

Composed to comfort

Hopefulness of Scripture as hermeneutical principle

David R. Bickel
University of Ottawa

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I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

—The Apostle to the Gentiles

Introduction

Only three decades after the death of Martin Luther, the Reformation in Germany was in danger of being blown apart by every wind of doctrine. Even Philipp Melancthon, author of the Augsburg Confession and one of Luther's closest disciples, had embraced synergism and was open to making concessions on the Lord's Supper. In this setting of warring theological factions, the authors of the Formula of Concord did not take the easy path of formulating a compromise document broad enough to tolerate the differing spiritualizing and Romanizing teachings that had arisen in the church of the Augsburg Confession. Rather, each of its articles took a definite stand on a subject of controversy, even to the point of anathematizing errors found to contradict the pure gospel (Galatians 1:8-9). Although the sacrifices made to attain and maintain doctrinal purity seem today like little more than academic philosophizing about irrelevant theories, much more was at stake if, as the new Reformers believed, the good news proclaimed in its purity and clarity truly is the only "power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Article XI, ¶69). This conviction is seen especially in the conclusion of the the section of the Formula devoted to settling controversies that arose within the church:

This will suffice concerning the controverted articles which have been disputed among theologians of the Augsburg Confession for many years and in which some have erred and serious religious contentions have arisen. From our exposition friends and foes may clearly understand that we have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility, and outward harmony. Nor would such peace and harmony last, because it would be contrary to the truth and actually intended for its suppression. Still less by far are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors. We have a sincere delight in and deep love for true harmony and are cordially inclined

and determined on our part to do everything in our power to further the same. We desire such harmony as will not violate God's honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him for ever through the sole merit of Christ...¹

With respected theologians backing each competing doctrine, the orthodox were forced to articulate their hermeneutical principles, the methods of interpretation used to arrive at the correct meaning of Scripture. The focus of this article is the principle explained negatively in Article XI of the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration):

For the apostle testifies that “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). But it is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit’s will and intent.¹

I call the teaching of that Pauline passage the *hopefulness of Scripture*, which, stated more positively, means all canonical writings read in the church were penned for the purpose of giving "the hope of the gospel" (Col. 1:21-23). That the hope is that of the gospel is clear from the proof text: “even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’” Here, Paul used the principle to interpret the sixty-ninth Psalm Christologically for immediate embodiment in the church (Romans 15:1-13). Centered on the hope of glory, Christ crucified, the hopefulness of Scripture could instead have been called the *Christocentricity of Scripture*. As Scaer observed, “Jesus, especially in the humiliation of His cross, is not only the center, but is the entire content of ‘theology,’ including that of God”;² <http://tinyurl.com/42qdtz> cf. Luke 24:25-27, 44-47; Acts 10:43; 1 Corinthians 2:2. The word “Christocentricity,” however, does not expressly rule out seeing Christ as one who comes to judge and to destroy men's lives, that is, another Christ (John 3:17; 12:47). Further, thanks to very different concepts of Christocentricity held by Luther, Socinus, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich, the term has no unequivocal meaning.³

Unencumbered by previous usage, the hopefulness of Scripture will be fleshed out by its application as a hermeneutical principle, with examples from the Formula of Concord and the catechisms and confessions Luther subscribed. The illustrations will be better grasped after reviewing more fundamental principles of interpretation that were essential to Luther’s Reformation: Scripture has the property of perspicuity (clarity); Scripture interprets Scripture; and all articles of the one true faith may be found in Scripture alone, that is, in the Old Testament and in the gospel announced by the apostles and eventually collected into a New Testament canon, even apart from other sources of tradition that rightly summarize such articles. As will be seen in the next section, these three principles, also derived from the Word,³ are so closely related that they may be combined into one hermeneutical principle: the rule of faith, the good news about Christ taught in clear passages of Scripture, clarifies the meaning of other passages of Scripture.

