Captured by the Word: Hermeneutics and the Agonizing Struggle[1]

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Before I begin, I want to express my sincere thanks to President Mohler, to the Provost, Dr. Paul Akin, and my Dean, Dr. Hershael York, for the invitation and honor of presenting this address to the faculty. I also want to extend my thanks and gratitude to my esteemed and beloved colleagues. It is a privilege beyond description to be numbered among you. And of course, to my students—the reason I and my colleagues are here. Above all, I am grateful to my wife Denise. To say that I would not be standing here today without her is an understatement. Of all people, she most embodies what it is to put the interests of others ahead of her own. And my daughter Jamie, the apple of my eye, I'm so proud of you and glad that you're here today.

Introduction

I read the Bible because it is "the book that reads me."[2] This is how a woman who, through the work of missionaries confessed faith in Christ, responded to a question from her friends and neighbors who noticed that the Bible was

her constant companion. They asked her, "Why do you read the Bible?" She replied, "It is the book that reads me." What she understood intuitively, just by reading, is that the Bible is not simply an inspired object of study. I think it's fair to say that what she discovered is that 2 Timothy 3:16 is more than a propositional statement about the Bible. It is also a statement about what the Bible itself does. The Bible exposes the reader, it reproves, corrects, and trains the reader in righteousness. In short, the woman was captured by the Word. This sort of capture cannot be coaxed from the Bible simply through applying proper critical tools and methods, putting together big pictures, retrieving pre-critical models of interpretation, or through pursuing an elevated, contemplative reading. Calling the Bible, "the book that reads me," likely sounds nice, even quaint. The kind of thing that gets a knowing nod, maybe elicits a low murmur, but ultimately filed away as a devotional comment, but not something that has a place in the work of interpretation, exegesis, and/or sermon preparation. I would, however, argue that our hermeneutics must flow from this simple thought: faithful interpretation, begins with the capture of the reader by the text.

Listen to the following quote from Mark Seifrid:

> Without in any way calling into question the need for careful, methodical study of the text, we may ask if the model to which we generally are accustomed properly acknowledges the way in which the Scriptures *interpret us* before we interpret them. To imagine that we can sit down with a text of Scripture, employing certain rules of study and using the linguistic tools at our disposal, determine the meaning of a text, and then go on to apply it prayerfully is to deceive ourselves. We imagine that we master the text, when in fact it discloses its meaning only as it masters us.[3]

Seifrid concerns himself there with the correct application of Luther's Law-Gospel distinction. What I will consider today is another of Luther's principles, and one that indeed goes hand-in-hand with the proper application of Law and Gospel as a hermeneutic. Luther identified three "rules" that make a theologian. Since interpreters ought to be theologians, I apply these rules to interpretation. The three rules are simple. The first two are *prayer* and *meditation*. I will address those briefly later. It is the third to which I want to give special attention. I want to focus today on the third

rule because not only is it the most challenging to understand but is also the most neglected of Luther's three rules. The third rule, in English anyway, is the *Agonizing Struggle.*[4] The struggle that will arise when a reader comes to the text in prayer and meditation (properly understood). It is only through this agonizing struggle in the interpretation of the Bible, that the reader will be captured by the word, and in this capture becomes subject to the Word not merely a user of the Word.

Using the Scripture

I frequently warn my students of the danger of coming to the Bible merely for what use we want to get out of it, a means to some other end. When Scripture is primarily a means to an end, then we will treat it essentially as raw material to be refined for some greater use. Of course, there are many proper "uses" of Scripture. It is necessary to use Scripture for academic and popular writing, for lecture preparation, for sermon and bible study preparation, for devotional reading, and perhaps even in the completion of a seminary assignment. I don't want to create yet another way for us to be more introspective and spiritually paranoid. I well recall a student, who after hearing me speak about this tendency only to use the Bible for some other end, came to me in something of a panic because he couldn't tell if he was "using" the Bible. The point is this: the Bible is not simply an instrument or tool for accomplishing a task, whether that task is devotional, pastoral, or academic.

