

# **Biblical Interpretation in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Lutheranism**

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## **Introduction**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a great century for confessional Lutheranism, perhaps the greatest since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Put yourself in the place of an observer in 1900, trying to imagine what lay ahead for Lutheranism in the bright new century, the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era, the 5<sup>th</sup> century for the Lutheran church. Things were looking good. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had been the best time for Lutheranism since the life of Luther.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century had not gotten off to such a great start. The effects of Pietism and the Enlightenment were being felt throughout the Lutheran church. As the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation rolled around, the Prussian Union had appeared as a state-enforced plan to put an end to an independent, confessional Lutheran church. Throughout the century the acid of historical-critical methodology would continue to eat away at what remained of the scriptural foundations of the Lutheran theological schools of Germany.

Yet amazingly, in the midst of this crisis there would be a rebirth of confessional Lutheranism, which would return the teachings of Luther and the Confessions to a prominence that was unmatched since the mid-seventeenth century. In some respects Luther's teachings were put into practice more fully in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than they had been in Luther's own time, because now for the first time the Lutheran church was free from the entanglement and pressures of a state church that had prevented the implementation of Luther's biblical principles of church and state and church and ministry.

The location of this rebirth was not, of course, Germany, but the New World. The man at the center of this resurgence of true confessional Lutheranism was C.F.W. Walther. To be sure, he had predecessors, allies, and successors in America and to a lesser extent in Europe, but more than any other individual Walther embodied the newfound vitality of confessional Lutheranism. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, the Missouri Synod and the other confessional synods drawn into fellowship with it in the Synodical Conference of North America were well positioned for rapid growth in their new homeland, for mission expansion throughout the world, and to be a source of strength and encouragement to smaller confessional churches throughout the world.

The rising material prosperity brought on by the industrial revolution, a revolution in transportation and communication (the steamboat and railroad, the telegraph and telephone), and the arrival of the electrical age seemed to foreshadow a great age of opportunity and expansion for the church. Colonial empires provided open doors for missions around the world. Rapid advances in automobiles and air travel were widely anticipated. Some bold futurists even predicted that by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it would be possible to send pictures instantaneously around the world in color. Optimism abounded for what was coming for society and the church.

To be sure, there were some ominous clouds on the horizon. Confessional revival in Europe was barely a ripple in the pond. The poisons of evolutionary theory and negative criticism continued to undermine the vitality of Lutheranism. In the North American heartland the election controversy of the 1880s had caused the first major fracture in the alliance of solidly confessional Lutheran churches. In eastern Lutheranism Schmucker's "American Lutheranism" which was a voluntary embrace of the principles of the Prussian Union, had been beaten back, but the old eastern Lutheranism had not experienced a true confessional revival. Even this wing

of American Lutheranism, however, could produce a theologian of the quality of Charles Porterfield Krauth. The doctrinal differences separating the Synodical Conference from the predecessor bodies of the ALC were issues like pulpit and altar fellowship, lodges, conversion and election, millennialism, and open questions. These were not trivial questions, but there was unity in fundamental doctrines.

It was obvious that, as always, there were dangers facing the Lutheran church as the new century broke, but who could have foreseen the depth of the disaster that the 20<sup>th</sup> century would produce for Lutheranism around the world. In Germany the church was devastated by two world wars, Nazism, Communism, secularization, and a nearly total surrender to critical views of the Bible. The Lutheran lands of the North became secular societies, more heathen than many mission lands of the Third World. In the mission societies and revival movements within the national churches and in the tiny confessional churches a small remnant still carries on a faithful testimony, but the voice of confessional Lutheranism is almost silent in its European homeland.

In America, the new stronghold of Lutheranism, liberal eastern Lutheranism, as embodied successively in the ULCA, LCA, and ELCA has swallowed up the moderate Lutheranism of the midwestern ALC. Groups like the Ohio, Buffalo, and Norwegian Synods, once so close to the Synodical Conference, are now absorbed into the ELCA merger, which retains a paper profession of loyalty to the confessions, but many of its theologians have abandoned virtually every teaching which they confess. Gone from their confession is even a paper profession of the inerrancy of Scripture. Gone from their sacramental practice is a firm confession of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. Gone from their ecumenical agenda is a commitment to "by faith alone," the core principle of the Reformation. It seems that "American Lutheranism" has won after all.

Even the LCMS, the anchor body of the once solidly confessional Synodical Conference, has been torn by a great controversy over the basics of biblical interpretation. In 1900 who could have imagined that by the 1930s Missouri's staunch position would already be suffering serious erosion and that by the 1960s historical criticism would dominate its theological training system. Who could have believed it! It took WELS and ELS 25 years to convince themselves that it was really true. Even today many around the world have a hard time believing what has happened to Lutheranism in this disastrous century. At the heart of the catastrophe is the surrender of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture by the greater part of American Lutheranism.

You have invited me to discuss the disastrous decline of the view of Scripture in American Lutheranism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a very good choice for a topic, since this is one of the most critical issues facing Lutherans who are trying to maintain, restore, or establish a Lutheran church which will be faithful to all the teachings of the Bible. Without a doubt, the most important doctrine of the Bible for Lutherans is justification by grace alone through faith alone. This is very properly called the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. But the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible ranks very close to this in importance. In fact, history has demonstrated that where the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy is lost, the doctrine of justification is soon endangered and lost too.

### **The Doctrines of Inspiration and Inerrancy**

Before we get to our topic we must quickly review the ABC's of the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.

The Bible does not contain the words “inspiration” and “inerrancy,” but like the word “Trinity” these are words which the church has adopted to summarize teachings which are clearly presented in Scripture.

“Inspiration” is the miraculous process by which God the Holy Spirit called the writers of the Bible to write and supplied them with the exact thoughts and words which they were to record. The term “inerrancy” confesses that since the content of the Bible was provided by God himself, the Bible contains no errors, even though it was given through human beings.

Christians call the Bible the “inspired” Word of God because of passages like 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is *breathed out by God*.”<sup>i</sup> In English versions of the Bible θεόπνευστος has traditionally been translated “All Scripture is *given by inspiration of God*.” This follows the translation adopted by Jerome in the Vulgate, “*Omnis scriptura divinitus inspirata*.”

We also called the writers of Scripture “inspired” on the basis of passages like 2 Peter 1:21, “No prophecy was ever carried in by the will of man, but as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God.”<sup>ii</sup> In his Latin Bible Jerome established the tradition of translating this verse, “Inspired by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God” (*Spiritu sancto inspirati locuti sunt sancti Dei homines*). Prophecy was given *by* God through the prophet (Matthew 1:22). We see that the tradition of calling both the Bible and the writers of the Bible “inspired” goes back at least to the time of Jerome.

