

Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions

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The Sixteenth Century Authority Crisis

There was a crisis concerning authority in the church of the sixteenth century, and there is a crisis in the church today, also the Lutheran church. What is the authoritative source of doctrine in the church? The papacy? The church itself? Church councils? The Fathers? The immediate revelation of the Spirit? Subjective experience? These were answers given commonly in Luther's day, given alike by Roman Catholics and by the *Schwaermer*—the two loud and militant groups with which Luther and the Reformers contended from 1519 (Luther's Leipzig debate with John Eck) until and after the last of the Lutheran Symbols was written in 1577. For Rome the validity of a dogmatic statement or formal creed lay in the authority of the pope, or church, or council. For the *Schwaermer*, religion (or theological utterances when these were taken seriously) derived its validity from experience or from the direct revelation or confrontation of the Holy Spirit. Rome has not changed on this matter since the sixteenth century. And the claims of the *Schwaermer* we observe today in existentialistic crisis theology (Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, et al.) and more recently in the charismatic movement. But the positions of Rome and the *Schwaermer* on the entire question of authority in the church were not entirely antithetical to each other: ultimately a synergistic notion of authority, resting either in the inspired church or in the inspired individual, prevailed.

Against church, council, pope, and every notion of immediate revelation and experience Luther set

the Scriptures as the only authority for teaching and teachers in the church. And it was because of these many and vociferous opposing voices that Luther and our Confessions so clearly proclaim the *sola Scriptura* principle in their day. It is no accident that Luther in the Smalcald Articles (III, VIII) links together both Muenzer and the papists as enthusiasts. Muenzer judges, interprets, and twists the Scriptures or the spoken Word according to his pleasure (SA, III, VIII, 3). And the pope does exactly the same as he boasts that "all laws are in the shrine of his heart" and claims that whatever he decides and commands in his churches is spirit and law, even when it is above and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word (ibid. 4). True, Luther is speaking about confession in this context and denouncing the Satanic heresy that the Holy Spirit comes apart from the external Word and Sacraments (ibid. 10). But he consistently mentions Scripture as he speaks of the external (*aeusserlich*) Word, and links it with the spoken (*muendlich*) Word (ibid. 4, 6). And the writing prophets were holy, according to Luther, specifically because they were moved by the Spirit to write Scripture (ibid. 13; 2 Pet. 1:21). Clearly the evil of enthusiasm is seen not merely in its bypassing the means of grace, but in its undermining Scripture as the cognitive source of pure doctrine.

More explicitly Luther sets the Scriptures against the human authority of fathers, councils, or church to establish doctrine in the church. Railing against alleged patristic authority for trafficking in purgatorial Masses, he says, "It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy Fathers' words or works. Otherwise what they ate, how they dressed, and what kind of houses they lived in would have to become articles of faith—as has happened in the case of relics. This means that the Word of God shall establish

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articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel" (SA, II, II, 15). This statement, which quite obviously speaks of Scripture as the source of doctrine, strikes at both the papists on the one hand and the enthusiasts on the other.

The early occasions, therefore, for the increasingly articulate statements in the Lutheran Confessions concerning Scripture as the source of doctrine are the constant claims of papists and enthusiasts. As time went on it became the more specific doctrinal aberrations and faulty exegesis of Romanists and of the Reformed, Crypto-Calvinists, enthusiasts, and sects that gave rise to even clearer affirmations of Biblical authority in the later Symbols, particularly the "Rule and Norm" section of the Formula of Concord.

In the Confessions the Lutheran churches and theologians of the Reformation are first and foremost confessing before God and out of deepest eschatological concern their faith by setting forth the doctrine of the Gospel (*evangelischen Lehr*) against any false and adulterated teaching (Tappert, Preface to the Book of Concord, p. 9 *passim*). "In these last times of this transitory world almighty God in his immeasurable love, grace, and mercy toward mankind has permitted the pure, unalloyed, and unadulterated light of his holy Gospel and of the Word that alone brings salvation to appear to our beloved fatherland, the German nation, and to light its way out of papistic superstition and darkness" (Preface, p. 3).

