The Analogy of Faith in the Theology of Luther and Calvin

Introduction
‘When Paul wished all prophecy to be made to accord with the analogy of faith [Rom. 12:6] he set forth a very clear rule to test all interpretation of Scripture. Now, if our interpretation be measured by this rule of faith, victory is in our hands...’¹ Here in the Prefatory Address to the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, in the course of a defence against the charge ‘that we falsely make the Word of God our pretext, and wickedly corrupt it,’ Calvin's ‘very clear rule’ sounds disarmingly simple. When we examine the history of its use across the succeeding decades, however, the principle of the *analogia fidei* on which the confident steps of Calvin's argument are taken can start to look less like a solid foundational axiom and more like a swaying web of problems, complexities and ambiguities. The interpretive rule itself requires some interpretation! This article will endeavour to explore the variety of ways in which Luther and Calvin understood and made use of the principle, and search for the threads that hold them together.

Explorations
The principle of the *analogia fidei* is usually touched on by twentieth century scholars in the course of discussion of the Reformers' biblical hermeneutics and exegesis.² After all, it is, Calvin tells us, 'a very clear rule to test all interpretation of Scripture.' But even this much cannot be taken for granted; before we can confidently label the analogy of faith as an 'exegetical principle,' we need to ask whether it is indeed biblical exegesis that Luther and Calvin say should be measured by the analogy of faith; in other words, what do they understand the ‘prophecy’ to which Paul refers in Romans 12:6 to mean?

And before even this question comes the question of how the Reformers understood the relationship between the theological principle of the *analogia fidei* and its (ostensible) foundation in Romans 12:6. When they used Paul's words, were they consciously following the apostle, or were they merely using the phrase as a traditional label for another principle altogether?

This second question is difficult to answer. Calvin, certainly, seems more explicitly conscious than Luther of Paul looking over his shoulder whenever he borrows the phrase from Romans 12. It is ‘the rule of the apostle,’³ ‘the analogy of faith, to which Paul requires all interpretation of Scripture to conform,’⁴ the ‘very clear rule’ laid down ‘when Paul wished all prophecy to be made to accord to the analogy of faith.’⁵ Luther is far more inclined to deploy the rule without mentioning its apostolic origins: ‘here the analogy of faith is demanded’;⁶ ‘this interpretation is in agreement with the analogy of the faith and of Holy

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³ *Institutes* IV.xvi.4.
⁴ *Institutes* IV.xvii.32.
⁵ *Institutes*, ‘Prefatory Address’, 2.
Scripture. But he too, on occasion, makes reference to the rule’s Pauline source: in one place within his Genesis commentary, for example, the analogy of faith is explicitly referred to as ‘the rule of Paul ... in Romans 12:6’.

If both Calvin and Luther, then, treat the rule as deriving its origin and authority from Paul, what do they understand Paul to have meant by ‘prophecy’? Calvin is consistent: his 1536 Prefatory address to the Institutes (as we have seen) implicitly identifies the ‘prophecy’ of Romans 12:6 with the interpretation of Scripture, as do other uses of the principle in the Institutes. His Romans Commentary of 1539 makes this identification more explicit: ‘...prophesying at this day amongst Christians is almost nothing else than a right understanding of the Scripture, and singular gift of expounding the same, since all the old prophecies and oracles of God have been finished in Christ and his gospel.’ His ‘almost nothing else’ leaves the door ajar to the faint possibility that the ‘prophecy’ exercised in the New Testament may not entirely have ceased, though he does not elaborate on this possibility.

Luther’s concept of ‘prophecy’ is broader and less consistent. His Romans commentary, written early in his career (1515-16), glosses the word as ‘prophecy, whereby the future is predicted,’ and discusses the matter throughout with that definition assumed. However, as we shall see, he is not averse to applying the rule to the exegesis of Scripture, and in later sermons on the Romans 12 passage, he first modifies and then abandons his earlier definition: ‘The interpreting of Scripture, that is the noblest, highest, and greatest gift of prophecy’ (1529); ‘Prophesying does not mean to speak as the prophets once did of future things but to interpret the Prophets, the Psalms, as we have done here in Wittenberg; we are prophets.’ (1531).

