by rights” the history of man should have ended with Genesis 3; “by rights” there is no room in the record for the Covenant of the Bow which creates a climate of compassionate forbearance in which the history of man may continue after the judgment of the Flood. And the unanimous name-seeking, tower-building hybris of mankind of Genesis 11—“by rights” the history of mankind ends here. Genesis 12 is the absolute miracle of the grace of God creating a way where there is no way that man can find—or even wills to find. The era of the triple curse (the curse upon the ground, on Cain, on Canaan) opens up, illogically, into the era of blessing: “I will *ble*ss you, and make your name great, so that you will be a *ble*ssing. I will *ble*ss those who *ble*ss you . . . and in you all the families of the earth will be *ble*ssed.” (Gen. 12:2-3)

The history that runs from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings is a somber one; it is a history in which the God of relentless judgment upon the sins of His people leads the

¹² The third “radical” in the “radical Gospel” complex—the transformation of man’s existence—has not been explicitly documented in the following, since it is so obvious in the prophetic call to repentance and the prophetic interpretation of history.

history of His people to so radical an upshot (the fall of Israel, the fall of Judah, the end of Jerusalem, the end of the temple, Judah's king living on the tolerance of the king of Babylon) that one scholar sees in it merely the message of "definitive and conclusive" judgment.¹³ The sum of Israel's history apparently equals zero. And yet a closer, more attentive look discloses that the message of this history is Gospel after all; this God of judgment is—*mirabile dictu*—a God to whom His rebel and apostate people may call and must call; there is still possible, as in the days of the Judges, a cry to God as "a reaching for the vigilant compassion of the Lord who has pity for the people of His choice."¹⁴ Repentance (the work of the Lord Himself, who will "circumcise the hearts" of His children, Deut. 30:6) can still open up a new epoch in a history that is, by rights, finished.

In Hosea we can behold the whole miracle of the radical Gospel within the scope of two verses:

And the Lord said, "Call his name, 'Not my people,' for you are not my people and I am not your God." Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "sons of the living God." (Hos. 1:9-10)

"In a situation which no longer offers any presuppositions for the continuation of salvation-history [these verses] set a people, brokenhearted and hopeless, before the future of the people of God as promised to Abraham."¹⁵

The voice that is heard in the story of the foundling girl in Ezekiel 16 is not an isolated one in the Old Testament; but it is a particularly poignant one. The beginnings of Jerusalem are pictured in the image of the foundling girl child, left lying in a ditch and weltering in her blood; no one regarded her or took pity on her except the Lord, who said: "Live, and grow up like a plant in the field" (16:6-7). Eichrodt permits himself a serious play on words, after the manner of the prophets, in commenting on this passage: "The city of God, and with it the people of God, owes its bare existence to an act of grace, one that has no basis in any excellence or activity of the recipient of that grace."¹⁶ The little girl grows up and becomes the bride of the LORD: "I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine" (16:8). The bride turns harlot: "You trusted in your beauty and played the harlot . . . and lavished your harlotries on any passer-by" (16:15). The harlot is judged: "I will deal with you as you have done, who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant" (16:59); and by rights the story ends there. But the story does not end there, and the terrible story is Gospel after all. The bride-turned-harlot may forget, but the LORD does not forget: "Yet I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. . . . I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, *when I forgive you all that you have done.*" (16:60, 62-63)

¹³ M. Noth, as quoted in H. W. Wolff, "Das Kerygma des Deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerks," *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964), p. 309.

¹⁴ Wolff, p. 314; see also p. 315: "It is not total apostasy that makes judgment definitive but contempt for the call to repentance."

¹⁵ H. Frey, *Das Buch des Werbens Gottes um Seine Kirche* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1964), pp. 25—26.

¹⁶ *Der Prophet Hesekiel*, ATD 22/1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), p. 122.