I am not suggesting that there is no difference between say, reading the Bible alone in communion with God in Word and prayer and the hard work of interpreting texts of Scripture with the skills, tools, and proper methods required for that task. What I am saying is that, regardless of how and for what purpose we read the Bible, the Bible remains the same. If we approach the Bible only for what we're going to do with it, how we are going to leverage it for a sermon, a lecture, an article, or a book; in order to learn what we must *avoid* and what we must *do* (and then of course do more of) then we may effectively place ourselves over Scripture. It is a necessary tool for the job. The work, however, is ours. We excavate, properly arrange, then add application to the Scripture.

In what follows, I will suggest that faithful interpreters, teachers, and students of the Bible—whether our professional pursuit is grammatical-

historical, historical-redemptive, or biblical-theological, then we should incorporate and follow Luther's three rules: prayer, meditation, and the agonizing struggle that will arise when we learn that the Bible must first read us.

A Retrospective

Before proceeding further, allow me to share a short retrospective with you. A reflection on what I've seen over the past twenty years of teaching and in the roughly ten years of study leading up to it. I do so because I've concluded based on personal experience, study, teaching, and observation that Luther's rules are, as he intended, essential for faithful interpretation.

Part 1: Objectivity is King

When I was first introduced to formal hermeneutics it was quite common to assert that step one is to recognize our presuppositions. In the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann (for one) observed that exegesis without presuppositions is impossible. Bible scholars therefore concluded that since we all have presuppositions it is our duty to identify them and, having identified them, set them aside. In other words, essentially become functional skeptics and cynics. For evangelicals, behind the eightball by a couple decades, this did not mean—in theory—dispensing with precommitments (confessional or personal), but rather identifying them and putting them on the table. Nevertheless, "presuppositionless" exegesis made an impact on evangelicals. In my days as a doctoral student, I distinctly remember hearing a student colleague say, "I have to remove my (dramatically taking off his glasses) 'evangelical rose-colored spectacles' and read the word of God as purely as possible." Hearing this quip, one seminar member (name withheld) responded: "Spectacles? You know, I wear 'spectacles' because I can't see without them, but maybe that's just me." This sort of presupposition-neutral perspective was typically linked with a rather unshakable confidence in proper methods. The idea went something like this: "All things being equal, and given the same background, knowledge and skill in applying the same method(s), an unbeliever and a believer can come to the same interpretation of meaning in a given text." Practically speaking, it was as though the purpose of a text, how an author expects a reader to respond, is detached from the meaning of a text. This, by the way, had nothing at all to do with defending

the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture, but an exultation of the reliability and apparent infallibility of proper methodology. In other words, biblical interpretation could be tested impartially and judged on the repeatability of results.

Let me be clear: Obviously, proper methodology is essential, but reliance on methodology alone is more akin to the work in a laboratory than interpretation of the Bible—if we believe the things we say about the Bible. I was not far from the kingdom of modern sensitivities myself, once declaring to one of my professors, "I can interpret most any text in Paul with only the conjunctions, participles, and particles—with the rest of the text hidden." I shared a similarly misguided (and embarrassing), idea with a fellow doctoral student studying systematic theology. He looked at me blankly for moment and replied: "But what about the theology in the text?" I knowingly replied, "grammar and syntax *is* theology!" Proving beyond doubt that Calvinism isn't the only thing with a "cage stage." Such approaches to the text of course didn't remain in the classroom but were reflected in various homiletics textbooks and in some pulpits where preaching, justified of course with the shibboleth, "expository," became more lecturing than proclaiming.

