

Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Authority of Scripture

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August, 1981

This paper seeks to outline some of the problems that have become evident among us in this area of doctrine and to reflect on the answer given in Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, the Theses of Agreement and their related documents. Because of the limited time available, the presentation is of necessity very brief. Nevertheless, we pray that in spite of its brevity, it might help us see the God-given answer to the questions raised particularly in the area of the authority of Scripture.

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST IS COMMONLY CONFESSED

At the outset, let it be stated that it is agreed by us all that the purpose for which the Scripture is given is to reveal Jesus Christ. The centrality of the doctrine of justification in all biblical interpretation is not under dispute. God's purpose in speaking to the world is that the world might come to know Christ and in Him possess eternal life. It is agreed that, when viewed from the purpose of the Bible, not all teachings or parts of Scripture are of equal importance. But such a belief in no way calls into question the total authority of the Bible in all its parts.

SCRIPTURE IS THE INSPIRED WORD OF GOD

It would appear that all are willing to accept the total inspiration of Scripture. This is a miraculous work of God. All reject the various attempts that have been made to force inspiration into a mechanical process. The HOW of inspiration is held finally to be a mysterious working of God whereby He gave, in human words through His chosen writers, His Word and revelation to the world! Luther urged, "deal with Scripture in such a way that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying what is recorded". (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21)

All reject that Scripture is the product of man's religious development, his seeking after God. Scripture is not the record of brute man discovering ever deeper spiritual truths about himself and the Creator. Rather, it is the record of man who once lived in perfect harmony with the will of God, but who, rejecting that condition, is rescued by a gracious God who had to reveal Himself anew to a world made blind by its own revolt.

The problem seems to be that while accepting the above, there are vital differences in the application of those truths to the teaching and practice of the Church. While using the same words, it seems clear that the same meaning is not always intended or accepted among us. This can best be seen when considering inerrancy and more particularly authority of Scripture.

SCRIPTURE IS THE INERRANT WORD OF GOD

This term expresses the truth that God does not lie; neither does the inspired Scripture present lies as it gives God's Word in and through the words of men. (1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Thess. 1:13) Inerrancy is accepted as an article of faith. It is not dependent in any way on some form of demonstrable proof. To point out problems in Scripture does not destroy inerrancy.

That there are some problems and difficulties in the Scriptures is granted. That these are many and numerous is rejected. What is significant, is that many major criticisms of the past have in fact been shown to be completely false through further discoveries of ancient manuscripts and findings in the field of archeology. Often the problems of Scripture reflect our lack of knowledge or inability to understand what is written.

The critics often deliberately draw caricatures of the beliefs of God's people, so it should not come as a surprise to us when in their "wisdom" they find a God who tells lies! This is rather a contrast to the attitude of the Reformers who boldly trusted the external Word of God as the sole source of doctrine. They rightly held that the words of the holy fathers and their works dare not be made the basis for articles of faith! Modern theologians are no more reliable or inerrant. This term is, however, not the real problem that confronts us at this time.

ALL SCRIPTURE IS GOD'S AUTHORITATIVE WORD

What do we mean by the authority of Scripture? By authority we understand the right and power to say what is binding in all teaching and practice. This authority not only establishes the norm and rule whereby, according to objective criteria, truth and falsehood are to be judged (John 5:39; Luke 16:29; Gal .1:8), but it also has the causative power to bring into being and to preserve a living faith in Christ according to its own power and promise (Rom.1:16, 10:17).

This authority has its source in the ultimate Author of Scripture who, through inspiration, caused "holy men" to record for the world in human words His good and gracious will. God alone has the prerogative to establish for us articles of faith which He does through the "external Word of God". What the Bible says, God says.

The following questions highlight some of the problems which confront Us in the area of authority.

1. Is the normative authority of Scripture established by God who is its ultimate Author, or by its Gospel content, or by the declared teachings of the church?
2. Is the authority and inerrancy of Scripture dependent on proof by human reason, or is it an article of faith?
3. Is Scripture in all its parts the verbally inspired, authoritative, written Word of God, or is Scripture to be divided into human and divine parts, the one the fallible work of men, the other God's infallible Word?
4. Is the Christian to accept and believe all that Scripture teaches as having divine authority, also in those matters which do not appear to relate directly to, or impinge on the Gospel?
5. Is everything in Scripture of equal importance for doctrine and life?
6. Is it a form of legalism to insist that the law remains God's normative Word also for the person who believes in Jesus Christ? (e.g. giving God's norm for the home, race relations, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, war, office of pastor, etc.)
7. Is the principle, Scripture interprets Scripture, valid and meaningful if Scripture is untrustworthy and is subject to change in meaning according to the world-view and "scientific" knowledge of the day?
8. Is the formal principal (Scripture alone) given authority by the material principle (Faith alone, Christ alone)?

The above questions reflect some of the areas of concern which have become evident among us. What may seem an obvious answer to some, is just as obviously rejected by others. The implications of these differences do not deal with matters on the periphery of our faith but have a very real bearing on the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Before stating as simply and clearly as possible what I understand to be the position of the Lutheran Church of Australia on these related issues, it might be helpful to examine briefly what Scripture says about its authority and how this is reflected in the Confessional Statements of the Lutheran Church.

