



The Brave Soloist: The Indian Significance of Martin Luther

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Abstract: The article discusses the exclusive ('*sola*') role of scripture, faith and grace in Luther's programme for Church renewal. Jesus holds the three together: scripture speaks to us about him; we can accept him only through faith; this faith itself is the fruit of God's grace. This perspective of Luther is basically in harmony with what the New Testament tells us. Luther, however, needs to be seen within the frame of his time.

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Martin Luther was educated in *Via Moderna* associated with William of Ockham.¹ As "the initial effort of the pious soul, this school encouraged voluntary acts of devotion."² In search of peace with God, the young Augustinian monk was very devoted to prayer and penance. "The more he tried to do for God, it seemed, the more aware he became of his sinfulness."³ Slowly he came to believe "that salvation is a gift of God's grace received by faith...This, he believed was God's work from beginning to end."⁴ This was not the result of some hasty conclusion, but the fruit of "his prolonged spiritual development."⁵ For him "theology was no mere academic

pursuit, but the struggle for oneself...[and] a struggle for and with God” (ACEC).

In 1517 he openly criticized the Dominicans who made fantastic claims for indulgences. The Dominican Johann Tetzel is reported to have said: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”⁶ As was to be expected, the Dominicans, the pope’s trusted spokespersons, were furious and wanted Rome to condemn him. “The papacy responded with *heavy-handed authoritarianism* combined with diplomatic appeasement of Luther’s prince...and a failure seriously to address the theological issues.”⁷ Gradually Luther became more and more alienated from Rome and “forever changed Christianity when he began the Protestant Reformation.”⁸

Five hundred years later, indulgences have taken a back seat in the thinking of many Roman Catholics. Some also think that Luther was correct. Even Rome has moved away from its original response to Luther. Benedict XVI admitted: “As the Bishop of Rome, it is deeply moving for me to be meeting you here... ‘How do I receive the grace of God?’ The fact that this question was the driving force of his [Luther’s] whole life never ceases to make a deep impression on me” (ACEC). We all need to make this question our own and more than even before we need to listen to Luther with evangelical openness.

Luther “articulated a radical understanding of the gospel that subsequent Lutheranism framed by its three famous *solas*—*sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*...The core of these *solas* may be summed up in one phrase—*solus Christus*.”⁹ We need to critique Luther in the light of contemporary scholarship and interpret him anew not only within the ecumenical concern so important for the West, but also within the multi-religious context so challenging for Indian Christians.

1. *Solus Christus*: Christ Alone

In the introduction to his commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians, Luther states his position very clearly: "For the one doctrine which I have supremely at heart, is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth day and night." Concluding this letter he says: "I bear on my body the marks (*stigma*) of Jesus" (6.17b). Luther enlarges Paul's claim: "I am the servant of Jesus Christ...I openly teach and confess, that no man can obtain the favour of God...but by Christ alone, therefore it behoveth me to bear the badges of Christ my Lord" (CG, 6.17b). "In the ancient world masters placed a *stigma* on their slaves."¹⁰ Luther is also expressing his own deep belonging to Christ. "Luther's thinking, his whole spirituality, was thoroughly Christocentric: 'What promotes Christ's cause' was for Luther the decisive hermeneutical criterion for the exegesis of sacred Scripture" (ACEC).

1. 1 *The Necessity of Jesus*

Even though an avid student of Scripture, Luther failed to see that the God of Jesus is above all a loving Abba. The philosophical image of God seems to have been more powerful in his thought. "If you seek thus to comprehend God, and would pacify him without Christ the mediator, making your works a means between him and yourself, it cannot be but that you must fall...For, as God is in his own nature immeasurable, incomprehensible, and infinite so is he to man's nature intolerable" (CG, 1.3). God is totally beyond our reach. Also the image of a God who is angry with sinful humans continues to affect Luther. In his commentary on Rom 1.18 ("The wrath of God is revealed..."), Luther says: "Through the Gospel, God is revealing his wrath from heaven upon all mankind because of the godless and unjust lives they live" (CR). For

Luther the Good News becomes the revelation of the wrath of God. Hence the need of a mediator: “When so ever you... dispute with yourself how God is to be found...then know you that there is no other God besides this man Christ Jesus...I know by experience what I say” (CG, 1.3). In the early years of his monastic life Luther did much penance to free himself from an angry God, till he realized that only God can free him through the mediation of Jesus.

