“The neglect of Scripture, even by spiritual leaders, is one of the greatest evils in the world. Everything else, arts or literature, is pursued and practiced day and night, and there is no end of labor and effort; but Holy Scripture is neglected as though there were no need of it… But its words are not, as some think, mere literature (Lesewort); they are words of life (Lebewort), intended not for speculation and fancy but for life and action.

“May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His holy Word with all our hearts. Amen” (1530 · LW 14:46).”

INTRODUCTION
Go to “Google” and type in the phrase, “A Layman’s Guide to Quantum Physics” on the search bar and you will get all sorts of interesting results. When I did so, the first item that popped up was an article titled, “A Layman’s Guide to Quantum Physics”. That seemed like a rather heady topic so I clicked on it and found an article by James Higgo written in 1999. I quickly perused the article and found that it actually seemed somewhat accessible and understandable to me.

So, when I have more time, I plan to return to read it more carefully. Perhaps with a little perseverance I might be able to crack this nut that in the past has seemed so impossibly hard for me.

This little exercise in self-edification raised me a question, “If quantum physics can be made somewhat more accessible to a science dunce such as I, why can’t Scripture be more accessible to the average layperson?”

I also wondered if Luther thought Scripture would be made so difficult to understand for the average literate person can’t pick up the Bible and readily understand it, then what’s the point? It’s no more accessible or useful to the average person than quantum physics, rocket science, or brain surgery. Scripture itself would be reduced to a topic reserved for specialists alone while the rest of us basically ignore it.

Anyone familiar with the history of the Reformation knows that leaving Scripture solely in the hands of ecclesiastical specialists was the last thing Luther wanted to do. Not only was it one of the main problems Luther faced regarding the controversy over indulgences, but it was the opposite of the legacy he wanted to leave to his followers when he was gone. Yet, ironically and unfortunately, that is exactly what has happened in the church that bears his name.

The Lutheran Church today too often relies more on experts schooled in philosophies and interpretive schemes foreign to and even inimical to the clear meaning of Scripture. Biblical scholars often deconstruct the Scriptures and then re-create them in ways completely unrecognizable vis-à-vis the original text. Pastors, using strange interpretative methods, or forcing the Scriptures to fit some foreign ideology, come up with conclusions which leave the average lay person scratching his/her head and saying, “How on earth did the pastor come up with that!”? But they reckon the pastor must know what s/he is talking about because, after all, s/he has been to seminary.

That may be a dangerous and unwarranted assumption. So, what are some basic principles one might look for in good preaching and biblical work?

LUTHER’S CHRISTOCENTRIC APPROACH
The first thing that comes to mind is what is often referred to as “Luther’s Christocentric approach to Scripture”. Jesus Christ for Luther is always the center of biblical witness. There are several implications of this Christocentricity.

First, the primary role of Scripture is to point to and proclaim Christ, and to anticipate His return.

Secondly, what Jesus says, taught, and/or did with regard to a particular topic is what is authoritative for the church over against anything else in the Bible including Old Testament law. For example, consider the woman in John 8 who was caught in adultery and was brought to Jesus. Jesus’ interaction with her shows that even if the OT called for the stoning of an adulteress, He instead showed compassion and did not condemn her. Nonetheless, He did tell her to, “Go and sin no more,” that is, stop her adulterous behavior. In short, Jesus modeled a new approach to sin and sinners.

Lastly, not only what Jesus taught and did, but also what the Apostles taught and did under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (“Who proceeds from the Father and the Son; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified…”) has authority over OT law.

An example of how this principle works came to me recently when I was browsing a website of the Southwestern Washington Synod of the ELCA. It is a site where pastors and laypersons share in an e-mail discussion of a variety of issues (I’m not sure if it qualifies as a “chat-room but, here it is: SWWA-Synod-Gracetalk@googlegroups.com). The topic at hand was how Lutherans read the Bible. A concern was expressed regarding certain expressions of biblical fundamentalism that take everything in the Bible too literally and without regard for context, biblically or culturally. The discussion turned to Deuteronomy 23:1 which says, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (NRSV). It was seen as an example of extreme OT
law which, when taken out of context and strictly enforced, is terribly lacking in compassion.

However, if we apply the principle identified above, we are reminded to do several things:

♦ First of all, we are to consider how Jesus dealt with persons who had physical afflictions and deformities. Jesus welcomed and showed compassion on the sick, the lame, and the lepers.

♦ Secondly, we are reminded that we ought not take this passage from Deuteronomy out of context, or in isolation (remember, it was not uncommon in primitive cults of the time for practitioners, while worked up into some sort of frenzy, to mutilate themselves – see 1Kings 18:28).

