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## The Gravity of the Divine Word: Commentators and the Corinthian Correspondence in the Reformation Era<sup>1</sup>

Scott M. Manetsch

In the final decade of the sixteenth century, a Dutch artist named Carel Allardt produced an engraving entitled “The Balance” which presented visual justification for the Protestant doctrine of Scripture’s supreme authority (*sola Scriptura*). The engraving is framed by two groups of church leaders. On the left side is pictured the pope, seated on his sacred throne, surrounded by an assembly of Catholic clergymen, including cardinals, an archbishop, an acolyte, and various priests and monks, several of whom are equipped with crucifixes, a bell, or rosary beads. On the right side of the frame stands a group of evangelical reformers, four of whom are recognizable as Jan Hus, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin. In a gallery behind them are seated four noblemen, examining and discussing what appears to be the Holy Scripture. At the center of the engraving—commanding the reader’s attention—is a balance, with plates suspended from either end. The Bible that sits on the right-hand plate far outweighs the papal tiara, the papal keys, as well as a Catholic book (perhaps Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*?) which rest atop the left-hand plate—despite the desperate efforts of two monks to counteract the gravity of the divine word. The emotive force and meaning of “The Balance” is clear: the message of Scripture, as taught by the Protestants, far outweighs the authority of the pope and every Catholic tradition.<sup>2</sup>

### I. The Gravity of the Divine Word

What Allardt communicated through the visual arts was announced regularly from Protestant pulpits and articulated in Protestant polemical and confessional works during the early modern period. The Holy Scripture, being God’s revealed word, must serve as the standard or norm by which all the church’s doctrines and practices are evaluated. “Pious and good souls,” wrote Luther in 1534, are “captive to the authority of Scripture as the Word of divine truth” and “cannot believe what

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this essay have been adapted from my introduction to the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: 1 Corinthians*, ed. Scott Manetsch (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Allardt’s engraving and other versions of “The Balance” are found in Émile Doumergue, *Iconographie Calvinienne* (Lausanne: Georges Bridel & Compagnie, 1909), 183–185.

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is taught in manifest contradiction to the Scriptures.”<sup>3</sup> Five years later, John Calvin repeated this theme: “The Scripture is like a Lydian stone, by which [the Church] tests all doctrines.” Indeed, “all controversies should be decided by the Word.”<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* was thereafter inscribed into most Protestant confessional statements, including the Second Helvetic Confession, penned by Heinrich Bullinger in 1566: “Therefore, in controversies of religion or matters of faith, we cannot admit any other judge than God Himself, pronouncing by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what to be avoided.”<sup>5</sup>

This commitment to scriptural authority brought with it entailments that proved crucial for Protestant faith and practice. Protestant scholars produced exegetical aids and Scripture commentaries as well as new vernacular translations of the Bible. Protestant ministers devoted their lives to the careful study of Holy Scripture and proclaimed its message through sermon, sacrament, and catechism. Protestant laypeople were now expected to be attentive consumers of God’s word as they attended sermons, sang metrical psalms, and memorized their catechetical lessons.

Protestant biblical scholarship in the sixteenth century was in large part the beneficiary of a pedagogical program known as northern humanism, which prioritized the mastery of the humane letters (*studia humanitatis*), the recovery of ancient texts, and the careful study of the Bible in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek. Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Calvin, and other Protestant reformers believed that the careful study of the Christian Scriptures, in their original languages, was necessary for recovering the Christian gospel and achieving the reformation of the church. Sacred philology was seen as necessary for, though subservient to, evangelical theology. Luther put the matter most clearly:

In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, preface to Antonius Corvinus, *How Far Erasmus’ Recently Published Plan for ‘Mending the Peace of the Church’ Should Be Followed While a Council Is Being Organized* (1534), AE 60:63. For development of this theme in Luther’s writings, see Mark Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther’s Approach to Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 276–282.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Letter to Sadoleto*, in John C. Olin, ed., *A Reformation Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 61, 86; *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia quae supersunt*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, vol. 5 (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1866), 393, 410.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Joel Beeke and Sinclair Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 16.

Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others.<sup>6</sup>

Believing that this linguistic return *ad fontes* was a precondition for church renewal, Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg instituted curricular reforms in 1518 requiring students to study the Greek and Hebrew text of Scripture. This practice became commonplace in other evangelical gymnasia, academies, and universities during the generations that followed. At the same time, Protestant churchmen published a variety of exegetical aids, including Greek and Hebrew grammars, concordances, commentaries, texts on hermeneutics, and word-books to assist pastors as they interpreted God's word. More important still, evangelical scholars, drawing upon their knowledge of the biblical languages as well as the scholarship of Catholic humanists such as Desiderius Erasmus and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, produced a virtual flood of vernacular translations of the Bible that challenged the monopoly of the Latin Vulgate version. By the end of the sixteenth century, new (and improved) versions of the Bible had appeared in Arabic, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, and Spanish.<sup>7</sup> Between 1534 and 1620, Wittenberg printers released around 100 editions of Luther's complete German Bible (1534) in folio, quarto, and octavo formats, totaling around 200,000 copies.<sup>8</sup> French translations of Scripture achieved a similar degree of popularity. Between 1550 and 1600 more than eighty editions of the complete French Bible, and another eighty editions of the French New Testament, were produced by Genevan printers alone.<sup>9</sup> The full impact of this tsunami of "Protestant" Bibles is impossible to measure, but undoubtedly it intensified criticisms of the traditional church and punctuated evangelical calls for reform of church and society in accordance with Scripture. Already in 1522, Luther's arch-nemesis, the Catholic polemicist Johannes Cochlaeus, recognized the danger posed to the Catholic laity by these vernacular Bibles:

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" (1524): vol. 45, pp. 358–359, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter *AE*. The relationship between sacred philology and evangelical theology is explored by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible: The Bible of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 23–28.

<sup>7</sup> See Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible*, 49–62.

<sup>8</sup> M. H. Black, "The Printed Bible," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 432.

<sup>9</sup> Bettye Thomas Chambers, *Bibliography of French Bibles*, vol. 1, *Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century French-Language Editions of the Scriptures* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1983).