Commenting on Gal 1.1 (“Paul an apostle...through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead”) Luther says that some may think “that the adding of these words: ‘And by God the Father, etc.’ is not necessary...[but they are needed] to preach the righteousness of God, which is called the resurrection of the dead...the righteousness of Christ, who was raised up by God the Father from the dead; by the which alone we are made righteous.” Jesus was accused of blasphemy, and as a result “he suffered the most reproachful death of the Cross” (CG, 3.6). He “is made a curse for us, and is hanged upon the cross as a wicked man, a blasphemer, a murderer and a traitor” (CG, 3.13). By raising him from the dead the Father justified him. The same Father now justifies us through his Risen Son.

Luther insists that “Christ himself, in the unity of his divine-human person, is the righteousness by which human beings are saved.”¹¹ Christ’s mediation is rooted in the mystery of his incarnation.

Christ is the Son of God and of a woman, who for us sinners was made under the law, to redeem us that were under the law. These words express both the person of Christ and the office of Christ. His person consists of his divine and human nature...Christ therefore is very God and very man. His office he sets forth in these words: “Being made under the law to redeem them that were under the law” (CG, 4.4).

Accepting the mystery of Incarnation, we can agree with Luther that no other mediator is now needed. “Wherefore mark

this well in the matter of justification...we must look upon no other God, but only this God incarnate and clothed with man's nature" (CG, 1.3). In explaining the uniqueness of Jesus we have to keep in mind two important theological concerns. First, Jesus is the way to the Father. Christian theology is theocentric, but for Luther "the gospel is defined primarily by its Christological content."¹² Even for many Roman Catholics spirituality is largely Christocentric. Jesus taught us to pray to the Father, calling him Abba. Today very few do that. Second, our explanation must always bring out more forcefully the grace of God revealed in Jesus. An exclusivist position will make the Father of Jesus a tribal God.

1.2 The Sufficiency of Jesus

Commenting on Gal 2.20b ("I live by faith in the Son of God...") Luther says: "Paul sets out most lively the priesthood and offices of Christ: which are, to pacify God, to make intercession for sinners, to offer up himself a sacrifice for their sins...etc." Luther thinks that there are two aspects of the mediating role of Jesus. One is 'historical'—through his passion and death, "because he had to pay the penalty of death and suffer in our stead the torments of hell..."¹³ The other is 'eschatological'—through his intercession: "So long as He sits at the right hand of God to intercede for us..." (CG, 4.6). Both these modes of mediation raise serious questions.

Luther thinks that because of our sin God is angry. He needs to be placated. "If the law be the ministry of sin, then it is also the ministry of wrath...it shows unto man the wrath of God..." (CG, 2.17). What sort of God is he? Also, to placate that angry God, it would be an act of injustice to require an innocent person to suffer on behalf of that sinner. The 'historical' dimension of Christ's mediation is not his passion and death, but in his being human and divine. "His person consists of his divine and human nature...His office he sets forth in these

words: ‘Being made under the law to redeem them that were under the law’” (CG, 4.4). When an honourable person sits with lepers and dines with them, he restores their dignity.

So too the ‘eschatological’ mediation as intercession is not that Jesus is constantly praying for us. No! The loving Father needs no reminders. Jesus “sits...at the right hand of his Father...made unto us of God...he is our high-priest entreating for us, and reigning over us and in us by race” (CG, int.). The high-priestly role of Jesus is precisely the coming together of the divine and the human in his person. His very presence in the glory of the Father is an assurance for us that one day we too will be in that glory. Jesus is an assurance given to us by the Father. In his mediatory role, both in its historical expression and its eschatological form, he is not our mediator before God, but God’s mediator before us, for us; not because he takes us to God, but brings God to us. In the Incarnation, the Father makes visible his love for us. Commenting on Gal 1.4, Luther quotes Jn 3.16: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” God remains faithful even though we have sinned. Being divine and human, only Jesus can intercede for us; and this is sufficient.

Convinced of the necessity and sufficiency of Christ, Luther looks back to his earlier days with regret: “For we all...taught that Mary was to be held in Christ’s place; we held Christ to be our angry judge and Mary to be our throne of grace... [we] took Christ’s office from Him and gave it to Mary...Sheer idolatry is what we learned.”¹⁴ Luther is not exaggerating. “The *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri (d. 1321) sums up the Mariology of the Middle Ages by depicting her as having influence throughout the entire universe...even hell. Thus on the eve of the Reformation, the central and unique role of Christ in our redemption had become obscured.”¹⁵ This was not a divine comedy but a deeply human tragedy: we were becoming idolaters, and thus debasing ourselves.

