

Luther and the Inerrancy of the Scriptures

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In the doctrinal discussions on Inspiration and the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures which are being conducted in several parts of the Lutheran Church throughout the world, the discovery has been made that the most difficult problem is to determine the precise meaning of what is known in the English speaking world as the "inerrancy" of the Scriptures and in modern Roman theology as the "inerrantia Sacrae Scripturae" (c.f. Denzinger's *Enchiridion* to the encyclical "Spiritus Paraclitus," 1920, No. 2, 186). The Confessions of the 16th Century, including the Reformed Confessions and the decisions of the Council of Trent, do not contain any express statement on the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The same applies to the Orthodox dogmatists. Even though it was of vital concern to them that the Scriptures should be without error, they did not deal with this inerrancy in a special section on the *affectiones sacrae scripturae*; rather, they considered it in connection with the Inspiration and Authority of the Scriptures. In other words, the inerrancy of the Bible was not yet a problem in the 16th Century. It was looked upon as a logical consequence of inspiration and as an indisputable presupposition for the authority of the Scriptures. Actually it was only in the 17th Century that it became a fundamental problem in theology, and indeed a burning question for the *Weltanschauung* of the whole Occident. This was due to the revolutionary discoveries in the field of the natural sciences and to the great advances made in the research of world history; the Churches were not able to by-pass all this and as a result they were confronted with the problem whether, or to what extent, the Bible is inerrant. As is so often the case in such discussions, the zeal with which the debate on this question was conducted by the enemies as also by the defenders of the Church, and even by differing parties within the Church, was not always in the best interests of a clarification of the issue. Of course, there was good reason for this zeal, for the issue at stake was nothing less than the very foundation of the Christian faith. For Christians it was a case of "to be, or not to be." But where there is a firm faith in Jesus Christ in accordance with the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions, and where Holy Scripture is acknowledged in the fullest meaning of our Confessions as the only source and norm of all knowledge of faith, and where consequently the inspiration and inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures as such is not questioned, and where therefore the problem merely hinges on the *how* of inspiration and on the *correct meaning* of inerrancy, there a discussion must be possible which is ruled by no other zeal or feeling than the passionate desire to know and to submit to what God Himself says in His Word.

I

If we take up a discussion on the correct doctrine of the inerrancy of the Scriptures, then it will be well for us to be conscious of the big responsibility which we have as theologians for the salvation of the souls of those members of the Christian Church which have been entrusted to us. We cannot withhold from a single human soul the skandalon of that revelation to which the Scriptures testify; nor can we spare them the skandalon which the miracles in the Bible offer to reason. But woe to us if by a well meant but thoughtless theology we create stumbling blocks which are in no way related to the skandalon of biblical revelation. We shall have to give an account for every human soul which is lost because of such stumbling blocks. The following example will make this clear. Luther shared the opinion of the medieval Church that the world was created about 4,000 years B.C. Like many of his contemporaries he was convinced that the blessed Last Day was at hand that the world would at most exist another century (c.f. his "Supputatio annorum mundi" of 1541 and 1545, WA 53, 1ff; German version in St. Louis Edition XIV, 483ff; c.f. also his remarks on the uselessness of a calendar reform in "Von den conciliis und Kirchen" of 1539, EA 25, 270ff). Similarly the new *Weltbild* proved his conceptions of the world in space to be wrong and his ideas on the duration of the world,

particularly in regard to the time of its end, were likewise refuted, as everyone will readily admit. Elert has convincingly shown that it was Luther with his thesis that the right hand of God is everywhere, who overcame the old *Weltbild*, even before Copernicus came on to the scene (*Morphologie des Luthertums I*, p. 363ff). Clearly Luther would have been the very last one to retain his hypothetical date on the beginning of the world. What point is there, then, in setting up as Church dogma such theologumena, which are nothing but products of the *Weltbild* of a certain age? What must be the effect of the Kerygma of a Church on a hearer, when he is told that the facts of the history of the world and of man must be compressed into the space of 6,000 years, when such a hearer in his office as natural scientist, as physicist, chemist, geologist, astronomer, biologist, or as anthropologist and historian, is not accustomed to set up empty hypotheses but simply records irrefutable facts which can in no way be made to agree with that chronology? We are not thinking here of superficial Aufklärer or of proud rationalists, but of baptized Christians who believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and who, as a modern scientist once expressed it, cannot think of the Church without faith in miracles and in the real presence of Christ, but who are imbued with the Lutheran conception of vocation and accordingly look upon their work in the laboratory as a service to God and the neighbour. It is true, we have no other truth, no other Bible, no other gospel for them than we have for the simplest Christian in our congregations. But we theologians are notorious for our ignorance on matters which lie beyond the sphere of our own activities; and if we confound or identify those facts with assertions which we regard as biblical, but which in reality are simply remnants of an obsolete *Weltbild*, in fact really elements of an outdated natural science, then the responsibility is ours if such people lose the gospel in rejecting our philosophy. We are not concerned here with determining what serious and irreparable mistakes were made in the past in this connection. We merely want to point here to the tremendous responsibility which is ours in making theological decisions. In view of the responsibility which we have towards the Word of God, it seems easier and safer to say rather more than too little about this Word. If we err, we would rather err in the direction of a too much, than in the direction of a too little. We would, we fondly think, trust the Word of God more than any human word, but we forget that just this is the crux of the matter, whether we have rightly understood that Word of God. Whether what we impose upon men as an obligatory dogma, is really the teaching of Scripture, or whether it is only our private interpretation of Scripture, a theologumenon by means of which we attempt to clarify the Scriptures. Every dogma has its negative counterpart, the rejection of those who teach otherwise. Just we theologians, who are more or less in the danger of becoming virtuosi of faith, should put to ourselves the very serious question in the case of every dogma which we hold: whom do we exclude from the Church of God when we teach this as an obligatory interpretation of the Holy Scriptures? Only when we are quite clear on this point, only when we are conscious of the meaning of our decision for the life, yes for the eternal salvation of other people, only then will our dogmatic decisions be ruled by that great charity without which even the best dogmatics is not a Christian dogmatics. Only when such charity can be sensed in our decision will they be trustworthy and truly convincing, even in cases where they must speak an irrevocable No to every abridgement of the divine Word.

II

There is another responsibility of which we must be conscious. As things are at present, the right understanding of the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures will determine the problem of the unity of the Lutheran Church. Of course, we do not mean that every body which calls itself "Lutheran" and accepts the Augsburg Confession on paper or in word, is actually Lutheran Church. Naturally we would like to be one with these Lutherans, but that can only be when they decide to take their Confession seriously and deprive heresy within their own ranks of the right to destroy the Church.

We are here dealing only with those Lutheran Churches which are determined and able earnestly to combat all heresy, not because they like a struggle, but because the Church can fulfill her task of saving souls only by preaching the pure gospel and rightly administering the sacraments. Now in these Churches there is no doubt that the Holy Scriptures are inerrant. The only problem which exists is the *extent* of this inerrancy. Twenty-five years ago Michael Reu described the position among American Lutherans in the following way. He distinguished between three parties: "There are those who appear to emphasize that the inerrancy of the Scriptures merely applies to everything which is an article of salvation and consequently they presuppose from the very start as a possibility or probability that the Scriptures are erroneous in other matters. The second group assume the complete inerrancy of the Scriptures in all matters and therefore they are not in favour of church fellowship with those who presuppose that there are errors here or there in the Scriptures in secondary matters, or in fact assert that there are errors in certain cases. The third group, on the other hand, agree with the second and regard it as wrong and dangerous to set up a theory which presupposes errors in subordinate matters. They are convinced of an absolute inerrancy, whether this applies to the present-day form of the Scriptures, or at least to the original manuscripts; but they are not prepared to refuse a man church fellowship simply because he presupposes that in single things obviously not dealing with matters of salvation, there are errors in the Scriptures, when without a doubt that man acknowledges God's Word to be inerrant in every single thing which the Scriptures teach directly or indirectly on faith and life and when he submits to the Scriptures as a self-understood thing." (Kirchliche Zeitschrift, Jubilee Number, vo. 50, 1926, p.705.) Prof. Joh. Meyer of Thiensville critically examined the article by Reu in a comprehensive paper entitled "The Scriptures cannot be broken" in the Theologische Quartalschrift, vol. 28, No. 3 (July 1931). Meyer attempted to prove why the position of the third group to which Reu referred, is untenable. Because the worthy President of the Theological Seminary of the Wisconsin Synod still holds the same view today as he did then in criticizing Reu (he was kind enough to draw the attention of the writer to this debate and sent him a copy of his paper), and because we must regard his view as that of his Church, it will be worth while making a detailed study of his argument. It will be sufficient for our purpose if we note here that he accepts the Orthodox teaching on inspiration and emphasizes that the human individuality of the biblical authors was taken by God into His service. However, he regards the self-testimony of the Holy Scriptures, particularly John 10:35, as the compelling proof for the absolute inerrancy of the original text of the Bible and consequently he looks upon the acceptance of this teaching as a necessary prerequisite for church fellowship. In other words, he belongs to that group which Reu has characterized as the "second." From this point of view he attacks not only the "first" but also the "third" groups. He regards the attitude of the latter as an "untenable one which must logically lead to the attitude of the group characterized above as the "first" (ibid. p. 194). He quotes the sentence in which Reu presents the theological argument for the mediating attitude: "Because they (the third group) must admit that the proof from John 10:35 and 2. Tim. 3:16 for the absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures is, as a matter of fact, in no way compelling, therefore they are not prepared to refuse church fellowship to a man who speaks of the possibility or reality of an error in such and similar cases" (Reu p. 707f, quoted by Meyer p. 195). Against this Meyer critically observes: "This attitude suffers from an inner contradiction. The third group confess the inerrancy of the Scriptures. It is one of their articles of faith. But they also confess that they do not possess a sufficient Scriptural proof for it. In other words, they confess an article of faith which goes beyond the very Scriptures which they nevertheless declare to be the 'only true norm in all matters of faith and life.' ... That is a self-contradiction. And it is disobedience towards God to add something to the Scriptures. To confess an article which God does not teach in His Word, is superstition" (ibid. p. 196). Quite correctly the inner weakness of the mediating attitude, so characteristic of every compromise, has been pointed out; but, for all that, Reu's argument has not been refuted. For just that is the

main characteristic of the attitude of the mediating third group that the absolute inerrancy is not raised to the status of being an obligatory article of faith and thus it is not declared to be an essential part of the Confession of the Church; rather, it is asserted to be a theological possibility, one of two possible explanations of John 10:35. To the representatives of this group the former explanation appears to be the more probable of the two, and consequently they decide in its favour, but they do so with the reservation that they do not dare to assert that the other *explanation is an impossibility*.

