

V. 43
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CONCORDIA
THEOLOGICAL
QUARTERLY

CTQ

Volume 43, Number 1

JANUARY 1979

A Tribute to Walter E. Buszin Kirby L. Koriath 1

Faith and Music M. Alfred Bichsel 12

Abortion: Historical and Biblical
Perspectives John A. Rasmussen 17

The Doctrine of the Word in Orthodox
Lutheranism C. George Fry 24

Theological Observer 45

Book Reviews 98880 50

Books Received 75



CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
FORT WAYNE, INDIANA
JAN 19 1979

The Doctrine of the Word in Orthodox Lutheranism

C. George Fry

Helen Keller, blind and deaf from birth, was once asked which of these two handicaps she felt to be worse. She immediately answered:

Deafness is a much worse misfortune, for it means the loss of the most vital stimulus—the sound of the voice which brings language, sets thoughts astir, and keeps us in the intellectual company of man.¹

Such isolation, continued Miss Keller, is a kind of spiritual death.

Institutions as well as individuals can suffer from deafness. Even the Church is not immune from this illness. But in the case of the Church the disease is fatal - for it means the inability to hear the Word of God. Throughout the Sacred Scriptures this sort of deafness is described as the terminal sickness of the Church. To his servant, the psalmist, the Lord promised, "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it," and then from the poets lips came this divine lamentation:

But my people did not listen to my voice:

Israel would have none of me.

So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
to follow their own counsels.

O that my people would listen to me . . .

(Psalm 81:10-13).

Or again, in another century, God warned through his messenger, the prophet Isaiah, of those

sons who will not hear the instruction of the Lord:

who say to the seers, "See not";

and to the prophets, "Prophesy not to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions . . ."

(Isaiah 30:9,10).

Still later, Jesus, in a remarkable conversation with the religious leaders of his generation, cited listening as a sure sign of a faithful Church: "He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (John 8:47).

If listening is a mark of a living Church and deafness is a sign of death, then we have every reason to think we are living

in an age of apostasy. More and more observers are commenting on the indifference of the contemporary Church to the Scriptures, the Voice of God. One author has spoken of the Bible as "the unknown book within the Church."² In another volume the same scholar, a Neo-Orthodox Presbyterian, lamented "the disappearance of biblical preaching" within Protestantism.³ On still a third occasion Dr. James Smart has puzzled over "the strange silence of the Scriptures within the Church." His concerns are shared by many others who fear that the famine foretold by Amos has now come to pass:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord God,
"when I will send a famine on the land;
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord"

(Amos 8:11).

The current deafness is worse than that of preceding generations, including those of ancient Israel and medieval Europe. At least the Hebrews and the Romans could plead poverty—and point to the scarcity of the Scriptures. Their perversity was the child of ignorance, not indifference. Furthermore, these forefathers responded in faith to the Word of God when it was finally heard—either in the times of Josiah or the days of Martin Luther.⁴ Modernists are denied this excuse, for contemporary Liberalism is the child of prosperity. No longer are the Scriptures copied by hand on scrolls, or written in an alien language, or hidden in a Temple compound, or chained to pillars in monastic libraries. Today Bibles abound!

Year after year the Bible continues to be the number one best-seller on the book stands. One example of the continuing demand for Bibles was provided by F. C. Aldridge, President of Gideons International. He noted that in 1970 the Gideons "distributed a record of 7.8 million Bibles throughout the world, an increase of 8.2 percent over the previous year. . . ."⁵ That same year the American Bible Society sent 132 million Scriptures in 450 languages to 151 countries. It was reported that the Bible had been translated into more than one thousand tongues. A virtual modern Pentecost has transpired as in the last few centuries the Word of God has appeared in Tamil, Urdu, Manchu, Swahili, Arabic, and Bantu as well as the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Furthermore, the Bible is published in an almost bewildering variety of formats. A recent "Grin and Bear It" cartoon showed a clergyman in a bookstore looking for a new Bible. The clerk asked, "Would you

like the Bible in hard cover, paperback, illustrated, stereo, or tape?"⁶ The difficulty is certainly not one of the availability of Scripture!

The problem is not economical, it is theological. It is one that systematicians, not publishers, must solve, for the issue is one of the interpretation not the distribution of the Bible. Professor James Smart summed it up succinctly when he wrote that we are "at a loss to understand how the words of this Book could become the very Word of God to these people of the twentieth century."⁷ That is a question for a dogmatics text, for it involves the formulation and articulation of a doctrine of the Word of God. Until the theologians have done their homework, we will continue to live with the tragic paradox of the contemporary Church—famine amidst a feast! Until there is a recognition that these Scriptures are, as Jesus said, "the word that proceeds from the mouth of God," which alone is proper food for the soul, the Church will continue to starve to death (Matthew 4:4).