Aware of what is happening in our country, I cannot but agree with Luther. “Mary, made a common idol, with innumerable services, celebrations, fasts, hymns, and antiphons.”¹⁶ Commenting on Lk 2.12 (“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe...”), Luther asks: “Why does he [the angel] not direct them to Mary and Joseph..? The reason is that God will not point us to any saint...for they may all err...a special place must be pointed out where Christ is...even if Joseph and Mary were not present.”¹⁷ Those who think that devotion to Mary and the saints is necessary are suggesting “that Christ is a good workman, who has indeed begun a building, but he has not finished it” (CG, 1.6). Jesus is the Way, “you shall find no other way to the Father” (CG, 1.3).

The traditional Roman distinction between *latria*: worship reserved to God alone, *dulia*: veneration of saints, and *hyperdulia*: special veneration of Mary, is quite neat on paper. But we need to honestly examine the ground reality in our parishes and shrines. The commission of the clergy more than the mission of Jesus explains better the flourishing cult of Mary and the saints. “There is a kind of Christianity made up of devotions reflecting an individual and sentimental faith life which does not in fact correspond to authentic “popular piety”. Some people promote these expressions...and in certain cases they do so in order to obtain economic benefits or some power over others (EG, 70). To me the growth of popular devotions is a convenient alibi for a clergy that is not adequately motivated for real pastoral work, and inadequately equipped for it. Already in the 1980’s it was noted that “by and large, the people who accept and respect the priests [and bishops] today are the uneducated, not the educated.”¹⁸ Pope Francis expresses his concern: “We are suffering from religious illiteracy to the point that, in some shrines around the world, things get confused...[where some] sell objects of superstition because people seek salvation in superstition.”¹⁹ The Roman Church in India is a Church of the past. “By the

Late Middle Ages indulgences had become a central part of piety for many people in the Western Church but were also a useful means of financial support for a cash-strapped papacy, so that indulgence preaching was labeled a *sacrum negotium* (holy business).²⁰ When the clergy needs money simony can become sacred, and superstition can become faith.

2. *Sola Gratia*: Grace Alone

A Christian is not one “who has no sin...but he to whom God imputes no sin” (CG, 2.16). It is the working of God’s grace “that we are accounted completely just before God. God’s grace is not divided into bits and pieces, as are the gifts, but grace takes us up completely into God’s favour... so that the gifts may begin their work in us” (CR). Here we need to understand what Luther means by ‘impute’, and why he distinguishes between grace and gifts. I shall try to explain this through the parable of the Lost Son (Lk 15.11-25).

2.1 *Justification as Relation*

The younger son wanted to break away completely from his father, and be his own master. He is far away from home and starving to death. He has lost all his dignity: caring for pigs—the dirtiest creatures on earth! When he is in this hell, he remembers his father as a rich landlord with many servants. He does not expect to be easily accepted. Hence he prepares a three-tiered plea—a confession: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;” an acceptance of the consequences of his misbehaviour: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son;” and a petition: “Treat me as one of your hired servants.” The third part is in anticipation of his father telling him to get lost.

The father had not forgotten him—how could he? Every day, morning and evening he would go up to the roof of his

house and look all around. Luke paints a powerfully appealing picture of the compassionate father. While the son “was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” Luke packs five verbs in one breath. The father does not wait for the son to come near and prostrate himself at his feet and ask forgiveness. He welcomes him as if a good bridegroom for his daughter was coming. This was what the boy least expected. This is grace: the restoration of the lost relationship. This is justification: the father treats that young man as his son, even though he is stinking. Grace, for Luther, is not divided into bits and pieces, because grace is not something, but accepting the gaze of a loving God.

The boy needs a good bath, a new set of clothes, a new pair of sandals. These are the ‘gifts’: a process of many parts. In the meanwhile, the servants get a grand dinner ready. All in the neighbourhood must know that the dead son is alive, and he who was lost is found, and he has been fully reinstated as the son. The gifts do not end there. He is emaciated: skin and bones. He will need some months to recover his health fully: to be healthy as he was before.

2.2 Relation as Grace

Even on the human level love is always a free gift. We cannot compel anybody to love us. Love is always a mystery of faith and hope. When I stand in the presence of a person with a hope that he accepts me, I also do so with the faith that he can really love me. When the other loves me, he puts his faith in me and hopes that I will accept and reciprocate his love. All real love is the experience of grace. Christ is “the Giver of grace and life...who gave himself, not for our merits...but for our sins” (CG, 1.4). The lost son did not expect that the father would welcome him as his son. Hence he came prepared with a plea that he be accepted as a servant.