The problem, then, with which the Lutheran Church is confronted today as it was twenty-five years ago, is this: Is the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures, which is taught by all who confess the Lutheran faith, an absolute inerrancy which excludes every discrepancy and every inaccuracy also in such matters which do not pertain to salvation? Or can it be reconciled with the inerrancy of the Scriptures which are the source and norm of faith, if one finds irreconcilable discrepancies in some of the historical data or smaller inaccuracies which in no way impair the reliability of the content of revelation and which we would then have to regard as belonging to the human side of the Bible? Is this absolute inerrancy the theologumenon of a theological school, or is it a dogma of the Church? It is a dogma of the Church if it can be proved to be a teaching of Scripture itself. There can be no doubt among us about that. But there should also be no doubt among us that if we reject this version of the teaching of the inerrant Scriptures, we do not do so because of a lacking readiness to submit to the Word of God. On the contrary, we reject it simply because according to our deepest conviction it is not in harmony with the self-testimony of the Bible. We are convinced that such an inerrancy is taught neither in John 10:35 nor in 2. Tim. 3:16 and that it is a pious opinion which has been read into these texts, particularly into the word of Jesus about the Scriptures which cannot be broken. Both approaches to the Scriptures will strive with each other as heretofore, and one can only hope that the debate between the representatives of the two schools of thought will be more fruitful in view of the experiences of the past and also in view of a more thorough study of Luther and the Reformation. The issue at stake is this—and it is a very important one: Will it be a debate between two schools of theological thought in one and the same Church and will this debate be conducted on the common basis of an absolute submission to the Holy Scriptures and with the common consciousness of being bound to the whole of the Lutheran Confessions so that the full biblical truth on the point at issue may be fathomed; or will church fellowship be broken by this point of difference so that discussions have to be conducted between Church and Church? There is no need to show in detail what a deep misfortune, humanly speaking, it would be for the Lutheran Church if the representatives of the inerrantia absoluta would immediately regard the other point of view as heresy, divisive of church fellowship. At the conclusion of his article Prof. Meyer says (p. 197): "There can be no church fellowship between those who, like Luther, accept the dictum of Jesus (John 10:35 is meant in the sense of an inerrantia absoluta), and those who limit it with all kinds of clauses, i.e. those who do not want to accept it." Meyer continues: "The manner in which we should deal in each case with a person who because of weakness believes that there are errors in the Scriptures in subsidiary matters, and how long such an erring one is to be tolerated in the hope that he can be convinced of his error—these matters are decided by the following declaration of the Chicago Theses: This is a case of Christian, brotherly love. In such a case we should act as Jesus did; He did not rudely brush aside His opponents..., but with the glowing love of a Saviour. He sought to find a piece of common ground where He could assume some understanding, where He could confidently appeal to their hearts and awaken their confidence: for the Scriptures cannot be broken." Indeed, if it was a matter of not accepting such a word, then we should have to regard ourselves as the most miserable of men, not worthy of any consideration or love. Then we would be enemies of God and destroyers of His Church. But if the others would just assume the possibility, quite hypothetically at first, that their exegesis of John 10:35 does not do justice to the meaning of

the verse, because they attach something to it which is not contained in it, and that their belief about Luther's understanding of the Scriptures is not correct, then they would realise that to persist with their point of view in an uncritical way, must have serious consequences for the unity of the Church. There is nothing so dangerous for the Church as mistaking a theologumenon to be a dogma. It may be that we are convinced a thousand times that a particular teaching is scriptural and the scriptural proof which we believe to be valid may so much have become part and parcel of ourselves because it has been repeated so often and so continuously, that we consider a re-examination of the whole position quite superfluous. Nevertheless, as theologians we are never absolved from the duty of a continuous re-examination. Tertullian's warning word to theologians, that Christ called Himself the Truth, not the Tradition, reminds us of the fact that an error, after it has been repeated a thousand times, is no longer felt to be an error; for all that, however, it does not cease to be an error. The fear that we might be guilty of an error should never depart from us if we would remain faithful to the truth. How strange we should feel, if on Judgment Day we were to hear that just where we thought to uphold nothing but the Word of God, we divided the Church by a human theologumenon!

III

It is not our intention here to enter in upon a systematic discussion on the problem of the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures. We shall merely try to show several essential aspects in answer to the problem by considering Luther's attitude towards the Bible and towards the origin of the biblical books. Luther's ideas on inspiration and the inerrancy of the Scriptures are, as is generally known, not just the ideas of the 17th Century Orthodoxy and it is doing neither him nor the great scholars of Orthodoxy a service, if this fact is suppressed. Luther should not be interpreted through the medium of Quenstedt (indeed, such a procedure is quite impossible for anyone who can think historically), and it is pointless to look for the Orthodox teaching *de sacra scriptura* in the Book of Concord. It seems that a development took place here, as it also did in the Reformed Church where in the 17th Century a teaching which in the 16th Century existed only in embryo received its full and final ratification. The chief difference between Luther's teaching on inspiration and that of the later Orthodox fathers is this: the latter believe that the actual miracle of inspiration occurs in the act of writing; Luther, on the other hand, looks upon the act of writing simply as the fixation of the inspired Word which, however, existed as such even before. Naturally the later theologians knew that the writers, Moses, the prophets, the writers of the Psalms, the apostles and evangelists, were inspired men. And Luther knows that Moses wrote the Pentateuch as the instrument of the Holy Spirit after receiving the impulse from Him and that it was this writing which made many texts to be Word of God. But the emphasis in the case of the later theologians lies on the *Scripture*, the *written* word, whereas Luther emphasizes the *Word*, the Word which certainly became Scripture and which we would not possess if it were not written, which, however, existed before it was written. This difference of emphasis may have been partly the result of the different ages. The 16th Century witnessed the mighty power of the Word of God, especially in the *preaching* of the gospel. This age regarded the prophets and apostles in the first place as mighty preachers. The 17th Century was an eminently literary one, producing the gigantic works of dogmatics in Germany and the monumental historical literature in France; so the men of the Bible were in the first place seen as authors and writers. But it is not just a matter of each age producing a different emphasis. It is a fundamental conception of the gospel which finds expression in Luther's emphasis on oral proclamation of the Word by the prophets, the apostles, and particularly by the Lord Himself. The Word to which Luther appealed in the most serious of his dogmatical struggles, the Word which he found in his Bible and which he wrote with chalk on the table in Marburg so that he might sustain himself with the written word in case he should be in danger of succumbing to a momentary weakness, that Word is the

Word which the Lord Jesus Christ has *spoken*: "Unser Text 'Das ist mein Leib' ist nicht von Menschen, sondern von Gott selbst aus seinem eigenen Munde mit solchen Buchstaben und Worten *gesprochen* und gesetzt," we read in his Grosses Bekenntnis vom Abendmahl, 1528 (WA 26, 446, 1ff). Verbal inspiration, which includes even the letters of each word, is here identical with the inspiration of the person who speaks (neither Luther nor the Church know of any other inspiration but verbal inspiration, i.e. an inspiration which takes each single word of the Scriptures to be the Word of God). Of course, Luther would never have denied that the written record of the Word of God thus spoken, also came into being under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; on the contrary, that is his conception of the origin of the gospels. But the actual miracle of inspiration is to be found in the Word which, as the living and powerful Word of God, is one and the same, whether spoken, or written or proclaimed. That is why inspiration can never be understood as a psychological process and why even a definition like the well known description of inspiration as *impulsus ad scribendum*, *suggestio rerum* and *suggestio verborum*, is totally inadequate (the term *suggestio* can be traced back to Augustine, but is not found in the Scriptures themselves – "divina inspiratione suggestum est," *De consensu evang.*, III, 13. c.f. II, 21). For at best that would apply only to the last act in the genesis of the written Word of God; but this act cannot at all be separated from that which precedes it and is the more important.