ORTHODOXY

A solution to this problem is suggested if we contrast the indecision of the modern Church with the radiant certainty of the Christian community in the seventeenth century. The Age of Orthodoxy was a time of spiritual prosperity, not poverty, because then there was

. . . no equivocation, reservation, hesitation, but zealous commitment to the truth. The theologians . . . believed in something, in the *solus Christus* and the *sola Scriptura*, and there they took their stand. In such a theological posture there is power and life.⁸

This insight, once understood, is extremely helpful and immediately points the serious student of the Scriptures in the proper direction. There is, indeed, much in the Age of Orthodoxy to commend it to the attention of all twentieth century Lutherans. The giants of that era were the very first systematicians of the evangelical faith. Philip Melanchthon's *Loci* forever has the honor of being the initial volume of all subsequent Protestant dogmatics. Furthermore, these men were the theologians who were closest to Martin Luther in time and in spirit. No one can ever surpass them in that respect. For this reason they produced the normative statements of Lutheranism, now enshrined in the *Book of Concord*. It can be said of the writings of such men as Melanchthon, Martin Chemnitz, David Chytraeus, and Jacob Andreae what can be said of no other

generation of Lutheran theologians—their writings are now officially recognized and received by all the churches. Subscription to their teaching is now required by all who aspire to be pastors or teachers (or even members) of a Lutheran Church. Thus in a unique and irrevocable sense, Orthodoxy is the source of all later Lutheran theology. Everything that has followed has been either an appreciation and an elaboration of the doctrines of the Fathers, or else it has been a repudiation or distortion of their proclamation. In either case, all later generations of Lutherans stand on the shoulders of the Fathers (though it seems as if some prefer to walk in their faces). Furthermore, the Fathers established the method by which Lutheran theology is performed, for it must be biblically responsible, intellectually coherent, emotionally satisfying, and socially significant.

Preeminently, however, the writings of the Orthodox theologians exhibit all “the characteristics of true religion” identified by perceptive Christian observers through the centuries.⁹ Three of these traits merit special attention—continuity, resiliency, and apostolicity.

Continuity means catholicity in time, Orthodoxy refers not merely to one generation, but to an ongoing tradition within Lutheran Christendom. For almost five centuries, from Martin Luther to C. F. W. Walther, Orthodoxy has been the main stream of Lutheran theology. All other varieties of Lutheranism have been derivatory from this one source. To the extent that they are contradictory to Orthodoxy, they are either anti-Lutheran, sub-Lutheran, pre-Lutheran, or post-Lutheran.

Resiliency means the durability of truth. Orthodoxy has survival and revival value! In the words that C. F. W. Walther boldly put on the masthead of *Der Lutheraner*,

Gottes Wort und Luther's Lehr

Vergehet nun und nimmer mehr,

we can say that fidelity to Scripture and Confession is the way to genuine relevancy at all times. That combination, the Canon and the Confessions, has been invincible. Catholicism could not absorb Orthodoxy in the sixteenth century; Calvinism could not refute it in the seventeenth; Rationalism and Pietism could not distort it in the eighteenth; Romasticism and Unionsim could not eliminate it in the nineteenth; and Secularism can not destroy it in the twentieth century. Orthodoxy has more durability than any other system of Lutheran theology. Though persecuted by Spanish emperors, Prussian kings, and myriads of others, it thrives today as never before, in all probability the majority faith of the Lutheran laity in the United States. Of all the varieties of Lutheran theology, it is the one with a future—because it has a past and a present!

Apostolicity is the explanation of this phenomenon. Orthodoxy survives and thrives because it is the "faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). On January 5, 1761, John Wesley wrote in his *Journal*: "We aver that Methodism is the one old religion; as old as the Reformation, as old as Christianity, as old as Moses, as old as Adam." To the extent Methodism was borrowed from Lutheranism, his boast is true. When asked, "Where was the Lutheran Church before Luther?" an Orthodox believer answers, "in the apostles, prophets, saints, and evangelists." Matthias Flacius even found . . . 700 witnesses through every century of the Christian era, even during the height of papal power, who had not ('bowed the knee to Baal') and could be called forerunners of Protestantism.¹⁰

Orthodoxy dates its *rebirth* from the Reformation, its *birth* from Pentecost.

Because of the pre-eminence of Orthodoxy as a system of Christian thought, from the primitive to the contemporary Church, it is mandatory that we understand its declarations and affirmations concerning the Word of God.

IDENTITY

The initial problem is that of the identity of the Word of God in recent theology. In the Sacred Scriptures there are two primary meanings for the expression, Word of God.