The way Luther speaks gives the impression that God's grace to us is linked with Christ's death on the cross. Jesus has "given himself for our sins, and with one oblation has put away the sins of the whole world, has fastened them upon the cross, and put them clean out by himself" (CG, 1.4). This is what many Christians believe: God sent his Son to save us from our sins. This in a way makes grace God's response to our sin. Grace is God's eternal purpose (Eph 3.11). Before the foundation of the world he chose us in his Son (Jn 1.1-2; Eph 1.5-6, 9-10; Col 1.15-16). What then happens to Luther's *theologia crucis*? For him "the Gospel of Christ crucified [is] the word of the cross and the foolishness of preaching" (CG, 3.6). This explains why the Church is not attractive. "For the Gospel which is the Word of the Cross...shines not so brightly as the doctrine of the law and works, and therefore she has not so many disciples...because she preaches the word of the cross of Christ crucified, against all the wisdom of the flesh" (CG, 4.27).

Our interpretation of Luther's *theologia crucis* can make sense only if it harmonizes with the New Testament. We need to shift from an expiation- to a compassion-paradigm to understand Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus died not for us but with us. He died in compassion with all the victims of the powers of darkness, powers that unleash all kinds of violence on innocent people. The death of Jesus is the final self-emptying of the God who is Love: to be with the beloved even in hell. In Jesus' resurrection we all rise with him. Our humanity is already in glory. The *theologia crucis* discloses the vulnerability of love. The Church lives the *theologia crucis* only through the radical self-emptying that love demands. Then she will withdraw to make place for God's Kingdom. Today we have a lot of the Church, but very little of the Kingdom.

3. *Sola Fides: Faith Alone*

Luther rightly said that many speak about faith “without understanding their own words” (*FC*, p. 104). A distinction must be made between faith and belief. The former is an existential mystery: a relation to a person. The latter is the cognitive content that is presupposed by, accompanies and follows faith. The failure to make this distinction has led to some horrible crimes in the past. We have burnt some people to death because they did not share our belief. The difference between faith and belief is seen in Abraham. He is our father in faith even though strictly speaking he was not even a monotheist.

3.1 *Faith: The Acceptance of Justification*

Luther considers Paul’s letter to the Romans “the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel... almost bright enough to illumine the entire Scripture” (*CR*). The letter was perceived as an attack on “a creed of merit and system of works unworthy of devotion or even of toleration.”²¹ This creed gives great importance to Law. Luther believes that we cannot keep the Law if properly understood. It is not enough to fulfil the Law outwardly, but we must do so with inner freedom and love for the Law. But “everyone finds inside himself an aversion to good and a craving for evil. Where there is no free desire for good, there the heart has not set itself on God’s law...[The Law] is spiritual, [and] no one can satisfy it unless everything he does springs from the depths of the heart” (*CR*). It is wrong to think that we can prepare ourselves “for grace by means of works. How can anybody prepare himself for good by means of works if he does no good work except with aversion and constraint in his heart?” (*CR*). Only when we are filled with love by the Holy Spirit will we be able to

keep the Law properly. The Spirit, however, “is given only in, with, and through faith in Jesus Christ” (CR).

Justification is not something but a relation with God. Only God in his goodness can invite us to himself; otherwise he would not be God, but some earthly figure. We have to accept this invitation in faith. “For the word of God cannot be received and honoured by any works, but by faith alone...as the soul needs the word alone for life and justification, so it is justified by faith alone” (FC, p. 107).

3.2 Works: The Expression of Justification

Luther distinguishes between naked or abstract and concrete or incarnate faith (CG, 3.10). When people are filled with faith, “then do they love God and their neighbour, then do they good works...This is to do the law indeed” (*idem.*). These good works are animated by faith: “faith must always be the divinity of works and so spread throughout the works as is the divinity throughout the humanity of Christ” (*idem.*).

Real faith takes us towards our neighbour. “Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire” (CR). Faith is the firm conviction “of the overflowing good will that God has shown in Christ: he had him die for us before we could ask him for it, yes, even while we were still his enemies” (*idem.*). This does not mean that good works are not needed. We too must love and serve others even before they ask us.

4. Sola Scriptura: Scripture Alone

Towards the end of his *Large Catechism* Luther warns his readers: a God-fearing person is bound to have enemies. He

should remember that he does not belong to this world, “and only keep to the Scriptures” (*LC*), because “what is asserted without Scripture or an approved revelation, may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed” (*OL*). Popes have made claims that today we would not approve of. Hence “who would help Christendom when the pope errs, if we were not to believe another, who had the Scriptures on his side, more than the pope?” (*OL*). “The Reformation happened because the pope tried to hinder him [Luther] from fulfilling his vocation of expounding the Scriptures.”²² Luther was a student also of the early Fathers. Though important, they have a limited function: “the writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time, in order that through them we may be led to the Holy Scriptures...[because] the Scriptures alone are our vineyard in which we ought all to work and toil” (*OL*). No wonder then that Luther is reported to have said: “A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it.”²³ After Luther launched the Reformation, questions concerning epistemology and hermeneutics have engaged many scholars. All this must make us more critical when discussing the role of Scripture in our life today.

