

Martin Luther: *Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, and the canon*

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Abstract

This article provides an in-depth analysis of Martin Luther's understanding of *sola Scriptura* and its profound connection to *solus Christus*, examining how these principles shaped his perspective on the biblical canon. Luther saw the expression "Word of God" as referring to Christ, the proclaimed Gospel, and the written Bible, which must unambiguously point to Christ to be considered authoritative. This view, in turn, led Luther to reject the canonicity of several books, particularly the Epistle of James, which he deemed non-apostolic and lacking a clear Christocentric message due to its emphasis on works. Finally, the article critiques Luther's Christocentric test for canonicity as inconsistent and subjective, arguing for more objective, biblically grounded criteria.

Keywords: Martin Luther, Biblical Canon, *sola Scriptura*, *solus Christus*, canonicity

Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece un análisis en profundidad de la comprensión de Martín Lutero respecto a *sola Scriptura* y su profunda conexión con *solus Christus*, examinando cómo estos principios moldearon su perspectiva sobre el canon bíblico. Lutero entendía la expresión "Palabra de Dios" como referida a Cristo, al Evangelio proclamado y a la Biblia escrita, la cual debía apuntar inequívocamente a Cristo para ser considerada autoritativa. Esta visión, a su vez, llevó a Lutero a rechazar la canonicidad de varios libros, en particular la Epístola de Santiago, la cual consideró no apostólica y carente de un claro mensaje cristocéntrico debido a su énfasis en las obras. Finalmente, el artículo critica la prueba cristocéntrica de canonicidad aplicada por Lutero por ser inconsistente y subjetiva, argumentando a favor de criterios más objetivos y bíblicamente fundamentados.

Palabras Clave: Martín Lutero, canon bíblico, *Sola Scriptura*, *Solus Christus*, canonicidad

Introduction

It is undeniable that the *sola Scriptura* principle was fundamental for Martin Luther. Throughout his life and writings, he consistently appealed to the ultimate authority of Scripture as the authoritative Word of God. Therefore, for Luther, true Scripture is differentiated from non-canonical writings as “the holy Word of God”.¹ In fact, he emphasizes that “God declares His Word” in the Bible,² and that God himself “speaks to us” through the Bible.³ Furthermore, Luther admonishes: “You are to deal with the Scriptures in such a way that you think that God Himself is speaking to you there”⁴. It is no wonder that W. Bodamer was able to find one thousand citations in which Luther clearly asserted that the Bible is the Word of God.⁵ In this, Luther showed no partiality. He considered *all* of Scripture as inspired and authoritative. Thus, he affirmed: “The entire Holy Scriptures are attributed to the Holy Ghost”.⁶

However, something that has often been overlooked is *which* Scriptures constituted the inspired and authoritative Word of God for Luther. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to analyze Luther’s concept of *sola Scriptura* from a canonical perspective and its relation to Luther’s *solus Christus* principle in order to understand Luther’s criteria for differentiating canonical and non-canonical writings. Then, Luther’s views on the non-canonicity of specific books will be analyzed, particularly the epistle of James.

¹ W1 22:3. Quoted and translated in Robert D. Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, in *Inerrancy and the Church*, John D. Hannah, ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 116. Note the following abbreviations used in this article when quoting from the various editions of Martin Luther’s works:

WA = D. Martin Luther’s *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883-2009); W1 = D. Martin Luther’s *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Johann Georg Walch, 1st edition (Halle: Johann Justinus Gebauer, 1740-1753); W2 = Martin Luther’s *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Johann Georg Walch, 2nd edition (St. Louis: Concordia, 1818-1930); LW = *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert Fischer et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986).

² W1 8:1303, quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 116.

³ W1 9:1800, quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 116.

⁴ W2 7:2095, quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 119.

⁵ Cited by Robert D. Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 121, n. 68. See W. Bodamer, “Luthers Stellung zur Lehre von der Verbalinspiration”, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 34 (1936).