1. It refers on occasion to the Christ. There are two clear occurrences of the word in this sense in the writings of St. John the Apostle. The initial instance is in the prologue of his Gospel, where he speaks of Jesus, saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The other occasion is in the first sentence of his first letter, where he talks of the same Incarnate Christ, "the word of life," or "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1). The purpose of St. John in this passage is to show that in Christianity, the two types of religion—the verbal (the Word, the prophet) and the visual (the Image, the priesthood) have become one in the Person of the Incarnate Word.¹¹

This purpose has been misunderstood as recent writers have departed from ancient usage and attempted to restrict the term "Word of God" only to Jesus. This has caused considerable confusion in the modern Church concerning the identity of the Word. Representative was Dr. Taito Almar Kantonen, long-time Professor at Hamma Divinity School, Springfield, Ohio, who attempted to restrict the phrase "Word of God" to the Incarnate Christ.¹²

2. It refers to the Canon. The most frequent use of the term, "Word of God," is in reference to the Canon. In fact, the most common name the Bible gives itself is "the Word of God." One authority has maintained that the Old Testament writers use this phrase, or its equivalent, over two thousand times.¹³

St. Paul, the greatest theologian of the first generation of New Testament Christians, believed the Bible to be the Word of God. Writing to Titus, he described a pastor as one who "must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). Furthermore, what he admonished others to do he exemplified in his own conduct, for Paul confessed, "we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word" (2 Cor. 4:2). By clearly accepting the Scriptures as the Word of God Paul stood in the grand tradition stretching back to Moses, the prophets, and the Psalmists.

In the Old Testament revelation was given to Moses when "the Lord said to Moses, 'Write these words. . . .'" (Ex. 34:27). Or again, "Moses wrote this law, and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi" (Deut. 31:9). Later, Isaiah heard the command,

And now go, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book that it may be for the time to come as a witness for ever (Isaiah 3:8).

Or again,

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord; my spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore (Isaiah 59:21).

David, the poet said, "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his Word was in my tongue" (2 Sam. 23:2).

For these reasons, John R. Lavik, the noted Orthodox Lutheran theologian, could say:

The Church is simply following the example of the prophets and of Jesus and His apostles, therefore, when it designates the Bible as the Word of God.¹⁴

Furthermore, it is impossible to separate Christ and the Canon as has been attempted in contemporary theology. The simple fact of the matter is this - if the Scriptures are not the Word of God, then neither is Jesus Christ. As John Theodore Mueller observed, *Scriptura Sacra est Deus incarnatus*, or "Sacred Scripture is God Incarnate."¹⁵ It is furthermore the case that just as Christ is the Living Word and the Bible is the Written Word, so *Christus Rex et Dominus Scripturae est*,

Christ is the King and Lord of Scripture. The Scriptures serve him, point to him, and find their fulfillment in him.

St. John, to whom many modern critics turn for comfort in their effort to divorce Christ and the Canon, confessed the connection of the two when he confessed: "These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31). The author of the Hebrews saw the connection of Christ and the preceding revelation in this manner: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. . . ." (Hebrews 1:1,2). Or again, Jesus said: "Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). Or still again: "And Jesus said unto them, these are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses and in the prophets, and in the psalms concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures. . . ." (Luke 24:44,45). For Jesus, the Bible was the Word of God, and he was its fulfillment!

SUFFICIENCY

The School of Orthodox Lutheran Theology has discussed the attributes of Sacred Scripture. Usually four are mentioned—sufficiency, efficacy, perspicuity, and authority. These are the traits of the Bible as the Word of God.¹⁶

Orthodox Lutherans, past and present, have always held fast to the doctrine of the divine perfection or sufficiency of Sacred Scripture (*perfectio Scripturae Sacrae*). The word "perfection" is from the Latin *perficere* ("to complete") and means "without defect," or "flawless," or "accurate," or "excellent in all respects." The word "sufficient" is from the Latin *sufficere* meaning "as much as is needed," or "enough," or "able to meet all requirements" or "competent."

When used theologically the expression *perfectio Scripturae Sacrae* means that the Bible "teaches everything that is necessary for salvation."¹⁷ This means, in the words of Edward C. Fendt, for many years the Dean of the Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary, Columbus, that "God in the Scriptures reveals everything he considers necessary for man to know and do in order that man can be saved."¹⁸ Or, in a fuller description, Heinrich Schmid has written:

From the fact that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it necessarily follows that all that is contained in them is perfectly true; from the fact that they are the only Word of God given to us, it further

follows that if we are at all to learn the way of life, it must be perfectly taught in the Holy Scriptures, and this is what is meant by their perfection or sufficiency.¹⁹ Under this rubric two kindred doctrines are manifestly taught:

1. *Qualitatively*, the Sacred Scriptures are perfect, without error or defect in any fashion. This is asserted of the original manuscripts, not of subsequent translations.

2. *Quantitatively*, the Sacred Scriptures are adequate, providing all that is required for man's salvation. No supplementary or additional information is needed.

John Gerhard nicely linked the two aspects of this teaching together when he wrote that "the Scriptures fully and perfectly instruct us concerning all things necessary for our salvation."²⁰ John Andrew Quenstedt indicated his agreement with this doctrine when he said that "The Holy Scriptures contain with perfect fulness and sufficiency all things necessary to be known in order to Christian faith and life, and therefore to the attainment of eternal salvation."²¹ These worthies were but paraphrasing the psalmist, who centuries earlier had written:

The law of the Lord is sure,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure,
making wise the simple (Ps. 19:7).