♦ Thirdly, we are instead to look to see if there are other passages which might offer a legitimate and mitigating perspective. For example, we might look at how Philip dealt with the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8: :27-39, as that eunuch certainly fit the criteria outlined in Deut.23:1.

Thus, with the example of how Jesus dealt with people/sinners, and when we see how the Church under the power of the Holy Spirit dealt with persons formerly rejected and condemned under the law, we find that many OT laws are at least put in a new perspective and perhaps even done away with. The Ethiopian Eunuch was welcomed and baptized, not excluded from the assembly!

**SCRIPTURE AS INSPIRED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT**

A famous German theologian by the name of Juergen Moltmann wrote a book titled The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit. We might here paraphrase that title to say that, for Luther, the Bible was and is under the power of the Holy Spirit. When commenting on 2Sam.23:2 where King David says, “The spirit of the LORD speaks through me, His word is upon my tongue”, Luther writes:

“In the first place, he (David) mentions the Holy Spirit. He (David) ascribes all that is foretold to the prophets to Him (the Holy Spirit). And to this and to similar verses St. Peter refers in 2 Peter 1:21, where he says: ‘No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man; but moved by the Holy Spirit, holy men of God spoke.’ Therefore we sing in the article of the (Nicene) Creed concerning the Holy Spirit: ‘Who spake by the prophets.’ Thus we attribute to the Holy Spirit all of Holy Scripture and the external Word and the sacraments, which touch and move our external ears and other senses. Our Lord Jesus Christ also ascribes His Word to the Holy Spirit, as He quotes Is. 61:1 in Luke 4:18: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, etc.,’ and as He quotes Is. 42:1 in Matt. 12:18: ‘Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen…. I will put My Spirit upon Him.’ And in Luke 1:35 we read that the Holy Spirit will overshadow Mary, that He will touch her, take her blood and impregnate her, so that the Lord is described as ‘conceived by the Holy Ghost.’”

(LW15, p275 - emphasis mine)

In short, Luther is affirming that the witness of Bible is attributed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Again, notice what he writes above, “we attribute to the Holy Spirit all of Holy Scripture and the external Word and the sacraments.” In other words, just as 2Timothy 3:16 puts it; “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”

This is extremely important and quite contrary to the emphasis of much modern scholarship, which seems to want to give more credit to the individual authors of the individual books than to the Holy Spirit. How often do we hear, “The Prophet Isaiah says…” rather than “God speaking through the Prophet Isaiah says…”? Or, “Luke says…” rather than “Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says…”? Tragically, what has been lost in this change of expression is the conviction that the Holy Spirit inspired and guided the writing of the Bible. Then, as a result, we have a book which is no different from any other book – the product of creative imaginations. “Why then,” a skeptical world asks, “should we pay any more attention to this book than to others?” However, if Scripture is under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, it then demands that we take it seriously as it is.

**THE CLEAR & CONSISTENT WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE**

Another principle that Luther used is one that I describe as “the clear and consistent witness of Scripture”.

Luther was a genius. One website estimates his IQ to have been higher than that of Bill Gates or Einstein. Whether true or not, the point is that Luther was no dummy; neither was he so naive as to believe that there were no difficult or seemingly contradictory passages in the Bible. So, by clear and consistent, it is meant that, for Luther, the meaning of Scripture was clear and did not need elaborate interpretive schemes to unwrap that clear meaning. For example, he had little patience with Thomistic (Roman Catholic) scholars and their dependence upon Aristotle (more on that later).

Neither did Luther have much to do with the allegorical, anagogical, or other metaphorical methods of the medieval period. For Luther, these methods gave way too much license to the “cleverness” of the individual interpreter and thereby robbed the text of its meaning. Instead, Luther went to the clear meaning of the text. However, by way of caution, Luther was in no way advocating what we call “proof-texting”, i.e., lifting a verse or phrase out of context in order to substantiate an already arrived at agenda. No. By “clear” he meant the clear meaning of the text because it was, he believed, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Luther believed that with perseverance, the reader would eventually find clarity in Scripture.

In addition, Luther also believed that Scripture was consistent in the sense of “SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS
By the way, it was Luther’s commitment to public education that came into his room and found him reading the Bible. Shocked at the discovery, the nephew said, “Uncle, what are you doing?” Fields responded, “Looking for loopholes!” Perhaps he was thinking he could sneak into eternity through the back door.

I admire those who are quick witted and who can come up with clever responses on the spur of the moment like that. However, more to the point, might it be the case, and a much less humorous one, that there are those who love to poke holes in Scripture? Whether the Deut. 23:1 passage, the question of the rabbit chewing the cud (Lev. 11:6), meats that were declared unclean, or other minor discrepancies, these passages are lifted up as a sort of smokescreen to cover a deeper desire to find a loophole so the skeptic doesn’t have to take Scripture seriously and is thereby free to do with Scripture as s/he sees fit. That might work in the secular world of linguistic analysis, but for Lutherans, especially those who take Luther seriously, such an approach ought to be nipped in the bud. For Luther, Scripture was always clear and consistent when it came to the essential matters of faith, life, and proclamation. Other matters and minor discrepancies were for him of little concern.

