"You Shall Bear Witness to Me": Thinking with Luther About Christ and the Scriptures

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“You shall bear witness to me”: 
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GARY M. SIMPSON

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; 
and it is they that testify on my behalf.

–John 5:39

The Bible has become problematic, as evidenced by the many programs of biblical 
literacy, the online introductions, and the wrangling about its use. Christians 
still receive and give the Bible, of course; they still read and listen, still memorize and 
recall. But is the relationship between the Scriptures and Christians as vibrant as it 
once was? And what about the future? Such questions are not new, even though new 
issues, both modern and postmodern, have given rise to them in our time.2

In this essay, we will think with Luther about the relationship between Scrip-
tures and Christian life. Of necessity, we will have to make a long story short, ad-
dressing rich and complex matters in a compact and stylized fashion. On the way

1John 15:26–27 is cited here as Luther cited it. See Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. 
Jude” (1546; 1522) in Luther’s Works (hereafter LW), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 55 vols. (Phila-

2See Gerhard Ebeling, The Word of God and Tradition (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); and Edward Farley and 

To get Scripture right, we must start with the right questions, as Martin Luther 
did: What is Scripture for? What is the relation between Christ and Scripture? 
Between law and gospel? How does the gospel function as promise?
we will take up four themes: what Scripture is good for; Christ and Scripture; law and gospel; and gospel as promise.

**WHAT IS SCRIPTURE GOOD FOR?**

Discussions of Scripture these days often turn quickly to the discourse of “the authority of the Bible.” The question of the Scriptures and authority is certainly legitimate, but a problem arises in the way the question is taken up. When our conversation about the relation between the Holy Scriptures and Christians gets framed right from the start around the question of authority, then “the authority of the Bible” discourse functions like a Trojan Horse virus, which woos the user into thinking that it is beneficial but, once unleashed, it wreaks havoc across the system. “The authority of the Bible” discourse often deputizes the user of the term, demonizes the other, and thoroughly stops the conversation. Unfortunately the discourse, in its manifold variations, is all too familiar: “What about the authority of the Bible? Aren’t you questioning, even destroying, the authority of the Bible?” Through the mystique of this discourse, authority becomes authoritarianism.

Martin Luther posed the question in a more fruitful manner: “What is Scripture good for?” What is its purpose? His immediate short answer was that the Scriptures “test everything,” quoting Paul’s mandate (1 Thess 5:21), as he did often. That is, the Holy Scriptures are good for testing all other (human) writings and what they teach. Simply put, in Luther’s immediate context their purpose and authority was to judge his writings and anyone else’s, even councils’ and popes’—perhaps especially councils’ and popes’. On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X had issued the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, which demanded that Luther retract forty-one erroneous teachings. “[N]o one is bound to believe more than what is based on Scripture,” Luther replied. In the two years following this immediate reply, he continued to probe the question of the Scriptures’ purpose in greater depth and for a wider context.

**CHRIST AND SCRIPTURE**

In the wider context of Christian life, Holy Scripture’s purpose to judge other writings is dependent on the more comprehensive and primordial purpose,
namely, “to promote Christ.” Like few before or since, Luther focused on this superlative purpose. Promoting Christ is the Scriptures’ solid foundation, though not their only criterion. Indeed, what most makes the Scriptures scripture is this promotion of Christ. All other purposes are derivative. By focusing on Christ and Scripture our conversation together will bear more beautiful and blessed fruit.

What most makes the Scriptures scripture is this promotion of Christ. All other purposes are derivative.

Luther highlighted this focus on Christ in an exemplary way in his “Prefaces to the New Testament,” which he wrote precisely for laypeople as they read the Bible in German. Especially well known is his preface to James. In his September Testament (German Bible) of 1522, Luther listed and numbered the first twenty-three books of the New Testament as we have them today. He then left open a space of about an inch and listed, without numbering, the last four: Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. In the prefaces to these four, he explained why they were separated without being numbered.

Like others before him, Luther was taking up the question of the canon of the Scriptures. His prime criterion for being cautious when reading, hearing, and heeding the last four books also reveals his understanding of the superlative salutary relation between the Scriptures and Christ. First, Luther quoted Jesus’ injunction to the apostles, “You shall bear witness to me” (John 15:27), as if addressed directly to the Holy Scriptures themselves.