But what is the basis and source of this evangelical doctrine? Not the authority of pope or church or any man. Not the dream of any self-anointed heavenly prophet or enthusiast. No, the Word is the source of the doctrine. Listen to just one of the more forthright statements on this matter in the Preface to the Book of Concord (*ibid.*, pp. 12-13): "Since this is the way things are, and since we are certain [*gewiss, certi*] of our Christian confession and faith [*Bekanntnues und Glaubens, doctrina and confessione*] on the basis [*aus*] of the divine, prophetic, and apostolic Scriptures and have been adequately assured [*versichert, confirmatae*] of this in our hearts and Christian consciences through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the most acute and urgent necessity demands that in the presence of so many intrusive errors, aggravated scandals, dissensions, and long-standing schisms a Christian explanation and reconciliation of all of the disputes which have arisen should come into being." Notice that all confession and faith (*fides quae creditur*) is based on the Scriptures. No other source of doctrine is mentioned. The Holy Spirit in turn gives us assurance—the later Lutherans called this assurance a *fides divina*—of the doctrine by His witness

through the Scriptures. We have in this statement an adumbration of the later distinction between the normative and causative authority of Scripture. The former is the objective authority of Scripture as the only source of evangelical doctrine; the latter is the power of Scripture, as the Spirit works through it, to authenticate its message and work divine certainty in that message. But, of greater significance, we see in this statement the inseparable connection between formal confession (the very purpose of our Symbols) and the Scriptures as the source of doctrine. This inseparable connection is even more forcefully brought out in one of the summary statements of the Preface to the Book of Concord (p. 13): "In conclusion, we repeat once again that we are not minded to manufacture anything new by this work of agreement [*Concordienwerk*: the reference is to the Formula of Concord itself] or to depart in any way at all, either in content or in formulation, from the divine truth that our pious forebears and we have acknowledged and confessed in the past, for our agreement is based [*gegruendet*] on the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. . . ." The purpose of Confessions and Symbols is to state formally the evangelical doctrine, the faith, the work of agreement (after controversy has plagued the church) *as this doctrine is drawn from the Scriptures*.

It is only natural, therefore, that the introductory "Rule and Norm" section of the Formula of Concord will deal specifically with two and only two matters: 1) the nature of Confessions and subscription to them, and 2) the normative function of Scripture in the Confession-making process and in the theological enterprise as a whole. For the church can carry out its great struggle to confess the faith only on the basis of the holy Scriptures. Commitment to the Lutheran Confessions and subscription of them absolutely entails commitment first to the authority of Scripture as the source and norm of all doctrine. This is clearly set forth in the initial argumentation of the "Rule and Norm" introduction to the Formula of Concord. The authors begin by stating the necessity of producing a summary formula and pattern of doctrine, unanimously approved, to settle the controversies racking the church. This formal pattern of doctrine confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is to be drawn from the Scriptures. The authors then pledge themselves to the Scriptures as the source of doctrine in the church ("the pure and clear fountain of Israel") "which is the only [*alleine die einige*: notice the pleonasm] true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3). Thirdly, the authors pledge themselves to all the previous generally accepted confessions of the Lutheran church as containing doctrine "drawn from and conformed to the Word of

God" (ibid. 5), that is, Scripture. These statements of doctrine are accepted by the Lutherans not because their theologians wrote them, but because they are "taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein" (ibid.). Everything else stated in the "Rule and Norm" introduction to the Formula of Concord is said only for the sake of explication and does not add to the three points originally made. True, the former confessions are chosen because they were already generally accepted and were written before dissensions arose among the theologians of the Augsburg Confession. But their scripturalness is the only necessary reason for their acceptance. The Confessions possess their authority as a pattern of doctrine in the church, and other writings are to conform to them, solely because they are "drawn from the Word of God" (ibid. 10). Meanwhile the Word of God (Lat: *sacrae litterae*) remains "the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and. . .no human being's writings dare to be on a par with it, but. . . everything must be subjected to it" (ibid. 9).

Since the purpose of the Confessions is to confess the faith, the evangelical doctrine, as it is drawn from Scripture, and because they accomplish this purpose, the Confessions are ecumenical and they are binding. To subscribe such Confessions with reservations or qualifications would be a contradiction in terms; for they are nothing else but a summary of what is taught in the Scriptures for our salvation (LC, Longer Preface, 18; Shorter Preface, 18). The Confessions must always be taken seriously as an exposition of the Scriptures. Their doctrine is the result of Biblical exegesis, and it is sure and secures posterity against impure doctrine "because it is based on the witness of the unalterable truth of the divine Word" (Preface, p. 3). On their own terms, the Confessions are binding only because they are a correct exposition of Scripture which alone remains the only norm of doctrine. Schlink says quite correctly, "A Confession has no binding force apart from the fact that it correctly expounds Scripture. If we were bound to the Confessions simply because they claim to be true interpretation, without being able to see the propriety of this claim on the basis of Scripture, the Confession would be, like tradition in the Roman church, a second norm for dogmatics alongside Scripture."¹ And so we subscribe the Confessions and confess their doctrine because (*quia*) they are Biblical, "based solidly on the divine Scriptures" (Preface, p. 1). Without commitment to the principle of *sola Scriptura* and the absolute divine authority of Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions could not have been written or subscribed. Confessions are, in the nature of the case, a witness to the divine nature and truth of the sacred Scriptures (Preface, p. 5).

