Presented at the Shepherd's 360 Conference
October 21-23, 2024 – Shepherds Theological Seminary, Cary, NC

The Hermeneutical Foundations of '*Sola Scriptura*':
A Critical Examination of Luther's Christocentric Method of Interpretation[1]

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1.1 Introduction

The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* rests squarely upon a hermeneutical foundation of protestant Bible interpretation. In an article written in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birthday, David S. Dockery wrote: "Luther initiated and fostered a hermeneutical revolution which changed the course of history. The protestant Reformation would have been impossible apart from this change in hermeneutics which was employed to interpret both the OT and the NT. In a very real sense, Luther is the father of Protestant interpretation and his influence is profound."[2] This paper is intended to provide a critical evaluation of those principles which defined Martin Luther's hermeneutical method. Emphasis will be given to the internal consistency of Luther's literal historical-grammatical hermeneutic with his Christocentric method.

The first part of the paper will include a summary of those protestant principles of biblical interpretation upon which the cries of '*Sola Scriptura*' rest, including: 1) the authority of Scripture; 2) the sufficiency of Scripture; 3) the perspicuity of Scripture; 4) the requirement of faith and spiritual illumination; 5) an affirmation of the literal or grammatical-historical interpretive method; 6) the rejection of allegory as a valid interpretive method; and finally 7) the Christocentric principle which perceived the centrality of Christ in all of Scripture.[3] The latter part of the paper will contain a critique of the compatibility of the seventh point listed above with the six which precede it. In other words, it will assess the consistency of Luther's appeal to a normal historical-grammatical hermeneutical method with his Christocentric principle of biblical interpretation.

1.2 The Reformation Principle of '*Sola Scriptura*'

In his comprehensive work on the history of biblical interpretation, Professor of Anglican studies, Gerald Bray, has offered the following observation: "the Reformers developed methods of

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[1] This paper appears as a chapter in Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio, *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2017).

[2] David S. Dockery, "Martin Luther's Christological Hermeneutics" in *Grace Theological Journal* 4.2 (1983), 189-190.

[3] This list is adapted from Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (1886; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1961), 332; c.f. A. Skevington Wood, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1960).

textual analysis which are still in use, and conservative Protestants continue to look at them as a source of inspiration."[4] He afterward goes on to state: "To understand the biblical interpretation of this period, it is necessary to grasp the implications of the Reformed doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Only then can we proceed to particular types of exegesis."[5] Therefore, given this recommendation—and in light of the quincentennial anniversary of the Luther's nailing of the ninety-five theses on the door of Wittenberg on the eve of All Saint's Day, October 31, 1517—a brief consideration of the reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* is an appropriate place to begin an examination of Luther's hermeneutical method, which fueled the Protestant Reformation and has continued to define the protestant and evangelical view of Scripture for the past 500 years.

In Phillip Schaff's defining work, *History of the Christian Church*, he points to "three fundamental principles of the Reformation,"[6] the first of which he identifies as "the supremacy of the *Scriptures* over tradition."[7] To this, he adds: "the supremacy of *faith* over works,"[8] commonly expressed by the maxim *sola fide* or "by faith alone," and third, he points to "the supremacy of the Christian *people* over an exclusive priesthood,"[9] commonly expressed by the maxim: "the common priesthood of every believer."

Concerning this observation by Schaff, it is important to point out that the latter two principles are derived from the first, inasmuch as the Scriptures, alone, served as the authority to which the reformers were able to make appeals against the magisterium. Whereas Rome appealed to the authority of the church as the arbiter of the words of Scripture, Luther appealed to Scripture alone, as it was understood through the individual reader's God-given faculty of reason.