Habakkuk is confronted with a history which threatens the very existence of the people of God, a history whose fearfully judgmental workings confront the prophet with an agonizing enigma. In a fever of anxiety he mounts his tower and “looks forth” for an answer from his God. And lo! this God of inescapable judgment is still the God in whom faith can hold firm, in spite of all enigmas (2:4), the God whose past action for His people is the surest pledge for the future:

Thou wentest forth for the salvation of Thy people,
for the salvation of Thy anointed. (3:13)

The firstfruits of the redemptive action of this God is seen in the faith of the prophet himself, who sees all the palpable blessings and sustaining comforts of God’s reign swept away—the produce of fig tree, vine, and olive, the gifts of field, fold, and stall, all gone—and can sing:

Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
He makes my feet like hinds’ feet,
He makes me tread upon my high places. (3:18-19)

No sampling of the Old Testament, even a sketchy one such as the above has been, may in fairness ignore the question posed by the Wisdom literature. Is there a positive and organic tie between this portion of the Old Testament proclamation and the radical Gospel? Is the Lutheran *res* broad enough to cover this “pedestrian,” “prudential,” “derivative” segment, or fringe, of the Old Testament message? We do well to recall that, according to the witness of Proverbs, “the wise man is as little wise in and of himself as the righteous man is righteous in and of himself.”¹⁷ Wisdom is “a tree of life,” planted by no human hand (Prov. 3:18). It has its beginning and basis in the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7; 9:10), in that unconditional surrender to God so grippingly documented in the history of Abraham, when he stood ready to sacrifice the son on whom the promise hung (Gen. 22). Wisdom expresses itself, therefore, in trust in the Lord (Prov. 3:5; 14:26-27; 16:3; 18:10); and the wise men of Israel do not evade the corollary that they must consequently distrust themselves (Prov. 3:5b). One of the wise men whose voice is heard in Proverbs, Agur, begins his discourse with the startling statement: “Surely I am too stupid to be a man” (Prov. 30:2). And this “vital art of the mastery of life” is capable of “liquidating itself” when it comes to the boundary of God’s wholly incalculable governance of history:

No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel
Can avail against the LORD
The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but the victory belongs to the LORD. (Prov. 21:30)

¹⁷ O. Weber, *Bibelkunde des Alten Testaments*, 9th ed. (Hamburg: Furche Verlag, 1961), p. 330. Translation my own.

And yet, this knowledge that wisdom is limited by the sovereign sway of God does not issue in a melancholy resignation or in a tragic sense of the futility of existence; rather, man is to “hear the words of the wise” and apply his mind to knowledge, in order that his “*trust* may be in the LORD.” (Prov. 22:17, 19)¹⁸

In the plural melody of the Old Testament, wisdom stands in a contrapuntal relationship to the *cantus firmus* of the radical Gospel.

In the New Testament the men of the Reformation heard the radical Gospel most clearly in Paul; it is no accident that the first passage cited in the Augsburg Confession (or the Smalcald Articles) is a passage from Paul. But they were not proclaiming a peculiarly “Pauline” Gospel; they claimed the whole New Testament, all of the Scriptures, as witnesses to this Gospel, as is clear both from their actual citations and from their debonair and sweeping assertions that they have all Scriptures on their side and really have no need to cite particular passages.

And they have good cause for their high confidence; from John the Baptist to John the Prophet of Patmos the radical Gospel is the one persistent and unifying theme of the New Testament. When the Baptist proclaims a radical, exceptionless, and imminent wrath of God on man as man, a wrath from which no sons of Abraham, no priestly aristocracy, and no meticulous pietists are exempted, and then points to the way which God has opened up by a baptism of repentance and for repentance, for the remission of sins, when he points to the Mightier One who burns chaff, to be sure, but also gathers winnowed grain into God’s barns and baptizes men with the creative Spirit—that is radical Gospel; His demand that men bear fruit that befits repentance is no mere strenuous moralism but a proclamation of a new possibility created by the redemptive will and work of God.

When the Fourth Gospel proclaims that God loved the *world*, loved mankind in an organized solidarity of opposition to Himself, mankind under the domination of the Liar and Killer (the complete antithesis to “grace and truth”), the prince of this world; when God is proclaimed as the God who sent the Light of the world to shine on men who lived in darkness and *loved* that darkness, and so opens up a future in which men may become sons of light and may walk in the Light—that is radical Gospel.

When the witnesses in Acts proclaim, to all sorts and conditions of men, in Jewry and to the ends of the earth, that one “name under heaven given among men by which we *must* be saved,” when the Lord’s messengers turn men “from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins”—that is radical Gospel.