⁶ W2 3:1889; quoted and translated in Robert D. Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John D. Hannah (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 119.

Luther's use of the term "Word of God"

To understand Luther's criteria for defining what books he considered canonical, it is essential to examine what Luther meant by the term "Word of God".

Firstly, and most obviously, for Luther, "Word of God" refers to the written Word comprised of the Old and New Testaments. This is why he affirms that "Scripture is God's Book, or Word".⁷ In this sense, Luther considers that the very letters, words, and phrases of the Bible are of divine origin. He asserts: "The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, written and (as I might say) lettered and formed in letters".⁸ "For not only the words, but also the phrases are divine, which the Holy Spirit and Scripture use".⁹ Furthermore, Luther maintained that the Holy Spirit had placed his Word in the mouth of the prophets,¹⁰ and spoke of the holy writers as penmen of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Secondly, Luther typically equates the "Word of God" with the gospel, or the spoken Word, specifically the oral proclamation of Christ. In his Preface to Romans (1522), for example, he states that faith "comes only through God's Word or gospel, which preaches Christ".¹² And the gospel, according to Luther's definition, "is nothing else than the preaching and proclamation of the grace and mercy of God which Jesus Christ has earned and gained for us through his death".¹³ Luther upholds that the message of the gospel —the announcement that God graciously accepts sinners because of Christ— is absolutely essential. Without it, the church could not exist, nor could genuine Christian faith and life. "One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom", he asserts. "That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ".¹⁴

Last but not least, Luther uses the term Word of God in reference to Christ. Commenting on the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Luther understood that the apostle was stating: "that in the very beginning —antedating the creation of the universe, of the heavens, of the earth, or of any other

⁷ W1, 9:1071; quoted and translated in Preus, "Luther and Biblical Infallibility", 118.

⁸ W2 9:1770; quoted and translated in Preus, "Luther and Biblical Infallibility", 120.

⁹ Personal translation from WA 40:254; quoted in latin in Preus, "Luther and Biblical Infallibility", 120, n. 61.

¹⁰ W1, 3:785.

¹¹ W1, 3:1889. It should be noted, however, that "Luther did not teach a 'mechanical inspiration' or 'dictation theory' of inspiration" (Preus, "Luther and Biblical Infallibility", 120).

¹² LW 35, 368.

¹³ WA 12, 259; quoted and translated in Jillian E. Cox, "Martin Luther on the Living Word: Rethinking the Principle of Sola Scriptura," *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies* 29, no. 1 (2016): 14.

¹⁴ LW 31:345.

creature—the Word existed, that this Word was with God, that God was this Word, and that this Word had existed from all eternity”.¹⁵ Thus, in this christological or personal sense, Luther uses the terminology “Word of God” in reference both to the eternal Word—the second person of the Trinity, the cosmic Christ through whom all creation came into being—and to the Word made flesh, the incarnate Christ who reveals God in a redeeming way. As God’s Word, Christ is therefore both the “spoken Word” of God through whom the heavens and the earth were created and the One through whom God fully reveals himself and redeems the world.¹⁶

It is in this act of revelation of the personal Word, Jesus Christ, through the written Word of God, Scripture, that Luther expounds the most. “For this much is beyond question, that all Scriptures point to Christ alone”,¹⁷ he asserts. And therefore, Luther admonishes: “So we must cling to the pure Scriptures alone which teach nothing but Christ”.¹⁸ This thought permeates Luther’s theology. The following quotes serve as examples: “The entire Scripture deals only with Christ everywhere if it is looked at inwardly”.¹⁹ “All of Holy Writ points solely to Him, attesting that He alone possesses seal and letter”.²⁰ “When Christ is not known, it is impossible to have any understanding in Scripture, since He is the Sum and Truth in Scripture”.²¹ Additionally, it is evident that when Luther refers to Christ in these terms, he is not only speaking of the person of Christ but also of His redemptive work, which he also calls the gospel (see above). Thus, Luther emphasizes, for example, that “the cross of Christ appears everywhere in Scripture”.²² “All Scripture teaches nothing else but the cross”.²³

To summarize what has been presented thus far, Luther’s understanding of the term “Word of God” has several interconnected meanings. It refers to Jesus Christ himself as the eternal and incarnate personal Word. But it also refers to the gospel message, or spoken word, which brings the church into being and sustains it, since it conveys Christ’s true presence. Additionally, it

¹⁵ LW 22:8.

