

Gardner-Webb University

Lutheran Methods of Interpretation 1500 -1800

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Dr. Lorin Cranford

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By

Justin Murphy

Boiling Springs, North Carolina

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther came from a frightening and confusing religious background, in which he constantly searched for peace and assurance of salvation. He eventually found it in his discovery in the book of Romans which states that the Just (justified) shall live by faith. From this discovery Martin Luther began looking at scripture in an entirely new way. One of the new ideas's to which Luther clung, was that of *Sola Scriptura* (scripture alone). This led him to battle the problem of allegory, and other various problems that arose from medieval religion. His idea of *Sola Scriptura* also led him to stand up against the Roman Catholic Church. Once his idea of *Sola Scriptura* was grounded, he began developing other ideas that permeated his overall view of scripture.

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<sup>1</sup>Some editing of the format has been done in order to make the paper conform more closely to the Turabian Style Guide requirements. Dr. Cranford

### **The Lutheran Methods of NT Interpretation**

Before examining Luther's methods, it is very important to have a basic understanding of Martin Luther's biographical background. Luther grew up in a home that was filled with religious confusion. His father was a strict and violent disciplinarian, who at the same time devoutly prayed to St. Anne (god of the mine workers) at the bedside of his son.<sup>2</sup> His mother was a very submissive woman as well as religious. Her religious views were very superstitious because they combined elements of old German paganism with Christian mythology.<sup>3</sup>

In 1501 Luther began his upper level studies at the University of Erfurt. This continued Luther's religious frustration because the entire training of home, school, and University was designed to instill fear of God and reverence for the Church.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is that medieval religion deliberately played off alternating fear and hope. This was intended to instill enough fear in a person that they would adhere to the sacraments of the church. Since Luther could not find comfort for his soul he joined the reformed congregation of the Augustinians, which was a very strict monastery. Even the rigorous life of monasticism did not give Luther the satisfaction that his soul was saved. Because of Luther's pain, his Bishop (Staupitz) suggested that he go off to study for his doctor's degree. After receiving his doctorate degree Luther became a professor at the University of Wittenberg as an Old Testament professor, but also taught some in the New

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<sup>2</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Luther* (Penguin Books USA, New York, 1995), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Bainton, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Bainton, 20.

Testament. While preparing his lecture notes to teach out of the book of Romans Luther had a revelation about Romans 1:17. After his revelation he no longer believed that salvation was work oriented, but that it was God's free gift that came as a result of grace through faith.<sup>5</sup> From this point on Luther changed the way that he viewed scripture.

Now that a basic background has been established, the next section of this paper will focus on the interpretive approaches that existed around Luther, and what he did with those approaches. This will help the reader to develop a clearer understanding of how Luther conducted hermeneutics. In doing this it is important to first look at the foundational method which Luther used to interpret scripture. The first aspect that will be looked at concerning Luther's foundation deals with how he views the authority of scripture.

In many ways, Luther's treatment of scripture was merely an extension of the medieval understanding. Martin Luther was born into a world in which medieval religion was a powerful force at work. This helped paved the way for the great role he was to play.<sup>6</sup> One of Luther's greatest influences as an early academic student was William of Ockham, who frequently argued for the sole authority of the Word as opposed to natural insight or rational ascent to an understanding of the divine.<sup>7</sup> In Luther's day this was not unusual because even the Pope, Erasmus, and the scholastics all agreed that scripture was a reliable authority. What made Luther radically different from all others was the degree to which he was willing to view Scripture as the ultimate

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<sup>5</sup> Bainton,49.

<sup>6</sup> E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and his times* (Saint Louis, Missouri, Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 155.

<sup>7</sup> Quodlibet, "Online Journal of Christian Theology and Philosophy"; available from <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

authority.<sup>8</sup> The general understanding had been that the authority of Scripture, though genuine, was supplemented by various elements claimed by the Roman Church. The question of the relationship between scripture and tradition was barely discussed during Luther's time. It was not until the reformation that the subject of the problem received a closer examination.<sup>9</sup> After some careful thought, Luther shed the assumption that a transgression against the authority of the Church implied a transgression against the Word, and vice versa. For Luther, *Sola Scriptura* (scripture alone) would become the guiding and primary principle of his reformation.<sup>10</sup> *Sola Scriptura* is the principle in which scripture is used by itself to gain understanding of God. For Luther, theology consisted of the interpretation of the Holy Scripture because he never doubted that the will of God was revealed to men solely through the Holy Scripture (by itself).<sup>11</sup>

