

# Prima Scriptura: Saving *Sola Scriptura* from Itself

By Paul R. Hinlicky

**Abstract:** Taking bearings from Walter Altmann's attempt to retrieve a proper understanding of *sola Scriptura*, this essay argues that the Latin ablative, "by way of the Scripture alone," presupposes a nominative *solus Christus* whom the Spirit proclaims in turn "by way of the Scripture alone"—a *dialectic* of Word and Spirit, a *virtuous* circle. It clarifies this proper understanding of *sola Scriptura* over against modern biblicism, crude and sophisticated, by teasing out its implications for dogmatics as a critical discipline.

**Key Terms:** Walter Altmann, biblical hermeneutics, dogmatics, Martin Luther, historical criticism, canon criticism, canonicity

## The State of the Question

A generation ago in his *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, Brazilian theologian Walter Altmann asked whether the Bible was being forgotten by Protestants while it was becoming the book of Catholics. His book made a compelling and sophisticated case for the critical appropriation of Luther's way of theologizing from the Bible for the pressing post-colonial situation. But he observed that it was among Catholic "base communities" that the Bible was freed from "prefabricated dogmatic interpretations as well as from suffocating exegetical erudition monopolized by theologians . . ." to take on "an impressive vitality in the lives and relationships of the people."<sup>1</sup>

One might say the function of Scripture as the Spirit's *matrix*<sup>2</sup> for evoking and forming faith that works hope amid hopelessness and thus becomes operative in love for the broken world was being rekindled in such communities—and indeed in

many others like them across the globe. By contrast, the problem Altmann identified in Protestant churches descended from Luther's reformation is whether the *sola* in *sola Scriptura* is being taken in such a way that the Bible is abstracted from its habitat in the particular community of faith for which it was written and is needed. As I also observed in a study now a half generation ago, under such circumstances *sola Scriptura* self-destructs.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, Altmann worried that among the Eurocentric Protestants of his Brazilian Lutheran church two countervailing but equally debilitating tendencies predominated: conservatives used the Bible solely to corroborate the established doctrine from the sixteenth century, while liberals were leaving the Bible behind as cognitive resource (let alone as sole source) for Christian practice and thought, turning instead to the social sciences. Altmann found in his study of Luther an alternative to these equal and opposite reactions to European modernity.

One comment: European modernity demands that claims to knowledge be founded on a sure

Paul R. Hinlicky is Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies at Roanoke College in Virginia. He is author of *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Ferdmans, 2015), *Divine Simplicity: Christ the Crisis of Metaphysics* (Baker Academic, 2016), and *Between Humanist Philosophy and Apocalyptic Theology: The Twentieth Century Sojourn of Samuel Siefan Osuský* (T&T Clark, 2016).

knowledge of knowledge. A knowledge of knowledge, of course, is the very essence of abstraction. And to reify its alleged results in an epistemology creates an optical illusion: the apparent certainty of founding actual knowledge on a ground beyond contestation just because it is out of this world.<sup>4</sup> With this modern quest for a foundationalist doctrine of Scripture, however, the *sola* in *sola Scriptura* takes on a burden that it cannot bear, as liberals came quickly to see but conservatives still willfully ignore.<sup>5</sup>

### Ablative vs. Nominative

Altmann pointed out how, in contrast to both today's conservatives and liberals, Luther made discoveries and formulated doctrine about the gospel for his times *sola Scriptura*, that is, *by way of* Scripture. Note carefully the import of the Latin *ablative, sola Scriptura*, and how it differentiates from the reification of the Bible in conservative repristinism. This latter treats the term as if it were a *nominative*, that is, as if the Bible were a self-interpreted deposit fixed once and for all. In the historical Luther's way, however, scriptural reasoning is the very method of theology's knowledge of God in Christ *hic et nunc*, where the church in turn exists in the mission of the Father's Son to the nations in the power of the Spirit. The Bible can have this normative role in theology because, and only because, Scripture is first of all the powerful Spirit's matrix of faith in God as Father by conformation to God's Son. In just this way, Scripture first of all and continually gives faith indispensable and irreplaceable language for naming, speaking, addressing God—thus also in theology for distinguishing true God from idols that enthrall and demons that enslave.