I think it is demonstrable in every case that those Lutherans today who find themselves unable to subscribe the Confessions as true expositions of Scripture have also abandoned the confessional position concerning the authority of Scripture.² In fact, they have long since forsaken the Scripture principle, and this is the reason they cannot be confessional Lutherans.

The Nature of Biblical Authority

There are clearly two aspects to Biblical authority according to our Confessions: 1) Scripture is the only source from which all Christian doctrine is drawn, and 2) Scripture is the only norm which judges all teachers and teachings in the church. This double aspect of Biblical authority in the theological task is assumed throughout all the Confessions as they base their doctrine on Scripture and do exegesis. But the point is explicitly made in the formative statement of the "Rule and Norm" prolegomenon to the Solid Declaration. The statement reads, "We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3).

The first part of this statement definitely sets forth the Scriptures as, what the later Lutheran theologians called, the *principium cognoscendi* of theology in the church. The phrase "pure and clear fountain of Israel" (*zu dem reinen, lautern Brunnen Israels*) is a metaphor referring to the source (*Brunn*) of the church's (*Israels*) doctrine. The "pure and clear" water, or well, refers to the truthfulness of the church's cognitive source of theology, namely the Scriptures (cf. ibid. 2, 13, 16).

The second part of the statement cited above speaks of Scripture as a norm for judging doctrine and teachers. In the Epitome Andreae emphasizes this aspect of authority when he says, "In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings is maintained, and Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong" (Ep, Rule and Norm, 7).

These two aspects of Biblical authority are assumed throughout the Confessions as they cite Scripture and do exegesis. Again and again they claim to base their theology on the pure Word of God (Preface, pp. 6, 8; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 4, 5, 10), and their practice illustrates a deliberate and concerted aim to draw all doctrine from the one divine

source. Whether their exegesis is intensive as in Melancthon's discussion of justification by faith (Ap IV) or the defense in the Formula of Concord (FC VIII) of the real presence, or whether they range all over the Scriptures proving a point as in the discussion of the bondage of the will (FC II), it is clear that the Confessions practice the Scripture principle. And throughout all their polemics they consistently subject themselves as well as their adversaries to the judgment of Scripture.

The authority of the Scriptures in both aspects is a divine authority. How often do the Confessions talk of Scripture from which they draw all their doctrine as the Word of God (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 10, 16; Preface, pp. 3, 6, 8)! To call Scripture judge—something both Romanists and enthusiasts refrained from doing—is to hypostasize Scripture; Scripture does the work of God in judging people and doctrine. Since Scripture is regarded as God's very Word, its authority, like all its properties, is divine. This is the reason why "other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God. . ." (FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 8). And this is why the "Word of God [*Gottes Wort, sacrae litterae*] is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but. . . everything must be subjected to it" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 9). The divine authority of Scripture derives from its divine origin and nature as God's Word; and in the nature of the case this divine Word must be the *only* authority.

The Basis of Biblical Authority

Robert Smith, now of Seminex, writes, "Luther and the Confessions based the authority of the Bible not on a theory of a unique literary origin of the Bible but on the content of the Scriptures, namely Law and Gospel. For Luther and the Confessions the Bible is authority because it judges and it pardons, it kills and it quickens."³ This statement not only misrepresents grossly the teaching of Luther and the Confessions, but affirms a false doctrine concerning Biblical authority, a doctrine quite antithetical to that of the Confessions themselves. Interestingly, Smith cites no evidence from the Symbols for his false doctrine. His view is by no means original, and it did not have its roots in Missouri soil. Kent Knutson, former bishop of the ALC, taught much the same doctrine in an article written about the same time as Smith's. Knutson, although writing on the subject, "The Authority of Scripture,"⁴ never gets to the subject of the normative authority of Scripture at all, but

defines Biblical authority as a "power" conferred upon Scripture. Scripture is authoritative in the sense that God works through Scripture to exercise His "authority" (power) to save and to judge. Thus, the authority of the Scripture is God's power, the power of the Gospel. Prior to Knutson or Smith, Gerhard Forde, now professor at Luther Seminary, in a similar way rejected the confessional doctrine of the canonical authority of Scripture as "the verbal inspiration method" of doing theology, presumably because traditionally the authority of Scripture was based upon its divine origin. Against this outmoded "One-Hoss-Shay" way of doing theology, Forde counters with what he calls the "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology."⁵