Next, I would like to shed some light on how Luther came to his ideas of *Sola Scriptura*. I would like to bring the readers mind back to Luther's problem of religious confusion. To do this I will show the problems that occurred as a result of Martin Luther being a student of the "Via Moderna." As a student of the Via Moderna he was taught that in matters of faith the Bible was the only reliable guide, that theology must forever be separated from philosophy, and that the human mind functioned properly only in the realm of this material world.<sup>12</sup> He was also taught that Aristotle must be put out of all Christian thinking; yet in doing so they did not realize

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An introduction to his thought* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1970), 96.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Ebeling, 97.

<sup>12</sup> Schwiebert, 156.

that they were destroying (what they believed) to be *Sola Scriptura*, by accepting the church and the Pope as sole interpreters of the divine revelation of the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

One of the first methods that Luther had to deal with is Augustine's view of Christianity. Augustine, who was highly influential in Luther's day played a large role in Luther's development of interpretive methods. According to Augustine's theology God had an infinite number of choices as to how He might create this world and man. Yet in His infinite wisdom He made this universe according to His final choice; which is the ordained plan which now exists.<sup>14</sup> Augustine believed that when God originally created the world, man was meant to live in sinless felicity with a will inclined toward the good even though grace was required to maintain man in such a state. According to Augustine, after the fall (of Adam) the human race was divided into two classes: (a) The elect and (b) the lost. These members were chosen from all eternity by God according to his divine purpose. Their number was fixed and unalterable regardless of the attitude of the lost.<sup>15</sup> As a way to tie all of this together, Augustine's view of justification and salvation will be examined. Augustine saw justification as a lifelong process, a gradual reparation of the soul by the inpouring of God's grace. Through baptism there occurred a remission of original sin, but man was neither justified nor certain of his salvation until the end of life.<sup>16</sup>

One of the major factors that caused Luther to try to get away from Augustine's teachings is that he emphasized that the historic Roman Catholic Church was the guardian of the truth, the

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<sup>13</sup> Schwiebert, 156.

<sup>14</sup> Schwiebert, 159.

<sup>15</sup> Schwiebert, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Schwiebert, 160.

interpreter of the word, and God's highest revelation.<sup>17</sup> As well as Augustine's view of the church, Luther realized that one of the great weaknesses of his theology was that he never learned to distinguish the true Pauline fashion between justification and salvation.<sup>18</sup> Because of this Luther sought to end his search for truth in Paulinism. Therefore, Luther laid the foundation of Sola Scriptura in Galatians 1:8, which affirms that neither Paul, Angels, nor any other man is greater than the Word of God. This, therefore, would also include the pope himself, who claimed to be the sole interpreter and arbiter of the Word.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, for Luther, Scripture became the cornerstone of all knowledge of God. The Word provided the sole foundation for both individuals and the institutionalized Church.<sup>20</sup>

Now that Luther had established that scripture is the sole authority for the church, he then needed to wrestle with the manner in which scripture needed to be handled. Thus, Luther's idea of how to interpret scripture will be examined.

While Luther was studying Augustine, he focused especially on what Augustine believed to be the essence of proper interpretation. To do this he read Augustine's document, *On Christian Doctrine*.<sup>21</sup> Luther found that according to Augustine's writings, the essence of proper interpretation involved being "turned toward the text in the proper way." To do this Augustine believed that one must possess certain character traits in order to interpret in the right spirit. These traits include fear, piety, knowledge, fortitude, mercy . . . [and a cleansed eye] through which

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<sup>17</sup> Schwiebert, 160.

<sup>18</sup> Schwiebert, 160.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004

<sup>21</sup> Direction: Luther and Interpretation in Marlowe and Goethe's Faustian Dramas; available from <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?907>; accessed 27 February 2004.

God may be seen insofar as He can be seen by those who die to the world as much as they are able.<sup>22</sup> This idea widely influenced much of the theological thought that permeated Luther's times. Because of this thought during the middle ages, the popular hermeneutic that was used employed was the fourfold method of interpretation. Because of this the allegorical method had gradually become the predominant approach.

