

TWO OPPOSITE POSITIONS ON SCRIPTURE IN THE LCA

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In order to contribute to an honest and open discussion, and hopefully towards a solution of the present controversies within the LCA on the theology of the Word, it is the plan of this paper first to define the nature of the two positions being held in the Church and to demonstrate that they are mutually exclusive so that they cannot stand together; then to produce evidence that these two positions have been present in our Church – one of them unofficially – from its very beginning and are still being maintained; then to show that only one of these two positions is taught and allowed for in the official documents of the Church, while the other is rejected; and finally to point out some of the dangers of the second position which is rejected in the official documents of the Church. In doing so it will be necessary to point to and quote from statements of individuals within the Church. This will be done as objectively as possible and without any intended malice against anyone. It is only the matter itself or the substance of what is quoted that is of interest here, because we shall be concerned only with arriving at the truth and not with any kind of disciplinary action. Facts will be treated as facts regardless of the persons to whom they are related.

1. THE TWO MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE POSITIONS

Already before the union of the two Lutheran Churches in Australia it became clear in the Adelaide meetings referred to in WHICH WAY LCA?¹ that there were two opposing views in the former Churches as to whether or not there are errors and contradictions in the Scriptures. The faculty members of both seminaries who were present at the first meeting in July 1966 vigorously objected to the statement of the DECLARATION AND PLEA adopted by the Queensland District ELCA convention declaring it to be error

... That inspiration was something less than the actual divine communication of the very words of the sacred text, so that inerrancy does not necessarily follow from such "inspiration"; or that "inerrancy", as applied to Scripture, might mean something other than the total absence of any errors or contradictions whatsoever; or that inerrancy could be limited to the "theological content" or the "divine side" of Scripture, as distinguished from the entire sacred text as such; or that some things presented as facts by Scripture might be "theologically true" without being factually true; or that "inerrancy" could be defined on the basis of an examination of the text for alleged errors, rather than solely and alone on the basis of the texts in which the Bible itself explicitly teaches its own inspiration and inerrancy.²

Much of what was rejected as error in this statement of the Declaration and Plea was defended by the seminary lecturers present. The discussion that ensued for the next day and a half centred largely upon their contention that there are numerous ERRORS AND CONTRADICTIONS in the Scriptures.

A number of examples of such ERRORS in the Scriptures were given. Dr Sasse asserted that often the numbers referred to in the Bible are not meant mathematically but rather simply as adjectives "big", "very big" etc. He gave what he claimed was two instances of this. The first was the alleged 18,000 people employed on the construction of Solomon's temple. He assured us that 18,000 people could not possibly work on the temple for they would get in each other's road. Hence we cannot take the figure of 18,000 as a true mathematical figure. It is simply equivalent to an adjective such as "big". However anyone who cares to read what the Scriptures actually say on this matter will discover that Dr Sasse was completely misguided in his assertion. In I Kings 5 we are assured by the inspired writer that there were not simply 18,000 people employed on the construction of the temple, but more than ten times that amount, 183,300, of which 30,000 were sent in relays of 10,000 a month to fell and transport timber from Lebanon; 70,000 were burden bearers; 80,000 people were quarrying and cutting stones in the mountains, and probably transporting them to Jerusalem, and another 3,300 were overseers. In charity one can only assume that Dr Sasse did not really study the passage itself but had simply repeated the assertion of some modern "bible scholar" without checking it.

¹ Which Way LCA? p18

² Synodical Report Qld Dist ELCA Special Convention May 6-7 1966 p36

The other notable example that Dr Sasse gave of numbers in Scripture that cannot be taken mathematically was the 600,000 people who came out of Egypt. He asserted that it would have been almost impossible for Moses to lead so many people through the wilderness and therefore that figure cannot be taken literally. It is an example of ancient historiography that is not meant to satisfy a modern statistician. However even a cursory glance at the Scripture passages involved reveals that Dr Sasse's assertions were unfounded. While the 600,000 referred to in Exodus 12:37 is indeed a "round figure" the true figure turns out to be vastly greater: 603,350 men able to bear arms, besides women and children and older men, the whole tribe of Levi, which was not numbered, and a mixed multitude that went with them (possibly as many as 1,500,000 in all). The figure of 603,350 men numbered from the eleven tribes is double-checked by the total weight of silver accumulated by gathering a half shekel from each of them to make sockets and hooks for the tabernacle – exactly 603,350. To reject that figure as no more than an adjective "big" which is not to be taken mathematically is not an example of Dr Sasse's best scholarship.

Another example of ERRORS in the Scriptures, given by the seminary lecturers, was that while Mark and Luke refer to only one ass in their accounts of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Matthew speaks of an ass and a colt (Matt 21:2ff). The disciples were clearly told to bring both of them to Jesus, and Matthew tells us that this was done that the words of the prophet might be fulfilled saying: "tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass." (Matt 21:5). It was insisted that this was not simply a case of Mark and Luke mentioning only the one animal because they saw no need to mention both, but that in fact here was only one animal. Mark and Luke were correct and Matthew was wrong. He introduced the second ass only because he misunderstood the prophecy of Zechariah as referring to two animals: "an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass". This is really an appositional phrase referring to one animal, but since Matthew did not realise this he invented the story of the second ass to fit in with his false idea of Zechariah's prophecy.

Still another very clear example of ERROR in the Scripture, given at the Adelaide meeting, was the alleged pseudonym of II Peter. While the writer of Second Peter clearly claims to be the apostle Peter (1:1) who was present on the Mount of Transfiguration and was an eye-witness of Jesus' majesty and heard the voice from heaven say: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." (1:16-18), and even though he claims that this is the second epistle that he is writing – alluding to the first epistle of Peter and apostle – yet it was claimed that this epistle, though it is the inspired Word of God, was not written by the apostle Peter at all, but by a forger (as we would call him today) probably in the second century. His express claims to be Peter are not factually true but were introduced so that under that great name his book might be more readily received and read in the churches. Much of this was repeated again, though somewhat less boldly, at the following Qld District Pastoral Conference (ELCA) in Toowoomba on the 15-17th August in the hearing of all those present, and is recorded briefly in the minutes of that meeting.³

From such examples it became clear that two opposite views were being held among us. It was not at all a question simply of terminology or semantics, but of real substance. In answer to the question: Are there REAL ERRORS and CONTRADICTIONS in Scripture? Some replied confidently with the Declaration and Plea, No! there are none. Others replied, Yes! there are some, in fact many. And in answer to the question: How do you regard the alleged difficulties that we see in the Scripture? The former replied: These things only appear as difficulties to us because we are so far removed from the time and circumstances of writing. There are not REAL ERRORS or CONTRADICTIONS in the original inspired text because the Scripture itself denies this. The latter, however, replied in effect: These difficulties are REAL and need not be harmonised because they do not affect the central message of God's Word. They are ERRORS only in minor or peripheral matters (because of the human side of Scripture) but this does not undermine the authority of God's Word. And so already then, in 1966, Dr Hamann openly and honestly defined the two opposing positions on Scripture thus:

POSITION A: No matter what the difficulties, real errors and contradictions in Scripture must be ruled out a priori on dogmatic grounds.