Luther's New Testament was so much multiplied and spread by printers that even tailors and shoemakers, yea, even women and ignorant persons who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel, and could read a little German, studied it with the greatest avidity as the fountain of all truth. Some committed it to memory, and carried it about in their bosom. In a few months such people deemed themselves so learned that they were not ashamed to dispute about faith and the gospel not only with Catholic laymen, but even with priests and monks and doctors of divinity.<sup>10</sup>

It is with good reason, then, that historian Irena Backus has argued that biblical exegesis became “the chief purveyor” of Protestant doctrine—and, we might add, a primary agent of religious change.<sup>11</sup>

The Protestants' commitment to biblical authority helped transform the job description of evangelical clergymen. Whereas medieval Catholicism emphasized the priest's sacral role as a dispenser of salvific grace through the sacraments of the church, Protestants elevated the biblical office of Christian minister, whose chief responsibility was to preach and teach the word of God through sermon, sacraments, and catechism.<sup>12</sup> By championing a word-centered ministry, the reformers believed that they were following the example of Jesus and his apostles as well as obeying St. Paul's injunction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season.” As Luther noted, “The ministry of the New Testament is not engraved on dead tablets of stone; rather it sounds in a living voice.” For, “the church is not a pen house, but a mouth house.”<sup>13</sup> Calvin echoed this assessment: “For God there is nothing higher than preaching the gospel, because it is the means to lead people to salvation.”<sup>14</sup> The Protestant commitment to preaching caused many of them to reorder sacred space, particularly in areas influenced by the reforms of Zwingli and Calvin. In place of the altar, the pulpit now commanded the central focus of public worship, raised above the congregation so that all might hear and see the preacher. Many reformed cities also introduced benches to parish

<sup>10</sup> Cochlacus, *De Actis et Scriptis M. Lutheri ad Ann. 1522*, cited in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 350.

<sup>11</sup> Irena Backus, “Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Exegesis,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, vol. 1, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 154. Hereafter cited as OER.

<sup>12</sup> See R. Emmet McLaughlin, “The Making of the Protestant Pastor: The Theological Foundations of a Clerical Estate,” in *The Protestant Clergy of Early Modern Europe*, ed. C. Scott Dixon and Luise Schorn-Schütte (London: Palgrave, 2003), 60–78; and, Scott Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5–6.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 90.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Supplementa Calviniana: Sermons inédits*, vol. 8, *Sermones in Acta Apostolorum*, cap. 1–7, eds. Willem Balke and Wilhelmus H. Th. Moehn (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1994), 210.

churches so that the gathered congregation might listen more attentively to their pastor's sermon. Parish life was restructured in other significant ways. In most Protestant cities, preaching services were conducted every day of the week to ensure that the Christian faithful understood and obeyed Holy Writ. For example, in Wittenberg, which boasted two city churches and around 2,000 people, Luther and his colleagues established nine preaching services per week: three sermons on Sunday, and one sermon each weekday morning. On Sundays the ministers preached from the Pauline epistles and the Gospels; during weekdays, the ministers preached successively through books of the Old and New Testaments, as well as from Luther's Catechism. A similar regimen was established in Calvin's Geneva (with a population of around 12,000–16,000 people), where six to nine reformed ministers preached around thirty-three sermons per week in the city's three parish churches.<sup>15</sup> In a social context where the majority of men and women could neither read nor write, the Protestant pulpit served as the single most important medium for communicating the evangelical message to townspeople and country folk.<sup>16</sup>

## II. Commentaries, Commentators, and Paul's Corinthian Correspondence

One of the primary ways that humanist biblical scholarship was transmitted to evangelical pulpits was through exegetical commentaries. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Protestant scholars produced hundreds of biblical commentaries covering every verse of the Scripture canon. These commentaries were never intended to supplant the authority of Holy Writ. Rather, their purpose was to clarify the meaning of the biblical text, usually in conversation with the interpretation of church fathers from the past. Most Reformation commentators would thus have agreed with the ancient biblical scholar Jerome, who stated that the task of exegesis is "to explain what has been said by others and make clear in plain language what has been written obscurely."<sup>17</sup> Commentaries during the Reformation era appeared in a variety of literary forms and genres, occupying a continuum from terse philological comments with little theological analysis to extensive theological reflection with minimal attention paid to grammar or syntax. Exegetical studies on the biblical text were entitled variously as "commentaries" (*commentarii*),

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<sup>15</sup> Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 148–149.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Scribner has estimated that literacy in sixteenth-century Germany may have been no higher than four to five percent. See Scribner, *The German Reformation* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986), 19–20.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Hagen, "What did the term *Commentarius* mean to sixteenth-century theologians?" in *Théorie et pratique de l'exégèse: Actes du troisième colloque international sur l'histoire de l'exégèse biblique au XVIe siècle*, ed. Irena Backus and Francis Higman (Geneva: Droz, 1990), 19.

“paraphrases” (*paraphrases*), “annotations” (*annotationes, annotatiunculae*), “lectures” or “sermons” (*enarrationes*), and “explanations” (*explicationes*), though this nomenclature never constituted hard-and-fast literary categories in the sixteenth century. Rich exegetical insight was also presented in published sermon collections (*sermones*) and sermon outlines (*postillae*) as well as moral discourses.<sup>18</sup> Taken together, this substantial deposit of exegetical literature justifies the claim that the Reformation era was one of the most prolific ages of commentary-writing in the history of the Christian Church.

Paul’s two epistles to the Corinthian church attracted the attention of many early modern interpreters. More than forty-five different Protestant authors wrote commentaries on 1 Corinthians before 1650; another forty Protestant churchmen wrote exegetical works on 2 Corinthians during this same period.<sup>19</sup> Lutheran churchmen who commented on 1 and 2 Corinthians included the Wittenberg humanist and reformer Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), the Wittenberg preacher and pastor Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), the pastor, theologian, and superintendent of Lutheran churches at Jena and Leipzig, Nikolaus Selnecker (1530–1592), Gnesio-Lutheran theologians Tilemann Hesshus (1527–1588) and Cyriacus Spangenberg (1528–1604), and David Chytraeus (1531–1600), an author of the Formula of Concord. Although Martin Luther never produced a comprehensive study of the epistles to the Corinthians, he did publish brief commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Corinthians 15.<sup>20</sup>

Reformed authors on the continent and in England also found the Corinthian correspondence to be fertile soil for interpretation and comment. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, noteworthy studies of these epistles were produced by the Zurich theologian Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), as well as his successors Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), and Rudolf Gwalther (1519–1586). In Geneva, the reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), his colleague Theodore Beza (1519–1605), and their successor Jean Diodati (1576–1649) all wrote commentaries or annotations on 1 and 2 Corinthians, as did the Bernese biblical scholar Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563) and the Dutch theologian Andreas Hyperius (1511–1564). In a similar fashion, Reformed Protestants or “Puritans” in England also published popular exegetical studies on these biblical

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<sup>18</sup> See Hagen, “What did the term *Commentarius* mean to sixteenth-century theologians?”; Irena Backus, “Bible: Hermeneutics and Exegesis,” in *OIR*, 1:158. The popularity of postil collections among sixteenth-century Lutherans and Catholics has recently been established by John M. Frymire, in his fine book *Primacy of the Postils*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 147 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> This number includes commentaries on the entire New Testament, commentaries on the Pauline Epistles, and discrete commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians.