4.1 Scripture as Authority

This insistence of Luther to have recourse to Scripture alone “only underlined his concern for finding a direct approach to Christ, one in which the individual is illumined by the interior witness of the Holy Spirit (*sola gratia*, ‘grace alone’).”²⁴ The fact is that many others claim to have their holy book, the only source of truth. Their ‘truths’ at times clearly contradict each other.²⁵ Different groups use their sacred book to justify unacceptable ways of thinking and acting. The Bible has been quoted to justify genocide (1 Sam 15.2-3), extreme attitude towards homosexuals (Lev 20.13), death penalty (Lev 20.2,

9), male domination in the Church (1 Tim 2.11-14), slavery (Eph 6.5-8), etc.

In upholding Scripture as a sure foundation for religious truth, we are engaged in a vicious circle. Vatican II states that the Church “relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20.31; 2 Tim 3.16; 2 Peter 1.19-20, 3.15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself” (*DV*, 11). How on earth could the Apostles know about the books of the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, when scholars today think that “the history of the development of the OT canon is a matter of controversy...[and] the formation of the NT canon also had its vicissitudes.”²⁶ Further, the Council—the Church—uses Biblical texts to make its claim for the Bible and to show that Jesus founded the Church.

Some scholars claim that the Church did not really create the Canon. “To say the church chose the canon is a misleading half-truth. A closer approximation would be to say that the church recognized the canon...there were certain documents which had been exercising authority within a widening circle of churches since they were delivered to their first readers.”²⁷ Granting the factuality of the claim does not legitimize the conclusion. Let me cite two examples.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* was “widely popular in the second and third centuries (there are more surviving copies of *The Shepherd* than of many canonical writings);”²⁸ and “in the Greek Church of the 2nd and 3rd cents. the work was widely regarded as Scripture.”²⁹ Some in the third century were uncomfortable with the *Book of Revelation* because it was “a favourite text of the Montanists.”³⁰ Today it is part of the Canon, while the former is not. At what point in her history did the Church recognize the Canon? How do we have

three different Canons today: Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestant?

The problem is further complicated if we accept that “with regard to their original formation Scripture and the Church are on the same level and cannot, in the last analysis, provide a mutual basis for each other. To suggest this would be to fall in the circle of ‘Church – canon – Church’.”³¹ This brings us face to face with two problems: 1. How do we know that the Church is a divine institution? 2. How do we get the assurance that the Bible is divinely inspired? “While all Christians accept that the Bible is authoritative, there is a surprising range of opinions about why this is so.”³² Should not this surprising range of opinions make us more sceptical?

4.2 Scripture as Identity

We cannot read a text composed two millennia ago the way it was read then. Being in history means journeying in knowledge and understanding. The context of the community plays an important part in shaping and interpreting its Scripture, even modifying the text created by others. Three examples make this clear.

David rapes Bathsheba and gets Uriah killed to hide his crime (2 Sam 11.1-27). This account begins with “In the spring of the year...” (2 Sam 11.1). The next episode is reported thus. “Now Joab fought against Rabbah... (12.26). The author of the *First Book of Chronicles* totally omits the David-Bathsheba episode. His version reads. “In the spring of the year...Joab led out the army...and besieged Rabbah” (20.1). He was a Davidic loyalist and so he whitewashes David. This should caution us: people in power can create Scripture to suit their selfish needs.

Mark and Matthew tell us that the people of Nazareth were not impressed by Jesus. As a result, “he *could do no* mighty work there” (Mk 6.5). Matthew, with his comparatively

advanced Christology, felt that was offensive. He tones it down: “he *did not* do many mighty works there” (13.58). The four reports of the Last Supper (1 Cor 11:23-26; Mk 14:22-25; Mt 26:26- 29; Lk 22:19-20) differ significantly. The writers are reporting not the Last Supper but the way the Eucharist was celebrated in their community. All this seems “to make access to the real event virtually impossible.”³³

The sacred text of a community mirrors its shifting loyalties and concerns. This explains the conflicting claims made by different Churches on the basis of the same text. Vatican II tells us that “Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation” (*DV*, 11). How do we know which truth is needed for our salvation? Today even Catholic biblical scholars question most of the dogmas proclaimed by Rome during the last thousand years. We can (ab)use Scripture to reflect and thereby legitimize what we are. Instead of Scripture shaping the Church, the Church shapes the Scripture. Texts do not exist in the air; they continue to be active through the interpretation we give. Hence our interpretation is the shape we give to the text. Yet we cannot be arbitrary in our interpretation.