A. SCRIPTURE AND AUTHORITY

The Old Testament writers repeatedly claim that what they wrote was given of God. The phrases "and God said...", "thus says the Lord...", "the Word of the Lord came to...", "he spoke as God had commanded him...", "hear the Word of the Lord...", are well known to any reader of the Old Testament. The New Testament follows the same pattern as it quotes from the Old Testament to establish the indisputable truthfulness of its statements. As the New Testament speaks of the prophecies of the Old Testament and their fulfilment, it emphasizes that "all this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (Matt. 1:22). As the final stamp of authority the New Testament repeatedly quotes from the Old Testament also in matters of doctrine. In this way, the matter is put beyond further debate, for God has spoken!

The words of 2 Sam. 23:2 concerning David, "The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me, his word is upon my tongue," or the words of 1 Cor. 2:12 "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God" lead to the expectation expressed in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers".

The Scripture repeatedly urges, "take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). The warning against false prophets is matched by the admonition to hold fast to the faith once delivered, because if "any one teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching which accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit, he knows nothing" (1 Timothy 6:3-4) and is heading for ruin and destruction.

The believer is urged to test everything, and that testing is to be by the revealed Word of God (1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1). Whatever does not measure up to the test of Scripture is to be put away. False teachers are to be made ashamed or even excommunicated. The obedience demanded is not because of human authority but because what is written is held to be the revelation of God. Should any dare to preach another Gospel than that which had been received through the revelation given to the prophets, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:8-9). Such a Word is not spoken with human authority but claims the divine authority of "thus God has commanded".

The same Spirit of God is at work in those who prophesied before Christ's coming as it is in those who preach the good news that in Jesus Christ these prophecies have been fulfilled (1 Peter 1:10-12). The claim of the New Testament is that it is a completely trustworthy record of all that God did and revealed through Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. That Word is equally true when the Spirit, speaking through the Evangelists and Apostles, gives us prophecies concerning the second coming of Jesus Christ. Therefore we are urged to "stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess. 2:15).

The prophetic word has come by the impulse of the Holy Spirit and the testimony of the New Testament writers is equally inspired. The instruction to teachers and elders clearly obliges them "to hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). This "sure word" included that which was spoken by the New Testament Apostles and Prophets, 2 Peter 1:15-21, 3:1,2,15,16; 2 Tim. 1:11-14, 3:14-17, 4:1-8. The record of Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, is that Word of truth through which people in later ages will know the will of God (1 John 1:1-5; John 20:30-31, 21:24; Rev. 2:7; the letters to the churches, Acts 2:4).

The promises of Christ in such passages as John 14:15-31, 16:12-15, 17:14-19; clearly contain the assurance that God's people would not be left without the record and interpretation of God's mighty acts for man's salvation in Jesus Christ. Without an authoritative record, the church of the twentieth century could not know just what it is that it should teach the world as commanded in Matthew 28:18-20. The believer has the assurance that as he continues in the Word of God, he is Christ's disciple (John 8:31-32). The promises of Christ to the disciples that the Holy Spirit would be with them to give them the words they should say when called before courts and kings is not without importance in this connection (Matt.10:19,20; Luke 12:11,12; Mark 13:11; Luke 21:14,15). The promise of Christ to

the seventy is still of comfort to us today. "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16). To continue in the Scripture is to continue in the Word God has given to the world.

B. CHRIST'S WITNESS TO OLD TESTAMENT AUTHORITY

Christ's use of the old Testament demonstrates an absolute assurance that it is true in every detail. When nearing the close of His earthly ministry He said to the disciples: "Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon, they will scourge him and kill him and on the third day he will rise" (Luke 18:31-33).

He frequently referred to the Old Testament accounts as factual episodes which illustrated conditions which would foreshadow future events. In prophesying about the end time, Christ referred to the evil evident in the days of Noah and Lot and used this to illustrate what is to be expected before His return on the Last Day (Luke 17:25-32). The death of Christ is likened to the experience of Jonah and the people of Nineveh are seen to rise up in judgement against the people of Christ's day (Luke 11:29-32). The Word of God is not to be altered but is to be taught exactly as commanded by God (Matt. 5:17-20). When answering questions on marriage Christ reminds the people of what is recorded in Genesis about the creation and bases his answer on that Word (Matt. 19:3-9). Continually Christ reminded and chided His hearers that they should give attention to what He had to say because "it is written" in Scripture and it is that which "was spoken to you by God" (Matt. 4:4, 22:32).

There is no case where the words of Christ cast the slightest shadow of doubt on the authenticity or the historicity of the Old Testament. He speaks of the events and the people of the Old Testament in a way that accepts these accounts as describing events that happened and as relating to people who lived.

Christ's statement to the Jews that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35) sums up His own approach to the Word. It is the Word of the Old Testament that reveals the truth of the hereafter to the people of this day, not some miraculous event such as one rising from the dead (Luke 16:31). As the disciples on the Emmaeus road learned, Christ took Moses and the prophets in order to explain why it was necessary for Him to "suffer these things and enter his glory" (Luke 24:25-27). To all the disciples He said: "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). In this way the minds of the disciples were opened and they were commissioned to go out and preach repentance and forgiveness of sin in Christ's name in all the world (Luke 24:45-47).