<sup>20</sup> *1 Corinthians 7* (1523), AE 28:1–56; *1 Corinthians 15* (1532–1533), AE 28:57–213.



books, as seen in the commentaries of David Dickson (1583?–1663) and John Trapp (1601–1669), as well as the marginal notes that appeared in the *Geneva Bible* (1560) and the *English Annotations* (1645).

What is missing from this impressive inventory of commentators, however, are so-called Radical Protestant and Anabaptist authors. As has frequently been noted, few Radical and Anabaptist leaders had either the humanistic training or the unhurried leisure and physical safety to produce substantial exegetical works.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, in their polemical and catechetical writings, Anabaptist and Radical church leaders such as Balthasar Hubmaier (1480/85–1528), Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541), Hans Denck (1500?–1527), and Menno Simons (1496?–1561) offered occasional, yet penetrating comments on passages in 1 and 2 Corinthians that intersected their distinctive theological and practical concerns, such as pacifism, the Lord's Supper, free church ecclesiology, and the prohibition of Baptism for those who could not confess Christian faith.

The books of 1 and 2 Corinthians occupied a strategic theological and polemical place for Protestant exegetes in the early modern period. Though these two epistles lacked the dogmatic structure of the book of Romans, they addressed many doctrines that were of cardinal importance to the reformers, including justification by faith alone, the priesthood of all believers, Christian liberty, the relationship between Law and Gospel, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. At the same time, Protestant interpreters found ammunition in Paul's epistle to combat Catholic practices and doctrines which they deplored, such as papal supremacy, mandatory clerical celibacy, purgatory, works righteousness, and praying to images. To a significant degree, then, Paul's Corinthian correspondence was located along the confessional fault line separating Protestants from Catholics, and Protestants from one another. Luther himself recognized the importance of these biblical books for Christians of his own day: "These Corinthians may well be an example for our people in these days," he noted, "who also certainly need an epistle of this kind."<sup>22</sup>

### III. Protestant Commentators and Premodern Exegesis

In a now famous article published in 1980, Professor David Steinmetz of Duke Divinity School challenged what he perceived as the hegemony of modern historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation, arguing instead for what he claimed to be the "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis."<sup>23</sup> In the decades since

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<sup>21</sup> Speaking of sixteenth-century Anabaptists, Irena Backus notes, "there was no school of 'dissident' exegesis." See Backus, "Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Exegesis," in *OER*, 1:157.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament" (1522), AI: 35:380–381.

<sup>23</sup> David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38.

the publication of his provocative essay, Steinmetz and a cadre of his former students, along with a company of European scholars, have produced a substantial body of literature that has explored the landscape of biblical scholarship during the Reformation era in an effort to map out the distinctive character of early Protestant exegesis.<sup>24</sup> These scholars have challenged the popular assumption that Reformation exegetes, in their methods and concerns, anticipated and were in substantial continuity with modern critical biblical scholarship.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, early Protestant commentators such as Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, and W. Musculus did depart from medieval patterns by challenging the monopoly of the ancient Vulgate and adopting more rigorous philological and rhetorical tools of biblical analysis which decried fanciful allegories and placed a greater emphasis on the literal sense of the sacred text. Nevertheless, as Steinmetz and his colleagues have demonstrated, early Protestant interpreters shared a view of the Bible and its significance that was fundamentally traditional or pre-modern in at least four ways.<sup>26</sup>

First, in contrast to the approach of modern higher critical exegetes, the reformers (along with their medieval predecessors) believed that the “story” of the Bible resided in the text of Scripture, not behind it or in front of it. Consequently, the Bible’s central message was to be found in the literal or grammatical sense of the text, as illumined by the Holy Spirit.

Second, Protestant commentators, in agreement with patristic and medieval exegetes, assumed the unity of the biblical canon by virtue of its divine authorship and purpose. Consequently, the meaning of a particular text was to be found, not by identifying the discrete *Sitz im Leben* of the pericope, but by considering its scope and purpose within the larger scope and purpose of the divinely-inspired canon of Scripture.

Third, Protestant biblical scholars, along with other pre-modern exegetes, understood the intended audience of the Bible’s message to be not only the historical

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<sup>24</sup> This research was presented in and stimulated by three international colloquies devoted to the history of Reformation exegesis held in Geneva (1976), Durham, North Carolina (1982), and Geneva (1988). The published papers of these conferences appeared in three separate volumes: Olivier Fatio and Pierre Fraenkel, eds., *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVI siècle* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978); David Steinmetz, ed., *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990); and, Irena Backus and Francis Higman, eds., *Théorie et pratique de l'exégèse* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> Nineteenth-century scholars such as Frederic William Farrar popularized the view that Luther and other Protestant reformers stood at the headwaters of modern critical exegesis. See Farrar, *The History of Interpretation* (London: MacMillan, 1886).

<sup>26</sup> Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, “The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335–345. This discussion summarizes the conclusions of Muller and Thompson, 340–342.

community addressed in the biblical text itself, but also the contemporary community of believers. Hence, as they interpreted Scripture, Luther and his colleagues believed that they were not merely studying a relic of the past, but discovering God's timeless word for the church of their day.

Fourth, Protestant commentators assumed that fruitful biblical interpretation must be conducted in conversation with Christian believers past and present. Hence, while the reformers affirmed the unique authority and clarity of Scripture, and as they insisted that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture (*analogia Scripturae*), they recognized the value of consulting the scholarship of patristic and medieval exegetes—not only as apologetic foils, but also as faithful guides to interpreting God's word.

By way of summary, then, early Protestant commentators affirmed the divine authority of the canonical Scripture, and believed that its message of salvation and instruction in Christian discipleship was relevant for believers of every age. The correct understanding of Scripture was the gift of the Holy Spirit, made available through careful attention to the grammar and letter of the sacred text, in collaboration with the Christian interpretive tradition.

It is not the purpose of this essay to assess the relative strengths or weaknesses of modern higher critical biblical scholarship—much less to defend the so-called “superiority of pre-critical exegesis.” (Although I do think that aspects of pre-modern exegesis can and should enrich modern biblical scholarship.) Rather, this brief survey of central commitments and assumptions shared by early Protestant exegetes provides a necessary frame of reference within which to explore Reformation commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians in greater detail.