POSITION B: One may readily admit errors and contradictions in "minor" matters.⁴

³ cp Minutes of Pastoral Conference ELCA Qld Dist Toowoomba 15-17th August 1966

⁴ cp Letter of K Marquart to Dr Koehne, Aug 3rd 1966

While many attempts were made to come to an agreement and while numerous assurances of “unity” were given by officials that no one would say or teach that there are errors in the Scriptures yet it was evident that Position B was still causing tension in 1970 where the official report of the CTICR to the Indooroopilli Convention stated that that body had received a request from several quarters to reconsider the Albury statement on “Inspiration and Inerrancy”. After considering three papers on the subject the Commission adopted a statement defining the real point at issue thus:

When the Theses of Agreement in VIII, 10 state that the holy writers whom God used “retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology), literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history as apart from direct revelation and prophecy”, we note that *there are at present two understandings of these words in the Church.*

There are those who hold that the words “apart from direct revelation and prophecy” mean that *the revelation and inspiration of Scripture require us to accept that all biblical statements are authoritative in their intended sense, also those which specifically deal with aspects of history or science or geography and the like, that is, that all such statements are factual, and speak of what actually is or what actually happened. This means that the Servant Form, ie, the limitations of human knowledge of nature and history or other distinctive features of the personalities of the writers did not find expression in any statement of God’s written Word in such a way as to result in error. Therefore in spite of modern opinion in these areas, the truth a factuality of such statements in the Scripture can nowhere be queried or invalidated.*

On the other hand there are those who hold that the words “as apart from direct revelation and prophecy” must be understood to refer to a direct revelation which was in some cases granted to the holy writers of Scripture in such things as history or science or geography and the like. Therefore all biblical statements, which specifically express such revelation, are factual and speak of what is and what happened, even though the holy writers retained all their limitations of knowledge of nature and history and all other distinctive features of their personalities.

However they further hold that the words “as apart from” also point to the possible direct revelation in areas of history or science or geography and the like, so that the holy writers not only retained all their limitations of knowledge of nature and history and all other distinctive features of their personalities, but were actually permitted by the Spirit of God to give expression to them in the human side of that written Word of God. Consequently, it is held, *there is evidence in God’s written word of statements which deal specifically with aspects of history to science or geography and the like which may not be factual in the light of more certain human knowledge in such areas.* Nevertheless they hold that this in no way invalidates the truth or inerrancy or authority of God’s written Word or makes God a liar, but rather points to the servant form of the written Word of God.⁵

The present writer is not aware of any more recent official attempts to define the two positions being held. No doubt it is possible to express these two positions in numerous different ways using different words, but it is impossible to define them honestly in a way which obscures their radical difference for they are and have always been *mutually exclusive* in the sense that one is a negation of the other. While the one answer NO! to the question, can there be REAL errors and contradictions in Scripture? the other answers YES! even though in more recent times it might prefer to call them by different names such as peripheral inexactitudes, leves errores, discrepancies etc. The point of difference between these two positions is NOT that one operates with the term “error” and the other does not. It is not a question of terminology. It is rather that one sees REAL conflict between passages of Scripture or between statements of Scripture and facts of history, geography, science, etc, and the other insists that while it may appear to us that there is conflict, yet it is NOT REALLY so.

A simple or brief definition of these two opposing positions might read thus:

POSITION A No matter what difficulties may appear to be present the existence of real errors and contradictions in the Scripture must be ruled out a priori (from the outset) on doctrinal grounds on the basis of the Scripture’s own teaching about itself.

⁵ Official Report LCA Convention, Indooroopilli, August 21-27 1970, p224-225 (italics mine)

POSITION B One may admit the existence of real errors and contradictions in minor and peripheral matters as being the actual state of the Scriptures as we recognise it by study; but this does not undermine the inerrancy or authority of Scripture or affect its nature as the Word of God.⁶

2. BOTH POSITION A AND POSITION B EXIST IN THE CHURCH TODAY

While Position A has always been openly held and defended in both former Lutheran Churches of Australia, and is still openly asserted by many pastors and laymen of the Church today, Position B now seems to be revealed only unde[r] pressure. The boldness and frankness with which it was once asserted at the Adelaide meetings in 1966 before union soon disappeared. Even at the following Qld District Pastoral Conference ELCA in 1966 which Dr Sasse and Dr Hamann were asked to attend for the express purpose of dealing with that matter, Dr Hamann was forbidden to present his paper prepared for this conference because it was deemed to be contrary to an “agreement” which had been made by officials before he left for Queensland. However the issues were raised again there and after intense questioning Position B was exposed to the pastors present at that conference.

While statements were drawn up and adopted in an attempt to reach some understanding yet the members of the faculties of the seminaries did not withdraw their opposition to Position A as set out in the Declaration and Plea. The matter was supposed to have been finally laid to rest in the Albury Statement which, we were assured, had clearly adopted the theology of Position A when it said:

The Theses of Agreement use the term “inerrancy” in its normal sense of freedom from all error and contradiction “factual” as well as “theological”. The only errors in the Scriptures acknowledged by the Theses of Agreement are those which found their way into the sacred text through deliberate or inadvertent alterations made by copyists.⁷

Within a year of the adoption of the Albury Statement in 1968 the Commission on Theology had received a number of requests to re-open the matter.⁸ After much discussion a new statement was prepared by the Commission on Theology for presentation to Pastoral Conferences and final adoption by the Church. This statement was adopted by the Horsham Convention in 1972, and this, we were assured, had settled the matter in favour of Position A, ruling out Position B so that the Church could now have peace.

Amid the joy over this triumph of true orthodox theology in the Church it would have been considered rude or even vindictive for those of us who were no longer immediately involved in the official discussions to ask too many questions as to how or why Position B had finally been given up. We had simply to trust that it was indeed genuine and try to build confidence in such assurances. In a private conversation with Dr Hamann at Coolum he made a remark for which the writer has never ceased to honour and respect him. In answer to a cautious question as to why Position B had been given up he said with characteristic frankness and openness words to this effect: “Well there are many other heads in the Church besides my own, and while I was not convinced by their arguments yet I was prepared to yield to their position for the sake of peace and harmony in the Church, because I don’t consider the matter to be of great importance.” We who heard this took it as a mark of deep humility and honesty which increased our respect and confidence. However the official basis for assurance that the problem was now resolved and Position B would not be tolerated in the Church, was to be found in the words of the Horsham Statement which are italicised in the following excerpt:

The Theses of Agreement in applying the term ‘inerrancy’ to Scripture mean to stress its full authority while taking into account the rich complexity of the holy Scriptures as the Word of God in all its parts and aspects. Accordingly, while understanding inerrancy in the normal sense of freedom from all error and contradiction, ‘factual’ as well as ‘theological’, the Theses state that this inerrancy ‘cannot be seen with human eyes nor can it be proved to human reason; it is an article of faith, a belief in something which is hidden and not obvious’.

⁶ cp Kumbia Late Resolution Qld Dist Convention 19??