Phillip Schaff reinforces this point, by clarifying: "The objective principle of Protestantism maintains that the Bible, as the inspired record of revelation, is the only infallible rule of faith and practice; in opposition to the Roman Catholic coordinating of Scripture and ecclesiastical *tradition*, as the joint rules of faith."[10] Schaff does well to point out that the claim of *sola Scripture* is one which speaks to authority. It says, in effect: Scripture serves as the chief authority to which Christians must appeal for faith and practice. No higher authority exists than Scripture alone; neither, on earth, is there found its equal.

2.1 The Authority of Scripture

In the *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, Luther's view on the authority of Scripture is summed up in the following words: "Scripture is its own authority because it is clear. No

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[4] Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 1996), 190.
[5] Ibid., 191.
[6] Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 7 (1888, repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 16.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

other authority is needed to see through its meaning."[11] Whereas the papacy did not, in word, deny Luther's appeal to the authority of Scripture, instead, they skirted the issue of Scripture's authority, in practice, by erecting a magisterium, which alone could serve as the arbiter of the meaning of Scripture.

Luther was appalled that, at times, the meaning of Scripture could be explained by the magisterium in a way that defied the plain message apparent in the text. Thus, the German Reformer became acutely aware that the issue of the authority of Scripture was subject to the interpreter. In light of recent abuses by Pope Leo X, who had promulgated the most famous of all indulgences on March 15, 1517[12], and Tetzel, of whom it was reported that "He gave sealed letters stating that even the sins which a man was intending to commit would be forgiven. The pope, he said, had more power than all the Apostles, all the angels and saints, more even than the Virgin Mary herself; for these were all subject to Christ, but the pope was equal to Christ."[13]

For Luther, if the magisterium's interpretation of Scripture could differ so radically from his own, then the conflict must reside with the subjectivity of the interpreter. Luther's conclusion, as testified by the confession of his own mouth at the Diet of Worms was: "I will never permit any man to set himself above the Word of God."[14] Upon being flatly asked by the Elector of Brandenburg, "If I rightly understand you doctor, you will acknowledge no other judge than the Holy Scriptures?"[15] Luther replied: "Precisely so, my Lord, and on them I take my stand."[16]

This was Luther's response, after so many attempts were afforded him to retract his statements, when, at last, he dug in his heels with the following declaration:

> "Since your most serene majesty and your high mightinesses require from me a clear, simple, and precise answer, I will give you one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the councils, because it is clear as the day that they have frequently erred and contradicted each other. Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning—unless I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted, and unless they thus render my conscience bound by the Word of God, *I cannot and I will not retract*."[17]

The accompanying statement: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise" so often associated with Luther's protest may not have been included. It would seem that the earliest printed version may have included these words, though they were not recorded at the time of delivery.[18] Nevertheless, the

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[11] Kenneth Hagen, "Martin Luther," in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. by Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVaristy Press, 1998), 215.

[12] Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Part VI: The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin 1300-1564* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 337.

[13] Ibid., 339.

[14] J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Henry White (1846; repr. Rapidan, VA: Hartland Publications, n.d.), 251.

[15] Ibid., 250.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 245.

[18] See d'Aubigné, 145 c.f. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950; repr. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 140-144.

sentiment is fully present in the words of Luther: "on [Scripture] I take my stand"[19] and "I cannot and I will not retract."[20] Thus, Luther stood solely upon the authority of Scripture, being rightly interpreted through the God-given faculty of human reason that is common to all men.

The keen observer could contend, from Luther's words, that he did not appeal to Scripture alone. Rather, he included an appeal to the faculty of human reason, saying: "Unless therefore I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning… *I cannot and I will not retract*."[21] Nevertheless, the Reformation principle is one of *sola Scriptura*, not *Scriptura*-plus-reason…or is it?

2.2 The Sufficiency of Scripture

Akin to the reformation appeal to the authority of Scripture is the appeal to the sufficiency of Scripture. These two ideals are intrinsically bound up in the Reformers' cry of *'Sola Scriptura*.' What role then does reason serve, if Scripture is sufficient in-and-of itself to direct the believer in all matters of faith and practice? The contention of the reformers was that reason played a major role. After all, one must judge--against Scripture, of course—whether certain teachings were from men or whether they were from God. Such judgment demanded an exercise of human reason that was unforgiving. On one hand, a wrong determination could result in physical death. On the other hand there existed an even graver perceived threat, where doctrinal error could result in eternal damnation.

