

# Luther's Relevance for Contemporary Hermeneutics

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The words and actions of the medieval monk and scholar Martin Luther, primarily known as the initiator of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation in Europe, had far-reaching consequences not only for the church but society at large. Throughout the centuries, he has had his advocates and critics.

One of his own students is quoted as having said,

Everyone who heard him knows what kind of man Luther was when he preached or lectured at university. Shortly before his death he lectured on ... Genesis. What sheer genius, life, and power he had! The way he could say it! ... in my entire life I have experienced nothing more inspiring. When I heard his lectures, it was as if I were hearing an angel of the Lord. .... Luther had a great command of Scripture and sensed its proper meaning at every point. Dear God, there was a gigantic gift of being able to interpret Scripture properly in that man.

So said Cyriacus Spangenberg, preaching on “the great prophet of God, Dr. Martin Luther, that he was a true Elijah,” on 18 February 1546. [...]

His opinion differed from that of Luther's contemporary, Johannes Cochlaeus, theologian and bureaucrat in the service of Duke George of Saxony, who concluded the first (albeit polemical) biography of Luther:

Let the pious consider what Luther accomplished through so many labours, troubles, and efforts of his depraved intention, by whose rebellious and seditious urging so many thousands of people have perished eternally ... and through whom all Germany was confused and disturbed, and let go all its ancient glory...<sup>1</sup>

Here we have two decidedly different interpretations of one and the same man and the impact of his work: Luther the blessed “angel of God” or a damned and dangerous heretic. Were one to hear these two opinions without knowing the person's name one would probably not expect them to refer to one and the same person. This is a vivid example of the differences in the way in which

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2009), 1.

people interpret events and words. Interpretation depends on the interpreter’s perspective; consequently, there is a wide range of interpretations of texts, even of biblical texts, which is what hermeneutics is all about.

As a theory of interpretation, the hermeneutical tradition stretches back to ancient philosophy. The question of how to interpret the sacred Scriptures was posed by outstanding Jewish and Christian theological thinkers such as Philo of Alexandria, Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, emphasizing especially their allegorical nature.<sup>2</sup> They were convinced that the literal sense of divinely inspired texts may conceal a deeper non-literal meaning that can only be discovered through systematic interpretative work. Scripture tells us something about history (literal sense). It teaches us about faith and belief (allegorical sense). It guides us in moral questions and shows us the way to live a good life (moral sense). After all, it shows us our end and the fulfillment of all things (anagogical sense).<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther started reading the Bible with this sense of the fourfold meaning.<sup>4</sup> Step by step he came to reject allegorical readings and to emphasize the literal sense of Scripture. It is in the wake of his principle of *sola scriptura* that a genuinely, modern hermeneutics gradually developed. Rejecting the authority of traditional interpretations of the Bible, Luther’s concern was to set Scripture free to interact with the reader. Since then, it has been up to the individual reader to stake out their own path to the meaning of the text. This created new problems of communal reading and, consequently, hermeneutics in general changed.

While it is impossible to give an exhaustive overview of the main concerns of this huge field of research, one can single out some of the ways in which Luther’s reading of Scripture impacted modern hermeneutics. Preoccupied with subjective piety and without developing anything like an explicit hermeneutical theory of understanding, his reflections on interpreting the Bible shaped and gave direction to modern hermeneutics.

Indeed, the task and necessity of interpreting actually begin in the Bible itself, and a part of this essay will give an insight into the Gospel according to John and its special way of handling the problem of hermeneutics. It is obvious that the author narrated and interpreted the story of Jesus in a strikingly different way to the so-called Synoptic Gospels.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Karen Joisten, *Philosophische Hermeneutik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009), 35–47.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 46f.

<sup>4</sup> On the way Luther used and rejected the fourfold meaning of Scripture, cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung. Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Fotomechan. Nachdr. der 1. Aufl. München 1942, 1968).

The starting point of the Reformation was Martin Luther's lecture on and exegesis of God's Word. The discovery of God's graciousness revolutionized all aspects of Luther's life and thought, but first and foremost it changed the way in which he read the Bible. Luther became a reformer because he discovered a new meaning to the Bible. Time and again he stressed the constitutive importance of the authority of God's Word. The fact that the Holy Scriptures embody ultimate authority served Luther as the unquestionable basis for all his theological argumentation. First of all, Luther saw his own role as interpreter of God's Word<sup>5</sup> and as a preacher of God's promises.<sup>6</sup>

In our quest for Luther's relevance for contemporary hermeneutics, three points seem to be especially relevant. First, Martin Luther was mainly interested in the literal sense of the text, questioning the authority of traditional interpretations of the Bible and thereby freeing the reader to uncover the meaning of a biblical text on their own. Second, according to him, Scripture alone is sufficient to make someone a Christian, i.e., to create faith by means of the Holy Spirit. Third, in spite of the individual aspects of reading the Bible, Luther pointed out that Scripture was its own interpreter and therefore the criterion of each interpretation and doctrine. It is necessary to recognize that Martin Luther was well aware of the fact, that the Bible often contradicts itself and is not fully coherent.

### **The literal sense (*sensus literalis*) of the text**

My first point is Luther's appeal to the literal sense of the text. As a medieval scholar, Luther was well versed in scholastic theology and especially in the scholastic way of studying the Bible. At the beginning of his career as a scholar he interpreted the Bible by applying the fourfold meaning. The problem with this way of interpreting the Bible, especially with allegorical interpretations, was, according to Luther, that they tended to be too arbitrary.<sup>7</sup> Thereby, the Bible could too easily be used to confirm its interpreters' preconceived ideas. Especially, the church and its tradition held the authority to decide about the contents of the Bible, in other words, to decide about the truth. By reading

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<sup>5</sup> See Athina Lexutt, *Luther* (Stuttgart: UTB, 2008), 29.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. The promise is especially singled out by Oswald Bayer, "Luther as an Interpreter of Holy Scripture," in Donald K. McKim, *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 73–85.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ulrich Körtner, *Der inspirierte Leser. Zentrale Aspekte biblischer Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1994), 88–91.