Now this view which substitutes the power of the Gospel for the authority of Scripture did not originate in the American Lutheran Church either. It can be traced clearly back to Edmund Schlink.⁶ Schlink speaks more circumspectly than his brash American counterparts. He does not substitute the power of the Gospel or the causative authority of Scripture for its normative authority. But he does base the authority of Scripture upon its Gospel content and the power of that Gospel rather than on Scripture's own divine origin and nature. He says, "Since, accordingly, preaching is the Word of God only as proclamation of the Gospel, and since the Gospel is the sole and unique message entrusted to the prophets and apostles, Holy Scripture is the sole norm." Later he speaks more explicitly, "Why is Scripture the sole norm and guide? Because it says that the Word proclaimed by it is the sole means of salvation! Because God saves through the Word proclaimed by it." Schlink is understandably somewhat bothered by the existence of the "Rule and Norm" section of the Formula of Concord which specifically speaks of the intrinsic authority of Scripture in the Confession-making process and in the theological enterprise as a whole. But he dismisses the entire section as having nothing to say on the matter of canonical authority because it says nothing about the how of the divine origin of Scripture, namely its inspiration. But this merely evades the issue.

The questions to be answered in this discussion are simply: Is Scripture the Word of God? Is it therefore divinely authoritative? And is this infallible and irrefragable divine authority of Scripture based upon its divine origin and nature as Word of God? We have seen that the Confessions give an affirmative answer to all these questions, and all theology is derived and taught and confessed from this premise concerning the nature and basis of Biblical authority. The inability of Schlink and others to understand the clear position of our Confessions on this issue is due, I

think, to their inability to accept the confessional position regarding Scripture's canonical authority and its implications.

Earlier Schlink had called the Gospel "the norm in Scripture" and Scripture the "norm for the sake of the Gospel." This to me is dangerous and misleading language. Nowhere is the Gospel called a norm in the Confessions. Scripture is called norm again and again, and it is always a norm and judge for doctrine, *also the doctrine of the Gospel*. According to the Confessions the Gospel of Scripture is not a norm in or for Scripture; such a view would be a *petitio principii*. Rather the Scriptures are employed throughout as a norm for the Gospel. One need only recall the tremendous amount of Biblical exegesis carried out by Melancthon in the Apology IV and XII as he clarifies and confesses, always on the basis of Scripture, the Gospel against Roman aberrations.

It is, I believe, the failure to grasp and face up to the confessional doctrine of Biblical authority which has given rise to much of the confusion in the Lutheran church today regarding the relation of the Gospel to Scripture, of the material principle, so-called, and the formal principle of theology. Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi*, the source of our knowledge of theology; the Gospel is the source of our faith itself. Scripture is the source of our doctrine (*fides quae creditur*), also the doctrine of the Gospel;⁷ the Gospel creates personal faith (*fides qua creditur*). Scripture is properly called the authority, norm, source, judge; the Gospel in Scripture, or wherever it obtains, is power, God's own power unto salvation to all who believe. The unity of faith in the Gospel is the foundation of our *fellowship in the church universal* (AC VII); unity in the articles of faith *drawn from the Scriptures* is the foundation for external fellowship among particular churches and synods (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 1; SD, X, 16, 31). The *sola gratia* and *sola fide* of the Gospel are the source and means of my salvation; the *sola scriptura* is the source of my preaching and teaching. Recognition of the formal principle (*sola Scriptura*) and loyalty to it are the fruits of faith in the Gospel; faith in the Gospel is the result of a Word and preachment drawn from and normed by the Scriptures.

Gerhard Maier in his recent attack against the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture criticizes sharply the reductionistic attempt of modern exegetes (H. Strathmann, W. G. Kuemmel, H. Braun, Ernst Kaesemann, et al.) to extract from Scripture and employ an authoritative "canon within the canon" in order to interpret and assess the theological content of the New Testament.⁸ Although he shows no appreciation for the centrality of justification by faith as the chief article of Scripture which

