When God Speaks

Reclaiming Scripture as the Generative Word of Faith

Dan Lioy

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that biblical authority is best understood as generative rather than merely descriptive or evocative. It critiques both fundamentalist propositionalism and liberal experientialism for grounding Scripture's authority in human capacities rather than in God's active address. Drawing on the Lutheran theological tradition, the essay emphasizes the external Word (*verbum externum*), the Law-Gospel distinction, and a Christological reading of the entire canon. Through an examination of Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Luke 24:13–35, and Romans 10:5–17, it shows how the biblical Word calls a covenant community into existence, interprets the crucified and risen Christ, and creates justifying faith through public proclamation. These exegetical findings then yield theological implications concerning Scripture's living power, its clarity, and reason's ministerial role before the essay engages objections from various other perspectives. Ultimately, the essay concludes that Scripture is not a static archive but the living instrument through which God addresses, forms, and sustains the redeemed.

Introduction: The Crisis of Authority and the External Word

Any account of Christian theology that takes Scripture seriously must eventually face a prior question: why should the Bible be regarded as authoritative at all? That query presses upon every congregation, pastor, and believer who opens the text and asks what claim it makes upon them. This introduction proceeds by diagnosing two competing accounts of biblical authority, thereby advancing this essay's central thesis and identifying the Lutheran resources that make that line of argumentation possible.

The Contemporary Crisis of Biblical Authority

Something has gone awry in the way Christians speak about biblical authority, and the problem crosses denominational lines. Two rival positions have hardened into opposing camps, each convinced the other has misunderstood Scripture. However, both share a deeper weakness—each ultimately grounds the Bible's authority in the human subject rather than in the living God who speaks through the text (2 Tim 3:16–17; Heb 4:12–13; 2 Pet 1:20–21).

The first approach, widespread in conservative evangelical and fundamentalist circles, tends in practice to ground the Bible's authority in its historical accuracy and factual verifiability. Here, exactitude becomes the precondition of faith rather than a consequence of trusting the God who speaks through the text. In turn, Scripture becomes a fragile object in constant need of defense, and faith is effectively redefined as intellectual assent that must wait on sufficient evidence.[1]

The second broadly liberal approach rejects that demand and relocates authority in Scripture's power to evoke religious experience. The Bible is understood less as divine address than as a witness to humanity's encounters with the sacred. Here, its authority resides not in historical facts but in its capacity to resonate with what the human spirit already senses. While this view correctly insists that Scripture addresses the whole person, it makes individual experience the final judge of meaning.[2]

The irony is that these apparent opposites share the same assumption. Specifically, both measure Scripture by human standards, one by reason and verification, the other by feeling and personal meaning. What both views fail to preserve is the possibility that Scripture's authority rests not in human capacities at all but in the God who actively addresses the redeemed through Scripture.

The Central Claim: Scriptural Authority as Generative

This essay proposes a different account rooted in Lutheran theology. Scripture's authority is generative rather than merely descriptive or evocative. The Bible is neither a static archive awaiting historical verification nor a reservoir of symbols, myths, and metaphors to be appropriated by readers to express their experiences. Instead, Scripture is the living instrument through which God creates faith, gathers and forms His children, interprets the saving work of Christ, and delivers the righteousness that justifies sinners.[3]

1. For a critique of the philosophical foundations that shaped early biblical fundamentalism, see Matthew C. Ogilvie, "Early Biblical Fundamentalism's Xenophobic Rejection of the Subject in European Philosophy: How Rejecting the Knowing Subject Formed Fundamentalism's Way of Thinking," *Religions* 15, no. 7 (2024): Article 790, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15070790.

2. For a scholarly framework to understand why the interplay between religious experience and the Bible is a recurring and contested issue in Christian theology, see A. Holder, "Religious Experience and Sacred Text," *Acta Theologica* (June 20, 2022): 1–16, https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/6442.

3. For an explanation of Scripture as the active means through which God produces faith, communicates Christ, and bestows righteousness, see the following: Lucas J. Admiraal, "The Sacramentality of Scripture in the Writings of Johann Gerhard," *Lutheran Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2023): 407–23, https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2023.a911859; Samantha Gilmore, "Christ for You and Me: A Lutheran Theology of Proclamation and the Presence of the Preacher," *Religions* 15, no. 3 (2024): 272, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15030272.

This distinction is crucial because historical reliability alone cannot explain what Scripture actually accomplishes. Accurate records do not create faith where none existed, absolve troubled consciences, or sustain hope in the face of death. Such effects belong to God's own action. Scripture possesses authority precisely because God uses it as His chosen instrument of address. Its authority is therefore not established from below by human judgment but exercised from above through God's ongoing speech.[4]

The generative power of Scripture rests in the God-breathed character of the written Word (2 Tim 3:16–17). Indeed, the biblical writings are the work of human authors whom the Holy Spirit moved to speak and record God's declarations (2 Pet 1:20–21). For this reason, the decisive category for biblical authority is not simply information but divine address. Scripture confronts its hearers not as an inert deposit of religious truths but as the living voice of God. The same Creator who spoke in the past now speaks through these writings (Heb 1:1–2). Wherever this Word is proclaimed and received, the Holy Spirit is at work, renewing God's claim upon His children and calling faith into being.

The Lutheran Contribution: Word, Christ, and Authority

The Lutheran tradition is uniquely positioned to articulate this account. Two governing principles define its approach: *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *solus Christus* (Christ alone). These are not competing emphases but a single, integrated claim about how God's Word operates.[5] *Sola scriptura* affirms that the Bible is the Church's sole rule and norm for teaching and life. It is the standard by which all others, including tradition, reason, and experience, are measured, each with genuine supporting roles but none equal to the Word. S*olus Christus* identifies that Word's center. Christ crucified and risen is the interpretive key to all of Scripture, the fulfillment of Israel's historical narrative, and the full disclosure about who God is.

Together, these dual commitments yield a theology of the Word that is both scripturally grounded and doctrinally coherent, approaching the Judeo-Christian canon as a unified divine address whose authority derives from the God who speaks and whose heart is the saving work of Christ. In the sections that follow, this claim is examined through three foundational texts: Deuteronomy 6:4–9, Luke

4. For a robust argument that Scripture's authority is exercised from above by divine action, not derived by human tradition, historical evaluation, or ecclesial judgment, see Phaswane S. Makuwa, "The Authority of God Takes Precedence over Scripture and Tradition," *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 58, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3012.

5. For a consideration of the Christological reading of Scripture as the distinctive Lutheran contribution to ongoing debates about biblical authority, see Francisco Sabotsy, *Sola Scriptura* Unlocked—The Scriptural Legacy of *Sola Scriptura* for the Lutheran Generations in a Constantly Changing Context over Time, *Open Access Library Journal* 11 (2024): e11197, https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111197.

24:13–35, and Romans 10:5–17. Each respectively illuminates a distinct dimension of the Bible's generative power: to call a redeemed people into existence, to interpret the Christ-event, and to create justifying faith.

Hermeneutical Orientation: Scripture as the *Prius* (Predecessor) of Faith

The interpretive framework guiding this essay is not imposed on Scripture from outside but arises from the Lutheran tradition's attentive listening to the biblical text. These commitments are not simply methodological rules. They are theological claims about how God speaks and how human beings receive that communication. Three dimensions form the foundation from which the biblical texts in subsequent sections are engaged.