⁷ cp Convention Report LCA 1968, p260

⁸ cp Convention Report 1970 Indooroopilli August 21-27 p.224

This understanding of inerrancy implies that, although error may appear to be present in the Scriptures, it is not really so. Some such cases are directly mentioned in the Theses: errors which found their way into the sacred text through deliberate or inadvertent alterations made by copyists, as well as the absence of verbal accuracy and uniformity in parallel accounts. In addition to these, the Theses likewise made reference to apparent errors in other directions: seeming deficiencies relating to and caused by the fact that the holy writers retained the distinctive features of their personalities, that they used contemporary methods of historiography and used the terminology of contemporary views of nature and the world. These evidences of the limitations of the human mind in no way invalidate the inerrancy of God's written Word, but illustrate the servant form of the written Word of God, which is interested not in technical precision for its own sake but in a popular, intelligible presentation which best serves the saving purposes of God. . . .

Some ways of speaking or teaching in the matter of inerrancy which are contrary to the sound doctrine of the Scriptures and of the Theses of Agreement are herewith specified:

1. *to speak of 'errors' in the Holy Scripture;*
2. *to hold that what according to clear biblical statements 'actually is or actually happened' may be regarded as what actually is not or actually did not happen;*
3. *to adopt uncritically and to propagate all the claims of historical criticism which often rest on or lead to unbiblical scepticism as to the historical basis of the Christian faith;*
4. *to use modern knowledge as a means to judge any biblical statements and attack the authority of Scripture;*⁹

While understandably there was no direct discussion on the inerrancy of Scripture, at least not in the Qld Dist Pastoral Conference after the Horsham statement was adopted by the Church yet it soon became evident that there was still a problem in this area. Occasional sarcastic remarks were directed against the insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture as if it were a difficult yoke to bear resulting in considerable chafing. It was like living under an uneasy truce which was occasionally violated by border skirmishes.

In the opinion of many one such "border incident" occurred in 1979 when Dr Hamann, then vice-princip[al] of Luther Seminary, gave a series of lectures while in America entitled "The Bible Between Fundamentalism and Philosophy" in which, so it was felt, he chastised Position A as a mark of fundamentalism in the Church (something which he considered to be a kind of theological sickness in theology) that the real inerrancy of Scriptural statements follows from the fact that they are God's Word. He criticised the attempts at harmonising biblical difficulties and was content to allow for minor errors in Scripture as having no implications for the truthfulness of the Word of God. These lectures were published in summary form in Cresset Magazine.¹⁰

In June 1982, Dr Hebart, former princip[al] of Luther Seminary and lecturer in systematic theology there, gave a series of three lectures at the Coolool Pastoral Conference in the course of which it seemed clear that Position B was being advocated, or certainly Position A rejected. (This was substantiated also in discussions between lecturers.) This was evidenced by his repeated rejection of the position of the orthodox Lutheran Fathers that the Scriptures are the

Supernatural book of doctrine, which is the inerrant word of God, not only in its central spiritual concerns, but also in the fine details of historical and this-worldly matters, without any fallibility in word or expression.¹¹

He even proposed a new definition of inerrancy as meaning, not freedom from all error and contradiction, 'factual' as well as 'theological', but rather a oneness of thrust in the Gospel. He says:

What is less clearly gospel is, as it were, carried along by what is most clear, and it is this oneness of thrust which constitutes what we may call the infallibility, the inerrancy of the NT writings. Hence single texts and

⁹ cp Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of LCA p81

¹⁰ cp Cresset November 1979 and January 1980

¹¹ Theology of the Word, Lecture III, p7 near top.

thoughts would not be singled out to make them bear the weight of authority. They are authoritative in the context of the total witness of the Gospel.¹²

In keeping with this view Dr Hebart also claims that II Peter was written by someone other than the apostle Peter even though the sacred text itself expressly claims to have been written by the apostle. Nevertheless he still accepts that book as part of the divine canon of Scripture.¹³ In all this we cannot but hear him as saying: there may be some real errors in the Scripture, (because of the human element) at least in the “fine details of historical and this-worldly matters” but this does not undermine the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. *What is that but POSITION B?*

Later on in November 1982 Dr Hamann presented five lectures at Tatachilla, in South Australia in which he took a very admirable and firm stand against certain modern errors and attacks against the inspiration and authority of Scripture. However in the fifth lecture he again raised the matter of the inerrancy of Scripture and defends that position which he himself had defined as Position B in 1966, citing some of the same examples of errors and contradictions in peripheral matters of Scripture as were produced in evidence of such errors in 1966. The only difference was that now these were not called “errors and contradictions” but “*leves errores*” and “peripheral inexactitudes”. The vocable had changed but the substance remained the same. Such instances of REAL “*leves errores*” are claimed on the basis of a study of the state of the Scriptures and not on the basis of the Scripture’s own teaching concerning itself. He says:

In cases like this, of which I shall quote a few in a moment, the opposition of inerrancy and error, or of authority and loss of authority, is a wrong one, and inspiration and authority may still be legitimately claimed in spite of *leves errores*, for that is how the Bible is.¹⁴

We have the Scripture claim to be inspired, and this claim must stand; but we also have the actual state of the Scriptures as we recognise it by study, and this must stand also.¹⁵

The most recent public instance of Position B to come to the notice of the present writer is from the pen of one who would probably object to the assertion that he holds Position B. And yet the plain words, repeated a number of times, express clearly what the present writer understands by Position B, namely that alleged errors and contradictions in the sacred text can in fact be REAL and not simply *apparent* errors or *seeming* discrepancies that only appear to be present in the Scriptures, but are really not so. In dealing with the alleged conflict between the accounts of the raising of Jairus’ daughter he says:

One answer is to say, No! God’s Word *is* perfect! Therefore any discrepancy in the text only *appears* so to our human understanding, but it is not *really* so.

This position is allowed for in the Horsham statement . . .

Now that sounds very safe, and it supposedly protects the integrity of God. After all, God cannot err. That would never do!¹⁶

He is not happy with that position and prefers to see *more than an apparent* error or discrepancy (call them what you will, they refer to the same alleged condition of Scripture) somewhere in the text. What else can these words mean if we are to understand them in their normal sense?:

What did God actually say? Clearly the words do not agree. Either Matt[hew] got it wrong or Mark and Luke were wrong. But which is the correct word. We simply don’t know!¹⁷

¹² *ibid.* p1 par 4

¹³ *ibid.* Lecture II p5 par 4 and Lecture I p3

¹⁴ Lecture V, The Scriptures and The Theses of Agreement p6 par 3

¹⁵ *ibid.* p7 par 3

¹⁶ Mayer’s Response to M Grieger’s Presentation at Nobby 18.1.83, p7

¹⁷ *ibid.* p6 par 2

Three accounts, all inspired by the Holy Spirit, yet clearly there is disagreement. How can we face it? We can't just bypass the problem. It is the Word of God – the problem is there – in the written Word.¹⁸

. . . *All we know of God* is what is expressed in the simple words of the Bible, yet some of those words are clearly at variance with each other.¹⁹

And the whole wonderful point is this: the variations (imprecisions, discrepancies) call them what you like, have absolutely *no* bearing on the message that God proclaims to us . . .