There can be no mistake—learning and applying rigorous interpretive and exegetical methodology, rooted in the original languages, is essential. And, contrary to what some in the retrieval camp(s) would have you believe, the modern era has made positive contributions beyond hospitals, anti-biotics, and hygiene. When I teach hermeneutics the pervasive influence of those from whom I learned hermeneutics is more than evident. All I'm suggesting is that merely identifying meaning apart from an author's intended purpose, or calls for exegesis alone, or reliance on methods to render the verified meaning of a text, is insufficient for biblical hermeneutics. It is also out of step with the Reformers, the magisterial Reformers in particular, and those Protestants who remain faithful to confessional traditions.

Part 2: Proliferation of Big Pictures

The late twentieth century saw the rise of a new interest in the study of the whole Bible as a coherent story of Redemption. This of course was not new. It was simply the popularizing of decades of Biblical Theology. On the Evangelical side of things, scholars built on the work of Geerhardus Vos' *Biblical Theology*. Jumping ahead, books like Graeme Goldsworthy's

According to Plan, were included in hermeneutics syllabi in evangelical institutions—including this one. In the scholarly guild, Oscar Cullmann's *Christ and Time,* and Leonhard Goppelt's *Theology of the New Testament* provided much of the impetus, not to mention the vocabulary of twentieth century history of redemption approaches to the Bible. Think, for instance, of the term "already and not yet." Evangelical biblical theologians, like George Ladd, published works explicitly founded on redemptive history. That trend continues to this day.

Over time, the redemptive-historical approach increasingly caught on in more popular publications. While not hermeneutics proper, the rise of "big picture" perspectives on Scripture quickly became all the rage in publishing and in pulpits. In fact, if you listen closely, you can hear another "big picture" book hitting the shelf as I speak. The rise in popularity of such a perspective on the Bible as a coherent story of redemption had and continues to have a positive effect among evangelicals. From scholars, to students, to congregants, the Bible came to life, as it were, in new ways. Old Testament (OT) narrative, for example, was no longer just stories that taught principles for living, working, running a business, or leading a family. The proliferation of redemptive-historical perspectives, or "big-picture" approaches, however, has not been entirely positive and, I might argue, reached a point of diminishing marginal utility. The benefits gained have decreased, maybe dramatically, with the increase of big-pictures. The reason is simple, an exclusive focus on big picture reading is an abstraction of Scripture. The emphasis of the abstraction is a matter of a scholar's, or reader's, or preacher's choice. Big picture approaches reconstruct a timeline or arc that, while intersecting with the text of Scripture, is suspended over the text. The real danger, if redemptive-historical readings become exclusive, is that a reconstructed, abstracted timeline, or theological paradigm, can become the main referent in interpretation. Difficult texts, texts that convict the reader and condemn sin, that teach uncomfortable truths, that challenge cultural and social trends—these things, not to mention the historicity of Scripture, can be bypassed for the "drama" of the story. Even when the intentions and results aren't as pernicious as all that, readers could spend a lifetime fascinated by the "story" (parts of it anyway) and never be confronted or engaged by the Word of God. Readers may, and do, pursue new and exciting connections in the Bible that grow ever more tenuous and

rely less on textual warrant. This is not a rejection, but a simple observation that by itself, a redemptive-historical approach, and its popular "big picture" second cousin is insufficient as a hermeneutic.

Part 3: Rediscovered Readers

In the last twenty years, attention to the role, place, and responsibility of the reader in evangelical hermeneutics has increased dramatically. Though I am well aware that the origins of the newfound interest in the reader go back much further than two decades. The rediscovery of the reader, however, does not signal a victory of reader-response hermeneutics. These "new" readers are, to use Jeannine Brown's term, "chastened" readers who (at least theoretically or ideally) do not place themselves over the text as the community sanctioned arbiters of meaning.[5]

Today there are many books (I mean primarily textbooks) on or in the vicinity of hermeneutics that put quite a bit of focus on the place of the reader in interpretation. Not the reader's control of the text, but an increased emphasis on the reader's role as object of the text of Scripture. This emphasis does not mean endangering authorial intent, or the historicity and veracity of scripture. The authors of these books are not, just to be clear, proponents of any sort of reader-response hermeneutics—that is, interpretation where the reader, not the text, controls and determines meaning. I will briefly mention a few such books with which I have some degree of familiarity.