#### IV. Reformation Commentaries on Paul's Corinthian Correspondence

This essay will highlight five key features of Reformation commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians: Commentaries and Hermeneutics, Commentaries and the Christian Tradition, Commentaries and Christian Theology, Commentaries and Pastoral Formation, and Commentaries and Spiritual Devotion.

##### *Commentaries and Hermeneutics*

The Apostle Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6—“the letter kills but the spirit gives life”—served as a classical locus in the history of Christian biblical interpretation. The early Christian theologian Origen argued that in this verse Paul was giving an interpretive key for unlocking the deeper meaning of Holy Scripture: “the letter,” he believed, referred to the grammatical or natural sense of the text; “the spirit” spoke of the allegorical meaning of the text. Consequently, for Origen, the

allegorical or figurative meaning that lay behind the “bare letter” of Scripture constituted a deeper source of spiritual insight and life-giving truth. Drawing upon and adapting Origen’s dialectic of letter-spirit, John Cassian in the fourth century proposed the fourfold division of Scripture into the literal, allegorical, tropological (or moral), and anagogical senses. This so-called *quadrige* was thereafter popularized in the famous mnemonic distich: “The letter teaches what has happened, allegory what one believes, the moral meaning what one does, and anagogy where one is going.”<sup>27</sup> This spiritual or allegorical approach to exegesis served as a governing paradigm for most biblical interpreters in the Catholic West during the Middle Ages, although a handful of medieval commentators such as Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra forged new paths by emphasizing the primacy of the literal sense in their biblical scholarship.

In the sixteenth century, Protestant exegetes launched a frontal assault on the medieval *quadrige* and what they perceived as arbitrary treatments of the biblical text that ignored or twisted Scripture’s literal meaning. As early as 1516, Luther criticized as a “scholastic game” the exercise of dividing Scripture into its literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Melancthon argued that medieval interpreters, through their gratuitous use of allegory, had transformed the apostolic letters into sophistical nonsense.<sup>29</sup> Calvin, in his comments on 2 Corinthians 3:6, refuted Origen’s exegesis of this passage and argued that allegorical readings of Scripture had been disastrous for the Church. “This error has been the source of many evils. Not only did it open the way for the corruption of the natural meaning of Scripture but also set up boldness in allegorizing as the chief exegetical virtue. Thus many of the ancients without any restraint played all sorts of games with the sacred Word of God, as if they were tossing a ball to and fro.”<sup>30</sup> Sharp attacks against medieval exegesis like these are found aplenty in Protestant commentaries in the sixteenth century—but that does not mean that Protestant exegetes rejected *all* allegorical or spiritual interpretations of the biblical text. They recognized, of course, that New Testament authors occasionally provided allegorical readings of Old Testament historical events and persons, as seen, for example, in 1 Corinthians 10:1–10 and Galatians 4:21–31. Moreover, did not Paul encourage Christians in 1

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<sup>27</sup> “Littera gesta docet, / quid credas allegoria, / Moralis quid agas, / quo tendas anagogia.” This precise formulation appears to have been first coined by Augustinus of Dacia (d. 1285). See Karlfried Froehlich, “Johannes Trithemius on the Fourfold Sense of Scripture,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Muller and Thompson, 40–42.

<sup>28</sup> See Karlfried Froehlich, “Johannes Trithemius on the Fourfold Sense of Scripture,” 41–42.

<sup>29</sup> See Timothy Wengert, “Philip Melancthon’s 1522 Annotations on Romans,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Muller and Thompson, 126.

<sup>30</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 196), 10:43. Hereafter abbreviated as CNTC.

Corinthians 13:2 to “understand all mysteries”? Luther took this to mean the gift of discerning the “hidden, secret meaning underneath the external meaning of the histories.”<sup>31</sup> What was needed, then, were hermeneutical guidelines to govern allegorical and figurative interpretations so that they remained subservient to the grammatical or literal meaning of the Scripture. One popular approach, proposed by Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75) in his influential book *Key of Sacred Scripture* (1567), was to limit allegorical readings to cases where Scripture presents a falsity, or where the grammatical sense of Scripture produces an absurdity, or where the literal sense conflicts with sound doctrine or proper morality.<sup>32</sup> We see this interpretive approach at work in W. Musculus’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:32, a passage where Paul reports that he “fought with beasts in Ephesus.” Since the book of Acts never describes Paul being subject to such mortal danger, should this passage instead be interpreted figuratively—that the *Ephesians* were like wild beasts in their treatment of Paul? Musculus rejected this figurative reading, reminding his audience that “metaphorical interpretations ought not to be rashly foisted on the plain meaning of a passage unless one is forced to do so by absurdity, by impossibility, or by the clear error of the plain meaning.” In the present case, Musculus concluded, one must affirm “the simple and plain meaning of the words in this passage”—namely, that Paul did indeed confront ferocious animals in the arena at Ephesus.<sup>33</sup>

Protestant commentators adopted other hermeneutical principles to govern their use of allegories and figurative interpretations. Though allegories might be useful for illustrating and adorning biblical truths, they must never serve as a basis for Christian doctrine. As Calvin insisted, “Allegories ought not to go beyond the limits set by the rule of Scripture, let alone suffice as the foundation for any doctrines.”<sup>34</sup> So too, allegories must be interpreted in light of the analogy of faith, that is, the broader message of Scripture and Christian teaching. In his commentary

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, *Church Postil* (1525), sermon for Quinquagesima on 1 Corinthians 13, AE 76:340. Johann Spangenberg interpreted this verse in a similar fashion. See his *Postilla Teütsch. Für die jungen Christen Knaben und Meidlin in Fragstück verfasst Von dem fürnembsten Festen durch das ganze Jar* (Augsburg: Valentin Othmar, 1547), 4:128v (= Johann Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace: The Chief Parts of Scripture Explained in Questions and Answers*, trans. Matthew Carver [St. Louis: Concordia, 2014], 99).

<sup>32</sup> Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible*, 35. Flacius Illyricus’s book was entitled *Clavis Scripturae S. seu de Sermone Sacrarum Literarum* (Basel: Ioannes Oporinus, 1567).

<sup>33</sup> Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii* (N.p., 1566), 672–673.