opens up the entire Scriptures and magnifies the honor of Christ (Ap, IV, 2; cf. SA, II, I, lff.), Maier is correct in pointing out that to isolate any doctrine or theme (justification, Gospel, *was Christum treibet*) as the authoritative and determinative canon for judging the rest of Scripture is a very subjective business and cannot be proved exegetically. In addition we might say that any such "canon within the canon" ultimately supersedes Scripture as the source and norm of doctrine in the church. This is precisely what takes place when the Roman church insists that pope or council is the supreme and normative interpreter of Scripture. Even basic principles of exegesis are violated.⁹ Our Lutheran fathers insisted rightly that there can only be one norm for doctrine, and when any second authoritative judge of interpretation be added to Scripture, that second norm of necessity gains the preeminence.¹⁰ And so it is inevitably today too, even though that second norm be extracted from Scripture itself. The Gospel, or the doctrine of justification, is clearly employed by Schlink, or more radically by Kaesemann and Strathmann, to determine what is true and false in Scripture, what is "Word of God" and what is not. The circular nature of their procedures does not seem to bother these modern theologians any more than the Romanists at the time of the Reformation were disturbed: for whatever the norm within the norm may be, it is somehow drawn from the Scriptures and then used to judge the Scriptures. This is nothing short of theological matricide. Unless Scripture is the *only* cognitive source and norm, it is not the source and norm at all. The *sola Scriptura* rules out any internal "canon within the canon" of Scripture as a determining standard of theology or truth just as emphatically as it rules out every external source or norm of theology (pope, church council, reason, history, experience, etc.).

Authority and Inerrancy

Biblical authority entails its inerrancy. In order to be a cognitive source from which we can elicit true doctrine (*reine Lehre*) Scripture itself must be truthful. It is inconceivable that our Lutheran fathers would have insisted so strongly that Scripture is the source and norm of all teachers and teachings in the church if they did not believe that the Scriptures proclaim the true doctrine. In no way could Scripture fulfill its function as source and norm if it contains errors.

In this connection it is well to bear in mind that the authority of Scripture as norm of doctrine is, according to our Confessions, not the coercive authority of a policeman or of a legal code (although the Law and commandments in Scripture are binding and even restraining, FC SD, VI, 1). Scripture is

regarded and treated basically as an informative message about God and His will and His mighty acts of judgment and grace in history. And the purpose of its message is to create faith and comfort and hope (FC SD, XI, 92-93). The message by virtue of its origin is a divine message and divinely authoritative, as we have seen. In other words, the message, the content of Scripture and every part of it, is divinely authoritative and infallible in everything that it asserts and teaches.

This is distinctly taught in our Confessions as they refer to Scripture as "divine" (*goettlich*, Preface, p. 1), as containing "the unalterable truth" (*ibid.*, p. 5), as being, "the pure, infallible, and unalterable Word of God" (*reine, unfehlbare, unwandelbare Wort Gottes*, *ibid.*, p. 8), as producing truth, faith, and certainty of doctrine (*ibid.*), as being "the infallible truth of the divine Word" (*ibid.*, p. 12) and the "pure and clear fountain of Israel" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3). Again as our Confessions say, "God's Word is not false nor does it lie" (FC Ep, VII, 13). "Believe the Scriptures. They will not lie to you. . ." (LC, V, 76). "God does not lie. My neighbor and I—in short, all men—may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err" (LC, IV, 57). There is no doubt that our fathers who wrote the Confessions have in mind a simple and plain doctrine of Biblical inerrancy when they speak in such a way of Scripture. That such adjectives are ascribed to Scripture commonly and in passing only demonstrates that the inerrancy of Scripture in the sense of the truthfulness of Biblical utterances was taken for granted. A "pure and clear fountain of Israel" means a true and infallible source and norm of doctrine in the church. The very term "infallible" is the strongest possible term for truthfulness and inerrancy. It certainly means that the Bible is *a priori* incapable of error or of leading one astray, *a priori* truthful in all its utterances. Actually the confessional term "infallible" (*unfehlbar*) is a stronger witness to the absolute truthfulness and authority of Scripture than the more modern term "inerrant." After all, a telephone book could be found to be inerrant *a posteriori*, or a geometry book; but Scripture is infallible: it not only does not err, it cannot err or fail.

And, significantly, the Confessions demonstrate their total commitment to the infallibility (inerrancy) of Scripture by the way they cite it and use it. Every quote, every quote from Scripture in the Symbols bears this out! Never is a Biblical assertion doubted; never is its authority and truthfulness questioned; never is an extra-biblical source or standard used to judge the Scripture or mitigate the *sensus literalis* of a single passage. The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are consistently treated just as our Lord Himself treated the Scriptures, according to the four Gospels.

He simply quotes the Scripture to friend or adversary, and what follows is incontrovertably true. Never is there the slightest embarrassment, qualification, evasion.

The pious and serious exegetical method employed in those lengthy discussions of Melancthon on justification (Ap IV) and confession (Ap XII) and particularly by the Formula of Concord on the Lord's Supper (VIII) illustrates with clarity the total conviction of the confessional writers concerning the inerrancy of Scripture. Melancthon carefully and meticulously proves his doctrine of justification by faith from hosts of Scripture references and passages. And it is to the Scriptural words of institution and to these words alone (not to some understanding of the Gospel) that the Formula of Concord repairs as it sets forth the true doctrine of the Lord's Supper—and these words do not lie or deceive (FC Ep, VII, 13).