The precise words do not agree, but *the Word* is absolutely clear *because we accept the words as the Holy Spirit gave them*. Thus the Word does *not* err. It *is* truth.²⁰

The present writer may be excused for reading these words as an expression of Position B when they are seen side by side with a statement of that position, and the concepts of that position identified. In the following presentation all [italicising] of the original text will be omitted, for the sake of simplicity, and the [italicising] shown will be purely to highlight the matter referred to.

| POSITION B | R MAYER'S RESPONSE | CONCEPTS REFERRED TO |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| One may admit the presence of real errors and contradictions . . . | What did God actually say? Clearly <i>the words do not agree</i> . | CONTRADICTION |
| | Either Matt[hew] <i>got it wrong</i> or Mark and Luke <i>were wrong</i> . | ERROR |
| . . . | . . . All we know of God is what is expressed in the simple words of the Bible, yet some of these words are clearly <i>at variance with each other</i> . | CONTRADICTION |
| | And the whole wonderful point is this: the <i>variations, (imprecisions, discrepancies) call them what you like</i> , have absolutely no bearing on the message that God proclaims to us! | ERRORS AND CONTRADICTIONS |
| | Three accounts, all inspired by the Holy Spirit, yet <i>clearly there is disagreement</i> . | CONTRADICTION |
| | One answer is to say, No! God's Word is perfect! Therefore any discrepancy in the text only appears so to our human understanding, but <i>it is not really so!</i> | REAL ERRORS |
| | . . . Now that sounds very safe, and it supposedly protects the integrity of God. After all God cannot err. That would never do! (Note: this solution is seen as unsatisfactory as the context shows.) | |
| | . . . Another attempt at solving the problem is ... Again, however, I find this rather unsatisfactory. ... | |
| ... in minor and peripheral matters ... | And the whole wonderful point is this: the variations, (imprecisions, discrepancies) call them what you like, have absolutely <i>no bearing on the message</i> that God proclaims to us. | IN MINOR AND PERIPHERAL MATTERS |

¹⁸ M Mayer's Response to M Grieger's Presentation at Nobby, 18.1.83, p6 par 7

¹⁹ *ibid.* p7 par 4

²⁰ *ibid.* p8 par 6 and 7

| POSITION B | R MAYER'S RESPONSE | CONCEPTS REFERRED TO |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ... as being the actual state of the Scriptures as we recognise it by study | What did God actually say? <i>Clearly</i> the words do not agree. | RECOGNISE IT BY STUDY |
| ... | Three accounts, all inspired by the Holy Spirit, yet <i>clearly there is disagreement</i> . | THE ACTUAL STATE OF SCRIPTURE |
| ... but this does not undermine the inerrancy or authority of Scripture or affects its nature | And the whole wonderful point is this: the variations, (imprecisions, discrepancies) call them what you like, have <i>absolutely no bearing on the message</i> that God proclaims to us. | DOES NOT UNDERMINE THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE |
| ... But this does not undermine the inerrancy or authority of Scripture or affect its nature as the Word of God. | The precise <i>words</i> do not agree, but <i>the Word</i> is absolutely clear, because we accept the words as the Holy Spirit gave them. Thus <i>the Word does not err. It is truth</i> . (NOTE the consistent use of capital "W" for Word of God, but not for words of Scripture. The former does not err while the latter do not agree. VG) | DOES NOT AFFECT ITS NATURE AS WORD OF GOD, NOR UNDERMINE INERRANCY & AUTHORITY |

Without trying to do an injustice to anyone, but accepting the words as they [are] read, it would seem to the present writer that the above statements all express the concepts of and operate with the presuppositions of Position B as we have come to know it.

To try to deny that Position B still exists in the Church today, or to try to put such a claim down to misunderstanding or semantics is not at all helpful for the true peace of the Church. It is the very thing that is shattering the confidence of those in the Church who have lived with and experienced these facts of life repeatedly. Not until we come to the stage when the problems facing us are clearly and readily acknowledged and carefully defined, can we hope to begin to eliminate them.

3. THE THESES OF AGREEMENT TEACH POSITION A AND REJECT POSITION B

Do the Theses of Agreement allow for both Position A and Position B? It is the conviction of the present writer that if the Theses are interpreted according to the normal usage of language they clearly teach Position A and reject Position B, despite the claim of some that Position B is also enshrined in the Theses.

It is important to remind ourselves once again that Position A and Position B are mutually exclusive since the one is a negation of the other. The one says NO to any *real* discrepancies or errors in Scripture, and the other says YES. Once this is realised it should be clear that if it can be shown that the Theses of Agreement actually teach Position A, then it has been shown that they reject Position B. Of course it is possible that they could actually TEACH neither but *allow* for both Position A and Position B. But if they in fact teach Position A, they thereby reject its opposite – Position B. To deny this is to accuse the These[s] and their framers of deceit or double-talk.

It should be quite obvious to all who have studied the Theses of Agreement that they are *not* a kind of listing of allowable conflicting theories, but are rather what they claim to be, namely Theses of *AGREEMENT*. In fact they are a *confession* of faith and therefore almost every paragraph begins: "We affirm", "we believe", "we teach and confess", "we declare", "we accept", etc – NEVER *we ALLOW* for this or that. Concerning the teaching of the inerrancy of Scripture it specifically declares:

We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the infallible Word of God, written by inspiration of God . . .

We believe that the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the infallible and only source and norm of Christian doctrine.²¹

²¹ Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions pA2 Thesis I, 1

With the whole true Church of God *we confess* the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God . . . *it is an article of faith* . . . *We believe* that the Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore inerrant.²²

Even the Horsham Statement, after variant views had been discussed, does not list a number of possible positions with respect to the inerrancy of Scripture and leave us to pick whichever we choose. It *teaches only one position* when it says:

While understanding inerrancy in the normal sense of freedom from all error and contradiction, ‘factual’ as well as ‘theological’, the Theses states that this inerrancy ‘cannot be seen with human eyes not can it be proved to human reason; *it is an article of faith*, a ‘*belief in something* which is hidden and not obvious’!

This understanding of inerrancy implies that, although error may appear to be present in the Scriptures, it is not really so.²³

There are no conflicting views of Scripture allowed for in the Theses of Agreement or the Horsham Statement. This means that everything that is said in the Theses or the Horsham Statement concerning the Scriptures and their inerrancy must be understood and interpreted as being in harmony with that teaching as specifically taught there. Thus when the Horsham Statement says of the Theses’ teaching of inerrancy:

This understanding of inerrancy implies that, although error may appear to be present in the Scriptures, it is not really so.²⁴

Nothing in the Theses can then be interpreted as implying that it is in fact *really so* that errors may be found in the Scriptures. All that can be claimed, according to the Theses, are *apparent* errors or *seeming* deficiencies which are *not really so*. This is the very essence of Position A.