The Priority of the Word

One of Lutheran theology's most counterintuitive yet foundational claims is that the Word of God does not respond to faith but produces it. Faith is not a prior disposition the hearer brings to Scripture. Rather, the proclaimed Gospel of Christ opens Scripture and creates the faith by which it is rightly heard as well as addresses the fallen human being before any capacity for openness exists, and then through the Word, the Holy Spirit calls forth faith. Theologians use the Latin term *prius* to name this priority. The Word is what precedes and makes faith possible in the first place (Rom 10:17; Gal 3:2).[6]

The above claim finds consistent expression in traditional Lutheran theology. For example, Article V of the A*ugsburg Confession* grounds faith's origin entirely in the Spirit's work through the proclaimed Word and sacraments.[7] Meanwhile, Luther's catechisms consistently present the Word as the active agent and the human being as its recipient.[8] The eternally self-existent God freely chooses the external Word as the instrument of His self-disclosure. It is not because His being depends upon speaking but because He has graciously bound His saving address to this appointed means. The Word is therefore always prior to any human act of thought or reception, and the initiative rests entirely with God. The mind genuinely receives the Word but does not produce it.

6. For a deliberation of the theological claim that God's Word precedes faith, the Word is an active address rather than a passive text, and faith is generated by God's initiative, see Jens Wolff, "The Word of God in Martin Luther's Theology," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, March 29, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.339.

7. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 40.

8. For example, in Article III of the *Small Catechism*, Luther affirms that faith is created by the Gospel and not by human strength or decision. See Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *Book of Concord*, 355.

This priority of the Word carries a necessary corollary about human nature. Lutheran theology teaches that in their fallen condition, people orient life around themselves rather than their Creator, so faith cannot arise spontaneously from within. It is the response of the human creature to the specific address of the living God, and where that address falls silent, faith withers.[9] This is why the Reformers insisted with such urgency that Scripture must be proclaimed, read aloud, and taught with care. Scripture is not a resource believers employ for their own purposes but the place where God speaks and an encounter with Him occurs. The reader who comes to the text in this posture does not stand over it in judgment but under it in expectation.

The External Word

If the Word precedes faith, it must also come from genuinely outside the believer, not from within the interior life of the reader. The Lutheran tradition calls this the *verbum externum*, or "external Word."[10] The concept addresses a recurring temptation in Christian spirituality, which is to seek God through private impressions, mystical feelings, or inner voices rather than through the public means God has actually appointed. Luther encountered this danger among those he called "Enthusiasts" who alleged direct access to divine revelation apart from the written, proclaimed, and enacted Word. His concern was not that inner experience is valueless but that, taken as its own validation, it offers no protection against self-deception. When the self both receives and confirms its own religious experience, the result is a closed circle with no external check.[11]

The external Word breaks that circularity. Because Scripture stands outside the reader and comes as address, it carries a content and a claim that the reader did not generate and cannot simply dismiss. The Bible can correct as well as comfort, disturb, as well as reassure. Far from making Scripture cold or impersonal, its external character is precisely what enables it to function as genuine address rather than mere information. The congregation gathers around the external Word

9. For an affirmation that trust in God comes into being solely through his proclaimed Word, and that whenever this divine speaking ceases, such trust inevitably fades, see Ndzi Leonard, "Justification by Faith: The Heart of the Gospel and Its Relevance Today," *Greener Journal of Social Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2025): 205–12, https://doi.org/10.15580/gjss.2025.1.052725094.

10. In support of the Lutheran *verbum externum* logic (Word precedes and creates faith), see Sasja Emilie Mathiasen Stopa, "'Ich Werdend Spreche Ich Du': Creative Dialogue in the Relational Anthropologies of Martin Luther and Martin Buber," *Religions* 14, no. 5 (2023): 564, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050564.

11. For an overview of how Luther's engagements with the Zwickau prophets, sacramentarians, and other spiritualist groups helped solidify his conviction that saving revelation comes through the external Word and the sacraments rather than through private illumination, see Amy Nelson Burnett, "Luther and the Schwärmer," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 511–24, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604708.013.030.

because that is where God has promised to be present. In this sense, the Church is not the guardian of the Word but its creature. Called into being and sustained by the divine address, it is consequently and subsequently made a mediator of that Word, especially in the pastoral office.[12]

Theological Grammar: Law and Gospel, Christ and Canon

That the Word is prior and external raises an immediate question: how does it actually function? The Lutheran tradition answers through two interrelated interpretive principles. The first is the distinction between Law and Gospel, and the second is the Christological reading of the whole canon.

Law and Gospel are not two successive stages of salvation history, as though the Old Testament dealt in demands and the New Testament in grace. They are two ways the Word operates on the reader at every point and across every portion of Scripture. The Law exposes the depth of human failure, bringing the conscience into honest reckoning with the gap between what God requires and what fallen human beings produce. The Gospel then announces the closure of that gap. It is not through compulsive human effort but through Christ's death and resurrection on behalf of sinners. Both movements are acts of grace from the same God, and both serve the single purpose of bringing the human creature into genuine relationship with Him. Separating them, either by preaching grace without judgment or judgment without grace, distorts the Word and leaves hearers either complacent or despairing.[13]

The Christological principle holds that Scripture is not a loose anthology of religious writings but a unified address in which diverse voices converge on a single center, the Messiah. In Luther's memorable phrase, the purpose of all Scripture is to *treiben Christum*, namely, to drive Christ upon the reader.[14] The parts of Scripture are properly understood only in relation to the whole, and the whole is properly understood only in relation to its climax in the person and work of Christ. This

12. For an account that grounds scriptural interpretation in the external proclamation of the Word within the covenant community, rather than in autonomous private interpretation, see Morne Diedericks, "Bullinger's Expression–*praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*, within His View of Scripture," *In die Skriflig* 58, no. 1 (2024): a3079, https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3079.

13. For an elaboration of the Law/Gospel dialectic as an interpretive grammar operating across the entire Judeo-Christian canon, rather than as a dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments, see Francisco Sabotsy, "Freedom from Legalism in Christ—Law and Gospel Dialectic in Luther's Theology," *Open Access Library Journal* 11 (2024): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111272.

14. For a synopsis of Luther's hermeneutic, particularly his use of *Christum treibet* as the governing criterion by which every scriptural text is interpreted in relation to Christ, see Matheus Rodrigo Lubki and Claus Schwambach, "Was *Christum treibet:* A Study of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Vox Scripturae* 27, no. 3 (2019): 495–524, https://doi.org/10.25188/2447.7443.2019v27n3.12.

principle does not collapse the richness of the Old Testament into a single pattern or reduce the New Testament to a proof-text collection. Rather, it insists that every text yields its deepest meaning only when read in relation to the one toward whom the entire canon moves.

Taken together, the Law-Gospel distinction and the Christological canon describe the internal logic of Scripture. It is a Word designed to expose human need and supply divine answer, to strip away the pretense of self-sufficiency and raise up the new creature who lives by grace. This is not a framework imported from the sixteenth century and imposed on ancient texts. It is the hermeneutic the texts themselves put forward. God does His alien work through the Law in order to do His proper work through the Gospel, thereby revealing the Father's heart in the Son and giving believers the peace and full assurance that come from knowing the mind of Christ. With this grammar in place, the biblical texts themselves can be examined, and the full generative force of the living Word put on display.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9, The Word That Constitutes the Redeemed, Chosen People

Of the three biblical texts examined in this essay, Deuteronomy 6:4–9 stands at the beginning. Here, the Word of God addresses a people in the act of constituting them as a covenant community. It is before they have entered the promised land, established a monarchy, or built a temple. The passage thus offers a clear window into what it means for a people to exist through divine address rather than by their own initiative or achievement.[15]

The Shema as Divine Convocation

When Israel recited, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God. The Lord is one!" (Deut 6:4),[16] it was not merely reporting information about monotheism. Israel was being

15. The discourse in this section has been informed by the exegetical and theological discussions of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 appearing in the following: Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1–21:9*, rev. ed., vol. 6A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 142–43; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 168–71; Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy,* vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 162–68; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 331–35, 337–43.