In Luther's own words, he offered the following appeal to the court:

> "Yet I am but a mere man, and not God; I shall therefore defend myself as Christ did. *If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil* (John xviii, 23), said he. How much more should I, who am but dust and ashes, and who may so easily go astray, desire every man to state his objections to my doctrine!
> "For this reason, most serene emperor, and you, most illustrious princes, and all men of every degree, I conjure you, by the mercy of God, to prove from the writings of the prophets and apostles that I have erred. As soon as I am convinced of this, I will retract every error, and be the first to lay hold of my books and throw them in the fire.
> "What I have just said plainly shows, I hope, that I have carefully weighed and considered the dangers to which I expose myself."[22]

Luther took his stand upon Scripture alone, though his was no less a carefully weighed and measured position. He relied upon his basic faculty of human reason, being keenly aware of the doctrine of man's depravity. Nevertheless, he trusted that Scripture was wholly sufficient to illuminate man's reason and to serve as an adequate guide into matters of doctrinal truth. The Word of God and the mind of man were designed for one another. Luther was convinced that it was incumbent upon the man of God to fully employ his faculty of mind and reason in the interpretation and application of Holy Scripture. Reason's job was not to perform mental gymnastics in search of strained interpretations that

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[19] d'Aubigné, 251.
[20] Ibid., 245.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 244.

were not plainly discernable from the text. Rather, the reader's job was to look for the plain and straight-forward meaning of Scripture.

2.3 The Perspicuity of Scripture

In speaking to the matter of interpretation as it concerns the reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, Bray notes: "The key issue which distinguished Protestants from Catholics was whether Scripture was self-interpreting, or whether it required the teaching authority of the church to make it plain."[23] This issue is summed up by the term the perspicuity of Scripture. This tenet was so central to the reformers' view of *sola Scriptura* that Bernard Ramm lists it first in his list of theological assumptions underlying the Protestant method of hermeneutics.[24]

In his book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Ramm expresses the idea as follows:

The Roman Catholic Church had its view of the clarity of Scripture. In that both Christ and the Spirit mystically indwell the Roman Church, the Church shares in the mind of Christ and the Spirit. It is therefore its gift to know the meaning of Scripture and in the exercise of this gift the Roman Catholic Church solves the problem of the clarity of Scripture.
    The Reformers rejected this view of the solution to the problem of the clarity of Scripture.[25]

Luther famously described his position concerning the perspicuity of Scripture in *The Bondage of the Will*, where he affirmed "The clearness of the Scripture is twofold,"[26] perceiving both an internal as well as an external clarity of Scripture. In Luther's estimation, the internal clarity involved the work of the Spirit in shaping the understanding of the human heart and mind of the reader, while the external clearness involved the use of normal human language which was intended to convey the Divine mind grammatically.[27] For Luther, both of these were requisite in order for Scripture to be rightly understood. Therefore, both of these will now be considered, in turn, beginning with the need for internal clarity, or the requirement of faith and spiritual illumination.

2.4 The Requirement of Faith and Spiritual Illumination

In his classic work on hermeneutics, Henry A. Virkler made the following observation about Luther's emphasis on the need for internal clarity in biblical interpretation: "Luther believed that faith and the Spirit's illumination were prerequisites for an interpreter of the Bible. He asserted that the Bible should be viewed with wholly different eyes from those with which we view other literary

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[23] Bray, 192.

[24] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Third Revised Edition (1950; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 97.

[25] Ibid., 98.