Scripture is used in this *critical* way of distinguishing appearances and reality for the sake of the contemporaneous production of theological knowledge by a specific theological subject for a specific context or audience.<sup>6</sup> Here the nominative is *solus Christus*, the “gospel concerning [God's] Son” (Rom 1:3-4). How can you appeal to *the* Word of God, critics asked, when there are so *many* words of God? Opponents thus challenged Luther's fresh

and critical claim for knowledge of God by way of Scripture with which he challenged accustomed practices of the church and their theological legitimations. With epistemic insight (but not epistemological foundationalism!) Luther replied that he was speaking of the word from the God of Israel that first of all speaks the promise of grace in Christ to us Gentiles, grafting us into the people of God (Rom 11:13-24).<sup>7</sup>

This Pauline specificity situates theological knowledge in the mission of the Son in the Spirit to the nations, executing the plan of God hidden from the ages but now made known to bring about the obedience of faith (Rom 16:25-7). Within this divine “economy,” as the early church came to call it, or biblical “narrative,” as we call it nowadays,<sup>8</sup> Scripture is holy in that it generates and articulates an apocalyptic hope against hope (Rom 15:4) within a world subjected to vanity and yearning for the redemption of the body (Rom 8:23).

### Holy, not “True”

To put it sharply: Scripture is *holy*—not “true.” That is the claim made for the canon, for *sacred* Scripture, the *holy* Bible. For in the Spirit's hands the Bible makes holy by moving the bodies of its auditors/readers from membership in Adam to membership in Christ, the new Adam, in whom creation's redemption and fulfillment lies. That promised fulfillment, on the other hand, is the “truth” of the Bible; that is a truth that only the God of the gospel to whom Scripture refers may in fact verify. When we ask otherwise whether Scripture is “true,” however, we undermine the specific canonical claim in two ways. First, we subject the Bible to some alien criterion of truth that, second, obscures, paradoxically, its own claim to truth, namely, to be the Spirit's means of sanctification.

### Knowledge of the World

According to this Pauline framework (as retrieved by Luther as retrieved by Altmann), we may accordingly note the important but decidedly *ancillary*

role played by social sciences or any other source. Such resources are not to replace Scripture with some other narrative but to provide the material for scriptural narrative to interpret. The cognitive act of interpretation in theology is scripturally *determined*; this is just what a *canonical* story must do, if it is functional. Put positively: we are to know our world in Christian faith as God's creation sighing under the hostile powers of malice and injustice and yearning for the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Where are we to get such knowledge of our world for scriptural reasoning to interpret? Such material for interpretation is provided by our best available accounts of experience as given to us in our own place in history by philosophy and the sciences. Such material necessarily is received in theology under the scriptural conviction that this world of experience, in which I write and you read these words, with all that implies, is the continuing creation of the God of redemption and fulfillment known from the gospel economy, by way of Scripture alone. Wherever this reception of secular knowledge is rejected, as if the Bible substituted an alternative to our experience in the world, the claim of the Bible's God to be the actual creator of everything that is not God is *de facto* betrayed. Earnest as may be such theologians of the Bible "as world-view," as if it provides a revealed science or philosophy, they are not intellectually honest and do not deserve to be taken with intellectual seriousness.

Dynamic and open as is this ever-fresh but singular use of the Bible as matrix of faith ever-sourcing the production of knowledge of God for the sake of the gospel mission here and now in the world of our experience, one might still object to Luther's way of theology via the Bible. Altmann himself acknowledged this when he asked, "Is *sola Scriptura* an element of dogmatism that we ought perhaps to send back to the sixteenth century with funeral honors?"

With the intervening rise and maturation of the historical criticism of the Bible, it could be objected that the very act of *canonicity privileges a particular selection* of ancient writings with normative power, as just argued. But this act of *canonicity* is the very essence of ahistorical dogmatism forcing

a retrospective unity upon heterogeneous materials; it makes an arbitrary selection that in the process excludes rival literature for the sake of ecclesiastical power. To say a canonical *yes* to the Gospel of John, for instance, is to say a firm *no* to the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>9</sup> Such an act of canonical exclusion turns a historically diverse assemblage representing a range of spiritual options into a false unity that only can be legitimated by a mystification appealing to a supernatural origin. But the down to earth reality of the act of *canonicity* is ecclesiastical bullying. This anti-canonical case was prosecuted above all in the incisive work of Walter Bauer.<sup>10</sup>

Less inflammatory is the more minimal but ethically significant complaint that in the canonical process such reification and mystification comes about at the expense of the historical particularity of individual writings; scholarship liberated from the theological act of *canonicity* (really the first dogmatic decisions of early Christianity against docetism in Christology and dualism in the doctrine of God) insists at all costs on knowing texts in their particular past. This is a form of ethical respect for the Other. Thinking this way, however, historical criticism comes to the dead end: such knowledge rigorously taken also must leave the dead texts there, in the past, where they belong. *Any* appropriation is hermeneutical violence, grave-robbing really.