16. Deuteronomy 6:4 has been translated in a number of ways, including the following: (1) "the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (NIV, NKJV, ESV, CSB); (2) "the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (NET, NASB); (3) "the Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Tanakh, NRSV, NLT); (4) "the Lord our God is one Lord" (KJV); and, (5) "Yahweh our God, Yahweh is unique" (Lexham). Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version, 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved.

summoned by the urgent and exclusive claim of the God who had elected, liberated, and bound this people to Himself. The Hebrew verb *shema*' carries a weight the English "hear" does not fully convey. To *shema*' is not merely to perceive a sound but to attend, to receive, and to be formed by what one receives. The imperative is not an invitation but a summons. It is an address that calls its recipients into a particular existence. Israel does not first form as a community and then receive this Word as an additional religious supplement. Rather, the Word that says "Hear, O Israel" is the proclamation by which Israel's identity as a covenant people is renewed and defined.[17]

This is what it means to describe the Shema as both divine convocation and instruction. A convocation is a calling together, a word that assembles the people it addresses. God does not speak to an audience that already exists independently of His speech. Instead, He calls that audience into being through the act of speaking. Stripped of this Word, Israel ceases to be the covenant community and becomes simply another ethnic grouping, indistinguishable from the surrounding nations.

The theological depth of the Shema becomes clearer when its wider canonical context is considered (for example, 1 Cor 8:6). Deuteronomy does not begin with the Shema. It begins with a rehearsal of God's saving acts, namely, the Exodus, Sinai, and the wilderness years (chaps 1–5). Israel is addressed as a people already redeemed. The Shema is therefore not an invitation to seek a previously unknown God but a declaration that names and claims a people whom God has already acted to rescue. Every time these words were spoken, Israel was drawn back into the reality of its own election. It is not because that election was uncertain but because the Word that gave it shape required continued hearing to sustain its ongoing work.

Catechesis and the First Table

The Shema does not stand alone. It is followed immediately by the great commandment—"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:5)—and then by a cascade of pedagogical instructions. The Word is to be taught diligently to one's children, spoken about at home and on the road, at bedtime and at rising, bound on the hand and fixed between the eyes, and written on the doorposts and gates (vv. 7–9). This accumulation of bodily, spatial, and temporal images describes how a generative Word is intended to function as a way of life for a people who exist in the realm of space-time reality.

What the text presents is an early picture of catechesis in the biblical canon. In its most basic sense, catechesis is the process by which the living voice of the faith

17. See William S. Kervin, "Dimensions of Worship in the Shema: Resources for Christian Liturgical Theology," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 48, no. 1 (March 2019): 115–137. https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429819828670. Kervin argues that the role and significance of the Shema in Jewish daily prayer, liturgy, and performative ritualization points to dimensions of worship in which text and action, liturgy and life, prayer and politics converge.

community passes from one generation to the next. This is not about transmitting static, clinical information about God. The instructions of verses 7–9 envision something far more embodied. It is the Word woven into the fabric of daily life, accompanying Israel through every transition and marking every space as a place where God's address remains active and transformative.[18]

From a Lutheran perspective, the commands of Deuteronomy 6 belong to the First Table of the Law, a key distinction within that tradition. It is those commandments governing the relationship between God and his children rather than between neighbors. Luther placed the Shema at the heart of the First Commandment, insisting that the call to have no other gods is fulfilled only where the heart trusts wholly in the one, true, and living God who has first spoken and saved.[19] The pedagogical commands that follow serve this same end. It is not merely to ensure children memorize correct doctrine but more importantly to form within them a posture of life entirely oriented around the Word that called Israel into being.

Lutheran theology also speaks about a third use of the Law (*tertius usus legis*), namely, its role in shaping the ongoing life of the redeemed community. Properly understood, this use does not undermine the Law-Gospel distinction.[20] Israel does not transmit the Shema across generations to earn its election but because that election has already been secured by God's faithful, prior action. As such, the catechetical instructions of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 are best understood not as a program of moral self-improvement but as the ordered passing on of a promise-shaped identity. It is the handing down of the Word that keeps a redeemed people alive.

Ecclesiological Implication

This reading of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 carries a direct and far-reaching implication for what the Church is meant to be. Israel comes into existence as a covenant community through divine address, and its continued life depends on the ongoing

18. See Michael Kodzo Mensah, "Shema as Paradigm (Dt. 6:4–9): The Bible, Education, and the Quest for Development in Contemporary Ghana," *Scriptura* 122, no. 1 (2023): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.7833/122-1-2117. Mensah argues that Deuteronomy 6:4–9 presents a holistic, formative model of instruction in which Israel's covenantal identity is embodied in daily life rather than conveyed as abstract information, offering a paradigm of transformative, lived catechesis.

19. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 9: *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 65–69.

20. See Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, Book of Concord, 502–3, where the FC SD VI's careful framing grounds the third use specifically in the regenerate, for whom the Law functions as a guide in sanctification. Also, see Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 168–73, where he argues that the Law teaches Christians how to live in their callings, even though it cannot justify them.

reception and transmission of that Word. The Church is no different. It is not fundamentally a voluntary association, a cultural tradition, or an institution that happens to use Scripture in its activities. At its most basic level, the Church is the creature of the Word (*creatura verbi*), a people called into being and sustained by a speech that comes from outside itself.[21]

This means the community does not possess the Word as a property it controls. Rather, the Word possesses the community. When ancient Israel drifted from God's ongoing address, as the prophets record with painful regularity, it did not simply experience spiritual decline but also lost its defining identity as the covenant people. The prophets' relentless calls to return were a summons back to the Word that alone could reconstitute what sin and unfaithfulness had dismantled.

The same logic applies to the Church. It does not precede the Gospel and then choose to organize itself around Scripture. The Church is brought into existence by the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen, and by the Holy Spirit is taught to speak the new language of faith. In articulating that faith scripturally, the Spirit sustains the community in the Word that first called it into being. This is the fulfillment of the divine address that began with Israel at Sinai and reached its definitive expression in the Word made flesh.

Furthermore, to displace the proclaimed Word, whether through human tradition, institutional authority, or experiential preference, is to cut the Church off from the source of its existence. This is why the Lutheran Reformers understood renewal not primarily as structural or moral reform but as a recovery of the Word in its full generative power. It must be preached, read aloud, taught to children,[22] and allowed to do what God promises in it. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 stands at the beginning of this tradition because it states with remarkable brevity what centuries of reflection have never exhausted. The people of God exist only where he continues to speak, and that speaking is always, at its core, an address of grace to those called to hear.

21. See Leo J. Koffeman, "'*Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda*': Church Renewal from a Reformed Perspective," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): a2875, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2875. Koffeman grounds ecclesiology in the Reformation idea that the Church exists because of God's Word rather than human initiative.

22. The emphasis on teaching the Word to children also points to the need for a reform of the children's sermon. Too often it has become neither truly age-appropriate nor genuinely catechetical, but instead an adult-directed performance. A more fitting approach is a simple scriptural practice: a single verse from the Sunday readings, repeated for memorization, briefly explained, and concluded with prayer. On this point, see David M. Friel, "The Children's Liturgy of the Word: An Appraisal," *International Journal of Evangelization and Catechetics* 4, no. 2 (2024): 121–139, https://doi.org/10.1353/jec.2024.a939335. Friel's analysis encourages a reorientation of children's liturgical formation away from entertainment and toward an encounter with the Word that is age-appropriate and Scripture-centered. It is proclaimed clearly, received intelligibly, catechetically deepened, and returned to God in prayer.