IV

On this background Luther's ideas on the origin of the biblical books can be appreciated. The biblical books are the written record of the divine Word. The *prophetic* books of the Old Testament are anthologies of the sayings of the prophets. "Keines Propheten Predigten sind ganz und vollk ommlich beschrieben, sondern ihre J nger und Zuh rer haben zu Zeiten einen Spruch gefasst, darnach aber einen und also zusammengetragen. Also ist die Bibel erhalten worden" (Tischrede EA 62, 132). Here the same thing happened as can be observed in the gospels: the "order" was lost. Thus we read of *Isaiah*: "Aber die Ordnung h lt er nicht, dass er ein Jeglichs an seinem Ort und mit eigenen Kapiteln und Bl ttern fassete, sondern ist fast gemenet unter nander, dass er viel des ersten St cks (i.e. proclamation of judgment and of the gospel to Judah) und das ander (threats against the heathen nations, particularly Assyria) und dritte (prophecies on the Babylonian exile) mit eingef hret, und wohl das dritte St ck etwa ehe handelt, denn das ander. Ob aber das geschehen sei durch den, so solche seine Weissagung zusammen gelesen und geschrieben hat (als man im Psalter auch achtet geschehen sein), oder ob ers selbst so gestellet hat, darnach sich Zeit, Ursachen und Person zugetragen haben, von einem jeglichen St cke zu reden, welche Zeit und Ursachen nicht gleich sein noch Ordnung haben m gen, das weiss ich nicht. So viel Ordnung h lt er, dass er das erste als das vornehmste St cks zeucht and treibt von Anfang bis ans Ende, beide, durchs ander und dritte St cke. *Gleich wie auch uns geb hrt in unseren Predigten* zu tun, dass unser vornehmest St cke, die Leute zu strafen und von Christo zu predigen, immer mit unterlaufe, ob wir gleich etwas anderes zuweilen zuf llig vorhaben zu predigen, als, vom T rken oder vom Kaiser etc." (EA 63, 57, Vorrede auf den Propheten Jesajam). This is an example of Luther's "Biblical criticism" and it is repeated in the case of the other prophets. The true and actual Word of God is that preached by the prophet. The written Word comes later. It is no less God's Word because it is the written record of the oral Word inspired by God. As written record of the inspired Word, it is itself inspired, even if the written record was made considerably later. Luther does not ponder over the manner in which this written record was made, whether perhaps with the help of some special divine assistance or by means of a special enlightenment. It should be particularly noted that he tries to get a clearer picture of the essence of prophetic proclamation by comparing it with the essence of preaching in the Church. If the prophets can be regarded as writers at all, then only in a secondary way. Primarily they are preachers of the gospel. They proceed to their task like any preacher today. Their Kerygma rests on

that of their predecessors of previous ages, and is available to them in the written record. "Und haben ohn Zweifel auf diese Weis die Propheten in Mose, und die letzten Propheten in den ersten studiert, und ihre guten Gedanken, vom Heiligen Geist eingegeben, in ein Buch aufgeschrieben. Denn es seind nit solche Leut gewesen wie die Geister und Rotten, die Mosen haben unter die Bank gesteckt, und eigen Gesicht gedichtet und Träume gepredigt, sondern sich in Mose täglich und fleissig geübt: wie er denn auch gar oft und hart befiehlt, sein Buch zu lesen" (EA 63, 379). In his very vivid way, so characteristic of the Reformer, Luther tries to get clear on the essence of the prophetic Kerygma by comparing it with the way in which faithful evangelical preachers of the 16th Century observed the rules of correct preaching which are valid for all times. Consequently he assumes, among other things, that the preachers in ancient Israel had an experience similar to that of preachers of a later age, namely that they did not always quite stick to the point. The task of the preacher is the proclamation of the gospel, the explanation of the Scriptures whose content is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Already Luther had to find out in Wittenberg that the people went to sleep when he preached on justification and only then woke up when he began to tell an interesting story. A particular danger among the prophets was that they concentrated too much on the proclamation of the future. "Die Schrift auszulegen, das ist die edelste, höchste und grösste Gabe der Weissagung; denn auch alle Propheten des Alten Testaments damit den Namen haben allermeist, dass sie Propheten heissen, dass sie von Christo geweissagt haben.... Dazu dass sie das Volk durch Auslegung und Verstand göttlichen Wortes im Glauben recht führten; viel mehr denn darumb dass sie zuweilen von den Königen und weltlichen Läuften etwas verkündigten, welchs sie auch selbst übten und oft auch feileten. Aber jenes übten sie taglich und feileten nichts, denn der Glaube feilet nicht, dem ihr Weissagen ähnlich war" (EA 8, 23). This much quoted passage from the Kirchenpostille (Sermon on the Epistle for Third Sunday after Epiphany) does not assert that there are false prophecies in the Old Testament. Nowhere in his Expositions on the Prophets did he point to one such passage, indeed it would be out of harmony with his conception of Holy Scripture. Luther is here thinking of the preaching of the prophets; he is picturing it on the analogy of 16th Century preaching. The Old Testament prophets were the evangelical preachers in Israel and their sermons were not always of the high standard which we find in Isaiah's preaching as it is known to us in the preserved record of his Kerygma. The Kerygma of the gospel is always essentially the same. If it is correct, it is an exposition of Holy Scripture, the pointing to its message, that is, the glad tidings of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of sinners Who is the theme of the whole of the Scriptures, for "they are they which testify of me." For that reason there is no essential difference between the Kerygma of Moses, of the prophets, and of the Church. In a single text like the Protevangel in Gen. 3:15 we have the full gospel. Luther points this out in his sermon on the gospel for Easter Monday in the Kirchenpostille (EA 11, 272ff) where in connection with the exposition of the Scriptures by the Risen Lord, he points out: "Hieraus folgt nu ein ganz Neu Testament, alle Predigten St. Pauli und der Apostel, welche nicht viel von der Historie und Wunderwerken Christi erzählen, sondern wo sie etwa können, aus einem solchen Spruch eine ganze Wiesen machen, ja, wenn die Offenbarung dazu kommt und der Heilige Geist, welcher weiss, die Worte recht zu käuen und zu keltern, dass sie Saft und Kraft haben und geben..." Luther thinks that on His way to Emmaus, Jesus will have given "aus seinem reichen Geist" an exposition of the text Gen. 3:15. "Also haben die Propheten in die Sprüche Mose gesehen und ihre herrliche Weissagung von Christo daraus gesogen; also Esaias (7:14) aus diesem Spruch (Gen. 3:15 is again meant) die Prophezei von Christi Geburt mit klaren Worten setzet. Item das ganze 53. Kapitel von seinem Leiden und Auferstehen..., welches ohn Zweifel Christus in dieser seiner Predigt (Luc. 24:25ff!) auch angezogen. Also haben auch die Apostel, die albernen Fischer, die Schrift nicht in den Schulen der grossen Schriftgelehrten, sondern durch die Offenbarung, dadurch Christus sie in die Schrift leitet, lernen verstehen und etwa aus einem Spruch können ein Buch oder eine Predigt machen, so die Welt nicht begreifen kann. Und wenn ich auch den Geist hätte, den Esaias oder

Paulus gehabt, so könnte ich aus diesem Spruch ein Neu Testament machen, wo es nicht gemacht" (ibid. 273). Luther then asks how Peter got to know what in 1. Peter 1:10f he expresses as his knowledge of Christ and of the Spirit of Christ. "Sind das eines Fischers oder eines klugen und weisen Schriftgelehrten Worte? Nein, sondern eben des Heiligen Geistes Offenbarung, der es zuvor den Propheten auch geoffenbart hat." The same applies to the knowledge expressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews (1:3f) that Christ is Lord over all and higher than the angels: "Freilich hat er es aus dem Alten Testamnt genommen, aber nicht durch Vernunft, sondern durch die Offenbarung darin ersehen" (274). Luther then repeats the thought that on principle every Christian could do that, if he had the same measure of Holy Spirit: "Also wollt ich Mosen, den Psalter, Esaïam und auch denselben Geist nehmen und ja so gut Neu Testament machen, als die Apostel geschrieben; aber weil *wir den Geist so reich und gewaltig nicht haben*, müssen wir von ihnen lernen und aus ihrem Brunnlein trinken." Luther repeatedly gave expression to the thought that if the believing Christian had the same measure of the Spirit he could as expositor of the Holy Scriptures do the same as the authors of the biblical books. The same thought also occurs in well considered academic disputation theses, e.g. in *Disputatio de fide*, 1535 (EA op. lat. v.a. IV, 378ff); this is one of the most important documents for an understanding of Luther's attitude to the Scriptures, particularly in its emphasis of the Christological interpretation of the Scriptures. Here we find such famous theses as the following: "41. Et Scriptura est non contra, sed pro Christo intelligenda, ideo vel ad unum referenda, vel pro vera Scriptura non habenda. And: 49. Quod si adversarii Scripturam urserint contra Christum, urgemus Christum contra Scripturam." In this connection we read the daring theses: "52. Habito enim Christo facile condemus leges, et omnia recte iudicabimus. 53. Imo novos decalogos faciemus, sicut Paulus facit per omnes epistolas, et Petrus, maxime Christus in evangelio." And such decalogues would be as superior to that of Moses as the clarity of Christ was to the clarity of Moses (54). For, to continue with Thesis 55, if the heathens could be a law unto themselves: "56. Quanto magis Paulus ant perfectus Christianus plenus Spiritu potest decalogum quendam ordinare et de omnibus rectissime iudicare. 57. Sicut omnes prophetae et Patres eodem spiritu Christi omnia sunt locuti, quae habentur in Scripturis. 58. Tamen quia interim sumus inaequali spiritu et caro adversatur spiritui, *necesse est etiam propter vagos spiritus certis mandatis et scriptis apostolorum adhaerere*, ne laceretur ecclesia. 59. *Non enim sumus omnes apostoli, qui certo Dei decreto nobis sunt infallibiles doctores* missi. 60. Ideo non illi, sed nos, cum sine decreto tali simus, errare possumus et labi in fide. 61. Quare nun est arrogandum ulli post apostolos hoc nomen: quod non possit errare in fide, nisi soli ecclesiae universali." It should be quite clear that Luther's conception of a Christian who could himself write Holy Scripture is worlds removed from the conception of later Neo-Protestantism which was given expression to by Schleiermacher in the well-known words: "Jede heilige Schrift ist nur ein Mausoleum der Religion....Nicht der hat Religion, der an eine heilige Schrift glaubt, sondern der, welcher keiner bedarf, und wohl *selbst eine machen könnte* (Rede "über das Wesen der Religion"). According to Luther the Christian would do so only in the form of an exposition of the Scriptures given to him, just as the Prophets, Apostles, and Jesus Himself had the Holy Scriptures before them. And the Christian could do so only if he was endowed with the Spirit in the same measure as the men of God in the Bible. And he would be in possession of this fulness of the Spirit only if he were called by God through a special decree, a *certum decretum* which cannot be doubted, to the office of an *infallibilis doctor* with the ability of a *posse non errare in fide*. Such, then, according to Luther, are the prophets and apostles, the most eminent among the authors of the biblical writings, of the prophetic and apostolic record of the Old and New Testament. They were called by a special decree of God's Will and were endowed with the Holy Spirit in a greater measure than other believers; and by virtue of this endowment with the Spirit they were infallible teachers of faith and proclaimed the gospel. This proclamation became Word of God when and insofar as it was later faithfully recorded by them or others; in exactly the same way the oral proclamation was God's

Word, and the pure exposition of the written Word is God's Word. The fact of inspiration as such is not bound to the process of writing alone. Inspiration began before the written record was made and it outlasts the process of recording inasmuch as the written Word remains "quick and powerful." The secret of this life in the Word is its content, not the way or manner in which it began to exist. Whether it be a great apostle like Peter or Paul or a minor prophet whose person remains little known to us, whether it be a gripping penitential psalm like the Miserere and the De Profundis, or a sober common sense word of Wisdom; the decisive thing is not the author, nor the form, but simply the content, and this content is He. "In Petro et Paulo non vult nos admirari et adorare apostolatam, sed Christum in eis loquentem et ipsum verbum Dei quod nobis afferunt et praedicant," as Luther says in the Commentary to the Galatians (EA Gal I, 143).