Paul’s letter to the Romans, Luther realized that the church’s doctrine on God’s grace differs from the justification sermon he had found in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Luther was convinced that the truth concerning this important point could not be disputed. He came to reject allegorical readings and historical and grammatical aspects of interpretation became more and more important for him.<sup>8</sup>

In the preface to his commentary on Isaiah, he argues that the reader of the Bible needs to be equipped with the knowledge of the historical origins of the text and its author. The reader’s efforts to grasp the meaning of a biblical text include grammatical and philosophical training as well as patient meditation. Nevertheless, Luther’s aim is not to propose a correct interpretation or truth of the biblical texts, but to place the reader into a proper relationship to Christ. Luther’s quest is not hermeneutical but theological and existential. Historical and philological information is the means of answering theological questions. Luther’s 1518 *Pro veritate inquirenda et timoratis conscientiiis consolandis* (For the Investigation of Truth and for the Comfort of Troubled Consciences) shows that the inquiry into truth aims at comforting troubled consciences. For Luther, the Bible was not in the first place a historical document to analyze what was preached and practiced at the time of Jesus and the first Christian communities and thus setting a norm for the readers’ belief. Rather, his main concern was to comfort consciences that feared the last judgment. His theology is about human sin and God’s grace, the sinning human being and the justifying God.<sup>9</sup> Through God’s Word, God creates faith in the reader, bringing freedom and certainty to the individual. “Luther calls this type of speech act *Verbum efficace*, that which establishes communication, which frees one and gives one confidence: an effective, accomplishing Word.”<sup>10</sup> The word of the law kills the sinner and the word of the gospel saves them; thereby reading the Bible can be seen as an event by which text and reader interact.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jörg Baur, “Sola Scriptura—historisches Erbe und bleibende Bedeutung,” in Hans H. Schmid and Joachim Mehlhausen (eds), *Sola scriptura. Das reformatorische Schriftprinzip in der säkularen Welt* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1991), 19–34, 32.

<sup>9</sup> WA 40II, 3281f.; cf. LW 12, 311. Cf. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation*, transl. Thomas H. Trapp (Michigan/Cambridge: W. B. Eerdmans Co, 2008), 37–39. On the significance of justification for Martin Luther’s understanding of Scripture, cf. the results of Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia. Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998), 491–503.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bayer, *ibid.*, 53. Bayer identifies these promises—sentences spoken in the name of Jesus who brings salvation to the reader or hearer—as performative speech acts. He uses John L. Austin’s theory that analyses the function of sentences. Cf. John L. Austin, “Performative und konstatierende Äußerung,” in Rüdiger Bubner (ed.), *Sprache und Analysis. Texte zur englischen Philosophie der Gegenwart*, KVR 275 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), 140–53. Promises such as “Your sin is forgiven,” or “To you is born this day a Savior!” (Lk 2:11), can be understood as performative utterances effecting what they say. Cf. Bayer, *ibid.*, 50–54.

It was Hans-Georg Gadamer who in the twentieth century explicitly pointed out that understanding means an event and not only the search for a fixed meaning in a text.<sup>11</sup> He warns us about taking too simply and straightforwardly the idea that a text reflects precisely that which was in the author's mind. It is not uncommon that a person says or writes something and the addressee asks if they really mean what they have said. In general, expressing our thoughts adequately is not easy. Words and phrases often have no clear and unique meaning, but it is the situation that determines their meaning.<sup>12</sup> Thus, texts once written take on a life of their own because they can be read in different contexts by different persons. Based on these insights, reader response theories have shown that one and the same text may be understood in a completely different way by different people because reading and understanding depend on the reader's context, especially in terms of the historical situation, cultural assumptions, literal knowledge, age and gender.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, Gadamer points out that any act of reading or understanding is itself historical and interpretations are part of the endless stream of historical interpretations.<sup>14</sup> There is no objective perspective on an event or text. With reference to the Bible, this means that we cannot understand it from an objective and stable position. Human beings interpret events and words from their personal perspective which is historically and socially determined. Thus, Gadamer changed the classic hermeneutical circle clearly depicted by Schleiermacher, who had described the circularity of reading.<sup>15</sup> In order to gain the overall meaning of a text, we need to give proper attention to its details. But we can only appreciate the significance of the details if we have an impression of the general idea of the text. Therefore, we suggest a possible interpretation that has not yet been proven to be true. Schleiermacher called this initial

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band I (5. durchgesehene und erweiterte Auflage, Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), 476–78. Cf. Günter Figal, "Hermeneutik IV. Philosophisch," in *RGG UTB 8401* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2005), 1652–54; Joisten, op. cit. (note 2), 141–51.

<sup>12</sup> According to Martin Luther, words gain a new meaning in Jesus Christ if they are understood from the perspective of God's saving action in Christ. Cf. Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, "Luther II Theologie," in *TRE* (Studienausgabe, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 530–67, here 543.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. An introduction to reader response theories with further literature is presented by Ralf Schneider, "Methoden rezeptionstheoretischer und kognitionswissenschaftlicher Ansätze," in Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Methoden der literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Textanalyse* (Stuttgart: Metzler 2010), 71–90. Concerning the relevance of reader orientated theories for New Testament hermeneutics, cf. Oda Wischmeyer, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments. Ein Lehrbuch*, NET 8 (Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 2004), 154–58.

<sup>14</sup> Gadamer, op. cit. (note 11), 281.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ingo Berensmeyer, "Methoden hermeneutischer und neohermeneutischer Ansätze," in Nünning and Nünning, op. cit. (note 13), 29–50, here 34f.

inductive hypothesis formation divination. It is necessary to continue reading the text clearly, using it to falsify or verify the hypothesis with respect to the details, called comparison. Schleiermacher was convinced that, with the help of this method, one could grasp the meaning of a text and that it was possible to understand the text better than its author by means of the psychological interpretation. The central point of this hermeneutical circle was not the dynamic interaction between text and reader, but the verification of the true and normative meaning of the text which is equivalent to the intention of the author.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the study of history becomes an indispensable tool in the process of unlocking the hermetic meaning and use of language.

