

THE SCRIPTURES AND THE THESES OF AGREEMENT

The final lecture of this present series on the Scriptures will in part be something of a summary of the lectures that have preceded this one. In this section of the lecture there will be no more than an itemization of what the Theses have to say about the Scriptures, with references for each item. It is taken for granted that all members of the conference have a copy of the Theses. The references will all take account of the pagination in the collection of statements, Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia. The larger section of this essay will busy itself with a matter so far not taken up in these studies, the matter of inerrancy, where the Theses have taken quite an original line.

Section VIII of the Theses of Agreement, “Theses on Scripture and Inspiration” begins

1. With a strong statement that only the Scriptures can establish articles faith. The Scriptures are defined as ‘the canonical book of the Old and New Testaments.’ (VIII: 1: A 17).
2. The Holy Scripture is the Word of God in writing; as such it is inseparably bound up with the Word Incarnate and the oral Word. ‘Although the Word of God in its totality is wider than Scripture, Holy Scripture is, without limitation, God’s Word. Everything that Scripture says is God’s Word.’ (VIII: 2).
Negatively, ‘nothing can be proclaimed as Word of God which is not taught in Scripture’. The idea that the Holy Scripture only contains the Word of God without being God’s Word as a whole and in all its parts is rejected; as is the endeavour to separate between what is Word of God and what is not in the Scripture, whether this is done by reference to different kinds of writings in the Scripture or to the necessity of making a distinction in Scripture between Law and Gospel. (VIII: 2,3; A 17).
3. All of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, proclaims Jesus Christ the Son of God, as Saviour and Lord. Faith in the Bible is faith in the Triune God. (VIII: 4; A 17).
4. Holy Scripture can be understood aright only by those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Saviour of sinners. Apol. IV, 2 is referred to, especially the German text which is quoted as follows: “the chief topic of Christian doctrine....is of special service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone show the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ and alone opens the door to the entire Bible”. The sentence reminds of a very similar sentence concerning the distinction between Law and Gospel in the Formula of Concord, SD V 1. (VIII: 5; A17,18).
5. Inspiration was a unique action of the Holy Spirit by which his Word of revelation was given to chosen men, for oral proclamation or written recording. (VIII: 6; A 18).
6. Inspiration extends not only to “individual words of the prophets, of the apostles, of the Psalms, and of the Laws, but of ‘all Scripture’, i.e., the Scriptures as a whole and in all single passages and words of the Old and New Testaments”.
Verbal and plenary inspiration is taught, but the various theories which have been offered as explanations of the process are rejected as are explanations which limit or deny verbal and plenary inspiration. Inspiration of the Scriptures remains a mystery. “We cannot know how God the Holy Ghost worked the miracle that human words are his Word.” (VIII: 7)
7. The Holy Scriptures are at the same time divine and human. God is the “prime and absolute source and origin of all revealed truth”. But he chose ‘holy men’ to speak and write as they were moved by the Holy Spirit – prophets are particularly mentioned. God dealt with these prophets in such a way, different ways, so that their personality, character, way of thinking and speaking were not extinguished.

God gave the command to write, and inspired the writers, but they retained their individuality and were not exempt from the labour, methods, and responsibility of human authorship. Analogies to this relation of divine and human are found in the union of the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ, in the word of absolution, and in the Sacrament of the Altar. (VIII: 9; A 18).

8. In developing these thoughts concerning the Scriptures and their inspiration “Because Holy Scripture is the Word of God, it is the perfect, authoritative, sufficient, and essentially clear revelation of divine truth. As for its authority, this aspect was given special treatment at an earlier stage of the negotiations. The relation between the formal and the material principles is developed as that of coordinate authorities”. (I: 4 (b), (c), and (e) 7; I: 5, 6; A 2 and 3); (VIII: 10; A 19).

In support of the theoretical line taken by the Theses of Agreement is their practical employment of the theoretical in the development of the various theses. See the various sets of Theses. Only where agreement existed between the two former Lutheran churches do we find brief statements of doctrine without Scriptural support; cf. .III and IV, ‘Theses on Conversion and Election’; A 5).

2.