[26] Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio: The Bondage of the Will* trans. Henry Cole (1525; repr. The Sovereign Grace Union, 1931), Sect. 4. https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/pdf/luther_arbitrio.pdf. Accessed on April 13, 2017.

[27] Ibid., c.f. Ramm, 98.

productions."[28] In his own words, Luther described the need for the Holy Spirit's illumination in this way: "If you speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures, but he that hath the Spirit of God."[29] By this, Luther does not mean that the plain language of Scripture is incapable of expressing itself clearly to the unregenerate man. Rather, he clarifies that without the Spirit's illumination, the heart and mind of the unregenerate reader is darkened and thus he is unable to rightly and fully perceive its meaning.

The German doctor goes on to say: "All have a darkened heart, so that, even if they know how to speak of, and set forth, all things in the Scripture, yet they cannot feel them nor know them…For the Spirit is required to understand the whole of the Scripture and every part of it."[30] Thus, Luther regarded the Holy Spirit's role of divine illumination as a critical component in yielding the full understanding of a biblical text. In his notable work titled *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, Skevington Wood remarks: "The way in which the Spirit conveys His interpretation of the Word is through the mind and soul of the man who submits himself to the discipline of instruction…Hence his maxim: *Sola experiential fecit theologum.* 'Experience is necessary for the understanding of the Word. It is not merely to be repeated and known, but to be lived and felt.'"[31]

Bernard Ramm offers the following remarks about the Reformer's view: "The internal clarity of Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart or mind of the believer, illuminating his mind to see the truth of Scripture as the truth of God. By the use of scientific philology and the illumination of the Spirit we arrive at the clarity of Scripture."[32] By scientific philology, Ramm refers to the science of interpretation, or hermeneutics, which is an essential component to all forms of human communication, and serves as the crux for Luther's view concerning the external clarity of Scripture.

2.5 The Literal Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutic

The Protestant understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture speaks to that quality of the written Word of God whereby it communicates clearly through the use of plain language. Nevertheless, communication does not occur without an agent or interpreter to receive the meaning that God has endeavored to transmit to man through the Sacred Text. This forms the basis for the need of a Protestant hermeneutic or method of interpretation which informs the reader's understanding of a text.

Luther's governing principle of biblical interpretation was to look for what he called the "literal sense" of the biblical text. Wood has regarded the Reformer's insistence on the primacy of the literal sense as "One of the most valuable of Luther's hermeneutical principles,"[33] noting:

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[28] Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 65.
[29] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, Sect. 4.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Wood, 15.
[32] Ramm, 98.
[33] Wood, 24.

He resolutely sets aside the verbal jugglery involved in multiple exegesis and firmly takes his stand upon the plain and obvious significance of the Word. 'The literal sense of Scripture alone', he asserts, 'is the whole essence of faith and Christian theology.' And again: 'If we wish to handle Scripture aright, our sole effort will be to obtain the one, simple, seminal and certain literal sense.'[34]

This principle has been summed up in so few words by a twentieth century Protestant interpreter: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense."[35] Ramm seems to regard this interpretive method as a logical extension of Luther's second principle of the perspicuity of Scripture when he writes the following: "Luther said that the external clarity of Holy Scripture was its grammatical clarity. If an interpreter properly follows what has been called 'the laws of language,' or 'the rights of language,' he can know what the Scriptures specifically mean."[36]

Similarly, another classical work which describes this protestant method of interpretation is Milton Spenser Terry's *Biblical Hermeneutics*. In it, he describes the grammatical-historical hermeneutic using the following language:

The grammatico-historical sense of a writer is such an interpretation of his language as is required by the laws of grammar and the facts of history. Sometimes we speak of the literal sense, by which we mean the most simple, direct, and ordinary meaning of phrases and sentences. By this we usually denote a meaning opposed to the figurative or metaphorical. The grammatical sense is essentially the same as the literal.[37]