Gadamer abandoned the idea that a text has a fixed meaning. Understanding does not mean grasping the meaning of a text, but rather to understand ourselves and our own historical situation. Thus, the hermeneutical interest turns to the reader and the reading process. For Gadamer, understanding is not restricted to understanding or interpreting texts, but understanding is the way we are in the world. Living means understanding; a human being is a being in language. In this crucial point, Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, accepted his teacher's ontological and existential turn in hermeneutics. With Heidegger, the hermeneutical circle refers to the interplay between one's understanding of the world and one's self-understanding. Gadamer points out that a human being is a being in language and only through language the world is opened for us.<sup>17</sup> In order to understand ourselves we need to understand that we live in a linguistically mediated historical culture. This has consequences for our understanding of texts. Being part of our own tradition, literary works do not present themselves to us as neutral objects of scientific investigation. They are rather part of our horizon that shapes our worldview. This aspect is not to be seen as a hindrance to our ability to understand or to analyze, but provides the basis for our understanding. In this context, Gadamer rehabilitates the merit of prejudices. Against the conviction of the Enlightenment, Gadamer claimed that it is neither possible nor desirable to set ourselves free from our prejudices in order to come to an objective viewpoint. Prejudices in the sense of being formed and informed by tradition are part of our humanness and the creative and necessary grounding of all processes of understanding.<sup>18</sup>

Because tradition is always alive and in constant productive development, we have no access to a historical text as it originally appeared to its contempo-

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Berensmeyer, *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, *op. cit.* (note 11), 387f.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

aries. Trying to ascertain a text's exact historical context or the intention of its author is a wasted effort. The text is handed down to us through a complex and ever-changing process of interpretation, which becomes richer and more colorful as time passes. History, Gadamer pointed out, is always effective history, a fact that is not to be seen as a deficiency.<sup>19</sup>

We recognize the significance of a text by explicating and interpreting it and thus entering into a dialogical relationship with the past. Gadamer refers to this as the fusion of horizons. Our own prejudices are brought into a quasi discourse with the text. Through the effort of interpreting we understand that which at first appears alien and, in so doing, we participate in the production of a richer meaning so that we gain a better understanding not only of the text but also of ourselves. This reciprocal determination of text and reader is Gadamer's version of the hermeneutic circle.<sup>20</sup> To obtain a better understanding of a text and of ourselves, we must, in the first place, accept and be aware that our own viewpoint is determined by our own prejudices. In the second place, we have to give the text a chance to express its own conviction. Gaining knowledge of the text and knowing ourselves are interminable processes without determinate endpoints. Indeed, tradition, prejudice and understanding are part of a process, which is neither subjective nor objective, but to be seen as the constant interplay between text and interpreter.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the hermeneutical circle in the sense of Gadamer is not a method, but it is foremost the description of the ontological basis of understanding.

Clearly, Gadamer is not primarily concerned with the alteration and formation of the subject but with the ongoing process of interpreting texts and the production of an increasingly encompassing context of meaning. Every single act of reception and interpretation is part of this historical process. A text is the result of an interpretation, and it is the initial point of new and other interpretations. Because of the new historical situation and individual prejudices of the reader, each reading brings forth a new understanding. Thus, the reading process does not provide final conclusions about a text's meaning for us, but an endless stimulation to further inquiry. The ideas we start with, our presuppositions and presumptions, determine how significant a text becomes for us. Gadamer primarily investigates the conditions of understanding as such and these conditions are not to be removed or bracketed by appealing to a certain method. Rather, these conditions open up the world to our understanding.

<sup>19</sup> Joisten, *op. cit.* (note 2), 145–47.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Berensmeyer, *op. cit.* (note 15), 34–36.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

What do his insights imply for the literal meaning of biblical texts? First of all, it shows that the historical interpretation based on Enlightenment ideals of critical reason and rationality does and cannot provide an objective and clear meaning of the biblical text based on the intention of its author. The widespread assumption that literal meaning is to be identified with historical meaning and the author’s historical intention is the literal truth of a text is obviously neither reasonable nor valid. Each process of reading is a new event in which the horizon of the text fuses with that of the reader. Therefore no “objective” reading or interpretation is accessible. The consequence is that the reader with their own individual situation and knowledge is an essential part of the reading process in which meaning is produced by the interplay between text and reader.<sup>22</sup>

This theory poses two severe problems with regard to interpreting biblical texts. If—as Gadamer and especially reader response theories suggest—the reader is a necessary part of the reading process in order to produce meaning, how can the Bible be understood as *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (Scripture clarifying itself)? Can the Bible still be *norma normans* if its meaning depends not only on the text, but also on the reader and the reading process? Secondly, how is it possible to talk about truth if it is not possible to single out one clear meaning of biblical texts? I will deal with these two questions by referring to Martin Luther and to modern hermeneutical and linguistic theories.

## Sola scriptura and modern reception theories

The idea that a text may have just one meaning that once grasped remains firm and unchanging for all time is a modern concept, which neither the biblical authors nor Martin Luther subscribed to. Luther did not read the Bible primarily historically, but christologically. Nevertheless, the literal meaning is important for Luther because God has bound himself to God’s Word. No one can interpret God’s will without reading and interpreting the letters of the Bible. “Therefore we should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil.”<sup>23</sup> For Martin Luther, “the proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Wischmeyer (note 13), 20.

<sup>23</sup> “Smalcald Articles (1537),” in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 323; *BSLK* 455, 31–465.5.