EFFICACY

The Lutheran Fathers and their faithful heirs also affirm a second attribute of the Word of God - the divine efficacy (*divina efficacia*) of the Sacred Scriptures. The word "efficacy" is from the Latin root, *efficacia*, and means "the power to produce effects; the production of the effects intended" or simply "effectiveness." When used theologically the term implies, as John Theodore Mueller wrote, that the Scriptures possess

. . . the creative power to work in man, who by nature is spiritually dead, both saving faith and true sanctification. The Word of God does not merely teach man the way of salvation and show him the means by which he may attain it; but by its truly divine power (*vis vere divina*) it actually converts, regenerates, and renews him. This unique efficacy is possessed by no other book in the world . . . for the divine efficacy of Scripture is nothing else than God's power in the Word.²²

Edward C. Fendt echoed this definition of the term in his sentence definition of efficacy as referring to "the Word of God as accomplishing the purpose for which God intended it, i.e., the salvation of men."²³

Certainly these two Lutheran dogmaticians of the twentieth

century rightly understood the classic teaching of Orthodoxy on this subject. David Hollaz spoke of efficacy as being a sure sign of the divine origin of Scripture, for its divinity

. . . is proved . . . especially by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit illuminating the minds of men, through the Scriptures attentively read or heard from the mouth of a teacher.²⁴

Abraham Calovius wrote that

. . . the Holy Scriptures are living and efficacious, and a means of illumination, conversion, and salvation, prepared and vivified by Divine power.²⁵

This is obvious, felt the Fathers, unless some artificial barrier is erected. Andrew Quenstedt taught that

The innate power and tendency of God's Word is always to convince men of its truth, unless its operation is hindered and prevented by voluntary self-assertion and contumacy super-added to a natural repugnance.²⁶

Quenstedt later explains this power as follows:

The Word works not only by moral suasion, by proposing a lovely object to us, but also by a true, real, divine, and ineffable influence of its gracious power, so that it effectually and truly converts, illuminates, etc., the Holy Spirit operating in, with, and through it; for in this consists the difference between the divine and human word.²⁷

Here, as elsewhere, the Orthodox Lutheran Fathers were following in the footsteps of the biblical writers themselves. Isaiah the prophet was the instrument through which God said:

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it (Isaiah 55:11).

Paul, so often called the Isaiah of the New Testament, often referred to the efficacy of the Word. To the Corinthians he wrote, "My speech and my preaching was . . . in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). Or again, to the Romans Paul said of the the Gospel, "It is the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16) and "so then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). And to the Thessalonians the apostle wrote, "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost" (1 Thess. 1:5).

It is evident, therefore, that the Fathers were but following the canonical writers and the Blessed Martin Luther when they affirmed the efficacy of Scripture. Dr. Luther had said:

Such is the efficacy of the Word, whenever it is seriously contemplated, heard, and used, that it is

bound never to be without fruit, but always awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devoutness and produces a pure heart and pure thoughts. For these words are not inoperative or dead, but creative, living words.²⁸

PERSPICUITY

A central teaching of the Lutheran theologians concerning the Word was the doctrine of the perspicuity of Sacred Scripture (*perspicuitas, claritas Scripturae Sacrae*). The word "perspicuity" is from the Latin, *perspicere*, meaning "to see through" or "clearly expressed or presented," or "lucid." Theologically, perspicuity means that on all matters necessary to salvation the Scriptures express themselves with perfect clarity. John Theodore Mueller, wrote that by the perspicuity of Scripture "we mean that it sets forth all doctrines of salvation in words so simple and plain that they can be understood by all persons of average intelligence."²⁹

In the centuries since the Reformation there has been a remarkable consensus among Orthodox Lutheran theologians on this doctrine. Martin Luther himself was the pathfinder when he firmly and enthusiastically testified to his faith in the perspicuity of Scripture. He said:

The things of God are obscure; the things of Scripture are perspicuous. The doctrines in themselves are obscure; but in so far as they are presented in Scripture they are manifest, if we are willing to be content with that knowledge which God communicates in the Scriptures to the Church.³⁰

In another place Luther wrote, "there is nothing left obscure and ambiguous, but all things brought to light by the Word are perfectly clear."³¹ Still again, commenting on the thirty-seventh Psalm, Luther wrote:

But if any one of them (the papists) should trouble you and say: "You must have the interpretation of the Fathers, since Scripture is obscure," then you must reply: "It is not true. There is no clearer book upon earth than is Holy Writ, which in comparison with all other books is like the sun in its relation to all other lights." They say such things only because they want to lead us away from Scripture and elevate themselves to the position of masters over us in order that we might believe their dream sermons. . . .³²