David Starling, committed to the Reformation principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, adopts the metaphor of the reader as an apprentice of the biblical writers.[6] In *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship* (2016) he shares a quote from Luther emphasizing that the self-interpretation of Scripture does not mean that we have little or no work to do. To the contrary, "we must soak with our sweat the Holy Scriptures alone." Reflecting on Luther, Starling adds, "Good interpretation requires not just sweat but skill, and not just skill but character."[7] Such skill and character is developed in and through the reading of Scripture itself—I will mention Romans chapter 5 later. The interpreter becomes the apprentice of the Biblical authors particularly in their reading of one another—for instance the way the NT authors read the OT, and also how later OT authors read the earlier OT books. For my purposes, I simply draw attention to the emphasis on the reader as a conscious student, apprentice, of the biblical authors themselves. Learning

to read their book *from* them, not simply applying the proper methods *to* their books. We cannot interpret the authors in their appropriate historical and grammatical contexts alone, but "we are their apprentices in the art of reading Scripture, learning from them how to understand Christ (and all things) in the light of Scripture and Scripture (and all things) in the light of Christ."[8]

Starling also proposes a legitimate Gospel centered hermeneutic. Taking Luke-Acts as an example, he demonstrates that such an approach doesn't simply describe and show the gospel as a series of redemptive historical events. A Gospel-centered hermeneutic "is also a summon to repentance and a gracious offer of forgiveness … not merely as a repository of background facts and fulfilled promises but as a living voice that promises, urges, summons, and invites in the "today" of their fulfillment in Jesus"[9] (117).

I mentioned Jeannine Brown earlier and her term, "chastened readers."[10] "Chastened" means not allowing readers to turn into authors or allow them to claim absolute objectivity. "It is an interesting observation," she states, "that both these extremes—making readers of texts into authors and claiming full objectivity for readers—assert the reader as all powerful. The reader becomes the god of the text whether through assimilation or mastery."[11] In *Scripture as Communication*, she speaks of a "threefold movement between reader and text in conversation" in "multiple back and forth movements" (49). The reader engages the text in terms of what is said, how it is said, and why it is said. (This is essentially a speech-act theory model focused on the acts of locution [what is said, the expression], illocution [how it is said, the force], and perlocution [why it is said, the purpose]). Second, the reader moves "with a particular focus on background-contextual assumptions."[12] That is, "the probable and necessary assumptions shared by both the author and reader."[13] Third, the reader grapples with what the author is saying to the implied readers: "What is the author communicating that the implied reader is meant to grasp, receive, and embody?" While the language of implied reader may sound opaque, the concept is simple. It distinguishes readers in general from readers who respond properly to the author's intention. An actual reader may or may not grasp an author's intention and may respond in various ways or not at all. As Brown puts it: "the implied reader functions as "the embodiment of the right response at every turn to the author's communicative intention."[14]

J. De Wall Dryden, who, like others, makes the case that biblical wisdom cannot be sufficiently identified or boiled down to a genre, suggests that since the goal of wisdom is to "shape human life, not just reform the intellect," then "the whole person is engaged in the hermeneutical process."[15] In this sense, the Bible as wisdom requires a "hermeneutic of wisdom." Such a hermeneutic is distinguished from both modern and post-modern conceptions of knowing and reading. The reader approaches the text which is the power that determines and shapes his or her existence and character. For Dryden hermeneutics is not simply an exercise in determining the meaning of the text then by extension the current significance, and finally identifying specific implications. The Scripture, in itself, has the power and purpose of transforming the reader. This transformation is not just the end result of employing either objective or subjective methods then coming up with ways to apply the text. "To read for wisdom," says Dryden, "is to be attentive to how the Bible, as a voice from outside our own idolatrous construal's of reality, challenges and retunes our understanding and desires, and to consciously open ourselves to that process."[16]