All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate [treiben] Christ. For all the Scriptures show us Christ, Romans 3:21; and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ, I Corinthians 2:2. Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaching Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it. ⁵

Six aspects of Luther’s thinking are noteworthy. First, the criterion “whatever inculcates Christ” aptly conveys Luther’s conviction that the superlative purpose of the Holy Scriptures is to promote Christ. ⁶ Any other purpose derives from that primary purpose. Second, in the paragraph just prior to the one quoted, Luther pointed to justification by faith alone as the companion criterion with was Christum treibt. Indeed, he always stressed Christ and justification together as the vec-

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⁵Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude” (1546, 1522), in LW 35:396.
⁶Theologians regularly use the German “was Christum treibt” to encapsulate Luther’s criterion (see for instance, Carl Braaten, Principles of Lutheran Theology [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983] 5). The English word “inculcate” does not ride well in contemporary speech. Inculcate connotes a constant iterative impressing of something upon something else, which does catch Luther’s use of treiben. I use the word “promote.” Luther’s sixteenth-century German is, “ob sie Christum treiben, oder nit” (in D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 71 vols. to date [Weimar: Herman Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–], WA DB 7:384) (hereafter, WA).
tor for the singular superlative purpose of God, a relationship we will explore under the theme of law and gospel. Third, Luther used verbs like “preach,” “teach,” and “inculcate” because they naturally carry oral, spoken connotations, again as we will see in our discussion of law and gospel. Fourth, Luther employed the same notion of testing and judging that he had used just a little more than a year earlier. Here he provides the theological depth to his earlier formulation. Precisely because Christ is the test and judge of the Holy Scriptures are the Scriptures qualified to test and judge all other writings. Furthermore, and most important, precisely as Christ is the test and judge of the Scriptures do the Holy Scriptures test and judge all other writings. This point is crucial for Luther’s thinking about Scripture and law, which we will consider in a subsequent essay. Fifth, the identity of human authors means little in comparison with the promotion of Christ. In this sense, Christ himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is the one who bestows “worthiness” and weightiness on whatever is written, scriptural or otherwise. For this reason, the making of creeds and confessions that promote Christ is a thoroughly and preeminently Christian way of life. Luther, like those who followed his lead, not only considered the Holy Scriptures the norming norm of all other writings, and thus not normed by any other writings, but he also considered Christ himself to be the norm even of the Scriptures. In this way, Christ is the “canon within the canon.” Finally, by emphasizing that “all the Scriptures show us Christ,” Luther established an intrascriptural warrant for his own insight. He did not just conjure up this stuff. The Holy Scriptures themselves recognize their own utter dependence on Christ. Read the Bible for yourselves, Luther was saying.

Luther used two images that especially convey this dependence of the Scriptures on Christ. First, in his well-known “Lectures on Galatians,” Luther remarked that the Scriptures are the “servant” while Christ is “the King of Scripture.” During this same time period, Luther, as was the custom in those days, composed a series of theses for the doctoral examinations of two students, Hieronymus Weller and Nikolaus Medler. Again, he pressed the same point, which these doctoral candidates were then to defend.

40. Briefly, Christ is the Lord, not the servant, the Lord of the Sabbath, of law, and of all things.
41. The Scriptures 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....
49. Therefore, if the adversaries press the Scriptures against Christ, we urge Christ against the Scriptures.

7Luther addressed the “worthiness” of Scripture in “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels” (1521), in LW 35:123. This brief instruction was originally the “dedicatory letter” to the Wartburg Postil, his first volume of model sermons for evangelical preachers.
8The Latin is norma normans non normata, literally “the norming norm not normed by any thing else,” sometimes shortened to norma non normata, “the norm not normed.” Carl Braaten’s statement is on target: “Luther’s old dictum, was Christum treibt, is still the best way to speak most clearly of the Bible’s authority” (see Braaten, Principles, 23). Also see Patrick R. Keifert, “An Ecumenical Horizon for ‘Canon within a Canon?’” Currents in Theology and Mission 14 (June 1987) 185–193.
9Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), in LW 26:295.
50. We have the Lord, they the servants; we have the Head, they the feet or members, ones which the Head necessarily dominates and takes precedence. Luther forbade the elevation of Scriptures at the diminution of Christ.