The hopefulness of Scripture rests on its clarity

Although there is no ambiguity in Paul's statement that all Scripture was written that "we might have hope," the comprehensive nature of the hopefulness of Scripture as defined above is not confessed by all Christians. Rightly rejecting many evangelicals' apathy toward theological

scholarship in general and church history in particular, more reflective Protestants have developed a reticence for believing any passage, even if as clear as the one cited, on the authority of Scripture without first consulting others' commentaries. Indeed, genuine faith in the hopefulness of Scripture, just as in any other revealed article, requires a level of Scripture's clarity beyond what is often passed as "the perspicuity of Scripture." And yet since the perfect clarity of Scripture by no means sanctions dishonoring the work of orthodox theologians, some discussion of the interpretive roles of Scripture and tradition is needed before turning to a relevant noncanonical document of the early church.

Lean not on your own understanding

The doctrinal divisions leading to a great number of denominations seen today are often blamed on letting each individual interpret the Scriptures. Many have argued that an authoritative interpreter of the Scriptures, such as a church body or a group of creeds received on account of their widespread acceptance, is needed to promote doctrinal unity among Christians. The implicit assumption is that the extra-biblical interpreter speaks more clearly than the Scriptures themselves.

According to Paul, however, the false doctrines fueling the sects come not from the obscurity of the Word but from a refusal to hear the Word (1 Timothy 6:3)⁴ (p. 323). An authoritative interpreter is nevertheless needed to explain certain difficult passages of Scripture, but that interpreter is the rule of faith, the set of articles of the Christian faith taught by Scripture passages that are perfectly clear in themselves; the confessions found to summarize such articles thus serve as the rule of faith.³ As used by Luther, the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture simply means its clear passages shed light on its unclear passages, not that the interpretation of clear passages should be adjusted to avoid apparent contradictions⁴ (pp. 361-363). For to do the latter is in effect to replace a man-made hierarchy with a man-made theological system as the authoritative interpreter of the Word. The objection that there is no objective way to distinguish clear passages from unclear passages⁵ would hold only if there were in fact no clear passages. Since a clear text by definition demonstrates its own clarity, no outside authority is needed to designate some passages as clear and others as unclear. No one who sees light dispelling the darkness needs to hear arguments that it does so. For example, Old Testament prophecies became perfectly clear from the explanations given by the Light of the World,⁶ (pp. 96-97, 119-121) explanations now available in the writings of the apostles.

While unclear passages must be understood in light of clear passages, to modify the interpretation of a passage that is completely clear in order to remove apparent conflict with another clear passage is tantamount to saying the former passage requires correction.³ Such modification exemplifies the tendency of interpreters to put their own thoughts between themselves and the text; preachers must constantly combat this demonic influence to make the words of a particular passage actually heard by their congregations.⁷ (pp. 202-203) Responding to the Council of Trent, Martin Chemnitz, an author of the Formula of Concord, condemned the reading of one's preconceptions into Scripture as leaning on one's own understanding.⁸ (p. 208) For example, many of the early heretics sought ways to resolve the offense of the cross: the Most High God became a man, was born of the virgin Mary, and died condemned.⁹ Some did so by letting texts teaching the full deity of Christ override those teaching his full humanity or vice versa, while others did so by downplaying texts teaching the absolute distinction between his divine and human natures or those texts teaching the full unity of his person, including the sharing of attributes between the two natures.⁷ (pp. 31-32, 204-214),¹⁰ Robert Preus explains,

We must never depart from the rule of faith [(the doctrinal content of the

clear texts of Scripture)] when interpreting passages which are not clear because of context, reference, or grammar... The [rule of faith] actually aids the exegete in solving apparent contradictions and other difficulties of Scripture — never, however, by denying or mitigating the [literal sense] of a text, but by getting at the given text's intention and referents (time, situation, person, etc.) and thus, in the optimistic conviction that Scripture is in harmony with itself, solving some of the difficulties which arise between passages..., rather than just giving up on the undertaking. Never is the [rule of faith] imposed upon a text to deny its [literal sense]. Obviously the enterprise of harmonization will not always succeed. Above all the integrity of the text must be upheld... This means that seeming contradictions between passages of Scripture which cannot be reconciled without doing violence to the biblical texts must be allowed to stand; and the exegete, as Luther said, must simply tip his hat to the Holy Spirit and concede that the difficulty may never be solved in this life... Even more vexing for the exegete is the fact that there seem to be inconsistencies or conflicts within certain articles, or mysteries, of faith... Such articles, or mysteries, which transcend our comprehension and are revealed in Scripture to be believed by us can be clarified as we apply the analogy of faith in the sense of accumulating all the biblical data pertaining to the article of faith. But no principle of unity or analogy can be used to mitigate the plain meaning of text... or to force biblical data in order to make one aspect or element of the doctrine compatible with another. The disastrous results of employing such a principle can be seen in the welter of ancient and modern heresies concerning the doctrines of Christ and the Trinity... To force reconciliation between Bible texts which seem to conflict or to force agreement between articles of faith which transcend reason by ever so subtle a violation of the [literal sense] of clear texts and pericopes from Scripture is rather an inappropriate, if not arrogant, admission that Scripture according to ostensive meanings of clear texts contradicts itself. To read something into another's words which is contrary to what a person says constitutes a criticism of that person's words or content.³

