The Word of God:

Principles of Interpretation
in
Lutheran Orthodoxy

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I. Introduction

In the Augsburg Confession, the Lutherans write against the Romish practice of administering Holy Communion in "one kind." The Lutherans maintain that both the Body and the Blood of Christ are to be administered to the laity. They base their doctrinal position, from the first sentence of the article, on the Word of God, Holy Scripture.[1] The Lutheran teaching is based on Matthew 26:27, the *Verba Domini.* The practice against which the Lutherans write is based on a decree by Pope Gelasius. The Lutherans assert "any custom introduced against the commandments of God is not to be allowed."[2]

Rome's condemning response to the Lutheran Confession, the Roman Confutation, begins by citing Scripture against the Lutherans. The Roman party cites Acts 2:42 and Acts 20:7, where Holy Communion is called "the breaking of bread."[3] These pericopes, the Romish party asserts, support the practice of administering the Body of Christ alone to the laity, while the priests receive in "both kinds."[4]

Rome never claimed to base its doctrine on Scripture alone. The Lutheran party, however, does. Still, in light of the conflict seen in this article and all the others, the issue must be more than one of "proof texting" to support doctrine. The question of the principles of interpretation of the Word of God underlies each and every article.

36 years later, the situation had not changed. When Martin Chemnitz authored his resounding and convincing *Examination* of the long-sought Council of Trent, the

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[1] *The Augsburg Confession*, Article XXII. *Concordia Triglotta*, 1921. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. pg. 59.
[2] *ibid.*
[3] It should be noted that the Greek words τῇ κοινωνίᾳ inform the meaning of τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου.
[4] *Reply to the Augustana: The Roman Confutation (1530)*, part II, article I. Published on the internet by Project Wittenberg at http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html.

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principles of interpretation of the Word of God received substantial attention in the first volume.[5] Rome in no way maintains that their position is based solely on Scripture. Andrada, the expositor of the Roman Confutation, says of the doctrine necessary for faith "It is by no means contained in its entirety in the Scriptures."[6] Still, when it comes to the interpretation of the Scriptures, Rome asserts that they, and they alone, can provide the correct interpretation. The Lutheran party will assert that Scripture is sufficiently clear that any Christian can understand it sufficiently for salvation. More, the Lutherans will hold that the true principles of interpretation of the Word of God are drawn from Scripture itself.

This paper will examine the principles of interpretation of the Word of God among prominent Lutheran theologians for a period of approximately 400 years. This study will begin with Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of Trent*. To survey Lutheran theologians of later years, this paper will rely on Dr. Robert Preus' *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. In it Preus clearly demonstrates the doctrine of orthodox Lutherans from the time of Chemnitz through the 19th century.

C. F. W. Walther was the first President and chief theologian of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. His adherence to Reformation theology is known and respected throughout the world. To study the principles of interpretation in the 19th century, Walther's *The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth*

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[5] Chemnitz's placement of the Word of God as his *prolegomena* highlights the role of the Word of God in Lutheran theology, and informs later Lutheran dogmaticians, like Francis Pieper.
[6] Chemnitz, Martin. *Examination of the Council of Trent*, part 1. Trans. Fred Kramer. 1971. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. pg. 44..

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will be examined. There Walther articulates principles of interpretation of the Word of

God that he holds to be true to the Reformers.

Lastly, to understand the principles of interpretation of the Word of God in the

20th century, Victor E. Mennicke's *Bible Interpretation*, an article in the second volume

of *The Abiding Word*, will be examined. The purpose of Mennicke's work is to

demonstrate that the Lutherans of his era still employ the principles of interpretation of

the Word of God practiced during the Reformation.

After a survey of the above named writings, this paper will evaluate and compare

the principles of interpretation of the Word of God practiced by Lutheran exegetes over

the period of four centuries. Similarities in the principles of interpretation of the Word of

God over this protracted period will be sought.

II. Interpreting the Word of God in Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of Trent*

The Second Decree of the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent issued this canon:

> Furthermore, in order to restrain willful spirits, the synod
> decrees that no one, relying on his own wisdom in matters of faith
> and morals that pertain to the upbuilding of the Christian doctrine,
> may twist the Holy Scripture contrary to that sense which holy
> mother Church has held and holds, whose right it is to judge
> concerning the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures,
> or contrary to the unanimous consensus of the fathers, even though
> such interpretations should at no time be intended for publication.
> Those acting contrary to this shall be reported by their ordinaries
> and be punished with the penalties appointed by law.[7]

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[7] Chemnitz, Martin. *Examination of the Council of Trent*, part 1. Trans. Fred Kramer. 1971. St. Louis:
Concordia Publishing House. pg. 207.

The frustration of the Tridentine council was apparent from their tone. The Lutherans, they held, those "willful spirits," had effectively used the Scriptures to uphold their teachings, separate and apart, and indeed quite contrary to, the "sense which holy mother Church has held and holds…" Martin Chemnitz, in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, agrees with the council at least in part:

> We also gratefully and reverently use the labors of the fathers who by their commentaries have profitably clarified many passages of the Scripture. And we confess that we are greatly confirmed by the testimonies of the ancient church in the true and sound understanding of the Scripture. Nor do we approve of it if someone invents for himself a meaning which conflicts with all antiquity, and for which there are clearly no testimonies of the church.[8]

But that which the Papalists call "twisting," Chemnitz calls "the gift of interpretation."[9] The entirety of the Romish position could not be clearly known from the canon in question[10], but the main points were ferreted out by Chemnitz from whence Rome had wrapped them in "crafty generalities," because they elsewhere "explained them very clearly." Chemnitz identifies "four chief points" in which "there is strife between us".[11] All of them deal with the interpretation of the Word of God.