Let us not forget the clear testimony of the opening verses of Hebrews, chapter 1, that God has spoken in these last days by a Son. That Son affirmed the truthfulness and authority of the Old Testament in the clearest possible terms. Either Christ accepted the testimony of the Old Testament as God's revealed Word of truth or by His Word and action He deceived the people of his day.

C. THE WITNESS OF THE EVANGELISTS AND APOSTLES TO OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORITY

The writers of the New Testament constantly use phrases and sentences from the Old Testament without any particular acknowledgement (e.g. Mark 6:34 from Ex. 34:5; Eph. 4:26 from Ps. 4:4). Equally numerous are the passages which quote from the Old Testament and name, in some way, the source (e.g. Matt. 2:17ff, etc.). There are the many references which acknowledge the source, recognising the divine origin of the message as in Matt. 1:22, "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet".

There is no doubt that the New Testament writers used many phrases interchangeably to identify passages from the Old Testament with the underlying emphasis that this was God's authoritative Word on the matter. The argument

of the writer may refer to aspects of the law as in 1 Cor. 9:8ff, or to an historical account as in 1 Tim. 2:11-15, or even to a specific word in a prophecy as in Ga1. 3:16-17.

The writers of the New Testament do not hesitate to remind their readers of the authority with which they wrote. The people who were recipients of the New Testament letters were told to remember and obey the instructions they received. Such words of warning and encouragement were not presented as coming from man's authority but on the authority of God. Obviously, they believed Christ's promise that when the Holy Spirit would come, He would teach them the truths of God. The Church is built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets as still today their witness and inspired record brings to the world God's truth.

The Galatians are forcefully reminded that the Gospel they had received from St. Paul was not man's gospel, but came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. The Word received by the Thessalonians was not the word of men but the Word of God. Should any refuse to obey what was written by the Apostle, that person should be treated in such a way that he may be ashamed, (Ga1. 1:6-9; 1 Thess. 1:4, 2:13; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:12-21, 3:14-18; 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus).

Clearly the New Testament Church believed and received the New Testament writings as having come from God. He is seen as the ultimate Authority giving the word of revelation its power. The New Testament writers support each other in this view. They obviously do not see the writing of Matthew, or Paul, or Luke, or Peter, or James, or John, as writings which differ in authority, purpose, or in their ultimate source. They see the writings as inspired by the Spirit of God, to be received as God's instruction and revelation. Nowhere is there a disparaging comment to suggest with twentieth century worldly-wise theologians that here and there the writers are simply uttering some old rabbinical myths. Neither is there any suggestion that what is written from an historical point of view concerning Christ and the early history of the Church is meant to be received as anything other than an eyewitness account of what happened.

Because it is given of God, the reliability of Scripture and its authority is never questioned, irrespective, of which book of the Bible is quoted or what subject matter is being treated. Any suggestion that some parts of Scripture are less inspired than others, or have less authority, is not found in the sacred record. On the contrary, the way in which the Apostles, Prophets, and Christ, continually used the Scripture, shows that they had no doubt as to the total inspiration and authority of Scripture.

D THE EARLY CHURCH AND SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY

The early Christians accepted the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God. As the New Testament writings of the Apostles and Evangelists were circulated, they too were received as the authoritative Word of God. For the main body of the early church the Old and New Testaments formed "part of one whole" and were "harmonious in their teachings".

Studies of the Church Fathers show that as they met with false teaching and heresy and as they formed the creeds of the church, the authority of Scripture was paramount. Many quotations from their writings show that they had no trouble in speaking of Scripture as "written by God". For this reason, it was urged that the Bible "is a well which has no bottom". Similarly the Scriptures were spoken of as "living words" to which no man is to add or to take away any part. The early church acknowledged the full inspiration and authority of Scripture.

It was left rather to heretics and enemies of the church to reject the authority and inspiration of Scripture. It is interesting to observe that as we have moved further away from the time of the writing of both Testaments, more and more "scholars" find that they are in a position to call into question and to "correct" the false information supplied by those who were eyewitnesses to the events and whose writings were received by people who also witnessed this history in the making.

When Augustine wrote, "Let us give in and yield our assent to the Holy Scripture, which knows not how either to be deceived or to deceive", he merely reiterated what was believed by the church of his time. These men were well

versed in Scripture. They knew the problems raised by various passages and did not close their eyes to such things. However, their attitude toward Scripture shaped their response. They did not elevate themselves to a position of equality or superiority to the Author of Scripture as they wrestled with Scripture.

Augustine is reported to have given the advice that when confronted with "something which seems not to agree with the truth" in Scripture, he had no doubt that the copy before him could be faulty, or the translation did not express exactly the original, or that or he himself simply did not fully understand the matter, but of this he was certain, God's Word did not lie. This attitude was expressed by the vast majority of the early Church Fathers. They humbly accepted the Scriptures as being in the form which God desired. Difficulties and problems had their base in man and his understanding, not with God, the divine Author, who spoke through those whom he chose.