The custom of using the term “inspiration” is supported by the wording of other passages of the Bible. The Bible says that the Spirit was in the prophets (1 Peter 1:21) and that the prophets were in the Spirit (Matthew 22:43). Both of these phrases closely parallel the English word inspiration. Though the word “inspiration” is not a very literal translation of 2 Peter 1:21 and 2 Timothy 3:16 it does reflect a scriptural concept of the relationship between the Spirit and the Word and the Spirit and the authors.

Unfortunately, the English expression “inspired” has become weaker than the original. Greek expressions “breathed out by God” and “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In English usage a beautiful sunset or an emotional event can “inspire” a person to write a poem. The poet is motivated to write the poem by something outside of himself, but the ideas and words used in the poem are his own. Critics of the Bible, who believe that it is full of errors, sometimes try to apply this looser definition of “inspiration” to the Bible. At times the word means little more to them than that the Bible is inspiring. They deceive people by keeping the word “inspiration” even though they deny the “inerrancy” of the Bible, which is inseparably attached to the biblical concept of inspiration. But the church’s definition of “biblical inspiration” cannot be determined by the wider range of meaning permitted by the English word “inspiration.” It must be determined by what the Bible itself says about the way in which it was “breathed out by God,” that is, “supplied by the Holy Spirit.”

Paul says, “We do not speak in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual [truths] with spiritual [words]” (1 Corinthians 2:13). Jesus sometimes based arguments on the exact wording of a passage (John 10:35). These passages make it clear that God gave the exact words to be written. Inspiration means that the Bible is not simply human thoughts and words about God, but God’s own words. In English we call this *verbal inspiration* (word-for-word inspiration) or *plenary inspiration* (full inspiration).

Scripture therefore defines “biblical inspiration” as the process by which the Holy Spirit supplied the writers with the exact words which they were to write. Since the exact words were given by God, who makes no errors, all the words of the Bible were without error. Though the

Bible was not written to be a history book or a science book, everything it says about history and about creation is true.

Sometimes the inspired writers heard a voice or saw a vision, but at other times they did not hear or see any visible sign of inspiration, as for example when Paul wrote his letters.

Inspiration does not exclude the inspired writer's use of his memory (John), research (Luke), or written sources (in Kings and Chronicles), but this process too was directed by God. Sometimes someone other than the inspired writer collected the writings (Proverbs 25:1).

Inspiration does not exclude the Holy Spirit's making use of the writer's personality, emotions, or natural style in the writing of Scripture.

Inspiration does not exclude the use of figurative language in Scripture. Inspiration does not exclude the presence of copying errors in the many manuscripts of Scripture.

### **Inspiration is an Article of Faith**

We can make some reasonable arguments in favor of the inspiration of the Bible, but inspiration cannot be proved by human reason. We believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture because the Holy Spirit has worked faith in us. We have had God's Law and Gospel preached to us. The Holy Spirit has worked faith in Christ in our hearts through the words of Scripture. The Holy Spirit has given us confidence in Scripture. Belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is ultimately a matter of faith, not proof. Belief in the inerrancy of Scripture rests on the testimony which the Holy Spirit has given through Scripture.

We will now turn to the sad story of how this important teaching of the Bible has been lost in much of American Lutheranism. Hopefully, some of the lessons learned in that battle, can also serve as an example and warning to us.

### **I. The Entry of Critical Views into American Lutheranism**

A belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture has been a basic teaching of Christianity from the beginning. For more than seventeen centuries there was little need to debate this within the church because there were few Christians who held any other opinion. Even heretical groups which challenged the orthodox church tried to prove their position from the Bible. The inerrancy of Scripture was not a highly contested topic at the time of the Reformation since all parties accepted it, even though Rome did not accept the *sola scriptura*. In their comprehensive treatment of biblical teaching the Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17<sup>th</sup> century set forth the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture in considerable detail.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century the subjectivism of Pietism and the anti-supernaturalism of Rationalism and the Enlightenment prepared the way for the in-roads of historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation into the Lutheran church.<sup>iii</sup> By the 19<sup>th</sup> century this method was well-entrenched in the Lutheran churches of Europe.<sup>iv</sup>

Except for a few rationalists like F.H. Quitmann, a student of J. S. Semler, the Lutheran churches in America were relatively resistant to these influences through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though calls for accommodation to evolution began to appear in American Lutheranism during the 1880s. Dogmaticians such as Walther, Pieper, and Hoenecke spoke out clearly against the critical views that had become dominant in Europe, including the views of the Erlangen School. S. S. Schmucker's "American Lutheranism" failed to carry the day even in the more liberal Eastern Lutheranism.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Missouri Synod and its sister churches continued to take a strong stand against the critical views, but others had begun to waver. The Iowa Synod led the way in introducing the critical view of Scripture into midwestern Lutheranism.

In the 1920s an Intersynodical Committee representing the Ohio, Iowa, Buffalo, Missouri, and Wisconsin Synods produced the Chicago Theses, which contained a very conservative statement on Scripture.

Over against modern theology we maintain now as formerly, the doctrine of verbal inspiration... We believe and confess that Scripture not only contains God's Word, but is God's Word, and hence no errors or contradictions of any sort are found therein. (D. 1)<sup>v</sup>

Nevertheless, during the preparations for the merger of the Iowa, Ohio, and Buffalo Synods into the old ALC in 1930 the Iowa Synod showed that it had a different spirit. The statement on Scripture in the proposed constitution for the united church was similar to the statement in the Minneapolis Theses, which had been produced by the three fore-named synods plus the Norwegian Synod. It could be interpreted in a very conservative way.

The Synod accepts all the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament as the inspired and inerrant Word of God and as the only source, norm and guide of faith and life.

Iowa offered the following amendment:

The Synod accepts all the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament as the inspired Word of God and as the only inerrant source, norm and guide of faith and life.<sup>vi</sup>

The change, which no longer claimed that Scripture was inerrant, but only that it functioned inerrantly as a source of faith, provoked protests from Ohio and Buffalo, so Iowa issued a statement affirming its acceptance of inspiration and inerrancy which include this comment:

When we confess the inerrancy of the Bible, as we now have it, we do not maintain that there are no inaccuracies of transcription, different readings, omissions and minor additions to the original text, or that there are no passages which *to us* seem to be contradictions and discrepancies, which, however, do not affect the interests of salvation or faith.<sup>vii</sup>

The merger went ahead as planned despite the evasive statements of Iowa. After the merger the ALC tried to steer a middle course between Missouri and the ULCA. Though he had himself wavered on the doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy in the 1920s, ALC theologian J. Michael Reu opposed the liberal tendencies of the ULCA in this matter during discussions in the 1930s. The ALC, however, gave in to the ULCA view in the Pittsburgh Agreement of 1940, since it settled on an ambiguous statement that was interpreted differently by the two parties.<sup>viii</sup>

In 1932 the Missouri Synod reaffirmed its clear stand in the *Brief Statement*:

Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters. (Conclusion of Article 1)

Nevertheless, in the 1930s the Missouri Synod began to take a more tolerant view of weak statements emanating out of the ALC, with which it had begun merger negotiations.