The grammatical-historical interpretive method then serves as the necessary counterpart to Luther's understanding of "the external clearness of the Holy Scripture."[38] In other words, it is not enough for Scripture to merely speak using plain language, but it must also be read and understood according to that very same manner in which it was given in order for Protestant interpretation to occur. In affirmation of this hermeneutical method, Luther once more appeals to reason, when he writes: "If the Scripture be obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its being sent down from heaven? Are we not obscure and ambiguous enough in ourselves, without an increase of obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness being sent down unto us from heaven?"[39]

Luther, along with John Calvin and as many others as walked in the tradition of the reformers accepted this principle of interpretive methodology which assigned to the text that plain and ordinary sense that the grammar, as used in its historical context, would convey in normal-everyday usage, regardless of whether the source were mundane or divine. The German doctor felt so strongly about

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[34] Wood, 24.

[35] David L. Cooper, *What Men Must Believe* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1943), 63.

[36] Ramm, 98.

[37] Milton Spenser Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (1883; repr. New York: Eaton and Mains, 1890), 101.

[38] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, Sect. 34.

[39] Ibid., Sect. 36.

this that he wrote: "they who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of the Scriptures, leave us nothing else but darkness."[40]

At this point a brief sample may serve well to reveal Luther's interpretive methodology applied to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans:

> "What conclusion then remains to be drawn…The words are plain—the division is certain—nothing can be said against it.
> Sect. 139.—BUT let us hear Paul, who is his own interpreter. In the third chapter, drawing up, as it were, a conclusion…What would the 'invented interpretations' of the whole world do against this all-clear sentence?...Here let him that can produce his 'convenient interpretation,' invent 'tropes,' and pretend that the words 'are ambiguous and obscure!'"[41]

It can be seen from the strong language that Luther employs, here, that for every bit as much as he affirms the normal-grammatical method of interpretation, he just as strongly denounces what he sees as its alternative, namely, the allegorical method of interpretation.

2.6 The Rejection of Allegory as a Valid Interpretive Method

Luther's vehemence toward the allegorical method of interpretation was not one that resulted from unfamiliarity with the despised hermeneutic. To the contrary, he had witnessed it from the papal edicts of Leo X to Johann Tetzel's merchandizing of indulgences. Wood notes that "For a thousand years the Church had buttressed its theological edifice by means of an authoritative exegesis which depended upon allegory as its chief medium of interpretation."[42] Moreover, he had personally been trained to utilize it in his monastic training, prior to his conversion to Christ. Concerning this, Wood writes:

> From his own experience he knew the futility of allegorization: 'mere jugglery', 'a merry game', 'monkey tricks'—that is how he stigmatizes it. He had suffered much from that sort of pseudo-exposition of which Dr. John Lowe speaks so trenchantly, where 'anything can mean anything'. 'When I was a monk', Luther frankly acknowledges, 'I was adept in allegory. I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans, I came to have some knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is no allegory, and learned to know what Christ was.'[43]

Nevertheless, despite all of the lucidity that the Reformer demonstrated in his affirmation of the necessity for adherence to the normal grammatical-historical method and his repudiation of the allegorical method of interpretation, Dockery rightly observed: "his theoretical rules were better than the outworking of them."[44] Moreover, Roy Zuck affirmed the same, noting: "Though Luther vehemently

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[40] Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, Sect. 36.
[41] Ibid., Sect. 138-140.
[42] Wood, 25.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Dockery, 193.

opposed the allegorizing of Scripture, he too occasionally allegorized. For instance, he stated that Noah's ark is an allegory of the church."[45]

2.7 The Christocentric Hermeneutic

These critiques offered by Dockery and Zuck serve well to introduce the seventh and final principle of Luther's biblical interpretation: the Christocentric hermeneutic or the perceived centrality of Christ in all of Scripture. Robert Preus offers a favorable view of the Reformer's use of this principle; therefore, his perspective serves as a good place to start:

> Like the church fathers, Luther saw the Scriptures as Christocentric in their entire sweep and soteriological in their purpose…To Luther, "Christ is the sum and truth of Scripture." "The Scriptures from beginning to end do not reveal anyone besides the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come and through His sacrifice carry and take away the sins of the world." "The entire Scripture points only to Christ."[46]

For Luther, both the Old and New Testaments, as well as everything in them, center on Christ. Wood observes that "[for Luther] This Christocentric orientation of Scripture is raised to a major hermeneutical principle. 'If, then, you would interpret well and truly, set Christ before you,' Luther advises, 'for He is the man to Whom it all applies.'"[47]

For the past 500 years, Protestants have largely embraced this seventh principle of Luther's Christocentric hermeneutic, along with all of the others which preceded it. The uncritical acceptance of this principle is evidenced in Preus' quote, above, which claims that Luther's perspective is shared by "the church fathers." Moreover, Preus goes on to claim: "The principle of the Christocentricity of Scripture was not something Luther inherited from the early church and then superimposed on the Scriptures. He derived the principle from Scripture itself; He found Christ there inductively through sound and serious exegesis."[48]

Not all Reformed interpreters have so unreservedly lauded Luther's exegetical method, however. Louis Berkhof, in his *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* observed that Luther's "hermeneutical rules were far better than his exegesis. Though he was not willing to recognize any but the literal sense, and scornfully spoke of the allegorical interpretation as *Affenspiel*, he did not entirely steer clear of the despised method." [49] That is to say, despite Luther's appeal to a plain-sense interpretation of Scripture, and his adamant rejection of fanciful allegory and mystical meanings behind a text, Luther may have inadvertently shut-and-barred the front door while leaving the rear-entry ajar. It therefore seems

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[45] Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 45.
[46] Robert D. Preus, "The View of the Bible Held by the Church: The Early Church through Luther," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Normal L. Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 374.
[47] Wood, 33-34.
[48] Preus, 375.
[49] Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1950), 26; c.f. Dockery 194.

necessary at this point to carry on in that very same spirit of the Reformers, and to offer a critical evaluation of this seventh principle, to determine whether it is possible to be "convinced by the testimony of Scripture, or by the clearest reasoning,"[50] and to assess whether these things be of men or of God.

4.1 Critique of the Christocentric Hermeneutic

It should be noted at this point that it is not necessary for a Christ-honoring reading of Scripture to be one which seeks to find Christ in every verse, or even every chapter of the Bible in order for Him to have the place of preeminence throughout the whole thing. It is one thing to say: "All of Scripture testifies to Christ," and yet it is quite another to say: "All Scriptures testify to Christ." The first claim communicates that the Scriptures as a whole speak to Christ, while the second claim implies that the Scriptures in each individual part speak of Christ.[51] Luther assumed a position that more closely reflects the latter idea: "All Scriptures testify to Christ."

In his evaluation of Luther's Christological hermeneutics, David Dockery risks being too charitable when he remarks: "Practically, it may be concluded that Luther's rule is true; exegetically, it leads to difficulties."[52] Farrar's assessment strikes truer: "It is exegetical fraud to read developed Christian dogmas between the lines of Jewish narratives. It may be morally edifying but it is historically false…We cannot find the New Testament in the ordinary historic narratives of the Old without large recourse to some form or other of the figurative interpretation which Luther had so decisively rejected."[53]

Despite the approval of Preus concerning Luther's Christocentric hermeneutic, he cannot help but admit that: "It was just his failure to find Christ and justification by faith in certain books of the Old and New Testaments (all *antilegomena*) that prompted Luther to depreciate the value of these books and question their canonicity."[54] In other words, when Luther's hermeneutical principle did not yield the kind of results he had expected, he displayed a tendency to call into question Scripture, itself, rather than his own interpretive method.