E. THE REFORMERS AND SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY

There are those who love to quote Luther to show that he did not bow to the authority of the Word. That Luther did not turn away from problems and difficulties in Scripture any more than the Church Fathers is obvious from his writings. He wrestled with the Scriptures. But in all his wrestling, you will not find any conclusions in doctrine or practice where Luther did not finally base his position squarely on the authority of the clear Word of God. He may have been misguided or wrong in his conclusion, but his belief is expressed continually that the written Word of God must rule in all matters of teaching and life.

M. Reu draws attention to the following quotes from Luther, "It cannot be otherwise, for the Scriptures are divine; in them God speaks, and they are His Word.... To hear or to read the Scriptures is nothing else than to hear God."

In dealing with a difficult and obscure passage, he makes the point that while he may be at fault, the problem is not to be seen in the divine Scriptures. Luther held that the individual words of Scripture are the words of God so that both the words and the phrasing are divine. "Let the man who would hear God speak, read the Holy Scripture." "The Holy Spirit Himself and God, the Creator of all things, is the Author of this book", the Scriptures.

Luther's understanding and attitude: toward Holy Scripture is shown in his writings when he continually emphasizes the need for the interpreter of Scripture to know his place UNDER Scripture. "The holy Fathers explained Scripture by taking the clear, lucid passages and with them shed light on obscure and doubtful passages." "In this manner, Scripture is its own light, it is a fine thing when Scripture explains itself." "That is the true method of interpretation which puts Scripture alongside Scripture in a right and proper way." Such a view and use of Scripture is possible only where it is held that the Bible is the very Word of God and that the interpreter is to allow the Author of Scripture to express His own meaning according to the normal rules of language and reason and in the light of all that He has written.

Both Zwingli and Calvin, just as certainly, upheld the principle that "the Spirit of God on the basis of Scripture is the only judge." Consequently, it could be explicitly stated, "The only thing I asked was that all controversies should be decided by the Word... We hold that the Word of God (Holy Scripture) alone lies beyond the sphere of our judgement and that Fathers and Councils are of authority only in so far as they accord with the rule of the Word." The Believer is "humbly and religiously to venerate the Word of God and submit to its authority".

This same truth is repeated in the great Protestant Confessions of Faith drawn up at this time. They carefully, precisely, and with unanimity acknowledge the Holy Scripture as the only sure rule of faith, inspired by God, having authority in itself because it is God who speaks, and containing all that man needs to know for salvation.

The writings of those who followed Luther leave us in no doubt as to their attitude toward the inspiration, inerrancy and authority of Scripture, They clearly show that they understood the purpose for which God inspired Scripture, namely that the world might know Jesus Christ. As one writer summarized it, they saw the Scriptures as "the only source of truth", "the only means by which we can attain faith" and the very means "to awaken this faith in us".

That these men understood well the formal and material principles of Scripture is clearly evident in the following statements. "The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God reduced to writing, according to His Will, by the prophets, evangelists, and apostles, perfectly and perspicuously [sic] setting forth the doctrine of the nature and will of God, that men may thereby be brought unto eternal life". "In the definition of the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God signifies formally the purpose of God, or the conception of the divine mind, revealed for the salvation of men immediately to the prophets and apostles, and immediately, through their ministrations, to the whole race of man".

"The fanatical sects, especially, deny that the Scriptures are, strictly speaking, the Word of God, maintaining that the internal Word of God alone can properly be called the Word of God". This attitude is prevalent among us today under various forms of dress. There are those who claim direct revelation and so have little or no need of the Scriptures. There are others who claim that the Word must be distilled out of Scripture which is just another way of making man the master of the Bible. This approach takes the Scriptures out of the hands of the common man and reserves it for those who have the necessary mystical powers of discernment. Against such teachings, without an objective measure in the Word of God, there can be no answer and Christ is lost.

It is in the post-reformation period that we find the objection most clearly voiced that it is inappropriate for the believer to be UNDER the authority of Scripture. These "theologians" have assumed the mantle of "prophets" as they unerringly dissect the Scriptures, claiming that what Scripture appears to say is in fact only a facade behind which the real truth lies. The fact that they cannot agree among themselves as to which parts of Scripture are authentic does not trouble them. This growth in a brazen rejection of the Scriptures as the revealed, inerrant, authoritative Word of God is nothing but a direct attack on the heart of the Gospel, Jesus Christ. Had Luther held such a view of Scripture, there would certainly never have been a Protestant Reformation! Neither would he have ever written: "The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification' (Rom. 4:25)".

Higher criticism demanded the application to the Bible of the same methods of literary and historical analysis as those applied to other books. Questions were asked concerning authorship, location, and date of writing, the intent of the writers, and the influences of the historical and cultural environment on the writing. What they completely ignored and rejected was the divine influence in Scripture. Much of the thrust toward such literary criticism had come from the sceptical attitude toward authority which was so evident among those who were caught up in the "Enlightenment" of the eighteenth century.