By the 1930s the critical view of Scripture had already made considerably greater inroads into old, mainline, Eastern Lutheranism. The ULCA had laid out its ecumenical standards in the 1920 Washington Declaration and the 1934 Savannah Declaration, both of which took a weak stand on Scripture and the Confessions ("we believe that in the Holy Scriptures we have a permanent and authoritative record of apostolic truth which is the ground of Christian faith).<sup>ix</sup>

This weak position on Scripture was made explicit in the 1938 Baltimore Declaration, as is illustrated by the following excerpts:

III. We believe that in its most real sense the Word of God is the Gospel, i.e., the message concerning Jesus Christ.

IV. We believe that in a wider sense the Word of God is that revelation of Himself which began at the beginning of human history...and reached its fullness and completion in the life and work of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

V. We believe the whole revelation of God to men which reached completion in Christ...is faithfully recorded and preserved in the Holy Scriptures, through which alone it comes to us. We therefore accept the Holy Scriptures as the infallible truth of God in all matters that pertain to His revelation and our salvation. We also believe that the Scriptures are now, and will be for all time to come, God's revelation of Himself. And because He continues to make Himself known through them, we believe that the Scriptures also are the Word of God.

VII. We believe that the whole body of the Scriptures is inspired by God... We do not venture to define the mode or manner of this inspiration, since God's ways of using human instruments are past our finding out.<sup>x</sup>

Here we see that all the elements of the present ELCA position, which we will consider later in this paper, were already explicitly present in 1938. Scripture is the Word of God, not because it is the very words of God, but because it functions reliably as a medium of revelation. Individual professors of the ULCA were already taking stands inconsistent with the orthodox doctrine of Scripture in the late 20s and early 30s. C.E. Jacobs was a leader in this movement. The ULCA and LCMS recognized their differences in this area, but the LCMS continued to work toward fellowship with the ALC in spite of the ALC's ambiguous position on Scripture that attempted to reach out in both directions. The Wisconsin Synod's protest against this action were the beginning of the conflict between WELS and the LCMS which culminated in the end of their century-long fellowship in 1961.<sup>xi</sup>

In the next two sections we will consider how this festering dispute over the interpretation of Scripture worked itself out in the LCMS and the ELCA.

## **II. A Partial Victory For Inerrancy in the LCMS**

Since its founding in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the Missouri Synod had been the undisputed champion of confessional Lutheranism throughout the world. When the controversies over Scripture between liberals and fundamentalists began to tear apart American Protestantism around the turn of the century,<sup>xii</sup> the churches of the Synodical Conference were relatively untouched. The adoption of the *Brief Statement* in 1932 seemed to verify and solidify Missouri's staunch position, but already in the 1930s the LCMS began to loosen its practices concerning doctrine and church fellowship because of its desire to work toward fellowship with the ALC. This led Missouri to a tendency to be too uncritical of the weak or ambiguous actions and statements of the ALC as it tried to reach out both to the ULCA on the left and to Missouri on the right.

Nevertheless, even the Missourians who were supportive of their synod's new ecumenical direction continued to defend inerrancy. In 1945, the Statement of the Forty-four,

which was a landmark in the more ecumenical turn of the Missouri Synod, affirmed inerrancy in its second thesis. The statement was, however, lacking in specifics concerning the nature of inerrancy. Two of its most prominent signatories, William Arndt and Theodore Graebner, continued to defend inerrancy, though they were somewhat oblivious to its denial by the other party in the merger efforts.

Nevertheless, critical views of Scripture were beginning to appear in the LCMS in the late 40s and early 50s. “Neo-Lutheranism” patterned after Karl Barth’s neo-orthodoxy became a powerful force in Lutheran seminaries after World War II.<sup>xiii</sup> This trend was made very clear in the ULCA by such events as the publication of Joseph Sittler’s *The Doctrine of the Word* in 1948, which declared that “to assert the inerrancy of the text of Scripture is to elevate to a normative position an arbitrary theological construction” (p. 68).

One of the first symptoms of the infection in the LCMS was the publication by Concordia Publishing House of Jaroslav Pelikan’s *From Luther to Kierkegaard* in 1950. Pelikan was serving on the faculty of Concordia, St. Louis, at the time. In this book Pelikan expressed admiration for the theological principles of Kierkegaard and faulted the orthodox view of Scripture. Later Pelikan added Schleiermacher, and even Tillich, to his list of theological models.<sup>xiv</sup>

By the 1953-1954 school year unrest about verbal inspiration had come out into the open at Concordia Seminary. In the next few years the student journal *Seminarian* gave prominence to the neo-orthodox view. It is generally maintained that the virus was introduced by teachers who had studied in the leading graduate schools of theology in Germany and America, where they had been changed by the teachings of the neoorthodox like Barth and Brunner and such “moderates” as Werner Elert. By 1959 even the *Walter League Messenger* was singing the praises of Barth as “the Einstein of theology.”<sup>xv</sup> By the end of the 1960s the LCMS seminary at St. Louis was almost completely controlled by professors who denied the inerrancy of Scripture and who practiced the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible. The neo-orthodox influence on the curriculum which was already appearing in the late 50s would claim dominance a decade later during the presidency of John Tietjen.

Some of the leading voices of the resistance to the liberal wave were Raymond Surburg, Robert Preus, Walter A. Maier, Harry Huth, Eugene Klug, Ralph Bohlmann, and John Warwick Montgomery. An independent voice on the side-lines was Herman Otten’s *Lutheran News*.

Among the prominent spokesmen for the liberal cause were Paul Bretscher, Robert Scharlemann, Norman Habel, Edgar Krentz, W. Bartling, and W. Bouman.<sup>xvi</sup>

The 1959 LCMS convention at San Francisco had resolved that all pastors and professors must teach according to the *Brief Statement*, but the 1962 convention in Cleveland wiped out the possibility of discipline by rescinding the 1959 resolution as an unconstitutional addition to the doctrinal standards of the synod and by merely appealing to all teachers to respect the *Brief Statement*. Liberal influence in the synod crested with the adoption of the notorious Mission Affirmations in 1965 and membership in LCUSA in 1965-67. The LCMS also established the long-awaited full church fellowship with the ALC in 1969, but this year also marked a turn of the tide, signaled by the election of J.A.O. Preus as president of the LCMS.