Yes, Biblical authority does entail inerrancy. In many of the confessional statements ascribing to Scripture its authoritative function as source and norm, infallibility and truthfulness are predicated of Scripture as well. If no explicit discussion of inspiration as such is found in the Confessions, the fact remains that an explicit section on Scripture's canonical authority is present in the "Rule and Norm" section of the Formula of Concord and there is clear reference to the matter also in the Preface to the Book of Concord; and such authority, as well as the infallibility of Scripture, is very clearly a corollary and result of Scripture's divine origin.

Biblical Authority and Confessional Hermeneutics

Throughout the history of the Lutheran church, theology has been likened to medicine. Both involve an aptitude and an activity, a *habitus*. Both operate with a *method*, a well worked out way of engaging in their activity. Both have presuppositions and a knowledge concerning the subject of their attention, whether it be the human body and mind, or the Scriptures. Both have a practical goal: one treats the human body and mind to afford joy and health to physical life; the other deals with its appropriate object, the Scriptures, seeking to understand and apply their message for the edification and salvation of people. In both cases an understanding of the subject dealt with (man's body and mind, or the Bible) and a clear awareness of assumptions and goals underlying one's method of dealing with the subject are utterly indispensable. A method of dealing with a subject is determined by the subject with which the method deals.

This is a basic principle in any methodology. Now the method of dealing with Scripture is a hermeneutical one. All cognitive discourse or literature can

only be dealt with hermeneutically. But Biblical hermeneutics must be appropriate to its subject. This means first of all that we who interpret the Scriptures must first understand what we are dealing with, what the Scriptures claim to be and *are* in terms of their form and content; otherwise our method of hermeneutics will be arbitrary, and our exegetical conclusions (which lead to doctrine) will be uncontrolled by the subject we are dealing with and utterly unreliable. When God spoke to Moses in the burning bush the word called for understanding and action on the part of Moses. If Moses had confronted that word of promise and command, thinking it was not a divine revelation, but only a human word or projection of his own imagination, both his understanding of it and his consequent action would have been quite different from what they in fact were. And they would have been wrong.

The hermeneutics of Scripture must understand the form and nature of Scripture as God's Word and must deal with it consistently as such. The hermeneutics of Scripture must also understand the content of Scripture as God Himself, His nature (revealed attributes, *opera ad intra*), and His works of creation, judgment, and salvation (*opera ad extra*), and must deal consistently and believingly with this content as such. If this is so, we can see the terrible heresy in most hermeneutical systems today (influenced by existentialism, positivism, secularism, historicism, various reductionisms, or modern *Schwaermerei*) which treat Scripture as merely human in form and often human in content. For not only is the divine nature of Scripture as God's Word commonly denied, but the divine content, God's mighty acts recounted in Scripture, is denied or questioned or made secondary or "interpreted" (demythologized) away, and man or his understanding of his own existence is made the burden of Scripture. These modern hermeneutical aberrations are the more devastating and frightening because they are prolegomenous in nature: they precede all exegesis and theologizing and effectually negate the very purpose of the theological enterprise to exhibit the true doctrine of the Gospel and to inculcate divine certainty in that message of the Gospel.

The only way out of this modern *cul de sac* is to return to the Biblical hermeneutics of our Confessions, based as they are on the divine nature and content of Scripture. Actually all the principles of hermeneutics distinctive to our Confessions are elicited from the formal principle of divine authority and from the material content of Scripture. How these principles are used throughout the Confessions and the consistency with which they are employed

cannot be traced in this study. But we can list the principles and say something about them.

1. *The Principle of Divine Origin.* The divine origin of Scripture, its authority and sufficiency underlie the confessional approach to Scripture and all exegesis. The Holy Spirit is the author of all Scripture and there is nothing there of no importance (Ap, IV, 108; cf. Ap, Preface, 9). Thus, whether God condemns or promises in Scripture, or simply informs, all is taken as God's authoritative and infallible Word.

2. *The Unity Principle.* Scripture teaches only one Gospel, one *doctrina coelestis*. This principle enables the exegete to trace a locus or theme everywhere in the Scriptures, knowing that there will be complete agreement, that one passage will complement and often clarify another passage dealing with the same topic (*analogia scripturae*). This analogy of Scripture, this agreement with itself, will enable the theologian to draw from Scripture articles of faith which are always clear and unequivocal. It will enable him to clarify possibly obscure passages from Scripture. It will enable him to relate the articles of faith to each other organically. All this can be done with the assurance that the *sensus literalis* and the context of a given pericope or verse is not violated. The actual unity of Scripture and the principle of analogical exegesis make pure doctrine and formal confessions possible in the church. We do not impose this unity upon Scripture through the use of some cipher or principle extracted from Scripture. No, the unity simply obtains in Scripture, and we find it there as we read and study the Word.