¹⁶ See LW 22:7-29; also 1:17; 12:312.

¹⁷ LW 35:132.

¹⁸ LW 52:173.

¹⁹ LW 25:405.

²⁰ LW 23:16.

²¹ LW 11:110.

²² WA, 3:63; quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 113.

²³ WA, 9:560; quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 113.

equally refers to the Bible as the written Word, inasmuch as it proclaims Christ and the gospel message.²⁴

Sola Scriptura and Solus Christus

It is more than clear that, for Luther, these two driving principles are inseparable. For him, in the Bible, *sola Scriptura* and *solus Christus* are inextricably connected and fused. Throughout his works, Luther consistently emphasizes the Christocentric character of true Scripture. “Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what else will you find in them?”²⁵ “The Scriptures from beginning to end reveal no one besides the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come and through His sacrifice carry and take away the sins of the world”.²⁶ And the opposite is true also: “Outside the book of the Holy Spirit, namely, the Holy Scriptures, one does not find Christ”.²⁷

However, it is necessary to note that Luther grants primacy to Christ over Scripture. For example, he once compared the Bible with a crib or manger which holds Christ:

Think of Scripture as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest lode, which will never be mined out, so that you may find the divine wisdom which God places before you in such foolish and ordinary form. He does this in order to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, to which the angels directed the shepherds, Luke 2:12. Swaddling clothes are plain and ordinary, but precious is the treasure, Christ, lying in them.²⁸

In this sense, Luther understands the Scriptures as subordinate to Christ. On one occasion, in replying to certain opponents who adduced biblical passages stressing works and merits, Luther objected:

Here is Christ, and over there are the statements of Scripture about works. But Christ is Lord over Scripture and over all works... I have the Author and the Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you. Nevertheless, it is impossible for Scripture to contradict itself except at the hands of senseless and stubborn hypocrites; at the hands of those who are godly and understanding it gives testimony to its Lord. Therefore see to it how you can reconcile Scripture, which, as you say, contradicts itself. I for my part shall stay with the Author of Scripture... You are stressing the servant, that is,

²⁴ See David W. Lotz, “*Sola Scriptura*: Luther on Biblical Authority”, *Interpretation*, Jul 1981, 263.

²⁵ WA 18:606; quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 112-113.

²⁶ W2 17:1070; quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession”, 191.

²⁷ W2 9: 1775; quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession”, 191.

²⁸ W2 14:3, quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 113.

Scripture —and not all of it at that or even its most powerful part, but only a few passages concerning works. I leave this servant to you. I for my part stress the Lord, who is the King of Scripture.²⁹

From this, it should not be understood that Luther opposed Christ to Scripture. In fact, there can be no access to the gospel and to Christ apart from Scripture. This is why, elsewhere, Luther emphatically argued that “the Scriptures must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason, they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures”.³⁰ Here, on the one hand, Luther asserts that Scripture must be understood and interpreted through the lens of Christ and the gospel. He elsewhere explained: “Every time I find a text that is like a hard nut, whose shell I cannot crack, I quickly throw it against the Rock [Christ], and then I find its delicious kernel”.³¹ On the other hand, however, Luther is also arguing that if any given text cannot be understood or interpreted in those terms, then it cannot be included in Scripture as canonical.

Were there any such non-Christocentric texts in the received canon of Scripture, for Luther? As it turns out, in fact, there were.