The ill-fated administration of Oliver Harms (1962-69) had allowed the LCMS to drift further in the liberal direction. Harms himself seemed to be committed to orthodoxy, but he was duped by the seminary faculty as his predecessor John Behnken had been.<sup>xvii</sup> His determination to have fellowship with the ALC may have been a factor in his blindness to the need to rein in an

out-of-control seminary faculty. The election of Preus signaled a desire for action on the part of many in the synod.

In 1970 the “moderates” called for tolerance and diversity in “A Call to Openness and Trust” (although they showed little interest in diversity when they controlled the staffing of the St. Louis seminary). President Preus’s Fact Finding Committee interviewed members of the seminary faculty in 1970 and 1971 and reported its findings to the synod in 1972 (“Report of the Synodical President,” also known as “the Blue Book”). It concluded that the St. Louis faculty did not teach verbal inspiration at all and that their definition of inerrancy was severely limited. Many of the professors were committed to the historical-critical method and were permissive of doctrinal positions not in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions (p. 22-25).

The seminary faculty’s response to charges of false teaching was a pair of pamphlets, “Faithful to Our Calling, Faithful to Our Lord.” This is the heart of its statement on inerrancy:

Throughout the Scriptures little is said about precisely how the prophets or apostles were inspired. The Spirit is seen as the living power of God accomplishing His purposes through them; and His ultimate purpose is the salvation of all men through Jesus Christ. To focus on the how of inspiration, therefore, is to divert our attention from the Christ to whom the Spirit directs us. In achieving God’s purposes, the Spirit operates with men and women who are limited and conditioned by the culture and language of their times. The Word of Promise was spoken amid the ambiguities of human lives and within the limitations of human language. Yet the Word always gets through to God’s community, and His Promise is true for all who believe it. They can rely on that Word through which the Spirit works. Because of the Gospel we affirm the reliability of the Scriptures, not vice versa. We believe the Scriptures because we believe in Jesus Christ. He is the one who interprets the Father to us; He is the key to understanding the Scriptures.

The historical character of the Scripture means that we cannot demand that the biblical authors possess the same knowledge of science or geology as we do, or that they operate with the same criteria of what is history or accuracy. The reliability or “inerrancy” of the Scriptures cannot be determined by twentieth century standards of factuality. Nor do the Scriptures link the work of the Holy Spirit with this kind of “inerrancy.” The purpose of the Spirit imparted by our Lord is to lead us into the whole truth about what God was doing in Jesus Christ, that we might be redeemed and He may be glorified. In disclosing that Truth God does not err, and in achieving that purpose the Spirit active in the Word does not lead us astray; to that the Spirit within us bears witness. (I, p. 27)

Here is “gospel reductionism” full-blown.

Jacob Preus issued “A Statement of Biblical and Confessional Principles” as a summary of the doctrine which was expected from all faithful pastors and teachers in the Missouri Synod. The 1973 synod convention at New Orleans endorsed Preus’s Statement and condemned the position of the seminary faculty, but no discipline immediately followed. Responsibility for discipline was entrusted to the newly elected seminary board.

A number of the dissident faculty members were removed by “honorable retirement” or non-renewal of the contracts of non-tenured teachers. A key skirmish in this battle was the removal of Arlis Ehlen by non-renewal of his contract. In his defense of Ehlen, Tietjen declared that “it is not possible for Dr. Ehlen to teach any of his assigned courses at the seminary level of instruction, thus taking the text of the Holy Scriptures with utter seriousness, without using historical-critical methodology.”<sup>xviii</sup> The battle between Preus and the seminary faculty reached



its conclusion in 1974 when Tietjen was suspended (not dismissed) from his position as president of the seminary. In protest, after some days of a student-declared moratorium on classes, nearly all of the seminary professors and students left the seminary to show their support for Tietjen. They apparently thought they could force the LCMS to reinstate the suspended seminary president in order to get them all to come back to the seminary. Instead their resignations were accepted and the LCMS started to rebuild the seminary without the protesters.<sup>xix</sup> Only 5 of 48 professors remained. The protesters formed their own seminary called Seminex (Seminary in Exile). In 1976 with some of their supporters they formed the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches with about 100,000 members. In 1988 the AELC joined the ELCA merger, but its members have not necessarily been “happy campers” there.

Especially interesting is the role of Professor Martin Scharlemann in this struggle. He had set off a fire-storm in 1959 with his essays “The Inerrancy of Scripture” and “Revelation and Inspiration”, which challenged the doctrine of Scripture as taught in the *Brief Statement*. His 1959 conference essay “The Bible as Record, Witness and Medium” added fuel to the fire when it pointed out that “this ancient notion of inspiration, the formal principle, which got into the church by way of the Greek apologists, brings with it a theory of inerrancy that is quite misleading and cannot be sustained from the Scriptures themselves.”<sup>xx</sup> This 26-page paper is loaded with statements of the neo-orthodox view of Scripture.” Scharlemann, nevertheless, claimed that he defended the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and that his essays were only “exploratory.” The St. Louis faculty’s defense of Scharleman, entitled “The Form and Function of the Holy Scriptures” said, “The Scriptures express what God wants them to say and accomplish what God wants them to do. In this sense, and in the fulfillment of this function they are inerrant, infallible and wholly reliable.”<sup>xxi</sup> Nevertheless, on the basis of his assurances Scharlemann was allowed to withdraw the essays from discussion, and the 1962 LCMS convention accepted his apology for disturbing the church.