The first point of contention is Rome's insistence that the "gift of interpretation" is wedded to the regular succession of bishops. Thus the office of interpretation of the

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[8] *ibid*, 208-9.
[9] *ibid.*
[10] See especially the first section of part 1 of Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of Trent*, where he asserts Rome believes "that the Holy Scripture is a mutilated, incomplete, and imperfect teaching, because it does not contain all that pertains to faith and to rules for pious living." (pg. 43) Further, Andrada supports this when he responds that the Christian faith "is by no means contained in its entirety in the Scripture." (pg. 44) The role of tradition in Biblical interpretation is dealt with in section V of the first book of Chemnitz's *Examination*.
[11] *ibid*.

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Holy Scriptures is conveyed "whenever anyone is brought to that throne." Immediately

upon installation, "all his interpretations must at once be received and respected as

legitimate, true, sound, and as having authority because of the privileged place which

they occupy." For the Romish party, this includes changing the form of the sacraments

handed down by the apostles, and the authority to "decree things contrary to the epistles

of Paul."

       This authority Chemnitz refutes from Scripture, citing Paul's description of the

gift of interpretation in 1 Corinthians 12:11, which gift is inspired in individuals by the

Spirit of God.[12] Chemnitz also notes that Old Testament priests were regularly "passed

over" when God chose prophets to interpret His will.

       In the second point of contention, Chemnitz faults the Romish party with making

"a kind of dictatorial authority" out of the gift of interpretation, thus eliminating the need

for them to support their interpretation by "showing sure and firm reasons and principles

of interpretation."[13] Chemnitz questions if the Papalists "have the Spirit," following with

Scriptural proof that the Bereans searched the Scriptures to verify Paul's interpretation.

More, Chemnitz points to "the principles of the true interpretation" shown in the Biblical

account of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.[14]

       In support of this, Chemnitz cites Augustine's use of several principles of

interpretation. First, the "darker passages must be interpreted from the clearer ones."

Next, that from the wording of Scripture, from context, by comparison with other

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[12] Importantly, this excludes non-believers from Scriptural interpretation, which Chemnitz establishes earlier in this section. See pg. 208. So too on pg. 214 Chemnitz quotes Augustine in *Contra Epistolam Fundamenti*: "The best safeguard of the rest of the multitude is not a lively understanding but a simple faith."
[13] *ibid.*
[14] *ibid*, 210.

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passages, and by the analogy of faith, "the simple, sound, and true interpretation must be sought."[15] The analogy of faith is defined elsewhere by Chemnitz in the *Examination*, as he cites Augustine's definition: "in the clear passages of Scripture all the things are found which contain the faith, and rules for living." So it is not Romish tradition that defines *analogia fidei*, rather the "clear passages of Scripture."[16] It is the heretics, not the *Una Sancta*, who "rest upon the things which have their origin from ambiguity."[17] Already in this short section Chemnitz has begun to enumerate hermeneutical principles. To these, Chemnitz adds a quote from Hilary: "The understanding of what is said must be taken from the reason for the speech." Again, Hilary: "Let the understanding of what is said be looked for either from what went before or from what follows after."[18] While context must be considered in interpretation, so also "the interpreter must thoroughly scrutinize the meaning which lies in the single words and syllables." A hermeneutical circle is quickly found in Hillary, one which Chemnitz cites in support of his refutation of Papalist rules of interpretation.

The *sensus literae*, or the common meaning, is Chemnitz's next hermeneutical principle, which he draws from Cyril: "When we want to understand a passage of Scripture, three points above all must be considered diligently: the time when the statement was written; the person who says it, or to whom or concerning whom it is said; and the matter on account of which or concerning which it is said. For so we will be able

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[15] *ibid*.
[16] Chemnitz, 245.
[17] *Ibid*, 244. This is Chemnitz quoting Tertullian.
[18] *ibid*, 211.

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to investigate the true sense without error."[19] Here too Chemnitz stresses context as an interpretive principle.

Chemnitz includes Augustine's "four fold" sense, a common medieval interpretive approach. He articulates from *De Utilitate Credendi* the historical, analytical, analogical, and allegorical "modes" of interpretation. In his defense of Lutheran doctrine against Trent, Chemnitz does not employ this four-fold exegesis.[20]

Chemnitz summarizes this section by saying "There is therefore no dictatorial or pontifical authority of interpretation in the church, but there are definite rules according to which interpretation must be carried out and arrived at."[21]

The third point of contention is that the Papalists transform statements of Scripture to agree with their interpretation. This they justify by selected statements of the Fathers. Chemnitz rejects the ancients as an absolute litmus for Scriptural interpretation, preferring instead that the interpretation of a passage be "in agreement with the words of Scripture, the circumstances of the text, and the analogy of the faith."

The fourth point of contention is that the Papalists "arrogate to themselves also this right, that they are able even in the clearest passages of Scritpure freely to depart from the simple and true meaning which the proper significance of the words gives, and by such dictatorial authority to patch on another meaning…"[22] Chemnitz goes on to cite egregious examples of Rome's twisting of Scripture to meet it's doctrinal stances. He calls the Papalist position, in very Lutheran terms, the "Babylonian captivity of implicit faith."

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[19] *ibid*.
[20] *ibid*.
[21] *ibid*, 211.
[22] *ibid*, 213.