man the sinner.”<sup>24</sup> Theology is about the relationship between God and human beings. Therefore a good theologian must discern between law and gospel, the first one accusing and killing the sinners and the second one justifying and saving them.<sup>25</sup> By means of God’s Word, God reveals God’s wrath and grace. In the law, God speaks against the sinners, and in the gospel God speaks on their behalf. If a word is to be read as law or as gospel depends on the situation of the reader. Indeed, the theological differentiation between law and gospel is to be interpreted as an anthropological category. One and the same Word of God can come across the same reader as law or as gospel as the case may be. The hermeneutical punch line of this differentiation primarily relates to the reader or hearer of the Scripture and the ever new situation of reception. Correspondingly, it cannot be ignored that Luther’s *sola scriptura* is not a formal principle denoting that the theological truth can be deduced solely from the letters of the text by using grammatical and philosophical tools. In fact, its content, the gospel of Christ, and its effect, the address of the sinner as the one to be saved by God’s grace, show an authority that is highly material.<sup>26</sup> Thereby Luther’s foundational thesis about the Holy Scripture as its own interpreter becomes clear. Only in this way can Scripture be the only source of faith, which excludes other authorities deciding about faith and the right interpretation of the biblical text. “[T]here is no book which teaches the faith except the Scriptures.”<sup>27</sup> “Christ has two witnesses to his birth and his realm. The one is Scripture, the word comprehended in the letters of the alphabet. The other is the voice or the words proclaimed by mouth.”<sup>28</sup> Faith comes by hearing the Word (Rom 10:17). The Augsburg Confession points to this key aspect of Lutheran theology by depicting that God gives the Holy Spirit by means of God’s Word, creating faith in those who hear the gospel.<sup>29</sup> “Rather, its authority consists in that it works faith. The Lutheran tradition has articulated this in such a way that its *auctoritas normativa* follows from its *auctoritas causativa*—because of the authority that it has to create faith.”<sup>30</sup> This is the obvious meaning of the Holy Scripture, or to state it more precisely, by

<sup>24</sup> LW 12, 311; cf. WA 40II, 3281f.; Cf. Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 37–39.

<sup>25</sup> WA 40I, 207, 17f; cf. Bayer, ibid., 38.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lexutt, op. cit. (note 5), 39. Joisten argues for a formal criterion, cf. Joisten, op. cit. (note 2), 69. Concerning this question, cf. Ulrich H.J. Körtner, *Einführung in die theologische Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 96.

<sup>27</sup> LW 52, 176; cf. WA 10I/1, 582, 12f.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 205; cf. WA 10I/1, 625, 14–16.

<sup>29</sup> “The Augsburg Confession,” Article V, in BC, op. cit. (note 23), 40; cf. BSLK 58, 2–10.

<sup>30</sup> Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 76f; Cf. Baur, op. cit. (note 8), 22, 30f.

means of God’s grace becoming flesh in Jesus Christ, God gives us the faith that brings us to a new birth from God (Jn 1:13).<sup>31</sup> Thus the literal meaning of Scripture has a spiritual significance which depends on its reception, that is the situation—the belief or unbelief—of the reader. Its truth is not enclosed in the letters, but it occurs fresh and anew when reading Scripture this way. Because of the need to be applied to the present situation, it is always something new. Understanding occurs as a sort of event that happens where and to whom the Holy Spirit wants.<sup>32</sup>

Luther’s differentiation between external and internal word can take us a significant step further. God gives God’s spirit to no one except by means of the external word.<sup>33</sup> This explicit reference to Scripture is a quasi protection against theologians or preachers who maintain to possess the Holy Spirit and are convinced that they talk in the name of God. The written word gives each Christian the possibility to prove if such claims are right or wrong. Despite dark passages in the Bible, Luther points out that the external clarity of Scripture is sufficient for the reader to recognize Christ.

The inner clarity of scripture is the light provided by the Holy Spirit, and thus the power of God himself, which enlightens the darkened heart of human being who is caught up in himself and is thus blind. [...] This light creates the human being anew, so that he confesses and recognizes himself to be a sinner and confesses and recognizes God as the one who justifies the sinner.<sup>34</sup>

The inner clarity of the Word is the process—initiated by the Holy Spirit—in which the reader applies the biblical text to their own life and situation. For Luther, reading Scripture is more than recognizing the letters and words of the biblical text, but there is an application of the text to the heart of each reader initiated by the Holy Spirit. By reading and interpreting the biblical text the reader is also interpreted by the text<sup>35</sup> or, in Gadamer’s words, the horizon of the text and that of the reader fuse.

<sup>31</sup> Wilfried Härle points out that the authority of Scripture has its basis in the revelation of Jesus Christ. Scripture is the witness of Jesus Christ, the authority of Scripture is derived from the authority of the revelation of Christ. Cf. Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1995), 113–17, 136–39.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. zur Mühlen, op. cit. (note 12), 549f.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Reinhard Schwarz, “Martin Luther II. Theologie,” in *RGG* UTB 8401 (Tübingen: Mohr, 2005), 573–88, 573. Cf. Baur, op. cit. (note 8), 30.

<sup>34</sup> Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 84f.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. also Gerhard Ebeling, *Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik*, in *ZTK* 48 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1951), 172–230, here 175.

In light of Gadamer's central insight and modern reception theories, namely that the reader plays an essential part in producing the meaning of a text, the biblical text itself cannot be seen as complete and sufficient.<sup>36</sup> The external word, consisting of the letters, is necessary but not sufficient. Nonetheless, with Luther the reception of a biblical text, the internal word, can be thought of as having been inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the biblical text creates the reader needed, so that they can believe in God and understand the Bible as Holy Scripture. Thereby, the biblical text can be conceptualized as the *medium salutis* for the reader whose individual horizon fuses with that of the Bible in the process of reading. Gadamer's conclusion and that of other reception oriented hermeneuticians did not necessarily exclude the *sola scriptura* of Lutheran hermeneutics. But biblical hermeneutics must be grounded in the concept of a reader whose reading process is inspired by the Holy Spirit.<sup>37</sup>

### **Scriptura sui ipsius interpres and the story of Jesus Christ**

From the above discussion, Scripture can still be seen as *medium salutis* that creates faith by the Holy Spirit inspiring the reading process. But how can one talk about the truth of a biblical text if one accepts that a text does not have a clear and objective meaning or content, one that only has to be detected by means of the right grammatical and philosophical methods? Because of the fusion each individual reader's horizon of the text on the one hand, and of the reading process on the other, each reader will construct another sense from a given text and its potential meaning.<sup>38</sup> Can the Bible strictly be seen as interpreter of itself? And, in what sense can the Bible be true if, like other texts, it does not have just one meaning?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This is the reason why Bayer clearly states that it is not the interpreter who makes sense of the text, but that the meaning of a text is expressed by the text itself. Cf. Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 69. This opinion contradicts the insights of modern hermeneutics and of cognitive theories, cf. Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics. An Introduction* (London/New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2002). Nevertheless, Bayer points out that reading is a circular process by which the reader interprets the text and the text interprets the reader. Cf. Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 69.