On account of this strained hermeneutical principle, the Reformer came to regard some parts of Scripture to be less inspired than others. Those biblical books which fit Luther's criteria were elevated to a level of super-Scripture while others were regarded as mere straw.[55] It must be observed that these

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[50] d'Aubigné, 245.

[51] This is commonly referred to as the fallacy of division, which ascribes to the individual parts that which is true of the whole. J. L. Mackie, "Fallacies," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Donald M. Borchert. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 537-550.

[52] Dockery, 193.

[53] Farrar 334-335.

[54] Preus, 375.

[55] Farrar notes: "There were books of Scripture which failed to come up to his test of canonicity, and when this was the case, he unhesitatingly placed them in a lower position. Had he accepted an infallible canon it could only have been on a human tradition which he fundamentally refused to recognize as authoritative. 'That which does not teach Christ is not apostolic,' he said, 'even if a Peter or a Paul taught it.' Hence he put some books far above others in value. He declared that St. Paul's Epistles were more a gospel than Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and

conclusions were reached no less out of a devotion to honor Christ in the reading of Scripture. Yet the end result was one which marginalized the Word of God—placing the reader as not merely Scripture's interpreter, but as its arbiter.

5.1 Conclusion

What then may be concluded from a review of the hermeneutical foundation of *sola Scriptura* as it was modeled by Martin Luther 500 years ago? First, it should be noted that the reformation principle of *sola Scripture* was intrinsically linked to the hermeneutical methodology which the Reformers themselves employed. These principles which have been enumerated above include 1) the authority of Scripture; 2) the sufficiency of Scripture; 3) the perspicuity of Scripture; 4) the requirement of faith and spiritual illumination; 5) an affirmation of the literal or grammatical-historical interpretive method; 6) the rejection of allegory as a valid interpretive method; and finally 7) the Christocentric principle which perceived the centrality of Christ in all of Scripture.

The critical evaluation offered above serves to reveal an inconsistency of Luther's hermeneutical method which many Protestant and Reformed interpreters are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge. Specifically, Luther's Christocentric hermeneutic risks undermining all of those essential principles which precede it. It is, therefore, the conclusion of this paper that Protestant interpreters today who seek to follow in the footsteps of the reformers would do well to follow the six points enumerated above while steering clear of a forced Christocentric hermeneutic which threatens to undermine the perspicuity of Scripture, the adherence to a literal or grammatical-historical interpretive method, and finally the rejection of allegory as a valid method of interpretation.

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that St. John's Gospel, the Epistle to the Romans, and the First Epistle of Peter were 'the right kernel and marrow of all books.' He has little to say of the Book of Esther. He saw the complete historic inferiority of the Book of Chronicles as compared with the Book of Kings. He saw that some of the Old Testament books had passed through revising hands. He refused to believe that Solomon could have written Canticles. He points out the unchronological order of the present arrangement of the Book of Jeremiah. Believing that all the prophets had built on the one foundation, he thought that there was hay and stubble as well as gold and precious stones in the superstructure. He was evidently startled and perplexed by the story of Jonah. He regarded the Book of Job as a drama in glorification of resignation. He believed that the Book of Ecclesiastes belonged to the time of the Maccabees. He considered one of St. Paul's proofs in the Galatians too weak to hold. Of the Epistle to the Hebrews, he said, 'Who wrote it is unknown, but also it does not matter.' He believed the Epistle of St. Jude to be unnecessary, second-hand, and non-apostolic. He called the Epistle of St. James a right strawy epistle and one which flatly (*stracks*) contradicted St. Paul, and he did not believe it to be written by an Apostle at all. Of the Apocalypse he said that 'his spirit could not accommodate itself to the book, and that it was insufficient reason for the small esteem in which he held it, that Christ was neither taught in it nor recognized.' He classed it with Esdras, and did not believe it to be inspired. He thought it a matter of no consequence whether Moses had written the Pentateuch or not. Thus without the least hesitation he sought for the canon within the canon." Farrar, 335-336.

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