

SOLUS CHRISTUS AND SOLA SCRIPTURA
THE CHRISTOLOGICAL ROOTS OF MARTIN LUTHER'S
INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

PAUL O'CALLAGHAN

SUMMARY: I. *Sola Scriptura*, a hallmark of the Protestant Reformation. II. Luther and Scripture. III. The five principles of Lutheran interpretation of Scripture. IV. Further attempts to understand *sola Scriptura*. V. Scripture and Catholic Theology. VI. *Sola Scriptura* and *solus Christus*. VII. Luther's Christ as personal Savior. VIII. The life of Christ in the Christian believer. IX. Lutheran kenosis and the realism of salvation. X. Summing up.

I. SOLA SCRIPTURA, A HALLMARK OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

The expression *sola Scriptura*, 'Scripture alone', is perhaps the best-known hallmark of the Protestant Reformation. The English theologian William Chillingworth in 1638 wrote: "The Bible, I say, the Bible only is the religion of Protestants"¹. It captures quite a simple idea: that true revelation is to be found only in Sacred Scripture and not in other sources, neither in the common witness of Church Fathers, nor liturgical practice, nor official Church teaching, nor practical Christian spirituality. God reveals himself in Scripture and it is there where we have to look to discover God's own word, God's will, God's rule for our lives. It was one of the many ways in which Protestants wished to ensure that God, and God alone, would occupy center-stage.

The *sola Scriptura* principle was present from the outset of the Reformation. Luther seldom used the expression, yet the idea became central in his famed 1519 debate with John Eck at Leipzig. He "regarded Scripture as the first principle (*primum principium*) on which all theological statements must directly or indirectly be grounded"². The expression was probably used for the first time in the 1536 Calvinist *Geneva Confession*. The Anglican *39 Articles* promulgated in 1563 makes

* The study reworks parts of chapters 4 and 5 of P. O'CALLAGHAN, *God and Mediation. Retrospective Appraisal of Luther the Reformer*, Fortress Press, Minnesota, 79-106.

¹W. CHILLINGWORTH, *The Religion of Protestants: a Safe Way to Salvation*, Leonard Lich, Oxford 1638, 375, cited by B.S. GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation: how a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2012, 91.

² LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION-PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, *From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt- Bonifatius, Leipzig-Paderborn 2013, 196, citing MARTIN LUTHER, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke*, H. Böhlau Nachfolger, Weimar 1883-2000 (abbrev. WA), vol. 7, 97. Translations of Luther's texts, which are mainly in German and Latin, are the work of the author.

special reference to the authority of Scripture. Later Lutheran documents such as the 1577 *Formula Concordiae* also speak about it in a programmatic way³.

II. LUTHER AND SCRIPTURE

Scriptural scholar himself, Luther himself of course accorded absolute centrality to the Bible. He undertook ample commentaries on different books of the Old Testament, especially Isaiah and the Psalms, and in the New Testament he commented extensively on the Pauline letters. He had a special fondness for Galatians and Romans, among other reasons because they provided the best expression of what he considered to be the center of the Gospel: the doctrine of justification by faith. Surprisingly, perhaps, he was less inclined to comment on the four gospels.

Apart from the fact that he felt drawn towards Scripture for personal reasons and on account of his studies, the fact that he distanced himself from two sources of religious knowledge is worth noting.

First, he kept his distance from an overly philosophical theology, based on reason, that in his view had lost contact with God's word (and therefore with faith):

I believe I have the following debt with Our Lord: to cry out in a loud voice against all philosophy and direct men to Sacred Scripture. Anyone else who attempted to do this would either be afraid or would not be believed. But I have spent many years in these things. I have found and listened to many like me. I see that this is not a vain search, condemned to perdition. It is now high time to shift away from other studies and learn Christ, and Him crucified⁴.

Besides, Luther distanced himself from the perceived Catholic theory of 'the two sources'. According to the latter, Revelation comes to us through two interacting sources, Scripture and Tradition, the latter including the Church's teaching authority or Magisterium. The perception portrayed by Luther was that the Church's teaching office (and in particular that of the Pope) could interpret Scripture at will, arbitrarily, and therefore that the word of God – Revelation – could be used and abused capriciously. It should be noted however that Luther respected the writings of Church Fathers, especially Jerome and Augustine, and considered as faithful reflections of Scripture the universal statements of Christian faith.