<sup>37</sup> One concept of a reader oriented inspiration theory is proposed by Körtner, op. cit. (note 7), 88–113.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. concerning the process of reading, Peter Müller, *Verstehst du auch, was du liest? Lesen und Verstehen im Neuen Testament* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 120–60.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida raises the more radical question if a text can even have a meaning at all. Cf. Joisten, op. cit. (note 2), 185–95; Peter V. Zima, *Die Dekonstruktion. Einführung und Kritik* (Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 1994)

Martin Luther was well aware of the fact that reading the Bible literally would not lead to one firm and forever unchanging interpretation and theology. Thus, he pointed to the fundamental content of the Bible in order to establish its validity. Luther holds fast to the conviction that the Bible is clear and has one single meaning in those texts which are decisive for people’s belief.

For what sublime thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher [Matt. 27:66; 28:2], and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, 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.<sup>40</sup>

According to Luther, the entire Scripture, Old and New Testaments, must be read and interpreted on the basis of Jesus Christ, and each struggle for understanding must primarily examine that which deals with Jesus Christ. Christ himself is the Word that became flesh (Jn 1:14).

[T]he measuring rod—the “canon”—is set up to establish what is absolutely truth, what is truly new, which will never become old. That which is eternally new has a name: Jesus Christ.

[In this way] all the correct holy books agree, in that every one of them preaches and drives Christ home. That is also the correct touchstone for evaluating all books: to see whether they drive Christ home or not, since all Scripture shows Christ, Rom. 3 [:21], and Saint Paul desires to know nothing but Christ, 1 Cor. 2 [:2]. Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Saint Peter or Saint Paul teaches it. Once again, whatever preaches Christ, that is apostolic, even if it were to be presented by Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod.

With absolute clarity one can see where the dividing line falls that distinguishes Christian theology from a Bible fundamentalism. One cannot state it any more incisively than Luther does when he articulates the criterion that uses specific, material content—against a claim for scriptural authority that is established on formal grounds.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *LW* 33, 25–26; cf. *WA* 18, 606, 24–31. Cf. Jörg Baur, *Sola scriptura*, op. cit. (note 8), 24f. He points out that Christ and Scripture are not identical, but Christ is the lord over Scripture.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 82, who is citing Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel*, 171. Cf. “The Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude,” in *LW* 35, 396.

Therefore, Luther is far away from teaching a biblicism that treats every biblical text as having equal importance. He is quite aware of the fact that there are writings within the biblical canon promulgating “another theology” as, for example, Paul. He puts the books whose theology he regards as questionable, i.e., James, Jude, Hebrews and Revelation, at the end of the canon, but he does not exclude them from the canon.<sup>42</sup> Thereby, Luther differentiates between the biblical texts without denying one of them its status of being a canonical text. For Martin Luther, the unifying subject of the New Testament texts is Jesus Christ, and the criterion of a text being the Word of God is Jesus Christ.

The texts of the New Testament are neither historical nor biographical in a modern sense, but they describe who Jesus Christ was, they offer interpretations of this person and its relevance for their authors' belief and they present the story of Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup> The name itself tells a story, identifying Jesus as the Christ, as the one who is sent and anointed by God.<sup>44</sup> Knowing something about Jesus Christ at the same time means learning something about God and God's story—love story—with Israel and the world. The New Testament texts are different interpretations of Jesus' worldly life. They are written by authors who wanted to describe how they experienced God through the story of Jesus and how this story became the foundation of and reason for their life and belief. They were not caught up in seeking to discover the history of Jesus Christ that lies behind the text—they did not even know the word “history” in our modern sense.<sup>45</sup> These texts present the Jesus Christ story that is not identical with the human Jesus and the life he lived, but they are interpretations and the earliest witnesses of Jesus Christ we have.<sup>46</sup> These texts can be seen as the first receptions of the story of Jesus Christ, reception comprehended as an interpretive understanding.

The hermeneutical process described by Gadamer can also be applied to understanding the New Testament texts.<sup>47</sup> The authors of the New Testament

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Baur, op. cit. (note 8), 25. Martin Luther was well aware of the fact that neither the Old nor the New Testament is free from errors.

<sup>43</sup> Eckart Reinmuth uses the term “Jesus-Christus-Geschichte” in order to discern the New Testament texts from the life of Jesus itself, from the “Geschichte Jesu Christi.” “Jesus-Christus-Geschichte” is Reinmuth's term to describe all the interpretations and memories, which were told or written because of the fact that the narrators came across Jesus Christ who addressed them individually. Cf. Eckart Reinmuth, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments. Eine Einführung in die Lektüre des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2002), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Ibid., 15.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Luther recognized the differences between the four gospels and the differences of their accounts, cf. *WA* 40I, 126, 20–22; Baur, op. cit. (note 8), 26. Luther preferred the Gospel according to John because John is the one who preached especially Jesus' words and his significance for belief. Cf. *WADB* 6, 10, 25f.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Reinmuth, op. cit. (note 43), 21.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. the analysis of the Gospel according to John by Takashi Onuki, *Gemeinde und Welt im Johannesevangelium. Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der theologischen und pragmatischen Funktion des johanneischen “Dualismus,”* WMANT 56 (Neukirchen-Vluy: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984).

lived in a historical context different from that of Jesus Christ, who was crucified two to nine decades before them. New questions concerning faith and Christian ethics arose, but it was not possible to ask Jesus as his disciples could do. The author of the Gospel according to John is the New Testament writer who approached this problem the most deliberately. He narrated the story of Jesus Christ from the perspective of the situation of his community, answering the community's questions by narrating anew his story, which means at the same time interpreting the Jesus Christ story from a new perspective. John is not primarily interested in historical facts or the chronology of the single events in Jesus' life, but rather points to the significance of Jesus—his life and his preaching and his relation to God who sent him—for the readers of his gospel. He explicitly points out that there is a difference between understanding Jesus and his significance before and after Easter.