## A Virtuous Circle

From these considerations we can draw a preliminary conclusion: a contemporary doctrine of Scripture as holy, that is, as the means by which the Spirit creates and forms Christian faith for the sake of contemporaneous production of theological knowledge, has critically to warrant this normative function of the Bible as canon or rule of faith in theology. In other words, under our conditions, *sola Scriptura* has to be saved *from itself*! The doctrine of Scripture has to do this, as we have just argued above by following out all the objections stemming from Walter Bauer, if Scripture is not to be betrayed into sophisticated dogmatism.

## Sophisticated Dogmatism

Sophisticated dogmatism, that is, the biblicism of the historical critics, occurs today when instead of leaving their dead texts in the tomb of the past, biblical scholars opine on contemporary theological questions without concern for coherence with other beliefs we hold to be true, without hermeneutical justification for selections or preferences, and without concern for questions of theological truth as such, that is, for the knowledge of God that theology is. In contemporary circles, this sophisticated biblicism not only silences the Bible as canon, as argued above, but replaces critical dogmatic theology as the operative guidance system (such as it is) for churches that have lost their way.

In contrast to the sophisticated (but ultimately inconsequential) dogmatism of contemporary historical critical biblicism, the normative authority of canonical Scripture is warranted by its causative authority<sup>11</sup> (cf. Mk 1:27), that is, as with Luther, by the gospel it attests and so bears into the world when and where the Spirit pleases.<sup>12</sup> With this gospel warranting of the inalienable primacy of the Bible for Christian faith, life, and thus also thought, critical self-awareness of the riskiness of Christian faith in a world surfeit with contending words of God marks the epistemic advance *beyond*, yet also *from* Luther's pioneering *sola Scriptura* that is requisite today for the work of a *critical* dogmatics.

## Scripture and the Church

Here the Bible is not the word of God standing over tradition and church. Rather Scripture and church are correlative concepts, as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck quite rightly have seen,<sup>13</sup> and I have tried to capture by describing the Bible as *matrix*. But church and Scripture alike stand under the "gospel concerning the Son" as *the* Word of God among many putative words from God that we are to hear and obey in the maelstrom of experience, as the first thesis of the Barmen Declaration

affirmed. To be sure, the correlates of Scripture and church operate in a historically determinate order, according to which matrix precedes and forms offspring. Yet one cannot be a mother without a child, nor a Christ without Christians, a head without a body.

Note well then: in this rescue of *sola Scriptura* (i.e., from *misunderstanding* as a nominative) into *prima Scriptura* (as a proper nominative referring to the *solus Christus*), the Bible for all its primacy cannot and does not play an epistemologically foundationalist role. No one believes in Christ *because* of the Bible but rather *by way of* the Bible. The Bible's agency under the Spirit is instrumental, not causative. Ultimately, only the resurrection of the crucified Son (Rom 1:2-4) as the gospel speech-act of God could play that causative role, which is as much to say, only the Spirit's crucifixion of the old Adam and resurrection to faith in conformity with Christ "founds" a theological subject who knows Jesus Christ as the Son of the Father's glory. But the truth of his "foundation" is the fulfillment of its promise in the public revelation of Christ at the parousia. In the interim, the knowledge in risky faith of God at work in the world of experience is instructed and encouraged by the testimony of the prophets and apostles.

So warranted, the Bible is not and cannot be Protestantism's "paper pope," given in a miracle of supernatural dictation. Nor is it received because the history of what really happened is there recorded for biblical critics to mine and extract. Rather Scripture is first, always and ever first, in sourcing and norming that gospel tradition in the world that is *sentire cum ecclesia*, thinking with the church—where and when the church exists in the mission of the Son as the work of the Spirit.