<sup>34</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.v.19, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 339. In a similar fashion, Luther argued that “For figures and interpretations are not a sufficient basis for our faith. Faith must first be based on clear Scripture, simply understood according to the sound and meaning of the words.” *Christmas Postil* (1522), sermon for the Sunday after Christmas on Luke 2:33–40, in AE 75:419.

on Genesis 9:17–19, Luther defended Nicholas of Lyra and his literal reading of Scripture, and then laid down this rule for governing allegories: “[W]herever you want to make use of allegories, do this: follow closely the analogy of faith, that is, adapt them to Christ, the church, faith, and the ministry of the Word. In this way it will come to pass that even though the allegories may not be altogether fitting, they nevertheless do not depart from the faith.”<sup>35</sup> The practical application of the principle of the analogy of faith is illustrated in Tilemann Hesshus’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:14, a passage in which Paul states that children of Christian parents “are holy” by virtue of a believing father or mother. In treating this cryptic verse, Hesshus sharply rejected the interpretation of John Calvin, who had argued that children of believers are made holy in the womb and exempt from the curse as a result of the covenant made by God to Abraham and his seed. Hesshus responded: “But this interpretation is very far from Paul’s intention, and does not accord with the analogy of faith. For the whole of sacred Scripture testifies that all children of both the saints and the wicked are born slaves to sin and under the curse of the law.” Hesshus proceeded to fortify his conclusion by quoting five biblical texts in support of his interpretation.<sup>36</sup>

Despite their suspicions of excessive allegorizing, most Protestant exegetes recognized that various levels of spiritual meaning were embedded in the Bible’s literal sense that provided Christological insights, spoke of Christian morality, or pointed to the believer’s future hope. In other words, early Protestant interpreters folded traditional features of spiritual exegesis—especially tropology (“how should I live?”) and anagogy (“what may I hope for?”)—back into the literal meaning of the text, albeit in a fashion controlled by the grammar, history, and canonical location of the passage, as well as by the analogy of faith. Hence, the “literal” interpretation of Scripture required attentiveness not only to philology, history, and the author’s intent, but also to the figures, tropes, types, metaphors, parables, and analogies found in the sacred text. The traditional *quadriga*, though frequently vilified, was never entirely abandoned.

At the same time, one can observe significant variations among the reformers in the extent to which they found spiritual meaning within the literal sense of

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<sup>35</sup> Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–1536), AE 2:164 (WA 42:377). For discussion on Luther’s use of the analogy of faith in his exegesis, see Mickey Mattox, “Luther’s Interpretation of Scripture: Biblical Understanding in Trinitarian Shape,” in *The Substance of the Faith: Luther’s Doctrinal Theology for Today*, ed. Dennis Bielfeldt, Mickey Mattox, and Paul Hinlicky (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 19–27.

<sup>36</sup> Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios* (Jena: Ernst von Gera, 1573), fol. 106r–107r. Hesshus is responding to this statement in Calvin’s Commentary on 1 Corinthians (see CNIC 9:149): “But the fact that the apostle ascribes a special privilege to the children of believers here has its source in the blessing of the covenant, by whose intervention the curse of nature is destroyed, and also those who were by nature unclean are consecrated to God by His grace.”

Scripture. Luther, for example, believed that the chief purpose of Scripture was to lead people to Christ. This insight, along with his law-gospel hermeneutic, formed the theological matrix within which he interpreted the literal or grammatical sense of Scripture.<sup>37</sup> Wolfgang Musculus was equally committed to the spiritual and christological meaning of the text. After careful grammatical and literary analysis, Musculus sought what he sometimes called the “mystical meaning” of the Scripture passage, exploring how it revealed Christ, established piety and good works, and nurtured Christian hope.<sup>38</sup> Philip Melancthon, by contrast, employed rhetorical analysis to determine the structure and primary purpose of Paul’s epistles, and then focused on major theological topics in the text that shed light on its exegetical, theological, and practical meaning. John Calvin’s hermeneutic was characterized by lucid brevity (*perspicua brevitate*) and interpretive restraint as he sought to expose the mind of the biblical author through careful philological and theological analysis of the letter of Scripture. Calvin reserved treatment of more detailed theological and practical topics for his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. What this illustrates, then, is that Protestant interpreters employed various degrees of exegetical restraint when exploring the spiritual or christological meaning of Scripture—but none of them were advocates of bare literalism or philological obscurantism. Holy Scripture was the church’s book, and through its literal sense the Holy Spirit supplied a rich reservoir of doctrine, moral instruction, and eschatological insights to Christians of every age.

#### *Commentaries and the Christian Tradition*

Protestant biblical scholars in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century who commented on 1 and 2 Corinthians did so in conversation with Christian interpreters from the past and present. Richard Muller and John Thompson are certainly correct when they argue that early Protestant biblical interpretation was never “a conversation between a lonely exegete and a hermetically sealed text.”<sup>39</sup> Collaboration occurred at every stage in the interpretive process. The majority of early Protestant commentators, including Luther, Melancthon, W. Musculus,

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<sup>37</sup> See Mark Thompson, “Biblical Interpretation in the Works of Martin Luther,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Medieval Through the Reformation Periods*, eds. Alan Hauser and Duane Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 299–318; Mark Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther’s Approach to Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Oswald Bayer, “Luther as an Interpreter of Scripture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73–85.

<sup>38</sup> Craig S. Farmer, “Wolfgang Musculus’s Commentary on John,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Muller and Thompson, 220–222; Reinhard Bodenmann, *Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563): Destin d’un autodidacte lorrain au siècle des Réformes* (Geneva: Droz, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Muller and Thompson, “The Significance of Precritical Exegesis,” 342.

Vermigli, and Bullinger, depended on Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum* (with its fresh Latin translation of the Greek text) as the textual base for their exegetical work.<sup>40</sup> Other exegetes, like Calvin or Beza, relied upon their own Latin translations—but even they maintained a lively dialogue with Erasmus's formidable biblical scholarship. Calvin, for example, mentioned Erasmus by name nearly fifty times in his commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians, usually to correct what he perceived as the humanist's mistranslations of the Greek text.

Protestant commentators on 1 and 2 Corinthians were heavily indebted to the biblical and theological inheritance of the fathers of the early Christian church. They looked to patristic sources to achieve two strategic purposes: to understand better the biblical text, and to demonstrate that Protestant interpretation was faithful to Scripture and consistent with the best of the orthodox Christian tradition. The patristic authors that Protestant commentators most frequently cited with approval were Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Theophylact<sup>41</sup>—with Chrysostom and Augustine being the most popular. For sixteenth-century Protestant commentators, Augustine was the model of a Christian bishop and preacher who faithfully articulated the doctrine of grace. Lutheran exegetes such as David Chytraeus and Hesshus even numbered Augustine in the ranks of the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther, each of whom possessed a unique endowment of spiritual wisdom, speech, and Christian knowledge.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, several Protestant commentators did not hesitate to criticize what they saw as Augustine's theological errors, especially his defense of infant communion and his teaching that sexual intercourse in marriage is only free from sin when it is practiced for the sake of bearing children.<sup>43</sup> In their theological comments, Protestant exegetes frequently discussed the trinitarian and christological debates of the early Christian church, condemning heretics such as Marcion, Origen, Arius, Eutyches, Sabellius, and Pelagius. Many of them were also critical of Jerome, whom they judged “more

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<sup>40</sup> For a critical edition of Erasmus's Greek and Latin versions of 1 and 2 Cor, see *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami. Recognita et Adnotatione Critica Instructa Notisque Illustrata*, ed. Andrew Brown (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004), 6/3:187–446.