V

Now the same applies to the other books of the Old and New Testament. It is the content which makes them Holy Scripture, no matter by whom they were written. It is well known that Luther was very tolerant in regard to the problem of the genuineness of the traditional names of the authors. Of Koheleth he says in his introduction of 1524: "Es ist aber das Buch freilich nicht durch den König Salomo selbst in eigener Hand geschrieben, oder gestellet, sondern aus seinem Munde durch andere gehöret und von den Gelehrten also zusammen gefasst" (EA 63, 40). In his Table Talk he once observes: "Dies Buch sollt völliger sein, ihm ist zuviel abgebrochen, es hat weder Stiefel noch Sporen, es reitet nur in Socken, gleichwie ich, da ich noch im Kloster war" (EA 62, 128), i.e. the book lacks the knowledge of the gospel which, nevertheless, existed even in Old Testament times. On the authorship of Solomon he says: "So hat er selbst das Buch nicht geschrieben, sondern ist zur Zeit der Maccabäer vor Sirach gemacht. Es ist aber ein sehr gut Buch und angenehm, darum dass es viel feiner Lehre hat, wie man sich im Hausregiment halten soll. Dazu ist's wie ein Talmud aus vielen Büchern zusammengezogen, vielleicht aus der Liberei des Königs Ptolemai Euergetis in ägypten" (ibid). Another important problem is the origin of the Pentateuch, the foundation for the whole structure of the Holy Scriptures. Luther naturally follows the Jewish tradition which assigns the "five books" to Moses. But he does so without any pedantry, particularly since the Old Testament text never regards Moses as the author of the whole work. When Johann Forster (1532 or 1533) related to him that some did not regard the Pentateuch as Mosaic, he answered, what does it matter? "Quid hoc ad rem? Esto Moses non scripserit, attamen est Mosis liber; hic enim solus mundi constitutionem optime describit" (WA Tischreden 3, p.23, 14, No. 2,844). In another part of the Table Talk he says of the Book of Genesis (1540): "Es ist aber meins Bedünkens nicht Mosis, denn man hat vor (her) auch Bücher gehabt und zitiert Bücher, and in this connection he refers to the "book of the wars of the Lord" (Num. 21:14) and to the "book of Jasher" (Joshua 10:13). And he goes on to say that he thinks even Adam, Noah and others made written records on "wie es ihnen ergangen." The Jews, he believes, were the oldest scriptures. "Graeci haben spät angefangen, und die Deutschen haben kaum 1,000 Jahr geschrieben" (WA Tischreden 4, Nr. 4,964). Thus he traces Moses' knowledge of primeval history back to written sources; but, of course, this in no way undermines the fact that the Pentateuch is the inspired Word of God, as little as the corresponding fact undermines the authority of the gospels. Moses also found part of the laws of the Pentateuch in older traditions and in accordance with divine mandate he incorporated them in his Law. ("*Ex mandato Dei* retulit in suas leges," "*ex mandato divino eas retinuit*" EA op. ex. 4, 269 or WA 43, 54, on Gen. 19.) In the case of the later historical books the sources also play an important part; indeed, partly they are originally national chronicles. "Die Bücher der Könige sind nur der Jüden Kalender, in welchen ordentlich beschrieben sind die Könige, wie sie regiert haben" (Table Talk EA 62, 132). Sources can have varying value; "Die Bücher der Könige gehen hundert Tausend Schritt vor dem, der die Chronika beschrieben hat, denn er hat nur die Summa und vornehmsten Stücke und Geschichten

angezeigt, was schlecht und gering hat er übergangen; darumb ist den Büchern der Könige mehr zu glaüben denn der Chroniken" (ibid.). That does not mean that Luther thinks the Chronicles make false statements and therefore deserve no credence. The problem of possible discrepancies between the two historical works is not even raised. All that is said is, that the books of the Kings contain more material, tell their story in a better way, and therefore are more perfect and yield more information for a knowledge of the happenings. The historian prefers the better source to the inferior one, without thereby declaring the inferior one to unreliable. But there is no answer in Luther to the question in what manner these books became Word of God, or how they have come to partake of the inspiration of the whole the Holy Scriptures, since their origin is different from that of the books of the prophets and the Psalms. But there is one thing of which he is firmly convinced and about which there is not the slightest doubt in his mind, namely that these books are God's undeceiving Word and that this distinguishes them from all other works of history. In his *Supputatio annorum mundi* of 1541 and 1545, an attempt at a chronicle of world history, Luther uses the biblical historians to write a world history. In the course of his book he also makes use occasionally of the secular histories at his disposal, just as it suits the task which he has before him. He comments on this in his introduction: "Dass ich die Geschichtsschreiber zwar nicht ganz und gar verachtet habe, aber die Heilige Schrift ihnen vorzog. Ich gebrauche derselben so, dass ich nicht gezwungen bin, der Schrift zu widersprechen. Denn ich glaube, dass *in der Schrift der wahrhaftige Gott rede*, aber in den Historien gute Leute nach ihrem Vermögen ihren Fleiss und ihre Treue, aber als Menschen, erweisen, oder wenigstens dass die Abschreiber haben irren können" (Walch 14, 1,117; St. Louis 14, 491). The essence of inspiration is defined very clearly by Luther in the case of the inspiration of the prophets or apostles; but quite hazy is his conception of the meaning of inspiration in those parts where the biblical text relates history. One ought therefore not to deny that Luther extended inspiration to include also these texts, as in fact he included the whole of the Holy Scriptures; nor is it permissible to place all parts of the Scriptures on the same level in the manner of later generations with their formula of "impulsus ad scribendum, suggestio rerum, suggestio verborum." To do that is to overlook the fact that large variations are possible within the compass of the incomprehensible How of inspiration, as large as in God's Word itself.

VI

Are there errors in the Holy Scriptures? What answer does Luther give to this question? In the first place he points out that our present text contains errors and he informs every reader of this fact in the marginal glosses of his German Bible. Thus we find in the gloss on Acts 13:20 (actually this is not yet contained in the editions of 1522 and 1524) a remark on the number in regard to the chronology of the Judges: "Etliche Text haben vierhundert; aber die Historien und Rechnung leidens nicht. Ist des Schreibers Irrtum, der vier für drei geschrieben hat, welchs leicht ist geschehen im Griechischen" (EA 64, 215 c.f. the German Nestle text for the passage). In another marginal gloss on 1. Chron. 23 (now 24): 3 he says of the number 30: "Es scheint die ebräische Bibel hier verfälscht zu sein, denn sonst allenthalben zwanzig geschrieben wird" (EA 64, 61). Whenever Luther comes across such passages which seem to him to be irreconcilable with other passages or for other reasons to be incredible, then he assumes an error or even a deliberate falsification by the copyists. Lack of space prevents us from citing more such passages. But Luther never seeks a way out through textual criticism, simply because of his great awe for the great mystery which he accepts. "Wenn Luther auch erstaunliche Beobachtungen über unvorstellbare Zahlenangaben und Unstimmigkeiten in alt- und neutestamentlichen Erzählungen gemacht hat, so erhöht das seine Achtung vor der Autorität der Bibel nur" (H. Bornkamm, *Luther und das Alte Testament*, 1948, p.161). But there are improbable figures which are in no way connected with miracles, e.g. 1. Kings 5:19: "Ich wollte gerne sehen, wo 80 oder 70 Tausend Zimmerleute mit ihren äxten her kommen..." (WA Deutsche Bibel,