“Swaddling clothes are nothing else than the Holy Scripture, in which the Christian truth lies wrapped”

In 1521, Luther expressed the Scriptures’ wonderful dependence on Christ in a second, most beloved image. We can “read and see for ourselves how Christ is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger...of the [Old Testament] prophets.” A year later, in his 1522 model Christmas Day sermon, he again returned to this image: “Swaddling clothes are nothing else than the Holy Scripture, in which the Christian truth lies wrapped; faith is described in it. For the Old Testament contains nothing else than Christ as he is preached in the gospel.” And a few months later, in his “Preface to the Old Testament,” he once again employed the image to counter the common opinion of the day that the Old Testament was too simple and lowly in comparison to the New Testament and that it could thereby be ignored.

Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the riches of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find that divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. Simply and lowly are these swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ who lies in them.

As he famously quipped to Erasmus a couple of years later, “Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?” Because Christ has lain therein from his birth, the Scriptures beautifully and irreplaceably remain his original manger. Writing has a salient preservative dimension, but that remains derivative.

LAW AND GOSPEL

“You shall bear witness to me” (John 15:27, in Luther’s translation). Jesus, after promising the apostles that the Holy Spirit would bear him witness, immediately gave them the same assignment. And this assignment, argued Luther,
pertained both to the apostles’ oral and written proclamation. That is, Jesus purposed the Scriptures likewise to bear him witness. This same promise extending from the Holy Spirit through the apostles pertains also to us. For this reason, Luther urged those who would study theology to implore the Holy Spirit to enlighten us so that we preach, proclaim, and promote nothing less than the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures.  

As Christ has priority over the Scriptures, so too does the oral presentation of the gospel have priority over the written. This, of course, was historically the case in the early church. Luther, however, also understood this prioritization theologically. And the gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called his teaching not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth.  

Jesus Christ himself comes to us, then, expressly through the living word, the living voice of the gospel—viva vox evangelii—comprised of both a report of something and an address to and for someone. And the word “Gospel” signifies nothing else than a sermon or report concerning the grace and mercy of God merited and acquired through the Lord Jesus Christ with His death. Actually, the Gospel is not what one finds in books and what is written in letters of the alphabet; it is rather an oral sermon and a living Word, a voice that resounds throughout the world and is proclaimed publicly, so that one hears it everywhere.  

The direct address of such preaching, proclaiming, and promoting “is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him.” “Therefore,” as Luther famously exclaimed, “the church is a mouth-house, not a pen-house.”  

**Gospel as Promise**  
The gospel, then, is both a report of something and an address to and for someone. As address, the gospel is performative, as contemporary communication theorists would say it. It is active; it does something. Long ago, the prophet Isaiah made this performative point: “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11).

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16 See Martin Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings” (1539), in LW 34:285–286.  
17 Luther, “Brief Introduction,” in LW 35:123.  
18 Martin Luther, “Foreword to the Epistle of St. Peter,” in LW 30:3. Also see Martin Luther, “Sermon on Epiphany (Matthew 2:1–12),” in Lenker, Sermons, vol. 1, 371ff.; here Luther noted that the writing of New Testament books was “a necessity” because of a “detriment” and “infirmity” of human nature.  
21 See John L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); and Gary
Law and gospel are both performative; they perform their own respective “office,” as Luther liked to put it. Keeping the respective offices of the law and gospel rightly distinct and coordinated is of the upmost importance. The office of the law or of Moses—Luther used them interchangeably—is twofold. First, the law’s official work is to command and give examples of what humans are to do and not do, thereby preserving human society by restraining sin and evil and promoting human flourishing. Second, the law’s official work is to accuse people of sin, to make them recognize their sin, and thereby to prepare them for the gospel by putting their Old Adams and Eves to death.

The office of the gospel is likewise twofold. First, the gospel brings Christ, who through the power of the Holy Spirit creates faith, bringing to an end the law’s accusation of the sinner. Second, faith in Christ brings love for the neighbor, again through the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason Luther regularly quoted Jesus, “A good tree [faith] produces good fruit [love]” (Matt 7:17).

Luther confessed the office of the gospel as the doctrine of justification by faith alone. With this doctrine he emphasized the performative, address character of the gospel. The Holy Scriptures bring out this characteristic when they use the concept of “promise” in reference to Christ or the gospel. “So you see that the gospel is really...a book of divine promises in which God promises, offers, and gives us all his possessions and benefits in Christ.”

