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# Lutheran Hermeneutics

DAVID P. SCAER



EACH WEEK A PASTOR HANDLES the sacraments and preaches the gospel. Church liturgy determines how he administers the sacraments. How he preaches is not predetermined. Within the context of confessional Lutheranism hermeneutics or biblical interpretation is not an autonomous science reserved for the lecture halls, but an art practiced within the church for the purpose of preaching. Often, however, in a perceived inability to interpret the text, the preacher takes refuge in the sermons and outlines of others and so in effect distances himself and his sermons from the Bible. Homiletics and hermeneutics become separate and virtually unrelated disciplines.

But sermons are for persuading people and hermeneutics draws meaning out of text. Thus a separation of the two is the road for disaster. A lack of confidence in interpreting the text may come from the false belief that hermeneutics is rigidly bound to one particular method or the application of certain rules. These allegedly objective principles of interpretation take the place of the Scriptures themselves and become a subsidiary dogmatics. They function as judge and jury. Hermeneutics becomes not what the Bible says but what somebody else says. The Bible remains the formal canon, but commentaries, hermeneutical principles, and lecture notes become the functioning canons. Lutheran hermeneutics must avoid these pitfalls.

Several perspectives set the boundaries of the hermeneutical task. First, the Scriptures are inspired. This has two ramifications: (1) They are distinguished from all other literature—including contemporary productions, a distinction that Helmut Koester finds impossible. For him the category of sacred literature does not exist. Our response is that words taken from the secular arena into the sacred take on a new and (for the world) unrecognizable meaning. Studies provided by Kittel are of limited and often no ultimate value. (2) Verbal inspiration means that the Bible's words are God's words. Plenary inspiration means all Scripture serves God's redemptive purposes and demands our attention. The assessment that one passage of Scripture is to be preferred over another in setting forth these purposes is a subjective judgment.

A second perspective for hermeneutics is that the Scriptures have their origin in the church (which includes Old Testament Israel). The Scriptures thus preserve what the church already believed at the

time they were written. Scripture did not bring startling new revelations even to its first hearers. So, for example, Paul draws his principle of justification from Genesis: Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. The first hearers of the Gospels knew that Jesus had been crucified and raised from the dead. Hermeneutics, however, is a church activity. Since the Enlightenment, universities have claimed an almost exclusive right of interpretation. Churches deal with faith, university scholars have the hermeneutical privileges. Though findings of the professional scholars who work outside the church are of value, ultimately the right of interpretation belongs to the church in which the Scriptures originated. The Scriptures are the church's book.

The perspective that the biblical texts originated with the Holy Spirit, who creates faith in Christ and took form in the church which confesses Christ requires a thoroughly christological interpretation of the entire Bible and not merely a few isolated or even majority of the texts. The inspiring Spirit proceeds from the Son and was given by the crucified (Jn 19:30) and resurrected Lord to his apostles (Jn 20:30), so the Spirit is as much the Spirit of Jesus as he is the Spirit of God. Zionism, millennialism, all forms of fanaticism, and the Reformed view that the Bible is an ethical codebook all come from a partially or completely non-christological interpretation of the Bible. At the very least, a non-christological reading of the Bible is symptomatic of other, often more serious problems.

Hermeneutics precedes homiletics. For the sake of argumentation, let us reverse the order and begin with homiletics and move to interpreting the divinely inspired text. St. Paul described his own proclamation as a preaching of Christ and him crucified. But how did he come to this conclusion? St. Paul's christological preaching, far from being an alien intrusion into the Old Testament, was derived from a christological hermeneutic of the Old Testament. (An aside: where St. Paul was determined to preach only Christ, some Lutherans have determined to preach St. Paul.) Both Paul and Jesus were convinced that Christ had to die and rise from the dead because the Scriptures required this. In other words, this was a hermeneutical conclusion. Though the New Testament writers do select certain verses or episodes from the Old Testament, the totality of the Scriptures, and not just this or that verse, speak of the necessity of Christ dying and being exalted by God (Mt 26:54). The christological hermeneutic is not an exclusive but inclusive principle. It embraces the entire Bible, not merely some verses to the exclusion of others. Both the Emmaus account and the appearance of Jesus to the disciples make it clear that the entire Old Testament is to be read christologically (Lk 24:27, 44). A christological her-