An ancient method of relieving tension between clear biblical passages is the imposition of a figure of speech onto a text that otherwise would have been read more literally. Luther saw in Erasmus's willingness to foist "tropes" (metaphors) onto the Word a tendency shared by false teachers from Arius to Ulrich Zwingli:

When, then, are we ever going to have a text pure and simple, without tropes and inferences, for free choice...? ... Let us rather take the view that neither an inference nor a trope is admissible in any passage of Scripture, unless it is forced on us by the evident nature of the context and the absurdity of the literal sense as conflicting with one or another of the articles of faith... What happened to the Arians in that trope by which they made Christ into a merely nominal God? What has happened in our own time to these new prophets regarding the words of Christ, "This is my body," where one finds a trope in the pronoun "this," another in the verb "is," another in the noun "body"? What I have observed is this, that all heresies and errors in connection with the Scriptures have arisen, not from the simplicity of the words... but from neglect of the simplicity of the

words, and from tropes or inferences hatched out of men's own heads.¹¹ (pp. 62-63, capitalization corrected)

Just as Arians had to interpret “God” symbolically to save subordinationism and just as Zwinglians had to interpret “is” symbolically to save the denial of the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the bread and wine, Erasmus and other synergists could point to no clear, literal text teaching the freedom of the will. Luther’s Reformation could not tolerate the creative formation of articles of faith from figures of speech in Scripture or from otherwise unclear texts, for that adds the cleverness of the human interpreter to the Word. The perspicuity of Scripture instead entailed holding only those articles of faith that are clearly taught in Scripture.

In short, no article should be taken on faith unless laid out clearly in a text of Scripture, and any article thus set forth must be believed. Woe to him who either adds to or takes away from the Word (Deuteronomy 17:19; Joshua 1:8)! Therefore, since the hopefulness of Scripture is clearly set forth in Romans 15:4, it cannot be doubted. A student of Charles Hodge’s inductive principle¹² or of a theological system of neatly harmonized doctrines may object that although the passage indeed appears to teach the hopefulness of Scripture, that interpretation might conflict with an equally clear passage somewhere else in the Bible, with the result that he cannot be certain of the article until he has searched the entire Bible for possible conflicts. If applied consistently, such methodology would destroy all possibility of an ordinary Christian’s believing any article revealed in Scripture since it would require remembering the entire content of the Bible or at least that the article in question has been tested by the entire Bible. Nor can this extreme form of biblicism explain how even illiterate Christians, who comprised most of the first-century church, are equipped to judge all teachers by the gospel they had heard since the beginning (Galatians 1:6-10; 2:4-6; 1 John 2:21-25; 4:1-6). Neither Paul nor John expected them to search passage by passage through the Old Testament, to which they had little or no access apart from the liturgy. Further, even if there were hundreds of passages that would seem to conflict with the hopefulness of Scripture, that would not warrant harmonizing away even one clear passage that does teach it. Rather, as noted above, any such tension must be left unresolved in the same way the church of the Athanasian Creed faithfully confessed Christ by leaving unresolved the numerous apparent contradictions related to the Incarnation.

The Lutheran Reformers’ reverent recognition of the clarity of the Word of God fostered — and limited — a deep reverence for the writings of the church fathers, as will now be seen.