Still, the primacy he accords to Scripture gave firm support to a determinative principle for all Protestant theology: we receive the word of God through Scripture alone. In Scripture is to be found, classical Protestantism tells us, divine authority, clarity, efficacy and sufficiency⁵. Thus there is no need for the Pope

³ Cfr. P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Sola Scriptura o tota Scriptura? Una riflessione sul principio formale della teologia protestante*, in M. TÁBET (ed.), *La Sacra Scrittura, anima della teologia*, Lev, Città del Vaticano 1999, 149, note 7.

⁴ LUTHER, WA 56, 371.

⁵ Cfr. C.H. PINNOCK, *Biblical Revelation. The Foundation of Christian Theology*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR. 1998, 95-98.

or for other interpreters. The meaning of Scripture is clear and sufficient to any ordinary believer. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, put it as follows: "In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church"⁶. And so, *sola Scriptura* became, in practice at least, the 'formal principle' of the Reformation.

Still, it would unfair to say that Luther was being reactionary to Church interpretation of the Bible when he insisted on the centrality of Scripture, pulling away from philosophy and other religious authorities. Though he did not use the term *sola Scriptura*, which arose later on, his approach to Scripture was not literalist, nor fundamentalist, nor simplistic. Doubtless, he trusted Scripture unreservedly. Against Copernicus' astronomical theories, he "believed in Scripture: Joshua ordered the sun to stop and not the earth"⁷. And he stated: "What is not to be found in the Scriptures is surely added on by Satan"⁸. Yet he treated the interpretation of the Bible in a deeply theological way, distinguishing between the Word of God and Scripture: "One thing is God, another God's Scripture, just as one thing is the Creator, another God's creature"⁹. More importantly, he insisted on the Christological centering of Scripture, that Christ is the *Dominus et Rex Scripturae*¹⁰, 'the Lord and the King of Scripture'. Thus the truth of Scripture is measured not simply by what Scripture says, but *was Christum treibet*, "by what promotes Christ and inclines to him"¹¹. In modern parlance we may say that the hermeneutical principal for Scripture is to be found in its living relationship with Christ.

III. THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF LUTHERAN INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

It is common to speak of five Lutheran principles applied to the interpretation of Scripture¹². *First*, that the New Testament interprets the Old. The two are not equal; the New is superior because it ushers in the definitive novelty of Jesus Christ: "The New Testament is nothing but a revelation of the Old; it is as if somebody had a sealed letter and later on broke it open"¹³. *Second*, what is clear

⁶ J. WESLEY, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, XV, Wesleyan Conference Office, London 1812, 180.

⁷ LUTHER, WA *Tischreden*, 1, 419; 4, 412, n. 4638, cited by E. HIRSCH, *Geschichte der neuer evangelischen Theologie im Zusammenhang mit den allgemeinen Bewegungen des europäischen Denkens*, I, Bertelsmann, Gütersloh 1949, 204.

⁸ LUTHER, WA 8, 418.

⁹ LUTHER, WA 18, 606.

¹⁰ LUTHER, WA 40/1, 458-9.

¹¹ LUTHER, WA *Deutsche Bibel* 7, 384. On the Lutheran interpretation of Scripture, cfr. R. PRENTER, *A Lutheran Contribution*, in A. RICHARDSON, W. SCHWEITZER (edd.), *Biblical Authority for Today. World Council of Churches Symposium on the Biblical Authority for the Churches' Social and Political Message Today*, SCM Press, London 1951, 98-111; J.A. BURGESS, *Lutheran Interpretation of Scripture*, in K. HAGEN et al. (edd.), *The Bible in the Churches: How Different Christians Interpret the Scriptures*, Paulist, New York-Mahwah 1985, 110-43; O. BAYER, *Luther as an Interpreter of Scripture*, in by D.K. MCKIM (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York-Melbourne 2003, 73-85.

¹² BURGESS, *Lutheran Interpretation of Scripture*, 128-33.