Luke 24:13–35, The Word That Interprets the Christ Event

The road to Emmaus is among the most carefully constructed narratives in the Gospel tradition, and its theological reach extends well beyond the account's immediate setting. What Luke depicts is a paradigm for how the risen Christ continues to make Himself known. It is not through direct physical presence but through the opened Scriptures and the broken bread. This passage illuminates a dimension of the Word's generative power distinct from either Deuteronomy 6:4–9 or Romans 10:5–17, specifically its capacity to interpret events that, left to themselves, yield only confusion and grief.[23]

The Crisis of Uninterpreted Experience

In one sense, the two disciples walking to Emmaus on the first Easter afternoon are the most theologically informed travelers on the road.[24] They know what happened in Jerusalem. They heard the women's report about the empty tomb and the angelic announcement that Jesus was alive (Luke 24:13–14, 18–23). Even so, for all that, they walk away from Jerusalem in grief, their faces downcast (v. 17), and their expectations shattered: "We were hoping that he was going to redeem Israel" (v. 21). The past tense is telling. For these two, Jesus' death has already foreclosed the future. The facts are in their possession, but those facts have produced despair, not faith.

The theological weight of this observation should not be underestimated. Experience, however vivid and recent, does not interpret itself. What the two disciples lack is not more information but a framework capable of making sense of what they witnessed. Events, no matter how dramatic, do not carry their own meaning. They

23. The discourse in this section has been informed by the exegetical and theological discussions of Luke 24:13–35 appearing in the following: Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1907–22; Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 28A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 1554–69; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 840–51; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 889–900.

24. For the possibility that Luke's "Cleopas" (Luke 24:18) is the same figure as the "Clopas" mentioned in John's Gospel (John 19:25), making "Mary of Clopas" the most likely candidate for the unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus, and thereby supporting a husband-and-wife reading of the pair, see Marc Rastoin, "Cléophas (Lc 24,18): un indice de la créativité littéraire et théologique de Luc?," *New Testament Studies* 67, no. 1 (2021): 22–37, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868852000021 1. On the narrative plausibility of interpreting the two travelers as sharing a home and a meal (Luke 24:28–35), see Michal Beth Dinkler, "Building Character on the Road to Emmaus: Lukan Characterization in Contemporary Literary Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 3 (2017): 687–706, https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1363.2017.292918.

arrive requiring a word from outside themselves to render them intelligible. This is not merely an observation about two discouraged followers but a claim about the structure of knowledge and faith as such. The Lutheran tradition, insisting on the priority of the Word over human experience, finds in this passage a vivid narrative confirmation of that principle. No human being, regardless of sincerity or proximity to the events, can derive the meaning of Jesus's death and resurrection from those events alone. It requires a speaker who stands outside them and interprets them, and that speaker is the risen Messiah.[25]

Christ as the Supreme Interpreter

Jesus, the unidentified traveler who joins the two disciples on the road, does not offer consolation. Instead, he listens to their account and then "explains" the prophetic import of the Hebrew sacred writings (vv. 13–27). The underlying Greek verb *diermēneuō* (v. 27) is the root from which the English word "hermeneutics" derives. Luke is not using it casually. The risen Messiah is presented as the supreme interpreter not of a few select passages but of Israel's entire canonical inheritance as a unified address whose center is Himself.

This moment crystallizes what Luther would later express memorably. To reiterate what was noted in §2.3, the purpose of all Scripture is to *treiben Christum*, namely, to drive or impel Christ upon the reader.[26] What Jesus does on the Emmaus road is far more than selective proof-texting. He interprets Israel's history, recorded in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, as a cohesive narrative moving toward his suffering and glorification. The Cross is not an interruption of Scripture's redemptive arc but its climax.

This is why the Cross, in the disciples' uninterpreted experience, registers as scandal rather than triumph. Nothing in the event itself signals victory. It requires Scripture, read in light of its Christological center, to reveal what the Cross actually accomplishes. Jesus's rhetorical question makes this plain: "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and to enter his glory?" (v. 26). The Greek verb *dei*—"have to"—is not the language of fatalism but of scriptural fulfillment.

For the Church, this exchange carries a direct implication. The proclamation of Christ crucified and risen is not a supplement to an experience that might otherwise speak for itself. It is the very condition under which that experience becomes intelligible. When the Church abandons the Christological center of its preaching, it does not merely become bland but instead becomes like the two disciples before the unidentified traveler joined them, a people who possess the facts but lack the Word that renders those facts life-giving.

25. See Martin Luther, "Gospel for Easter Monday (Luke 24:13–35)," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 77, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, James L. Langebartels, and Christopher Boyd Brown (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 44–45.

26. See Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:123, 396.

Word and Sacrament

The Emmaus narrative does not end with Jesus's biblical exposition. When the three reach the village, the two disciples urge the unidentified traveler to stay with them (vv. 28–29). At the table, He takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them. At that moment their eyes are opened and they recognize Him (vv. 30–31). The language carries unmistakable liturgical resonance. Luke uses the same sequence of verbs—take, bless, break, give—that appears in his account of the Last Supper (22:19). Significantly, recognition does not occur during the scriptural exposition, as revelatory as that is—it takes place at the table.

This sequence is theologically deliberate. The opening of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread are not two unrelated events. They are two dimensions of a single encounter with the risen Christ, neither complete without the other. The preached Word opens the ears and prepares the heart. Meanwhile, the sacramental action opens the eyes and delivers the Messiah's real presence. Lutheran theology has consistently held that the sacraments are a "visible word" (*verbum visibile*). It is the Gospel made tangible for the body as the proclaimed Word addresses the ear.[27] The Emmaus meal illustrates this unity with striking narrative economy.

When the pair recognize Jesus, He vanishes from their sight (v. 31). What remains is the realization that while Jesus spoke to them "along the road" (v. 32), their "hearts" were "burning" within them. Indeed, the ascended Lord is not absent but is present precisely where he has promised, in the proclaimed Word, in the waters of baptism, and in the elements of the Supper. The text is not a relic of past revelation but the living instrument through which the glorified Redeemer continues to address and sustain His people. Cleopas and his companion "returned to Jerusalem" (v. 33) that "very hour." It was not with a vague feeling that might be doubted but with a real encounter mediated by the opened Scriptures and the broken bread. This is the pattern the Church has followed ever since.

Romans 10:5–17, The Word That Generates Justifying Faith

Romans 10:5–17 explores how the Word of Christ reaches an individual sinner and creates the faith by which that person stands acquitted before God. Paul's answer is neither abstract nor theoretical. It follows a clear sequence of claims that

27. This understanding is Luther's adaptation of Augustine's famous formula, "*Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*" ("The word comes to the element, and it becomes a sacrament"). See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 36: *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 123–25.

illuminate the way in which the saving Word moves from its divine source to the specific conscience it addresses.[28]

The Two Kinds of Righteousness

Paul opens Romans 10:5–17 by drawing a sharp contrast between two fundamentally different accounts about how a human being stands in a right relationship with God. The apostle calls the first the "righteousness that comes by the law" (v. 5). This mindset is found in Leviticus 18:5, "Anyone who does them will have life through them." The focus is on God's "regulations" and "ordinances," and the logic is one of performance.

The Mosaic legal code demands that the human being supply, through sustained obedience, the righteous standing God requires. Every commandment must be kept, and every debt must be paid (Rom 2:13; 7:10; 10:5; Gal 3:12, 21; Jas 2:10–11). The Law does not grade on a curve but speaks to what human beings must do, and in this way declares the truth about what they have failed to do (Rom 3:9, 23). This is precisely the Law's purpose. It is not to save but to expose the depth of the human predicament with a clarity that no self-assessment could match (Rom 3:20; 5:20; 7:7; Gal 2:21; 3:24; 1 Tim 1:8–9).