Critical reverence for tradition

Because Erasmus regarded no biblical texts clear enough to render a judgment on the article of election, he felt a need to rely on others’ interpretations of Scripture:

The entire argument of Erasmus' writing is based on the assumption that Holy Scripture must be interpreted in light of the church fathers and the teaching authority of the church. Only thus had he been able to reconcile the various Bible passages. Without this necessary commentary, the Bible would be to Erasmus a dark book, full of irreconcilable statements... This concept of perspicuity, which, unfortunately, has later become that of the old Protestant Orthodoxy, is not identical with the [clarity] of Holy Scripture which Luther teaches over against Erasmus... For [Luther] there is one thing in which the Bible is absolutely clear to the believing Christian who accepts it as God's Word. Holy Scripture teaches Christ with great clarity.¹³ (p. 382)

As much as Luther’s idea of the perspicuity of Scripture differs from that of Erasmus and “Protestant

Orthodoxy,” it does not imply that one can learn the gospel without any need of others. Even scholars in church history and the original languages must depend on the scribes who passed down the New Testament manuscripts. Literate laymen in turn rely on those who translated the Scriptures from the original languages. Illiterate believers have always depended on those who read them the Scriptures or who otherwise speak the word of God to them. Likewise, infants are born of water and the Spirit upon hearing (John 3:5; 1 Peter 1:22-25) from the minister of Word and Sacrament that they are baptized in the name of the Triune God.

Such undeniable need for other people does not mean God’s Word cannot be understood without authoritative fathers and rabbis between the Word and the sinner, for there is “one teacher” (Matthew 23:8-12; 1 John 2:26-27). Rather, God’s Word works directly to offer the forgiveness of sins in whatever mode it comes. The Incarnate Word speaks the gospel with equal power to save if heard in Aramaic from his lips, if read in a Greek manuscript, if confessed in an English translation of the Nicene Creed, or if received in the visible Word of baptism. The sheep thus listen to their pastors only insofar as they limit their oversight to speaking the oracles of the Chief Shepherd (John 10:1-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11; 5:1-5). The authority of the ministers of reconciliation is that of ambassadors of the reconciled God making his appeal through them (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

Pelikan succinctly characterized the attitude of Luther’s Reformation to tradition as one of “critical reverence.”¹⁴ On one hand, it is not a lack of reverence due the fathers, the assumption that there is nothing to be learned from them in the interpretation of Scripture. This irreverence manifests itself in disinterest in church history and, at its worst, in suspicion of any early teaching foreign to the current evangelical consensus as too Catholic.

At the same time, a critical reverence is distinguished from an uncritical reverence that accepts the interpretations of the most revered fathers and creeds merely on their individual or collective authority. Chemnitz pointed out that the fathers themselves do not want their interpretations of Scripture to be believed even when it is found that Scripture itself teaches something different. As he explained, the Ethiopian eunuch accepted Phillip’s explanation of Isaiah (Acts 8:35-38) because he judged it to be true, not because Philip was an authoritative mediator (Part 1, 1.8). The extreme form of uncritical reverence may be seen whenever a scholar unconvinced by the exegetical arguments of one or more fathers nevertheless adheres to their interpretation as if it were a revealed article of faith. Melancthon, shaken by the argument that “the weight of the ancient tradition” opposed the oral reception of Christ’s flesh and blood in the Lord’s Supper,¹⁴ (p. 48) eventually deviated from Luther’s stand on the Word alone¹⁵ (pp. 254-255). (Melancthon’s student Chemnitz more consistently judged the writings of the fathers by the Word; Quentin Stewart provides a careful study of their positions on Scripture and tradition.¹⁶) Other instances of excessive reverence are more common. Many appeal to a church council or creed as the final authority on whether Scripture teaches a particular doctrine. (Since antiquity has false creeds as well as true creeds, only those creeds that summarize apostolic preaching function as the rule of faith.) Others will not believe even the clearest passages of Scripture until they investigate how Christians have previously interpreted them.