On the whole, and with caveats, I welcome the emphasis—really a recovered emphasis—in the last twenty years on the place of the reader before and under the authority of Scripture. The interpreter, as one engaged with and by Scripture, is not simply an examiner and reporter of Scripture. In my view, such an emphasis is not only compatible with a hermeneutic founded on the principle of authorial intention, but a more comprehensive expression of authorial intention because it does not separate an author's meaning from his equally intended purpose.

There is, as always, a danger here. Not necessarily an inherent, exclusive, or inevitable danger. The danger is a *hermeneutic of ascent*. That is, following a pattern of coming to the Bible to be trained simply to know, do, and respond in action to the text. In a hermeneutic of ascent, the text is a means of moving upward to glory with the cross as a mere starting point. The emphasis shifts, yet again, to the elevation of the reader. Timothy Wengert, reflecting on interpretation in the era before Luther, simplifies a hermeneutic of ascent as coming to Scripture to learn what "must be done," "what must be believed" and "what must be hoped for."[17] In other words, an unreflective return to the pre-Reformation model of "reading-meditation-prayer-contemplation." An approach corrected by Luther. A reading that uses the text of Scripture as

essentially a springboard to reach greater heights of spiritual experience and/or moral action. As Michael Bird puts it:

> That formula represents a movement inward and upward from praying with the lips to meditating with the heart to pure, wordless contemplation. The theologian steps beyond letter to Spirit, to a place above the words of scripture. Theology by that scheme consists in disembodied speculation, a flight from the Bible into the naked majesty of God on my own inner-spiritual wings.[18]

The danger of developing, or returning to, a hermeneutic of ascent does not arise only when a greater emphasis is placed on the reader. It is wrong to think that an objective approach to the text of Scripture is inherently immune from this danger. A hermeneutic of ascent is just as at home among self-professed objective readers for whom the Christian life is essentially a works-driven progression in which suffering and the cross serve as an entry way to glory, reserved merely for reflection on what happened in the past.

Over against a hermeneutic of ascent, the concept of *the agonizing struggle* takes seriously that Holy Scripture is itself both sanctified and sanctifying.[19] It connects with how the Bible speaks of itself and its purpose for us (2 Tim 3:16-17); how it speaks of our perseverance and sanctification (Rom 5:1-11); finally, it takes seriously that Spiritual Warfare takes place in, and perhaps never more so, the interpretation of the Bible.

The Agonizing Struggle of Interpretation

What I'm going to suggest is that Luther's three rules for becoming a theologian (Interpreter of Holy Scripture) *prayer (oratio), meditation (meditatio), and "the agonizing struggle"* (an English translation of *tentatio* I'm taking from Stephen Preus and others, in German translation is *Anfectung, assault, attack*) is necessary for hermeneutics because it captures the essential nature of the holy book we read, how we are meant to read it, and why we read it. It places proper emphasis on the reader as a justified sinner having Christ himself for righteousness. It rightly aligns the reader with Luther's concept of the theologian of the cross rather than a theologian of glory (*Heidelberg Disputation*). What I'm suggesting is that the neglect of Luther's

three rules, or the relegation of them to wistful thoughts on devotional reading or spiritual formation, has created a lacuna, a void, in evangelical hermeneutics that Luther as well as other magisterial Reformers would likely find astonishing.

Three Rules, Not Three Steps

As I tell my students, Luther is not suggesting a three-step process to interpretation. The three rules are inseparable and thinking of them as a simple linear process will likely lead readers away from what Luther intended and turn them into three things one must "do" to interpret scripture.