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I am making a renewed attempt to come to grips with the problem of inerrancy. Every time I have tackled the problem I have got into hot water, now with the upper **hierarchy**, now with the rank and file clergy. I wonder whether I shall be more lucky this time or whether I shall only succeed in making matters worse. However, one has to bite into the sour apple some time. So here goes. What is to follow is something like a commentary on a commentary on the statements of the **Theses of Agreement**, VIII: 10; A 19). The statements were adopted by the Joint Intersynodical Committees in 1951, and then by the LCA at the time of union. Not all members of the old ELCA were happy with everything, especially in paragraph 10. And the same may have been the case in the UELCA, but as to this I am ignorant. After union a number of years were spent in the CTICR on a study of paragraph 10: lengthy essays were written, discussed, torn apart, and in part rejected. However, finally, at Horsham in 1972 a statement prepared by the CTICR on The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy was adopted by the General Pastoral Conference and by the Church with a considerable degree of consensus. Now, in 1982, we are at it again.

This commentary will take together the original Theses (VIII: 10) and the Commentary of 1972.

First of all, we have a number of statements to the effect that the ‘inerrancy’ confessed by the LCA is a matter of faith. It ‘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’. In spite of various difficulties ‘we must believe it until “that which is perfect is come” (1 Cor. 13:10)’.

Next, as a foil to the assertions just enumerated, we have statements pointing to the many features of the text which seem to point away from ‘inerrancy’. The term ‘has no reference to the variant readings in the extant textual sources’ no matter what their cause; it ‘does not imply an absolute verbal accuracy in quotations and in parallel accounts’. There are ‘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’. Further, God chose often to use different men to write on the same subject, which led to ‘differing accounts of the same event or saying’. ‘Limitations of the human mind’ are evident in the Scriptures.

The Theses and the official commentary of 1972 go on to reject any undesirable deductions which could be made from the admissions made. 'None of the natural limitations which belong to the human mind even when under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost can impair the...inerrancy of the Word of God'. All 'attempts of modern religious liberalism to make man the judge of the Word of

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God are rejected.' Four specific ways of speaking against inerrancy are enumerated in the official commentary (B 1).

Finally, there are indications in the paragraph on inerrancy as to the reasons God could have had to allow what might be called blemishes (my term!) in the Holy Scriptures. It is said that 'absolute uniformity' was 'evidently not part of God's design'. What that evident design was is stated in these words: 'God made use of them in such a manner that even that which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scriptures must serve the divine purpose'. This is not very helpful, but the official commentary comes to the rescue: 'These evidences of the limitations of the human mind...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'.

In all this, it should be clearly noted, the commentary asserts that the Theses 'understand inerrancy in the normal sense of freedom from all error and contradiction, 'factual' as well as 'theological'.

I think it is good at this point to introduce another commentary on the Theses, one from 1961. This commentary is none other than a commentary by the actual original formulator of the celebrated VIII: 10, or at least the first draft of it, and who gave it its specific thrust. This commentary appears in a letter written to Dr. Behnken on September 17, 1961, copies of which were made for Dr. C.E. Hoopmann, my father, and for myself. The opening paragraph of the five-page foolscap size, single space letter says quite distinctly:

We (Sasse, Hoopmann, 2 Hamanns) decided that I should write and answer the question as to the understanding of our theses on Scripture and Inspiration. I do so in a great hurry in order that you may have this reply in time for the meeting on the 26th.

After some three pages of historical introduction, touching on both the ancient and the modern scene, Sasse comes to 'inerrancy'. What he has (had) to say is given here verbatim:

Only from this firm belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures, from the conviction that the Bible is not only record, witness and medium (against Scharlemann) of a revelation of the past, but, as the Word of God the Holy spirit, the Paraclete who speaks today in this Word, God's revelation today, can we discuss the problem of inerrancy. This should be clear to every reader of theses. The inerrancy follows from the inspiration, not vice versa. We cannot prove the inspiration of the Bible by proving its inerrancy, as some people demand. Even if