In whatever form it takes, undue reverence for the commandments of men reflects a lack of due reverence for the Word of God, which Luther regarded as more clear than even the most lucid church council¹⁴ (p. 62). Having learned that “there is no clearer book written on earth than Holy Scripture” and that it spoke more clearly than the fathers, he depended directly on its “bare” words, without any clarification,⁴ (pp. 348, 360-361, 366-367). A salient case in point is that only after he noticed from

Scripture what Paul meant by “the righteousness of God,” he found that Augustine had the same interpretation.¹⁷ (pp. 95-98) Likewise, the Reformers of the next generation dared to resolve doctrinal controversy in part on the basis of the naked words “whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

The consensus of the church

By selectively quoting the fathers, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Lutheran Church has each argued that “the consensus of the church” supports its distinctive teachings. Each of their arguments can appear plausible, especially to those who are not scholars of patristics, since the writings of the fathers represent a wide range of conflicting viewpoints¹⁴ and are often unclear. For today’s Roman Catholics, the problem that they “do not agree with each other with a precise mathematical unanimity” is solved ultimately by appeal to “the infallible teaching instruments of the Church,”¹⁸ (p. 413), i.e., to the pope's decrees “from the chair.” Likewise, contemporary confessional Lutherans have been influenced by the theologians of the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy, who increasingly emphasized Scripture as the infallible norm by which the fathers are judged rather than more subjective notions of a consensus of the church.¹⁶

There is nonetheless an objective consensus of the church — not some institution structured after the polity of the first-century church, but the one Christian church invisible with respect to its membership and yet with visible signs indicating its location.¹⁹ (pp. 22-24) Once we learn to recognize the pure administration of the gospel and the sacraments from clear passages of Scripture, we can see, to various degrees, the marks of this truly catholic church at all times and places but without knowing who is and who is not in the church.

The approach starting with the signs of the church revealed in Scripture is reversed when a former evangelical first chooses one of the many ancient churches claiming an unbroken succession from the apostles and then uncritically views Scripture through the lens of that church’s interpretations. Even in the second century, before it was seen that even the bishops of the churches planted by the apostles could teach contrary to the writings of the apostles, apostolic succession was not relied on apart from Scripture since heretics claimed their own lines of succession. Because heterodox congregations insisted that the meaning of Scripture could only be uncovered with the aid of oral traditions they allegedly received from the apostles, Irenaeus, the most important second-century theologian,²⁰ (p. 1) called Scripture rather than simply the church “the ground and pillar of our faith”:

That the apostles preached that Gospel and then subsequently wrote it down is important for Irenaeus, as it will later enable him to appeal to the continuous preaching of the Gospel in the Church, the tradition of the apostles. It is also important to Irenaeus to specify that what they wrote has been handed down (“traditioned”) in the Scriptures, as the ground and pillar of our faith. While Paul had spoken of the Church as being the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim 3:15), in the need to define more clearly the identity of the Church Irenaeus modifies Paul’s words so that it is the Scripture which is the “ground and pillar” of the faith, or, he states later, it is the Gospel, found in four forms, and the Spirit of life that is “the pillar and foundation of the Church” (*AH* 3.11.8). It is by their preaching the Gospel that Peter and Paul lay the foundations for the Church, and so the

Church, constituted by the Gospel, must preserve this deposit intact.^{6 (p. 39)}

As the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Article IV) asserted against the papacy, the authority of this church is the consensus of “all the prophets,” who bear witness that “whoever believes in [Jesus] will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43).

If his high view of Scripture made Irenaeus too Protestant for modern Catholics, his high view of the sacraments made him too Catholic for modern Protestants. He knew nothing of the Zwinglian divorce between Word and Sacrament that would be officially granted by the Council of Trent. According to Irenaeus, the rule of faith needed to understand Scripture is in believers, having been received through baptism (*Against the Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter 9). Since he was a disciple of Polycarp, in turn a disciple of John the Elder,²¹ that conviction was probably derived from if not identical to the doctrine represented in the writings of the latter. His Gospel says only those in whom Jesus’ cleansing Word remains will know the truth (John 8:31-32; 15:3). Likewise, he assured his “little children” that if the message/anointing they had received in the beginning remained in them, it would testify against the proto-Gnostic teachings (1 John 2:24-27). The concept of receiving of the rule of faith in baptism may precede even John’s writings: an earlier “exhortation to put away evil and to receive the implanted Word is freighted with baptismal imagery”^{22 (p. 65)} (James 1:21). Not having been born of water through the resurrection to a living hope (John 3:5; 1 Peter 1:3; 3:21), the Gnostic opponents of Irenaeus took Scripture passages out of context to interpret them contrary to the gospel (Book 1, Chapter 8). By contrast, the orthodox of the early church recognized the canonicity of the genuine New Testament books on the basis of the baptismal creeds that had originated with Christ before the doctrine of the apostles was committed to writing.²³ This use of the creeds confessed in baptism both to acknowledge the authority of Scripture and to interpret it was appropriate since baptism fully reveals the Triune God.²³