While I'm focusing on the third thing—*tentatio* (Anfectung) the "Agonizing Struggle"—I don't want to assume that everyone is familiar with what Luther intends by prayer and meditation. It is especially important that we don't skip over these since they are inseparable, though distinguishable.[20]

Prayer (oratio)

Prayer, in this case, does not mean saying an obligatory prayer before beginning your study, like saying grace before a meal, nor is it prayer to ask God to reveal special meaning. If we conceive of the posture, the comportment of the one who prays, as coming to God with open hands, there to receive rather than to give, then we are getting close to what Luther meant. It is prayer specifically with respect to the Word of God before us. As Luther put it, Scripture is a "book that turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness." He instructs the interpreter to follow the example of David praying Psalm 119: "Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me." Luther comments:

> Although he well knew and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason as if they were Markolf (medieval tales) or Aesop's fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed.[21]

Meditation (meditatio)

It can be difficult to explain meditation because of the genuinely confusing ways the word is understood. Meditation is everywhere these days. Social media is full of influencers telling people about the power of meditation and there are a variety of apps that can guide users through meditations, even down to a minute. There are meditation tracks, and brown-noise tracks played at just the right megahertz, with optional chimes, wind, rain, and nighttime sounds. Even if Christians don't buy-in to all the technologically enhanced mediation practices, there is still the question of "how?"—and that question likely remains after asking other Christians.

Luther, happily, spells it out.

> You should meditate not only in your heart, but also externally by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading, and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them…. Thus you see in the same psalm how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God's word and commandments[22]

Of course, Luther didn't create the concept—he no doubt learned it as a monk. In Luther's rules, meditation is more like getting a hold of a text and thinking it through, mulling it over, studying it, living with it, wrestling with it—an emphasis found in multiple readers and scholars preceding Luther. It is not, however, as though he adopted part of a known formula wholesale and changed just one thing or made a made some tweaks. The most important distinction Luther makes regarding meditation, as well as prayer, is the inherent connection to his third rule. Rather than rising up from scripture, the reader plunges deeper in scripture. The reader is led deeper into the cross, for it is only by dying to the self at the foot of the cross that a believer may rise with Christ. This is not merely contemplative, but comes by faith in the prayerful, meditative struggle with the Bible.

The Agonizing Struggle (Tentatio; Anfectung)

"This is the touchstone" says Luther, "that teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's word is."[23] The Agonizing Struggle

is what the interpreter, engaged in prayer and meditation on Scripture will, even must, encounter. In an often-quoted line Luther says, still reflecting on David in Ps 119: "For as soon as God's word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults (*anfectung* is the German word used there) will teach you to seek and love God's word." He is not saying the Devil leads a reader into truth, but that the struggle that must come when engaged and confronted by the Word of God ought to have the opposite result than the devil intends. This is a kind of struggle that comes specifically through reading Scripture. Of course, like all Christian suffering, there are two ways. Reading the bible will leave you at a crossroads. The believer, when suffering—including when agonizing over the meaning of a text that exposes and uncovers sin and which we may be tempted to sweep aside or rationalize—may either be lured away by an ancient voice asking, "Did God really say…?" or turn to God in faith and cling to God's word alone.

Tentatio says Stephen Preus,

> is unique to the Christian, for though unbelievers also have internal struggles due to tension in family, work, government, etc., tentatio is a direct result of one praying (oratio) and meditating upon the Word of God (meditatio). When a Christian prays for the Holy Spirit, when he meditates on God's Word through which the Spirit works, then the spirit of darkness, the devil, will assault him and cause tentatio. The devil hates God and His Word and so attacks the Christian occupied with it…. He makes it seem that God is failing us, is not living up to His Word, and does not care. [24]

It is this third rule that puts Luther out of step with approaches to Scripture that both preceded and followed him. Though it often seems to me that the concept of *tentatio* is perhaps more at home in the centuries before Luther than it is these days. Not that we evangelicals don't talk about evil, or the devil. Our talk about the devil is, however, often vague references to "evil" that help us identify the root cause of events in the news and cultural and moral decline. We do speak fairly often of the reality of spiritual warfare but, simple question: when was the last time you heard about or thought about spiritual warfare with regard to reading the Bible? Oddly, both pre-and post-Reformation authors, not least Luther, spoke of the devil's constant raging

and interfering, tempting and accusing. It was a solid fourteen years or so before such an idea surfaced in my own hermeneutics classes (apart from a beginning devotional).