POSITION A IS EXPRESSLY TAUGHT IN THE CHURCH’S STATEMENTS

That Position A is *expressly taught* in the Theses and the Horsham Statement cannot possibly be denied. The very word “*infallible*” which is predicated and confessed of the Holy Scriptures means and implies that the Scriptures are *incapable of erring*. And this is expressly applied to the Scripture “as a whole and in all its parts”. In other words the Theses expressly reject any attempt to “distinguish between that which is Word of God in the Scripture and that which is not”.²⁵ Whatever is Holy Scripture is incapable of erring according to the express teaching of the Theses.

The very word “inerrant” which the Church has expressly declared to be used in the Theses of Agreement in its normal sense of “freedom from all error and contradiction, ‘factual’ as well as ‘theological’”, also clearly teaches Position A that there are no *real* errors and contradictions in the Scriptures, and the Horsham Statement asserts that what may appear to be error “is not really so”. This is exactly Position A. Moreover the Theses of Agreement and the Horsham Statement both declare that inerrancy as thus defined is *an article of faith*, and that is why Position A declares that real errors must be ruled out a priori on doctrinal grounds. The Theses refer to II Tim 3:15-17; I Cor 14:37; Ps 119:160, etc as the Scripture’s own teaching concerning itself. Thus everything stated in Position A is expressly taught in the Theses and the Horsham Statement. Hence it must be acknowledged that everything contrary to Position A, including Position B is therefore rejected as false.

POSITION B IS NOWHERE TAUGHT OR ALLOWED FOR IN THE CHURCH’S STATEMENTS

Despite the foregoing it is seriously claimed that Thesis VIII, 10 does allow for Position B, that there can be *real* errors and discrepancies in Scripture, for instance when it says:

²² *ibid* pA19 Thesis VIII, 10

²³ *ibid* B1

²⁴ Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions pB1

²⁵ *ibid* A17

This inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures cannot be seen with human eyes, nor can it be proved to human reason; it is an article of faith, a belief in something that is hidden and not obvious. We believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore inerrant.²⁶

The fact that the inerrancy of Scripture cannot be seen with human eyes or proved to human reason, but is an article of faith, a belief in something that is hidden and not obvious, does not give anyone the right to claim that therefore this inerrancy may be qualified so as to allow for real errors and contradictions at least in peripheral matters. That would not be fair to the words of the Theses. There are many things in the Scriptures that cannot be seen by human eyes or proved to human reason – that are hidden and not obvious – but this does not make them any less the inerrant Word of God. Thus the doctrine of the angels, the incarnation, the real presence of the body and blood in the sacrament, etc cannot be seen by human eyes and may even appear to be contradicted by human reason, and yet they are the absolutely inerrant truth of God. To use those words of the Theses in support of the view that there could be errors – real errors – or peripheral inexactitudes in Scripture is to “run counter to the letter and spirit of the Theses of Agreement.”²⁷

What about the next words of Thesis VIII, 10?

The term inerrancy has no reference to variant readings found in the extant textual sources because of copyists’ errors or deliberate alterations.²⁸

Some have thought that these words would surely modify inerrancy and provide some support for Position B. But a glance at the Theses on Scripture and inspiration will show that the Theses first teach the inspiration of Scripture before they confess that Scripture to be inerrant, because the latter depends upon the former. “Scripture” is not a general term referring to all writings of men but it is defined as that Holy Scripture which is given by inspiration of the Holy Ghost (II Tim 3:16; II Pet 1:19ff) and goes on to assert:

Inspiration in this sense was the unique action by which God the Holy Ghost gave His Word of revelation to men, whom he chose for oral proclamation or for written recording, so that of this their spoken and written word it must be said without limitation that it is God’s own Word. I Thess 2:13.²⁹

This means that the Scripture which is the infallible, inerrant Word of God is that which was given by inspiration of God to the holy writers. If copyists or translators have deliberately or inadvertently changed the wording of the original text, no one can claim that these changes are inspired. For instance when Moffat translates the words of institution: “This means my body” instead of “This is my body”, so as to avoid the real presence, who would assert that just because those changed words appear together with the truths of God in Scripture they must be the inspired and inerrant Word of God? Never! And so the Theses are careful to spell out that the term inerrancy has no reference to the variant readings found in the extant textual sources because of copyists’ errors or deliberate alterations. The Theses of Agreement therefore predicate the term inerrancy to the original inspired text of Scripture and to every copy (and translation) which faithfully reproduces the thoughts and ideas of that original text. The difference between Position A and Position B is not that one has less textual problems than the other, but rather that Position A insists that whatever the original text said is the inerrant truth of God. Position B, on the other hand, reserves the right to question the original text if it appears to be discrepant in the light of our study. But the Theses nowhere give anyone the right to plead that something might be a copyist’s error just because he cannot accept it when there is no evidence of such an error in the extant textual sources, as the unfortunate statement implies:

Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away!

But maybe Jesus never said those exact words.

They could be copyists’ errors or alterations . . . who knows??³⁰

²⁶ ibid A19

²⁷ Albury Statement, cp Convention Report 1968 p260

²⁸ Doctrinal Statements pA19

²⁹ ibid A18

Some have tried to find a haven for Position B in the next words of Thesis VIII, 10 referring to inerrancy:

Neither does it imply an absolute verbal accuracy in quotations and in parallel accounts, such absolute uniformity evidently not having been part of God's design.³¹

Just because one evangelist does not record the words of God or some person in exactly the same words as another does not at all suggest that either one or the other "got it wrong" and that only one is correct.³² It is often not possible to tell in the original language which, if any writer, is quoting a statement verbatim. And why should they? We don't always do that either. Because one observer reports that a father said of his daughter that she was the apple of his eye, and another observer reports that he said of his daughter, "You are the apple of my eye", does not mean that the two reports are in conflict at all. Neither got it wrong. They can both be truthful accounts of what was said. So the Theses of Agreement rightly say that the inerrancy of Scripture does not imply an absolute verbal accuracy in quotations and parallel accounts. Hopefully no one will accuse me of getting the Theses wrong because I did not quote verbatim just now.

Is there any hope for some kind of support for Position B in the next words of Thesis VIII?

We believe that the holy writers whom God used, retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology, literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history as apart from direct revelation and prophecy). God made use of them in such a manner that even that which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scripture must serve the divine purpose. Furthermore it pleased the Holy Ghost to employ authors possessing various gifts for writing on the same subject.³³

Surely in all that list of human features (and to err is human) there might be something that could allow at least a few real errors or discrepancies on the human side in Scripture. But the Theses are quick to point out that even if it should seem to human reason, because of differing accounts of the same event, that there is a discrepancy, yet this is not really so at all. It goes on to say:

How in such cases it is possible that differing accounts of the same event or the same saying are the true and inerrant report of one and the same fact cannot and need not always be shown by rational harmonisation. We must believe it until 'that which is in part shall be done away' and 'that which is perfect is come' (I Cor 13:10). We reject the attempts of modern religious liberalism to make man the judge of the Word of God.³⁴

Clearly it is wrong to sit in judgement over the Word of God and say that Matthew got it wrong or Luke is opposed to John, or that what Peter writes did not really happen. The Theses of Agreement remain consistent with themselves. The same meaning that is given to inerrancy in one place is reaffirmed throughout. And so Thesis VIII, 10 concludes:

None of the natural limitations which belong to the human mind even when under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost can impair the authority of the Bible or the inerrancy of the Word of God; for the Holy Scripture is the book of divine truth which transcends everything called truth by the wise men of this world (I Cor 1:17ff,27; Col 2:8) and is therefore able to make us 'wise unto salvation' (II Tim 3:15).³⁵

Furthermore the Horsham Statement reaffirms that all "apparent errors" are in fact not real but only seeming discrepancies. It says:

³⁰ R Mayer's Response to M Grieger's Presentation at Nobby, p8

³¹ Doctrinal Statements pA19

³² R Mayer's Response to M Grieger's Presentation at Nobby, p6

³³ Doctrinal Statements pA19

³⁴ ibid pA19

³⁵ ibid pA19

This understanding of inerrancy implies that, although errors may appear to be present in the Scriptures, it is really not so. . . . the Theses likewise make reference to apparent errors in either direction: seeming deficiencies relating to and caused by the fact that the holy writers retained the distinctive features of their personalities, that they used contemporary methods of historiography and used the terminology of contemporary views of nature and the world. These evidences of the limitations of the human mind in no way invalidate the inerrancy of God's written Word, but illustrate the servant form of the written Word of God, which is interested not in technical precision for its own sake but in a popular, intelligible presentation which best serves the saving purposes of God.³⁶

Obviously the inerrancy of God's written Word which is no way invalidated by the evidences of the limitations of the human mind is the same inerrancy as was defined earlier as "freedom from all error and contradiction, 'factual' as well as 'theological'". No new definitions have been given, and it would be deception to change the meaning of a word, already defined earlier, in the same paragraph. In other words this statement must be interpreted as teaching that despite the human limitations of the authors no error or contradiction can be found in God's Word. That is to say Position B is not allowed for.

POSITION B IS SPECIFICALLY REJECTED IN THE STATEMENTS OF THE CHURCH

The Horsham Statement *specifically rejects* Position B when it lists a number of ways of speaking and teaching which it declares to be contrary to the sound doctrine of the Scriptures and the Theses of Agreement. They are:

1. to speak of 'errors' in the Holy Scripture;
2. to hold that what according to clear biblical statements 'actually is or actually happened' may be regarded as what actually is not or actually did not happen;
4. to use modern knowledge as a means to judge any biblical statement and attack the authority of Scripture;³⁷

As for No.1, the context shows that the term "errors" refers not to *seeming* or *apparent* errors but to *real* errors by whatever name they happen to be called – leves errores, peripheral inexactitudes, discrepancies, etc.

No.2 specifically rules out many of the examples upon which Position B is ultimately based (the alleged exaggeration of the number of people coming out of Egypt, the alleged pseudonym of Il Peter, and Matthew's alleged invention of the second ass to fit his false understanding of Zechariah's prophecy, etc).

No.4 implies that those who seriously claim to find errors and discrepancies in biblical statements on the basis of modern knowledge, be it science of biblical scholarship, are sitting in judgement over those passages of God's Word and so attacking the authority of Scripture.

IT IS THE CONVICTION OF THE PRESENT WRITER THAT IF THE THESES OF AGREEMENT AND THE HORSHAM STATEMENT ARE UNDERSTOOD ACCORDING TO THEIR PLAIN SENSE AND THE ORDINARY USAGE OF LANGUAGE THEY AFFORD NO ROOM AT ALL FOR POSITION B IN THE CHURCH. If it is claimed that Position B with its *REAL* errors or discrepancies, call them what you will, is allowed for by some kind of PREVARICATION OR DOUBLE-TALK the present writer can only express shock and di[s]gust to think that such a thing could be done in the name of our Lord who does not lie or deceive. It is utterly unbelievable to him that a confession of faith could be so drafted in order to deceive those by whom it was adopted – whose confession it was to be – and at the same time claim to confess the infallible truth of God. This possibility is unthinkable in a Christian Church and must be ruled out categorically on purely moral grounds.

4. SOME OF THE DANGERS OF POSITION B IN THE CHURCH

From the foregoing it might appear that, since the LCA has, from the very beginning, determined its theology of the Word to be that of Position A and not Position B, as the Theses so clearly teach, and since this position has

³⁶ Doctrinal Statements pB1

³⁷ ibid pB1

been reaffirmed, despite a number of challenges and turbulent discussions, first in the Albury Statement and then in the Horsham Statement, it is now purely a matter of simple honesty and integrity whether the LCA will honour the confessional and contractual obligations to which it agreed, by insisting that this position be adhered to, or whether it will betray the trust and confidence of those who took it seriously by dishonouring its confessional undertakings.

But the matter is really far more serious than simply a question of honesty and integrity among the members of the Church. If that were all, the question might well be asked whether, out of love, and for the sake of making others happy, the Church ought not also to tolerate Position B in its midst. After all a democratic Church body is surely free to alter its opinions from time to time if the majority should so decide. But this matter is ultimately one of loyalty to the Scriptures and therefore loyalty to Christ Himself, for these are inseparable, as the Theses point out: "Loyalty to Christ requires loyalty to His Word."³⁸

POSITION B IS OPPOSED TO THE SOLA SCRIPTURA PRINCIPLE

In arriving at or drawing up any teaching of the Church as an article of faith it is a fundamental Lutheran principle that such a teaching should be drawn only and alone from the Scripture's own statements concerning that matter. Nothing is to be added to what the Scriptures say and imply, and nothing is to be diminished from it (Rev 22:18f). For instance it would be totally illegitimate for the Church to draw up a dogma of the Lord's Supper not only upon the clear words of Scripture which teach these truths, but also at least to some extent upon personal observation or study of the sacrament – how they find it in actual experience – and a careful examination of the elements involved. The SOLA SCRIPTURA principle demands that only the Scripture's own statements concerning the sacrament dare be accepted as a basis for the Church's teaching on the sacrament. We are all aware of the disaster that results if this principle is ignored. No doubt it will lead to a denial of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, and a consequent reinterpretation of the words of Scripture, which, if taken simply as they stand would teach the real presence. This departure from the Sola Scriptura principle is the reason for the Reformed denial of the real presence of the true body and blood of Christ in the sacrament.

It is exactly the same error – a failure to follow the Sola Scriptura principle – transferred into the theology of the Word that is the father of Position B. Instead of looking only and alone at what the Scriptures have to say about the Word of God, theologians have based their teaching concerning the nature of Scripture upon their own personal examination or study of the text and form of Scripture. And since they claim to have discovered there what they think are evidences of errors or peripheral inexactitudes and discrepancies, they construct a doctrine of Scripture which takes into account the results of their personal investigation and study of the scriptural writings. The result is that they come up with a theology of the Word which allows for error or peripheral inexactitudes in Scripture, even though not one statement of Scripture is cited as teaching that there could be such errors anywhere in Scripture. Thus Position B is born which is totally unscriptural in the sense that it is not based on any statements of Scripture concerning itself, but rather human (and therefore errant) investigation of the text. In the total absence of any clear Scriptural statements teaching that there could be errors in the written Word of God, those supporting Position B often resort to questioning the plain meaning and implications of passages which teach Position A. Thus the term "truth" is given a philosophical injection to numb its propositional and factual implications in the hope that it might become more compatible with error. Again once is struck by the vivid similarity to the Reformed arguments against the real presence. With Luther we need to call attention simply to the words of Scripture and what they teach concerning the nature of the written Word, and not allow ourselves to be driven from it. If the Sola Scriptura principle is abandoned in this area it cannot be consistently maintained in any other doctrine. The ultimate collapse of true Lutheran Theology lies hidden in Position B, at least in principle.