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III. Interpreting the Word of God: The Post Reformation Lutherans

The work of Martin Chemnitz examined above took place between 1565 and 1573. The Formula of Concord was published in 1580. The need for an orthodox, Lutheran approach to the interpretation of God's Word continued after Chemnitz. The period of "classical Lutheran orthodoxy" is defined as a time "roughly from the time of the Formula of Concord to the first quarter of the 18th century."[23] Robert Preus catalogs the hermeneutical approach of the main Lutheran figures in this era. For these theologians Scripture remained the source and norm of Christian doctrine. As they continued to react to Roman Catholic positions, the teachings of other "Protestant" bodies, and the doctrinal differences inside of Lutheranism, the Lutherans honed their hermeneutical arguments. Rome held that only the Romish church could establish the canon of Scripture, it was an article of faith not provided by Scripture. Chemnitz had written against this in his *Examination*.[24] Gerhard, Hutter, Brochmand[25] and their followers held fast to the position that the Holy Spirit established the canon. The canon is not an article of faith, but rather establishes faith as its source and norm. God Himself inspired the canon as He inspired the individual Books. The church is a witness to this, the Holy Spirit convinces her of it through the Scriptures. The later Lutheran theologians

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[23] Preus, Robert. *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, Volume I: A Study of Theological Prolegomena*. 1970. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. pg. 15. Preus further subdivides these theologians into a. "The Age of Golden Orthodoxy", which extends to the second decade of the 17th century; b. "High Orthodoxy," from the 1620's to the Thirty Years War; c. "The Silver Age of Orthodoxy", beginning with the Thirty Years War and ending with Quensted and Calov. See Preus, 45-46.
[24] See Chemnitz, pg. 168 ff.
[25] Preus provides helpful biographical information on each of the theologians he includes. See Preus, 47ff. Gerhard lived from 1582-1687, Hutter from 1563-1616, and Brochmand from 1585-1652. Their significant theological contributions to Lutheran orthodoxy are detailed in Preus.

continue to hold to the distinction between *antilegomena* and *homolegoumena*, but the inspiration of both was always upheld, it was the authorship that was questioned.[26]

Similarly, the orthodox Lutheran theologians had a high view of the Greek and Hebrew texts. They held firmly that there was no corruption of the Hebrew text before Christ, since our Lord Himself cited them and commended them for use. After Christ, while errors in transmission are admitted by the Lutherans, there was no "general corruption" of the Scriptures. This is proven even today, centuries later, by comparing all the extant manuscripts with all the variants. The Greek manuscripts were the subject of such reverence that corruption of the texts is precluded. God retains providence over the manuscripts as well. The Lutherans rejected the Vulgate for the Greek and Hebrew texts, appealing to them in every controversy.[27]

The Lutherans of the period of orthodoxy held the "sufficiency" of Holy Scripture, which is to say that the Bible contains everything necessary for salvation and a God-pleasing life. Not every Book includes every article of faith, but "the perfection of Scripture resides in Scripture as a whole."[28]

The high view of the clarity of Scripture found in Luther and Chemnitz was shared by the theologians of the orthodox period. This is not to say that everything in Scripture is clear. Many passages of Scripture are mysterious, beyond our understanding. They are, nonetheless, recorded in "lucid and unambiguous language."[29] Still, "In all matters pertaining to salvation and Christian life the Scriptures are clear enough to those who read them aright, prayerfully, and beseeching the guidance of the Holy Spirit." This

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[26] Preus, 304-5.
[27] *Ibid*, 306-7.
[28] *ibid*, 309.
[29] *ibid*, 312.

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further underlines that it is not the content (mysteries), but the language and sense of the words of the Scriptures, that are clear.[30] The clarity of Scripture is an article of faith for the Lutherans.[31]

The Lutherans of the 16th and 17th centuries held to the necessity of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture. The unregenerate man, they held, can not interpret the Bible.[32] Scripture is not a "dead book." Rather it is God "speaking, urging, pleading, striving to make His claim on us."[33]

Preus asserts that the "fundamental hermeneutical rule" among the theologians of the period of Lutheran orthodoxy was "establishing the literal meaning of the text."[34] Only this sense, the literal sense, "is valid for establishing doctrine and teaching in the church." This sense is defined as "the meaning, or tenor (*proprietas*) that the words directly and obviously convey."[35] This is also "the sense intended by the writer, whatever trope or genre is used." This is established when words are "taken according to their ordinary and native meaning."[36] This principle is fundamental to the unity of Scripture, and to the principle *Scriptura Scripturam Interpretatur*.[37] The literal sense is held by the interpreter unless the Scripture itself intimates that the interpreter should recede from that sense. Preus calls this a "hermeneutical rule" of the period of Lutheran orthodoxy.[38]

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[30] *ibid.*
[31] *ibid*, 313-14.
[32] *ibid*, 319.
[33] *ibid,* 321.
[34] *ibid.*
[35] *ibid.*
[36] *ibid*, 322.
[37] *ibid*, 323.
[38] *ibid.*

The next principle for interpreting the Word of God proceeds from the establishment of the literal sense: *Sensus literalis unus est*, the "literal sense is one".[39] A "given text of Scripture offers only one genuine sense, the literal sense. This one meaning of individual words or passages in their given context is a constant and can not be changed." A correlative rule held by the Lutherans was that "a definite meaning was intended by the Spirit of God in every individual pericope of the Scriptures."[40] The invocation of *sensus literalis unus est* was held by some to be destructive of Old Testament typology. The orthodox Lutherans dealt with this question extensively. They held first that typological and allegorical interpretation "cannot be applied to every passage of Scripture but must be restricted to those cases where Scripture itself practices such a method."[41] Further, allegory is an illustration, a type is a prediction: a direct predictive prophecy which points directly to Christ. The Lutherans were "very cautious and generally did not find types lurking within every Old Testament figure; nor did they seek to discover or make anything of prophecy in the Old Testament where the New Testament did not find it."[42]