What Luther re-established in the Church, the next generation faithfully confessed. Abraham Calovius, "the most voluminous of our theologians," whose life spanned most of the seventeenth century, attested the perspicuity of Scripture when he wrote:

Because in those things which are necessary to be known in order to obtain salvation, the Scriptures are abundantly and admirably explicit, both by the intention of God their Author, and by the natural signification of the words, so that they need no external and adventitious light.³³

John William Baier, whose ministry was spent as a professor at Halle, and of whom C. F. W. Walter said he had "in addition to Lutheran fidelity in doctrine, the expression of a living heart faith, and of a mild, pious sensibility," wrote:

Perspicuity, or that those things which are necessary to be believed and done by man in seeking to be saved, are taught in Scripture in words and phrases so clear and conformed to the usage of speech, that any man acquainted with the language, possessed of a common judgment, and paying due attention to the words, may learn the true sense of the words, so far as those things are concerned which must be known, and may embrace these fundamental doctrines by the simple grasp of his mind; according as the mind of man is led, by the Scriptures themselves and their supernatural light, or the divine energy conjoined with them, to yield the assent of faith to the word understood and the things signified.³⁴

In this teaching the Fathers were merely repeating the message of the Scriptures. From the Pentateuch to the Apocalypse, the biblical authors speak of the clarity of God's Word. They frequently, though not always, compare it to a light. Moses, the historian, lawgiver, liberator, and statesman received these very words of God:

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" (Deut. 30:11,12).

God makes it plain from the beginning, then, that His books possess perfect clarity in all matters necessary for salvation.

That teaching was continued through the entire canon. David, the poet, while using a different manner of writing than the prose style of Moses, and while composing hymnody not history, nevertheless confessed his belief in the comprehensibility of the divine message, saying,

The precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord
is pure, enlightening the eyes (Psalm 19:8).

This idea of the Book being comparable to light is expressed

later in the Psalter where it states, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). Obviously this statement is teaching the doctrine of perspicuity, or clarity, for the very word "clarity" in English is ultimately derived from the Latin word meaning "shining."

Still later, the biblical philosopher, using a style different from both history and poetry, that of proverbial literature, affirmed the same trust in the ability of God's Word to be understood. Again the image of light is employed when the author wrote, "For the command is a lamp and the teaching a light" (Prov. 6:23).

Lest critics contend that this conception is something limited to the Hebrew heritage, the same doctrine is carefully discussed by St. Peter. In his second letter to the early Christians the "prince of apostles" reminded them that "we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19).

The Lutheran Confessions and the Orthodox theologians were being faithful to the teachings of Scripture itself when they affirmed wholeheartedly the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture.

AUTHORITY

The Confessions and the Fathers teach a final attribute of Sacred Scripture—its authority. This teaching is central to the doctrine of the Word in Lutheran Orthodoxy. What is meant by "authority"? Perhaps an ordinary dictionary definition would be helpful. A recent standard reference work offers two possible definitions: (1) "the right and power to command, enforce laws, exact obedience, determine, influence, or judge," and (2) "an expert in a given field."³⁵ This secular usage corresponds to the way in which the term is used theologically. John William Baier, professor at Halle and general superintendent of Weimar, said "the authority of the Holy Scriptures is the manifest dignity that inclines the human understanding to assent to their instructions and the will to yield obedience to their commands."³⁶ John Theodore Mueller characterized the divine authority of the Scriptures as

. . . the peculiar quality of the whole Bible according to which as the true Word of God it demands faith and obedience of all men and is and remains the only source and norm of faith and life.³⁷

This means that the authority of the Word is two-fold, causative and normative (or canonical). In the words of Professor Fendt, causative authority means that the Bible "communicates to man the Word of God and convinces him of its truth." The stress here is on the Word's *source* within God.

Normative or canonical authority means that Scripture "is a rule whereby all information and experiences pertaining to Christian faith and life must be judged."³⁸ Here the concern is the role of the Word as the *standard* within the Church.

The two aspects together constitute the Orthodox doctrine of biblical authority; as August Dorner said, "Lutheran Orthodoxy recognized the Canon as something given, and appealed to scripture as the sole *norma et iudex* in all matter of faith. . . ."³⁹ Dean Fendt explained the *causative* authority of the Word in this manner:

. . . the causative authority of Holy Scripture teaches man to know who it is that is speaking to them there: God. It requires of men to listen and obey, since it is no less an authority than God himself who is addressing them there.⁴⁰

The teaching is clear: the worth of a word often depends on who has spoken it. The truth of a testimony is its origin. This implication is seen in the very derivation of the English term, "authority," coming ultimately from the Latin word *auctor*, meaning "author." The Ultimate Author of Sacred Scripture is God Himself.