When James exposes man as producing from his native concupiscence that which leads through sin to death (with the inevitability of conception, gestation, and birth)—and then confronts man with the good Giver God who brings forth, of His own will, a new man to be the beginning and pledge of a renewed creation; when James confronts man with the God who chooses the beggar and makes him rich and an heir of His kingdom; when he confronts man, doomed by his own demonic wisdom, with a wisdom from on high that has on it the marks of the Christ and produces a harvest of righteousness—that is radical Gospel.

¹⁸ See von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, I (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1962) pp. 453—54, and Prov. 16:9; 19:21; 21:2; 20:24.

When the Prophet on Patmos weeps because no one is found in all the universe to answer the strong angel's challenge, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?"; when he sees himself, mankind, and all the world without a future and without hope, doomed in the presence of their Creator and Judge; when it is given him to behold the Lion of Judah and the Root of David, who "has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals," and to hear the jubilant acclaim of all the company of heaven and of every creature in heaven, earth, and sea—then the radical Gospel is being proclaimed.

Exegesis has long occupied itself with pointing up the "varieties of New Testament religion" and, rather pedantically, positing inconcinnities and contradictions within the New Testament. The reversal of that process is long overdue; and the Lutheran Confessions can help us find and really hear the *cantus firmus* in its wondrous and challenging plural melody.

THESIS VI The validity of this Confessional *res* becomes manifest when it is contrasted with other *res* (not in themselves wrong but insufficiently contoured and coloured).

Other *res* have been proposed and praised as "opening the door to the entire Bible" and as the key to its interpretation. The sovereignty of God is one such. This is a valid Biblical emphasis; the God proclaimed in the Bible *is* sovereign both in judgment and grace—man cannot evade His judgment, and man dare not trifle with His grace. And it is a Lutheran accent; Luther liked the phrase, "The high majesty of God has spoken it." The First Article of the Augsburg Confession speaks of God's *immensa potestas*. And the Confessions' teaching on original sin, for example, is a marvelous prostration before the sovereign judicature of God. But to say that God *is* something does not set the interpreter free for the whole message of the Bible, for the Bible says more; it says that He is acting. The "is" statement invites systematic rationalization; if this is how He is, how might He act? The radical-Gospel statement begins—and ends—with the hard nonmalleable *fact* of how He *has* acted and is acting. One cannot go on from here to a *gemina praedestinatio*, and one can bow before mysteries.

Another popular *res*, "the God who acts," has the advantage of removing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from the category of the God of the philosophers, and embodies a genuinely Biblical emphasis. But in saying, "He is up to something," it does not yet express the color and contour of the God of the Bible, concerning whom the Lutheran *res* tells me explicitly, and truly: "He is seeking you."

"Self-disclosure of God," much used in discussions of revelation, has the advantage of stressing the personal character of God's dealings with man; but the concrete nature of those dealings remains unexpressed. One might question also the validity of the idea of "self-disclosure" as a designation for the revelation which actually takes place in the Bible; that revelation, as Gloege has pointed out, is less mystically-immediate and more "refracted" than the term "self" would lead one to expect.¹⁹ The Lutheran *res* will not permit the interpreter to lose himself in a contemplation of God's "self"; it drives him inexorably to the Biblical data concerning the God who has spoken, acted, and become incarnate, the God who shall judge mankind and transfigure His fallen world.

What of "verbally inspired, infallible Word"? This is Biblical and Lutheran and not to

¹⁹ G. Gloege, "Offenbarung," in RGG, 3d ed., Vol. IV, col. 1611.

be surrendered. But it does not say enough: it does not in itself say the essential thing. It says: “The Word of God is an arrow with a perfect tip and a shaft without flaw, check, or blemish, feathered and balanced as no other arrow is; there is no arrow like it under the sun.” The Lutheran *res* says: “This perfect arrow is aimed at you; it will kill you, in order that you may live.” The Lutheran *res* will not permit the church to become a Society for the Preservation of the Perfect Arrow.

The Lutheran *res* subsumes all that is good and true in the other *res* that have been proposed; and it puts them in a right relation to the central *res*—and so puts them to work *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.

THESIS VII This *res* does justice to both the theological and the craftsmanly aspects of interpretation. It leaves the interpreter open to both the overwhelming *divinum* and the tough *humanum* of Scripture. The connection between the *res* and the *verba* is an organic connection.