The Lutherans held *Scriptura est suipsius interpres*, "Scripture is its own interpreter." This means that the "true sense of Scripture must be derived from Scripture itself."[43] To this Hollaz adds a remarkable triad of hermeneutical aids: *antecedent, formal,* and *consequent.* Antecedent aids include prayer, acquaintance with the articles of faith, knowledge of the Biblical mode of speaking, a love for the truth, and the continued

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[39] *ibid*, 325.
[40] *ibid*, 326.
[41] *ibid*, 327.
[42] *ibid*, 328.
[43] *ibid*, 329.

and repeated reading of Scripture.   Formal aids include a careful and analytical examination of the words and phrases of the text, a careful consideration of the scope and intention of the text, a careful study of the context, collation of parallel passages, and continual reference to the analogy of faith.[44]

IV. Interpreting the Word of God in C.F.W. Walther's "*The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth*"

In what the translators describe as Walther's "first principles," likened to Luther's *To the Christian Nobility, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,* and *The Liberty of a Christian Man*, C.F.W. Walther writes theses examining the nature of the true Church, and the relationship between the Lutheran church and the Invisible Church.[45]   The title of his work reveals his conclusion, stated clearly in thesis XXV: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church has thus all the essential marks of the true visible Church of God on earth as they are found in no other known communion, and therefore it needs no reformation in doctrine."[46]

From the first thesis Walther bases all his assertions on the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures. In the first ten theses, Walther names Scripture as the proof of each thesis. With these theses he establishes the definition of the true Church, and to what extent visible congregations are a part of the invisible Church, the "total of all that truly

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[44] Preus defines "analogy of faith" earlier in his book. He approaches it from two perspectives. First, "that all doctrine and interpretation must be in agreement with the fundamental or primary points of the faith that have express, clear, sure, and firm witness in the Scripture…" (pg. 97) Second, "the unbroken meaning and sense of the Holy Spirit…" (223) Preus ties this to Romans 12:6 as a gift of the Spirit, similar to Chemnitz's handling of *analogia fidei*, see note 220, pg. 392.

[45] Walther, C.F.W. *Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden.* "The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth." In *Walther and the Church*. Wm. Dallmann, W. H. T. Dau,. TH. Engelder, ed. 1938. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. pgs. 116-128.

[46] *ibid*, pg. 128.

believe in Christ and are sanctified through this faith."[47]   Theses X through XII deal

specifically with the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and her relationship to the invisible,

True Church. Here Walther asserts "If the Evangelical Lutheran Church has the marks of

pure Gospel-preaching and unadulterated administration of the holy Sacraments, then it is

the true visible Church of God on earth."[48]

Thesis XIII brings Walther to the question of the interpretation of the Word of

God upon which all his theses are based. These theses articulate principles for the

interpretation of Holy Scripture, and importantly provide *sedes doctrinae* for each

principle drawn from Scripture, as well as citing Luther's Works and the Lutheran

Confessions to support the principles.

In thesis XIII, Walther asserts "The Evangleical Lutheran Church recognizes the

written Word of the apostles and prophets as the only and perfect source, rule, norm, and

judge of all teaching – a. not reason, b. not tradition, c. not revelation." This Walther has

amply demonstrated in the first dozen theses, all based on God's Word. To support this

thesis Walther cites FC SD XXX, Smalcald II.2 ("The Word of God shall establish

articles of faith and no one else, even an angel."), and Luther's Works 15:1935, 1670.[49]

Further citations of the Confessions and Luther are provided to support the rejection of

human reason and tradition as sources of "religious knowledge."

Thesis XIV treats of the clarity of Scripture. Here Walther asserts that "The

Evangelical Lutheran Church holds fast to the clearness of Scripture. (There are no

'views' and 'open questions.')" In support of this thesis Walther cites Psalm 119:105

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[47] *ibid*, 117.
[48] *ibid*, 122.
[49] *ibid*, 123. While Walther does not cite the version of Luther's Works, I understand it to be the St. Louis edition.

("Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet…", 2 Peter 1:19, 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, and Luther's Works 5:334 and 18:1681.[50]

Thesis XV rejects the infallibility of any human interpreter based on his office: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church acknowledges no HUMAN interpreter of Scripture whose interpretation must be received as infallible and binding on account of his office – 1. not an individual, 2. not an order, 3. not a particular or general council, 4. not a whole Church (*nicht eine ganze Kirche*). In support of this thesis Walther cites 2 Peter 1:20, adding that the interpreter "must show that his interpretation is not his own but that of the Holy Spirit." So Luther, in his exegesis of Matthew 16:18, can write "They can not prove from Scripture that Peter is the Pope. But we can prove that the 'rock' is Christ. This interpretation is right, taken from God's Word." Here Walther quotes Luther from 9:1362. What began as a thesis on the authority of interpretation quickly gives way to proof of the hermeneutical principle *scriptura scripturam interpretatur*. It is the inspired Word of God which interprets itself.

Thesis XVI asserts exactly that: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church accepts God's Word as it interprets itself."[51] Nine sub-theses are established to support this assertion. First, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church lets the original text alone decide." This is over-against the use of the Vulgate, and supported by Luther's assertion "As dearly as we love the Gospel, so zealously must we cherish the languages. For God had a purpose in giving the Scriptures only in two languages, the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in the Greek…"[52]

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[50] *ibid*.
[51] *ibid*, 124.
[52] Walther cites Luther, 10:470.

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The second sub-thesis regarding Scripture interpreting itself, is a grammatical principle: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church, in the interpretation of the words and sentences, holds fast to the usage of language." In support of this assertion Walther quotes Melanchthon as saying that the Scriptures cannot be understood theologically if not first understood grammatically. Luther's Works are cited here again, 18:1820.