After Easter, the Holy Spirit reveals to John's community that crucifixion and resurrection are descriptive of Jesus' life. God sent Jesus to save the world by means of his crucifixion and resurrection, both referred to as elevation in John. As John and his community came to know the significance of Jesus (Jn 8:28; 20:28), they understood Jesus' deeds and words as well as the traditions of his story in a new way (Jn 2:22; 7:39; 12:16; 14:26). If Jesus is revealed as God's Son at Easter, then he must have been God's Son since his birth, even before his birth. With this new insight, the author of John's Gospel perceives Jesus' whole life from a new perspective, that he truly is God's son. This is where according to Gadamer the horizons fuse.<sup>48</sup> The new perspective of the author, inspired by the Holy Spirit, who revealed to him the significance of Easter, led him to a new interpretation of Jesus' life. Now he saw Jesus' divinity also in his human being. But he was very conscious of the fact that this perspective was enabled after Easter by the Holy Spirit (Jn 2:22; 12:16). In theological terms, John's insight and that of his community can be described as revelation; in anthropological terms it can be seen as a new interpretation of the life of Jesus caused by the Easter event. This new insight was brought about by the Holy Spirit and influenced the narration of his story about Jesus Christ. John does not differentiate between events and interpretation because for him the events clearly show the nature of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Jesus' words and deeds are relevant with regard to the community's current problems. In his narration, the author pays special attention to those aspects of Jesus' deeds, which in his opinion are of special significance for his community's present situation. The accounts about Jesus are seen together and presented together

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 193–213.

with the experiences of the community. This dialectical way of narration is a consequence of this fusion of the two horizons that is especially obvious when Jesus teaches post-Easter insights before Easter (Jn 3:11; 9:4, 31, 17, 14 et al.).<sup>49</sup> The Gospel according to John can be seen as a new interpretation of the Jesus Christ story for John's community. Thereby the newly narrated and interpreted story can relate to questions and problems the contemporary addressees have. It combines two temporal horizons—that of the time of Jesus and that of the time of John and his community. These two horizons can be differentiated. This differentiation constitutes a hermeneutical tool which can help us better to understand the special construction of John. However, the two horizons cannot be separated because events and interpretation are intermingled.

Given this background, the question remains if this astonishing new interpretation of the Jesus Christ story is theologically legitimate. John repeatedly refers to the Holy Spirit.<sup>50</sup> The Paraclete serves to ensure access to Jesus' words and deeds by teaching the disciples and by reminding them of all his words (Jn 14:26).<sup>51</sup> The essential function of the Spirit according to John is related to proclamation and teaching.<sup>52</sup> The Spirit teaches everything and reminds them of Jesus (Jn 14:26). The Spirit also reminds the disciples that he will be their advocate in conflicts concerning the truth and that he leads them to the truth (Jn 16:8–15). The resurrected Jesus gives the Spirit to his disciples (Jn 7:39; 20:22). The Spirit supports and encourages the disciples in the trials of their belief. The truth of their belief cannot easily be demonstrated or defended against differing opinions. Therefore, the Spirit comforts them and ensures their belief. It is the Spirit who assures the disciples that the unbelief of the world is wrong, that Jesus did not fail but in truth returned to his Father and that the sovereign of this world is already convicted (Jn 16:9–11). In so doing, the Spirit enables the disciples to believe and reassures them that the unbelief and the mockery of the world cannot destroy their belief. He is the godly

<sup>49</sup> Onuki, *op. cit.* (note 47), 204.

<sup>50</sup> Concerning the pneumatology of John, cf. Udo Schnelle, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2007), 664–67; Udo Schnelle, *Johannes als Geisttheologe*, NT 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 17–31; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, HThK IV/1 (Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 33–58.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Schnelle, *Theologie*, *ibid.*, 56, who speaks of a hermeneutical concept of memory in the Gospel of John. Concerning the significance of pneumatology for Martin Luther's hermeneutics, cf. Asendorf, (note 9), 184–89.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Jörg Frey, *Vom Windbrausen zum Geist Christi und zur trinitarischen Person*, forthcoming. Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J., differentiates between the spirit reminding aspects of the past for the present on the one hand and the spirit teaching everything, i.e., teaching new things in the future. He writes: "Such future words cannot be tested or normed, although later we hear of cries for 'discernment of the spirit' (1 Jn 4:1; 1 Cor 12:10)." Cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J., *The Gospel of John* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2006), 250.

creator and preserver of their belief; he opens their eyes to the truth that can only be recognized by means of interpretative retrospection concerning Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> He himself leads them to the truth, to Jesus Christ who has gone to his Father (Jn 16:13).

The author of the Gospel according to John thus understands truth always in connection with God. Truth means God’s truth that was revealed in Jesus (Jn 1:14, 17). Jesus, John the Baptist, the Spirit, they all testify to the truth which is related to God or to Jesus (Jn 5:33; 8:40-45; 15:26; 16:13; 18:37). The Johannine Jesus himself says, “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the except through me’” (Jn 14:6). “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (Jn 18:37). That implies that it is not the author of the Gospel who has the truth and can give it to others, but God reveals the truth time and again. And the truth is bestowed on human beings by the Spirit. The Spirit of the truth (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) testifies to Jesus; he testifies what he hears from God. By means of his teaching, the Spirit continues the teaching of Jesus (Jn 14:26; Jn 16:13–15), and he informs the disciples about the truth (Jn 20:22f). The aim of this teaching is primarily to comfort the disciples and accordingly the readers of the Gospel and to confirm their belief.<sup>54</sup> Since they can no longer see Jesus (Jn 7:39; 14:26), it is necessary that the Spirit recalls Jesus to their mind. According to John, truth is connected with God or Jesus and the witness to him testified by the Spirit. And this witness creates and confirms the faith of the disciples. This implies that the truth is not to be found in the letters of the gospel, but in the message of God freeing the hearers from sin (Jn 8:32ff) and turning their hearts to God and Jesus (Jn 14:6).<sup>55</sup>

This corresponds to Luther’s insight that God is the one who works faith and salvation in everyone by means of Jesus Christ and by means of the Spirit who brings the word of Christ to the hearts of human beings. The truth is not included in the letters of the Bible, but the truth is in God and when someone reads the Bible and God’s Spirit opens their eyes to the truth during the reading process, then faith can emerge and the reader comes into contact with the