THE TERMS "MINOR" AND "PERIPHERAL" ARE UNSCRIPTURAL AND ILLUSIVE

Position B deludes itself in thinking that true scriptural authority is safeguarded by the terms "minor" and "peripheral". If it allows for errors only in so-called minor or peripheral matters of history and geography then surely the Gospel is safe and the rest doesn't really matter much. But such a view is nowhere to be found in the Scriptures themselves not in the Theses of Agreement. It is totally unscriptural. While we may indeed divide

³⁸ Ibid pA3 Thesis I, 5

Scripture into various categories, such as peripheral and non-peripheral, for the sake of illustration, yet it must ever be remembered that the Scriptures themselves do not make such a division, certainly not when speaking of their own truthfulness. And so we dare not deny to one of our man-made categories of Scripture what the Scriptures claim for themselves as a whole. This is not being faithful to the claims of Scripture. By way of example: if the constitution of a country guarantees religious freedom for its citizens, it would be less than honest for its government to divide the population into categories of important and unimportant citizens, and then claim that it is faithful to the intention of the constitution when it grants religious freedom to the former class but denies it to the latter. Since the Scriptures refer to God's Word as *truth* (John 17:17), and since the 1972 Statement forbids us to speak of errors in Holy Scripture, it is no more honest to divide the Scriptures into categories of peripheral and non-peripheral, and then restrain ourselves from speaking of errors in the non-peripheral category but allow for errors or inexactitudes in the other, which we call "peripheral".

We need to bear in mind, furthermore, that the terms "peripheral" and "minor" are very flexible terms which admit of degrees. Some things are more peripheral or less peripheral than others. Who then is to say at what degree of periphery inexactitudes or errors may be permitted. There are many who would consider everything but the essential Gospel itself to be peripheral to God's revelation in Scripture, including the so-called theology in which the gospel is couched. That Jesus died for our sins is no doubt *basic truth*, but what of the rest of the narratives in which this basic truth is taught: that He was kissed by Judas in the garden, that He was arrested, that He healed Malchus's ear, was forsaken by His disciples, tried before the high priest, mocked, blindfolded and beaten by those who held Him, was brought before Pilate, sent to Herod where he was treated with contempt, was crowned with thorns, scourged, and made to carry his cross, was crucified on a wooden cross between two evil doers, etc? Who is to say which, if any, of these details belong to the *essential Gospel* or the *basic truth* of the narrative? Perhaps they are all peripheral matters and therefore liable to the errors inexactitudes espoused by Position B. To claim that there can be real errors in minor or peripheral matters is to claim that by far the greatest part of Scripture could well be subject to error – perhaps as much as 90% or even 99% depending on who is defining "periphery". Surely at least logic (or common sense, for those who confuse logic with Aristotle) if not experience teaches us that the adjectives "peripheral" and "minor" are no real protection against the concept error. Once the principle of errors in peripheral matters is admitted the range of application is merely arbitrary and subjective. This is A MOST DANGEROUS AND DESTRUCTIVE ERROR with very far reaching consequences.

THE FALSE DISTINCTION BETWEEN "THEOLOGICAL" AND "FACTUAL" TRUTH

In the debate about the inerrancy of Scripture it is sometimes assumed that the *great theological truths* of the Gospel – the essential message of the Bible – is somehow not in any way dependent upon the mere *facts* of a historical or geographical nature. Therefore these historical and geographical details may be questioned or denied without in any way affecting the great theological truths or the authority of God's Word. This was apparently the position of some who challenged the Albury Statement in 1969 as the CTICR report states:

There is evidence in God's written Word of statements which deal specifically with aspects of history or science or geography and the like which may not be factual in the light of more certain human knowledge in such areas. Nevertheless they hold that this in no way invalidates the truth or inerrancy or authority of God's written Word or makes God a liar, but rather points to the servant form of the written Word of God.³⁹

The same thing would seem to be implied in the words referred to earlier:

And the whole wonderful point is this: the variations (imprecisions, discrepancies), call them what you like, have absolutely *no* bearing on the message that God proclaims to us. . . .

The precise words to not agree, but *the Word* is absolutely clear *because we accept the words as the Holy Spirit gave them*. Thus the Word does *not* err. It *is* truth.⁴⁰

³⁹ LCA Convention Report Indooroopilli August 1970 p225

⁴⁰ R Mayer's Response to M Grieger's Presentation at Nobby 18.1.83 p7

While it is no doubt true of many pagan religions that their *basic teachings* are not dependent upon such historical or empirical facts, yet this is simply not so at all with Christianity. Every one of the great theological truths of the Christian faith is deeply rooted in an historical, geographical and empirical or potentially scientific setting of which it is an inseparable part. There is simply no Christian incarnation apart from the one described in the Gospel narratives complete with all the historical and geographical details. Nor is there any atoning death of Christ in true Christianity which is not inseparably connected with all the details of that account in the Gospel narratives. Any belief in a resurrection which is independent of the empty tomb with the stone rolled away, the empty grave clothes, the appearance of the angels to the women, the many appearances of Jesus to His disciples, etc, is simply not the resurrection on which the Christian faith depends. Dr Montgomery rightly points out:

In biblical religion it is impossible to conceive of theological truth divorced from historical, empirical truth; this divorce would destroy the whole meaning of the incarnation. *The theological truths of Scripture are thus inextricably united with earthly matters, and the truth of the one demands the truth of the other.* The Bible recognises as fully as does analytical Philosophy that to speak of “theological truth” or of “existential encounter with God” apart from the empirical veracity is to speak nonsense. . . .

Therefore each “jot and tittle” of Scripture has an impact, however slight, on the totality of the Bible; and this impact must be either for good or for ill. On the basis of the thoroughgoing incarnational theology of the Bible, we can affirm that all verbal impact is always veracious, not only theologically but also in all other aspects touched. For in the final analysis, the *biblical theology that centres on Christ the incarnate Word knows no distinction between “other aspects of life” and the religious*: biblical truth is holistic, and its claim to theological validity is preserved from meaninglessness by its verifiability in the empirical domains that it touches.⁴¹

For anyone to say that the historical details of some biblical narrative “may not be factual in the light of more certain human knowledge” is not only to stand in judgement over some minor, unimportant matters, but to stand in judgement over the theological truths of God with which they are inseparably connected. Each one of those divinely inspired and revealed details is a part of the whole truth of God so that while the denial of this or that detail may not necessarily destroy the whole truth of God, nevertheless it is an attack upon it. For example, the destruction of a member of the body may not necessarily destr[o]y the whole body (if it is “peripheral” but it is nevertheless an attack upon the body and will certainly inflict pain and loss to the body. We are deceiving ourselves if we think we can question or attack this or that detail of God’s inspired Word, just because we have chosen to classify it as historical, without attacking the Word of God as a whole.