In the showdown that came in the early 70s Scharlemann was one of the “faithful five” who opposed the Tietjen administration and remained with Concordia Seminary after the Seminex walkout. Scharlemann was harshly condemned by the majority of his colleagues for requesting and supporting the Preus investigation. Scharlemann may have had a true change of heart when he saw where his views were leading the LCMS, but the fact remains that his essays, both in their content and in the way that they were dealt with, were a big factor in letting the genie out of the bottle in the LCMS.<sup>xxii</sup> Frederick Danker of Seminex, a fierce foe of Scharlemann, maintained that Scharlemann retained his critical views of Scripture even in the 1970s when he acted as president of the purged St. Louis seminary.<sup>xxiii</sup>

When the ALC insisted on ordaining women as pastors, the LCMS ended its fellowship with the ALC in 1981. It also refused to enter the ELCA merger in 1988. It has consistently objected to the doctrinal excesses of the ELCA. The LCMS, however, remains very divided on many doctrines and practices because many supporters of the Seminex viewpoint remain in the LCMS. There seems to be no move to discipline those who hold to unscriptural doctrines and practices. The LCMS continues to seek some level of cooperation with the ELCA, but not full pulpit and altar fellowship. The quest for wider fellowships which was a major factor in creating Missouri’s problems seems to be unchanged. There are troubling signs that remnants of the moderate view of Scripture remain, for example, the almost complete lack of reference to direct Messianic prophecy in the Concordia Study Bible. In doctrinal controversies there is a disturbing tendency even for conservatives in the LCMS to rely on mining the Confessions and Lutheran

fathers for quotations rather than on emphasizing the primacy of exegesis of Scripture. For these reasons, we would classify the outcome of the battle in Missouri as “a partial victory.”

### **III. The Loss of the Doctrine of Scripture in the ELCA**

In previous sections of this paper we have seen how the negative critical view of Scripture made steady in-roads into the Lutheran church in America. We have seen how the LCMS won a partial victory over the incursion of the critical view of Scripture. In this last section we will see how the battle for the Bible has largely been lost in the largest body of American Lutheranism, the ELCA.

The critical doctrinal battle during the formation of the ELCA was the dispute about whether the church should retain the doctrine of biblical inerrancy in its confession. We must, therefore, examine this issue at greater length. The official confession states:

a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection, God fashions a new creation.

b. The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world. COF 2.02

ELCA theologian Timothy Lull comments:

Why is this section so long? Perhaps misunderstanding is likely at this point. In our society “Word of God” is likely to be heard as Bible or Holy Scripture. That is part of the meaning. But Lutherans intend something more than praising the Bible when they attribute faith to the power of the Word. (*The Lutheran*, Nov. 2, 1988, p. 17)

It is clear from sections a and b of the confession and from Lull’s remarks that these two sections (although true in and of themselves) are intended to detract from the unique importance of Scripture as the only primary source of the Word of God which we have available to us today. The confession does not clearly state whether Scripture actually reveals specific, true statements from God or simply conveys testimony about the religious experience of its writers. Sections b and c imply that present-day preaching from Scripture and our act of listening to preaching from Scripture are on the same level as the inspiration of Scripture. They minimize the importance of the historical content of Scripture and exalt our experiencing of revelation. That this is deliberate is clear from Lull’s commentary on this article:

Lutherans turn to Scriptures for personal study or community teaching knowing already that at their heart is to be found not many things, but one thing: the saving knowledge of the Triune God revealed in Jesus’ preaching. We confess what we have learned there—that God’s chief purpose has been to shower love and salvation on us, not primarily to fill us with information nor to make us moral people. These things are in the Bible too, and it is a key task of faith to see how they are related to the central message of Jesus Christ.

For the Bible to be the Word of God in this strong effective sense, it cannot be a dead book—however perfect or inspired. It must be a living medium through which the Spirit moves us to believe the good news that we read there. This is why the Spirit is mentioned both as inspiring the authors—and equally important—as speaking to us “to create and sustain Christian faith.”

Some of what Lull says can be understood correctly, but the intention is clearly to reduce the content of Scripture which must be believed to a gospel core and to permit the view that the effect the Bible has on us is more important than what the Bible says. How are believers to relate the moral commands of Scripture to the central message of Scripture about salvation? Are we to use the commands as a guide for gospel-motivated Christian living or may we dismiss them as secondary, unessential matters? How is the historical information in Scripture to be related to the central truth of the gospel? Is it a fictional framework for the message or an account of the real events through which God carried out his plan? Both possibilities are left wide open in the ELCA.

The vague, non-committal nature of this confession is clearly illustrated by the two key statements on Scripture:

The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. COF 2.02

This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life. COF 2.03

The confession twice declares the ELCA’s loyalty to Scripture as the inspired Word of God. This may fool the unsuspecting, but anyone who paid attention to the merger negotiations could see that this wording was a deliberate watering down of the statement concerning Scripture in the ALC constitution, which had included the term “inerrant.” There were pleas to retain the concept of inerrancy, but they were decisively rejected. Lull comments:

What is the ELCA’s specific view of the authority of Scripture? The confession simply affirms that the Bible is “the inspired Word of God.” Some Lutherans are disappointed that there is no claim that the Bible is infallible, inerrant, or non-contradictory. But it serves us well not to rush by “inspired” without considering its strong claim. The ELCA affirms that God has spoken and still speaks through the Bible to bring us to faith. Adjectives are not piled up to emphasize the meaning of “inspired.” Instead, the confession makes a sweeping claim about the Bible’s function. (*The Lutheran*, Nov. 23, 1988, p. 17)

The ELCA’s confession is clearly intended to reject verbal, plenary inspiration and to allow for the view that there are many errors in Scripture. As a result of the pre-merger debate about this section of the confession *The Lutheran* ran an article to explain the intention of this paragraph to its readers (*The Lutheran*, Oct. 15, 1986). After identifying “inerrancy” as a Fundamentalist term borrowed by some Lutherans, the article summarizes the views of the ALC and LCA concerning Scripture.

When the LCA and the new ALC appeared on the scene in the early 1960’s, many people wondered, “Why two churches instead of one?” One reason was a division of opinion over Scripture. The leaders of the churches that formed the ALC insisted on the position their predecessors had taken in 1919 and 1930, when they described the Bible as “the

divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God” in the constitution of the new ALC. The LCA constitution, on the other hand, shows the influence of the historical-critical approach.

It is clear which approach won out in the ELCA statement. The more liberal ULCA/LCA approach is the clear victor. However, the victory did not require much of a battle, because it is clear that the 1960 ALC confession was a sham from the start. From the beginning the ALC’s confession of scriptural inerrancy was a ploy to calm the conservatives. Even while the leading theologians were accepting the word “inerrant” in the constitution, they were publicly rejecting its real meaning.