This was the teaching of Jesus. The Master said, "For I speak not of myself; but the Father that sent me, he hath given me a command, what I should say, and what I should speak not of myself; but the Father that sent me, he hath him [the Father], these speak I unto the world" (John 8:26). Or still again, "I do nothing of myself, but as the Father taught me, I speak these things" (John 8:28). Referring to the later composition of the New Testament, Jesus promised his disciples, "Howbeit, when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth" (John 15:13).

St. Paul likewise taught the divine origin of the Scripture. To Timothy he wrote: "Every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). And in an earlier letter, to the Thessalonians he wrote: "And for this cause we also thank God without ceasing, that, when ye received from us the word of the message, even the Word of God, ye accepted it not as the word of man, but, as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). Of his word, as well as that of his fellow apostles, Paul wrote, "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth" (1 Cor. 2:13). Writing to the Romans, Paul specifically refers to the Old Testament as "the words of God" (Romans 3:2). Peter shared Paul's position. He wrote: "No prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation. For no

prophecy ever came by the will of man; but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost" (1 Peter 1:20,21).

This is the reason why the Lutheran Fathers did not err, when, in the words of John Andrew Quenstedt, they affirmed that "God therefore alone, if we wish to speak accurately, is to be called the Author of the Sacred Scriptures."⁴¹ Furthermore, in the words of John Gerhard, they could not understand how any one could question such a clear-cut teaching of Scripture:

Those who are within the Church do not inquire about the authority of Scripture, for this is their starting-point. How can they be true disciples of Christ if they pretend to call in question the doctrine of Christ? How can they be true members of the Church if they are in doubt concerning the foundation of the Church? How can they wish to prove that to themselves which they always employ to prove other things? How can they doubt concerning that whose efficacy they have experienced in their own hearts? The Holy Spirit testifies in their hearts that the Spirit is true, i.e., that the doctrine derived from the Holy Spirit is absolute truth.⁴²

For this reason, the Lutheran Fathers taught the total *veracity* or truthfulness of the Sacred Scriptures. This is an obvious logical corollary of the causative authority of the Bible and is furthermore plainly revealed in Scripture. The Psalmist affirmed, "The word of Jehovah is right; and all his work is done in faithfulness" (Psalm 33:4). And again the inspired poet wrote, "The sum of thy Word is truth, and every one of thy righteous ordinances endures forever" (Psalm 119:160). Earlier in the Old Testament we read: "God is not a man that he should lie" (Numbers 23:19). Jesus said, "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17). St. John wrote, "We know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). St. Peter testified: "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). The Fathers, therefore, merely followed in the footsteps of the apostles and evangelists when they said they accepted "the Word of God as the eternal truth" because "God's Word is not false nor does it lie."⁴³ Dr. Luther, in his usual manner, put it bluntly but plainly: ". . . we know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I—in short, all men—may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err."⁴⁴ Because they were persuaded of the truth of God's Word, the Fathers also held to its consistency (it is without contradiction), its unanimity and unity, and its inerrancy.⁴⁵

Together with the apostolic church, the Church of the Lutheran Reformation held to the *normative or canonical* authority of the Holy Scriptures. This means, in the words of

Dr. Fendt, "Christians have thus a standard of authority whereby all controversy in the Church must be settled and whereby all error from without must be averted and rejected."⁴⁶ Or, as Henry Eyster Jacobs, celebrated historian and theologian of the old General Council wrote, "the Scriptures are regarded as the absolute norm of revealed truth rather than as a magazine or receptacle in which the truth is stored."⁴⁷

Certainly this was the authoritative principle in biblical religion. In Isaiah we read: "To the law and to the testimony! If they speak not according to this Word, surely there is no morning for them" (Isaiah 8:30). St. Peter wrote, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Or, once more, St. James said, "Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment" (James 3:1), because of the sober responsibility to be a correct interpreter of the Word. Jesus summed it up, "If a man love me, he will keep my words" (John 14:23). And, conversely, to his enemies he said (and still says), "Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God" (Matthew 22:29).

Our Fathers, therefore, did not err when they said in the *Formula of Concord*, as they had affirmed repeatedly before, the precious truth

. . . that the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and that no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subjected to it.⁴⁸

What was confessed in 1580, on the occasion of the publication of the *Book of Concord*, should be confessed just as loudly in the "Church of the Open Bible" as we approach the four hundredth anniversary of that event in 1980. If we continue in our forefather's doctrine of the Word (which is that of Scripture itself), we can anticipate God's blessings on our fellowship in the future. If we forsake it, then the only alternative will be infidelity, adversity, and the judgment of God. What better birthday celebration could we plan for 1980 than true unity in the Orthodox doctrine of God's Word which is asserted by the Confessions?