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we could prove, as some of the Fathers tried, that the Bible is, from a mere human point of view, the most perfect book, if we were able to substantiate by historical documentation its every historical statement, if we could prove that there is a wonderful harmony between statements which seem to contradict each other or to be at such a variance that we cannot reconcile them, if we could prove, furthermore, that all the Bible says on nature corresponds exactly to what modern science, or rather science which is just modern, says, we would not have proved the divine inspiration of Scripture, but rather that it is as perfect as a good mathematical textbook or a most perfect historical work, not more. Otherwise we would have to claim divine inspiration for any book without mistake. This is what we mean that

inerrancy is an article of faith just as the inspiration from which it follows [flows]. It must be believed even against what seems to us evidence. Evidently there has been only one text of the title of the cross. How is it to be explained that there [is] a diversity of the texts? When was Jesus crucified? In the third hour, the Synoptics have it or at noon as it would have been according to John? Augustine has in vain tried to give a satisfactory answer. Some people would say: This proves that the Bible is not accurate, that it contains erroneous statements. One could say: such things do not really matter, the Bible does not give always an accurate statement. God did not give us a Bible without all error. The strange phenomenon is that such variances occur not only in minor matters, but just in most important points. One could say, and it seems [to] be true, that the words of the Father in the baptism of Jesus are varying, but that each form gives one true meaning: The words were addressed to the Son, they were addressed to the witnesses, and they are, as an old text of Luke has them, the quotation from Psalm 2. But why do the text of the Lord's Prayer or the words of institution at the Lord's Supper show diversities? Already Luther saw that it is not possible to find the exact order of the events told in the Easter gospels. All this would be easily explained if the Scriptures were nothing but books written by human authors only. But if we believe, as the Church has always believed, that these human authors wrote exactly what God wanted them to write, that what they wrote is God's own Word in, with and under the human words, just as in the Eucharist the bread and wine are the true body and blood Christ because body and blood are really present in, with and under the earthly elements, then we must assume that the earthly, human form of the Bible has its meaning in the sight of God. It seems to be a law, so to speak, of the writing of the Word that it is always written in doublet and parallels. Almost every great event is told twice or even three times. We have two versions of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, we have the Gospel even in four versions. All attempts

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to harmonize them since Tatian and Augustine have failed and have even done damage to the sacred content of the Gospel itself. It seems sometimes as if the human language and the methods of one writer are not sufficient to give all aspects of the truth. Here belongs the strange fact that we have the Old Testament two versions, the Septuagint which is still the Bible of the Eastern Churches and which is used in the New Testament in a way that indicates it is more than a mere translation, side by side with the Hebrew text which was the Bible of our Lord. Even the Hebrew Old Testament has Aramaic parts, as if one language is not sufficient to express the whole Word of God. There is a divine mystery behind this manifoldness which would lose its meaning if it were only explained by human deficiencies or even mistakes. This is the reason why the Church maintains the "inerrancy" of the Holy Scriptures, its freedom from conscious untruth not only, but also from false statements. Where we meet with what to our reason seems to be error we say with Luther: "Dei sapientia abscondita est sub specie stultitiae et veritas sub forma mendacii – ita enim verbum Dei, quoties venit, venit in specie contraria menti nostrae". God's wisdom is hidden under what seems to be foolishness and His truth under what seems to be a lie. For as often as the Word of God comes, it comes in an appearance contrary to our mind" (Ad Rom. 12: 1ff.)

Only if we humbly bow before the mystery of the Word of God which is hidden under a truly human appearance and which seems to contradict that which we would expect the Word of God to be, we shall be able to investigate the human form. It was a great mistake of what Luther would call a "theologia gloriae" of the Word to expect that the Bible must correspond our human ideals of a perfect book. We have to recognize that it pleased God to speak of nature in the Bible in such a way that people of all ages, wise and unwise, could understand what He wanted us to know. We have also to recognize that He wanted the historical

narratives to be written in exactly the same way in which the people of the Ancient Orient wrote history.