The allegorical method allowed the commentator to seek hidden or deeper meanings in the text by seeking parallels between the passage and either history or concepts. Inevitably, this led to wild speculations and often meaningless applications of the Scriptural passages under consideration.<sup>23</sup> Luther likewise initially used this method. He once wrote about this saying "When I was a monk, I was an adept at allegory. I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the Epistle to the Romans, I came to have some knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is no allegory, and learned to know what Christ was."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, combating allegorical interpretations of the Old (and New) Testament, without losing its Christological significance, was a major preoccupation for Luther, because it is on this belief that he depended on the literal sense of scripture, which established true doctrine.<sup>25</sup> From the time of his understanding Christ through his encounter with Romans, Luther turned to what he referred to as the "grammatical historical sense" or "literal sense". He expressed his displeasure with the latter phrase due to its easily being misunderstood and ridiculed by opponents. On the importance of the literal understanding, Luther writes, "The Christian reader should make it his first task to seek out the literal sense, as

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?907>; accessed 27 February 2004.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past & Present* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 172.

they call it. For it alone is the whole substance of faith and Christian theology; it alone holds its ground in trouble and trial."<sup>26</sup> Even though Luther adamantly warned against trying to interpret the Bible as subjective and ambiguous, he did not intend to reduce the scripture to mere grammatical sentences. In Luther's understanding of Scripture, the Holy Spirit played a crucial role in the interpretive process. Without the participation of the Holy Spirit's work within the reader, Scripture would yield none of its teachings. To Luther, the Lord opens and explains His Word through the work of the Holy Spirit within the reader. The Holy Spirit, being spiritual, rises above reason, thereby allowing the reader to likewise transcend reason and grasp the spiritual Word.<sup>27</sup>

Also, Luther believed that the Word is something that has to be experienced. Luther believed that the word is the means through which God confronted the individual, and the individual experienced the will and Word of God. To Luther, the Word is not something to be merely repeated, but to be lived and felt.<sup>28</sup>

Now that there is a better understanding of how Luther gained his ideas about Sola Scriptura, the paper will now focus on some of the ideas that Luther developed (added to, contributed, etc). The first section that will be looked at is Luther's theology of the cross. This will be examined under the umbrella of Luther's foundation of the concept, his doctrine of the hidden God, his doctrine of faith, and what the cross offers to the Christian life.

The foundation of Luther's concept of the theology of the cross sprang from his special concern for the certainty of salvation. This caused Luther to look as deep as he could into what

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.quodlibet.net/luther.shtml>; accessed 21 February 2004.

Christ really did for mankind. This, in turn, led Luther to the doctrine which he calls the Doctrine of the hidden God.<sup>29</sup> According to Luther, the cross of Christ makes it clear that there is no direct knowledge of God for man; in fact, all Christian thought must come to a halt before the fact of the cross. The cross itself makes thought- demands on Christians which must be either acted on or ignored. Thus the foundations of a theology of the cross results.<sup>30</sup> From here the theology of the cross is seen as a theology of revelation. If this theology is now seen as one of revealing, how then does God choose to reveal himself? The question arises that there really should be some knowledge of God on the basis of works (shouldn't there) ?; but there isn't. Without reservation Luther agrees with the apostles verdict in Romans 1:22, which affirms that the knowledge of God's invisible nature on the basis of works of creation does not make one wise.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, since men have failed to honor the God who was manifest in his works (referring to the Old Testament), God has now chosen a new way to reveal himself. Therefore, the cross now becomes the revelation of God.<sup>32</sup> Through such a concealment God enters in order to reveal himself. If there is to be a revelation of God, the visible God must become the hidden God. By doing this, God becomes "hidden in sufferings". As God hides himself, the visible things of God become manifest: His human nature, weakness, foolishness etc. Thus God becomes visible as he conceals himself, and only in this concealment does he become visible.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Walter Von Loewenich, *Luther's theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 27.

<sup>30</sup> Loewenich, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Loewinich, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Loewenich, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Loewenich, 29.

According to Luther's theology of the cross, God wants to be recognized only in the humility and shame of the cross. If God himself is hidden in sufferings, it is clear that also the works of God, in which his activity confronts us, bear the same character. Therefore, the works of God will always be unattractive to the naked eye because God's power reveals itself in weakness.<sup>34</sup>

If God is a hidden God then how can we understand Him? Luther's method says that we must seek to know it, and we must receive an eye for the hidden character of the divine properties and works. This is because God will not disclose himself to direct, metaphysical contemplation. Luther believes this because he believes that God wants a relationship with man, and if man is to stay in the will of God the wisdom of the cross must be granted to him. This wisdom, however, is considered foolishness by the world. Therefore, according to Luther, he who wishes to become wise does not seek wisdom by progressing toward it, but becomes a fool by retrogressing into seeking folly...This is the wisdom which is the folly to the world.<sup>35</sup>