The third and fourth sub-theses regarding Scripture as it's own interpreter are a clear assertion of *Sensus Literalis Unus Est*: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church acknowledges only the literal sense as the true sense."[53] Luther is cited in support of this principle, saying "With allegory you can prove anything from everything." (3:1389) Further, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church holds the literal sense has but one sense." Here Pfeiffer is quoted: "If it has a fourfold sense, you'll never be sure of any sense."

The fifth sub-thesis asserts that context and intention are guiding principles in interpretation: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church, in interpreting, is guided by the context and the intention. Otherwise the Scripture is garbled." Here Walther cites the Apology: "Passages, when produced in their entirety, very frequently bring the interpretation with them." (Ap. III, § 159)

The sixth sub-thesis of the thesis that *Scriptura Scripturam Interpretatur* is that "The Evangelical Lutheran Church acknowledges the literal sense may be the improper sense as well as the proper; but it does not depart from the proper sense unless forced by Scripture itself – either the circumstances of the text itself or a parallel passage or the analogy of faith." While the three remaining sub-theses are numbered to correspond to *Scriptura Scripturam Interpretatur*, they are in fact expositions of this sixth sub-thesis.

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[53] *ibid*.

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In support of sub-thesis six, sub-thesis seven states "The Evangelical Lutheran Church interprets the dark passages by the clear ones." This thesis also serves to support the clarity of Scripture, and the earlier assertion that "there are no 'views' or 'open questions.'"[54]

The eighth sub-thesis provides a definition for the *analogia fidei*: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church takes the articles of faith from the texts constituting the seat of doctrine and judges all *obiter dicta* accordingly." Thus the *analogia fidei* is nothing more, and nothing less, than the sum total of the *sedes doctrinae* and other clear passages of Scripture. In a last and related sub-thesis, Walther asserts "The Evangelical Lutheran Church rejects out of hand every interpretation not in harmony with the analogy of faith, Rom. 12:7." This use of Romans 12:7 is very much like Chemnitz's use of 1 Corinthians 12:11 in refuting the Papalist insistence that interpretation is wedded to Episcopal office. For Walther the analogy of faith is not a "tradition" in the sense of extra-scriptural verbal tradition, but rather is the corpus of the *sedes doctrinae* and other clear passages of Scripture itself, which in turn norms any interpretation of Scripture. Thus for Walther, who bases his theses on Scripture, the Confessions, and Luther, specific principles for interpretation are necessary, found in Scripture, and normative for the Evangelical Lutheran Church's understanding of Scripture. This circular arrangement is in perfect concord with Chemnitz's hermeneutical assertions, and at several places it seems that Walther is citing Chemnitz, although he never attributes any of the theses to Chemnitz directly. We have seen in Preus' handling of the period of Lutheran orthodoxy that many

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[54] *ibid*, 123, thesis XIV.

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of these principles were common to theologians in the Lutheran tradition after Chemnitz also.

V. Interpreting the Word of God in the 20th Century: The Abiding Word

At the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod regular convention in 1941, it was decided that a restatement of the fundamental doctrines upon which the church was founded would be published. This was not to be new doctrine; rather it was to "present the doctrines of God's Word as they have been taught in our midst during the past century, the theology of the Word." So within a century of Walther's "first principles," the church would revisit "writings of the fathers and founders of our Synod."[55]   Joining authors like E.M Plass, Wm. Arndt, and Paul Bente, Victor E. Mennicke authored the section on Bible Interpretation.[56]

The first assertion of Mennicke is that "The principles of Bible interpretation rest upon the Bible itself. Our rules for Bible interpretation are lifted from Scripture itself."[57] Mennicke writes that these principles are "clearly enunciated" throughout Scripture. The rules that are clear in Scripture are to be carefully distinguished from rules not based on Scripture. Examples of extra-Biblical rules are the early Eastern church's efforts to superimpose a system of philosophy on the Bible, Rome's usurpation of Biblical interpretation, and the Reformed church's employment of reason as an interpretive tool. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod never, states Mennicke, "evolved a set of rules for Bible interpretation." Rather those which our Lord established are used, since they are

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[55] *The Abiding Word*. vol 2. 1947. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. Quotes are taken from the preface which is included in all three volumes.
[56] Mennicke, Victor E. "Bible Interpretation." in *The Abiding Word*. vol 2. 1947. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. pgs. 35-58.
[57] *ibid*, 35.

all-sufficient and of a perfect nature. Some of these rules are self-evident to human

reason, but are not accepted for that. They stand rather because they are Biblical.[58]

The first principle, and "foremost principle," of Biblical interpretation is that "the

Scripture interprets itself." To support this, S.D. VII, 50 (Triglotta) is cited, as well as

numerous examples of Biblical occurrences of this principle.[59] Mennicke expounds on

this thesis with several sub-theses. Since the Holy Spirit speaks "only through the

Scripture," the intent of the Holy Spirit "is not to be separated from the words of

Scripture."[60] Because of this, "No human being has the right to inject his own views into

the Scripture." The interpreter must accept "that interpretation which the Holy Ghost

gives us, for *the Holy Ghost is the only safe and true interpreter of the Scripture*."

(Italics Mennicke's). Examples given are John 2:19-21, where the "Temple" is

interpreted to be Jesus' Body, and Revelation 5:8, where the vials are the prayers of the

saints. The interpreter's job, therefore, is simply to "set forth the meaning of the Holy

Ghost."[61] This is the meaning accepted by the Church, and "is certain in its faith."

Multiple Luther quotes, and several citations from the Confessions, support this principle.

Therefore, "neither tradition nor the authority of the Church Fathers can be a rule of

interpretation," nor may human reason, nor the "so-called 'inner light.'" The correctness

of the interpretation must be proved by the interpreter solely by and from Scripture.