In Romans 10:6–8, Paul quoted from Deuteronomy 30:12–13, which included part of Moses's final charge to the Israelites as they were about to enter Canaan. The Israelites did not need to ask for God's message to be brought down again from Mount Sinai or for someone to cross the vast ocean to get it. After all, they already possessed the Torah, which the Lord clearly revealed to Moses. In Paul's Christological application of this passage, he noted that people did not have to bring the Son down from "heaven" (referring to his incarnation; Rom 10:6). Nor did He need to be brought up from the "abyss" or the realm of the dead (referring to his resurrection; v. 7) for people to obtain the Father's acquittal. After all, the Creator's declaration of innocence was received only by "faith" (v. 8). This good news was nearby, both on the lips and in the hearts of repentant, believing sinners.

In verse 9, Paul elaborated on the core message of the Gospel. The first part was an affirmation of Christ's supreme lordship (Acts 2:36; 10:36; Phil 2:11). The second part was the Father's resurrection of the Son (Rev 1:18). Paul explained

28. The discourse in this section has been informed by the exegetical and theological discussions of Romans 10:5–17 appearing in the following: C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 520–37; Robert Jewett and Roy David Kotansky, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 622–42; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans,* The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 644–66; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, vol. 6, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 550–75.

that the Spirit enlivened the mind of the lost to believe the Gospel and receive God's pardon. Likewise, the Spirit enabled them to openly declare that their faith in Christ as the basis for their "salvation" (Rom 10:10). These were two closely related aspects. One facet was inward (taking place in one's "heart") while the other was outward (occurring through one's public confession).

Next, Paul quoted from Isaiah 28:16 to declare that despite what pagans thought, God would acquit and vindicate rather than disgrace and dishonor anyone who trusted in the Messiah (Rom 9:33; 10:11). The apostle noted that irrespective of a person's ethnicity and heritage (whether "Jew or Greek"; 10:12), there was only one supreme Creator. He remained impartial in richly blessing those who called upon Him. Joel 2:32 confirmed that anyone who cried out to the "Lord" (Rom 10:13) for help would be rescued from the final, end-time judgment.

For Lutheran theology, the contrast Paul drew maps directly onto the Law-Gospel distinction that governs the Word's movement through Scripture. The Law-righteousness corresponds to everything the human being must do and has failed to accomplish. Meanwhile, the faith-righteousness corresponds to everything God has done in Christ and now delivers through speech. The two are not complementary halves of a single spiritual program but mutually exclusive in terms of the basis of enjoying an upright standing before God. The one demands whereas the other bestows. This is why Luther insisted that confusing Law and Gospel (such as presenting God's demands as the ground of acceptance or reducing the Gospel to moral instruction) is not a minor theological imprecision but a fundamental distortion of the Christian message.[29]

The Chain of Salvation

Having established that the "righteousness that comes by faith" (Rom 10:6) arrives through the "word" (v. 8) that is "near," Paul moves in verses 14–17 to trace the chain by which that declaration reaches its hearers. His argument unfolds as a sequence of rhetorical questions running deliberately backward from faith to its ultimate source.

Specifically, people cannot call on someone in whom they do not believe. Likewise, they cannot believe in someone about whom they have never heard. Furthermore, the lost cannot hear about Christ without someone heralding the gospel. Consequently, preachers must be sent to announce the wonderful message of salvation. Isaiah 52:7 confirms the importance of these priorities as well as adds a note of joy and beauty to the act of evangelism. Here, the movement from sending to preaching to hearing to faith is not incidental to Paul's point—it is the

29. See Francisco Sabotsy, "Freedom from Legalism in Christ—Law and Gospel Dialectic in Luther's Theology," *Open Access Library Journal* 11 (2024): e11272, https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1111272. Sabotsy emphasizes that confusing Law and Gospel inevitably obscures the gratuitous character of justification and undermines the heart of Lutheran theology.

point. Each step depends on the one before it, and the entire salvific chain is not anchored in human initiative but in divine sending.

In Romans 10:16, Paul acknowledged that many of his fellow Jews neither welcomed nor heeded the "gospel." In support of this observation, the apostle quoted from Isaiah 53:1. The passage's rhetorical question implied that an untold number of people would reject the message about the coming Messiah, yet a lack of acceptance did not invalidate the Gospel, for this outcome was foretold in the Jewish Scriptures.

The theological weight of the above sequence has been appreciated with particular depth in the Lutheran tradition.[30] On Paul's account, preaching is not a human activity that conveys information about salvation existing independently of its proclamation but is the means by which salvation is extended to its recipients. When Paul states that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ" (v. 17), the Greek noun he uses for "hearing" is *akoē*. This carries the dual sense of the act of hearing as well as the content of what is heard. What reaches the ear is not merely a message about what the Messiah has done but His actual word. It is the living address from the Redeemer conveyed through those whom he has sent to proclaim it. Consequently, the preacher who announces the Gospel is not offering an opinion about salvation. This person is the instrument through whom the saving word reaches its destination.

The above understanding is what Luther captured in his emphasis on the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel. The Reformation insistence on preaching was not motivated by a preference for verbal communication over other forms of religious expression. It was incentivized by the conviction, thoroughly Pauline in its basis, that the Word must be spoken aloud because the living God has chosen speech as the instrument of his saving work.[31] As such, the congregation gathered around the proclaimed Word is not an audience receiving a lecture but the holy community the Spirit creates in the world into which he draws people so that there the Gospel may be preached to them and God's promised work accomplished among them. The sending that Paul describes in verse 15 is grounded in Isaiah's announcement about those who bring good news. It is also an apostolic commission that continues wherever the Church faithfully heralds what it has been entrusted to declare.

30. See Samuel J. Dubbelman, "'Faith From Hearing' in Luther's Sermons on the Visitation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Autumn 2019): 276–86, https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2019.0057. Dubbelman analyzes Luther's Visitation sermons to show his mature emphasis on the external, preached Word as the means through which faith is created.

31. See Clara Wepener and Cas Wepener, "Cura Vocalis: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Voice Care in Service of Preaching," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 9, no. 2 (2023): 1–18, https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2413-94672023000200007. The authors maintain that God, in the exercise of his sovereign will, has designated spoken proclamation as the means through which he accomplishes his saving work.

Pro Me ("For Me"): The Promise as Personal Address

The redemptive arc traced in Romans 10 reaches its destination not in a theological abstraction but in a specific act. It involves individuals hearing themselves addressed by God's promise and receiving it as directed to them personally. Verse 8 reveals that the "word" is not "near" in some general or impersonal sense. Furthermore, according to verses 9–10, the saving message arrives at the specific location of the individual listener. It addresses them as sinners for whom Christ died and before whom His resurrection has been announced.

Luther gave precise expression to this dimension of the Gospel through what he called the pro me, the "for me." The good news is not properly heard until it is spoken directly to the hearer. It is not a general announcement about the entire human race but a specific declaration.[32] The saving message heralds that Jesus's death was for this sinner, and His resurrection is this person's ground of hope. Here, faith is not reducible to an intellectual conclusion drawn from historical evidence. More importantly, faith is the response of the conscience and volition to a Word that has arrived as personal address. The Lutheran Confessions capture this with precision. Faith is trust (*fiducia*), not just intellectual acknowledgment (*assensus*). It is the act of relying upon the divine promise as one's own, not simply affirming it as true in principle.[33]

This is why Romans 10 places such an emphasis on the auditory character of faith. The proclamation is made vocally so that belief can take root in the heart (vv. 8–10). Hearing precedes believing because the message must arrive from outside the self before it can take up residence within. What Paul describes as the acoustic reception of the divine promise is precisely what the broader argument of this essay has identified as the defining feature of the external Word. Specifically, faith is not self-generated but awakened by an address. It strikes the conscience with its claim while simultaneously extending the mercy it announces.

Theological Implications: Authority as Efficacy

Taken together, these texts indicate that Scripture's authority is not exhausted by juridical categories. As God's prophetic and apostolic Word, Scripture is the appointed instrument through which He continues to act (for example, binding,

32. See Theodor Dieter, "*Promissio* as Oswald Bayer's Key to Luther's Reformational Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2025): 249–335, https://doi.org/10.1353/lut.2025.a967535. Dieter explains how Luther's *promissio* functions as a concrete, individualizing "for me" address that is spoken directly to the hearer, thereby bestowing Christ personally and creating the very faith by which the sinner is justified.