4.3 Scripture as Experience

Texts that acquire a sacred significance are related to some deep experience of the writers. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete” (1 Jn 1.1-4). The author repeatedly assures us that he is sharing with us an experience so profound that even writing about it gives him joy. He wants not to provide us with some dogmatic

formulae, but to draw us into that fellowship which he has experienced. My impression is that in the Roman Church Scripture is primarily a *locus theologicus*. Yet it seems to have forgotten that “exegesis is, after all, a matter of obedience.”³⁴ The more thorough our exegesis the greater will be our obedience to Scripture.

We need to remind ourselves that “in the sacred books, the Father...meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the...the everlasting source of spiritual life” (*DV*, 21). If Luther gave so much importance to Scripture, it is precisely because he saw it as the source of deep religious experience. “Let us therefore hold it for certain...that the soul can do without everything, except the word of God...having the word, it is rich... since that is the word of life,...and of every good thing. It is on this account that the prophet in a whole psalm [Ps 119], and in many other places, sighs for and calls upon the word of God with so many groanings” (*FC*, p. 106). Here Luther is not speaking of the text of Scripture, but of the experience of being guided by God. He also recalls Amos 8.11, where the prophet speaks about a famine of hearing the word of God. Scripture will impact us to the extent we internalize it: “For if the touch of Christ was healing, how much more does that most tender spiritual touch, nay, absorption of the word, communicate to the soul all that belongs to the word” (*FC*, p. 109). Scripture originates in experience; it must also mediate an experience.

4.4 Scripture as Interpretation

The New Testament is an effort to interpret the life and teaching of the historical Jesus. A person articulates his experience in the way he understands it. The problem becomes more complex when we keep in mind that the four Gospels are not the works of individual authors, but were

nurtured within different communities. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the books of the New Testament were not written at the same time. Hence it is characterized by unity and diversity. We cannot put aside the legitimacy of pluralism by suggesting that it smacks of relativism. After spending many years of study on the New Testament, this is the conclusion James Dunn arrives at: “I have come to see more and more clearly that Christian unity is impossible without diversity, that without sufficient diversity Christian unity will be (heretically) narrow...[and] Christian unity will be as ludicrously lopsided and grotesque as the body which consists only of an eye or an ear (1 Cor. 12.17–20).”³⁵ The Spirit “alone can raise up diversity, plurality and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity” (*EG*, 131).

4.5 Scripture as Compassion

The “the fundamental message [of the Bible is] the personal love of God who became man, who gave himself up for us, who is living and who offers us his salvation and his friendship” (*EG*, 128). God desires steadfast love (*hesed*; LXX: *eleos*) and not sacrifice (Hos 6.6). In the Old Testament, *hesed* “has a relational aspect that is essential to any proper definition of the term...[on the human level] *hesed* connotes mutual obligation on the part of individuals or groups... *hesed* is the ‘essence’ of the covenantal relationship.”³⁶ In other words, originally the prophet was inviting the Israelites to be faithful to God by dealing fairly with each other as he deals with them, his covenantal people. This obligation was more important than cultic worship. In Mt 9.13 and 12.7, Jesus quotes Hos 6.6, in both cases to justify some behaviour which pious Jews considered questionable—eating with tax collectors and sinners, and plucking heads of grain on a Sabbath. The Good Samaritan was moved with compassion (Lk 10.33) for the victim of the robbers and had mercy on him (*eleos*, v. 37: the

kindness we show to a person in need, without expecting any return). As the pilgrim moves ahead, so does the text: from within the frame of the covenant to the wider human concern.

The Roman Catholic teaching about divorce and remarriage is based on Mk 10.5-12. Matthew adds a mitigating clause: “Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity (*porneia*), and marries another, commits adultery” (19.9). We have this except-clause also in 5.32. Many commentators think that “these words [except for unchastity] are not part of the saying as originally uttered, but are a community regulation later inserted into the text.”³⁷ Whatever be the occasion of this insertion, the result was the mitigation of the absolute requirement found in Mark. Jesus sees the “Mosaic permission as a departure from the standards presupposed in the creation of a single pair made for each other.”³⁸ He had claimed to be greater than Jonah and Solomon (Mt 12.41-42). He could rightly claim: “There is somebody greater than even Moses here.” I believe that the Holy Spirit, that guided Moses and the community of Matthew to respond to a pastoral problem with compassion, is also guiding the Church today.