The Analogy of Faith is next. Mennicke too bases this on Romans 12:6, as had

the Lutherans before him. But his definition is perhaps more exact than others this paper

has considered, a definition taken from Gerhard: "By rule of faith we mean the plain

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[58] *ibid*, 38.
[59] *ibid*.
[60] *ibid*, 39.
[61] *ibid*, 40.

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passages of Scripture in which the articles of faith are set forth in plain and express terms."[62] In addition to Gerhard, the Apology states "Besides, examples ought to be interpreted according to the rule, *i.e*., according to certain and clear passages of Scripture…"[63] Multiple Scripture references, and Walther's *Lehre und Wehre*, are cited by Mennicke in support of this principle and definition. The Analogy of Faith is therefore not something external to Scripture, but rather Scripture itself speaking. Paraphrasing the Papalist understanding of the Analogy of Faith, Mennicke cites Trent IV, pg. 19, which holds that the Bible must be interpreted in light of oral tradition, and that the church be recognized as "supreme authority over Scripture." So "holy mother church, whose it is to judge the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scripture" is for the Romish the principle of interpretation. Not so for the Lutherans. In fact, "humble faith and complete submission to the Word of God is essential to accepting the analogy of faith in the interpretation of Scripture."[64]

The fourth principle of interpretation Mennicke presents is "Scripture is a Light, and as such it alone can cast light upon those passages which to us seem dark."[65] Under this principle the New Testament casts its interpretive Light upon the Old Testament, as Luther says "The entire Old Testament contains nothing else than Christ just as He is presented in the Gospel…"[66] Luther is also quoted by Mennicke as saying that he would not have perceived the prophecy in Joel to have referred to Jesus of Nazareth, but the Holy Spirit revealed it to the Apostles in order "that they understood the Scripture."

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[62] *ibid*, 42, Mennicke citing Gerhard, *Loci*, De Interpr. Scr., par. 75.
[63] Mennicke, citing the Apology, *Triglotta* p. 441, par 60.
[64] *ibid*, 45.
[65] *ibid*, 46.
[66] *ibid*, 46. Mennicke here cites Luther from the Saint Louis edition of Luther's Works, 21:133.

Similarly, "Those passages of Scripture which to us seem difficult must be interpreted by means of those that are clear." This natural corollary maintains that there are passages in the Bible that require no further interpretation due to their clarity. These clear passages contain "everything that pertains to faith and life."[67] Luther adds "If a passage of Scripture is dark, don't harbor any doubts. It certainly contains the same doctrine which is taught clearly in other places."[68] In the same way "passages of Scripture in which a doctrine is merely touched upon must be interpreted by those passages where a doctrine is expressly taught."

Context holds an important hermeneutical position for Mennicke also. Citing *Lehre und Wehre*, he asserts "in the interpretation of Scripture both the purpose and the context must be observed." No interpretation "dare contradict the preceding context nor that which follows." As an example of this, he cites the much maligned Genesis 6:2, where "The sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair, and they took them wives of all which they chose." The context, established by the preceding genealogies, clearly requires this to be a discussion of humans, not angels.[69]

While his organization of the principles differs from Lutheran exegetes that precede him, Mennicke does include grammatical principles. He simply places them near the end of his work. His fifth over-arching principle is "In the interpretation of Scripture the common usage of human language must be observed." This is because the Holy Spirit gave the Scripture in human language, so it therefore follows that "the grammatical

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[67] *ibid*, 47. Mennicke here is quoting St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book 2, par. 9.
[68] *ibid,* 47-48. Mennicke here is quoting Luther's Works, St. Louis edition, 5:338.
[69] *ibid*, 49.

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usage of language must be observed in interpreting words and sentences."[70] Where this

is not true, where grammar and language are twisted beyond their common usage, "false

doctrine is the inevitable consequence."

The interpretation of the Scriptures is based on the original languages. This

attribute of the original text provides a necessary exactness and thoroughness. The

original languages contain "many shades of meaning which cannot be reproduced in a

translation." In a quote used also by the translators of Walther's *The Evangelical

Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth*, here Mennicke also quotes

F.V.N. Painter's comments regarding the translation of Luther into English: "It is not

easy to make the great, rugged, impetuous German speak our language acceptably."[71]

Mennicke's sixth principle of interpretation is familiar to us by now as *Sensus

Literalis Unus Est*: "Each passage of Scripture has only one Spirit-intended meaning."

He continues "No sentence or form of words can have more than one true sense, and this

is the only one we have to inquire for. This is the very basis of all interpretation.

Interpretation without it has no meaning… to have two meanings in view is equivalent to

having no meaning. The interpretation of two meanings implies absurdity."[72] To

interpret otherwise is to consider God a deceiver.[73]

What then of allegorical or typological interpretation? Mennicke answers "The

so-called 'spiritual, or allegorical, or typical meaning' is not another meaning besides the

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[70] *ibid*, 51.
[71] *ibid,* 52. See the introduction to Walther, pg. 116, where the translators apply these same words to
Walther's writings.
[72] *ibid*, 54-55.
[73] *ibid*. This is Mennicke's language.