<sup>41</sup> Theophylact was the eleventh-century bishop of Ochryda, Bulgaria, who wrote influential commentaries on the Gospels, the book of Acts, the Pauline epistles, and the Minor Prophets. Reformation commentators mistook him for an early church father.

<sup>42</sup> See Chytraeus, *Dispositio epistolarum, quae diebus dominicis et aliis in ecclesia usitate populo proponi solent* (Wittenberg, 1563), 382–383; Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios & proposita piae iuventuti in Academia Ienensi* (Jena: Ernst von Gera, 1573), 11v.

<sup>43</sup> See Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 3:398; Vermigli, *In Selectissimam Priorem ad Corinthios Epistolam . . . Commentarii* (Zurich: Froschouer, 1551), 152v.



superstitious than devout”—a contentious man whose teachings on human sexuality and remarriage blatantly contradicted Scripture.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, had it not been for Augustine, stated Heshus, this “hot-tempered and impatient man” would have “instigated great conflicts in the church.”<sup>45</sup>

Though sixteenth-century Protestant exegetes frequently cited patristic sources to justify their previous exegetical conclusions, this does not mean that they did not also learn from them. When treating the thorniest of interpretative questions, Protestant commentators regularly looked to the early church fathers for assistance. This is illustrated in what is probably the most difficult exegetical conundrum found in the Corinthian correspondence—what does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 15:29 when he speaks of people “being baptized on behalf of the dead”? The exegetical problems are fourfold. How is one to understand the meaning of the word “baptized”? How should the Greek preposition *ὑπέρ* be rendered? What does Paul intend by the “dead” (*νεκροί*)? And, does Paul approve of this practice or not? Early Christian authors proposed a variety of interpretive options, including the following: First, Chrysostom reported that the second-century heretic Marcion had used this passage to justify the baptism of the corpses of his followers who had not received baptism. Second, Tertullian and Ambrose argued that Paul was speaking of a practice (of which he disapproved) whereby living believers received baptism vicariously for deceased Christians who had died unbaptized. Third, Cyprian understood this passage to refer to the popular custom where believers deferred baptism until their death was imminent—that is, until they were considered no better than dead. Fourth, Chrysostom and Theophylact proposed that Paul was speaking of the symbolism of baptism itself—that believers are baptized into death, even as they will one day be raised to life in the future resurrection.

Reformation commentators rehearsed, assessed, and critiqued these various interpretive options—and sometimes proposed new ones of their own. Calvin and John Donne followed Cyprian’s explanation that the “dead” were those who faced imminent death.<sup>46</sup> Luther and Melancthon argued that Paul was speaking of an early (undocumented) custom of baptizing believers in cemeteries among or over the graves of the dead, as a vivid testimony of the future resurrection.<sup>47</sup> Zwingli, following Tertullian, believed this passage was an allusion to vicarious baptisms of

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<sup>44</sup> See Melancthon, *Annotations on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. John Patrick Donnelly (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995), 92; Heshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 195–196.

<sup>45</sup> See Heshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 289v–291r.

<sup>46</sup> CNTC 9:329–330; Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 7:206–209.

<sup>47</sup> Luther, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15” (1534), AE 28:149–151.

Christians on behalf of deceased believers.<sup>48</sup> While sympathetic to Zwingli's interpretation, Bullinger concluded that Paul was alluding to ancient pagan rituals in which corpses were washed or sprinkled before interment.<sup>49</sup> The editors of the *English Annotations* argued that Paul was employing the word "baptism" as a metaphor for persecution—hence, the hope of the resurrection was demonstrated by believers embracing suffering on behalf of Christ and the martyrs.<sup>50</sup> John Trapp recommended this view as well.<sup>51</sup> As for Heshus, he took a different track altogether. After reviewing in detail the traditional interpretations of this verse, he admitted his uncertainty, and then launched into an attack on the papal practice of sprinkling holy water on graves.<sup>52</sup> Although it is not always clear whether the reformers' access to the early church fathers was direct or indirect, nevertheless their exegetical work took seriously the Christian tradition and engaged in a lively conversation with it.

Protestant commentators also read and borrowed from the exegetical insights of their contemporaries, although frequently this dependence remains cloaked to the modern reader. In their commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians, Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, W. Musculus, Vermigli, and Diodati make virtually no reference to contemporary scholarship, though textual clues indicate that they were in substantial dialogue with other Protestant exegetes. The commentators occasionally attacked contemporary theological opponents by name, but this was more the exception than the rule. An illustration of how Protestant interpreters engaged the exegetical work of other Protestants is seen in their treatment of the curious Aramaic words *Marana tha* in 1 Corinthians 16:22. On this singular occasion, Calvin divulged his exegetical conversation partners in some detail: "Now Bullinger has pointed out, on the authority of Theodore Bibliander, that in Aramaic, *Maharamata* is the same as the Hebrew חֶרֶם (*chërem*, i.e. ban, curse): and Wolfgang Capito, that man of blessed memory, once gave me collaboration of that."<sup>53</sup> Tilemann Heshus, in his exegesis of this verse, also understood *Marana tha* as a banning formula. He too cited the biblical scholarship of Bibliander and Capito, along with Paul of Burgos (1351–1435), in support of this view.<sup>54</sup> Wolfgang Musculus, on the other hand, informed his readers that his interpretation of this passage was based on the exegesis

<sup>48</sup> Zwingli, *Annotatiunculæ per Leonem, ex ore Zvinglii in utranque Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolam publice exponentis conceptæ* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1528), 131–132.

<sup>49</sup> Bullinger, *In Priorem ad Corinthios Epistolam Commentarius* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1549), 246–247.

<sup>50</sup> Downname, ed., *The English Annotations*, 2nd ed. (London: John Legatt, 1651), EE4v–EE5r.

<sup>51</sup> Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition Upon All the Books of the New Testament* (London: R.W., 1656), 699.