Luther Questions the Canonicity of Certain Books of the Bible

In Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Hebrews, he begins by stating in no uncertain terms: “Up to this point we have had [to do with] the true and certain chief books of the New Testament. The four which follow have, from ancient times, had a different reputation”.³² referring to Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation.

In fact, in Martin Luther’s first German translation of the New Testament, published in September 1522, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation do not have numbers as do the other books of the New Testament. Additionally, Luther placed a space between them and the others, thereby making it quite obvious that these four books do not stand on the same level as the other New Testament books. In the 1534 complete Bible, this is made even more noticeable by the fact that the Biblical books are treated in the same manner as the Old Testament Apocrypha in the index.³³

²⁹ LW 26:295.

³⁰ LW 34:112.

³¹ LW 10:6. See also the following quote: “To read Holy Writ without faith in Christ is to walk in darkness” (WA 44:790; quoted and translated in Lewis W. Spitz, “Luther’s Sola Scriptura”, *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31 [1960], art. 84, 745).

³² LW, 35:394.

³³ See M. Rue, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1944), 45.

Luther considered that Hebrews “is not an epistle of St. Paul, or of any other apostle”,³⁴ and that “we cannot put it on the same level with the apostolic epistles”.³⁵ The epistle attributed to St. Jude also contends, Luther says, that it is not of apostolic origin, which led “the ancient fathers to exclude this epistle from the main body of the Scriptures... Therefore, although I value this book, it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books which are supposed to lay the foundations of faith”.³⁶

Regarding Revelation, says Luther, “I leave everyone free to hold his own opinions. I would not have anyone bound to my opinion or judgment. I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic... For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images and visions... I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced [Revelation]”.³⁷ And he adds: “For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it. But to teach Christ, this is the thing which an apostle is bound above all else to do; as Christ says in Acts 1[:8], ‘You shall be my witnesses.’ Therefore I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely”.³⁸

From these quotes, it is clear that Luther did not accept the canonicity of the four books in question (Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation). No wonder Jaroslav Pelikan came to the conclusion that “within the received canon Luther made sharp distinctions, to the point of constructing a private miniature canon”.³⁹

Luther also questioned the canonicity of the Old Testament book of Esther, placing it in the same category as the second book of the Maccabees, and saying: “I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities”.⁴⁰ In another place, Luther includes Esther along with the deuterocanonical books of Esdras, Judith, and the story of Susanna and the Dragon, and adds that Esther “deserves more than all the rest in my judgment to be regarded as noncanonical”.⁴¹

Although he does not say it explicitly, from Luther’s arguments regarding Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, it is probable that he also rejected Esther for the same reasons: simply because those books are not of apostolic (or

³⁴ LW 35:394.

³⁵ LW 35:395.

³⁶ LW 35:398.

³⁷ LW 35:398.

³⁸ LW 35:399.

³⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, Luther’s Works Companion Volume (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 87-88.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, *The Tabletalk of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed. William Hazlitt (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 102.

⁴¹ LW 33:110.

prophetic) origin, and this is shown by the fact that their message is not centered on Christ. Thus, we see here, once again, the prominence of Luther's *solus Christus* principle applied to *sola Scriptura*. "In brief terms, for Luther *sola Scriptura* means *solus Christus*, or at least leads us directly to this principle".⁴²

The Epistle of James, a Case Study

Without a doubt, it was the epistle of James that Luther wrote and spoke of the most when referring to doubts on canonicity, and it serves as a case study to understand Luther's arguments regarding what books should be accepted as Scripture. Already in 1519, Luther revealed doubts about James's status in the biblical canon:

However, since the letter of the apostle James teaches "Faith without works is dead", in the first place, the style of that letter is far below apostolic majesty, and should not be compared with the Pauline [style] in any way, since St Paul speaks of living faith. For dead faith is not faith, but fancy. But see the theologians, they fasten their teeth upon this one notion, caring for nothing beyond that, although the whole of the rest of Scripture commands faith without works; for this is their custom, to raise their horns from one snippet of the text torn out of context, contrary to the whole of Scripture.⁴³