The simplest explanation for this change in his interpretation of the term is probably the effect of observing in the course of the middle 1520s the excesses of flesh-and-blood ‘fanatics’ and ‘heavenly prophets’ (culminating in the Peasant War of 1525). Nevertheless, Luther in his later years is not constant in this revised opinion, and oscillates between outright dismissal of all extra-biblical revelations, and a desire to curb and control them by means of the analogy of faith. This oscillation in Luther’s views on what is meant by ‘prophesying’ in Romans 12 should not be viewed solely as the outworking of his own changing circumstances; the way in which the word is used within Paul’s writings themselves suggests a certain elasticity of reference. If Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 14 is our best guide, it would seem that προφητεία for Paul could function as an umbrella word for a variety of different Spirit-enabled word ministries, some of which were more spontaneous (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:30) and others less so (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:26), some of which were more revelatory in nature (eg. 1 Cor. 14:25, 30) and others more hortatory or didactic (eg. 1 Cor. 14:19, 31).
What is understood by ‘prophecy’ will obviously have significant implications for what it means for it to be regulated ‘according to the analogy of faith.’ Where Luther identifies prophecy (true or false) with claims to extra-biblical revelation, he appears at times to use the *analogia fidei* as rough equivalent to the principle of the supreme authority of Scripture: the claims of prophets, dreamers and visionaries must be weighed against the truth of Scripture. Thus, ‘the nonsensical statements of the monks’ are to be ‘weighed according to the analogy of faith and the rule of Scripture.’

‘Concerning apparitions, however, I have spoken in a general way on several occasions above, and it is necessary to know that not all of them are to be believed, but only if they are of the analogy of faith. I shall cling to the Word of God and be content with that.’

But (as we shall see) this is not the only way in which the *analogia fidei* is interpreted in its application to extra-biblical prophecies. And where, as is more common in both Calvin and Luther, the rule is being appealed to in disputes over the interpretation of Scripture itself (that is to say, where ‘prophecy’ is understood to be the exegesis of Scripture) this fairly simple understanding of the analogy of faith as roughly synonymous with the ‘rule of Scripture’ itself raises new questions.

In cases where the interpretation of Scripture is in dispute, what is the content of the principle of the *analogia fidei*, and how is it to be applied? Here, before we embark on an examination of several important instances in which Calvin and Luther make use of the principle, some important distinctions need to be drawn. To begin with, is the principle fundamentally one of inclusion or of exclusion? That is to say, does it require that prophecies are not to fall short of faith, or that they are not to go beyond it? More importantly, is the ‘faith’ with which prophecy is to correspond to be understood objectively as *fides quae creditur* (the faith which is believed, i.e. the Faith) or subjectively as *fides qua creditur* (the faith by which one believes, i.e. our faith)? And if the former interpretation is taken, where are we to go for the content of ‘the Faith’?

Luther’s commentary on the Epistle to the Romans provides us with our earliest, and least typical, Reformation interpretation of the analogy of faith. The lectures were given at Wittenberg during the course of 1515-16 (at the time of or shortly after his ‘theological breakthrough’ concerning the meaning of ‘the righteousness of God’ in Romans 1:17), and were prepared and delivered in the traditional form of brief glosses on the text, accompanied by more extensive scholia. In the glosses on Romans 12:6, as we have said, ‘prophecy’ is read as referring to the prediction of the future, and no mention is made of any application of this text to the interpretation of Scripture. Already, in the Romans commentary, there is the ambivalence of whether we are to read ‘faith’ as *fides quae* or *fides qua*. On the one hand, we are told that the purpose of the *analogia fidei* is to ensure that prophecy ‘does not go beyond the Faith and its rubrics.’ Yet the dominant message here is that genuine prophecy is not to be merely an exercise of calculated prognostication, fettered by the limits of human reason, but is rather to follow as far as it is led by faith: ‘if we have the gift of prophecy, whereby the future is predicted, then we ought to possess it and use it in proportion to our faith, that is, not in proportion to human wisdom.’ The scholia develop this point:

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17 Genesis commentary, Luther, *LW*, 3.168. (It is clear in context that Luther is here using the two phrases which he has put in apposition as virtually synonymous.)