In their efforts to calm ALC conservatives and justify the omission of “inerrancy” from the ELCA constitution ALC officials explained that the word “inerrancy” in the ALC constitution never had any real and final meaning. In *The Lutheran Standard* (Dec. 12, 1986) Lowell Erdahl cited the autobiography of Fredrik Schiøtz to substantiate this claim and concluded, “Let’s stop scrapping over the ambiguous, confusing, misleading, unnecessary word ‘inerrant.’”<sup>xxiv</sup>

The only positive thing that can be said about this whole development is that the former deception and cover-up of historical-critical conclusions about the Bible have been replaced by an open rejection of inerrancy and by an attempt to educate the laity to the “virtues” of critical methods of Bible study. A concerted effort has been made to inform the laity and to win them over to the negative critical method. (This effort has been only partly successful. A post-merger poll in *The Lutheran* revealed that about 60% of ELCA lay people believe in scriptural inerrancy in some form, but 80% of the pastors believe that there are historical and factual errors in the Bible.) One can only hope that the ELCA theologians have overplayed their hand and that their open propaganda for their critical views will open the eyes of some lay people and that they will reject the package they have been sold. However, it seems overly optimistic to expect that many ELCA members will be moved to action. Any who had their eyes open should have known what they were getting in the ELCA confession. Its implications were clearly revealed before ratification, yet very few refused to go along with it. It can be expected that if the popularization of critical views continues in the ELCA there will be a significant decline in the percentage of the laity that holds to inerrancy.

### **The Dogmatic Elaboration**

The denial of inerrancy (and, in reality, of inspiration in the scriptural sense of the term) is fairly subtle in the ELCA confession. It is much more direct and forthright in the writings of ELCA theologians. Our primary source to demonstrate this will be the textbook, *Christian Dogmatics*, which was written by six prominent theologians of the ELCA in the hopes that it would become the standard text for teaching doctrine in their seminaries. This two-volume text, published in 1984, is generally called Braaten and Jenson after its two editors, who at that time were professors of systematic theology at Chicago and Gettysburg. If the approach to doctrine which is typical of this text dominates the seminaries of the ELCA, the prospects for the survival of truly Lutheran, biblically-based doctrine in the ELCA are bleak indeed. Indeed, it needs to be stressed that Braaten and Jenson are relatively conservative in the theological spectrum of the ELCA. Many of the theological books published by Fortress go much further than Braaten and Jenson in abandoning biblical doctrine.

It is not surprising that careful study of Bible passages is almost totally absent from Braaten and Jenson’s work. Their presentation consists almost entirely of analysis and criticism

of the traditional teachings of the churches, followed by their proposal for changing the doctrine to make it more appropriate for today. This approach is the natural result of the authors' rejection of the Scripture as a reliable, authoritative source for dogmatics. Although they call Scripture "the source and norm for the knowledge of God's revelation which concerns the Christian faith," they limit the authority of the Bible for Christian theology to the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Christian Scriptures bear witness. This is made very clear in the chapter on Scripture, which was written by Braaten.

The introductory thesis for his chapter on Scripture is reproduced here in its entirety:

The Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of the knowledge of God's revelation which concerns the Christian faith. The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness—the "canon within the canon." Jesus Christ himself is the Lord of the Scriptures, the source and scope of its authority. (I, 61)

Notice that for Braaten the Scriptures are no longer written revelation from God, but the source of knowledge of revelation about faith. This means that Scripture does not reveal facts about God which are the basis for our faith, but tells us about the faith experiences of the apostles so that we can have the same experience. This makes Scripture less than the "very words of God" (Romans 3:2).

We certainly agree with Braaten that the gospel is the heart of Scripture, but all other doctrines serve the gospel. The correct biblical teaching of a specific doctrine must be based on all of the passages that speak about that specific topic, not on some vague personal opinion deduced from a "principle of the gospel." For example, the terrible reality of hell cannot be denied on the basis of the gospel proclamation of God's love since many other passages clearly speak of hell. The role of women in the church must not be based on imaginative interpretation of some alleged "gospel principle of equality," but it must be based on the passages which specifically address the issue of women's role in the church. Every passage of Scripture is authoritative for the specific topic which it addresses.

A basic premise of Braaten is that the historical-critical method has made the traditional view of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture obsolete. His grounds for abandoning the doctrine of biblical inerrancy are the alleged exposure of many errors and contradictions in the biblical text and an alleged desire to avoid elevating the Bible as an idol above Christ. The doctrine of the Word which characterizes this book is that the Bible is the Word of God only in a derived way. The Bible is the Word of God, not so much because it was given by inspiration of God, but because it conveys the message of salvation. According to this view it is not possible to assume the literal historicity of events recorded in the Bible.

Braaten says,

In modern Protestant fundamentalism [Braaten's term for groups like the WELS, ELS, and the LCMS], which ironically claims to bear the legacy of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture is extended to include infallible information on all kinds of subjects. Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel. Non-fundamentalist Protestants [i.e. ELCA] also accept the Bible as the Word of God in some sense, but they point out that the concept of the Word of God, as Barth made clear, cannot be confined to the Bible. (I, 74,75)

Today it is impossible to assume the historicity of the things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events.

Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place. (I, 76)

This section gives a pretty good idea of what impression, if any, ELCA seminary students would get of WELS and ELS. Our seminaries certainly cannot be classified among the “great theological schools” by Braaten’s standards. ELCA theologians “accept the Bible as the Word of God *in some sense*.” Do ELCA lay people realize this is the real meaning of their confession’s statement, “This church accepts the canonical Scriptures as the inspired Word of God”?

Braaten and Jenson reduce the Bible to a source book for the imaginative reconstruction of church doctrine. The disastrous effects of this approach upon any attempt to produce a biblical dogmatics are exposed by a statement which concludes the introduction:

Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrong-headed, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus. (I, 77)

No wonder intercommunion with the Reformed, convergence on justification with Rome, and acceptance of the episcopate have made their home in Lutheranism.

### **Popularization of this Teaching**

If members of the LCA and ALC were formerly unaware of how completely their theologians have abandoned the inerrancy of Scripture, they no longer have an excuse for such ignorance in the ELCA. The abandonment of any meaningful understanding of inerrancy and the adoption of the conclusions of negative criticism of the Bible are not hidden away in obscure writings of ELCA dogmaticians. They are being proclaimed in *The Lutheran* and in the educational publications of the ELCA. Those who remain in the ELCA in spite of this false teaching can hardly claim ignorance as a plausible defense. How heartbreaking that so few are willing to take a stand for the truth.

In recent years there has been a definite effort to bring the laity up-to-date with recent doctrinal developments in the ELCA. Even before the merger both the LCA and ALC had programs to introduce and popularize the historical-critical approach to Scripture among the laity. In 1984 the ALC produced a series of essays published under the collective title *The Doctrine of the Word in the Lutheran Church*. This document was sent to all congregations as part of the pre-merger effort to win acceptance of the historical-critical method. The ALC’s *Search* and the LCA’s *Word and Witness* programs were other efforts toward this goal. Prior to the merger *The Lutheran* and *The Lutheran Standard* published numerous articles to increase the acceptance of the historical-critical method among the laity.