3,419, 8ff). Such passages may result from a misunderstanding of the copyist or from a falsification. Indeed, Luther assumes intended falsifications on a large scale, even in passages which are theologically important. To be able to understand the Old Testament one must learn the Hebrew language from the Jews, says Luther at the conclusion of his writing: "Vom Schem Haphoras und vom Geschlecht Christi" of 1543. But one must avoid "their faith and reason." "Darum sollten unsere Ebraisten (darum ich sie auch hiemit um Gottes willen gebeten haben) lassen ihnen diese Arbeit befohlen und angelegen sein, die heilige alte Bibel von der Jüden Peres and Judaspisse zu reinigen, wo sie die Punct, Distinction, Conjugation, Construction, Signification, und was mehr die Grammatica hat, könnten ändern und von der Jüden Verstand wenden, dass sichs zum und mit dem Neuen Testament reimet, dass sie solches getrost und mit Freuden täten, wie S. Paulus Röm. am 12, 7 lehret, dass die prophetia sollen analoga, ähnlich sein dem Glauben. Denn so haben sie uns, das ist, der Biblia getan diese 1500 Jahr. Wo sie die Biblia mit Puncten, Distinction, Conjugation etc. haben können von unserem Messia und Glauben wenden und dem Neuen Testament unähnlich machen, das haben sie mit grossem und rasendem Fleiss getan..." Luther then refers to several passages, also to Isa. 9:5 where the Jews read the text so that it makes the following sense: "es wird der Wunderbar, Rat, Gott, Held, ewiger Vater den Messia nennen Friedfürst," so that the Messiah is deprived of the divine attributes. The original meaning in this and other passages must be reconstructed on the basis of the New Testament principle: "dass die alte heilige Schrift (the Old Testament is meant) auf Messia und unseren Glauben gehe und zeuge" (EA 32, 356). "Mit dieser Weise könnt man der Jüden Verstand in der Biblia fein schwächen, und ist das Vorteil, dass *Mose und die Propheten nicht haben mit Puncten geschrieben*; welchs ein neu Menschenfündlein, nach ihrer Zeit aufbracht: darum nicht not ist, dieselben so steif zu halten, als die Jüden gern wollten, sonderlich, wo sie dem Neuen Testament zuwider gebraucht werden" (EA 32,357). In regard to the latter quotation we should note that Luther does not share the opinion of later Orthodoxy that also the vowel signs of the Hebrew text are inspired. Of course, he knows that certain vowels correspond to the original text. But they have not necessarily always to be the present ones and in certain cases, e.g. Tetragram, he is quite right. One might be inclined to attribute Luther's serious accusation that the Old Testament text was falsified, to the bitter mood of hostility to the Jews, which so characterizes this writing of his old age. But the same accusation is already to be found in his commentary on Isaiah, e.g. in the exposition of Isa. 9 in EA op. ex. 23, 109, where Luther offers a classical formulation of his accusation when he says: "Sicut enim Christum crucifixerunt, sic et verba prophetarum ipsius crucifigunt." It is extraordinarily significant for Luther's understanding of the Scriptures that the text of the Hebrew Old Testament may have undergone a comprehensive falsification and that it is the duty of Christian theology in the very first place to determine a reliable text which will be in harmony with the New Testament. No doubt the sweeping accusation against the Jews is phantastic; the Septuagint and the Vulgate offer us the possibility of checking up on alleged later alterations. Nevertheless, the most recent discoveries of Old Testament manuscripts and the research work on the Septuagint have confronted us with the fundamental problem whether in every case we really have the oldest, the absolutely reliable text of the Old Testament in our Hebrew Bible (apart from minor variations and text corruptions). What if this is not everywhere the case? What if we merely had a suspicion that our text is not quite reliable in smaller or even larger portions of the Old Testament? For many Christians that would result in a serious shaking of the foundations of their faith. They would ask on what one could still rely in this world, if not on the text of the Bible. Luther and the Lutheran Church would not be sorely afflicted by such a prospect. And if all the vowels of the Old Testament were problematical, the Old Testament as such would continue to exist. Its content would not be problematical. For we know and are acquainted with what in the Old Testament is Law and Gospel and the New Testament confirms it for us. Yes, the Church could, if it were necessary, restore the Old Testament in its purity on the basis of the New

Testament. What a daring thought that is. And yet this thought of Luther is no more than an expression of his very deep knowledge of what God's Word and the Bible, as the Word of God, is.

VII

That the text of Holy Scripture as we have it, contains mistakes and errors has never been denied. But what about the original text, i.e. the text which in the case of each single passage is to be regarded as the uncorrupted text? Errors in the original are found by Luther in the Apocrypha (on which to dwell here is unnecessary), and in writings whose canonicity is not sure and which were called "antilegomena" in the Ancient Church or deuterocanonical books by Lutheran theology. Luther's often quoted criticisms of biblical texts refer to them, especially to the Epistle of James. In the Old Testament the book of Esther is suspected of not belonging to the canon. The ancient rabbis already expressed that suspicion. It is of utmost importance for the understanding of the Bible as a whole, that not only the text of Holy Scripture, but also its extent is open to doubt. As we no longer have the original manuscript of the books of the Bible — or whatever may correspond to it in the individual case—nobody is able to say with absolute certainty whether each of the books received into the canon really belongs there. The extent of the canon as used in the Church is determined by the Church through synodical decrees or through silent agreement or mere custom. Since the Church, however, is not above Scripture and no decree of a synod can claim infallibility, a remnant of uncertainty must be there. It is to the credit of the Lutheran Church which always desires to *submit* unconditionally to the Word, that she has refrained from disposing of Holy Writ by quick decisions, determining what is canonical and what not, and that she has preferred a certain amount of uncertainty to a false certainty. Undoubtedly that which is truly God's Word belongs to the Holy Scriptures and is beyond our criticism. On the other hand, we are not entitled to declare something to be God's Word which really is not. *Luther's Biblical criticism is an endeavour to hear and to explain the whole Word of God and at the same time to distinguish it from everything which is not the Word of God.*

What this "criticism," i.e. this distinction and separation between the Word of God and that which is not Word of God, is like, we shall see by studying not his much discussed utterances on James, but what he says on the Epistle to the Hebrews which for Luther was not an epistle of "straw" but an "exceedingly fine epistle." In the Preface to Hebrews (in all editions since 1522): "Bisher haben wir die rechten gewissen Hauptbücher des Neuen Testaments gehabt. Diese vier nachfolgende (he means those placed at the end of the New Testament: Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation) aber haben vor Zeiten ein ander Ansehen gehabt. Und aufs erst, dass diese Epistel an die Ebräer nicht St. Paul noch einiges Apostels sei, beweiset sich dabei, dass im 2. Kap. (v.3) stehet also: Diese Lehre ist durch die, so es selbst vom Herrn gehört haben, auf uns kommen und blieben. Damit wird es klar, dass er von den Aposteln redet als ein Jünger, auf den solche Lehre von den Aposteln kommen sei, vielleicht lange hernach." Luther points out that the remark in Gal. 1:1 would also cause a difficulty. über das hat sie einen *harten Knoten*, dass sie am 6. und 10. Kapitel stracks verneinet und versaget die Busse den Sündern, nach der Taufe, und am 12. (v.17) spricht: Esau habe Busse gesucht und doch nicht funden. Welchs, wie es lautet, scheint wider alle *Evangelia und Episteln St. Pauli* zu sein. Und lauten doch die Wort so klar, dass ich nicht weiss, obs genug sei. Mich dünket, es sei eine Epistel von vielen Stücken zusammen gesetzt, und nicht einerlei ordentlich handele." Yet he says, it is "eine ausbündige feine Epistel, die vom Priestertum Christi meisterlich und gründlich aus der Schrift redet, dazu das Alte Testament fein und reichlich ausleget." The author according to Luther is a splendid, learned man, a disciple of the apostles. "Und ob er wohl nicht den Grund legt des Glaubens..., welchs der Apostel Amt ist: so bauet er doch fein drauf *Gold, Silber, Edelsteine*, wie S. Paulus 1. Kor. 3 (v. 12) sagt. Derhalben uns nicht hindern soll, ob *vielleicht etwa Holz, Stroh oder Heu mit untergemenet*

werde, sondern solche feine Lehre mit allen Ehren aufnehmen; ohn dass man sie *den apostolischen Episteln nicht allerdinge gleichen mag*" (EA 63, 154f). The verdict of the Reformer on this writing is perfectly clear; it is not to be put on the same level as the writings of the apostles. For it contains in addition to the pure gold and silver of the pure doctrine a few things which contradict that doctrine and cannot be reconciled to it by a "gloss," an explanation. Therefore its place is at the edge of the canon. Is it God's Word? To this question Luther would answer: Yes, it is the Word of God insofar as it teaches the gospel. (c.f. the quotation on Heb. 1:3f in the sermon EA 11, 273.) It is the Word of God in the same way as every correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures by any true, faithful teacher is Word of God. Of everything taught correctly in Hebrews (and that applies by far to the greater part) we might say that which must be said of all pure doctrine of the gospel; Luther formulates it thus: "Also bin ich gewiss, wenn ich auf den Predigtstuhl gehe oder auf die Kathedra trete und predigen oder lesen, dass es nicht mein Wort ist, sondern meine Zunge ist ein Griffel eines guten Schreibers, wie der 45. Psalm (v.2) sagt; denn Gott redet in den heiligen Propheten oder Gottes Männern, wie es St. Petrus in seiner Epistel (2. Pet. 1:21) auch saget: Die Heiligen Gottes haben geredet, getrieben durch den Heiligen Geist. Da soll Gott und Mensch nicht von einander gesondert noch geschieden werden nach dem Verstande und Urteil menschlicher Vernunft; sondern man soll stracks sagen: dieser Mensch, Prophet, Apostel, oder rechtschaffener Prediger und Lehrer, was er aus Gottes Befehl redet oder tut, das redet und tut Gott selber, denn er ist Gottes Mundstück oder Werkzeug. Da sollen die Zuhörer schliessen und sagen: Jetzt höre ich nicht Paulum, Petrum oder einen Menschen, sondern Gott selber reden, täufen, absolvieren, strafen, bannen und das Abendmahl reichen" (EA 57, 39). This is a thought which Luther repeats again and again; it is of the utmost importance for his understanding of the Word of God. "Ein Prediger, wenn er gepredigt hat muss mit Jeremias sagen und rühmen: Herr du weisst, dass, was aus meinem Munde gangen ist, das ist recht and dir gefällig. Ja, mit St. Paulo, allen Aposteln und Propheten trötzlich sagen: Haec dixit Dominus. Das hat Gott selber gesagt. Et iterum, Ich bin ein Apostel und Prophet Jesu Christi gewest in dieser Predigt" (WA 52, 517; EA 26, 58f). It should be noted how in this and similar words oral and written teaching, the proclaimed and the written Word always belong together. But it also is to be observed that in principle he does not distinguish between the teaching of the biblical men of God, whether oral or written, and the teaching of the ministerium ecclesiasticum. What distinguishes the apostles from the later teachers, among whom Luther would also place the author of Hebrews, is the special call and the possession of the fulness of the Spirit. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews would lack that call and the "posse non errare in fide" which, as we have seen, according to Luther the Holy Spirit has given to the authors of the "real, certain main books of the New Testament." But there is one thing which they all have in common, the Prophets, the Apostles, the authors of the deuterocanonical books of the Bible and the later preachers and teachers of the Church of all times: the Word of God, the gospel; its ministers they all are, it is above them all, they cannot dispose over it, but rather it disposes over them and judges all of them. Even the apostles are under the Word and must submit to its judgment. Thus there is a possibility of examining the men who claim to be bearers of divine revelation, and also of examining the writings which claim or are claimed to be divine revelation. "Das ist der rechte *Prüfstein*, alle Bücher zu tadeln, wenn man siehet, ob sie Christum treiben oder nicht, sintemal alle Schrift Christum zeigt....Was Christum nicht lehret, das ist noch nicht apostolisch, wens gleich S. Petrus oder Paulus lehrte. Wiederumb, was Christum prediget, das wäre apostolisch, wens gleich Judas, Hannas, Pilatus und Herodes tät" (EA 63, 157). Thus there is a norma above the norma normans of the Scriptures and only he is able to understand the Scriptures as "the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers shall be judged and examined," who understands the Judge above the Judge, the Dominus Scripturae, who, as we have seen in another connection, is at once also content of Holy Scripture. The practical application of this norm, according to Luther, must be undertaken according to the