<sup>53</sup> Frey, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Schnelle, *Theologie*, *op. cit.* (note 50), 668; Onuki, *op. cit.* (note 47); Manfred Lang, “Johanneische Abschiedsreden und Senecas Konsolationsliteratur,” in Jörg Frey and Udo Schnelle (eds), *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditions-geschichtlicher Perspektive* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2004), 365–412.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Asendorf, *op. cit.* (note 9), 50f.; Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, “Geist/ Heiliger Geist/Geistesgaben IV. Dogmengeschichtlich,” in *3TRE Studienausgabe* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 196–217, here 208f.

truth. God's Word can be found there where Christ is preached. This is not only a dogmatic teaching; this is an event which happens ever anew during the reading process when God brings about the justification of the reader or hearer, when God forgives sin and thus frees from the fear of the future. Thus, neither interpretative skills nor hermeneutics can extract the truth from the words of the Bible, but it is only the Holy Spirit who can put the truth into words and create belief and assure salvation. This means that while the external word is necessary, it is the internal word which effects belief in each individual reader by means of the Spirit thereby demonstrating its truth. Therefore, it is not possible to grasp the truth of the Bible once and forever. It is necessary to read the Bible again and again and to let the Holy Spirit speak to one's own situation or, to put it in hermeneutical terms, to let the horizon of the text fuse with that of the reader. Each reading is at the same time an interpretation as we have seen before.

What is thus of utmost importance [...] is that one take seriously that a *reciprocal relationship* exists between that which is fixed and that which is changeable, between the verbal and the written, between the living Spirit and the fixed literal text. Whoever does not take this to be true misses the point about the unique character of the authority of Holy Scripture, which is none other than the authority of the living God himself. Luther took into account that what is fixed and what is open-ended both exist concurrently.<sup>56</sup>

This is in agreement with modern hermeneutical insights pointing out that a fixed text produces ever new interpretations during each reading process. The material criterion to prove if an interpretation or even a biblical text is good is its agreement with Christ and his message that brings faith and deliverance to human beings. Whatever Jesus Christ teaches in this way is God's Word.

When Christ is preached as the prophets and apostles present him, then when the preacher speaks, God speaks and the Holy Spirit produces faith, hope, love, and a joyful new life. "The poor Holy Spirit," said Luther, "doesn't want anything else to be preached." [...] "The preachers have no other office than to preach the clear sun, Christ. Let them take care that they preach thus or let them be silent."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 80f.

<sup>57</sup> Fred W. Meuser, "Luther as Preacher of the Word of God," in Donald K. McKim, *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 136–148, here 138.

The inner clarity of the Word shows the truth of the Word, but it is the gift of the Holy Spirit and does not become the possession of the human being. Similarly, a publication of the Protestant Church in Germany states that, from a Christian perspective, truth cannot be understood as a true and verifiable statement about reality, but truth is an event that happens. God reveals Godself by means of God’s Word as the one that a person can rely on. From a Christian perspective, truth happens when God is revealed as a God who frees me from sin and who creates belief by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>58</sup> The human witness represents this truth, but like every human action this witness is fallible.<sup>59</sup> Each reading, understanding and interpreting is a human reaction to God’s saving action in Jesus Christ and therefore fallible and not perfect. This holds true also for the Holy Scripture itself narrating, with human words, experiences with God and especially the story of Jesus Christ.<sup>60</sup> Truth happens when someone reads the Scripture and recognizes that Christ is its center and that Christ offers them salvation and freedom. But every human reading and interpretation is only an approach to the truth, an answer to the message God has spoken to me.

Reinmuth suggests that it is senseless, even dangerous, inhuman and fatal solely to rely on the letters of the New Testament.<sup>61</sup> John 8:44 can serve as an alarming example. The Johannine Jesus accuses his opponents, the Jews, of evil-doing, of lying and murder, calling them sons of the Devil. This biblical text was used, or rather misused over the centuries to legitimate crimes against the Jewish people. New Testament texts are themselves interpretations of the story of Jesus Christ and the critical question is if they are consistent with this story of Jesus Christ that they tell in a new way.<sup>62</sup> The Jesus Christ story or in Martin Luther’s words “what drives home Christ”<sup>63</sup> is the material criterion to prove Scripture and its interpretations.

Preaching the Jesus of the Gospels always meant preaching his love for sinners. Notice how gently the Savior deals with wounded spirits, Luther said to the Wittenbergers, how friendly Jesus is to publicans and sinners, how patiently he

<sup>58</sup> Cf. EKD Texte 77, *Christlicher Glaube und nichtchristliche Religionen. Theologische Leitlinien* (Hannover 2003), 14, at [www.ekd.de/download/Texte\\_77.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/Texte_77.pdf).

<sup>59</sup> Concerning the relation between human sin and human understanding of scripture, cf. Baur, op. cit. (note 8), 37, 41.

<sup>60</sup> With reference to the differentiation between God and Holy Scripture, cf. *ibid.*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Reinmuth, op. cit. (note 43), 37.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Thomas H. Trapp, “Translator’s Preface,” in Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), xiii, concerning this translation of Luther’s dictum, “Was Jesum Christum treibet.”

bears with the disciples who misunderstood him, what compassion for lepers, for the widow whose son had died, for blind Bartimaeus, and for the woman taken in adultery. When Luther preached to people who, like himself, had been taught to think of God and Jesus as threatening and distant [...], Luther delighted in speaking of the Lord as one who made ordinary people feel at home in his presence. Comfort and assurance were high priorities for Luther.<sup>64</sup>

Luther's foundational thesis that Scripture is its own interpreter not only refers to the letters and words, but especially to the effect that a biblical text or its preaching has and which must be brought into agreement with the central message about the subject of theology that "man [is] guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner."<sup>65</sup> That the essence of the reading process is not solely to be found in the text itself, but especially in the reading process by which a text gains its significance for the reader, is a salient insight of modern hermeneutical and linguistic theories<sup>66</sup> but would not at all be surprising news for Martin Luther. Luther was well aware of the role of the individual reader in the reading process since he considered faith to enlighten the understanding of the Bible while unbelief darkens it. The written word can only create faith when the Holy Spirit works through these very words on the heart of the reader.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, a formal understanding of the Lutheran *sola scriptura* misses the point about his hermeneutical insights for he knew that the texts of the Bible cannot be brought together to form an unambiguous theological system.