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real sense, but it is the true meaning as recorded b the Holy Spirit."[74] In support of this

Mennicke cites St. Paul's use of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4:2. Here Mennicke's

argument is quite specific: "When the Holy Ghost caused Moses to write the story about

Hagar, He intended to use this story as an allegory later. This is evident from Gal. 4:24,

where the Apostle, speaking by the same Holy Spirit, calls this story an allegory. Only in

the New Testament does the Holy Ghost open us to us the full sense of this story, His

own intended sense. Thus the passage has a 'spiritual meaning,' but this is and remains

nothing else than the originally intended meaning."[75]

While on its first reading this appears to be a contradiction of *Sensus Literalis*

Unus Est by the assertion of two meanings, or a *double entendre*, Mennicke clarifies:

"The 'spiritual interpretation' by the Holy Spirit is to be carefully distinguished from that

attempted by human interpreters." Thus only the Holy Spirit Himself, author of the

Scriptures, may interpret such a pericope allegorically by specifically citing it elsewhere

in Scripture and assigning it its meaning. A natural corollary of this follows: "…the real,

the actual sense is not always to be found in the literal, but frequently in the figurative

meaning of the words."[76] Thus it is not "human fancy," but God's Word that determines

"whether a passage is to be understood in the literal or the figurative sense. Therefore we

dare not depart from the literal sense of any word or sentence unless Scripture itself

compels us to do so." How might Scripture compel such an interpretation? By the

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[74] While Mennicke uses different terms, this principle correlates with Walther's "proper" and "improper"
sense of the text. This is repeated in Mennicke by his use of "real, actual sense" being found in the
"figurative meaning", see pg. 24 of this paper and note 78.
[75] *ibid*, 55.
[76] *ibid*, 56.

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circumstances of the text itself, parallel passages, and the analogy of faith.[77] Mennicke

clearly holds that orthodox Lutheran exegesis practices strict rectilinear typology,

allowing for no intermediate fulfillment. To support this Mennicke convincingly quotes

Luther, who says "…But every trope which is not absolutely required by Scripture itself

ought to be avoided as the most deadly poison."[78] Therefore all texts must be taken in

their literal sense, unless the exegete is compelled by Scripture itself to render a different

meaning.[79] "Proof that a passage must be understood in a figurative sense must be both

apparent and sufficient."[80]

Mennicke has provided a good, inclusive, and comprehensive summary of the

hermeneutical principles cited by Chemnitz, Preus, and Walther above. Many of the

principles were tied directly to Luther, and all were tied to Scripture itself. His article

will serve as the basis by which the other author's principles of interpreting the Word of

God will be compared.

VI. Comparison and Comments

Even the casual reader of the interpretive principles considered above finds

significant unity and agreement. This is all the more remarkable considering the period

of time covered is almost 400 years. It is clear that orthodox Lutheran hermeneutical

principles changed little over that time, and that they served to defend right Biblical

teaching against the many heresies of that period, not the least of which was so-called

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[77] *ibid*, 57.
[78] *ibid,* 58-9.
[79] *ibid*, 58.
[80] *ibid*, 58.

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"critical scholarship" or "Biblical criticism" that finds its roots in the tradition of the Enlightenment.[81]

To expedite the analysis of the principles of interpretation, this paper will use the categories provided by Mennicke, since his treatment is more extensive. This paper will provide working titles for these categories, which serve to show the unity between the four sources considered. Those categories are:

1. Interpretive principles are taken from the Scriptures.
2. *Scriptura Scripturam Interpretatur*
3. *Analogia Fidei*
4. The Christocentricity of Scripture
5. The clarity of Scripture
6. Context helps determines meaning
7. Grammatical principles
8. Original languages
9. *Sensus Literae*
10. *Sensus Literalis Unus Est*
11. Typology/Allegory

These categories will be employed briefly below to allow a discussion that brings synthesis and evaluation to the aforementioned authors' approach to Biblical interpretation. Admittedly, due to the inter-relation of several of these principles, they can be categorized differently, and the order give above does not denote importance.

It should be noted that overarching principles, such as the Divine inspiration of Holy Scripture, the inerrancy of Scripture, the infallibility of Scripture, the sufficiency of Scripture, Scripture as the sole rule and norm of faith and life, and the distinction between Law and Gospel are all clearly stated as fundamental principles accepted by all of the authors this paper considers. This is frequently accomplished in the *prolegomena*

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[81] For a correlation between the Enlightenment and the critical approach to Holy Scripture, see Harrisville, Roy A. and Sundberg, Walter. *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*. 2nd ed. 2002. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. pgs. 329-335.

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to their sections on Biblical interpretation. It should be remembered that what Preus

asserts are interpretive principles he finds common to many orthodox Lutheran

theologians during a long period of the history of the Lutheran church.

1. Interpretive principles are taken from the Scriptures.

This point is asserted by all the authors. This is clearly a position that the authors

assume early on as a polemic against the Romish teaching that the church, hence the

Pope, has sole authority for interpretation. Its employment by church Fathers

demonstrates that they too, confronted with the necessity of defending the *analogia fidei*

against heretics, found the principles of interpretation to be given by Holy Writ itself. In

our study Chemnitz uses Scriptural proofs to establish this principle, citing the Bereans

and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Walther also articulates, in his thesis XIII, that it is the Word

alone that provides the principles for interpretation. This is Mennicke's first assertion,

and provides a basis for all that follows in his articulation of principles of interpretation.

2. *Scriptura Scripturam Interpretatur*

While this is a clear corollary of the first principle above, still its nuance is

different. While all of the interpretive principles are drawn from Scripture, it is Scripture

itself that interprets Scripture. This is asserted by all of the authors. Again early on this

is a polemic against Papal authority in interpretation, but it is noteworthy that the authors

attribute this principle too to the church Fathers. Nonetheless, the principle stands on its

own as a fundamental principle, employed by all the authors this study considers. It

underlies Chemnitz's assertion of clear passages interpreting darker passages. Preus

names it a bit differently (*Scriptura est suipsius interpres*), but follows the same

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principle. Walther states it outright in several places. Mennicke uses this, by name, as his second principle.