This dialectic of Word and Spirit is not a vicious but a virtuous circle. Gospel warrants Scripture; Scripture attests gospel. The scriptural word concerning the Son refers us to the Spirit to receive a mind/heart illuminated to hear and grasp him. Yet this same Spirit refers to the Son attested in the scriptural narrative to know what Spirit is indeed holy—not unholy (cf. Mk 3:28-30), precisely the Spirit of the Father who rests upon the Son.

## Tillich, Hegel, and Marx

This virtuous dialectic, rooted in the interplay of the trinitarian persons of the gospel narrative, matters immensely for saving *sola Scriptura* from itself. Altmann's own resolution to the critical question of warranting Scripture as matrix of faith and its knowledge of God was ambiguous. On the surface it appears that Altmann relied almost entirely on his (mis-?)understanding of an interpretation of the contemporary spiritual situation put forward by Paul Tillich. His motive in this appropriation of Tillich is evident: he wanted to escape the grip of conservative repristinatism on account of its apolitical and individualistic doctrine of justification reduced to the otherworldly fragment that on account of Jesus sinners go to heaven when they die. According to Altmann's reading of Tillich, however, the question of justification and eternal life, which was so important for Luther, is passé in the modern world, supplanted by the existential threat of meaninglessness.

What is the problem with this, aside from the objection that it is a clumsy reading of Tillich? For one thing, mere existentialism remains individualistic. Furthermore, Altmann uses Tillich to relativize what for Luther was the *cognitive* key to the Scriptures—the plotline of sinful humanity and the justifying God; this relativization allows him to reconceive the biblical plotline as a story of liberation from oppressive powers—a regressive step from Jesus back to Joshua. Finally, with this move it is an easy, if not expressly intended, slide down a slippery slope, from Hegelian idealism or Kierkegaardian existentialism to Marxist materialism. It certainly is not clear from Altmann's text that he intends these things, but the problems indicated are worth a brief digression.

While affluent Europeans have come to Hegelian self-consciousness (namely, if I may only slightly parody, the contingent realization of the contingency of all things) and are troubled by the meaninglessness of it all, the poor of the earth see things in christologically unmodified apocalyptic black and white. Turning Hegel on his head, as Marx claimed to have done, they come to see that the classes

exploited by existentially bewildered oppressors have not the luxury of pondering putatively big questions when daily life is a struggle for survival. Thus from Marx's inversion of Hegel, liberation emerges in place of justification as the watchword of contemporary Bible-reading among the elite (Eurocentric!) instructors of the struggling "church of the poor."<sup>14</sup> Out of the frying pan into the fire. Marx too was a European, even if a dissident.<sup>15</sup> With him the reduction, no longer to metaphysics but now to the social sciences, is at hand. So far as theology is concerned, with this the servant once again becomes the master, as Daniel Bell has so powerfully shown in his critique of liberation theology. The Christian refusal to cease suffering—*conformitas Christi!*—is the lesson actually drawn from Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

## Altmann's Luther

Returning to Altmann's Luther: from the perspective of this Luther, all this reactionary modernism is beside the point, for there is an integral relation in Christian theology between the justification of the sinner and liberation from sin, taking both socially rather than individualistically. And in truth, Altmann was much concerned to flesh this out, even if his superficial invocation of Tillich at this juncture obscured rather than clarified this relation. Let us thus clarify in Altmann's own words, so that virtue of the interpretive circle of the Word and the Spirit is plain to see.

What is dubious about the attempt to relativize justification in Christ to the needs of a bygone epoch is the assumption that Luther's biblical claim for justification as cognitive key to Scripture somehow emerged as an expression of the sixteenth century's anxious preoccupation with mortality.<sup>17</sup> This stands behind the corresponding cliché of existentialist Luther research about the monk seeking a gracious God. What we actually see from Luther's earliest writings, however, is rather a decidedly prophetic execution of Last Judgment now assailing spiritual security and indicting structures of malice and injustice. One might say, for

pertinent example, that the message of the Ninety-five Theses was Purgatory *without Delay*—Purgatory *Now!*

The *biblical* question of justification never has been anything remotely like the spontaneous religious or spiritual self-expression of any epoch. It does not occur to us naturally but must be learned from the prophets of Israel. To ask for the justice of God is to have been asked by the prophets whether one is just before God. This is the learned behavior called *repentance*. It is learned from the Holy Scripture when the Scriptures are taught by the Holy Spirit to necessitate Christ and him crucified as alone sufficient for our justice before God. Altmann in fact recognized just this in a telling passage that stands side by side—unintegrated, as it seems to me—with his flawed employment of Tillich:

Implicit in the doctrine of justification is the rejection of values that prevail in modern societies—values in relation to production, possession, culture, power and social stratification. Justified by faith, persons are accepted unconditionally as they are and not for what they have or can produce or even consume. To use Pauline terminology, the godless are justified . . . The doctrine of justification by faith is also critical with respect to the church itself, to the degree that the church is tempted to shape and accommodate itself to the values prevailing in its environment . . . Its internal values can become a copy of the model of economic production, and it can expressly (by identification) or tacitly (by virtue of the dichotomy [of church and state], enter into alliances with the prevailing political power.<sup>18</sup>

If we still want to stand with Luther in this theological tradition that has its primary in the prophets of Israel prosecuting the LORD's controversy with the people, *pars pro toto*, with humanity, we have to take the doctrine of justification as *apocalyptic*, not merely existential; just so, the canonical act of taking the Bible as source and norm in theology correlates with theology as critically dogmatic *knowledge of the revealed God* who justifies the ungodly.

One might still resist: how is such a theology at work *sola Scriptura* (instrumental ablative, not nominative!) to be warranted? Indeed, the unspoken problem that united Altmann's conservatives and liberals was the modern quest for epistemological foundations causing and caused by the collapse of the Bible's warrant at the hands of the historical critics. Conservatives simply have lost this battle, though they pretend otherwise; but the victory of the historical critics, so far as they still intend theology as knowledge of God, is a pyrrhic one as pointed out above. What must a doctrine of Scripture accomplish for us today, after the historical criticism of the Bible, which has seemed to destroy *the literal or historical sense* on which Luther depended *as primary*? Can Scripture be primary?

### Prima Scriptura

The root, and so deeply buried, assumption in Luther's way of theology by the Bible, is that when read as a unified story, the Genesis-to-Revelation canon tells of the one God who is determined by the missions of God's Son and Spirit to redeem and fulfill the creation.<sup>19</sup> This is the plain, literal, or historical sense of *canonical* Scripture, the varied writings of the Bible *taken together as a whole*. When Luther had finished commenting on the first three chapters of the book of Genesis, for notable instance, he summed up its narrative of creation and fall pointing forward to the coming of Christ as savior and then commented: "According to our ability, we have treated all these facts in their historical meaning, which is their real and true one. In the interpretation of Holy Scripture the main task must be to derive from it some sure and plain meaning, especially because there is such a variety of interpreters . . . Almost all of these not only do not concern themselves with the story, but bury it and confuse it with their nonsensical allegories."<sup>20</sup>

### "Who" not "How"

How are we to take Luther's "facts" or "historical meaning" here? If we take them to be the Genesis

text's reference to "how it actually happened," today's literary knowledge of ancient Hebrew and scientific knowledge of cosmological origins discredits Luther's deep assumption as ill-founded knowledge now superseded. As an epistemological foundation, Luther's would-be historical meaning of the Bible is vitiated by scientifically ascertained facts.

We know today with all the probability that the best available science can muster that our cosmos originated some 13 billion years ago in a mysterious explosion, in which our solar system and planet Earth within it is a miniscule fragment and relative latecomer. And we also know that Genesis 1 is a theological reinterpretation of Babylon's cosmogony in light of Israel's knowledge of the saving God of the Exodus.<sup>21</sup>

This contemporary knowledge stands behind the oft-repeated but still insufficiently grasped truism that the Bible tells us *who* the creator of the cosmos is, and so how the cosmos is to be interpreted, namely, as God's gift though subjected to futility, as yet unfulfilled. But it does not tell us *how* creation occurred, a question the Bible itself leaves to the vocation of human science under the mandate of Genesis 1:26-28. This crucial distinction between who and how is "insufficiently grasped" because the biblical knowledge of who God is does *not* consist in the lame similitude of a loving parent in the sky. As apocalyptic, the biblical knowledge of God is rather *fierce* ("Yahweh is a warrior! Yahweh is his name!" Ex 15:3); this is the *battle-cry* cognitive claim of revealed theology (Rev 11:15-18). It is *militant* knowledge aimed at the redemption and fulfillment of a creation subjected to vanity on account of sin. It is knowledge *wroth* at the "ruin of Joseph" (Amos 6:6).