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menetic involves the reader or hearer of the Scriptures intimately with the Scriptures as the words connect him with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Christ was put to death for our sin and raised for our justification. Lutherans recognize this as the source and center of C. F. W. Walther's understanding that all the Scriptures serve the law and the gospel. So the Scripture has at its first level an historical reference that involves and requires a christological interpretation. Christology is inherent in and intrinsic to the original events or words. The words of the Bible tell about what happened in history, but they also tell us something about Jesus. Moreover, the words of Scripture also involve the Christian who by baptism is included in Christ. So in speaking of Christ, the entire Bible tells us something about ourselves. The Jonah account provides an example. Historically it is the account of a "near-death experience" of a reluctant prophet whom God rescued from the sea: "For thou didst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me; all thy waves and thy billows passed over me" (Jonah 2:3). Within the context of Israel's history Jonah's story continues the story of God's deliverance of Israel, especially the deliverance from Egypt by passing through the sea. What God did in making Israel a nation he later did for Jonah. According to Jesus, Jonah's plight and rescue sets the pattern for his own death and God's deliverance of him by resurrection (Mt 12:40). All three accounts—deliverance from Egypt, the fish, and the grave—find a focus for the Christian in baptism, which is a dying and rising with Christ, and as such anticipates and actualizes the death of our bodies and resurrection on the last day. The water that drowns us is the means of deliverance. The God who delivered Israel, Jonah, and Jesus delivers us now and will continually deliver us. This christological hermeneutic involves and provides the foundation for the law and gospel motif: the God who kills is the God who resurrects. Only that which is dead can God make alive. Bugenhagen hit the nail on the head when he said that the Psalms have a first referent to the author, then to Christ, and then to us.

The christological principle is not one hermeneutical principle among several, but the foundation, goal, purpose, and content of all biblical interpretation. Without it we are left with grammatical rules, disjointed linguistic data, an historical account of an ancient people, and for some, reworked legends and tales about Jesus, or in the case of the Old Testament, an inferior, morally undeveloped religion. Without a totally christological hermeneutic the veil of Moses hangs over the eyes of the interpreter: he really does not see what the Bible is all about because he does not see Christ. This applies to the Jews but in a certain sense to the Reformed. Their hermeneutic is not wrong because it is not Lutheran, but because it is guided by an anti-incarnational and hence anti-sacramental philosophy. The purpose of the Bible for the Reformed is not God coming to the aid of man, but man serving God with holy living. Accordingly sanctification takes the place of Christology as the predetermined goal of hermeneutics. The gospel serves the law, and the focus is not what God has done in Christ but what the Christian can and must do for God.

Biblical interpretation is on one side determined by the historical incarnation, *incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto*, and on the other side by the actualization of that incarnation in eucharistic bread and wine. A christological hermeneutic is inherently a sacramental one, because it requires that it express itself in a preaching that

invites the hearers to find Jesus in the sacrament of his body and blood. The Gospels were written not that our souls should find Christ at God's right hand, as the Reformed believe, but that we should find him with both our bodies and souls in his sacraments. I cite Luther as an exponent of the christological hermeneutic with hesitation, for Luther was only doing what the Scriptures themselves require. Robert D. Preus claimed that for Luther "the entire Scriptures were Christocentric in content." Luther himself said, "Christ is the sum and truth of Scripture." Or again, "The Scriptures from beginning to end do not reveal anyone beside the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come and through his sacrifice carry and take away the sins of the world." And still again, "One must not understand Scripture contrary to Christ, but in favor of him; therefore Scripture must be brought into relationship to Christ or must not be regarded as Scripture."\* The words of Jesus in this matter should suffice; I cite Luther for those who believe that a Luther quotation provides conclusive evidence.

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The grammatical details, the structure of entire biblical books and their parts, and the original languages of the biblical books will always remain at arm's length for every pastor and scholar, no matter how learned he thinks he is. Grammatical rules are only approximate explanations of the structure of ancient languages by scholars living much later. Just how certain can we be whether a genitive is an objective or subjective one? Was the original speaker aware of this distinction? Did the category even apply then? A person versed in biblical Hebrew may be less than competent in biblical Greek. A person versed in the epistles of St. Paul may not find the Gospels as accessible. Linguistic knowledge will always remain partial and the principles of interpretation open to revision. Solomon's prediction of an endless supply of books and St. John's claim that not all the books in the world could contain all the acts and words of Jesus find some kind of fulfillment in the endless production of commentaries and hermeneutics. The biblical treasure, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, is so vast that no mortal (including the professional scholar) can claim to have exhausted the meaning and techniques of the holy writers. Rather, Christians can be certain that all the Scriptures point to Christ. Not finding Christ throughout the Scriptures suggests that the principles of interpretation are not as rock solid as their practitioners claim. When this happens, there is no other choice but to forsake the paths beaten into our minds by the commentators and teachers so that we may enjoy the christological grandeur of the biblical scenery. God save us from the day when we hear the Scriptures read and do not find Christ in a way in which we did not see him before. **LOGIA**

\*Robert Preus, "Luther: Word, Doctrine and Confession," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (December 1992): 31-32.