All Scripture imparts hope

Can it really be maintained that all passages of Scripture were written to give, maintain, or strengthen the hope of the gospel? It may be argued that some passages were not written for hope in the age to come, but for comfort in this life or for helpful rules for living. Likewise, given the fear and uncertainty many experience in reading the passages on election, how is it possible that even they were written for hope? Each of these objections to the hopefulness of Scripture is addressed here.

Benevolence of the Father

Promises of the Creator’s provision for people’s needs in this age abound throughout the canonical writings. Are such promises exceptions to the rule that all Scripture confers hope, or do they imply that the hopefulness of Scripture regards not only hope in Christ seated above at the right hand of the Father (Colossians 3:1-4), but also hope in having an improved life in this world?

Jesus dealt specifically with the relationship between eschatological hope and the needs of this life in his discourse on anxiety (Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-34), the clarity of which has been clouded by reading preconceived ideas into the text. North American evangelicals naturally see in Matthew 6:33 a blessing only for the few who commit themselves to achievement in a purpose-driven life. In the words of Rick Warren,

If you will commit to fulfilling your mission in life no matter what it costs, you will experience the blessing of God in ways that few people ever experience. There is almost nothing God won’t do for the man or woman

who is committed to serving the kingdom of God. Jesus has promised, “[God] will give you all you need from day to day if you live for him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern.”²⁴ (pp. 286-287)

Making God’s gift of “all you need from day to day” conditional on “serving the kingdom of God” would challenge the hopefulness of Scripture. Applied consistently, this interpretation leaves the believer asking, “Am I committed enough that I can depend on God to give me that rare blessing — or even to meet my needs?”

Jesus, however, did not tell his disciples to seek the kingdom, much less to *serve* the kingdom, in order to secure earthly blessings. (Warren’s changing seeking the kingdom to “serving the kingdom” accommodates the doctrine of eternal security, which makes literally seeking the kingdom unnecessary for believers.) Rather, Jesus relieved the disciples’ anxiety about the needs of this life with the argument that since the Father feeds and clothes even the birds and lilies, he will much more feed and clothe those of much more value. Had he taught that only the disciples have greater value than the lilies and birds, the disciples would have worried about whether they truly seek the kingdom. The thought behind the argument is instead that according to the Father’s love, a *man* is of much more value than the lower creation (Matthew 12:12). Indeed, the Father’s provision for people’s needs in this age does not depend on their seeking the kingdom, for his love extends to the unjust as well as to the just (Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-27). Thus, Jesus gave the discourse on anxiety not to motivate the disciples to committed service driven by the prospect of a rare blessing, but to instill in those “of little faith” (Matthew 6:30; Luke 12:28) a firm confidence in their Father’s love displayed in his care even for the birds, which “neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,” and for the lilies, which “neither toil nor spin.”

For only with such trust in his love can the disciples seek the kingdom (eternal life²⁵) by faith in the words of Jesus rather than by goal fulfillment or other human efforts (Luke 10:38-42). Since the Father who is pleased to give them the kingdom will also continue to provide everything they need in this age even without their anxious toil, they have nothing to fear and are freed from bondage to money (Matthew 6:19-24, 33; Luke 12:29-34).

This exhortation to seek good things, both of this age and of the age to come, by faith in the loving Father is also found in the address to “Our Father” that precedes all petitions of Lord’s Prayer (cf. Matthew 7:7-11). Luther’s Small Catechism explains,

“Our Father who art in heaven.” What does this mean? Answer: Here God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father.¹

Accordingly, the discourse on anxiety has been presented as an expansion of this daily prayer (Matthew 6:11) of the disciples²⁶, and Paul also replaced anxiety with prayer (Philippians 4:6-7).