Furthermore, the Preface to the Epistles of St James and St Jude from Luther's New Testament stated the following Christological arguments:

[The Epistle of James] does not once mention the Passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He names Christ several times; however he teaches nothing about him, but only speaks of general faith in God. Now it is the office of a true apostle to preach of the Passion and resurrection and office of Christ, and to lay the foundation for faith in him, as Christ himself says in John 15[:27], "You shall bear witness to me". All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ. For all the Scriptures show us Christ, I Corinthians 2[:2]. Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.⁴⁴

It is clear that for Luther, apostolicity equates to canonicity, and therefore, here he is defining a canonical principle. Thus, apostolicity includes

⁴² Paul O'Callaghan, "Solus Christus and Sola Scriptura: The Christological Roots of Martin Luther's Interpretation of Scripture", *Annales Theologici* 31 (2017): 467.

⁴³ WA 2:425, translated in Glen E. Zweck, "Luther on James: A Curious Oversight", *Lutheran Theological Review* IX (Academic Year 1996-97): 55.

⁴⁴ LW 35:396.

not only the origin of the written text but also its Christological content.⁴⁵ In other words, Luther's Christological principle determines what is authentically scriptural. In fact, as stated before, Scripture is itself *judged* on theological grounds by reference to the Christ who is the Lord of Scripture.⁴⁶

Luther goes so far as to say that even someone who is *not* an apostle (such as Annas, Pilate, or Herod) could hypothetically produce an "apostolic" (canonical) text, insofar as it proclaims Christ.⁴⁷ And the opposite would be true also: even Peter or Paul could have written a book that is not Christocentric, and it would not be "apostolic" (canonical).

To this, Luther adds: "Therefore I will not have him [James] in my Bible to be numbered among the true chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him. One man is no man in worldly things; how, then, should this single man alone avail against Paul and all the rest of Scripture?"⁴⁸

Thus, although he himself did not consider James as part of the canon, Luther made it clear that this was his own personal opinion and that he was willing to allow others to consider James canonical if they so desired.

From 1530 onward, it seems Luther's stance on James may have softened slightly, because this comment was amended as follows: "Therefore I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him".⁴⁹

Note the omission of the phrase: "I will not have him in my Bible". This may be an indication that he was more open to including James in the Bible, perhaps for the sake of others.⁵⁰ However, this does not mean he personally changed his mind about the canonicity of James. He later expressed: "Only the Popists accept James on account of the righteousness by works, but my opinion is that it is not the writing of an apostle, especially because it calls faith body and the works soul. This is apparently absurd and against Scripture. Some day I will use James to fire my stove. We can adorn and excuse it, but only with great

⁴⁵ See Zweck, "Luther on James: A Curious Oversight", 67.

⁴⁶ See Lotz, "*Sola Scriptura*", 264.

⁴⁷ An example of this could be Caiaphas. See John 11:49-51; 18:34.

⁴⁸ LW 35:397 n. 55.

⁴⁹ LW 35:397 n. 55.

⁵⁰ "Many have tried hard to make James agree with Paul, as also Melanchthon did in his *Apology*, but not seriously. These do not harmonize: Faith justifies, and faith does not justify. To him who can make these two agree I will give my doctor's cap and I am willing to be called a fool". WA *Tischreden* 3, no. 3292 a. Translated in Rue, *Luther and the Scripture*), 42-43.

difficulties”.⁵¹ In another place, Luther similarly expressed, rather sarcastically: “I almost feel like throwing Jimmy [James] into the stove, as the priest in Kalenberg did”.⁵²

Thus, though showing openness to other views, far from changing his own personal opinion on James, Luther seems to have maintained it throughout his life. Even as late as 1543, Luther refused to accept a citation from James in the context of a debate because this Epistle lacked the necessary authority.⁵³