Martin Luther's doctrine of faith carried with it many attachments. The most important aspects of this doctrine will be examined. The first attachment that will be looked at is faith and understanding. Luther breaks this part of his doctrine down into roughly three parts. (1.) Faith alone enables the understanding to understand the invisible. The concept of understanding (within itself) is subject to change. This is because man's ability to comprehend understanding is hindered by sin to the point of impotence. Therefore, without faith there is no understanding of the invisible. (2.) Faith is at the same time a means to knowledge; through faith one arrives at

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<sup>34</sup> Loewenich, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Loewenich, 29.

understanding. (3.) The intellectual side of faith is also strongly emphasized; therefore faith equals understanding.<sup>36</sup>

With this in mind, it is also important to remember that faith does not have its origin in any of the abilities of the soul. This is because mans ability and rationale are hindered by sin.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is the Holy Spirit that gives us what is considered the concept of faith, and the Holy Spirit is the creator of the new life. This idea went against the Roman Catholic idea which believed that salvation (new life) came at the moment of death if the person had become righteous. Contrary to this Luther believed that salvation comes at the moment of faith when God declares us not guilty, and therefore salvation is done without works; salvation comes by grace alone.<sup>38</sup>

To conclude this section a practical application shall be given. For Luther, Christ is the mediator between God and man, the only mediator. He is the mediator of all mankind through the shedding his blood. Through his death he effects reconciliation between God and man; God's wrath, is a reality that is removed only in Christ. Because of this important discovery, Luther does not see the cross as merely a subject of theology; it is, rather, the distinctive mark of all theology.<sup>39</sup> Martin Luther's theology of the cross is very important to his methods of interpretation because this permeates every aspect of his thought when he sits down to read his biblical text.

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<sup>36</sup> Loewenich,61-62.

<sup>37</sup> Loewenich, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Edwin Stepp, *Martin Luther: His Theology* (Boiling Springs, North Carolina, Publisher not given, 2004, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Loewenich, 17.

The final issue of Luther's interpretive methods that will be dealt with is his doctrine of the two kingdoms. Luther noticed that there was a twofold perversion of governmental power. The Bishops, instead of governing souls with the Word, rule castles, cities, lands and people outwardly. And the secular authorities, instead of truly governing their territories wish to exercise a spiritual rule over their souls. In Luther's eyes they have put the shoe on the wrong foot.<sup>40</sup> Even though this was a perversion that Luther believed was caused by sin he believed that God had ordained two governments: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that they are obligated to keep still and maintain an outward peace.<sup>41</sup> The secular world was needed to restrain evil and promote good; but no political program should be equated with the will of God. The kingdom of God was not about withdrawing from the world, but being active in the world in which we all live.<sup>42</sup>

In dealing with this issue Luther always asserted that these kingdoms are not rigidly fixed provinces into which the Christians existence is divided. People cannot live in only one or the other. They must live in both (at the same time) and whether he chooses to or not, they must continually act in both. According to Luther, as a Christian, people are to use the means of the one or the other "government" in order to carry out the will of God, which holds the world together.<sup>43</sup> This is extremely important because, since this is the way Luther saw the world around him, it

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<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1966), 6.

<sup>41</sup> Bornkamm, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Stepp, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Bornkamm, 9.

had a profound impact on the way in which he understood scripture. Luther's two kingdom doctrine is so completely woven into his total theology that one can follow the threads in all directions: to his view of God, his doctrine of the creation and preservation of the world, his Christology, his eschatology, his concept of the church, of reason, of justice, and so forth. This doctrine permeated almost every aspect of his view of the Bible, which has left a lasting effect on the way Lutheran (and protestant) successors have come at the Bible.

The next section will focus on some of Luther's successors, and what they did with Luther's methods. The first successor that will be discussed is Philip Melanchthon. After taking a teaching position at the University of Wittenberg, Melanchthon came under the influence of Martin Luther and began to study theology. The proclamation of God's grace freely given became the enduring mainstay of his life. As this experience penetrated his intellectual world, it led him to develop the reformations message systematically.<sup>44</sup> Melanchthon held Luther in very high respect and came to many of the same conclusions as Luther. Melanchthon wanted his doctrines to come out of a scripturally based exposition of the text, although it is important to note that he was not successful at applying this hermeneutic consistently. For Melanchthon, the distinction between gospel and law offered the key to what he believed was Martin Luther's central formula for evangelical insight.<sup>45</sup>

Though Melanchthon was Luther's successor he did not always agree with Luther, and generally Luther was not upset by that. Some examples would be, while Luther affirmed that human will is bound by sin, Melanchthon believed that humans did possess a certain amount of freedom. Also, Luther believed that in the Eucharist, the bread really became the body of Christ.