POSITION B UNDERMINES THE TRUE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

It is for very good reason that the Lutheran Confessions teach that no human beings or their writings dare stand in judgement over a statement of Scripture so as to imply that that statement could be in error. The Formula of Concord declares:

Luther explicitly made this distinction between divine and human writings: God’s Word alone is and should remain the only standard and norm of all teachings, and no human being’s writings dare be put on a par with it, but *everything must be subjected to it.*⁴²

The Large Catechism of Luther says even more explicitly:

. . . We know that God does not lie. My neighbour and I – in short, all men – may err and deceive, but God’s Word cannot err. (latin: Verbum Dei nec potest errare nec fallere.)⁴³

Clearly the confessions explicitly teach that the Bible is to stand in judgement over all other books and human beings, all of which may err and deceive, but God’s Word cannot err and deceive. To declare the Scriptures at any

⁴¹ Crisis in Lutheran Theology Vol 1 pp41-42 (italics mine)

⁴² FC (Sol Dec) Summary Formulation 9. This excellent translation was taken from Montgomery’s Crisis in Lutheran Theology p43 (italics mine)

⁴³ Large Catechism par 57

point to be in error or to question the truth of any statement of Scripture is to deny the *normative authority* of God's Word – to reduce the Bible from the position of judge to that of defendant. Hence to claim with Position B that there can be real errors in peripheral matters of Scripture, but that this does not undermine the inerrancy or authority of the Scripture or affect its nature as the Word of God, is to say in effect: "This is God's inspired and inerrant Word which is completely authoritative and truthful; but it is mistaken and false. I hold it to be in error; I disagree with it and do not accept what it says." To claim that this position does not affect the authority or inerrancy of Scripture is either a deceptive use of words, or it is meaningless nonsense, as far as the present writer can see. If it is anything else than that surely someone ought to explain it carefully:

POSITION B IS NOT BASED ON SOUND HISTORICAL OR SCIENTIFIC SCHOLARSHIP AS IS OFTEN CLAIMED

Dr Montgomery has correctly observed that when those who deny the absolute inerrancy of Scripture (especially in matters of history or geography or science) claim to do so as a result of modern biblical scholarship and scientific discoveries, this is a deception. No matter how much they may pretend that recent historical and scientific scholarship make it impossible for modern theologians to maintain the absolute inerrancy of Scripture, and that to insist upon this is to fight an impossible battle; the facts are rather that from the point of view of both recent historical and scientific investigation and experiment there has never been a time more hospitable to the claims of inerrancy. Dr Montgomery writes concerning the anti-inerrancy claims:

The strangeness in this line of argument lies in two principle considerations: (1) the alleged factual errors and internal contradictions in Scripture which are currently cited to demonstrate the impossibly archaic nature of the inerrancy view are themselves impossibly archaic in a high proportion of instances; and (2) the most recent scholarly investigations and intellectual trends bearing on the validity of biblical data have never been more hospitable to inerrancy claims.⁴⁴

The situation is no different here in our Australian Church for the examples of alleged factual errors and contradictions in Scripture, presented in support of Position B, are not really the result of modern scholarship at all, but are so-called discrepancies that have been known for centuries and have been dealt with effectively by apologists of the Church over and over again. Furthermore the most recent arch[a]eological and historical research almost daily confirms the truth and reliability of the Scriptural record. Many things in the Bible that were at one time questioned by secular historians are today being shown to be the truth. Even many of the most recent scientific investigations and experiments are reaffirming biblical facts that have been questioned in previous decades. This includes even the much maligned chronology of Scripture as worked out by Bishop Ussher which is today supported by astronomical dating methods.⁴⁵

POSITION B IS BASED ON OUTMODED PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

It has repeatedly happened that when an alleged error or contradiction in Scripture, as claimed by Position B, is shown to have a perfectly natural and simple solution or explanation, this solution is not acceptable on the grounds that the contradiction must be allowed to stand. No simple solution is acceptable and any harmonisation is opposed almost on principle. This surely demonstrates that the real basis for Position B is not recent historical and scientific scholarship at all – not empirical knowledge – but philosophical presuppositions. Dr Montgomery has shown that the two philosophical strands which have influenced modern theologians against the traditional view of an inerrant Scripture are metaphysical dualism (coming down from Plato through Reformed Calvinism to the modern idealism of Kant and Hegel with the denial of propositional truth) and existentialism (which asserts that truth is not propositional but personal). Dr Montgomery says:

Thus the cultural pressure to existentialism, combined with a powerful tradition of metaphysical dualism impels much of modern theology to reject inerrancy. Modernity is indeed the source of the new approach to Scripture; but it is not a modernity characterised by new discoveries of empirical fact which have forced modifications of traditional thinking. Rather it is a modernity of philosophical *Zeitgeist*.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Crisis in Lutheran Theology p19

⁴⁵ cp Article by Barry Setterfield on Velocity of light and Age of Universe; Ex Nihilo vol4 no.1 p38ff and article on Solar Temples and Astronomical Dating.

⁴⁶ Crisis in Lutheran Theology, Vol 1 p25

But the fact that philosophical presuppositions or idealism is the basis of this new approach to Scripture which denies the absolute inerrancy of the Bible is a most dangerous threat to true Lutheran theology for it ultimately rejects the Sola Scriptura principle of the Reformation, and, as Montgomery demonstrates, “ties itself to philosophical stars which are fast burning out”,⁴⁷ and which have already been exposed as being analytically meaningless and nonsensical.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

It has been the object of this paper to demonstrate that the present dispute in the LCA, regarding the theology of the Word, is not some little side issue that might be safely ignored, but that the Church is in fact faced with a most serious crisis in her theology. Unless she is determined to maintain her theological position as confessed in the Theses of Agreement, to the point of ruling out Position B, she may ultimately sacrifice her true confessional character as a church, and join the international debating society on religious and social topics. She needs to heed the theological perception of Dr Montgomery when he wrote:

As the Patristic age faced a Christological watershed, as the Medieval and Reformation churches confronted soteriological crises, so the contemporary Church finds itself grappling with the great epistemological question in Christian dogmatics. And, let it be noted with care: just as the Church in former times could have permanently crippled its posterity through superficial or misleading answers to the root questions then at issue, so we today have an equal obligation to deal responsibly with the Scripture issue. If we do not, future generations of theologians may find that no criterion remains by which to solve any subsequent doctrinal problems, and the theologians of the twentieth century will have gained the dubious distinction of having made their discipline (and the Church which looks to it for doctrinal guidance) totally irrelevant.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Crisis in Lutheran Theology, Vol 1 p25

⁴⁸ To demonstrate this here would take too much space, but the reader is referred to the excellent treatment of this matter by Dr Montgomery in his Crisis in Lutheran Theology Vol 1 p25-44

⁴⁹ Crisis in Lutheran Theology, Vol 1 p15-16