One more word on the concept of *tentatio* before I suggest how it intersects with a few key biblical concepts and the Christian life. This final word comes from the eminent Luther scholar and theologian Oswalt Bayer:

> Tentatio precludes one from walking away from the issue, though that is characteristic of our present situation: walking away into academic theology, into a professional type of public religion, and into silent private piety. Agonizing struggle and temptation—their meanings cannot be differentiated theologically in a hard and fast sense….[They] both convey in their deepest severity…that there is a horrific possibility that one can face a final destruction, but yet one that will never come to an end, which is even more horrific than the destruction of the whole world and all of humanity: eternal death as existing externally apart from God.[25]

The Agonizing Struggle and Hermeneutics

In closing, I offer the following observations about how Luther's three rules—particularly *tentatio*, intersect with aspects of biblical teaching applied often (and rightly) to the Christian life but which are curiously absent from evangelical hermeneutics. One might, with justification, argue that they are part of the spiritual formation of the interpreter in preparation for the business of interpretation. The problem with that is such an observation separates the Christian life into linear segments or compartmentalizes "spiritual growth" and "devotional life" from the act of interpretation. This is like how we readily acknowledge that loving God and loving neighbor is the heart of everything but rarely apply it any sort of biblical or theological pursuit other than a vague idea of application or aim. Luther's three rules place interpretation squarely in the realm of the Christian life. As Bayer points out, the professional theologian (just hear that as "interpreter") is "really not to be distinguished from any other Christian…. An academically trained theologian (interpreter) is to be differentiated from other Christians… only in the fact that—and this is his professional calling—he is to be asked to give an account of the Christian faith"[26]

1. *Tentatio takes up a well-known verse not just as a result of reading the Bible,*

*but concurrent with reading the Bible: "*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17).

Inspired Scripture is not simply good for us to reprove, correct, and train others. The interpreter himself is made complete through the reproof, correction, and training for righteousness that comes in and as a result of the struggle that comes when he engages and is engaged by God in his holy word.

2. *Tentatio, includes the act of interpretation in the formation of perseverance and hope though suffering—a theme we typically reserve for talking about the divinely purposed trials and suffering that come our way in the course of life.* The circle of building perseverance and hope through suffering described by Paul in Romans 5 may also take place in the interpretation of Scripture.

> We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:3-5).

Here Paul makes clear that the very thing we need to persevere in suffering, to gain proven character that ultimately results in the hope of faith, comes through suffering. We grow not by putting suffering behind (neither ours nor Christ's) but through suffering we are shaped and formed and learn endurance. Why would it be that a thing so central to the life of the justified—suffering and perseverance in the present with hope in God's promise of the future based in his declaration that we are justified that Christ is our righteousness—why would that take place in and through our daily lives but not take place in the study of the word of God?

3. *Tentatio recognizes and applies a biblical truth that is associated almost exclusively with discipleship and spiritual warfare to the act of interpretation.* Namely, that the devil is in fact real, and that evil is more than an impersonal force in the world. What I'm suggesting is that in a proper approach to Scripture, even for academic study and teaching (maybe especially), we are ill-advised to leave out these well-known realities of the Christian life. For example, take two well-known texts of Scripture:

> Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:11–12).
>
> Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. (1 Pet 5:8–9).

Certainly, it is true that the fight against forces of evil is not somehow sidelined during the act of interpretation. Do we think that the devil never comes around intending to do us harm when we read and interpret the Bible?