Luther laid bare the promissory nature of the gospel with special clarity as he wrestled with the sacrament of Holy Communion in the context of its numerous abuses at the time.

This testament of Christ [this cup of the new testament] is foreshadowed in all the promises of God from the beginning of the world; indeed, whatever value those ancient promises possessed was altogether derived from this new promise that was to come in Christ...[A]ccess to it is to be gained, not with any works, or powers, or merits of one’s own, but by faith alone. For where there is the Word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting [person].

As if to make sure that we do not miss or even underestimate the point, he intensified his rhetoric.


23Luther, “Brief Introduction,” in LW 35:120.
For God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with [us] otherwise than through a word of promise, as I have said. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise....For anyone can easily see that these two, promise and faith, must necessarily go together. For without the promise there is nothing to believe; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith.25

Faith alone justifies, the Lutheran confessors argued at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, because the gospel is “based upon the nature of a promise.”26

Luther offered case after case of God’s promises from the beginning of the world and then concluded: “So, too, it is not yet knowledge of the gospel when you know these doctrines and commandments [which appear in the New Testament], 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.’”27 In a Lutheran imagination the nature of a promise stipulates the gospel’s relational way of being—its promissory ontology of relationality, if we were to use current philosophical categories.

Still, the promissory character of the gospel is constantly endangered. “See to it, therefore, that you do not make a Moses out of Christ,” Luther constantly warned.28 “Be sure, moreover, that you do not make Christ into a Moses, as if Christ did nothing more than teach and provide examples as the other saints do, as if the gospel were simply a textbook of teachings or laws.”29 It was so common to turn Jesus into “Moses at his most Mosaic”—and isn’t it still, for who can ever forget the ubiquitous and, thereby, iniquitous WWJD!—that Luther expanded on the problem and its resolution.30 Jesus, of course, is an example, but as an example “this is the smallest part of the gospel, on the basis of which it cannot yet even be called gospel.” Indeed, “on this level Christ is of no more help to you than some other saint.”31 You would be better off modeling your life after your Christian grandmother since she at least must confront contemporary life. Rather, emphasized Luther:

You must grasp Christ at a much higher level….[A]ccept and 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. On this you

25Ibid., LW 36:42.
28Ibid., LW 35:360.
30Martin Luther, “Commentary on Psalm 90” (1534), in LW 13:77. Here he makes up a Latin phrase that is a sheer hoot. The suffix for the superlative degree of an adjective is *issimus*; Luther’s phrase is *Mosissimus Moses*—Moses to the superlative degree, to the nth degree (see WA 40/3:486).
31Luther, “Brief Instruction,” in LW 35:119.
may depend as surely as if you had done it yourself; indeed as if you were Christ himself.32

Luther could not emphasize enough that, through the promissory character of the gospel, Christ “belongs to you.” He poignantly brought out this formative quality of the gospel promise in two beloved sermons from 1519 and in his treatise on Christian liberty: “Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours…. [H]e who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ.” In this “becoming ours” Christ “takes upon himself our form…. [and] we take on his form” so that “each one should become as it were a Christ to the other.”33 Precisely because the promise’s performative character forms us, “the scriptural Word… is formative before it is normative,” as Robert Bertram persuasively argues.34 Indeed, the Scriptures norm doctrines so that they become the ground rules for our speaking of Jesus—report and address—as the Holy Spirit’s unconditional promise of God’s salvation.

BRIEF SUMMARY

Our four themes have shown us that the Scriptures’ authority is derivative, rooted in the Scriptures’ primordial purpose to promote Christ in combination with the Scriptures’ character as the original “manger” of Christ. What the Scriptures are good for proceeds, therefore, from their formative power to shape Christian faith and life and extends outward to their normative quality as precedent for and judge of all other writings. In a subsequent *Word & World* essay we will explore four additional themes that will round out our thinking with Luther on these important matters—Scripture interprets itself, Scripture and natural law, natural law and reason, Christian love and vocation. In Christian conversation, preemptive recourses to “the authority of the Bible” discourse become the canary in the coal mine, forewarning a precipitous breach of the Scriptures’ own gospel threshold of authority. Luther and the Lutheran confessors recovered the threshold of gospel authority in their time. Will those today, who claim Luther’s name, again fall below that threshold?  

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32Ibid.