The clarity of Scripture is a corollary of its divine origin and unity. In all that is necessary to believe for salvation, Scripture is clear. Passages are obscure to us either because of unknown historical referents contained therein or because of grammatical structures or words not fully understood by us. But the Scriptures are essentially clear, if we read them aright; this is affirmed again and again in the Confessions (Ap, IV, 314; XVIII, 10; XXIV, 94; XXVII, 60; AC, XXII, 2; XXIII, 3; XXVIII, 43; FC SD, VII, 50).

3. *The Hauptartikel Principle.* According to Melancthon all Scripture ought to be divided into two chief themes (*loci*), the Law and the promises, or Gospel (Ap, IV, 5-6). But the chief theme (*praecipuus locus*) which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasures and right knowledge of Christ is the doctrine of justification through faith in Christ (ibid. 2). Luther makes the chief article (*der Hauptartikel*) the work of Christ which is to be

accepted by faith. This amounts to the same thing (SA, II, I, lff.). All exegesis and theology emanate from the recognition of the centrality and preeminence of the Gospel of justification. The same article can function to assess the church's doctrine and practice and can be used hermeneutically in assessing the church's understanding and reading of Scripture (Ap, IV, 70, 81, 110, 120, 130; XII; 77; SA, II, II, 25). The article, because it is normed by Scripture (Ap IV), cannot of course violate the intended sense of any Bible passage. But it can, as Melancthon asserted (Ap, IV, 2—German), "open up the door to the entire Bible." What does this mean? Not that we have a substitute for pious grammatical exegesis. It means simply that the Gospel in both Old and New Testament (Ap, IV, 5-6), the Christological center and nucleus, opens up all the Scriptures to us, if we perceive and interpret everything in Scripture from the perspective of this all-pervading theme. That has got to be Melancthon's meaning when he ascribes such a function to the doctrine of justification. And what a key hermeneutical function that is! It makes hermeneutics evangelical!

4. *Luther's Realist Principle.* The Lutheran Confessions believe in a real God (AC, I, 2), in an inherited corruption of man which is real and "truly sin" (AC, II, 2), in a Savior who is "truly (*vere*) God and man," who truly (*vere*) rose from the dead after propitiating God's wrath by His substitutionary sacrifice (AC, III, 2, 4). Lutherans believe that the "true" (real) body and blood of Christ is present in the Sacrament under the bread and the wine (LC, V, 8, 12 *passim*). Reality underlies Biblical assertions. The referents of theological language exist. At times the Scriptural Word simply describes what is already real (God, creation, sin); at times the Scriptural Word creates the reality (Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament, conversion). But in every case this profound Biblical realism is recognized by the Confessions, and it is alluded to and *used* hermeneutically. Demythologization, existential interpretation, the allegorical method, and anti-supernatural historicism are utterly ruled out as impossible procedures according to this realist principle, for in every case these approaches to Scripture minimize or rule out the realism underlying all Biblical theology and thus deny the faith.

5. *The Spirit Principle.* The Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture and therefore He is the best interpreter of it (Ap, IV, 107-8). And He does this through and only through the Scriptures themselves. "He opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures and to heed the Word" (FC SD, II, 26). And as He explains the Word to us who even as

regenerate Christians have a darkened understanding He also edifies and sanctifies us with His grace through the Word (SA, III, VIII, 6 *passim*).

6. *The Eschatological Principle.* Commenting on Rom. 15:4 the Formula of Concord (SD, XI, 92) says the following: "But it is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent." Since the purpose of the Spirit is to save us eternally, this is also the purpose of His Word. And any interpretation of predestination or any Biblical theme which robs one of the comfort of eternal life through faith in Christ must be rejected. Again, this principle does not bypass grammatical exegesis. A great deal of serious exegesis underlies discussion of predestination in the eleventh article of the Formula of Concord. But to be aware of this consistent purpose of Scripture will alert one to false interpretations of Scripture and to the need of reexamination of the text in the light of Scripture's purpose.

These principles of hermeneutics which are unique to the Bible and are found and practiced throughout the Confessions all hang together.¹¹ And they are fundamental if we are to carry out our theological task under the sacred Scriptures. The divine origin and authority of Scripture will be of no value to us in our own faith life or in our ministry of reconciliation if we use a hermeneutic which is contrary to the *sui generis* character of the Bible or its *sui generis* content.