To assess how this campaign is proceeding in the ELCA we will consider two sources: the doctrinal leadership provided by the first presiding bishop and the ELCA publications for the laity.

### **Bishop Chilstrom**

For better or for worse the doctrinal direction of a church will be influenced by its leader. As the first bishop of the ELCA Herbert Chilstrom had a unique opportunity to influence the

direction of the new church. Unfortunately, his position on Scripture was made clear in an interview published even before the merger was complete (*The Lutheran*, March 21, 1984).

The prescriptive method [of using Scripture] is based on the assumption that Scripture is used to discover final answers to questions. Thus, when confronted with a particularly thorny issue, one could go to Scripture, study carefully every text that addresses the issue and come up with a conclusive response. Scripture as “norm” means Scripture as answer book.

I suspect that most of us in the LCA come at these matters from the descriptive method. We see Scripture as no less important. . . . But for us “norm” means “guide” rather than “rule.” Having informed ourselves of what Scripture has to say, we go on to ask questions about other ways in which God may be trying to enlighten us.

In the interview Chilstrom expressed the opinion that his view of Scripture is “very conservative.” With such leadership is it any wonder that the troops are confused and doctrinal chaos reigns?

### ***The Lutheran***

For well over a decade *The Lutheran* has clearly set forth the critical view of Scripture that dominates the ELCA. We will cite just a few examples from its question and answer column. (In some cases the answers are abbreviated here.)

*Question: Is it now considered naive or even heresy for Lutherans to believe that Adam and Eve were real people?*

For centuries the church believed in the actual existence of Adam and Eve. Recent scholarship suggests that the significance of the Adam and Eve stories is not their literal truth or lack of it but the theological points they make about the creation of humankind in God’s image.

If someone believes Adam and Eve were historic people, and this view is helpful to their Christian life, it is not good ministry to rip such a viewpoint from them. Nor should the faith of those who understand these stories in a symbolic way be questioned. (June 22, 1988, p. 42)

*Question: There are rumors in my congregation that ELCA does not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. Is this true?*

Please gently correct those who believe the rumors you have heard because they are false . . . . The framers of the [ELCA] confession, following the insights of many Lutheran theologians, believe that this is a more accurate understanding of God’s intention for the Scriptures than the term inerrancy. The non-Lutheran, 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of inerrancy leads to many unhelpful misunderstandings and questions like inerrant in what way? Is the Bible inerrant in matters of history? genealogy? astronomy? These questions lead us directly away from the Scripture’s purpose, which is to declare Christ, that we might believe and be saved. The Bible is the source and norm of the church’s life, not because it gives us unerring information, but because God continues to speak through it. (July 13, 1988, p. 46)

*Question: Does the ELCA teach the inerrancy of the Scriptures the way fundamentalist churches do?*

No. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired word God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life (ELCA Statement of Faith). We believe the Scriptures because they proclaim Christ, which was Martin Luther's practice. The Scriptures do not need us to defend them. Rather, we need to "read mark, learn and inwardly digest" them, as Luther instructed, so that our words and lives proclaim Christ.

The fundamentalist approach sidetracks the meaning of the Scriptures, arguing that the Bible is inerrant in the fields of history, geography and nature. The ELCA takes the Bible seriously on its own terms—as the bearer of Christ. (January 2000, p. 19)

Here the Barthian view and gospel reductionism are clearly on display for any but the most naive to recognize. The destructive view of Scripture set forth in the ELCA confession and taught by its theologians is being popularized in its congregations.

### **How those who Believed in Inerrancy Lost the Truth**

The biggest losers in the ELCA merger were the conservatives, mostly in the ALC, who believed in inerrancy. Many voices in the ALC were raised against the ELCA merger. The Fellowship of Evangelical Lutheran Laity and Pastors and the Iowa Committee for Lutheran Cooperation opposed the merger or tried to influence it in a more conservative direction. More than 800 ALC congregations voted against the merger, but only about 40 ALC congregations refused to enter the merger when the majority accepted it. Why this great difference?

The conservative, confessional movement in the ALC that opposed the merger failed to have any significant effect on the new church because it was a house-divided from the very beginning. It was a shaky alliance of orthodox Lutherans, fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, neo-orthodox, and people alarmed by the promotion of sexual immorality in the LCA and ALC. They all were disturbed by certain doctrines and practices of the new church, but they themselves had no true agreement on the nature of scriptural inerrancy nor on the principles of church fellowship. A few of those who held the strongest views on Scripture refused to join the ELCA and formed a new church body, the American Association of Lutheran Congregations (AALC), but this group has suffered divisions because they did not have a common, clear understanding of inspiration and inerrancy, nor were they united in doctrine. Similar problems seem to exist in other small groups that have left the ELCA.

Even before the merger was completed many of the conservatives had announced that they would go along with the merger even if their beliefs were rejected by the ELCA's leaders. This certainly undermined any influence their testimony in favor of inerrancy might have had. Many charismatics stayed with the ELCA in the naive hope that their spirituality could somehow revitalize a church which had no solid doctrinal foundation. A significant reason for the failure of the conservative movement to have much impact on the merger may have been that so many of its supporters were much more concerned about personal religious experience than about sound doctrinal statements. In the end most of them placed personal ties and group loyalties ahead of the truth of God's Word. Many other ALC members sympathized with the moral and doctrinal concerns of the protesters, but they remained silent while the battle was lost. Although a few of



those who remain in ELCA fight for biblical truth, a strong public witness for the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy has almost been silenced in the ELCA. As a result almost every possible denial of biblical doctrine is tolerated.

It should be clear that confessional Lutherans and the advocates of critical views of Scripture can never reach agreement in doctrine. Where there is no agreement that Scripture is the rule of doctrine, attempts to reach doctrinal agreement are useless.

Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, important as it is, is no substitute for agreement on the doctrine of Scripture, because many contemporary issues, such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the role of women in the church, etc., are not directly dealt with in the Confessions. Furthermore, those who limit their acceptance of the accuracy and authority of Scripture also limit their subscription to the Confessions.

An alarming tendency among confessional Lutherans is the practice of searching the Confessions and Lutheran fathers for quotations to establish the required doctrine of the church without first going through a careful exegesis of Scripture. Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions and loyalty to their teachings is important, but it is not a substitute for establishing doctrine directly from Scripture. The confessions themselves do not wish to be a second source of doctrine, but a secondary source which testifies to the doctrine contained in Scripture. No doctrine can be established without Scripture, and in controversy confessional Lutherans should always turn first to Scripture, not the Confessions. The introduction to the Formula of Concord states this principle very clearly.