33. See Thomas W. Simpson, "Faith as Trust," *The Monist* 106, no. 1 (January 2023): 83–93, https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onac025. Simpson affirms that the Lutheran Confessions—especially Melanchthon's *Apology*—define authentic faith as *fiducia* (personal, trusting reliance on the divine promise for oneself) rather than mere intellectual *assensus* (assent, agreement, or approval).

commanding, accusing, and consoling). Thus *sola scriptura* should be heard alongside *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. Scripture, faith, and grace are the means by which the Spirit brings us to *solus Christus*. He is the crucified Jesus whom the Father vindicated in the resurrection as His beloved Son, delivered up for our sins and raised for our justification. This section draws out the implications of that claim, beginning with the nature of Scripture's living power.

Beyond Juridical Authority: Scripture's Living Power

It is natural to think about authority in legal terms. A law is authoritative because an institution with the recognized right to legislate has enacted it. Applied to Scripture, this framework yields a view of the Bible as a divinely issued code whose commands bind the conscience because God, the supreme legislator, has spoken. On one level, Scripture does bind the conscience, for God speaks through it. However, on another level, its authority cannot be reduced to a merely juridical model. *Sola scriptura*, in parallel with *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, is instrumental. It is by Scripture, faith, and grace alone we are brought to *solus Christus*. This is the crucified Jesus whom the Father vindicated in the resurrection as His beloved Son. He was "handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification" (Rom 4:25).

Consider Isaiah 55:11, which states that the "word" proceeding from God's "mouth" does not "return" to him "empty." Instead, it brings to pass the "purpose" for which it was sent. At stake here is not only the reliability of God's promises in the abstract. More importantly, it is the claim that His declaration is inherently productive. The oracle does not merely describe a state of affairs or announce a decision reached elsewhere. The Word is the instrument God employs to achieve what he intends to accomplish in the world. Hebrews 4:12 confirms this truth by describing the "word of God" as "living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword." Moreover, it "penetrates even to the point of dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, even being able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart."[34]

A merely juridical model fails to account for this dynamic quality. Scripture's authority is not that of a civil code. Luther's disputes with the Zwickau prophets, Karlstadt and Müntzer, exposed the danger of confusing Scripture with civil law or

34. See Jacob R. Randolph, "Salvation and Speech Act: Reading Luther with the Aid of Searle's Analysis of Declarations," *Perichoresis* 15, no. 1 (2017): 101–16. https://doi.org/10.1515/perc-2017-0006. Randolph reads Luther's theology of the Word as a performative declaration (Searle's category). God's speech—especially Gospel promise and absolution—does not merely inform but actively accomplishes what it declares, granting the reality it signifies. Scriptural proclamation and sacramental words thereby create new realities: sins forgiven, faith created, and believers incorporated into Christ. Efficacy derives from God's sovereign authority, not human convention. Here, the creative "Let there be…" of Genesis 1 and the heralded Gospel are the same divine speech-act that creates, re-creates, and saves.

even with the natural law written on the human heart, most clearly expressed in the Decalogue.[35] The Law can restrain and accuse, but only the Gospel gives inward trust, repentance, and new life.

Scripture, operating through the Holy Spirit, accomplishes both. It not only demands repentance but also establishes the conditions necessary for a turnaround. God's Word does not merely proclaim forgiveness; it actually delivers it. This is what the Lutheran tradition means by describing the Bible's authority as indivisible from its efficacy. The two cannot be separated without distorting both. Scripture unmoored from its generative power becomes a rulebook. The Spirit detached from the external Word becomes an interior impression answerable to no one. Together, Word and Spirit constitute the living address through which God has chosen to accomplish his purposes in the lives of the redeemed.[36]

Scriptural Clarity: The Public Word and the Proclaimed Christ

One consequence of the generative account of scriptural authority is that the Bible's central message must be genuinely accessible. If Scripture is the instrument through which God acts upon the world, then it cannot be a text available only to specialists, mystics, or those possessed of unusual spiritual sensitivity. The Reformers called this the clarity or "perspicuity" of Scripture, and it remains one of the most practically significant claims in the Lutheran theological heritage.[37]

35. See John Witte Jr., "From Gospel to Law: The Lutheran Reformation and Its Impact on Legal Culture," *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 19, no. 3 (2017): 271–291, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956618X17000461. Witte argues that Luther's encounters with radical reformers forced him to clarify the distinction between the Gospel's governance of the conscience and the role of civil and natural law in ordering temporal life. Luther insisted that Scripture must not be reduced to a coercive legal program, even when framed in terms of Moses, the Decalogue, or the law written on the heart. See also Amy Nelson Burnett, "Karlstadt and the Zwickau Prophets: A Reevaluation," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 114, no. 1 (2023): 105–128, https://doi.org/10.14315/arg-2023-1140106. Burnett's reassessment shows that Luther opposed Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets not only for their claims to revelation but also for the disruptive implications of their program. Luther contended that it blurred the line between scriptural authority and radical social reform, thereby destabilizing the proper distinction between the divine Word and the structures of earthly order.

36. See Will Willimon, "Preaching as Protest against the Apophatic Silencing of God's People," *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): Article 233, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020233. Willimon ties the Word's authority to its productive power (creating faith, communion, and protest against silence), while warning that detaching it from this efficacy (or from the Spirit's public work) reduces it to ineffectual silence or subjectivism.

37. See Philip G. Ziegler, "On the Present Possibility of *Sola Scriptura*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 24, no. 2 (2022): 569–87, https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12568. Ziegler argues for the continuing viability of the Lutheran *sola scriptura* program by grounding Scripture's authority in Luther's own claim that the biblical message is, in and of itself, certain, accessible, intelligible, and self-interpreting.

This clarity is not the claim that every passage of the Bible is equally transparent or that no text requires sustained exegetical effort. Rather, it is the assertion that Scripture's central message—what God has done for sinners in Christ's life, death, and resurrection—is not hidden (1 Cor 15:1–11). Knowing the Gospel does not require access to an authoritative interpretive tradition, a mystical experience, or a specialized technique to unlock. The good news is open to anyone who hears it proclaimed, reads it in a reliable translation, or receives it through the catechesis of the faith community. This is what Luther meant when he distinguished between the "external clarity" of Scripture, which is centered on the text and remains the focus of public proclamation, and the "internal clarity" that the Spirit works in the heart of the hearer.[38]

Luke 24:13–35 illustrates this distinction with narrative precision. The two disciples who walked to the "village named Emmaus" possessed all the relevant facts. What they lacked was not esoteric knowledge but the Christological framework that allowed those facts to become good news. Once the risen Messiah opened the Scriptures and set the cross-resurrection event within its proper canonical context, the meaning was evident. The burning of the duo's hearts was not the experience of initiation into a mystery reserved for the few but the recognition of something that had been there in the text all along, waiting to be heard with open ears.

Scripture is not clear because isolated verses explain themselves. Rather, it is clear because the Bible tells one unified account centered on Christ crucified and risen. The Church recognized this unity through the Spirit's guidance as it received the canonical writings. These faithfully confessed the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the true incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, the Gospel tradition did not rival Scripture. Instead, it helped the Church recognize the Scriptures through which that same Gospel would be proclaimed. Apart from this Christ-centered Gospel, Scripture becomes obscure, just as it was for the disciples on the Emmaus road until the risen Messiah opened the Scriptures to them.