Some Jewish Christians insisted that the Gentile Christians be circumcised (Acts 15.1). Peter objected: “Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (v. 10). The elders draft a letter to the gentile Christians: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us... that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity” (Acts 15.28-29). The books of the Old Testament “contain some things which are incomplete and temporary” (*DV*, 15). This is also true of the books of the New Testament. Today many of us ignore the first three norms unanimously decreed by the Jerusalem Council.

Matthew shows Jesus again and again telling his audience: “You have heard that it was said...” and each time he quotes a text from the Old Testament (Ex 20.13, 14; 21.24; Lev 19.12, 18), and then adds: “But I say to you...” (Mt 5.21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). What Jesus then says will be substantially accepted by all people, even if they do not believe in God. He was fully aware that the Old Testament is the story of a pilgrim people. It was not merely a geographical and political pilgrimage, from one place to another, from bondage to freedom. It was also a moral, spiritual and theological pilgrimage. All books reflect their context, and as such have a qualified significance for the future. Can any text be fully final for a truly pilgrim community?

4.6 Scripture as History

To profess Jesus we need to know him, the Jesus who lived two thousand years ago. For this the New Testament helps us, but we need to keep in mind its limit. “As we know, the Sacred Scriptures are the written testimony of the divine word, the canonical memorial that testifies to the event of Revelation. The Word of God therefore precedes and exceeds the Bible. This is why our faith is not only centred on a book but on a history of salvation and above all on a Person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh.”³⁹ We are not Biblicians, but Christians. The person of Jesus is an historical reality. If God’s revelation comes to us through history, we need to take the Jesus of history very seriously. This becomes an imperative in a multi-religious context, and in the postmodern age. The “historical Jesus subverts not just some ideologies but all ideologies...Properly understood, the historical Jesus is a bulwark against the reduction of Christian faith in general and Christology in particular to ‘relevant’ ideology of any stripe... [therefore] a constant stimulus to theological renewal.”⁴⁰

Jesus saw himself as the final prophet. He believed that the end of the world was coming very soon, and that the whole ministry of the apostles would be confined only to Israel (Mt 10.1-23). Paul thought that he would be alive to receive the Lord when he returns (1 Thess 4.17). Guided by the historic-critical method we can say that Jesus of Nazareth did not start a new religion. He did not found the hierarchical Church, institute a ministerial priesthood, prescribe any special rituals.⁴¹ He did not expect his disciples to have their own special book. In Luther's thinking, "each *sola* affirmed the centrality of Jesus Christ. Christ is the sole content of Scripture and the principle for selectivity within Scripture."⁴²

Jesus shared with his disciples the insight he gained from the many hours he spent in silence: God is the one loving parent of all and, hence, we ought to love one another. Being sensitive to human need was the principle that guided Jesus, and he had no qualms of conscience in ignoring institutions of human making, however sacred they might have been.⁴³ This conclusion may help us to deal with Postmodernism. "A major issue facing Christian theology today is the question of power. On the wider cultural level, the postmodern critique of thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and especially Michel Foucault contains the charge that all claims to truth, including the claims of theology, are merely secret bids for power."⁴⁴ The Jesus of history is the canon within the canon. All our understanding of Scripture must bring us closer to that compassionate Jesus. If the Sabbath is for humankind, so is Scripture.

Notes

- 1 References to Luther's writings and Roman documents are provided within the main text of my study. They have been downloaded—unless indicated otherwise—from godrules.net/library/luther on 30th November 2016. Those marked with an asterisk (*) do not have any section or paragraph numbering. In

some cases, I have ‘modernized’ the language. I shall be using the following abbreviations:

ACEC BENEDICT XVI, “Address to the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany”, 23 September 2011, w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110923_evangelical-church-erfurt.html; ao 31-12-2016.

ao accessed on

BC *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. *

CG *Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*.* I shall try to indicate the verse on which Luther is commenting.

DV VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum*.

EG Pope FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

FC *On the Freedom of a Christian*, sourcebooks.fordham.edu/hal-sall/mod/luther-freedomchristian.asp; ao 31-12-2016.

LC *Large Catechism*.*

OCCT Adrian HASTINGS (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

ODCC F. L. CROSS & E. A. LIVINGSTONE, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

OL *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*.*

2 Euan CAMERON, “Luther, Martin”, *OCCT*, pp. 398b-401b, here pp. 398b-399a.

3 See www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-Bible-history/martin-luther.html; ao 31-12-2016.

4 *Idem*.

5 CAMERON, “Luther, Martin”, p. 399a.

6 Martin BRECHT, *Martin Luther: A Biography*, 3 vols., Tr. James L. SCHAAF, Fortress Press, 1993–1999, vol. 1, p. 182, qt. by www.theopedia.com/martin-luther; ao 30-09-2016.