¹³ LUTHER, WA 10/1/1, 181.

interprets what is not. The interpreter should not begin with the difficult passages but rather with the clearer ones, based on God's action. Above all, clarity is that which points towards Christ. Whatever does not do so is unclear. In other words the notion of the 'clarity' of Scripture for Luther is theological and internal, not merely historical or linguistic.

Third, that Scripture interprets itself: *Scriptura sui ipsius interpretes*¹⁴, 'Scripture interprets itself', Luther says. This means Scripture is the final authority and cannot be judged by any other. He observes: "those who presume to interpret Scripture and the law of God on the basis of themselves, on their study and intelligence, are mistaken"¹⁵. Calvin put it even more clearly: *Deus solus de se idoneus est testis in suo sermone*¹⁶, "only God can give witness to his own word". And elsewhere: "the Word is the instrument with which the Lord prepares the faithful for the illumination of the Spirit"¹⁷. In the Lutheran *Smalcald Articles* we read: "The true rule is this: God's Word shall establish articles of faith, and no one else; not even an angel can do so"¹⁸.

It could happen, however, that an exclusive concentration on Scripture *sui ipsius interpretes* might be taken in a self-referential sense, in two mistaken directions: towards biblical literalism that makes theology meaningless and dialogue with science and philosophy impossible; or towards biblical criticism that leads to radical reinterpretations that have little or nothing to do with what Church Fathers, medieval theologians and Protestant reformers proposed. Neither was the intention of Luther, however, because Scripture always points to Christ, not to some other subordinate or alternative authority.

This brings us to the *fourth* principle Lutherans apply to the interpretation of the Bible, the fundamental one: Scripture above all is what promotes Christ, and inclines us to him: *die Bibel was Christum treibet*¹⁹, Luther says graphically, 'the Bible is what drives home or leads us to Christ, what inculcates him in us'. This points to the *solus Christus* principle we shall consider presently. "He who would read the Bible must simply take heed that he does not err, for the Scripture may permit itself to be stretched and led, but let no one lead it according to his own inclinations but let him lead it to the source, that is, the cross of Christ. Then he will surely strike the center"²⁰. Christ would tell us to study Scripture "so that in it you discover Me, Me"²¹.

The *fifth* and last principle may come across as a surprising one: Scripture is interpreted only within the Church. The reason of course is that Christ is to be

¹⁴ LUTHER, WA 7, 97; 99.

¹⁵ LUTHER, WA 57, 185.

¹⁶ J. CALVIN, *Institutiones christianae* I, 7, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 9, 2-3.

¹⁸ *Smalcald Articles* II, 15.

¹⁹ LUTHER, WA *Deutsche Bibel*, 7, 384.

²⁰ LUTHER, WA 48, 43.

²¹ LUTHER, WA 51, 2.

found in and through his Church, and the Spirit of Christ, given by Christ, acts within the Church. This brings us to ask what kind of Church is involved in this case, a Church in which, to the mind of Luther, both Christ and the Spirit act freely. The question is an open one: where exactly do Christ and the Spirit act? Where are they located? How does the Church channel divine action?

IV. FURTHER ATTEMPTS TO UNDERSTAND SOLA SCRIPTURA

Understandably the principle of *sola Scriptura* has been considered time and again by Protestant theologians and exegetes as they sought to refine their methods and approaches to the study of the Bible. One of the authors who has attempted in recent decades to explain the principle anew is the Lutheran theologian Gerhard Ebeling. He holds that the Lutheran article by which the Church stays or falls, that is 'justification by faith alone', is not merely one more element of Christian anthropology, but a true critical principle, a hermeneutic principle. He interprets Luther's *Scriptura sui ipsius interpretes* in a deeply Christological way: "the history of Christ incarnate is not repeated nor duplicated on the basis of a cultural method (a ministerial act with power of its own), it is not actualized by a spiritualizing interpretation. Rather it is received in the very movement in which it is present to the one who receives it in faith"²². Luther's *sola* means that nothing whatever should be added to Christ, just as nothing should be added on to faith, to grace, to Scripture, basically in the same way as nothing should be added to God. The same may be said at an epistemological level: should there be a point of reference to Christ outside Christ, to faith outside faith, to Scripture outside Scripture, then we would no longer have *solus Christus*, *sola fides* or *sola Scriptura*. Ebeling cites approvingly Luther's expression *quod homo nihil est, et solus Christus omnia*, that 'man is nothing, and Christ alone is everything'²³.