<sup>52</sup> Heshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolæ ad Corinthios*, 668.

<sup>53</sup> CNTC 9:357–358.

<sup>54</sup> Heshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolæ ad Corinthios*, fol. 371r–372r.

of Peter Martyr Vermigli—a man “especially well trained in the sacred Scripture.”<sup>55</sup> What this illustration suggests is that early Protestant exegetes read one another’s work, and learned from one another—even if they did not always cite one another.

*Commentaries and Christian Theology*

It comes as no surprise that Protestant commentaries were written within a particular confessional tradition with the goal of defining and defending particular theological perspectives. Commentaries written by Lutherans, the Reformed, or English Puritans bear a family resemblance in their doctrinal concerns and practical applications of the biblical text. Hence, the theme of Law-Gospel, which serves as the central theological topic of Melancthon’s *Annotations on 1 Corinthians*, is prominent in the commentaries of other Lutheran interpreters as well. Likewise, distinctive Reformed doctrines such as church discipline, predestination, and the so-called regulative principle of worship are highlighted in the commentaries of most Reformed exegetes, including Calvin, Bullinger, W. Musculus, and Beza. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that most Protestant interpreters of 1 and 2 Corinthians displayed at least some independence in their exegetical judgments—a fact illustrated earlier in our examination of Paul’s statement regarding baptisms on behalf of the dead (1 Cor 15:29).

Paul’s Corinthian correspondence addressed many theological subjects that were at the heart of the sixteenth-century religious crisis, and Protestant exegetes frequently wielded their commentaries as weapons to attack the Roman church and defend (what they saw as) right Christian doctrine. Protestant commentators harvested abundant exegetical material to challenge the Catholic doctrines of purgatory, papal supremacy, clerical celibacy, transubstantiation, sacramental penance, lenten fasting, indulgences, monastic oaths, and the veneration of the saints. Not infrequently, the polemical tone of the commentaries reached fever pitch. For example, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7, Luther responded to Catholic opponents who praised the superiority of celibacy to marriage in this fashion:

These fellows view the state of marriage as a superfluous, presumptuous human thing that one could dispense with and do without, just as I can do without an extra jacket or coat. Then they fill the world with their foolish and blasphemous scribbling and screeching against the married state, advising all men against it, although they themselves feel—and abundantly demonstrate by

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<sup>55</sup> Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii* (N.p., 1566), 691.

their actions—that they cannot do without women. . . . instead they run after and plague themselves with whores day and night.<sup>56</sup>

Protestant commentators not only attacked Catholic opponents, but also provided for their readers detailed explanations of Paul’s teaching related to sin, justification by faith, law and gospel, the resurrection of the dead, Christian vocation, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, as well as various practical issues regarding marriage and divorce, worship, spiritual gifts, church discipline, and gender roles. A number of interpreters imbedded substantial “common places” (*loci communes*) in their running commentaries to provide their readers with a more substantial discussion of contested points of doctrine. Peter Martyr Vermigli, for example, included in his commentary on 1 Corinthians no fewer than ten common places addressing such topics as divorce, the image of God, faith and works, Christian freedom, purgatory, the good of marriage, soul sleep, and the veiling of virgins.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Tilemann Hesshus, in his explication of 1 Corinthians 11, inserted an eighty-page excursus on the Lord’s Supper that explained Lutheran teaching on Christ’s real presence in the sacrament (including the *manducatio indignorum*, the “eating by the unworthy”), followed by a detailed refutation of the “fanatical errors” of the Zwinglians and Calvinists.<sup>58</sup> Hesshus, of course, was not alone in devoting his exegetical energies to explaining Paul’s theology of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 9 and 11. No theological topic in these commentaries invited more vehement discussion—and none triggered greater controversy—than the eleven Latin words found in chapter 11, verse 24: “*Hoc est corpus meum pro vobis, hoc facite in meam commemorationem.*”<sup>59</sup>

#### *Commentaries and Pastoral Formation*

Many of the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century commentaries under consideration originated in the classroom as biblical lectures delivered to future pastors and teachers. This was true of many of the commentaries of Melanchthon, Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin. It was also true of the exegetical writings of Wolfgang Musculus, who wrote his Corinthian commentaries as academic lectures for the municipal secondary school in the Reformed city of Bern.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, Protestant commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians frequently communicated rich practical advice on the pastoral office. Indeed, some commentaries functioned as virtual

<sup>56</sup> Luther, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7” (1523), AI: 28:5.

<sup>57</sup> These topics are listed in an index at the conclusion of Vermigli’s commentary.

<sup>58</sup> See Hesshus, *Explicatio prioris epistolae ad Corinthios*, 173–254.

<sup>59</sup> “This is my body for you, this do for my remembrance.”

<sup>60</sup> See Manetsch, “(Re)constructing the Pastoral Office: Wolfgang Musculus’s Commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians,” in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Stanley Porter and Eckhard Schnabel (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 253–266.

pastoral handbooks for young pastoral candidates. Protestant commentators addressed in detail such topics as the personal character of a Christian minister, the duties required of a faithful pastor, the qualities of good preaching, the nature of pastoral care and church discipline, and the unique challenges faced by godly ministers. Several quotations must suffice to illustrate the richness of this *pastoralia*. In his comment on 1 Corinthians 16:10, Musculus defined the central duties of the Christian minister in this fashion:

What is the work of the Lord which must be undertaken by a faithful minister? Is it to wear a two-horned miter? To have rings encircling one's fingers? To exhibit the shepherd's crook? To be draped in a pallium like a rain jacket. . . . and once or twice in the course of a year to amuse oneself with theatrical displays, anointing walls, chalices, altars, and bells? This trash has nothing to do with the work of the Lord. The work of the Lord is the ministry of proclaiming the gospel, planting and nourishing the church, and applying oneself tirelessly to care for the salvation of believers.<sup>61</sup>

Tilemann Hesshus, in his treatment of the spiritual gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:12, offered wisdom regarding the nature of faithful Christian preaching:

[The minister must] direct all things, and especially the labor of ministry, to magnifying the glory of God and edifying the Church. The pastor should always deal with subject matter that is useful and necessary. He should see to it that he instructs his people in the catechism, delivering it to them faithfully. . . . He should vehemently reproach the sins and errors that attack the church. He should strengthen those who are feeble; he should offer consolation to those wasting away from sorrow; he should arouse those who are lazy; he should not engage in joking in the presence of the Church of Jesus Christ. He should not be zealous for subjects that are uncertain, but in everything he should seek to build up the Church.<sup>62</sup>

At the end of the day, gospel ministry was taxing and dangerous, a point that Huldrych Zwingli emphasized in his annotations on 2 Corinthians 4:11:

To preach the gospel of Christ is nothing other than always to stand ready for battle. . . . Therefore, those who preach the Word not only face the danger of death, but death itself threatens daily. Nevertheless, such danger encourages and comforts them, because they know that whether they are rescued from

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<sup>61</sup> Wolfgang Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii*, 757.