7 CAMERON, “Luther, Martin”, p. 399a, emphasis added.

- 8 See www.biography.com/people/martin-luther-9389283, ao 31-12-2016.
- 9 Carl E. BRAATEN, “Lutheranism”, *OCCT*, pp. 401b-403b, here p. 402a.
- 10 Frank J. MATERA: *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina Series: 9, Collegeville (Minn): Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 227.
- 11 David S. YEAGO, “Luther, Martin”, in Trevor A. HART (ed.), *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000, pp. 331b-335b, here p. 332b.
- 12 *Idem*.
- 13 See godrules.net/library/luther/129luther_c25.htm; ao 31-12-2016.
- 14 See www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_d22.htm; ao 31-12-2016.
- 15 Richard P. McBRIEN, *Catholicism*, 3rd ed., London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, rep. 2000, p. 1089.
- 16 *Idem*.
- 17 See godrules.net/library/luther/129luther_b2.htm; ao 31-12-2016.
- 18 Paul PARATHAZIAM, “Catholic Priests in India: Reflections on a Survey”, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 52 (1988), pp.379-389, here p. 388.
- 19 See w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/_2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-vescovi.html; ao 31-12-2016.
- 20 See www.augsburgfortress.org/media/downloads/_9781451482799_Excerpt%20from%20Chapter%201.pdf; ao 31-12-2016.
- 21 Craig C. HILL, “Romans”, in John BARTON & John MUDDIMAN, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 1083-1108, here p. 1083b.
- 22 Timothy GEORGE, “Dr. Luther’s Theology”, *Christian History*, 34 (1992), www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/dr-luthers-theology ao 31-12-2016.

- 23 See www.azquotes.com/quote/866577; ao 31-12-2016.
- 24 McBRIEN, *Catholicism*, p. 1029.
- 25 Christians and Muslims, both claim that they follow the final prophet.
- 26 “Canon of Scripture”, *ODCC* , pp. 281b-282b, here p. 281b.
- 27 James J. D. DUNN, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed., London: SCM Press / Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, (1977) 1990, p. xxxi.
- 28 Michael W. HOLMES (ed. & tr.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed., Grand Rapids (Mich): BakerAcademic, 2007, p. 442.
- 29 “Hermas”, *ODCC* , pp. 764a-765a, here p. 764b.
- 30 Adela Yarbro COLLINS, “Revelation, Book of”, in Ain David Noel FREEDMAN (ed. in chief), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., New York (NY): Doubleday, 1992, vol. 5, pp. 694b-708a, here p. 695a.
- 31 Paul NEUENZEIT, “Canon of Scripture”, in Karl RAHNER, *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, 6 vols., Bangalore: Theological Publications in India (TPI), 1969, rep. 1989, vol. 1, pp. 252a-257a, here p. 256b.
- 32 John BARTON, “Bible, its authority and interpretation”, *OCCT*, pp. 69b-72b, here p. 71b.
- 33 Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week*, London\San Francisco: Catholic Truth Society\Ignatius Press, 2011, 103.
- 34 Joachim. JEREMIAS, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, London: SCM, 1990, p. 8.
- 35 DUNN, “Foreword”, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. xix; emphasis added. The ‘twelve years’ refer to the time between the first and the second edition of this book.
- 36 D. A. BAER and R. P. GORDON, “*hṣd*”, in Willem A. VanGEMEREN (Gen. ed.), *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., Grand Rapids (Mich.): Zondervan, 1997, vol. 2, pp. 211-218, here p. 211.

- 37 W. F. ALBRIGHT & C. S. MANN, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Anchor Bible: 26, New York: Doubleday, 1971, p. 226.
- 38 *Idem*.
- 39 See w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/april/documents/papa-francesco_20130412_commissione-biblica.html; ao 31-12-2016.
- 40 John P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1991-2009, vol. 1, p. 199.
- 41 See Subhash ANAND, "Announcing the Uniqueness of the Christ-event in the Pluralistic Context of India", *Journal of Indian Theology*, 8-3 (2015 December), pp. 6-53.
- 42 Timothy GEORGE, "Dr. Luther's Theology", *Christian History*, 34 (1992), www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/dr-luthers-theology ao 31-12-2016.
- 43 See Subhash ANAND, "The Religionless Prophet: Revisioning Jesus of Nazareth", *Third Millennium*, 17/4 (October-December 2014), pp. 31-52.
- 44 Graham TOMLIN, "Theology of the Cross: Subversive: Theology for a Postmodern World?", www.theologynetwork.org/the-cross/theology-of-the-cross--subversive-theology-for-a-postmodern-world.htm; ao 31-12-2016.

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