René Marlé sums up Ebeling's position in the following terms:

The mistake made by modern hermeneutics, whether humanistic or enlightened, lies in the fact that it does not see nor does not dare to recognize the hidden character of revelation, in the fact of not having penetrated into the mystery by ways different from the faith, in having wished something other than witnessing its hidden character, that is, 'in having wanted man to be something beside Christ'²⁴.

To interpret Scripture nothing else is needed, Ebeling would hold, neither the Church, nor Tradition, nor philosophical hermeneutics, but only the power present in the word of God itself, "for the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints

²² G. EBELING, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1962, 341-2.

²³ *Ibidem*, 454.

²⁴ R. MARLÉ, *Parler de Dieu aujourd'hui: la théologie herméneutique de Gerhard Ebeling*, Cerf, Paris 1975, 52.

and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). However Ebeling had his own pre-comprehension of what justification is about that was both sin-centered and existential²⁵. So understandably Ebeling attributes a critical role in interpreting Scripture to the Holy Spirit. He cites Luther approvingly: "the Word of God is incomparably above the Church; over the Word nothing can be established, ordered or done, but the Word alone establishes, orders, acts as a creature"²⁶.

Over the last five centuries the question of the meaning of *sola Scriptura* has been looked upon, understandably, in a somewhat negative way, especially by Catholics. The Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann speaks extensively of this:

Scripture itself is the sufficient and, for everyone who can read, the comprehensible testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which justifies sinners. But is Scripture literally infallible? Is scripture 'the Protestant pocket-paper-pope'? Behind that question there is a genuine theological problem: the problem of the teaching ministry in the church. The Catholic view says that the doctrinal authority of the apostles has passed via Peter to the Bishop of Rome, or to the bishops as a whole. For that reason the bishops now speak with apostolic authority in the name of Christ. The Protestant view says: the authority of the apostles was passed on to no one. The apostles were eye-witnesses of the risen Christ, and for their part appointed no new apostles to be their successors. Instead their apostolic authority was passed on to their apostolic writings. They speak today in the church and through the church by way of the writings of the New Testament. The first view talks about a *successio apostolica*, an apostolic succession; the second about a *successio evangelica*, an evangelical succession. What use is the formal apostolic succession from one bishop to another if these bishops do not belong to the true succession of the proclamation of the gospel according to Scripture?²⁷

A recent work by the historian Brad Gregory on the Reformation insists particularly on the damaging effect over the centuries of the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. Though not referring specifically to Luther, he says for example that "from the outset of the Reformation to the present day, the insistence on *sola scriptura* and its adjuncts has produced and continues to yield an open-ended range of incompatible interpretations of the Bible, with centrifugal social and wide-ranging substantive implications for morality"²⁸. Gregory speaks of "the open-ended arbitrariness generated by *sola scriptura*"²⁹. Besides he sees it as a source of Protestant fissiparity, as socially divisive, as politically subversive, as a source of contemporary hyperpluralism, as an inner complement to the *sola ratio* of modernity, and as damaging for biblical studies as a whole³⁰. Gregory

²⁵ Cfr. P. O'CALLAGHAN, *Fides Christi. The Justification Debate*, Four Courts Press, Dublin 1997, 161-7.

²⁶ Cit. by G. EBELING, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung*, 295.

²⁷ J. MOLTSMANN, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1999, 195-6.

²⁸ GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation*, 205.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 374.

³⁰ Cfr. *ibidem*, 569. According to Benjamin Kaplan, Protestantism itself is irrepressibly fissile: *ibidem*, 92.

opines that it brought about a radical individualization of Biblical interpretation and religious truth, and substantially facilitated the process of secularization in the West.