FOOTNOTES

1. News item, *The Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, August 21, 1971, p. 12.
2. James D. Smart, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 132. For some documentation of how frightening this ignorance of Scripture within the Church has become, see J. M. Hopkins, "College Students Flunk Bible Quiz," *The Christian Century* LXXXV (April 24, 1968), p. 564.
3. James D. Smart, *The Rebirth of Ministry* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 69. For more recent documentation, see D. Callahan, "Post-biblical Christianity," *Commonweal* LXXXV (January 6, 1967), pp. 359 ff. and (February 24, 1967), pp. 606-607. And again, P. R.

- Gastonguay, "Let's Update the Bible and Sermon," *Catholic World* CCXIII (August, 1971), pp. 232-235.
4. The inspired author reports the results rather eloquently. The account tells how "Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law of the Lord given through Moses" (2 Chron. 34:14) and continues with the story of the repentance of King Josiah, primarily for his sins of ignorance, and the promise of the Lord that "because your heart was penitent and you humbled yourself before me, and have rent your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the Lord" (2 Chron. 34:27). This is obviously an entirely different situation from one in which the Word abounds and is either ignored or, worse still, falsely interpreted. This is what St. Peter had in mind when he warned that "there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them. . . ." (2 Peter 2:1).
 5. News item, *The Lutheran Standard* XI (August 17, 1971), p. 20. The upsurge in Bible sales caught even the attention of business journals; see J. Thackeray, "Boom in Bibles, *Dun's Review* LXXXVIII (July 1966), pp. 39-40.
 6. "Grin and Bear It," *The Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, August 22, 1971, p. 72.
 7. Smart, *The Rebirth of Ministry*, p. 73. This has been the crucial question in the theology since the birth of the so-called "historical-critical method" in the early nineteenth century. A sampling of current thought on this subject is as follows: Among Anglicans, see Alec R. Vidler, *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962). As to Roman Catholics, see J. T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and "The Bible: Dogma, Myth, or Mystery?" *America* CXIX (December 7, 1968), p. 600; For evangelical thinking, see Klaus Runia, "Modern Debate Around the Bible," *Christianity Today* XII (July 5, 1968), pp. 12-15; (July 19, 1968), pp. 11-13; (August 16, 1968), pp. 8-12; the same author, "What Do Evangelicals Believe About the Bible?" *Christianity Today* XV (December 4, 1970), pp. 3-6; (December 18, 1970), pp. 8-10; W. C. Robinson, "The Inspiration of Holy Scripture," *Christianity Today* XIII (October 11, 1968), pp. 6-9; J. L. Kelso, "The Inspiration of Scripture," *Christianity Today* XIV (June 5, 1970), pp. 6-9; L. Nelson Bell, "The Unique Book," *Christianity Today* XIII (October 25, 1968), pp. 31-32; W. S. Reid, "Christian Faith and Biblical Criticism," *Christianity Today* XVI (May 26, 1972), pp. 11-13; Carl F. H. Henry, "Evangelicals and the Bible," *Christianity Today* XVI (March 3, 1972), pp. 35-56. And for a Neo-Orthodox opinion on the subject, see C. L. Manschreck, "My Conscience is Bound by the Word of God: Thoughts on Luther," *Vital Speeches* XXXVII (June 15, 1971), pp. 540-544.
 8. Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 405. Perhaps the best way to appreciate Lutheran Orthodoxy is to contrast its view on Scripture with that of other schools of thought. A classic discussion of Orthodox Lutheranism in opposition to other denominations and traditions is Karl Graul, *Distinctive Doctrines*, edited by Reinhold Seeberg and translated from the German by D. M. Martens (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1897); for the role of Scripture in the Confessions, see J. L. Neve, *Lutheran Symbolics* (Burlington, Iowa: German Literary Board, 1917); a nineteenth century gem is C. H. Schott, editor, *The Unaltered Augsburg Confession* (New York: Ludwig Company, 1850); an Orthodox Lutheran systematics from the Old South is George Andrew Voigt, *Biblical Dogmatics* (Columbia, South Carolina: Lutheran

Board of Publication, 1917); and Conrad Bergendoff, "Lutheranism," *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, edited by Marvin Halverson (New York: Meridian, 1958), pp. 220-223.

For a history of Christian attitudes toward the Scriptures, see E. von Dobschütz, "The Bible in the Church," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), II, pp. 579-615. A study of the alleged "abuse of the Bible in the Church" is by the German theologian, A. Dorner, "Bibliolatry," *Ibid.*, II, pp. 615-618.

Representative liberal views are Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924); Alfred E. Garvie, "Revelation," *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by James Hastings, Extra Volume (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), pp. 321-337; another liberal Anglican view, H. L. Goudge, "Revelation," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, X, pp. 745-749; a Methodist modernist approach is that of Georgia Harkness, *Toward Understanding the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954); Erich Dinkler, "Myth," *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, pp. 238-243.