analogia fidei in the exposition of the Scriptures. Where it is a question of "was für heilige Schrift und Artikel des Glaubens zu halten sei," there Luther says, we shall "bei dieser Regel bleiben, die uns St. Paulus lehret Röm. 12:7: Alle Weissagung soll dem Glauben ähnlich sein. Welche Lehrer nun so lehren, das dem Glauben an Christo gemäss ist, die wollen wir lehren und halten. Welcher aber nicht dem Glauben gemäss lehret, den wollen wir weder hören noch sehen" (Glosse auf das vermeintliche kaiserliche Edikt etc. 1531, EA 25, 80) c.f. the sermon already referred to in the Kirchenpostille on Rom. 12:6-16, EA 8, 14ff , particularly p. 22ff. We need not show here with what confidence and efficiency and, compared with later Biblicists, with what boldness Luther has applied that rule in order to understand the Word of God. Neither do we want to show here how on the basis of this principle the Gospel of the Saviour of sinners became the key to the whole Bible and how only from the sola fide the sola scriptura received its meaning. So Luther exercised what we could call his Criticism of the Bible, the careful study of the question whether the collection of writings, offered by the Catholic Church of his day as the Bible, is really God's Word. By applying the standard discovered by him he came to reject the Old Testament Apocrypha as not being the pure Word of God, to doubt a book like Esther, to distinguish the "real, certain and main books" of the New Testament from the later antilegomena where he found some contradictions to the Gospel, i.e. some doctrinal errors. For the rest, however, this examination led him to the recognition that the claim of the Bible to be the Word of God is splendidly justified.

VIII

Did Luther also find errors in those books of the Holy Scriptures which are without a doubt canonical? Since he ascribes a posse non errare in fide, effected by the Holy Spirit, to the apostles and so implicitly to all authors of canonical books, he cannot find errors in faith in these books. If he should find such an error, he would assume a corruption of the text. For Luther a canonical book with a false doctrine would be an unthinkable contradictio in adiecto. But what of mistakes, inaccuracies, contradictions, discrepancies or whatever other deficiencies may be found in a book? We have seen that Luther admits the possibility of many serious corruptions or falsifications of the text of the Old Testament. We have seen how seriously he endeavours to find out which writings constitute Holy Scripture. If corruptions have crept into the text, if moreover whole books which actually do not belong to the Bible since they are not at all God's Word, have been incorporated into the Bible, and if the elimination of them is so difficult that Luther never reached full clarity on the extent of the canon, then the Book of books simply cannot be regarded as the most perfect of literary products. It might have been better if the theological discussions within the Lutheran Church had followed the leadership of Luther instead of yielding to the temptation coming from Reformed and Catholic theology and making the doctrine de sacra scriptura a chapter of a theologia gloriae. In reading the paragraphs in the works of dogmatics by the Orthodox dogmaticians on the perfection of Holy Scripture, one comes across nothing but praise for all the perfections ascribed to the Bible and the question immediately suggests itself: what would Luther have said about all that? He was acquainted with the Bible like no other man, he was the greatest of all expositors and translators of the Bible; but he knew well enough that the glory of the written Word was "hidden under the cross," in the same way as is the glory of the proclaimed Word and of the Word incarnate. But then the question arises, how, according to Luther, does this "form of a servant," this existence of the written Word of God under the cross, find its expression? And this further raises the question, whether the non posse errare in fide also includes an absolute inerrancy and infallibility in matters which are not de fide.

The forma servi of the written Word finds its expression according to Luther in the fact that the Holy Spirit in using human instruments also made use of the weakness of these instruments. Isaiah

remains a poor sinner though he received on the occasion of his call the forgiveness of his sins in quite a particular way, a fact later remembered in the Christian service before the reading of the Gospel (c.f. the prayer, "Munda cor meum" in the Roman Mass). Paul, God's chosen vessel, was a chronically sick man and had to experience that strength is made perfect in weakness. What a deep insight is expressed in the fine apology with which Luther defends the Holy Spirit Who in speaking through the apostle is suspected of grammatical shortcomings: "Condonandum est autem Spiritui Sancto in Paulo loquenti, si peccet aliquando in grammaticas et praecepta rhetorica ..." (EA Gal. 1. 141 on Gal. 2: 2). The speaking of the Holy Spirit is done with the full co-operation of man; and that means, not only man with the peculiar traits of his own character, but also with his certain frame of mind. Luther would perhaps not have been able to answer the question whether in this case a *suggestio verborum* must be assumed as was assumed in the case of the poets of the psalms; in his exposition of Psalm 127:3 he says: "Non solum vocabula set et phrasis...est divina, qua spiritus sanctus et scriptura utitur." The co-operation of men is regarded in the case of Gal. 2:2 as causing the Holy Spirit to sin against grammar. The Holy Spirit makes the weakness of man who in his excitement disregards the rules of grammar, his own weakness. We shall have to be more lenient than the men of the 16th Century were in passing judgment on such "mistakes." Certainly we must note here that Luther in this case assumes a grammatical mistake, even though it is one which has to be "forgiven to the Holy Spirit." If such grammatical shortcomings belong to the "form of the servant" of the written Word of God, then shortcomings in historical statements will also have to be regarded in this way. Thus Luther in his Commentary to the Galatians (EA Gal. I, 97 on Gal. 1:11) states that not only dates in the life of Paul but also the historical statements of the Bible caused difficulties: "Sunt autem historiae in scripturis saepe *concisae et confusae*, ut conciliari facile non possint, ut sunt negationes Petri et historia passionis Christi etc. Sic hic Paulus integram historiam non recitat. Ego non laboro neque multum sollicitus sum de ea concordanda, sed tantum hic considero, quod Pauli sit consilium, et quo spectet." While Jerome tortures and troubles himself trying to reconcile the narratives (*esse torquet laborat*), Luther refrains from doing so if he cannot succeed, and addresses himself to the actual content of the text. In his Easter sermon of 1525 he discusses the differences in the Easter narratives: "Die Evangelisten all vier haben nicht gross Achtung gehabt, dass sie die Geschichte in ein Ordnung bringen und nach einander erzählen. Einer schreibt mehr, der ander minder, der schreibt das, ein ander jenes Stück; haben nit viel Acht auf die Wörter, sehen allein darauf, dass sie die Geschichte an ihm selbs beschreiben. Dann an den Wörtern liegt nit viel Macht, wie auch unter den Menschen in all Sprachen geschieht; wann sich etwas Grosses und Neues begibt, davor sich jedermann entsetzt, so sagt mans darnach aus, der mit solchen, einer mit diesen Worten.... Also hie auch sagen sie nit mit einerlei Worten. Das macht die Grösse des Wunders, dass ein Mensch soll von Toten auferstehen" (EA 17, 141). As plausible as this explanation of the differences between the narratives may sound (actually the different stories are full of the excitement caused by the marvellous events), the question cannot be avoided why the Holy Spirit, Who has inspired all the narratives, seems to have shared in this embarrassing human aspect of them and why, indeed, He did not change disorder into order. The question is all the more pressing since the faith of the Christian wants to get an exact picture of what happened and it is not satisfied with the plain statement that Christ is risen. For that reason Luther, too, in the following sentences attempts to give a picture of the Easter event to his hearers: "Wir wollen es aber in ein Ordnung fassen, wie es ergangen ist." Once again he repeats: "Paulus, Petrus und die anderen Apostel haben sich nit viel bekümmert mit der Ordnung und Historie der Auferstehung, sondern viel mehr getrieben die Kraft und Nutz derselben." Luther says that this is what matters most and not the astonishing details of the event. "Darum haben die Evangelisten die Historie schlecht beschrieben, nit viel Acht gehabt auf die Wörter, damit sie uns von der Geschichte rissen auf den Nutz" (p.145f). The same embarrassment is caused by other passages of the Gospel, especially in the