The Twentieth Century Authority Crisis

This is where the crisis centers today, in hermeneutics, in new and inappropriate approaches to the Bible, approaches unsuited to either its form or its content. And the insidious aspect of our modern conflict is the impression often made by exegetes and theologians that their approach is pious and consistent with Scripture's form (authority) and its content (Gospel). We can meet this crisis only by analyzing and understanding clearly what the assumptions, procedures, and goals of each new and succeeding hermeneutical approach are and by evaluating the adequacy of each new approach in the light of the authoritative Scripture Word itself. And we can meet the crisis only by remaining faithful to the authority of Scripture as God's Word and to its Gospel content. We must bear in mind that when the organic principle falls (when Scripture is no longer regarded as God's Word), the Gospel of salvation is distorted, or reduced to something else, or denied altogether. One can see this in much of modern theology today. It is our burden as confessional Lutherans to face up to this crisis in authority today.

Notes

¹Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, tr. Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 29.

²See Theodore G. Tappert, "The Significance of Confessional Subscription" in *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (no place, 1961), pp. 28-32; Carl Braaten, "The Crisis of Confessionalism" in *Dialog 1* (Winter 1962): 46 passim; also Richard Neuhaus, "How to Kill Confessionalism" in *Lutheran Forum* (Dec. 1969): 18-19.

³"Scriptural Authority among Lutherans" in *Lutheran Forum* (Oct. 1968): 13.

⁴CTM 40 (March 1969): 160, 163, passim.

⁵See *Theological Perspectives, A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Lutheran Theology*, by members of the department of religion, Luther College (Luther College Press, no date), pp. 50ff.

⁶Op. cit., p. 10. Holsten Fagerberg effectively refutes Schlink on the basis of the Confessions themselves. See *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions*, tr. Gene Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), pp. 30ff.

⁷See Harry Huth, *Gospel and Scripture, The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, November 1972, pp. 19-20 for ample

evidence in the Confessions that the Gospel as a cognitive message is normed by the divine Scriptures.

⁸Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, tr. Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), pp. 27ff.

⁹See Conrad Louis, ed., *Rome and the Study of Scripture* (St. Meinrad, Indiana: Grail Publications, *Vigilantiae*), p. 32. "As we were saying, the nature of the divine books is such that in order to dissipate the religious obscurity with which they are shrouded we must never count on the laws of hermeneutics, but must address ourselves to the Church, which has been given by God to mankind as a guide and teacher. In brief, the legitimate sense of the divine Scriptures ought not to be found outside the Church nor be pronounced by those who have repudiated its teaching and authority."

¹⁰Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), pp. 5ff; 93ff.

¹¹I have discussed these principles in much greater detail in a paper entitled "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret and Use the Old and New Testaments?" delivered as the *1973 Reformation Lectures* at Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota, Nov. 1 & 2. See also Ralph H. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968) for a thorough discussion of the subject.

The Layman and the Notion of Bible Myth

F. Samuel Janzow

Liberals and conservatives in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod agree that the forgiveness of sins and eternal life are offered to us only in the Gospel. It is the Gospel promise alone which, when appropriated by faith, makes us partakers of the mercy that Christ won for all men. The Gospel is like a lovely mansion full of light and grace in which the children and heirs of the heavenly Father live in the sheltering presence of the risen Christ. The Gospel is the heart and center of the Holy Scriptures, the great estate which is our inheritance from the Father and His Son and His Spirit and which supplies us with all things profitable for our souls' welfare.

There is now a serious controversy among the heirs about their inheritance. Though all agree that the basic concern must be to continue living under the Gospel roof, some imagine that the Gospel is

detachable from the authority of the Scriptures, that it is like a Zeppelin floating above the landscape. Because of this delusion they are not much concerned about the erosion of the land surrounding the Gospel mansion, that is, about the piece-by-piece crumbling away of the inherited estate, the surrender of portion after portion of Scriptural teaching to the realm of pious fiction and myth.

Others, however, cherish the Scriptures as "the written Word of God" (Synod's Constitution, Art. II), as the title deed, will, and testament by which God their heavenly Father has committed to them the total inheritance of all that He communicates, commands, proclaims, and promises. They cannot in good conscience legitimize attempts to subvert the Father's will. They are not minded to tamper, or to condone any tampering, with the title deed and testament declaring them heirs of the total Bible truth that has the Gospel as its center. They are convinced that for the church to accept the erosion of Scriptural authority and the conversion of clear Biblical assertions into pious fantasy and myth would be like the folly of a

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