The subjection of the Bible to the same analysis as other books is not objective or neutral. Such an approach denies the whole question of the divine nature, origin, and authority of Scripture. It removes God from the scene. Consequently anything super-natural is to be rejected. The limitations and vulnerability of fallible man are automatically applied to the Bible. The result is, as expected, that each critic creates his own dung hill from which to crow. But God's truth remains undisturbed, "He who sits in the heavens holds them in derision".

The whole developmental view of nature, man, and theology, which received such emphasis in the nineteenth century removed the need for God; His loving concern for the world, and above all, for the mission of His Son to give his life to redeem mankind from the grip of eternal damnation. What need has man who has risen from the ooze of the primordial mire to the great heights of atomic destruction of a God who speaks of sin and grace, of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, of death and eternal life?

Scepticism is the hallmark of much modern Biblical criticism which seeks freedom by removing God and His authoritative Word and by elevating man to the position of judge and ruler. Today, those who would defend biblical authority, accepting the old belief that "what Scripture says, God says", are classified as blind, uneducated bigots deserving nothing but ridicule. Acceptability in theology today is reserved for those who propose something new in the spirit of the Athenians or of those who have the disease of itching ears. To challenge God seems to have become a virtue! There is simply no limit to the extent man can "develop theology".

Scripture is seen merely as presenting assertions which are relative in value depending on the social climate of the time. When historical accounts are simply classified as the fabrication of man's imagination so that things that are said

to have happened, are to be understood as never having happened, we have reached the goal of unbelief which sceptical scholarship sets for itself. If Holy Scripture is untrustworthy, then there is no reason to suggest that people should find comfort in believing in a mythical Saviour, who perhaps never even lived!

F. THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AND SCRIPTURE

While the Lutheran Confessions have no particular article on Scripture, its inspiration, authority and inerrancy, they do give us a very clear picture of the attitude of the writers of the Lutheran Confessions toward the Bible.

The various doctrines outlined and explained in the Confessions are defined and defended by quoting proof-texts from Scripture.

Throughout the Confessions, Luther's attitude prevails that while our flesh does err, the Scriptures do not lie (Tappert p.455:76 Large Catechism).

Consequently the Confessions define the role of Scripture and its relationship over against all other writings in the following way: "the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel" (Tappert p.295:15, Smalcald Art.).

"We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged, as it is written in Ps. 119:105, 'Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path'. And St. Paul says in Ga1. 1:8, 'Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed'."

"Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times". (Tappert p.464, 465:1-2; Formula of Concord).

"In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testament; and all other writings is maintained, and Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong.

"Other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned" (Tappert p.465:6-8).

The introductory words of the Solid Declaration are equally clear: "A general, pure, correct, and definitive restatement and exposition of a number of articles of the Augsburg Confession concerning which there has been a controversy among some theologians for a time, resolved and settled according to the Word of God and to the summery formulation of our Christian doctrine" (Tappert p.501).

The introductory comments then stress the special nature of the Scriptures by emphasizing "that no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subjected to it". The Confessions are upheld because they are "supported with clear and irrefutable testimonies from the Holy Scriptures". Christian doctrine in the Confessions is formulated "on the basis of God's Word for ordinary laymen in most correct and simple, yet sufficiently explicit, form.

Any doctrine, set out on the basis of God's Word, is seen as binding for all time. "Therefore, in the presence of God and of all Christendom among both our contemporaries and our posterity, we wish to have testified that the present explanation of all the foregoing controverted articles here explained, and none other, is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God's grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgement seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account. Nor shall we speak or write anything, privately or publicly,

contrary to this confession, but we intend through God's grace to abide by it. In view of this we have advisedly, in the fear and invocation of God, subscribed our signatures with our own hands" (Tappert p.636:40).

G. L.C.A. STATEMENTS ON SCRIPTURE

The Theses of Agreement deal with matters relating to inspiration, authority, and inerrancy in several sections.

From the "Theses on Principles Governing Church Fellowship" we might summarize the following points:

1. The Old and New Testaments are the infallible Word of God, written by inspiration of God, 2 Tim. 3:16, by the holy men of God, 2 Peter 1:21, as the Spirit gave them utterance, Acts 2:4.
2. Scripture alone is the source and norm of Christian doctrine and the sure and authoritative guide for life and practice.
3. Differences in teaching are to be decided on clear passages of Scripture.
4. A difference in teaching or practice, which is a departure from the doctrine of the Bible, is not to be tolerated.
5. All doctrines and teachings of Scripture are equally binding. (Compare 4(a), (b), and (i) in the Theses).
6. Not everything revealed in Scripture is of the same importance when considered in the light of the purpose of Scripture which is to reveal Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world.
7. Scripture shall interpret Scripture. (4(c) in the Theses).
8. The authority of Scripture is absolute.
9. Reason, feeling, or subjectivism are not to compromise or undermine the authority of Scripture.
10. The material and formal principles of Scripture are not to be opposed to each other. The Gospel reveals Christ, His person and work. The Scriptures are God's authoritative Word in which the Gospel is revealed.