In conclusion, the promises that the Father lovingly satisfies the temporal needs of all sinners are hopeful, but not in the sense of turning disciples’ hope to earthly things. They were instead written to impart strong confidence that he is so benevolent that he valued the whole world enough to give his Son to purchase eternal life for it in spite of its unworthiness. How can I believe God’s love for all people (and thus for me) moved him to sacrifice his Son for us if I do not believe it moves him to meet our needs in this age? For Jesus did not portray God as a self-serving king who unpredictably dispenses his grace and who may or may not have decreed the covenant of grace.² Rather, the Son revealed a heavenly Father who by nature lovingly and dependably gives to his creation rather than seeking his own. The enfleshed Word ultimately glorified the God who is love

not by a humanly understandable display of power, but by being lifted up on the cross (John 1:14-18; 3:14-15; 8:28-30; 12:27-33; 17:1-5; 1 John 4:8-10).

Law and gospel

God's law in the narrow sense of the word, that is, apart from the gospel defined narrowly as the good news of Christ's conquest of Satan, sin, and death, is devoid of hope since it only issues commands with threats for breaking them and rewards for keeping them. Nonetheless, the law was included in Scripture to confer hope in at least two ways.

First, the law tells sinners they deserve damnation, thereby preparing them to rejoice in the good news that Christ saved them from their sins. Once Peter's accusation that the men of Israel killed their Messiah drove them to cry out, "What shall we do?" they were ready to gladly hear the promise, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:36-38).

Biblical commands that believers bear the fruit of the Spirit in specified ways are also hopeful. This is called "the third use of the law" since the same law that restrains by force (first use) and that brings conviction of sin (second use) also shows believers how to channel their Spirit-given desire to please God. Partly in reaction to modern Protestants' overemphasis on the third use of the law, many Lutherans have denied it entirely in spite of its explicit affirmation in Article VI of the Formula of Concord. Counter-intuitively, such antinomianism undermines not only the law, but also the gospel.²⁷ Indeed, since all Scripture, including Scripture on sanctification and the fruit of the Spirit, was composed to comfort, a refusal to hear any part of it endangers faith.

The third use of the law generates hope by instructing believers to perform good works that will serve as signs to strengthen their faith that they have been forgiven (Matthew 5:2-12). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession compares these signs to the sacraments:

Nevertheless, Christ frequently connects the promise of forgiveness of sins with good works. He does not mean that good works are a propitiation — for they follow reconciliation — but he does so for two reasons. One is that good fruits ought to follow of necessity, and so he warns that penitence is hypocritical and false if they do not follow. The other reason is that we need external signs of this exceedingly great promise, since a terrified conscience needs manifold consolations. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, for example, are signs that constantly admonish, cheer, and confirm terrified minds to believe more firmly that their sins are forgiven. This same promise is written and pictured in good works, which thus urge us to believe more firmly... Just as the Lord's Supper does not justify *ex opere operato* without faith, so almsgiving does not justify *ex opere operato* without faith.¹ [Cf. the octavo edition.²⁸ (p. 162)]

Likewise, the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration, Article XI, ¶ 73) teaches believers to live holy lives "so that the more they experience the power and might of the Spirit within themselves, the less they will doubt their election."³¹ Luther found forgiving other sinners to be a precious sign and seal of God's promise to forgive (Large Catechism on Matthew 6:12, 14):

Whatever can be effected by Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which are appointed as outward signs, this sign also can effect to strengthen and gladden our conscience.¹

When believers cannot see their good works as signs of their forgiveness, they need not

despair, for God is greater than their heart and knows all things (1 John 3:19-20). Acutely aware of the law's condemnation (e.g., Matthew 6:15), they again flee to their meek Shepherd, who never rejects them, though the weakness of their faith frightens them (Mark 9:22-27; John 6:35-37). Reconciliation with God is always available to believers as well as unbelievers (2 Corinthians 5:18-20); as part of the Lord's prayer, the request for forgiveness should be made at least once a day (Matthew 6:11). Christ's sincere offer of salvation to all (Matthew 11:28-30), including those who may have already believed, would have removed the obsession of many Puritans about whether or not they had been justified at some point in the past, and the hopefulness of Scripture is enough to refute the doctrine of perseverance that motivated their anxious introspection. Closely related is the article on election, to which we now turn.