The way of God attested by Scripture, as interpreted in the light of the Confessional *res*, is *sui generis*. It stands in sharp contrast to all humanly devised ways of bringing man back to his God.

The sanctification of conduct by the strengthening of the will; the sanctification of the emotions by a strenuous training of the soul; the sanctification of thought by a deepening of the understanding: moralism, mysticism, speculation, these are the three ladders on which men continually seek to climb up to God, with a persistent purpose that it seems nothing can check; a storming of Heaven that is just as pathetic in its unceasing efforts as in its final futility.²⁰

Therefore the Scripture is *sui generis*; and its uniqueness as radical Gospel becomes more and more apparent as it is seen in its cultural and historical setting, with all the “parallels” that this setting presents. Since it is uniquely the product of God’s Holy Spirit at work in history, man needs the Spirit in order to interpret it—and the Spirit is “available” for its interpretation, at work in it, so that Scripture interprets itself. Under the afflatus of the Spirit the interpreter sees ever more clearly, with eyes of the heart enlightened, that these writings are indeed the “fountains of Israel,” from which God’s people may drink and live, that the prophetic and apostolic writings are to be “received and embraced,” that the interpreter is in no position to judge them but is judged by them, as every teacher and all teaching must be: “Scriptura legitur cum credendi necessitate: aliorum scripta leguntur cum iudicandi libertate.”²¹ (Selnecker)

This Confessional *res* leaves the interpreter open to the overwhelming *divinum* of Scripture; if he reads Scripture as quintessentially radical Gospel, he moves in the presence of God always. But this does not, or at least need not, lead to a double-track exegesis, one theological and another historico-grammatical. Just when the interpreter is open to the radical Gospel, he is open to the tough *humanum* of Scripture; for the way of God to which the Scripture as radical Gospel witnesses is the way of the Servant, historical, verbal, incarnational. The Lord God moves in history, on the ground, amid the collisions of

²⁰ Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, tr. J. C. Mattes (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), p. 2.

²¹ “When we read Scripture, we must believe; when we read the writings of others, we are free to pass judgment upon them.”

nations. He deals with Pharaoh and Tiglath-Pilezer and Pontius Pilate and Domitian. And the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets; He announces, interprets, and recalls His mighty acts with penetrating loquacity. His ultimate, eschatological Word is the Word made flesh, a whole yea to the created world and its history. If we take the radical Gospel seriously, we must take language and history seriously.

“Radical Gospel” is no holy shortcut in exegesis. It will not automatically answer all the historical questions posed by the texts. Nor will it settle *hoti's* business. But it does provide the highest incentive for doing the historical work faithfully (and reverently!) and for doing the grammatical work meticulously (“meticulously” has the root *metus*, fear, in it, be it noted). The very nature of the radical gospel impels the interpreter to work with all resources that God has put at his disposal. When he parses out these words, he knows: *Tua res agitur*.

The radical-Gospel orientation gives the interpreter light to work by; he can see both the part and the whole and their relationship to each other. He will be like the stonemason who, being asked what he was up to, answered not, “I am dressing a stone,” and not, “I am helping build a cathedral,” but, “I am glorifying God.”

And the radical-Gospel orientation will give him freedom, freedom to hear the individual text in its individuality, to hear just this voice in its closer or more remote contrapuntal relationship to the *cantus firmus* which ever rings in his ears; freedom to examine with composure, to evaluate, to utilize critically whatever techniques or materials are discovered or rediscovered in the course of the Bible’s progress through history.

In a word, the radical-Gospel orientation leaves the interpreter open to the usefulness, the *profitableness* which Paul marks as the distinguishing quality of the inspired Word. And this is the most important point of all; for if interpretation does not lead to and serve proclamation, it is a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal—and the percussion section in the ecclesiastical orchestra is already disproportionately large.

This orientation promises to let us get at the life of the text; we shall no longer be preaching edifying anecdotes larded with morals, and we shall be able to see beyond our snub little historical noses in dealing with prophecy and fulfilment. It promises that we shall get at the heart of God’s people; our hearts will burn within us, and fire has a way of catching and spreading. With a renewed religious appreciation of the Word, we shall be enabled to get at the conscience of the world: “By the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” (2 Cor. 4:2)

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