From the "Theses on Eschatological Matters" we glean the following concerning the interpretation of Scripture:

- (a) Eschatological matters, in particular, require a Christocentric approach.
- (b) The words of Scripture are to be adhered to closely.
- (c) Clear doctrinal passages are to have particular emphasis.
- (d) Scripture is to interpret Scripture.
- (e) The Old Testament is to be read in the clear light of the New Testament.
- (f) The essential distinction between Law and Gospel is to be carefully maintained.
- (g) In all interpretation, the inviolable authority of Scripture is to be maintained and the central importance of the doctrine of justification is to be acknowledged.

From the "Theses on Scripture and inspiration" we note the following points:

- (a) Holy Scripture alone is to be used to establish doctrine.
- (b) Holy Scripture is without limitation, in everything it says, the Word of God in writing.
- (c) All attempts to distinguish between that which is Word of God in the Scripture and that which is not are rejected.
- (d) A proper understanding of Scripture requires faith in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of sinners. "Faith alone" leads to a right understanding of "Scripture alone".
- (e) Holy Scripture, in all its words, in all its passages, and as a whole, is the inspired Word of God.
- (f) Holy Scripture as the Word of God written by men is at the same time both divine and human. Yet, God always remains the pure and absolute source and origin of all revealed truth.

- (g) The human side of Scripture relates to the fact that God chose to retain the individuality and personality of the writers, not exempting them from the labour, methods and responsibility of human authorship. God has given His Word under, or in the garb of, the human word of the biblical writers.
- (h) The inerrancy of 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.
- (i) Even such matters which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scripture must serve the divine purpose and in no way impair the inspiration, authority, and inerrancy of Scripture.
- (j) Holy Scripture is therefore defined as the perfect (Ps 19:7) authoritative (John 10:35), sufficient (Gal. 1:8f; Rev,22:10), and essentially clear (2 Peter 1:13; Ps.19:7f; Ps. 119:105) revelation of divine truth (John 1.7:7).

The 1972 Convention of the L.C.A. adopted certain statements which also have a bearing on this matter.

Under "The Theses of Agreement and inerrancy" the following points are listed as being contrary to the sound doctrine of the Scriptures and the Theses of Agreement:

- (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 adapt uncritically and to prop[a]gate all the claims of historical criticism which often rests on or lead[s] to an unbiblical scepticism as to the historical bases of the Christian faith;
- (4) to use modern knowledge as a means to judge any biblical statement and attack the authority of Scripture;
- (5) to make faith in the inerrancy of Scripture in any way depend on the human certainty attained by rational argument and demonstration;
- (6) to regard all statements of the Scripture as being of equal value and importance;
- (7) to treat the Bible in such a way as though its divine authority rendered historical investigation unimportant or irrelevant.

"Under 'Genesis 1-3: A Doctrinal Statement' the following assumptions are rejected:

- (a) That the biblical documents must be treated in principle like all other historical documents, without regard to their claim to inspiration and authority;
- (b) That science, history, and other disciplines are valid and legitimate norms and standards by which the truthfulness and reliability of biblical statements can and must be judged;
- (c) That the miraculous aspects of the witness of the biblical writers may be discounted as an element of primitive culture;
- (d) That the Apostles' and even our Blessed Lord's own understanding and interpretation of particular texts of Scripture may in principle be regarded as defective or questionable, and as subject to progressive correction by subsequent biblical scholarship.

Such assumptions as these constitute an attack not only on the apostolicity of the Church (Eph. 2:20), but on the very Lordship of Christ. For this reason we reject them unconditionally."¹

The proper function of reason and scholarship are defended but these must always be UNDER and not OVER Scripture.

In dealing with a general approach to understanding Genesis 1-3 the following is again defined as being contrary to the form of sound doctrine;

- a. "to deny the revealed character of Israel's faith and to assume that Israel's "religion" developed like any of the religions of surrounding and contemporary peoples;
- b. to reduce the stature of Moses, in opposition to the New Testament (John 1:17, The Transfiguration), by

¹ It is unclear why this section is in inverted commas. It may be that the intent is to emphasise that they are propositional, in light of the subsequent rejection.

- holding that the Pentateuch is not essentially Mosaic, or by questioning the historical value of what the Pentateuch attributes to him, or by denying that he wrote of Christ (John 5:45,46);
- c. to throw doubt in general on the historicity of the persons and facts mentioned in the Pentateuch."

The whole statement concludes with the admonition: "In this confused age the Church must reflect serene confidence in Genesis as the Creator's own account of what happened in the beginning."

RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONS POSED

The following answers to the questions posed earlier in this paper would seem to me to state the position of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

1. Is the normative authority of Scripture established by God who is its ultimate Author, or by its Gospel content and function, or by the declared teachings of the Church?

We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are without limitation the inspired, authoritative, inerrant, and essentially clear Word of God (Th. of Ag. Art. 8:6,7,8,10).

God cannot be separated from His Word. Therefore Scripture is the sole norm and source for all teaching and doctrine in the church. The normative authority of Scripture comes from God who inspired it.

We teach that Scripture is as authoritative when it declares that the wages of sin is death, the soul that sins shall die, and that on the last Day Jesus will say to the unbelievers: "Depart from Me you cursed, Into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels", as it is when it declares that all who continue in His Word are His disciples and will know the truth that frees, that whoever lives and believes in Christ shall never die, and that on the last Day Jesus will say to those believing in Him: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world".