19 and in the cases where the principle is applied to extra-biblical revelations in some other way than by requiring them to be tested against the teachings of Scripture.

20 Lectures on Romans: Gloses and Scholia, Luther, *LW*, 25.106.
the gift of prophecy ought to be held and used in proportion to faith. And they act
counter to this who prophesy on the basis of human judgement or according to probable
conjectures based on the workings and signs of nature, such as those who give counsel
by the stars or from some plausible opinion of their own. For the prophecy which
comes from God comes in such a way that it is against all reason and asserts the
impossible, as it were.21

Calvin's Romans commentary reads the verse quite differently.22 ‘Prophecy’ we have
already touched upon: ‘...almost nothing else than a right understanding of the Scripture, and
singular gift of expounding the same, since all the old prophecies and oracles of God have
been finished in Christ and his gospel.’23 But ‘faith’, too, is for Calvin in this work
unmistakeably fides quae - the Faith – taken objectively, and applied not inclusively but
exclusively, as a test of purity of doctrine in the public exposition of Scripture: ‘Under the
name of faith he signifieth the first principles of religion, wherunto whatsoever doctrine is
found not agreeing, even thereby is condemned for false.’24 The concern here is to see that
those ‘prophets’ who expound the Scriptures in the church do not ‘err from the line’ and stray
into novel and unorthodox interpretations of the text.

Judging from their two Romans commentaries, therefore, Luther and Calvin would seem
to be worlds apart on almost every count in their understanding of the meaning and function
of the analogy of faith. However, in neither case can the Romans commentary necessarily be
said to contain the definitive statement of each on the subject. Both refer to or make use of
the principle in other places, and in ways that are quite at variance with what their respective
Romans commentaries would lead us to expect.

Nor is there any necessary connection between an interpretation of ‘prophecy’ as biblical
exegesis and an objective interpretation of faith as ‘the Faith’ (as in Calvin's Romans
commentary) or between reading ‘prophecy’ as extra-biblical revelations and speaking
subjectively of ‘faith’ as fides qua creditur.

So, for example, as we have already seen, the quite frequent references in the Genesis
commentaries (which Luther delivered as lectures during the last ten years of his life) to
‘prophecies’ true or false that claim to be extra-biblical revelations concerning the future
show something of a return to the openness that Luther displayed in the Romans commentary
to the real possibility of ‘prophecies’ in the Church that predict the future, but still maintain
his later, objective reading of ‘the Faith’.25 That is to say, the essential message in the
Romans commentary is that we should prophesy concerning the future
in proportion with our faith in the revelation that God gives us; in the Genesis commentaries
we are bidden to measure such prophetic claims against the revelation that God has given us
in ‘the Faith’. The Luther of the Romans commentary writes as if his readers will be making
the prophecies; the Genesis Luther assumes his reader will be judging them.

Contrasting with Luther's Genesis commentaries on both counts (the meaning of
‘prophecy’ and ‘faith’) is Calvin's earliest (and lengthiest) statement concerning the analogy
of faith, contained in the passage which we quoted from the 1536 Prefatory Address to the
Institutes. There, ‘prophecy’ is unquestionably the interpretation of Scripture; Calvin adduces
the analogy of faith as a ‘very clear rule’ to demonstrate to the French king the integrity of