By the way, it was Luther’s belief in the clarity of Scripture that helped motivate him not only to translate the Bible into the vernacular (i.e. common German), but also to become a strong advocate for public education. He did so because, on the one hand, he wanted an educated clergy, trained in Greek, Hebrew and the humanities. Schools would be like a pipeline for the training of clergy. On the other hand, he also wanted an educated laity. However, Luther’s commitment to education for laity did not arise out of the same concerns that motivate secular people today, namely, the earthly desire to have a lucrative career where one might make a lot of money. Instead, Luther’s commitment to public education arose out of his bad experience with ecclesiastical hierarchy which could so easily go astray chasing unbiblical rabbits, as it were (e.g., indulgences, and persecution of reformers who merely preached the Word). As a result, Luther believed that an educated laity, well-grounded in the Bible, basic interpretive fundamentals, and the basics of the Christian faith (e.g., the Small Catechism) would stand a better chance of holding Pastors and the hierarchy accountable. 5

Isn’t it interesting that we have so strayed from these basic commitments that we now have church sponsored biblical scholars tearing down the Bible on the basis of having found “loopholes” who then deconstruct the clear witness of Scripture all in the name of some clever innovation they want to propose thereby reshaping the Bible in their own image? And these are the experts who are telling us that the Bible doesn’t really mean what it appears to mean? Hmmm. What would Doctor Luther say to that?

With all this in mind, Luther would have resisted with all his might those who allow the Church to be taken captive by principles of interpretation foreign to the witness of Scripture. That was why he rejected the scholastic system of St. Thomas Aquinas because of Thomas’ dependence on Aristotle and Aristotelian metaphysics. That does not mean that Luther was anti-Aristotle per se. In fact he found Aristotle’s “Logic” and “Rhetoric” quite helpful. However, he found Aristotle’s metaphysical system inadequate and unhelpful in terms of dealing with the dynamic witness of Scripture. For example, he wondered how we humans could possibly hope to encapsulate Christ’s promise to be present in the Eucharist in terms of Aristotle’s “substances” and “accidents”. For Luther, Thomas (Aquinas)’s system regarding Holy Communion is an interesting bit of speculation, but that’s all it is – speculation! And, more importantly, it undermines the clear promise of Christ who is present in the sacrament whether we understand how He is there or not! How do we know He’s present? Because He promises to be! Therefore, Luther could not understand why Thomas (and the Church) would seek to build a theology on such a system. Clearly, he concluded, they did not understand what they were doing.

In addition, returning to a theme we explored earlier, it took Scripture out of the hands of the laity and put it into

- Scripture that Luther, Scripture was always clear and consistent when it such an approach ought to be nipped in the bud. For Lutherans, especially those who take Luther seriously, might work in the secular world of linguistic analysis thereby the skeptic smokescreen to cover discrepancies meats that the question of the rabbit chewing the cud (Lev. 11:6) poke holes that was thinking he could sneak into eternity through the back room. Their discussion was legitimate and sincere. By the way, it was Luther’s clever -

- SCRIPTURE”. As we have seen with regard to the text about the emasculated male, one might take for example that passage in isolation and end up with nothing but a hard passage completely lacking in compassion. Then we could say, “This is ridiculous” and use this example as a precedent for deconstructing all meaning out of Scripture and rob it of its authority. However, Scripture inspired (not dictated) by the Holy Spirit emerges as very clear in saying that the rejection of the emasculated male would be contrary to the teachings of Christ who welcomed the wounded, the broken, and the unclean (e.g., lepers). What’s more, the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 was not only welcomed but baptized! Scripture thereby interprets Scripture and, via the authority of Christ, emerges as being clear and consistent in compassion rather than confused and hard-hearted.

- Let me add a caveat at this point – one which is in no way aimed at my colleagues at the synod website/chat-room. Their discussion was legitimate and sincere. However, there are those who seem to delight in finding obscure and antiquated biblical passages which they use to poke holes in the principles of “The clarity of Scripture” and “Scripture as the norm for the faith, life, and proclamation of the church”.

- I am reminded of a somewhat famous story about the late comedian, W. C. Fields. Fields was known to be a skeptic and hardly a man of faith. However, towards the end of his life when he was quite ill, his nephew one day came into his room and found him reading the Bible. Shocked at the discovery, the nephew said, “Uncle, what are you doing?” Fields responded, “Looking for loopholes!” Perhaps he was thinking he could sneak into eternity through the back door.