V. SCRIPTURE AND CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

Emphasis on the principle of *sola Scriptura*, however, has at least had the effect of making the Bible essential for all Christians without exception. Still, Catholics, by paying special attention to tradition in the interpretation of Scripture, and seeking qualified guidance from the successors of the Apostles, have come to recognize two things. *First* that Scripture itself has been handed on by the early followers of Jesus, and its books have been received into the life of the Church on the basis of the Church's own authority; many works that provide precious insights into Our Lord's life and saving work were excluded by Church authorities, who considered them apocryphal. This idea has been confirmed and developed in recent decades by Protestant authors such as Brevard S. Childs who speak of a 'canonical' exegesis of Scripture³¹. And *second*, Scripture, on account of the complexity of theology (which involves God, Jesus Christ, salvation, Christian spirituality and ethics) and of the concrete circumstances in which it originally developed, stands in need of authoritative interpretation within the Church itself, which should be, as Luther said, driven by Christ and the Spirit. The Catholic position may be summed up as follows:

Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit... And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching... As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence³².

For Orthodox Christians a similar position applies: "the Holy Bible forms a part of Holy Tradition, but does not lie outside of it. One would be in error to suppose that Scripture and Tradition are two separate and distinct sources of Christian Faith, as some do, since there is, in reality, only one source; and the Holy Bible exists and finds its formulation within Tradition"³³.

³¹ "There is no one hermeneutical key for unlocking the biblical message, but the canon provides the arena in which the struggle for understanding takes place", B.S. CHILDS, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1985, 15.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, United States Catholic Conference, Washington D.C. 2000, 81-82. Cfr. *ibidem*, 75-79.

³³ ANON. (ed.), *These Truths we Hold - The Holy Orthodox Church: Her Life and Teachings*, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, Moscow 1986, s.v. *Holy Tradition*.

VI. SOLA SCRIPTURA AND SOLUS CHRISTUS

Luther, as we saw, says that “Scripture interprets itself”. It is a key phrase, not to be taken lightly. Biblical exegesis should not depend on, nor be supplemented by, external interpretations or ‘previous understandings’ (for example the *Vorverständnis* of Bultmann). This means two things for him. Primarily, that the interpretation of Scripture leads and draws necessarily to Christ, *was Christum treibet*. After all, “Christ is its decisive content”³⁴... “Because all Scripture is everywhere about Christ alone... all things sing for Christ”³⁵. Thus the principle of *sola Scriptura* leads directly to that of *solus Christus*. That “Scripture interprets itself” also means, for Luther, that the Bible is not difficult to understand, since it shares in Christ’s own clarity. In comparison with the complexity of the exegesis practiced by Erasmus, he says optimistically that “in its decisive utterances Holy Scripture is clear and unequivocal”³⁶. Again, this is because Christ is present in Scripture as light is present in darkness, as clarity amidst complexity. “Take Christ out of the Scriptures”, Luther says, “and what will you find left in them? The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms”³⁷.

Indeed, the center of Scripture is Christ: Luther compares Scripture to the swaddling clothes in which Christ was wrapped when he was born. In the Bible “you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them”³⁸. He encourages us to look on Scripture *ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans*, ‘that by itself [Scripture] is most certain, most easy to understand, most clear, its own interpreter, testing, judging and illuminating everything’³⁹.

And at the same time, he adds, the *claritas interna*, or inner clarity, of Scripture “is furnished only by the Holy Spirit, who in his activity makes use of Scripture by disclosing its true meaning”⁴⁰. Obscurity on the other hand is the correlate of sinfulness:

If you speak of the internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in Scripture unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly

³⁴ B. LOHSE, *Martin Luther’s Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2011, 193.

³⁵ LUTHER, WA 56, 414.

³⁶ LOHSE, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 194.

³⁷ LUTHER, WA 18, 606. *Tolle Christum e Scripturis, quid amplius in illis invenies?*

³⁸ LUTHER, WA *Deutsch Bibel* 8, 12.

³⁹ LUTHER, WA 7, 97.

⁴⁰ LOHSE, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 195.

understand nothing of it. They neither believe in God, nor that they themselves are creatures of God⁴¹.

In brief terms, for Luther *sola Scriptura* means *solus Christus*, or at least leads us directly to this principle.