3. *Analogia Fidei*

The definition of the "analogy of faith" was at issue in Chemnitz, since Rome asserted that it was not based on Scripture alone, but rather on tradition as well. Chemnitz employs St. Augustine's definition of *analogia fidei* against Trent, and provides a definition that the other authors considered also use: the Analogy of Faith is the sum total of all the *sedes doctrinae* and other clear passages of Scripture. These, taken together, norm faith and life.

4. The Christocentricity of Scripture

This is wedded to many of the other principles, since the Bible teaches Christ as the center of the Scriptures. Following Luther, all of the authors assert this. As Walther states, this is the context and the intention of all of Scripture.

5. The Clarity of Scripture

Chemnitz wrote against Rome's position that the Scriptures were unclear, and thus insufficient for faith and life. All of the other authors considered for this paper make the same assertion that Chemnitz does – Scripture is clear. While conceding that some parts of Scripture are less clear than others, all the authors hold that the clear passages are used in the interpretation of the less clear passages. Luther encourages the exegete not to worry – the less clear passages always mean the same as the clear passages.

6. Context helps determine meaning

This principle is a natural corollary to many of the above principles. All the authors assert this principle. Rome was shown to willfully use pericopes out of context.

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The Lutherans place all interpretation inside of Scripture itself, indeed inside a Christological context, and inside the immediate context that the individual pericopes of Scripture provide. An excellent example is provided by Mennicke when he cites the orthodox Lutheran interpretation of Genesis 6:2.

7. Grammatical principles

God gave Holy Scripture through men who used words. Each Word of Scripture is inspired by God. Men used known human languages, with established ways of speaking and certain meanings, as they wrote. Walther quotes Melanchthon in support of this principle, shared by the other authors as well. Both Walther and Melanchthon show Luther's use of grammatical principles in support of their own. Mennicke reminds the reader that if this is not true, the truthfulness of God is implicated.

8. Original languages

As a natural outgrowth to the previous principle, the languages in which the Holy Scriptures were originally written take precedent in interpretation over all translations. Luther certainly asserted this; Chemnitz, Preus, Walther and Mennicke remain inside of the Lutheran tradition by also holding to this principle.

9. *Sensus Literae*

Beginning with Chemnitz, the authors considered for this paper include the originally intended sense of the Words of Scripture an important interpretive principle. Chemnitz further defines this as the sense intended by the author. Walther does the same. Mennicke cites the same quotation of Luther's translators that Walther's translators used. This emerges as a common fundamental Lutheran interpretive principle.

10. *Sensus Literalis Unus Est*

The literal sense of a word of pericope of Scripture is its one intended sense. Mennicke, Preus, Chemnitz and Walther all assert this clearly and without equivocation. Chemnitz quotes Augustine in the establishment of the simple, sound and true interpretation. Preus asserts that the Lutheran theologians considered this a rule of interpretation, and that doctrine and teaching in the Lutheran church were based upon it. Walther writes that the literal sense is the only true sense. Mennicke asserts that the Holy Spirit has only one intended meaning.

11. Typology/Allegory

Mennicke treats this more fully than the other authors, but all the authors treat this principle. The relationship between *Sensus Literalis Unus Est* and typological or allegorical interpretation is the most considered point in the writings of the authors evaluated for this paper. Mennicke uses the example of Galatians 4:2 (Sarah and Hagar) to uphold both *Sensus Literalis Unus Est* and appropriate typological interpretation. Mennicke asserts that for Lutherans the New Testament must identify the type for it to be considered a type. Mennicke's handling of this principle, endorsed by the LC-MS as the position it has held since its founding, seems more stringent than the other authors. Chemnitz simply argues for the literal sense over any allegorical interpretation.[82] He identifies allegorical interpretation as a departure from the letter of Scripture. Preus agrees with Chemnitz, but like Mennicke states the case more strongly. Preus asserts that the Lutheran theologians restricted the use of typology and allegory to those cases where Scripture itself practices it. While this supports Mennicke's assertion, Mennicke's assertion reveals a tighter interpretive rule than Preus'. This principle is undoubtedly

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[82] See Chemnitz, 285.

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related immediately to *Sensus Literalis Unus Est, Sensus Literae*, *Scriptura Scripturam Interpretatur*, and the *Analogia Fidei*. Preus' comment that among Lutheran theologians allegory is used for illustration, while typology is used for proof, is especially helpful here.[83]

VII. Conclusion

This paper set out to seek similarity in the principles employed by Lutheran interpreters of the Word of God from the 16th to the 20th centuries. The scope of study was limited to four authors, Chemnitz, Preus, Walther and Mennicke. Each of these authors understood their writings to represent the interpretive principles of orthodox Lutheran theologians, but did not limit their sources to interpreters after the Reformation, frequently calling on church Fathers (especially Augustine) in support of their interpretive principles. Because of the setting of Chemnitz's writing, he was much broader in his use of early church theologians.

Great similarities in the interpretive principles of Lutherans during a 400 year period emerge. This paper has articulated those principles under somewhat arbitrary headings, and in no particular order (other than that used by Mennicke.) It is not the purpose of this paper to argue for or against any of these principles, only to assert that they are common, supported by Scripture itself, and indeed held to be orthodox Lutheran, by all of the authors. Without doubt other principles occur in the vast corpus of writings created by Lutheran theologians over the centuries. Undoubtedly there is, in that corpus, disagreement on the relative importance and grouping of these principles. That interpretive principles exist however, indeed interpretive principles held as orthodox

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[83] See Preus, 328.

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Lutheran and employed by the greatest names in the Lutheran church over a 400 year period, cannot be denied. The discipline and reverence with which these men approached Scripture, their high view of Scripture, their adamance that interpretive principles be employed and taken from Scripture alone, and their faithful dedication to basing doctrine and life on Scripture alone, endure as marks of four centuries of orthodox Lutheranism.

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