### **Some Lessons Learned from the Struggle for Inerrancy in American Lutheranism**

What can we learn from the battle over inerrancy in American Lutheranism to avoid suffering the same losses which have occurred elsewhere?

- 1) Theologians who reject the inerrancy of Scripture usually try to hide their unbelief from devout pastors and lay people by using language which makes it sound as if they believe in inspiration even though they believe the Bible is full of errors. They like to cloak their teaching with the mantle of Luther. We must always be on the lookout for false teachers. They do not openly announce themselves until they have firm control.
- 2) Official statements proclaiming belief in the inerrancy of Scripture are of no value if theologians are allowed to ignore them and to teach that the Bible is full of errors. The church must remove from office those theologians and pastors who continue to deny the inerrancy of Scripture after they have been admonished.
- 3) If theologians and pastors are allowed to reject the inerrancy of Scripture, very soon every other doctrine is under attack, including even the doctrine of justification and the reality of Jesus' resurrection.
- 4) Devout Lutherans who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture cannot preserve the true teachings of the Bible for themselves, for their children, and for future generations unless they separate themselves from false teachers who deny these truths.
- 5) Loyalty to the Lutheran confessions is an important mark of true Lutheranism, but it is not a substitute for a clear stand on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture nor for a consistent practice based on the solo scripture.
- 6) The crucial first step for any group of Lutherans trying to restore and maintain sound confessional Lutheranism, which holds to all of the teachings of the Bible, is to be sure that they share a common understanding of the inerrancy of Scripture. This understanding must be based on Scripture's own statements about its origin and character, not on human

opinions. Such a group must be sure that they are committed to this belief as the necessary foundation and rule for all of their other efforts to establish and maintain agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture.

### **What Can We Do?**

- 1) *Teach the doctrine.* The doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy can't be tucked away in old dogmatics books. It belongs in our sermons, in our Bible classes, in our catechism classes, and in our popular publications. Teaching the whole truth includes testified against error and exposing the deceptive language of false teachers.
- 2) *Stress the importance of the doctrine.* I am sure most of you have been asked, "What difference does it make if Jonah was swallowed by a fish?" We must make it clear that God's Word hangs together as a whole. If we dismiss the historicity of such accounts as the story of Jonah, there is no reason not to apply the same canons of judgment to the words and works of Christ, as the Jesus Seminar has demonstrated.
- 3) *Be on guard against heterodox influences.* Graduate study in non-Lutheran and liberal theology schools, especially by young scholars who had never served in the parish ministry, played a significant role in the introduction of historical criticism into confessional Lutheran schools. Once the presuppositions of the historical method are accepted, it is impossible to use the method in a controlled, moderate way.
- 4) *Preach the whole counsel of God.* The doctrine of the Word does not stand alone. If one teaching falls, the wave of error spreads out over others. When any teaching of Scripture is denied, the clarity and authority of Scripture are undermined.
- 5) *Continue to testify to the whole church.* Because of our love for their souls we should continue to sound the warning against the deadly results of the historical critical method also to the victims of heterodox churches.
- 6) *Pray.* Finally, we must realize that though we are to work energetically and faithfully, the victory does not depend on us, but on the power of the Spirit.
- 7) *Use the Word devotionally.* Our confidence in the clarity and power of the Word grows as we use it devotionally. As Calov said:

When we humbly submit to God who speaks to us in his Word, we take our reason captive in obedience to faith, we accord faith to those things that ought to be believed and obedience to those things that ought to be done.

The Word is its own best defender. Our task is to turn it loose, so that people are compelled by its power. Its power does not depend on us but on the Spirit who speaks through its words, which he revealed.

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<sup>i</sup> Πᾶσα γραπὴ θεόπνευστος

<sup>ii</sup> οὐ γὰρ θελήματι ἀνθρώπου ἠνέχθη προφητεία ποτέ, ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι.

<sup>iii</sup> Any method of biblical interpretation which allows human reason or any field of knowledge to pass judgment on the truthfulness of the Bible is “historical-critical.”

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<sup>iv</sup> The beginnings of modern biblical criticism are usually attributed to the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677) and the French priest Richard Simon (d. 1712). Key figures in the 18<sup>th</sup> century were J.S. Semler (d. 1791) and J.G. Herder (d. 1803).

<sup>v</sup> Wolf, p. 364.

<sup>vi</sup> Wolf, p. 331.

<sup>vii</sup> Wolf, p. 333.

<sup>viii</sup> Nelson, p. 97-108.

<sup>ix</sup> Nelson, p. 72.

<sup>x</sup> Wolf, p. 357-359.

<sup>xi</sup> Wolf, p. 402.

<sup>xii</sup> An early salvo in this war was the conflict revolving around B.B. Warfield and C.A. Briggs beginning in the 1880s. J. Gresham Machen and R.D. Wilson were key defenders of the orthodox view in the controversies that led to the division of the Presbyterian church in 1929. The surge of the Evangelical movement in the 1940s and 50s seemed to be a token of better things to come, but in the last two decades there has been a drastic decline of the doctrine of Scripture in American Evangelicalism. A failure to practice scriptural principles of fellowship seems to have been the key factor.

<sup>xiii</sup> Though Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, commonly known as "the white elephant" because of its size and color, is not widely read, the parallels between his terminology and that of the neo-orthodox is obvious. "The Holy Scripture too is the Word of God...The recollection of God's past revelation...or better, the Bible's imposition of itself on the strength of its special content...all that is an event and can only be understood as an event. In this event the Bible is the Word of God" (CD I, p. 122).

<sup>xiv</sup> Marquart, p. 115.

<sup>xv</sup> Marquart, p. 116.

<sup>xvi</sup> Marquart, p. 124 ff. Baker, p. 34, 48-54. See the list at the beginning of "Faithful to Our Calling."

<sup>xvii</sup> Marquart, p. 93-100. Baker, p. 44-48.

<sup>xviii</sup> Marquart, p. 92.

<sup>xix</sup> In his defense of the Seminex faction Danker presents them as knowing martyrs who were aware they would not be re-called. The seminary board's account of the departure is in *Exodus from Concordia*.

<sup>xx</sup> Schmitzer, p. 8. *State of the Church*, p. 3.

<sup>xxi</sup> Schmitzer, p. 9. *State of the Church*, p. 39.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Baker, p. 61-65.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Danker, p. 31-32. Danker portrays Scharlemann as an opportunist who was acting out of "sour grapes" because he had been passed over for the seminary presidency.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Schioltz's statement, "The ALC holds that the inerrancy referred to here does not apply to the text but to the truths revealed for our faith, doctrine, and life," is cited in Marquart, p. 114.