Perhaps even more illuminating is an excerpt from one of Luther’s *Tischreden* or “tabletalks”, probably from around 1540: “The Epistle of James we have thrown out from this school [Wittenberg] because it has no value. It has not one syllable about Christ. It does not even mention Christ once except in the beginning. I hold it is written by some Jew who heard only a dim sound concerning Christ but no clear, distinct message”.⁵⁴

Simply put, then, for Scripture to be considered the *written* Word of God, it must proclaim the *living* or *personal* Word of God, Jesus Christ, the Lord of Scripture. This distinction is very clear in Luther’s view, as the following quote shows:

In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.⁵⁵

Within the context of the rest of Luther’s writings, the list of books that “show you Christ” mentioned by Luther here should not be interpreted in terms of canonicity. As has been (and will be) shown in this article, he considered all the Old and New Testament books as canonical, except for Esther, Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. It seems more appropriate to understand this list as

⁵¹ WA *Tischreden* 5, no. 5854. Translated in M. Rue, *Luther and the Scriptures*, 43.

⁵² LW 34:317. The priest referred to here was said to have received the visit of a duchess. Being in the need of warming the room, the priest began placing several wooden statues of the apostles into his stove. James was the last one left, and as the priest pushed his statue into the fire, he exclaimed: “Now bend over, Jimmy, you must go into the stove; no matter if you were the pope or all the bishops, the room must become warm” (LW 34:317 n. 21).

⁵³ See Rue, *Luther and the Scriptures*, 44. Also Zweck, “Luther on James: A Curious Oversight”, 59.

⁵⁴ WA *Tischreden* 5, no. 5443. Translated in M. Rue, *Luther and the Scriptures*, 43.

⁵⁵ LW 35:362.

being Luther's personal favorite books of Scripture in view of their clear depiction of Christ's teachings.⁵⁶

It is clear also that Luther often uses the terms "Christ" and "gospel" as a kind of catchword for the teaching of justification by faith, namely that sinners are made right with God not by their own efforts, but by God's grace, for the sake of Christ, and through faith. For Luther, then, any writing that weakens or contradicts this message diminishes Christ's honor, cannot truly be said to proclaim Christ, does not count as Scripture, and is not considered part of the biblical canon. In other words, "by urging Scripture alone Luther was in fact urging Christ alone. *Solus Christus* is the presupposition and ground of *sola Scriptura*".⁵⁷

It is true that Luther calls James "a good book",⁵⁸ but this does not necessarily imply that he considers it as part of the canon, because he said something very similar concerning the apocryphal books of the Old Testament: "these books are not held equal to the Scriptures but are useful and good to read".⁵⁹

Though Lutherans in general today accept the canonicity of James (as well as Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation) by appealing to the authority of the Book of Concord,⁶⁰ many Lutherans also recognize they have "a canon within the canon", because they "measure the books of the Bible first and foremost by how they relate to and proclaim the life and ministry of Jesus".⁶¹ This seems to suggest they hold to degrees of inspiration or authority *within* Scripture, placing the New Testament, and especially the Gospels and Paul's epistles, in a superior category of authority. In this, of course, their aim is to follow Luther. However, it is probable that this was not Luther's true intention.

For Luther, there are no insignificant matters in Scripture.⁶² He wrote on a certain occasion: "It is impossible that there is a single letter in Paul which the entire church should not follow and observe".⁶³ Elsewhere, he added: "Whoever

⁵⁶ For a more detailed discussion on this distinction in Luther see Zweck, "Luther on James: A Curious Oversight", 61-63.

⁵⁷ Lotz, "*Sola Scriptura*", 273.

⁵⁸ LW 35:395.

⁵⁹ LW 35:337 n. 1.

⁶⁰ *The Lutheran Study Bible*, Edward A. Engelbrecht, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 2132.

⁶¹ Michael Rogness, "A canon within the canon? Yes: proclaim Christ", *Word & World*, Aut 2006, 436. See also Lotz, "*Sola Scriptura*", 272; and Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, 87-88.

⁶² WA 5:463.