But we today are far from this. It is as if the post-fundamentalist trauma of discovering the frequently legendary character of biblical stories has made those in Luther's tradition today allergic to the cognitive claim of the Bible, thus also to theology as the task of critical dogmatics. We content ourselves instead with mushy similitudes that suggest a lot but say nothing. Modern Lutheran theology largely has shied away from this cognitive claim—in putative horror at Karl Barth's renewal of dogmatic theology<sup>22</sup> concerned with the

identification of God, God's will, and God's works in the world; it has instead embraced, with a few express exceptions,<sup>23</sup> the anthropological turn of Cartesian-Kantian modernity.

The paucity of biblically saturated dogmatics is quite striking among contemporary Lutherans (whose merit, I concede, is intellectual honesty in distinction from Altmann's conservative repristinators of "confessional Lutheran dogmatics"). This self-destruction of *sola Scriptura* among Luther's more honest contemporary heirs stands in painful contrast, however, to a wide-ranging post-liberal renewal of the Bible in other confessional traditions.<sup>24</sup>

But this devolution is not necessary. By *history* Luther meant the story line as it is literally written, just as *literal* means literally, as it were, "according to what the letters say." A literal reading of a parable of Jesus, then, is not one that finds a reference to a historical event as its *res*, the thing signified. Instead the thing in history thus narrated is itself the sign; and its signified thing is the God of the gospel. As narrated history is the sign of God in the Bible, a necessary step in referring it properly to the God of the gospel is *deliteralization* (not "demythologization"! ). This step goes back to Luther's treatment of the ascension in his dispute with Zwingli, who had appealed to Jesus' upward flight to a local heaven as the reason why the glorified Lord could not bodily be present in the Supper. But in order to refer the ascension to God's act in exalting Jesus, Luther had to expose the picture-language as but a picture, a sign, the sense of which is the human Jesus' full participation in divine glory.

Thus theology by way of the canonical Scripture is *about* God; it is *knowledge of God*. There is for Luther, following the patristic consensus that goes back to Irenaeus' battle with Gnosticism, a *literal*, that is, the *literary* plot-line in the biblical narrative that yields a definite meaning when it is attended to according to grammatical and rhetorical analysis. This is an "external clarity" that any rational person can follow, even if its cognitive claim to the knowledge of God will be resisted apart from the Spirit's grant of illuminating faith providing "internal clarity."

## The Justifying God of Sinful Humanity

This definite meaning, for Luther, reveals God whom incompetent interpreters “bury and confuse” with impatient and far-fetched allegories. Allegories are not wrong for parsing applications moral, ecclesial, eschatological, and otherwise of what is known. But what is to be known must be primary. The justifying God of sinful humanity is what is to be known. Allegories that turn the biblical story into some other narrative—Origen, who turned the Bible into a Neoplatonic *editus-reditus* story is one of Luther’s favorite targets—in fact impose alien meanings on the text under the cover of “spiritual” readings “discovering” (inventing!) what hides behind what the letters say.

What Luther does not yet notice, and historically cannot yet notice, is that as a Christian reader of the Hebrew Scriptures he takes a step not literally justified by the Genesis text as such when he reads the narrative of creation and fall from the Pauline perspective, according to which the two humanities of Adam and Christ contend. Critical realization of this step in Christian theological self-awareness would come about, however, as Luther’s own requirement for reading the Bible attentive to its own message(s) (i.e., with increasing appreciation of the plural and thus the dynamism of their tension-laden interactions<sup>25</sup>) worked its way out in the exegetical methodologies which we today classify loosely as historical criticism. Unlike Luther, but not wholly, we today know that “proof from prophecy” is not demonstrative evidence for the New Testament’s christological claim that must convince rational agents,<sup>26</sup> but rather the urgent turn of the earliest Christians to Hebrew Scriptures to explain to themselves the unprecedented and unanticipated Word of God spoken on Easter morn in the resurrection of the crucified Son.<sup>27</sup>