## Consequences for a responsible Protestant interpretation of Scripture

In dealing with some aspects of modern hermeneutics, we have seen that even such words as "meaning," "reading," "history," or "truth" are not really clear and have changed their meaning over the centuries. The author of the Gospel of John had no concept of what we now describe as "historical." Of course, for John "truth" is not the accordance of the description with the historical facts but

<sup>64</sup> Meuser, op. cit. (note 57), 138f.

<sup>65</sup> *LW* 12, 311, cf. *WA* 40II, 3281f.; cf. Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 37–39.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes conclusion that writing is a proposal and the reader defines its significance. Roland Barthes, *Literatur oder Geschichte* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), 126.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. e.g., *WA* 5, 537, 12. Cf. concerning the problem of tradition and interpretation Henning Paulsen, "Sola Scriptura und das Kanonproblem," in Hans H. Schmid/ Joachim Mehlhausen, *Sola Scriptura. Das reformatorische Schriftprinzip in der säkularen Welt* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1991), 61–78, here 65–78.

truth is personal, Jesus Christ himself is the truth. If the meaning of relevant words is ambiguous, how then can a sentence, i.e., a network of words, or even a whole text, a network of sentences, be clear at all? Hermeneutics warns us about taking too simply the idea that a biblical text says what I think it means. Thereby, the insights of modern hermeneutics and linguistic theories help us not to make absolute claims regarding our understanding of a biblical text. But, given this situation, how can we interpret the Bible at all? There was neither a perfect writer nor is there a perfect reader. It was Martin Luther himself who warned us that sin darkens human understanding, even the understanding and interpretation of biblical texts. Indeed, Martin Luther knew that Christ alone can be the teacher of the truth and the master of interpreting God’s will. He wished explicitly that

each person ought to refrain from mentioning my name, and not call one-self a Lutheran, but rather, a Christian. What is Luther? Is it not true that the teaching is not mine! In the same vein, I have been crucified for no one, Saint Paul [1 Cor. 3:4] would not allow it that the Christians would be called Pauline or Petrine, but just Christians. How did it happen to me that I, a poor, stinking sack of maggots, should have someone call the children of Christ after my unworthy name? Not so, beloved friends! Let us eliminate the names that identify various parties and just call ourselves Christians, because of Christ, whose teaching we have... I am and wish to be master of no man. I have, along with the community, the one, universal teaching of Christ, who alone is our master [Mt 23:8].<sup>68</sup>

The insights of modern hermeneutic and linguistic theories have shown that reading is a process that includes the cooperation of the reader. Therefore, reading is not only the reception of the meaning a text proposes, but reading is an action of the reader who is constructing the significance of the text in cooperation with the text.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, thinking about hermeneutics means thinking about human actions and this includes an ethical dimension. Based on his semiotic approach, Stefan Alkier understands interpreting as acting with signs. He formulates three rules for ethics of biblical interpretation.

<sup>68</sup> *WA* 8, 685, 4–16 The English translation is cited from Bayer, op. cit. (note 9), 8.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Müller, op. cit. (note 38), 120–60; Stefan Alkier, “Ethik der Interpretation,” in Markus Witte (ed.), *Der eine Gott und die Welt der Religionen* (Würzburg: Religion- & Kultur-Verlag, 2003), 21–41, here 22f.; The relevance of Martin Luther’s hermeneutics in the context of modern hermeneutics starting with the text analyses, cf. Asendorf, op. cit. (note 9), 51–67.

The first criterion he calls the principle of reality, which means that the text is a counterpart to the reader.<sup>70</sup> Each reading or interpretation must be reviewed with the question if a reader accepts a biblical text as something different, without trying either to use the text to legitimate their own preconceived ideas or blindly to accept everything the text proposes. Interpreters should attempt to explicate aspects of the text considering that an interpretation is never identical with its basis. In Gadamer's words, the biblical text has its own historical horizon which cannot be grasped totally by means of interpretation. Even if a reader reads a text or a book in a different biographical situation, they can gain the experience that different aspects of the same text become important for them according to their personal circumstances. In hermeneutical terms, the text can be regarded as autonomous in reference to its readers.

The second criterion for Alkier, that here is translated as the principle of joint practice, takes into account that there are different people who read and interpret the Bible with different results.<sup>71</sup> Interpretations that propose being the one and only true interpretation of Scripture are to be criticized. This criterion should not lead to disinterest and casual thinking that each reader can make their own path to heaven. Different interpreters of the Bible should work together in trying to discover the significance of a text for today. Interpretations that differ from my own can be consulted in trying to find an important aspect of the text I did not recognize during my own reading process. But all interpretations are to be respected because of the contingency of each interpretation, since, spoken with Luther, it is the Spirit who reveals individually the inner clarity of the word to the heart of each reader or, in terms of modern hermeneutical theories, because of the contingency of human thought. If, however, the fruits of interpreting a biblical text are in contradiction to that which drives Christ home, then the content of an interpretation is to be criticized.

Alkier's third criterion is the principle of context.<sup>72</sup> A good interpretation is aware of its own cultural or political situation. Gadamer has pointed out that the reader's horizon influences the reading and interpretation of a text. Therefore, it is reasonable to explicate one's own position and personal interests combined with the reading. The idea of an objective interpretation—even in a scientific context—can no longer be sought for in the light of the given hermeneutical and linguistic insights.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Alkier, *op. cit.* (note 69), 32–36.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–38.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Alkier, *op. cit.* (note 69), 38f.

This third criterion has also to be borne in mind when assessing the relevance of Martin Luther’s understanding and interpretation of Scripture for modern biblical hermeneutics. He, too, interpreted the Bible and wrote his voluminous works in a specific historical situation that influenced his reading of Scripture. Thus, both his interpretations and the effects of his interpretations must be thought about carefully in order to see if they are in accordance with the story of Christ. Surely our evaluation of Martin Luther’s teaching and its effects will lead us to a differentiated approach recognizing assets and drawbacks of his work and influence.