21 Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia, LW, 25.106.
22 The Romans commentary was composed by Calvin in Strasbourg in 1539, during his exile from Geneva after
his first brief stay in Geneva from 1536 to 1538.
23 Calvin, Commentary Upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans, 349.
24 Commentary Upon the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans, 349.
25 E.g. LW, 3.168; 6.131; 6.331; 4.126.
the protestant interpretations, against the accusations of Catholic critics. But, contrary to what we might expect, the ‘faith’ to which Calvin appeals is not the ‘objective’ standard of ‘the Faith’, but rather the humble faith of the protestant interpreter of Scripture, who ‘presumes nothing of himself’, and whose doctrine gives all glory to God:

For what is more consonant with faith than to recognize that we are naked of all virtue, in order to be clothed by God? That we are empty of all good, to be filled by him? That we are slaves of sin, to be freed by him? Blind, to be illumined by him? Lame, to be made straight by him? Weak, to be sustained by him? To take away from us all occasion for glorying, that he alone might stand forth gloriously and we glory in him?26

Luther combines the same two elements rather differently on occasion, as when he urges that the interpretation of Scripture should not be undertaken in slavish adherence to the ‘fusty rules of grammar’ of the modern Hebraists, but rather in modesty, faith and reliance on the illumination of the Holy Spirit.27

A revealing cluster of appeals by both Calvin and Luther to the analogy of faith was generated by the disputes within the camp of the Reformation over the doctrine of the Sacraments and (in particular) over the proper exegesis of the words of institution: ‘This is my body’ (Matt 26:26).

Thus, at Marburg,28 it is in the course of dispute over these words that Luther makes his appeal to the principle of the analogy of faith. Zwingli appeals to reason, and repeatedly protests against the ‘absurdity’ of the Lutheran position. Luther replies with ‘the analogy of faith ... according to the definition of faith in Hebrews 1:1.’29 His appeal is not to ‘the Faith’, but to the believing faith of Heb. 1:1, the faith that ‘looks upon the body [of Christ] as present [in the sacrament] and upon the body which is in heaven.’ It is (as in his Romans commentary) essentially an argument against rationalism: ‘I am not concerned about what is contrary to nature but only about what is contrary to faith.’

It is the same dispute, thirty years later,30 revived by the attacks made by the Lutheran controversialist Joachim Westphal against the Calvinist sacramental theology, which prompts Calvin to make use of the analogy of faith. Little has changed in thirty years. Westphal wheels out against the Calvinists the same argument that Luther used against Zwingli at Marburg: ‘They boast,’ explains Calvin, ‘that we are so bound to human reason that we attribute no more to the power of God than the order of nature allows and common sense dictates.’31

In reply, Calvin grasps the analogy of faith with both hands and turns the Lutherans’ argument on its head, to use it against them:

Besides, there is no doubt that the analogy of faith, to which Paul requires all interpretation of Scripture to conform, in this case remarkably supports my view. Let those who so cry out against plain truth see to what standard of faith they are conforming themselves. He who does not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is

27 *LW*, 2.15-16.
29 ‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’
30 The chapter of the *Institutes* concerning the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (IV.xvii) though composed in its present form for the 1559 edition of the work, was composed in no small part of materials woven together from previous editions. However, the parts of the chapter with which we are concerned (secs.30-34) were original material, prompted by the running controversy of 1556-63 between Calvin and Westphal.
31 *Institutes* IV.xvii.24.
not of God [1 John 4:2-3]. These men, although they cover it up or do not notice it, deprive him of his flesh.\textsuperscript{32}

The argument is a clever one, first attempting to show how the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ's body cancels its true corporeality,\textsuperscript{33} then using the analogy of faith ('the Faith' taken objectively) to measure the Lutheran doctrine against an article of the Faith which 1 John 4 makes a test for heresy. This is chronologically the latest and marks perhaps the high point of complexity in the arguments that Calvin and Luther make from the analogy of faith.