VII. LUTHER'S CHRIST AS PERSONAL SAVIOR

Luther fully accepted the classical Christological dogmas⁴², which he considered a correct and complete summary of what Scripture teaches. However, it should be said that his Christology is of a very personal kind: Christ is always spoken of as *Christ for me*, for us, and the reason for this is a simple one: Christ is above all the Redeemer of humanity. He confesses: "In my heart this one article holds sway, that is, faith in Christ, from, through, and in which all my theological reflections flow to and fro, day and night. Still and all, I do not believe I have grasped the wisdom of such great height, breadth, and depth, except for a few weak and poor rudiments and fragments"⁴³. In the *Book of Concord* we read a typically Lutheran summary of the Christological dogma: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil"⁴⁴.

Marc Lienhard describes Luther's all-embracing Christology in the following terms: "Christ is the *simul* who unites all contradictions: God and humanity, judgment and grace, etc. And he is that, not only as an image or figure of an ultimate unity that lies beyond him. But he is in truth that place where all these things and contradictions have found their unity!"⁴⁵. Luther encourages believers to contemplate Christ in his humanity, for in that way they come to know the Father, since Christ is "a mirror of the Father's heart"⁴⁶, as we read in the 1529 *Large Catechism*. In a 1519 letter he wrote: "Whoever wants to reflect or speculate in a salutary way about God, let him set everything aside for the humanity of Christ"⁴⁷. In his emphasis on Christ's humanity, Luther "adopted essential features of the Christology of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, not to speak of medieval Passion piety"⁴⁸.

The principal aspect of Christ's humanity Luther concentrates on, of course, is Calvary and the Cross, the source of our salvation and key to understanding the

⁴¹ LUTHER, WA 18, 609.

⁴² Cfr. LOHSE, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 219-31.

⁴³ LUTHER, WA 40/1, 33.

⁴⁴ LUTHER, WA 31/1, 365-6.

⁴⁵ M. LIENHARD, *Luther, Witness to Jesus Christ: Stages and Themes of the Reformer's Christology*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis 1982, 43.

⁴⁶ LUTHER, WA 30/1, 192.

⁴⁷ LUTHER, WA *Briefwechsel*, 1, 145.

⁴⁸ LOHSE, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 220.

Christian mystery. But he makes it clear that the Father is truly revealed *by* and *not in spite of* Christ's humanity. Lohse explains that it would be incorrect to hold

that Luther ascended from the earthly, human Jesus to the Father in heaven, that he intended to arrive at divinity from the true humanity, and in this way to sketch a theology 'from the bottom up'. Affirmation of ancient church dogma always underlies Luther's emphasis on Jesus' humanity. It is always assumed. Those features in the earthly Jesus that appear to be divine are not to be emphasized, so that we ascend from his humanity to his Godhead and to the Father in heaven. Rather, in the earthly Jesus the believing observer should clearly see how God acts. Only in Jesus is this manner of the divine activity knowable. In him, in his person and work, God reveals his whole fatherly heart⁴⁹.

VIII. THE LIFE OF CHRIST IN THE CHRISTIAN BELIEVER

A Christological reading of the whole of Christian reality, parting from the humanity of Christ, is to be found especially in an early work of Luther's, his lectures on the Psalms during the years 1513-14. "Whatever is said literally concerning the Lord Jesus Christ as to His person", he says, "must be understood allegorically of a help that is like Him, and of the church conformed to Him in all things. At the same time this must be understood tropologically of any spiritual and inner man against his flesh and the outer man"⁵⁰. That is to say, the Church and each Christian is (meant to be) conformed to Christ, as a kind of representation or presence of Christ before others. In the words of Lohse, "all statements about Christ also apply to the Christian in a figurative sense"⁵¹. Luther applies to believers what the Psalter says of the majesty of the Messiah, and also about his suffering and humiliation (for example Ps 21 is interpreted in Mt 27:46 to be Jesus forsaken on Cross).

This principle works both ways, of course, for Luther was one of the first theologians to insist in crudely realistic terms on Jesus' forsakenness by the Father on the Cross⁵². "Through the bold axiom that all statements about Christ also apply to the Christian in a figurative sense", Lohse observes, "reflection on discipleship was also broadened and deepened"⁵³.

At the same time, the priority of Christ's life and action over the individual Christian's obviated any danger of falling into a spirit of works-righteousness. In effect, Christians live through Christ's suffering, humiliation and forsakenness, but do not 'contribute' to the work of redemption through their own good works of humility or self-giving. Luther took up Augustine's idea of Christ as *sacramen-*

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 224-5.