Reason as Ministerial: Serving the Word Rather Than Judging It

The final implication concerns the role of human reason in relation to Scripture. Nothing in the generative account of biblical authority dismisses reason or treats intellectual engagement with the text as spiritually suspect. The Lutheran tradition has never been anti-intellectual, and the Reformers were formidable scholars who insisted on careful attention to languages, literary genres, historical contexts, and the internal logic of the biblical argument. What the tradition has resisted, however,

38. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 33: *Career of the Reformer III*, eds. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 24–27, 89–99.

is a particular misuse of reason. It is the tendency to place the human intellect in the position of judge over the Word rather than servant to it.[39]

The distinction at stake here is between what Luther called the "magisterial" and the "ministerial" uses of reason. Reason becomes magisterial when it sets itself above Scripture, reducing the text's meaning to a reconstructed history behind it and then judging the biblical witness as more or less mistaken or false. That is the danger of historical criticism when it is governed by assumptions alien to the Gospel. Scripture, though, is also a human text and artifact of history, and therefore it rightly invites careful historical, linguistic, and literary study. The question is whether such study serves the text or rules over it.

Reason operates ministerially when it brings its God-given capacities into humble service under the authority of the Word of God as revealed in Scripture.[40] In that role, reason helps distinguish the treasure from the clay vessel by attending to genre, grammar, argument, historical setting, and canonical context. It does not decide in advance what Scripture may say. Instead, it asks what the text actually says and how the Spirit uses this written witness to deliver Christ, accuse sin, console sinners, and sustain faith.[41]

This ministerial use of reason is not a diminishment of the intellect. Rather, it is the intellect functioning at its best: rigorously and carefully in service of a purpose larger than its own self-justification. The entire exegetical effort of this essay has been an exercise of exactly this kind of reason. The point has not been to establish whether the biblical texts are credible by some external standard but to allow them to disclose their own inner logic and thereby show what the living God does through them. This is the posture that makes genuine interpretation possible, and it reflects the deepest conviction of the Lutheran theological tradition. Specifically, the Word does not need reason to validate it, but it does need reason to receive,

39. See John B. Webster, "What Makes Theology Theological?" *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (May 2015): 17–28, https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2015-3.091413220417. Webster maintains that the human mind plays a supporting role in theology. The mind receives and responds to what God reveals rather than sitting in judgment over it, and is therefore properly positioned beneath divine revelation rather than above it.

40. See Daniël J. Maritz, "By Scripture and Plain Reason: A Historical Retrieval of the Relationship between Faith and Reason to Better Engage with Present-Day Secularism," *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 57, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v57i1.2905. Maritz argues that rightly ordered Christian reason is neither autonomous judge nor fideistic casualty. Instead, it is a God-given servant that discerns, clarifies, defends, and submits to the revealed Word of God, thereby placing its intellectual gifts ministerially in service to Scripture's authoritative witness.

41. Modern Lutheran scholarship emphasizes that Luther did not reject rational inquiry but distinguished between a magisterial use of reason, which places human judgment over revelation, and a ministerial use, in which reason functions as an interpretive servant of Scripture. For example, see H. Ashley Hall, "The Development of Doctrine: A Lutheran Examination," *Pro Ecclesia* 16, no. 3 (2007): 326–44, https://doi.org/10.1177/106385120701600302.

understand, and pass it on. Reason in this mode is not the master of the text. It is the skilled and attentive servant through which the text continues to do its redemptive work in the world.[42]

The preceding analysis has attempted to demonstrate across three biblical texts and three dimensions of theological implication that the authority of Scripture is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be inhabited. It is neither established by marshaling sufficient evidence nor earned by the intensity of personal experience. It is repeatedly exercised wherever the living God addresses His creatures through the written, proclaimed, and enacted Word. The Spirit uses Scripture to call the lost into covenant existence and open their understanding to the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. The proclamation of the Gospel becomes the effective agent to create trust in repentant, believing sinners. This enables them to stand before the Creator not as defendants but as those whom He has acquitted at infinite cost to Himself (Rom 8:31–39; Rev 12:10–12). In the end, Scripture's authority originates from the God who speaks and has never fallen silent. By the Spirit, he teaches the faithful to inhabit Scripture as their own language. They learn to pray God's promises back to Him, confess His Word in trial, and answer His grace with praise.

Addressing Potential Objections

Any theological account that departs from familiar positions will attract criticism from multiple directions. The argument advanced in this essay is no exception. Six objections deserve direct engagement, not as threats to be neutralized but as genuine questions that sharpen and clarify the position itself.[43]

42. Lutheran theology treats the work of interpretation as an act of service to the Word rather than a judgment over it, with theological reasoning functioning within the Church as *ministerium verbi*, a ministry that clarifies and proclaims Scripture rather than authorizing it. For example, see E. M. Wiberg Pedersen, "Radical Incarnation and Creative Ambiguity: Luther's View of Ministry and Gender," *Studia Theologica* 73, no. 1 (2019): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2019.1587642.

43. See comparable deliberations in the following: Pablo Blanco-Sarto, "Catholics and Lutherans on Scripture. A Proposal by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI," *Verbum Vitae* 42 (2024): 47–62, https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.16754; Mark Alan Bowald, "The Character of Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 2 (April 2010): 162–83, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2009.00448.x; James R. A. Merrick, "*Sola scriptura* and the *regula fidei*: the Reformation scripture principle and early oral tradition in Martin Chemnitz' *Examination of the Council of Trent*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 3 (2010): 253–71, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930610000359; Peter-Ben Smit, "Canonical Criticism: On the Road Towards Ecumenical Hermeneutics?," in *From Canonical Criticism to Ecumenical Exegesis?* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 139–72, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004301016_005; Philipp Stoellger, "Martin Luther on Faith," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, March 29, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.331.

The Inerrantist Objection: Does Efficacy Compromise Propositional Truth?

Critics from the broadly propositionalist camp may contend that grounding scriptural authority in the Word's generative power quietly abandons the commitment to Scripture's historical and factual reliability. Allegedly, if the Bible's authority rests on what it does rather than on the accuracy of what it reports, then propositional truth has been traded for something more functional and therefore less stable.

This objection rests on a false binary. The external Word account does not deny that Scripture speaks truthfully about the events it narrates. Rather, it insists that historical credibility cannot by itself account for all that Scripture accomplishes. Accurate records do not create faith, absolve guilty consciences, or call a community into existence. These effects belong to divine action working through the text. To locate Scripture's authority in God's ongoing address is not to undermine the text's truthfulness but to place it within its proper purpose. The two commitments are not rivals but complementary dimensions of a single account.

The Liberal-Experiential Objection: Is the External Word Simply a Form of Religious Experience?

From the opposite direction, critics in the experientialist tradition may argue that speaking about a "living Word" or a "divine address" is a more sophisticated way of appealing to interior religious experience. Therefore, the Lutheran account has not escaped the subjectivism it set out to correct. This objection misreads the logic of the external Word. As the argument of §2.1 makes clear, the external word does not originate within the interior of the human person. Rather, it approaches from without, reaching the hearer before any receptive posture toward it has yet formed.

This is precisely the distinction the experientialist model cannot make: between an interior impression the self generates and an address it receives from outside its own domain. Because the external word is genuinely prior to and constitutive of experience by creating the faith it calls forth, it cannot be reduced to a religious feeling, however intense. The Word does not confirm what is already sensed within but announces what could never be derived from within.

The Roman Catholic Objection: Scripture Without Tradition?

Catholic interlocutors will press a different concern. They claim that Scripture cannot interpret itself. It requires the authoritative guidance of the Church's teaching office to be read correctly. Without this external governance, *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") dissolves into a multiplicity of competing private interpretations, each claiming biblical warrant.