<sup>62</sup> Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 304r.

death or even killed, they will always be victorious. Indeed, in death itself they will find life. For the death of preachers produces life and fruit in their hearers.<sup>63</sup>

Quotations like these (which could be multiplied) suggest that Reformation commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians served as important resources for shaping pastoral identity and guiding Protestant ministers in their work of preaching and pastoral care.

#### *Commentaries and Spiritual Devotion*

A final notable feature of Reformation era commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians is their practical and devotional character. More than polemical pieces—more than theological common places—these commentaries pulsate with practical advice and encouragement for ordinary Christians as they travel their earthly pilgrimage. Commentators reflected on the nature of true confession, the beauty of the Christian soul, the pathology of spiritual blindness, the dangers of wealth, characteristics of a happy marriage, God’s purposes in suffering, and the glorious hope of heaven. Sprinkled throughout the commentaries are countless proverbs and aphorisms sparkling with spiritual insight: “Christian soldiers always either advance or retreat” (Tilemann Hesshus).<sup>64</sup> “Every gracious man is a grateful man” (John Trapp).<sup>65</sup> “No one can fully fathom the happiness that comes from being the people of God” (Wolfgang Musculus).<sup>66</sup> “Where the Lord builds a church, the devil builds a chapel next door” (Cyriacus Spangenberg).<sup>67</sup> “Marriage does not hinder godliness; rather it is the school of the Holy Spirit” (Tilemann Hesshus).<sup>68</sup> “[Faith] is so active and mighty that it tears heaven and earth apart and opens all graves in the twinkling of an eye” (Martin Luther).<sup>69</sup>

As a general rule, devotional material like this was closely tied to the commentators’ explanation of the literal sense of Scripture. In other words, tropological and anagogical meanings of the text were gleaned from the literal sense by way of implication or application. This approach is clearly illustrated in the way that Protestant interpreters treated Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” in 2 Corinthians 12:7. No consensus existed as to what this “thorn” might be. Musculus and Chytraeus, following the interpretation of Chrysostom, believed that the thorn referred to

<sup>63</sup> Zwingli, *Annotatiunculæ . . . ex ore Zvinglij*, 165–166.

<sup>64</sup> Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, fol. 345v–346r.

<sup>65</sup> Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition*, 658.

<sup>66</sup> Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii*, 2:215.

<sup>67</sup> Spangenberg, *Die ander Epistel Pauli an die Corinthier* (Strasbourg: Samuel Emmel, 1563), fol. 5v.

<sup>68</sup> Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, fol. 115r–v.

<sup>69</sup> Luther, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7” (1523), AE 28:67–68.

Paul's human enemies who were inflicting numerous injuries, insults, and persecutions upon him. Calvin believed that the "thorn" summarized all the different kinds of *spiritual* trials that Paul endured.<sup>70</sup> David Dickson argued that it related to the residual sin with which Paul struggled.<sup>71</sup> John Trapp concisely defined the "thorn" as "a corruption edged with a temptation."<sup>72</sup> Tilemann Hesshus warned his readers against "excessive curiosity" on the question, and then listed the many ways that Satan attacks God's people and seeks to undermine their Christian witness, including mental terrors, grief, and temptations, as well as various illnesses such as kidney stones, colic, tuberculosis, perpetual runny noses, and fevers. The lesson to be learned, Hesshus believed, is this: "We should not be annoyed at the cross which the Lord places upon us, because we see that the Lord God spared neither the Apostle Paul nor his only begotten Son."<sup>73</sup> Johann Spangenberg drew a similar spiritual lesson from this text:

In this we see the benefit of afflictions [*Anfechtungen*], namely that they drive us to call on God for help. Christ cannot be mighty in us—nor even his Word and faith—if our bodies are not thrust into afflictions [*Anfechtungen*] and weakness. For, if human power and creaturely aid and consolation is present, God cannot do his work in us. However, if we instead allow God to work in us, then our weakness becomes eternal strength, our suffering eternal joy, and our temporal death eternal life.<sup>74</sup>

For Reformation commentators, then, the message of every chapter and verse of Paul's Corinthian correspondence was packed with practical meaning, intended for the instruction, edification, and consolation of the Church of every age. Scripture was not an ancient text to be studied, interpreted, and set aside on a shelf. Rather, Protestant exegetes believed that the Bible was God's holy word which continued to announce Jesus Christ and his gospel to sinners, continued to instruct and guide the Church militant, continued to prepare earthbound saints for the glories of the future resurrection. Hope, joy, and supreme confidence—these themes run as leitmotifs throughout Protestant commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians and find special expression in Paul's glorious eschatological vision in 1 Corinthians 15:22. Tilemann

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<sup>70</sup> CNTC 10:159.

<sup>71</sup> Dickson, *An Exposition of all St. Paul's Epistles, together with an Explanation of those other Epistles* (London: Eglesfield, 1659), 91.

<sup>72</sup> Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition*, 733.

<sup>73</sup> Hesshus, *Explicatio Secundae Epistolae Pauli ad Corinthios* (Helmstadt: Jacob Lucii, 1580), 278–279.

<sup>74</sup> Spangenberg, *Postilla Teütsch: Auslegung der Episteln, so auff die Sonntage von Advent biss auff Ostern in der Kirchen gelesen werden*, Postilla Teütsch 4. (Magdeburg: Michael Lotter, 1544), 4:124v–125r. (= Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, 95).

Hesshus's commentary on this passage provides a particularly appropriate conclusion to our study:

“So that God might be all in all,” that is, that his divine majesty might shine forth in the Son and in the whole Church. At that time, God will no longer reign in the Church through the ministry of the gospel and sacraments, but his divinity will impart heavenly blessings directly; he will fill us with his penetrating light; he will adorn us with complete righteousness; he will drench us with pure joy; he will raise us up to eternal life. . . . Seeing God will be our highest goodness, our greatest happiness, our eternal joy. . . . “O Lord Jesus, when we will have happily finished the race that you ordained for us, with the help of your Spirit, guide us to this highest and singular happiness and eternal joy, so that the fruit of your death might also shine forth in us, and that we might love you forever, eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and never grow weary of worshipping you. Amen.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 342v–343r.