- (a) We reject the approach that the normative authority of Scripture is to be established, appraised or judged by the Gospel content or the declarations of the Church.
- (b) We reject the teaching that the believer is free to reject any clear teaching of Scripture on the ground that the church has no declared doctrine or dogma on the matter.

2. Is the authority and inerrancy of Scripture dependent on proof by human reason or is it an article of faith?

We teach that the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is not dependent on proof by human reason, since it is an article of faith (Th. of Ag. Art. 8:10). (We do, however, defend the right of those who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture to show how many of the so-called "errors" referred to by the critics are based on a false understanding of the Word, or on false suppositions and often on a plain lack of knowledge of all events.)

3. Is Scripture in all its parts the verbally inspired, authoritative, written Word of God, or is Scripture to be divided into human and divine parts, the one the fallible work of men, the other God's infallible Word?

We believe and teach the inspiration of Scripture in all its parts (verbal and plenary) so that it remains God's Word in all its parts even "under or in the garb of, the human word of the Biblical writers" (Th. of Ag. Art. 8:9).

We teach that divine inspiration makes the whole of Scripture unique giving it normative authority. It is the God-given source for establishing absolute propositional truths as, for example, are set down in the Creeds and Confessions of the Church. We uphold the use of proof-texts from Scripture for the purpose of establishing doctrine as a proper use of the Word of God. Luther emphasized the trustworthiness of Scripture for such purposes when he wrote: "Because we know that God does not lie...God's Word cannot err" (Tappert p.444:57 Large Catechism).

We teach that Scripture is always both divine and human in all its parts and not either or.

- (a) We reject any teaching which would speak of Scripture as though some parts of the Word of God are more inspired or authoritative than others (Th. of Ag. Art. 8:2,3,9,10).

- (b) We reject the teaching and the assumption that the human side of Scripture in any way impairs the inspiration, authority, or inerrancy of the Word of God as though the human side of Scripture incorporates the sinfulness of man into the Bible (Th. of Ag. Art. 8:10).

4. Is the Christian to accept and believe all that Scripture teaches as having divine authority also in those matters which do not appear to relate directly to, or impinge on the Gospel?

We teach that everything revealed in Scripture is equally binding on the Church because Scripture in all its parts has divine authority. This binding nature and applicability of Scripture is naturally dependent on the conditions defined and stipulated by the Word itself. This is clearly demonstrated in Co. 2:16-23 (Th. of Ag. Art. 1:1,2,4(b)).

Every interpretation of a specific passage is bound to preserve the analogy of Scripture so that the unity and purpose of its ultimate Author, the "God, who never lies" (Titus 17711), is maintained.

This also takes into account such things as context, time, place and purpose so that the Good News is not turned "into petrified law".

- (a) We reject the claim that normative authority is determined by the relationship of a passage to the article of justification.
- (b) We reject "atomistic or fanciful" interpretations of Scripture which take passages in isolation from their context and intended purpose, and so turn the Bible into an encyclopedia of general knowledge.

5. Is everything in Scripture of equal importance for doctrine and life?

We teach that not everything in Scripture is of equal importance when viewed from the centre and purpose of Scripture as revealed in Jesus Christ (Th. of Ag. Art. 1:4(b)).

We reject the approach that since not everything is of equal importance therefore the church can disregard or reject any clear statements of Scripture.

(We need to distinguish between problems relating to the interpretation of Scripture and the way in which such matters affect Church fellowship (Th. of Ag. Art. 1:4)).

6. Is it a form of legalism to insist that the law remains God's authoritative and normative Word also for the person who believes in Jesus Christ? (e.g. Giving us God's norm for the home, race relations, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, war, office of pastor, etc.).

We teach that the believer is never free to set aside the normative nature of the Law of God (Gal. 5:1-12).

While the believer is set free from the coercion and curse of the Law and does not seek forgiveness or eternal life through obedience to the Law, yet the New Man in Christ delights to follow after the Law so that, he might truly know what are good works "which God prepared beforehand, that he should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10, Chapters 4,5,6; Phil. 3:12-21).

Hence we teach that "though they (believers) are never without law, they are not under but in the law, they live and walk in the law of the Lord, and yet do nothing by the compulsion of the law".

(Epitome Art. 4:8-19, Solid Declaration Art.4: para 7,20,32,38. Article 6: para 1,4,5,11,12,15,20,21).

- (a) We reject the idea that the believer automatically knows what is the will of God and what are truly good works.
- (b) We reject the view that the message of salvation in Jesus Christ gives the believer a rule and norm for Christian living. Such a view turns the Gospel into a new law!
- (c) We reject the idea that the Gospel sets aside the normative authority of the law either for the believer or the unbeliever.

7. Is the principle, Scripture interprets Scripture, valid and meaningful if Scripture is untrustworthy and is subject to change in meaning according to the world-view and "scientific" knowledge of the day?