The Lutheran response does not deny that Scripture is always read within a faith community shaped by tradition. To revisit what was noted in §1.3, there

is a distinction between Scripture as the ruling norm and tradition as a derived and accountable norm. It is one that remains answerable to the Word rather than coordinate with it. More importantly, the Christological reading principle examined in §4.2 is not an external criterion imposed upon the text from without. It is the interpretive logic the canonical text generates. The risen Christ on the Emmaus road did not appeal to an institution to interpret the Scriptures. He opened them, and doing so was an act of the Word, not a supplementary authority alongside it.

The Reformed Objection: Is the Lutheran Framework Too Restrictive?

Reformed theologians may question whether binding the Spirit's work so tightly to the proclaimed Word and the sacraments (§4.3) unnecessarily constrains the sovereign freedom of God. On this view, the Spirit moves where He wills, and the insistence on the external Word risks making the Spirit a prisoner of ecclesial practice.

The Lutheran tradition does not deny the Spirit's sovereignty. It insists that the Spirit has freely chosen to work through specific means (preaching, baptism, and the Supper) as a gift to the Church, not a limitation on God. The external Word is not a safeguard against divine freedom but against human self-deception. The alternative to grounding the Spirit's work in the external Word is not greater spiritual freedom but a closed circle in which the self's impulses serve as its own validation. The shared Reformed commitment to the Spirit's work through Scripture remains genuine common ground, even where the two traditions diverge on the scope of those appointed means.

The Historical-Critical Objection: Does This Framework Flatten the Text's Human History?

Historical-critical scholars may challenge the canonical and Christological reading of Scripture on the grounds that it ignores the complex editorial history behind the text and is therefore methodologically naive. Engaging with this objection requires acknowledging the genuine contribution of historical inquiry without conceding the claim that such inquiry governs all interpretation.

Canonical exegesis does not pretend the text has no human history. It affirms both the historical particularity of each biblical text and the theological authority of the Scriptures the Church has received and transmitted. Still, even the shape of the received text involves historical judgment, as textual criticism shows, and such judgments are always probable rather than absolute.

Historical and textual criticism therefore serve theological exegesis when they function ministerially: helping readers know the saving God who addresses sinful humanity through the scriptural text. Attention to compositional background, textual history, and canonical reception may clarify and deepen the

reading, but it must not stand over the text as judge. Scripture's authority does not depend on resolving every question of authorship, provenance, or textual history but on the God who addresses His Church through these prophetic and apostolic witnesses.

The Postmodern Objection: Who Controls the Meaning of the Word?

Finally, critics shaped by postmodern approaches will question whether any stable, authoritative meaning can be assigned to Scripture at all. It is asserted that all interpretation is shaped by particular cultural and ideological commitments that inevitably influence what readers find in a text. The Lutheran tradition does not respond to this challenge by maintaining a naive interpretive objectivism, as though readers bring no assumptions to the text. It responds by pointing to the public, Christological center of Scripture described in §6.2.

The clarity of Scripture is not the transparency of every verse in isolation but the public intelligibility of the Gospel—Christ crucified and risen for sinners—as the center of the canon. Because communities and traditions shape how Scripture is received, theological exegesis must practice real epistemic humility. This means it remains capable of self-criticism, even toward its own most venerable interpretive traditions, including those stemming from Luther.

Ministerial reason serves the text; it does not make any inherited exegetical judgment immune from correction. At the same time, such humility does not mean interpretation collapses into relativism. Theological exegesis may also expose the hidden assumptions of postmodern readings that reduce all traditions to struggles for power between oppressor and oppressed. Where the publicly proclaimed, Christ-centered Word is heard, tested, and returned to across generations and cultures, that Word—not the reader's horizon, the Church's habit, or the culture's ideology—remains the final court of appeal.

Conclusion

The Arc of the Argument

Three texts, drawn from across the canonical breadth of Scripture, have together illuminated a single, coherent claim. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 established that the covenant people do not precede the Word that forms them. Instead, Israel comes into existence through divine address and remains a distinct community only by continuing to receive it. Luke 24:13–35 demonstrated that even the most dramatic event in human history—the death and resurrection of God's own Son—does not carry its meaning on its surface. It required the risen Messiah to open the Scriptures and set His crucifixion within its proper canonical frame before grief could yield to living faith. Romans 10:5–17 then traced the chain from divine sending to public proclamation to the specific conscience that hears itself addressed, showing that

the Word does not merely report salvation but delivers it. Across all three texts, the same movement unfolds. God speaks a people into being, explains through Scripture what he has accomplished in Christ, and applies that completed work through the proclaimed Gospel.

The Authority of the Speaking God

The argument converges on a conclusion that is straightforward to state yet demanding to inhabit. The authority of Scripture rests in the fact that the living God addresses His creatures through the prophetic and apostolic Word. It is not a property the Bible holds independently of its source, like the binding force of a statute, nor is it a quality believers confer upon it through faithful reading. When Scripture is proclaimed, taught, and received, the voice of the God who created, redeemed, and sustains the world is genuinely heard.

To hear Scripture rightly is therefore to hear the risen Christ: the crucified Jesus whom the Father has vindicated, declared to be His Son in power, and exalted as Lord. This is not a pious sentiment but a claim with exegetical weight. The Shema that summoned Israel into covenant existence, the risen Lord opening Israel's Scriptures on the Emmaus road, and the Word near the lips of Paul's hearers are not separate events. They are the activity of the one God who addresses His creation through the means He has freely chosen.

The Distinctive Lutheran Contribution

Lutheran theology names and defends what other traditions often sense but struggle to articulate consistently. The insistence on the external Word resists the subjectivism that weakens both propositionalist and experientialist accounts of biblical authority. The Law-Gospel distinction preserves the proclaimed message against complacency on one side and despair on the other. The Christological reading principle holds the canon together without flattening its diversity or reducing it to proof texts. Luther's doctrine of the Holy Spirit then gives this vision concrete form. The Gospel creates a faithful community, and within that community the Spirit continues to preach the Gospel so that faith is generated by the Word. These are not merely sixteenth-century positions. They are living instruments for reading Scripture in a way that lets it do what God promises.

The Road Ahead

These convictions press upon the Church with urgency. In a cultural moment when inherited commitments are widely questioned and sustained attention is increasingly rare, the temptation is to trade substance for accessibility. However, the Lutheran tradition examined in this essay suggests that the Church's renewal depends not on accommodation but on recovery. This includes catechesis that forms genuine faith across generations rather than transmitting bare information. It also involves liturgical practice that keeps the Word and sacraments at the center rather than

at the margins. A community that understands itself as the creature of the Word will worship, teach, and live from that conviction outward. The God who has never fallen silent continues to speak. The question for the Church in every age is whether it remains ready to hear and heed that Word, along with speaking Scripture aptly and intelligently as the language of its faith.

Dan Lioy is a Professor of Biblical Theology at ILT Christ School of Theology. He holds the Ph.D. from North-West University (South Africa) and is a teaching pastor at Our Savior's Lutheran Church (NALC) in Salem, Oregon. dlioy@ilt.edu

Promissio

A Journal of Confessing Theology

A Call for Papers

Promissio seeks submissions for the upcoming issues:

Volume 1, No. 4 (Autumn 2026):
How do creeds and confessions provide
the grammar of the scriptural language of faith?

Volume 2, No. 1 (Winter 2027):
The doctrine and proclamation of the Fatherhood of God

Volume 2, No. 2 (Spring 2027):
The doctrine and proclamation of the divine Sonship of the man Jesus

Volume 2, No. 3 (Summer 2027):
The doctrine and proclamation of the personhood of the Holy Spirit

Volume 2, No. 4 (Autumn 2027):
The doctrine and proclamation of the Holy Trinity

All submissions should be emailed to the General Editor

All accepted authors will need an account at promissio.ilt.edu

Please see the Submissions Guidelines there for important information!

All questions can be directed to:

Paul R. Hinlicky, General Editor

phinlicky@ilt.edu