⁵⁰ LUTHER, WA 3, 13; 55/1, 8.

⁵¹ LOHSE, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 222.

⁵² Cfr. E. VOGELSANG, *Die Anfänge von Luthers Christologie: nach der ersten Psalmenvorlesung, insbesondere in ihren exegetischen und systematischen zusammenhängen mit Augustin und der Scholastik dargestellt*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Leipzig 1929, 18-19.

⁵³ LOHSE, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 222.

tum et exemplum, as ‘sacrament and example’. In the words of Lohse, “Christ can be a model for us only when he is first a sacrament”⁵⁴. In other words, we are meant not just to *imitate* the example of Christ, in this way stimulating our desire to do good works (this could be Pelagian), but rather we allow him to *live within us*, and as a *result* we end up imitating him and performing good works. First the belongingness, and then the imitation, first the sacrament, then the example.

Lienhard puts it as follows: “His death is to be realized in me and I am to die with him before I can imitate him”⁵⁵. That is why Luther insists time and again that in order to know Christ, we must encounter him as Savior, as *our own personal* savior: “You must also know and believe that He did all this for your sake, in order to help you”⁵⁶. The life of each Christian is entirely bound up with that of Christ, and the power of Christ is constantly present in the soul. In the words of Lohse, “Human sin, but also God’s work of salvation, are ever-present powers”⁵⁷. In Luther’s hymn “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”, we hear:

To me he [the Son] said:
 ‘Stay close to me, I am your rock and castle.
 Your ransom I myself will be;
 For you I strive and wrestle;
 For I am yours, and you are mine,
 And where I am you may remain;
 The foe shall not divide us.’⁵⁸

IX. LUTHERAN KENOSIS AND THE REALISM OF SALVATION

When speaking of justification Luther insisted on the patristic notion of the *admirabile commercium*, the ‘happy exchange’, established by faith between Christ and the sinner. The Finnish school of Lutheran studies, led by Tuomo Mannermaa⁵⁹, attempted to read the presence of this patristic motif in Luther, in dialogue with Orthodox theologians, discovering dimensions in Luther of the classic doctrine of divinization (or *theosis*)⁶⁰. Irenaeus of Lyons sees divinization as an intrinsic complement of the Incarnation, stating: “God became man so that man could become God”⁶¹. The direct effect of the Incarnation of the divine Word was

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ LIENHARD, *Luther, Witness to Jesus Christ*, 25.

⁵⁶ LUTHER, WA 12, 285.

⁵⁷ LOHSE, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 224.

⁵⁸ “Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice”, stanza 7, translation by R. MASSIE in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis 1978, n. 299.

⁵⁹ Cfr. T. MANNERMAA, *Christ Present in Faith*. On this school of thought, cfr. C.E. BRAATEN, R.W. JENSON (eds.), *Union with Christ. The new Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (MI)-Cambridge (UK) 1998.

⁶⁰ Cfr. P. O’CALLAGHAN, *Children of God in the World. An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2016, 142-56.

⁶¹ IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Adversus Haereses V*, 8:1.

the divinizing of humans. The same position is common among other Church fathers, particularly Clement of Alexandria and Athanasius.

A lot is to be said for this position. However, Lohse and other authors see it as a surreptitious entrance of the more traditional, ontological doctrine of 'created grace', by which sinners are elevated through divine power, and not simply pardoned of their sins on account of a 'forensic' justification. Classic Lutheran authors on the whole prefer the notion of redemption as 'happy exchange'⁶² that retains the stark alternative between God and the sinner which finds dramatic expression in the life of Christ. Luther does use the term 'divinization': "Everything Christ is and does is present in us and there works with power, so that we are utterly divinized, so that we do not have some part or aspect of God, but his entire fullness"⁶³. Still, Lohse says that "though we cannot dispute a deification motif alongside others, we must be cautioned against overestimating this line of the tradition"⁶⁴. What is central for the believer, Luther says, is faith in Christ, *fides Christi*, Christ who was abandoned by God on the Cross. And this abandonment, this forsakenness would be domesticated by a symbiotic or mutual kind of 'divinization'⁶⁵. Luther explains the *fides Christi* as follows: "In my heart this one article holds sway, that is, faith in Christ, from, through, and in which all my theological reflections flow to and fro, day and night. Still and all, I do not believe I have grasped the wisdom of such great height, breadth, and depth, except for a few weak and poor rudiments and fragments"⁶⁶.