- I admire those who are quick witted and who can come up with clever responses on the spur of the moment like that. However, more to the point, might it be the case, and a much less humorous one, that there are those who love to poke holes in Scripture? Whether the Deut. 23:1 passage, the question of the rabbit chewing the cud (Lev. 11:6), meats that were declared unclean, or other minor discrepancies, these passages are lifted up as a sort of smokescreen to cover a deeper desire to find a loophole so the skeptic doesn’t have to take Scripture seriously and is thereby free to do with Scripture as s/he sees fit. That might work in the secular world of linguistic analysis, but for Lutherans, especially those who take Luther seriously, such an approach ought to be nipped in the bud. For Luther, Scripture was always clear and consistent when it came to the essential matters of faith, life, and proclamation. Other matters and minor discrepancies were for him of little concern.

- By the way, it was Luther’s belief in the clarity of Scripture that helped motivate him not only to translate the
the hands of the specialists and the hierarchy who could thereby twist it to suit their purposes. In the experience of Luther (especially regarding the indulgences controversy), history showed how unreliable the hierarchy and specialists could be.

**SCRIPTURE AND THE ROLE OF REASON**

The same was true with regard to Luther’s controversy with Zwingli. Unlike Thomas Aquinas, Zwingli was not dependent upon a philosophical system like that of Aristotle. However, in Luther’s view, Zwingli, like Thomas, imposed a false litmus test on Scripture – namely, his own reason. To simplify, Zwingli couldn’t understand how Christ could be present in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and be ascended into heaven at the same time. Therefore, in Luther’s view, Zwingli denied the clear witness of Scripture where Christ says, “This is my body… blood.” For Luther what other witness or testimony do you need than the clear word of Jesus?

However, for Luther there was perhaps no more dangerous threat to the church and the authority of Scripture than that posed by “the prophet of Zwickau”, Thomas Muntzer. Muntzer took Paul’s statement in 2Cor. 3:6, “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” and radicalized it to mean that because true Christians now have the Holy Spirit, they no longer needed the Bible (letter). He even went so far as to reject the Bible because, in his view, the Bible got in the way of direct experience of the Holy Spirit. The Bible was for him mere letter, paper, and ink – “Bible, babble, bubble,” he used to say.

Luther was outraged at such irresponsibility. He saw in Muntzer’s approach an open door to absolute chaos. As was mentioned earlier with regard to allegorical, anagogical, and metaphorical interpretation, Muntzer’s lack of solid grounding allowed way too much freedom for the cleverness of creative imaginations to come up with “inspirations” which in turn gave individuals license to do whatever s/he may want or feeling like doing with the Scriptures. Little wonder Luther said of Muntzer that he had swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all. Under Muntzer’s guidance, Luther wondered what “new thing” God might be accused of doing with no other authority than the whim of the individual making the assertion.

**CONCLUSION**

And so, Luther was again and again brought back to the Bible guided by the principles we have just laid out:

- the Bible as Christocentric;
- the Bible as inspired by the Holy Spirit;
- the clear and consistent witness of Scripture;
- the “Scripture interprets Scripture” principle to discern clarity;
- and human reason in service of biblical witness as opposed to the Bible being subservient to human reason, or whatever philosophical categories one might want to impose upon it.

Again, all of this relates back to Luther’s primary assumption, namely, that the Bible was inspired and guided (not dictated) by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the proper approach to interpreting Scripture is not to seek to poke holes in its witness; neither is it to look for loopholes. Instead, while recognizing that there are a variety of literary forms in the Bible, the proper approach to the study of Scripture is to ask in all humility: what is it that God is trying to say to me/us through the witness of Scripture?

“May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His holy Word with all our hearts. Amen.”

---

1 For a more thorough examination of this topic, please see my article “The Role of Scripture in Lutheran Deliberation” at the Word Alone website: http://wordalone.org/docs/wa-jepsen-essay-scripture-2007.shtml.

2 LW15, p.275.

3 For example, the on-line lectionary of the ELCA for Reformation Sunday, in the introduction to the lesson from Jeremiah 31, says that “the Prophet envisions a future day…” However, there is a problem with this interpretation. If this vision of a new day when God will write His covenant upon human hearts is simply the result of Jeremiah’s imagination, who cares? It would mean no more than a clever script from Hollywood when the scriptwriter envisions us going “Back to the Future”. It’s fun to imagine, but it’s not authoritative. However, if the vision God inspires (as we say we believe), and if the introduction to the reading were to say, “God inspires in Jeremiah a vision of a future day…”, then the text has divinely inspired authority!

4 Consider also Roland Bainton’s recap of Luther’s debate with Eck at Leipzig (1519) in which Luther said, “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it” (Bainton’s Here I Stand, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950, p.117)