Passion narrative. Particularly difficult is the story of the Cleansing of the Temple. It is most characteristic of Luther's interpretation of the gospels when, in dealing with this story, he says: "Es sind Fragen und bleiben Fragen, die ich nicht will auflösen: es liegt auch nicht viel daran, ohne dass viel Leute da sind, die so spitzig und scharfsinnig sind und allerlei Fragen aufbringen und davon Frage und Antwort haben wollen. Aber wenn wir den rechten Verstand der Schrift und die rechten Artikel unseres Glaubens haben, dass Jesus Christus, Gottes Sohn, für uns gestorben und gelitten hat, so hats nicht grossen Mangel, ob wir gleich auf alles, so sonst gefragt wird, nicht antworten können. Die Evangelisten halten nicht einerlei Ordnung: was einer vornen setzt, das setzt der ander bisweilen hinten, wie auch Markus diese Geschichte schreibet, sie sei am anderen Tage nach dem Palmstage geschehen. Es kann auch wohl sein, dass der Herr solches mehr denn einmal getan hat und dass Johannes das erste Mal, Matthäus das ander Mal beschreibt. Ihm sei nun, wie ihm wolle, es sei zuvor oder hernach, eins oder zweir geschehen, so bricht uns an unserem Glauben nichts ab..." (EA 46. 173ff). It is always the same answer that Luther gives to such problems. He is convinced that nothing worse than a "disorder" in the sequence of events can be found in the Bible; in the case of seeming contradictions some explanation should be found. When he cannot find such a solution, he passes on and leaves the matter to God Who will grant or withhold an answer according to His good pleasure. On any account, what really matters is not these details, but the Gospel as a whole. And this is not endangered by the "confusion" and by the lack of order in the historical presentation. Luther accepts the Bible as it is without having the slightest doubt that it is the Word of God and that as such it is absolutely reliable. He believes the Bible also in matters not pertaining to faith. The new theory of Copernicus came into Luther's horizon for the first time in 1539 (a few years before the appearance of the famous book) in the form of a rumour about a new astrologus "who wanted to prove that the earth moves and rotates, and not the sky or the firmament, or the sun and moon." To this Luther observes: "... es gehet jetzt also: wer da will klug sein, der soll ihm nichts lassen gefallen, was andere machen, er muss ihm etwas Eigens machen, das muss das Allerbeste sein, wie ers machet. Der Narr will die ganze Kunst Astronomiae umkehren. Aber wie die Heilige Schrift anzeigt, so hiess Josua die Sonne still stehen, und nicht das Erdreich" (EA 62, 319, Table Talk according to Lauterbach). We have already seen how Luther in his World Chronicle prefers the Bible as a source book in chronological problems of world history to profane works on history. "Ich glaube, dass in der Schrift der wahrhaftige Gott redet, aber in den Historien gute Leute." In short, the result appears to be this: Luther knows of the "form of the servant" which Holy Scripture has, because he knows of the uncertainty of the text in many passages; because he knows of the uncertainty of the extent of the canon; because he knows of the literary shortcomings of the Bible and of the weaknesses in the presentation of historical matter. But that this "form of the servant" could also find an expression in the occurrence of errors, that discrepancies and variations might become contradictions, that shortcomings might be mistakes, all this apparently never occurred to Luther. It seems that the doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of Holy Scripture also in matters not pertaining to faith; has an impressive and authoritative champion in Luther. It is not difficult to show that when the reliability of the historical statements of the Bible was at stake, Luther appealed to the unconditional credibility of Holy Scripture as the true and infallible Word of God.

IX

Indeed, this is Luther's opinion: the Holy Scriptures are free from errors. But in stating this, we have not yet given an answer to the crux of the problem. For Luther the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible is a deep personal conviction. But is it also a dogma in the strict sense of the word, i.e. a doctrine taught in Holy Scripture and consequently binding for the Church? Luther is deeply convinced that the Bible does not contain errors. But is it also his opinion that it *could* not contain an error, that it would cease to be the Word of God if even the slightest error, the most trifling fault "in

leviculis" were to be discovered? Quenstedt and the later Orthodoxy held this view. Was it also held by Luther? Franz Pieper interpreted Luther in this way when he ascribed to him the view that "Scripture is the only book in which no historical errors *can* occur" (Chrstl. Dogmatik I, p. 384-the emphasis is Pieper's). In support of his interpretation Pieper can quote only one passage from Luther. It is the quotation from the Supputatio annorum mundi to which we have already referred. "I make use of them (viz. the secular chroniclers) but so, that I am not compelled to contradict Holy Scripture. For I believe that in Scripture the true God speaks, but in historical books good men show their diligence and their faithfulness, but as men; at most, I believe that copyists might err." But in this passage Luther does not speak of what the Bible **can** or cannot do, but of what, in his opinion, the Bible *does* do. Wilhelm Walther understands the passage correctly when he interprets it as follows: "Wieder also stellt er (Luther) nicht den dogmatischen Lehrsatz auf, ein Irrtum in chronologischen Angaben könne in der Bibel nicht vorkommen, sondern er spricht es als *seine Ansicht* aus, die Bibel sei, weil sie Gottes Wort sei, auch in Nebendingen ohne direkte Irrtümer. Und so bestimmt er diese seine Meinung ausspricht, um sein Verfahren zu erklären, so verlangt er doch nicht von anderen dieselbe Ansicht" (Das Erbe der Reformation I, Der Glaube an das Wort Gottes, 1903, p. 52; the emphasis is Walther's). W. Walther summarizes Luther's attitude to the question of the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures in the following words: "Wenn Luther die Autorität und Irrtumslosigkeit der hl. Schrift in dem Sinne betont, dass er diese Stellung zu ihr als die einzig normale, daher von jedem Christen zu erstrebende darstellt, dann hat er stets nur ihren sachlichen, religiösen Inhalt vor Augen. Dagegen begegnen wir niemals bei ihm der Behauptung, die Bibel könne nicht Gottes Wort sein oder ihre Autorität falle dahin, wen sie auch nur in einem geringen Nebenpunkt etwas Unrichtiges enthalte"(ibid. p. 48f). Dr.P. E. Kretzmann in an essay which he was kind enough to send to the author recently ("Misunderstanding Luther in his teaching on Inspiration") suggests "that Walther's presentation offers a strange contradiction." But the contradiction is not to be found in Walther's interpretation; rather it is present in Luther's teaching which Walther has quite correctly presented and interpreted. For actually Luther holds two views, side by side: the conviction that the Holy Scriptures do not contain a single error, even in historical details; and the conviction that the authority of the Holy Scriptures would not be impaired if such an error should occasionally occur. As proof for this latter conviction Walther quotes what Luther writes in his German Commentary on Zechariah on the passage Zech. 11: 12f which is quoted as coming from Jeremiah in Matt. 27: 9. The old question whether or not an error on the part of the evangelist is to be found here, is answered by Luther in the following words: "Solche und dergleichen Fragen bekümmern mich nicht, weil sie wenig zur Sache dienen und Matthäus gleich genug tut, dass er gewisse Schrift führt (i.e. that he quotes a genuine text of the Bible), ob er gleich nicht so eben den Namen trifft.... Kann man nun dasselbe leiden und geschieht es ohne Gefahr des Sinnes, dass er nicht eben die Worte führt; was sollte es hindern, ob er den Namen nicht so eben setzt?" To which Walther adds by way of explanation: "Damit erklärt Luther freilich, es würde nichts schaden, *wenn* Matthäus hier ein Versehen begangen hätte. Und doch vermeidet er, auszusprechen, dass wirklich ein solches vorliege. Nur als eine *Möglichkeit* erwähnt er dies, während er die nichtbuchstäbliche Zitationsweise bei Matthäus als Faktum hinstellt. Denn dort wählt er zweimal die Partikel 'ob,' hier dagegen 'dass'"(ibid.p.52, the emphasis is Walther's; the quotation from Luther in Walther is from EA 42, 330f). If Walther had compared the text of the Latin Commentary on Zechariah he would have experienced a considerable surprise. For there Luther states quite frankly that the text in Matthew contains a slight error: "Nec crediderim facile libros prophetarum esse immutatos variatis titulis, deinde fuerunt haud dubie cum Mattheo sancti et eruditi viri pleni spiritu, qui admonuerunt in Zacharia esse illam scripturam, quam citarat non in Hieremia, quorum admonitione admonitus potuisset *levem illum errorem* emendare, si libuisset aut si putavisset magnopere referre. Sed nihil est, cur his et similibus scrupulis nos anxie torqueamus, cum not sit in illis caput et summa nostrae

fidei" (WA 13, 650, 28ff; EA op. ex. 28, 164). We append the German translation of the St. Louis Edition, 14, 2,124: "Ich möchte nicht leicht glauben, dass die Bücher der Propheten verwechselt worden seien durch Veränderung der Titel. Sodann waren bei Matthäus ohne Zweifel heilige und gelehrte Leute, voll des Heiligen Geistes, die ihn erinnert haben, dass diese Schriftstelle in Sacharja sei, die er angeführt hatte, nicht in, Jeremia. Durch deren Erinnerung veranlasst, hätte er *diesen geringen Irrtum* leicht verbessern können, wenn es ihm beliebt hätte, oder wenn er dafür gehalten hätte, dass viel daran liege. Aber, es ist kein Grund warum wir uns mit diesen und ähnlichen Bedenken ängstlich abquälen sollen, da in diesen Dingen nicht das Hauptstück und der Inbegriff unseres Glaubens liegt." It is true, the Latin Commentary was not written by Luther himself but by Stephan Roth on the basis of Luther's Latin lecture. However, a comparison between the mode of speech in the German and the Latin text, and a comparison of this Latin Commentary with the elaborate commentary which Roth himself began to write on the basis of Luther's lecture (he managed to write only the first chapters) shows that the text is a faithful rendering of the lecture which Luther gave in Wittenberg 1625/26. This view was also shared by the editors of the St. Louis Edition, otherwise they would not have incorporated this text in their edition. Thus it did happen occasionally that Luther spoke of a slip like the one to be found in Matt. 27: 9 as a "levis error," a slight error which does not concern the matter with which the biblical texts deal, and which does not affect the inerrancy of the Bible. And this is by no means the only case where Luther assumes that Scripture uses a mode of speech which, according to the strict standards of logic at any rate, renders the facts in a very inaccurate way. As to the high figures in some narratives of the Old Testament, which can hardly be understood or for which no explanation can be found at all, Luther remarks in a passage of his Table Talk: "Wenn man lieset, es seien oft grosse Summen erschlagen, also 80,000 etc., so glaub ich, dass ihrer oft kaum tausend erschlagen sein. Man meint das ganze Volk. Wer regem schlägt, der schlägt alles was er hat. Als wenn König aus Frankreich mit 10,000 geschlagen ist, sagt man, es seien 80,000 geschlagen, quia er vermag so viel etc. Sonst kann ichs nicht concilieren"(Table Talk 1542/43 in WA TR No.5,560) Put bluntly, this would mean that the Old Testament occasionally can make use of an exaggeration of figures as a rhetorical means of illustration similar to that which was customary with all historians of the Ancient World. We are stating this as a conjecture expressed on a special occasion by no lesser authority than Luther himself and we are convinced that Luther, in making such a conjecture, did not deprive the Old Testament narratives of their historical value. How unprejudiced Luther was in assuming that the biblical authors in their presentation of history followed the methods of all historians, may be shown by another quotation from the Supputatio annorum mundi where the difficulty is discussed which Stephen's discourse in Acts 7 presents with its divergence from the Old Testament narrative. Again we quote the German text from the St. Louis Edition, 14, 714f: "Zu der Erzählung des Stephanus kann dies gesagt werden, dass es nicht seine eigne Behauptung gewesen sei, sondern eine Erzählung, die aus dem Munde des Volks hergenommen sei; eine solche pflegt verwirrt und dunkel zu sein. Sodann pflegen die Evangelisten vielmehr die Stellen der Schrift anzuzeigen, als anzuführen und lassen sich daran genügen, dass sie dieselben kurz angezogen und anf die Quellen selbst verwiesen haben. Denn siehe den Matthäus im ersten Kapitel an, wie das Geschlechtsregister mit den Historien nicht übereinkommt. Zugleich kann nicht in Abrede genommen werden, dass eben diese Stelle, Apost. 7 auf mehr als Eine Weise verderbt worden sei durch etliche Klüglinge. Denn das ist ein offener Irrtum, dass er sagt, der Herr sei ihm in Mesopotamien erschienen, ehe er in Haran wohnte, und sei hernach aus Chaldäa gegangen. Es ist Mesopotamien für Chaldäa gesetzt, es sei denn du lässtest Chaldäa in Mesopotamien gelegen sein. Sonst war er schon längst aus Chaldäa gezogen." One has only to compare this frank discussion of the problem with the attempts of modern apologists to minimize the difficulties, in order to understand how far Luther (the same, by the way,