\textbf{Conclusions}

So is the ‘very clear rule’ adduced by Calvin in 1536 to defend the integrity of his biblical exegesis just another of the theological sophistries by which (as Calvin's critics claim) the reformers ‘falsely make the word of God [their] pretext, and wickedly corrupt it’? Two key questions arise: the question of objectivity and the question of coherence.

\textbf{(i) Objectivity}

The central problem with the Reformers' use of the \textit{analogia fidei} is often articulated as one of objectivity: whether the reformers are invoking the principle against the enthusiasts who make claims to be the bearers of extra-biblical revelation, or defending their doctrines against the charge that, ultimately, their ‘private interpretations’ of Scripture are of no better authority than the ‘prophecies’ of the fanatics, the key question is whether ‘the analogy of faith’ can satisfactorily function as an objective yardstick of truth.

If ‘faith’ is taken subjectively, referring to the inward faith of the interpreter, obvious objections arise: after all, ‘the enthusiasts also appealed to their posture of faith and possession of the Spirit.’\textsuperscript{34} And the perennial Catholic criticism of Luther has been that he introduces a fatal subjectivism into the interpretation of the Scriptures; ultimately, it is claimed, he is no better than the fanatics:

Luther's objectivism was self-deception, since there cannot be religious objectivity without an infallible teaching authority; his illogicality was that he was a servant of the Word – according to his own very personal understanding. In the end, the crucial point is that he threw man back upon himself, alone before the Word; whatever objectivity he tried to preserve could only stand in tension with this subjectivism. The individual had won.\textsuperscript{35}

Conversely, if ‘the Faith’ is taken objectively as (in Calvin's words) ‘the first principles of religion’, then what defines its content? ‘Scripture,’ Luther especially is inclined to claim. Against the accusation that it is a circular argument to appeal to Scripture when it is the interpretation of Scripture that is precisely what is under dispute, Luther and his defenders commonly answer this charge with a distinction between the obscure and the clear parts of

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Institutes} IV.xvii.32.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Institutes} IV.xvii.16-17.

\textsuperscript{34} Hof, ‘Luther's Exegetical Principle of the Analogy of Faith’, 245.

Scripture, or between the parts and the whole: the former must be read in the light of the latter.\(^{36}\)

The point is a fair one, but it must be asked in reply: who says which are the clear parts of Scripture and which the obscure, or what is the message of the whole of Scripture? Recourse may here be had to the creeds, as an authoritative distillation of the *tota scriptura*.\(^{37}\) But (one might argue) this would seem to bring us perilously close to the traditionalism that the Reformation ostensibly rejected:

In opposition to traditionalism [Luther] had been able to proceed as though every article of faith were ultimately subject to exegetical re-examination, though he himself did not necessarily subject it to such re-examination. In opposition to a rejection of the tradition, however, he proceeded as though there existed a given body of articles of faith.\(^{38}\)

If our understanding of ‘objectivity’ is of the sort that looks for a simple, unilinear movement from presuppositionless exegesis to doctrinal construction, then the Reformers will disappoint us. There is something irreducibly recursive in the way that both Calvin and Luther configure the relationship between Scripture and theology.

Commentators on Calvin, for example, routinely comment on the way in which the 1559 Preface introduces the *Institutes* not as a theological systematisation to be read after the biblical commentaries but as a pathway into them, and into Scripture itself:

> It has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling. For I believe that I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents.\(^{39}\)

> If anyone cannot understand all the contents \([\text{of the *Institutes*}]\), he must not therefore despair, but must press onward, hoping that one passage will give him a more familiar explanation of another. Above all, I must urge him to have recourse to Scripture in order to weigh the testimonies that I adduce from it.\(^{40}\)

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The relationship between biblical exegesis and doctrinal construction that Calvin advocates in theory and exemplifies in practice is thus an iterative one:

As an interpreter of the Bible Calvin moved from his commentaries and sermons on particular texts to the *Institutes*, and from the *Institutes* back again to the interpretation of particular texts. Good exegesis required both attention to detail and a knowledge of the larger context in which those texts were fully intelligible.41

The effect is reminiscent of what later theorists came to describe as the ‘hermeneutical circle’ that exists between the analysis of the parts of a text and the apprehension of the whole,42 or between the pre-understandings of the reader and the discoveries of the reading process.43 Whether the circle functions viciously, as a self-perpetuating cycle of error, or virtuously, as a spiral of deepening understanding, depends on the skill and dispositions of the interpreter, the nature of the interpretive conversations within which readings of Scripture are formed and advocated, and (ultimately) the illumining work of the Spirit.