In his 1520 text *The Freedom of the Christian*, Luther powerfully describes the presence of Christ in the believer:

So Christ has all the blessings and the salvation which are the soul's. And so the soul has upon it all the vice and sin which become Christ's own. Here now begins the happy exchange and conflict. Because Christ is God and man who never yet sinned, and his piety is unconquerable, eternal and almighty. So, men, as he makes his own the believing soul's sin through the wedding ring of its faith, and does nothing else than as if he had committed it, just so must sin be swallowed up and drowned⁶⁷.

In a commentary on Paul's doctrine of Christ who divests himself (*kenosis*) of the 'form of God' (Phil 2:7), Luther writes:

The 'form of God' is wisdom, power, righteousness, goodness and freedom too; for Christ was a free, powerful, wise man, subject to none of the vices or sins to which all other men are subject... He relinquished that form to God the Father and emptied him-

⁶² See LOHSE, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 221, note 11. Cfr. also the works of W. ALLGAIER, "Der fröhliche Wechsel" bei Martin Luther. Eine Untersuchung zu Christologie und Soteriologie bei Luther unter besondere Berücksichtigung der Schriften bis 1521, Diss., Univ. Erlangen, 1966; T. BEER, *Der fröhliche Wechsel und Streit: Grundzüge der Theologie Martin Luthers*, Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1980.

⁶³ LUTHER, WA 17/1, 438.

⁶⁴ LOHSE, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 221.

⁶⁵ Cfr. *ibidem*, 229-230.

⁶⁶ LUTHER, WA 40/1, 33.

⁶⁷ LUTHER, WA 7, 25.

self, unwilling to use his rank against us, unwilling to be different from us. Moreover, for our sakes he became as one of us and took the form of a servant, that is, he subjected himself to all evils⁶⁸.

And again in his 1525 *Fasten Postille* (Lenten Scriptural sermons):

[The form of a servant] means that Christ divested or emptied himself, that is, he acted as though he laid his Godhead aside, and would not use it... Not that he removed it or could put it off or remove it, but that he put off the form of the divine majesty, and did not behave as God, which he truly was. Just as he did not put off the form of God so that one would not feel or see it, for then there would be no form of God there, but did not make use of it, did not make a display of it against us, but much rather served us with it⁶⁹.

He goes so far as to say that at the Crucifixion, the Godhead ‘withdrew’ from Christ. *Christus in cruce pendens non sentit divinitatem, sed ut purus homo*, ‘when Christ hung on the cross, he did not sense the deity, but (suffered) as a mere man’⁷⁰. In Christ, he says, “God has suffered, Man has created heaven and earth... the Servant is the Creator of all things”⁷¹.

X. SUMMING UP

According to Luther, *Sola Scriptura* leads us by the hand to *solus Christus*, as we saw. And Christ, the Word incarnate, who lives *in* the believer, *through* the believer, individually and together with other believers, leads us to consider the creature of the Word, the *creatura Verbi*, that is the Church, and its structuring by means of ecclesial ministry. But ecclesiology is a separate question.

ABSTRACT

Sola Scriptura, ‘Scripture alone’ is usually considered the formal principle of Protestantism: God’s revelation is communicated to believers through the word of God present in the Bible, and not so much by patristic tradition, liturgical practice, the teaching office of bishops and pope. Although Luther seldom used the expression he did consider Scripture as the prime source in theology, because it refers essentially to Christ. We interpret Scripture, he said, in terms of what draws us to Christ. On occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation this study attempts to present the Lutheran understanding of Biblical interpretation as well as Luther’s classical though personalist view of Christology on which it depends.

⁶⁸ LUTHER, WA 2, 148.

⁶⁹ LUTHER, WA 17/2, 243.

⁷⁰ LUTHER, WA 17/1, 72.

⁷¹ LUTHER, WA 39/2, 280.