is true of Calvin in spite of his stricter conception of the inspiration) was from denying the possibility of slight historical mistakes.

Thus we have to state it as a historical fact that Martin Luther, the pious and faithful reader and interpreter of Holy Scripture, was able to combine the assertion that the Bible is free from error, with the assumption that in certain passages the solution of the “scrupuli” (that is what he called these difficulties) which troubled him so much as he testifies in the appendix to the *Supputatio* (St. Louis 14, 714ff) was possible only on the basis of an assumption of a *levis error*. Just those who for their person shrink back from such an assumption, should ask themselves the question how these two views could coexist in the soul of so great a Christian as Martin Luther. Why should such a coexistence be impossible? What is there to prevent our first admitting the possibility of a “slight error” in the Bible? What makes the assumption of an absolute inerrancy of Holy Scripture, even in matters not pertaining to faith, necessary? What compels us to believe this kind of inerrancy? The actual fact that in some cases the Bible contains different historical traditions which can hardly, or not at all, be reconciled with each other, suggests that the Bible is not free from contradictions and occasional slight errors. What forces us to believe in its complete inerrancy despite these facts? We read in F. Pieper (op. cit. p. 384): “Wenn die Schrift *nebenbei* solche Dinge, die in das natürliche Gebiet gehören, lehrt, so hat sie auch darin stets recht gegen alle entgegenstehenden Behauptungen der menschlichen Wissenschaft, denn *pasa graphe theopneustos*.” Is that really a logical conclusion? Does *theopneustia* logically include absolute inerrancy? Have we to infer from the idea of *theopneustia* what the *graphe theopneustos* may or may not teach in regard to secular and natural matters? Should we not rather conclude from the actual facts of the inspired Word of God what is possible within the compass of the inspired Word? Where is it stated that an inspired word must not contain a “*levis error*” in natural or historical matters? Is there a scriptural proof for that contention? Is it John 10:35? No unprejudiced exegesis can read more into this passage than it really contains. It speaks of Scripture as the document of divine revelation. It speaks of what Scripture tells us about God and divine truths. Therefore this passage has never really been cited as the source of the doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of the Bible. What is the origin of this doctrine? This doctrine is an axiom clearly promulgated for the first time by Augustine in the sentence that the reverence which we owe to the canonical books of Holy Scripture must lead us to believe that none of the authors has committed an error in writing (*nullum eorum autorem scribendo errasse aliquid*), and that if a passage seems to contain an error, we must not doubt that it is either the fault of the manuscript or of the interpreter or of our own deficient intellect (“*nihil aliud quam vel mendosum esse codicem, vel interpretem non adsecutum esse, quod dictum est, vel me minime intellexisse*. Ep.82, 3 CSL 34, 354, 3ff). This axiom, promulgated as it was by the great Father of the Church, and accompanied with his practical advice as to how to deal with what appears to be an error in the Bible, has been of immense influence. Like so many other thoughts of Augustine, it has influenced Western theology for more than a thousand years and in the 16th and 17th centuries it determined the theology of the Word in all churches. That an inspired Scripture has to be free from any error, even the slightest one in non-theological matters, this assertion is so evident, so plausible, that Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans and Calvinists accepted it without noticing that it was an unproved and unprovable axiom like any axiom in Euclid. But it is not a dogma of the Church. To this very day nobody has proved it from Scripture. That is the reason why the Confessional writings of the Lutheran Church are silent in regard to this doctrine. And Luther is a great master of Scripture and one of the greatest teachers of all times. Particularly great is the simplicity of mind with which in his thinking he can have standing side by side what in reality actually does stand side by side in the living and mighty Word of God. In the person of the God-man we also find what at first seems to be an irreconcilable contradiction: Jesus Christ has divine omniscience as part of the majesty which he had “according to the personal

union, and yet He abstained from it in the state of His humiliation" (Form Conc. Epit. VIII, Triglotta p. 821) as we know from Mark 13: 32.

X

It appears that a renewed discussion on the nature of Holy Scripture is beginning in the Lutheran Church of today, caused by the spiritual emergency within our Church and within all Christendom. For we are living in a time when all nations, all institutions, and also all the churches of Christendom are shaken in their very foundations. It is necessary and right that we should begin by studying again Luther's powerful doctrine on the Word of God, not in order to have our pet thoughts backed by his authority, but in order to learn from him, and perhaps even to unlearn. It may be that the simple facts of history, and the knowledge of the writings of Luther which today is far more extensive than it could be in the 19th Century, will compel us to revise some of our judgments. As Lutherans we know that the question as to what is doctrine of the Church is decided by Holy Scripture, the only source and standard of all doctrine. Not what Luther said is normative, but what the Scriptures say. But we must beware of the rash conclusion: If Luther sometimes really should have surrendered something of the absolute inerrancy of the Bible, then we shall refuse to follow him and follow the Scripture against Luther. Of course, if and where Luther should err, there we must refuse to follow him. But then we must be quite sure that we are really following the Scriptures and not an axiomatic theory on the Scriptures. We ought to be sure that we do not turn from Luther, the evangelical theologian, to Augustine, the Catholic. Such a return would not be obedience to the Word of God. Ferdinand Walther, the revered Father of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, wrote the following words in 1886 against modernistic misrepresentation of Luther's doctrine on the Word of God, and Pieper quotes them (I, p. 370f): "Gesetzt, Luther hätte wirklich die Bibel für ein mit allerlei Irrtümern behaftetes Buch gehalten, aus welchem nur die Gelehrten den göttlichen Wahrheitskern herauschälen könnten, so wäre damit den Bibelchristen eben nur Luther genommen." That is quite true. But it is only with great apprehension that one reads the following sentences in which Walther warns against the so-called "Gottmenschlichkeit" of Scripture when he says: "Wenn ich das glaube, dass die Bibel auch Irrtümer enthalte, so ist sie mir kein Prüfstein mehr, sondern bedarf wohl selbst eines solchen." If this sentence should mean that Luther can be recognized only insofar as in the doctrine on inspiration and inerrancy he agrees with Quenstedt, if his word on the levis error should already be regarded as apostasy from the pure doctrine, then the end of the Lutheran Church is in sight. Karl Holl once said that the unconcerned way in which Luther spoke of the inconsistencies in the narratives on the Baptism of Jesus and on other passages of the Gospels, would certainly have led to Luther's excommunication from his own church fifty years later. (Luthers Bedeutung für den Fortschritt der Auslegungskunst, Gesammelte Aufsätze I, Luther, p. 574.) The Orthodox Fathers were not quite as un-Lutheran as Karl Holl thought and there is no likelihood that the time will ever come when the Lutheran Church would condemn Luther's doctrine on the Scriptures, of which the "critical" words which we have quoted, are an integral part. But if we should condemn him, in what company shall we find ourselves? Among what kind of "Bible Christians" shall we be? We should not be far removed from those Jesuits who attacked the great John Henry Newman when he, already a cardinal of the Roman Church, admitted in an essay on the Inspiration of Scripture (XIX. Century, February 1884, p. 187) that there are "obiter dicta," incorrect historical statements, in the Old Testament. Certainly we should also be in the respectable company of the more serious Reformed Christians of America but unfortunately also in the company of the most dangerous sects. This very fact, that we should find ourselves in the company of the most dangerous enemies of the pure Gospel cannot but make us realise that the doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of each word of the Bible as a necessary consequence of the doctrine on Inspiration is in itself no evangelical doctrine at all. Thus in all our discussions on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures we

should not cease to keep in mind the fact that Luther's doctrine on Holy Scripture is inseparably bound up with his doctrine on the Incarnation of Him Who is the Eternal Word of God, and with the doctrine of the justification of the sinner by faith alone, and that, therefore, also this doctrine is a part of his great theologia crucis, the theology which speaks of God as One Who reveals Himself by hiding His majesty behind the weakness of a human life, and His glory behind the cross.