⁶³ W2 19:20, quoted and translated in Preus, "Luther and Biblical Infallibility", 133.

despises a single word of God does not regard any as important”.⁶⁴ And although he considered much of the Mosaic law to be binding only for the Jews of the Old Testament,⁶⁵ Luther argued that everything in Moses is in some way edifying to the Christian community.⁶⁶ Also, he held the Old Testament prophets in high esteem, considering them “holy and glorious”. Isaiah, says Luther, “in the clearest manner, preaches Christ”, while Daniel “describes and portrays the kingdom of Christ”.⁶⁷

Taken as a whole, as we have seen, Luther’s writings assert full authority to every word of Scripture. Therefore, it seems more reasonable to consider his arguments regarding Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation not as advocating for degrees of inspiration or authority, but rather as directly considering them non-canonical.

Luther’s Canonicity Principle Examined

Given the fact that many followers of Luther today take his views on canonicity very seriously (as mentioned), the question is, of course, was Luther right in his judgment of the canonical books? In other words, can and even should the books of the Old and New Testaments be examined through the *sola Christus* principle to determine their *sola Scriptura* (canonical) status?

First and foremost, it is interesting to note that Luther is questioning the community canon approach to a certain degree, in the sense that he does not recognize the Church (or the Christian community) as the final authority to determine the scope of the canon.⁶⁸

In Paul Althaus’s words:

[Luther] thereby established the principle that the early church’s formation and limitation of the canon is not exempt from re-examination . . . The canon is only a relative unity, just as it is only relatively closed. Therewith Luther has in principle abandoned every formal approach to the authority of the Bible. It is certainly understandable that Luther’s prefaces were no longer printed in German Bibles. One may characterize his attitude in this way: The canon itself

⁶⁴ WA 26:449; quoted and translated in Preus, “Luther and Biblical Infallibility”, 130.

⁶⁵ W2 3:9; 12:1037; 20:146.

⁶⁶ W2 20:153.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther, *The Tabletalk of Martin Luther*, 102.

⁶⁸ See Lotz, “*Sola Scriptura*”, 273. Luther, at times, seems to appeal to the authority of “the ancients” (see LW 35:394, 395). However, although Origen and Eusebius may have shown doubts as to the canonicity of certain books of the Bible (such as James or Revelation), many others in the early church considered them canonical (See Martin Foord, “The ‘Epistle of Straw’: Reflections on Luther and the Epistle of James”, *Themelios* 45, no. 2 [2020]: 297-298). However, more importantly, as this article demonstrates, Luther’s primary arguments centered on the Christocentric principle of canonicity, rather than the authority of the Church or the Church Fathers.

was, as far as Luther was concerned, a piece of ecclesiastical tradition and therefore subject to criticism on the basis of God's word.⁶⁹

However, Luther was not consistent in his own judgment of the canon. It has already been mentioned that his stance on James seems to have softened at times. Notably, Luther wrote an expanded and more positive preface to the Revelation later in his life, apparently because it became a useful source for his attacks against the Papacy.⁷⁰

Additionally, although Luther presents a few biblical texts to support his Christological principle of canonicity, it is clear that this principle alone is insufficient. If that were the case, any number of Christian writings that center on Christ could be considered "canonical", even many of the New Testament apocrypha. And if true apostolicity, as Luther stated, depends only on preaching Christ and Christ alone, then any Christocentric author who arose after the apostles' time could be considered "apostolic", and we might end up having a never-ending canon!

The biblical writers themselves present other, more important arguments in support of the authoritative divine origin and nature of their messages. For instance, Luther does not take into account the inspired or "God-breathed" aspect of Scripture (see 2 Tim. 3:16) when deciding which books he considers canonical or not. Thus, this internal explicit evidence of the biblical writers themselves is completely overlooked.

