

MARTIN LUTHER

on the Bible



Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553). 1529.

Martin Luther's deep engagement with Scripture caused the Lutheran Reformation. Writing in 1545, a year before his death, Luther recalled how his meditation on Romans 1:17 had affected him. The words of the apostle Paul, "He who through faith is righteous shall live," led Luther to a new understanding of the righteousness or justice of God. Luther remembered that "a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me." He no longer saw God's righteousness as the righteousness by which God judges us but rather as the way God justifies us, that is, puts us in right relationship with God.

Luther then "ran through the Scripture from memory," he later said, and found similar passages about "the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise . . ." In his "Reformation breakthrough" he came to recognize that God acted in the gospel to give away his righteousness. That was profoundly different from God acting in the law to demand righteousness from

us. Luther's insight had tremendous implications for how we read the Bible, how we engage with the Bible's message, and how we live as Christians in the world.

How Luther Read the Bible

For Luther, God's two ways of dealing with humans—law and gospel—gave both content and shape to the biblical message and provided the proper lens for reading the Bible. He recognized that truly understanding the biblical text always rested on fundamental principles of Christian teaching or doctrine. But he also understood these principles to arise from the Bible itself rather than from the mind of the reader. Today we may struggle with the idea that certain core Christian beliefs shape the way we read the biblical text. But Luther and other theologians through the centuries recognized that this is true. Luther always tried to make his presuppositions clear, to show his readers that they

originated in the Bible itself, and to show that they truly helped the hearer and reader to understand the biblical message.

☀ Law and Gospel in the Bible

Luther recognized both law and gospel as God's good ways of working in the lives of humans. Sometimes he equated the Old Testament with law and the New Testament with gospel, but more often he recognized that law and gospel were found in both parts of the Bible. God gives us the law to teach us to fear, love, and trust in God above all. The law also helps us to order society, to curb evil, and



Facsimile of a page of the New Testament printed in 1523.

to provide a standard of righteousness that guides human life. God gives the law so that we may know what good works please God. Luther recognized that some laws in the Bible were outdated or did not apply in his time and place. But he never dismissed biblical laws lightly and never merely because they were inconvenient or difficult. He taught that the biblical laws were one valid expression of the natural law governing humanity, law that could vary according to time and place. Most importantly for Luther, our failure to live up to God's law also reveals our sin and puts to shame all our assumptions about our own human ability.¹ This function (or "use") of the law drove humans to the promise of the gospel.

The gospel is the gracious promise of God in Christ. It grants forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation to the fallen and unworthy sinner. To read the Bible with the gospel as its heart is to "urge Christ" in each biblical text. "The Scriptures," Luther stated, "must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures." And again: "If one of them had to be parted with, Christ or the law, the law

would have to be let go, not Christ."² Like Christian interpreters since the earliest era of the church, Luther understood Jesus Christ to be the center of Scripture. Christ was found throughout Scripture, not just in the New Testament. For many prior interpreters Christ was primarily an example to be imitated. But Luther saw Christ first and foremost as gift (gospel) and only secondarily as example (law). For him, this carried very personal implications:

The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you . . . recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you . . . This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content . . . Now when you

have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you . . . Therefore make note of this, that Christ as a gift nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works. These do not make you a Christian. Actually they come forth from you because you have already been made a Christian.³

☀ Is the Bible the Word of God?

Repeatedly, Luther warned against confusing law and gospel, demand and promise, example and gift, when interpreting Scripture: “It is not yet knowledge of the gospel when you know these doctrines and commandments, but only when the voice comes that says, ‘Christ is your own, with his life, teaching, works, death, resurrection, and all that he is, has, does, and can do.’”⁴

So Luther never simply equated the Word of God (both law and gospel) with the written Scriptures. On the contrary, he taught that the word of God is essentially oral in character; it is a “living voice.” In a famous passage from the *Church Postil* of 1522, Luther contrasts Moses as a writer of “doctrine” with Christ, who commanded that his teaching “should be orally continued giving no command that it should be written.” That the New Testament finally took written form is, for Luther, evidence of “a serious decline and a lack of the Spirit which necessity forced upon us....”⁵

Where is the Word then? Luther believed that all humanity, all institutions, including the church, are affected by the hurly-burly of events and infected with sin. God’s Word is mingled with and hidden under the forces that oppress the church at all times and places. God’s Word is realized in the community of faith only because the Word itself acts in us. It forms in us confession of faith, a loving response to divine grace. Although that has been true from Adam to the present day, knowledge and proper understanding of God’s Word are not a continuous, unbroken achievement of the church. Rather, our knowledge of God is best understood as God’s gift, which draws the spontaneous response of the Christian community to the gospel. It is a response created within the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit’s work in the Word. God, not doctrinal propositions, a pope, or a succession of bishops, provides faithfulness in the church. Therefore, under the guidance of the Spirit, responsible faith requires critical discernment of the text of Scripture, not just listening to the traditions of the church.⁶



Genesis. Fontispiece Depicting the Creation,
From the Luther Bible, 1st edition, 1534.