Neo-Orthodox views are found in Hans W. Frei, "Religion—Natural and Revealed," *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, pp. 310-321; Langdon B. Gilkey, "Neo-Orthodoxy," *Ibid.*, pp. 256-261; Bernard W. Anderson, "Bible," *Ibid.*, pp. 35-40; George A. Buttrick, "The Study of the Bible," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1952), I, pp. 165-174; C. H. Dodd, *The Bible Today* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947); Marcus Dods, "Inspiration," *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), I, pp. 831-835; Herbert H. Farmer, "The Bible: Its Significance and Authority," *The Interpreter's Bible*, I, pp. 3-31; Walter H. Horton, "Revelation," *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, pp. 327-328; J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (London: Methuen, 1957); Alan Richardson, *A Preface to Bible Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954); and Richardson and W. Schweitzer, editors, *Biblical Authority for Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951).

9. John Andrew Quenstedt identified the characteristics of true religion as follows: 1) divine sublimity (divine in its origin); 2) unity; 3) truth; 4) perfection (contains perfectly and sufficiently all things necessary to faith and Christian life); 5) holiness (it teaches a knowledge of a holy God, the cultivation of a holy life; it communicates holy precepts, reveals holy mysteries); 6) necessity; 7) utility; 8) antiquity; 9) invincibility; 10) perpetuity; 11) spontaneity (is not compulsory, but seeks to be taught, and calls for unconstrained assent); 12) varied treatment (exposed to various persecutions, obscured but not extinguished, oppressed but not suppressed); 13) efficacy (illustrating the glory of God, in soothing the conscience, in converting men, in cherishing growth in piety). See Revere Franklin Weidner, *An Introduction of Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1898), p. 47.
10. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, p. 36.
11. See Gardiner Spring, *The Bible, Not of Man* (New York: American Tract Society, 1847) and Joseph Sittler, *The Doctrine of the Word* (Philadelphia: The Board of Publications of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1948).
12. Taito Almar Kantonen, *Resurgence of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), p. 101.
13. Jacob Sheatsley, *A Guide to the Study of the Bible* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1918), p. 13.
14. John R. Lavik, *The Bible is the Word of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), p. 14.

15. John Theodore Mueller, quoting Martin Luther, in *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 92.
16. The relationship has been explained thus: "(1) Since Holy Scripture is the Word of God to us, then it follows that we owe it acceptance and obedience (divine authority). (2) Since Holy Scripture is the only source and norm of faith and life given by God to man, then it follows that we have all thing necessary for our salvation (divine sufficiency). (3) Since Holy Scripture is God's revelation of Himself and His will for men, then it follows that men must there have a clear and understandable communication (divine perspicuity). (4) Since Holy Scripture is God's only Word of life given to man, it follows that men must here have a power to implant and sustain saving faith in them (divine efficacy)." Edward C. Fendt, *Christian Dogmatics: A Study Guide and Outline for Discussion*, 4th edition (Columbus: Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1954), p. 39.
17. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 137.
18. Fendt, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 42.
19. Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., translated from the German and Latin by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), p. 64.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 65
22. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 133.
23. Fendt, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 47.
24. Weidner, *An Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, p. 89.
25. Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 80.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 503.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 504.
28. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 133.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 138. Dr. Philip J. Spener, the Pietist, wrote of the perspicuity of Scripture:
"Question: Are the Scriptures, therefore, not too difficult for simple persons who are without education?
Answer: No. For even in the Old Testament the divine Word was given, in order to make wise the simple (Ps. 19:7; 119:130), and that fathers might teach it diligently to their children (Deut. 6:6,7). But the New Testament is still clearer (Rom. 13:13; 1 John 2:8). Accordingly Christ did not direct His teaching to the wise and prudent of this world, but to the simple (Matt. 11:25,26). Every one who wants to understand Jesus, must put aside all worldly wisdom and became a child (Matt. 18:3; Luke 18:17). Paul, therefore, and all other Apostles did not discourse in high words but in the power of God which was hidden from the wise, but revealed to infants, in accordance with the unsearchable wisdom of God. which 'by foolish preaching' has brought to naught the wise of this world (1 Cor. 1:18-24; 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 1:12- 10:4,5). Hence the Apostles have written their epistles mostly to unlearned and simple men, who could not have understood them, from heathen arts or sciences, but who, without them, by the grace of God, could understand them to their salvation (1 Cor. 1:2; 2:6-10)." Quoted in Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1905), p. 585.
30. Weidner, *An Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, p. 91.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Quoted in Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 139, 140.
33. Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 69.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
35. Peter Davies, editor, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1974), p. 48.
36. Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 51.

37. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 120.
38. Fendt, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 39.
39. Dorner, "Bibliolatry," p. 616.
40. Fendt, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 39.
41. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 103.
42. Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 55.
43. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Theodore G. Tappert, translator and editor, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 506; Epitome, *Ibid.*, p. 483.
44. Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, *Ibid.*, p. 444.
45. See *The Nature and Function of Holy Scripture* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975) and *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972).
46. Fendt, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 40.
47. Henry E. Jacobs, "Lutheranism," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), VIII, p. 203.
48. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, in Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 505.