In this sense, John Peckham's threefold criteria of canon recognition is much more compelling than Luther's Christocentric principle, though within the same non-communitarian approach. Peckham's criteria are grounded in the canonical writings themselves, and are the following: books must be (1) divinely commissioned as prophetic and/or apostolic, (2) consistent with past "canonical" revelation, and (3) self-authenticating.⁷¹

For example, considering the first criteria, in Revelation John explicitly says he has been commissioned by God to "write in a book what" he sees (Rev. 1:11). Also, the content of his writing is the "revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants" (Rev 1:1). Revelation thus

⁶⁹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 85, 336.

⁷⁰ Luther identified the Papacy as the second beast of Revelation 13 (LW 35:399-411). For a more nuanced treatment of Luther's view on Revelation, see Charles A. Gieschen, "The Relevance of the Homologoumena and Antilegomena Distinction for the New Testament Canon Today: Revelation as a Test Case", *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 79 (2015): 286-289.

⁷¹ John Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 37.

testifies of itself as direct revelation from God.⁷² This is one example of the intrinsic evidence for canonicity in the New Testament writers. Michael Kruger makes a strong case supporting the fact that “there are a number of instances where the New Testament authors are quite aware of their own authority”, and that “they expressly understood their writings to be apostolic in nature—that is, they were consciously passing down the authoritative apostolic message”. Thus, “an apostolic writing would bear the highest possible authority. Indeed, it would bear Christ’s authority”.⁷³

The Epistle of James, without a doubt, was the one most attacked by Luther, and although a thorough examination of this epistle in order to determine if it meets the three criteria mentioned above goes beyond the scope of this article, a few considerations can be mentioned.

First, a strong case can be made to argue that it was written by one of Jesus’ own brothers (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), thereby establishing a direct connection to Christ. It is noteworthy that James attained a position of leadership in the early church, thus acquiring what could be considered “apostolic” status (Acts 12:17).⁷⁴

As for the second criterion, James quotes, references, and alludes to the Old Testament throughout his Epistle.⁷⁵ Therefore, his theology is not contrary to previous revelation, but firmly grounded in the Old Testament canonical writings. Moreover, when analyzing his theology, one can perceive the influence of Jesus’s own teachings. In fact, in Douglas Moo’s assessment, “no New Testament document is more influenced by the teaching of Jesus than James”.⁷⁶

Summary and Conclusion

Martin Luther upheld the *sola Scriptura* principle, believing the Bible to be the authoritative Word of God. For him, the “Word of God” referred to the written Scriptures, the proclaimed gospel, and Jesus Christ himself. He

⁷² See, Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 35; also Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 153.

⁷³ Kruger, *The Question of Canon*, 153-154.

⁷⁴ For a more nuanced treatment of the authorship of James, see Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 9-11.

⁷⁵ For example, James 2:8 quotes from Leviticus 19:18; James 2:11 quotes Exodus 20:13-15; James 2:23 quotes from Genesis 15:6; James 4:6 quotes from Proverbs 3:34; and he also alludes to Jeremiah 9:23, Isaiah 40:6 and Job 14:2 (in 1:10); to Genesis 22:9 (in 2:21); to Joshua 2 and 6 (in 2:25); to Job 1 and 42 (in 5:11); and to 1 Kings 17:1 and 18:41 (in 5:17-18).

⁷⁶ Moo, *The Letter of James*, 27.

emphasized that true Scripture must point to Christ (*solus Christus*), and judged a book's canonicity based on its Christ-centered content.

Because of this, Luther questioned the canonicity of books such as James, Hebrews, Jude, Revelation, and Esther, which he believed lacked a clear focus on Christ or apostolic authority. James, in particular, was heavily criticized for emphasizing works over faith. However, the fact that Luther found it difficult to harmonize James's emphasis on works with the Pauline emphasis on faith does not mean they are contradictory. Rather, they should be seen as complementary.

In conclusion, while Luther's emphasis on Christ and the gospel profoundly shaped Protestant theology, his selective approach to the biblical canon appears inconsistent and subjective. His approach remains influential in certain circles, but has clearly been superseded by more comprehensive, objective, and scripturally grounded criteria for recognizing canonical Scripture.