Ironically, we have argued, under the impact of this powerful tool of historical criticism *sola Scriptura* came to be misunderstood all the more than previously in Orthodoxy and Pietism as a Latin nominative rather an ablative: as Bible only. Under

cognitive pressure, this misunderstood Bible progressively reduced to the historical critic’s canon within the canon, always poised over against church dogmatics. But a *critical* dogmatics today would proceed with the greater self-awareness mentioned above, yet still by means of the Bible alone, where the canon is the Genesis-to-Revelation narrative of God’s history with God’s people to bring blessing to all humanity (Gen 12:1-3). Without this move to the economy of the God of the gospel as the mission within which Scripture functions as instrument of the Spirit, the Pauline unity of the Bible that Luther took for granted (but which we today must warrant) cannot but dissolve into the multitude of contrary, if not contradictory, meanings of authors known and unknown spanning a millennium as unearthed by historical critics.

Luther’s search for the literal or historical meaning transposes into the quest to find out what really happened behind each of the discrete biblical texts, so that the text would be criticized by the critically reconstructed history lying behind its production. But this really is a *vicious* circle, in which the dog chases its tail. Faced with the mountain heap of archeological rubble that results, it is no wonder that allegory returns nowadays (say, in “reader-response” silliness) in churches that have lost their way to “make meaning” of a Bible that in its own voice according to its own unity has been silenced.

## Endnotes

1. Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, trans. Mary M. Solberg (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 43-45.

2. The Holy Spirit “has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God . . .” See Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 436.

3. Paul R. Hinlicky, “The Lutheran Dilemma,” *Pro Ecclesia* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 391-422.

4. The program was clearly and concisely expressed in the early Spinoza’s *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998): “1) to put aside all prejudice, 2) to discover the foundations upon which everything should be built, 3) to uncover the cause of error, and 4) to understand everything clearly and distinctly” (p. 7). While the mature Spinoza broke from Cartesianism in significant ways (especially with its mind-body dualism), the foundationalist

ambition remained and formed the basis of his demand that nature interpret Scripture, not vice versa. That demand is the marching order of his seminal historical criticism.

5. On this point see the still-unsurpassed dismemberment, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "What Does 'Inerrancy' Mean?" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36, no. 8 (September 1965): 577-93.

6. Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

7. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) (hereafter cited as LW), 31:346. LW 35:358.

8. On this crucial point, that Scripture can bear the burden of its exclusive usage for forming and articulating the knowledge of God in Christian faith only when Scripture itself is located within the economy of God, see John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2012).

9. Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

10. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*, ed. R. Kraft and G. Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971; reprint Sigler Press, 1996).

11. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 77.

12. This warranting, which aims to overcome historical criticism with historical criticism, was the particular burden of my *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (St. Paul, Minn.: Fortress, 2010), to which the reader is referred for the extended account which here can only be asserted, not argued.

13. See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1974); and George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

14. Roland Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015).

15. Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2013).

16. Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001). Altmann is heavily dependent on Ulrich Duchrow's *Christenheit und Welverantwortung* (p. 75-83), which I rightly causes him to see both law and gospel, state and church, as God's instrument against the

regnum diaboli but 2) also causes him to underappreciate the crucial disjunction between law and state as modalities of coercion, and church and God's word as modalities of freedom and persuasion. This eliding of the difference between rough justice in society and justification by grace in the new society of the church, furthermore, underappreciates the historic difference between Luther and his renegade disciple, Thomas Müntzer, in the trauma of the Peasants Revolt. This is a difference between a pure apocalypticism and one that has been christologically modified. Proper appreciation of this difference would, as Altmann tentatively explores, see Luther as a source for an ethic of nonviolent civil disobedience in the struggle for social justice as opposed to revolutionary violence and zealotry.

17. Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1999) is a virtuoso exercise in this trope, the revenge visited upon the mid-twentieth century's existentialist rendering of the reformer.

18. Altmann, *Luther and Liberation*, 142.

19. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), 49.

20. LW 1:231.

21. Bernard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

22. Exemplary here is the post-war essay of Gerhard Ebeling, "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism," in *Word and Faith*, trans. J.W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 17-61.

23. From a generation ago: Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), 21-218.

24. See especially the fascinating dogmatic engagements with Hebrew Scripture in R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Names and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices*, vol. 1 (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2011); Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015); and Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2016).

25. Witness the masterful work of Walter Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

26. In fact, just this lack of critical self-awareness stands behind Luther's notorious turn from his early philosemitism to the harsh polemic against the rabbis in his later years.

27. Donald H. Juel, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).