The principal emphasized in the Reformation that "Scripture is to Interpret Scripture" has as its basis the conviction that the Bible is completely trustworthy in all its parts, has a unity of purpose and a harmony of doctrine which is the result of its having been inspired by one Author, the all-knowing, all-powerful, and merciful God.

While we endorse all true scholarship and the proper use of reason –

We reject any idea that authorities outside of Scripture, science, research, reason, or the moral values of any particular time, are valid authorities to impose their particular view on Scripture.

8. Is the formal principle (Scripture alone) given authority by the material principle (Faith alone, Christ alone)?

We believe that the formal and material principles must not be brought into opposition to each other. We teach that the Christ of Scripture is the object of saving faith, while the Scriptures are the source whereby the Spirit leads us to know Christ.

We teach that the fundamental article of faith is that man is saved alone by faith in Jesus Christ and that this message is brought through Scripture, which God inspired and gave so that we might know Christ.

- a. We reject all attempts to subordinate the one to the other.
- b. We reject the idea that the formal principle elevates Scripture to the position of a sacred law book as an end in itself.
- c. We reject the suggestion that the saving message of Christ is brought by the Spirit to work on people's hearts without the Scriptures.
- d. We reject the notion that those who believe in Jesus Christ have no need of an inspired authoritative Word given by a gracious God to show them what are truly good works. (Th. of Ag. Art. 1:5 and 7).

A D D E N D U M

Problems in the application of the principles set out in the previous Section are perhaps best discussed in the light of specific portions of Scripture. The following was submitted as part of a paper to the C.T.1.C.R. in February, 1981.

The Interpretation of Genesis 1-3

There has been much discussion concerning the figurative and literal understanding of Genesis 1-3.

The Statement adopted by the Church in 1972 makes the following points amongst others;

- a. that the New Testament supports and confirms what is said in Genesis 1-3; (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21ff and 45ff; 1 Cor. 11:7-12; 1 Tim. 2:13f).
- b. that the factual-historical framework of the narrative is established;
- c. that any undermining of the facticity of the framework is to be rejected;
- d. that "historical" refers to what actually happened;
- e. that figurative elements are no doubt to be found.

In the light of these guidelines, adopted by the 1972 Synod, are we free to interpret the whole account of Genesis 1-3 simply as truth "put in the form of fictitious tale" that still "sets forth actual truth", so that the whole passage might be described as a parable?

St. Paul, obviously, did not understand the figurative nature of Genesis 1-3 as he referred to it in Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21f, and 45f; 1 Cor. 11:7-12; and 1 Tim. 2:13f. Are we to say this was caused by a lapse of judgement or knowledge on his part because he was not quite free from the sinful bias of his flesh, his rabbinical training, and the custom of his times?

Is this the human side of Scripture which we are able to detect and correct because of our greater enlightenment?

The question is not an academic one. The answer affects the validity of doctrinal statements based on these chapters and others. If such judgements are our prerogative, then we have an effective and simple device for removing the authority of Scripture by insisting that the true meaning of Scripture can be quite different from that which the simple words appear to give.

SUCH AN APPROACH GIVES THE SUBJECTIVE REASONING OF MAN AUTHORITY OVER THE OBJECTIVE WORD OF GOD.

Does Genesis 1-3 have anything to say about the following questions –

- a. Was man created before woman and was there any difference in their creation?
- b. Just how did the first man and the first woman, the parents of the human race, fall into sin?
- c. What is meant by the curse of Genesis 2:17 and how was it fulfilled?
- d. Was a serpent involved in the Fall? Was satan also active?
- e. What is the meaning of the curse in Genesis 3:14?
- f. What is the significance of Genesis 3:15? Is this a promised salvation?
- g. How is the curse of Genesis 3:16-19 to be understood?
- h. In regard to the problem of the talking serpent, what makes this passage more difficult to accept as having literally happened as compared to the talking ass of Numbers 22;28-30?

To some, the above may be rejected as idle questions because they claim that they do not touch the doctrine of justification.

To others, the questions are of no consequence because this part of Scripture is classified as a collection of Jewish tales, which simply reflect the development of the social, cultural, and spiritual pattern of the times in which they were written and so the whole section needs to be interpreted by the increased enlightenment of our day.

To others, the above questions have important significance for spiritual growth and maturity because they see in Genesis 1-3 the eternal and authoritative Word of the living God which tells us of the history of creation, which describes the historic fact of man's fall, and which shows the love of God which still sought him in the garden where he lived so that He might bring him the promise of deliverance.

If the account is historical, that is, it actually happened, then I would contend that we are not at liberty to describe Genesis 1-3 as a piece of Jewish history teaching the social and cultural pattern of the times in which they were written; neither can we classify the account as a "fictitious tale" so that it becomes a parable, a figurative tale which is not "historical". Genesis 1-3 has all the marks of being an account of the creation inspired by God to tell us what actually happened, the description of which includes figurative elements because of man's limited ability to understand all that took place. This human side of Scripture in no way introduces man's sinfulness or the limitations he now has because of the Fall. The human side of Scripture is not synonymous with the corruption of natural man.

Those New Testament passages which take up Genesis 1-3 treat the record as an account of what actually happened. The account is clearly seen to be historical.

"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry." (2 Timothy 4:1-6)