Concluding Thoughts

I find that Luther's *tentatio* dovetails with his understanding of the true theologian, the theologian of the cross who understands everything, who sees everything, through the cross. Much has been made of Luther's distinction between theologians of the cross and theologians of glory.

Tentatio, along with prayer and meditation of course, provides for a true cross-centered or "cruciform" hermeneutic. Not in the sense of locating a center or providing a way of reading, or redemptive historical landmarks. But in a more profound sense: the reader is sanctified not by progressively moving from the cross but progressing always in and through the cross. Through the agonizing struggle, the cross will become more prominent. *Tentatio* guards against leveraging the Bible as merely a guide for telling us what to do. *Tentatio* will draw us ever back to the cross even as we are tempted to find a way around it, to pursue glory apart from suffering and the cross.

In the coming years, it is not going to be easier to submit in faith to the Scripture. Without proper training and experience in this sort of reading, grounded as it is in the cross and suffering, it will be easier to give in to outside pressure, seductively tempted by culturally defined vague principles of love, peace, justice, and unity. "Did God really say those things about men and women, about love, marriage?" On the other hand, "Did God really

say that about honoring the king? Respecting the authorities?" "Did God really condemn all sorts of slander?" "Did God really say that meekness and suffering and loving your enemies are the true signs of his kingdom?" Only the believer steeped in prayer, meditation, and the agonizing struggle will be ready to answer those questions.

Ultimately, in the agonizing struggle, the believing reader is confronted by God in his word and pointed to the struggle and agony of Christ on the cross without which there is no ascent to glory. The interpreter must approach prayer, meditation, and embrace the agonizing struggle in interpretation. In this way, and only in this way, will we be captured by the Word.

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1 This article was originally given as a Faculty Address on February 7, 2024 at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

2 Hans Ruedi-Weber, *The Book that Reads Me* (Geneva: WCC), 1995. Cited by, Mark A. Seifrid, "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth," in *The Necessary Distinction a Continuing Conversation on Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia), 2017, 33.

3 Mark Seifrid, "Rightly Dividing The Word of Truth: An Introduction to the Distinction between Law and Gospel," in *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel,* eds. Albert Collver III, James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 33.

4 I am adopting Stephen Preuss' translation of tentation/anfectung. https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/tentatio/

5 Jeannine K Brown, *Scripture as Communication* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 72

6 David Starling, *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship: How the Bible Shapes Our Interpretive Habits and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 2016.

7 Starling, *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship,* 17.

8 Starling, *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship,* 19

9 Starling, *Hermeneutics as Apprenticeship,* 117.

10 Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 72.

11 Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 74.

12 Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 49

13 Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 49.

14 Brown, *Scripture as Communication,* 40.

15 J. DeWaal Dryden, *A Hermeneutic of Wisdom: Recovering the Formative Agency of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

16 Dryden, *A Hermeneutic of Wisdom*, 17.

17 Timothy J Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 12.

18 https://mbird.com/theology/this-post-cant-teach-you-theology-learning-with-luther/.

19 Here I am generalizing (I think correctly) the point(s) made by John Webster in, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17-30. In that work, Webster does not address Luther's rules. I am simply applying Webster's principle(s) to *tentatio.*

20 Since Luther's three rules are discussed in detail in multiple places and all the discussion springs from Luther's preface to his German Works (*WA* 50; *LW* 34), I am not going to reinvent the wheel by presenting the rules in full but will draw primarily from Luther and the works on the topic by other scholars.

21 Though it is more common to reference Luther's collected works, I am taking the passages from *Pastoral Writings,* ed. Mary Jane Haeming, vol. 2, *The Annotated Luther*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 483-84.
22 Haeming, *Annotated Luther*, 4:484
23 Haeming, *Annotated Luther*, 4:486.
24 https://lutheranreformation.org/theology/tentatio/
25 Oswalt Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 20.
26 Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 18.