Predestined for glory

The authors of the Formula of Concord originally applied the hopefulness of Scripture as a hermeneutical principle to the doctrine of election, as Robert Kolb described:

The document's treatment of predestination began on a note of pastoral concern, with Romans 15:4: "For whatever was written was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the consolation of the Scriptures we might have hope." That meant, according to the Consensus, that the purpose and goal of all teaching dare not conflict with the apostolic teaching on repentance and dare not deprive troubled consciences of their consolation and hope. With this passage the pastoral concern of Marbach and Flinsbach laid down the fundamental hermeneutical direction of the statement. It was to exposit biblical truth for the sake of God's people, applying God's Words of their lives through the distinction of the law that works repentance and the gospel that consoles and bestows hope... Finally, the Consensus taught that the doctrine and discussion of predestination has [sic] two purposes or goals: to reject the idea that human powers or freedom of choice can play a role in the justification of sinners, as Augustine, Luther, and Bucer had clearly taught, and to give consciences the firm consolation of the gospel in their daily struggle against sin, based on the confidence that no one will tear Christ's sheep out of his hand (John 10:28).²⁹

Two opposite doctrines were seen as preventing, weakening, or undermining the hope of eternal life. At the synergistic extreme, the teaching that predestination to salvation is conditional on something in the elect would mean that they must depend at least partly on themselves for salvation. At the fatalistic extreme, the teaching that God elects some to damnation because he does not sincerely desire all to be saved leads to a sinner's doubting the good news that Christ atoned for his sins and wants him to receive the forgiveness Christ genuinely offers by Word and Sacrament. The Lutheran Reformers presented clear passages that taught unconditional election and clear passages that taught universal grace but, true to their hermeneutical principles, without attempting to resolve the tension. Having set forth the comfort of a Christian's knowledge of his predestination to salvation, the article on election ended where it had begun — with the hopefulness of Scripture (Solid Declaration, Article XI):

This doctrine gives sorrowing and tempted people the permanently abiding comfort of knowing that their salvation does not rest in their own hands. If this were the case, they would lose it more readily than Adam and Eve did

in paradise — yes, would be losing it every moment and hour. Their salvation rests in the gracious election of God, which he has revealed to us in Christ, out of whose hand “no one can pluck” us (John 10:28; 2 Tim. 2:19). Hence if anyone so sets forth this teaching concerning God’s gracious election that sorrowing Christians can find no comfort in it but are driven to despair, or when impenitent sinners are strengthened in their malice, then it is clearly evident that this teaching is not being set forth according to the Word and will of God but according to reason and the suggestion of the wicked devil. For the apostle testifies that “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope...”¹

Conclusion

We have seen that the hopefulness of Scripture is taught by the church’s infallible rule of faith. It has been employed as a powerful tool for understanding Scripture on grace, law, and election. Asking whether any given interpretation is Christological in the sense that it gives hope can prove invaluable in future biblical exegesis as well.

Unfortunately, one can correctly apply the hopefulness of Scripture and the other hermeneutical principles presented and yet remain separated from Christ and without hope. That is not what it means to know the Word. To understand Scripture, one must in faith listen to him of whom it bears witness: “Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word.” (John 8:43). Those who accept all articles of the good news of freedom as true propositions without rejoicing in their own deliverance from bondage, perhaps in an effort to achieve objectivity, do not study Scripture with its own presuppositions, for while a dissertation is written for a scholar, a “message of liberation is sent to a prisoner.”⁷ (p. 71) As the first president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod warned seminarians,

A young man who has arrived at “faith” in God’s Word by a sterile conviction of his intellect is a pitiful sight. If he is an acute reasoner, he can easily be led to accept all sorts of errors and become a heretic, because he has never passed through any real anguish of soul. But any one who has experienced the power of the Word and passed through the ordeal of genuine and serious penitence will not easily slip into the hidden spiritual sink-holes, for he has been made wary by experience. When his reason begins to hold forth to him, he clings to the Word and bids his reason be silent.³⁰ (p. 120)

May we likewise set our hope fully on the coming of Christ (1 Peter 1:13), always praying, Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of Thy holy Word we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life which Thou has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.³¹ (p. 107)

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