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<sup>44</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 3., "Philip Melanchthon."

<sup>45</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 3., "Philip Melanchthon."

Melanchthon, on the other hand, believed that with the bread the body of Christ was offered and that Christ was present. When Melanchthon shared this with Luther it sufficed for him and he did not demand a more precise explanation.<sup>46</sup>

To sum up the difference between Luther and his successor Melanchthon, a brief view of their doctrinal differences will be examined. Luther was concerned about having a free and living faith; he drew a sharp distinction between his faith and the Roman Catholic Church. Melanchthon's lifework was aimed at the formulation of clear, commonly accepted doctrine. He stated once that he would accept a pope if he did not go against the gospel. Though he never fully achieved his overall acceptance he was able to develop a sense for exact formulations and thus prepared the way for orthodoxy.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is his love for organization, and systemizing that helped him to further Lutheranism.

The final successor that will be discussed is Johannes Brenz. He is arguably the most important Lutheran theologian of his time after Melanchthon. Brenz led his city in the gradual introduction of Lutheran doctrines and ceremonies, and was made a central organ of church government.<sup>48</sup> Brenz was very concerned about classical Lutheran Orthodoxy; an example is that he vigorously argued for Luther's interpretation of the real presence of Christ in communion. Also, Brenz advised governments not to kill Anabaptists and other religious dissidents, even after Luther changed his mind later in his life.

Later in life Brenz was given the task to reorganize the Wurttemberg Church. The greatest significance of this task is the way in which he centralized the ecclesiastical polity through

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<sup>46</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 3., "Philip Melanchthon."

<sup>47</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 3., "Philip Melanchthon."

<sup>48</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 1., "Johannes Brenz."

which the Duke exercised his responsibility.<sup>49</sup> This control includes the appointment and dismissal of pastors and teachers, management of church property, and the enforcement of uniformity in doctrine and ceremonies.<sup>50</sup> Unity of doctrine is not where Luther would have gone, as Melancthon would have commented , although his method was highly effective. This system of ecclesiastical polity, which was widely copied in protestant Germany, survived the introduction, with modifications, until 1918/19, which shows that Brenz accomplishment as a church organizer was even more durable than his accomplishments as a theologian.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 1., “Johannes Brenz.”

<sup>50</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 1., “Johannes Brenz.”

<sup>51</sup> *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 1., “Johannes Brenz.”

## Conclusion

If there were one phrase that could tie together Luther's entire theology it would be "Justification by faith." The concept of justification is master and head, Lord, Governor, and judge over all the church's doctrine.<sup>52</sup> The correlation between Word and faith dominates his Pauline studies.<sup>53</sup> Martin Luther offered a radical insight into the view of God. He showed the world a God who could be relied upon, and looked at with confidence because he presented God as merciful and ready to relieve sinners through the merits acquired by the death of Christ.<sup>54</sup> He based this foundation on Romans 1:17 which states that "The just shall live by faith." He construed that the word "faith" meant an assurance of personal salvation and "justification" meant not an infusion of justice into the heart of the person justified, but a mere external imputation of it.<sup>55</sup> After spreading this idea around Luther helped to accomplish the re-discovery of this doctrine, and therefore a reformed way of thinking about Holy Scripture. In essence, Luther has freed

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<sup>52</sup> B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and reason: A Study In The Theology of Luther* (Oxford, London: Clarendon Press, 1962), 58.

<sup>53</sup> David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1980), 112.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick F. O'Hare, *The facts about Luther* (New York, Frederick Pustet & Co., 1916), 102.

<sup>55</sup> O'Hare, 103.

people from a works oriented view of the Bible, and has affirmed that salvation comes by faith alone and without works.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> O'Hare, 103.

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Encyclopedias, but for academic interest the Author has chosen to give the name in citation area.  
Actually Turabian does require citation of everything. For instructions and examples go to [http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocChi\\_WC\\_encyc.html](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocChi_WC_encyc.html) for an example.