(ii) Coherence

Observations of this sort about the role played by the subjective dispositions of the interpreter and how they are to be related to the objective content of the Faith bring us back to the second question raised above, as to whether any coherence can be found within the varied uses that the Reformers make of the principle of the analogy of faith. The heart of the question has to do with the way both Luther and Calvin can alternate between the subjective and objective interpretations of analogy – between *fides quae* and *fides qua*. Against which rule are they measuring biblical interpretations (and, for that matter, extra-biblical prophecies): the rule of ‘faith’ or the rule of ‘the Faith’?

The ease with which the Reformers can switch – often without comment – from one to the other would indicate that we should be wary of analyses that rely on separating what, in their minds at least, belongs together. In Gerrish's words:

Instead of asserting that Luther wavers between two principles – whether freedom of conscience and the doctrine of justification (Zeeden), or subjectivism and objectivity (Lortz) – it would be closer to his intention to argue that he builds on a single principle, which is the strict correlation of subject and object”.44

*Fides quae* and *fides qua* are, for the reformers, to be distinguished but never to be separated, for it is by its object that faith lives: ‘It is the Word of God which is the object and goal of faith at which we are to direct our attention, the basis by which it is supported and upheld, without which it cannot even exist.’45 These two belong together, faith and God.’46

The reformers show little interest in ‘faith’ that is not faith in the Word of the Gospel; the corollary of this is that they assert that the Bible is to be read not as a patchwork of proof-texts but as a single book with a single message – Christ – speaking a word which is

41 Steinmetz, ‘John Calvin as an Interpreter of the Bible’, 291.
46 Luther's Large Catechism (1529), quoted in Gerrish, ‘Doctor Martin Luther’, 48.
fundamentally a word of promise, to be received by believing. The message – ‘the word of faith’ – is to be read in accordance with its nature – that is, ‘according to the analogy of faith.’

The roots of both this ambivalence between fides quae and fides qua and the coherence that ties it back together go back beyond the theology of the Reformers to the New Testament itself. Commentators on Romans remain divided over whether the ‘faith’ referred to in Rom. 12:6 is the subjective faith of the prophet or the objective Faith of the gospel. James Dunn, for example, argues for the former, Ernst Käsemann for the latter. Whilst the similar language used in v. 3 probably tilts the balance of probabilities in favour of the subjective ‘faith’ of the prophet as the referent Paul has in mind in v. 6, the decision is not an easy one to make, because of the way in which Paul elsewhere employs language that speaks of the gospel as ‘the word of faith that we proclaim’ (Rom. 10:8), describes the coming of Christ as the coming of ‘faith’ (Gal. 3:23) and, especially in the Pastoral epistles (e.g. 1 Tim. 1:2) defies easy distinctions between fides quae and fides qua.

This ‘striking ... relation between method and content’ is the reason Torrance can speak of the analogy of faith as ‘the supreme principle of objectivity that was to govern all Calvin's thought in content and method alike. There is still circularity in the argument – it is built on the assumption of the centrality of Christ and the word of the gospel as the unifying principle of the Scriptures – but there is an internal coherence here that ties the threads of the analogy of faith together into a viable and useful whole.

49 James D. G. Dunn, Romans (2 vols.; Dallas: Word, 1988), 2.726-28
50 Ernst Käsemann, Commentary on Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 341-42.
51 Cf. the argument in Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 765-66.
53 Torrance, The Hermeneutics of John Calvin, 64.