It is not a lie if somewhere figures are given, concerning the size of the people or the like which, as all such figures in Ancient historiography are not meant to satisfy a modern statistician but to serve as illustration of a multitude. It was a great mistake of the theologians of the 17th century that they read their ideals of a book into the Bible, defending the holy writers even against the suspicion that their Greek was not flawless. The same mistake was made in the later centuries when professors trained as they believed, in the methods of true historical research, dissected the Holy Scriptures and accepted only that which they liked. We have learned, meanwhile, or we should have learned, that the books of the Bible must be understood by the measure they themselves have set. What did the author mean? What was the intention he had when saying this or that, when making use of traditions in this or that way?

I don't think that there is much doubt about what the Theses, together with various interpretations, say, but repeated analysis of them has led me to the same conclusion, again and again: there is a certain prevarication about the use of the 'inerrancy'. Inerrancy is understood in the normal sense of freedom from all error and contradiction, factual as well as theological, on the one hand; but, on the other, it is something that cannot be seen, demonstrated, proved to human reason, but must be believed – because the Bible is the God's Word it must be inerrant for faith. And, beyond that, because of the actual state of affairs evident to everybody who reads the Bible, there are difficulties of various kinds, inconsistencies in reports and quotations, deficiencies traceable to limitations of the human mind, and so on, which, in any other book would be classified as errors. Because of the situation just mentioned and the syllogism: God's Word, therefore inerrant to faith --, we get the distinction between 'apparent' errors and 'real' errors, the first being possible in this life, but not the latter, and the former being such as to be resolved in the perfection of the future. We have used the term 'inerrancy' (Dr. Sasse, too) in two ways, one to match the confessed divinity of the Word of God in the inspired Bible, the other to correspond to the difficulties which unprejudiced, believing reading of the Bible as well as unbelieving reading finds to exist there.

So the question is raised by me now, as it has been raised by others before: Why continue to use the term at all? It is not a Biblical term nor even a Biblical idea. The writers of the Bible generally say nothing about the inerrancy of their writings. John 10:35, no matter how often used to prove such a claim, does not have anything to say about inerrancy in the way the term is usually used. Lythenai is something different again from 'to be in error', and the Greeks had words for making a mistake or being in error, planasthai being one of them. There is plenty of reference to the authority of the Old Testament, and the NT writers claimed it for themselves, and this was pointed out fully in a previous lecture. It is a term of comparatively recent coinage in the Church, I think, although it is granted that its equivalent has been around a long time, for Quenstedt, for instance, writes:

scriptura sancta canonica originalis est infallibilis, veritatis omnisque erroris expers, sive quod idem est, in scr. s. nullum est mendacium, nulla falsitas, nullus vel minimus error, sive in rebus, sive in verbis, sed omnia et singula sunt verissima, quaecunque in ea traduntur, sive dogmatica illa sint, sive moralia, sive historica, chronologica, topographica, onomastica, nullaque ignorantia, incogitantia aut oblivio, nullus memoriae lapsus spiritus sancti amanuensibus in consignandis sacris litteris tribui potest aut debet.

But note the curious fact about the term. No matter how rigorously it is defined, as in the quotation from Quenstedt, it is immediately modified somehow. Quenstedt does so himself by referring to the autographs, of which there are just no examples remaining. So inerrancy is limited

to non-existent material. Which does not imply that there is not value to the idea from Quenstedt's point of view, for there still is a difference between what has been transmitted from an inerrant original and what from an errant original. There are those among us who contend very strongly for inerrancy, but they are quite willing to admit errors in the Bible; for instance in matters of grammar, style, and aesthetics. It is only errors in matters of fact that they will not admit. So the question has to be seriously faced whether a term is a valuable or helpful one which immediately has to be modified, defined, and redefined, till it really has very little resemblance to the term as normally employed.

It seems to me that to speak of the authority of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God preserves all that we want to preserve with a word like inerrancy, but it is not subject to the same criticism. Especially if authority is linked with some necessary Negativa or rejections, as we have them in the 1972 statement for example.

It may be necessary to add another comment at this point, whether we think in terms of inerrancy or of authority. We can make a legitimate distinction between basic truth and peripheral **inexactitudes** in historical matters, in matters of pure reporting of events that are said to have happened or words that are said to have been spoken; as there may be a difference between the basic principle asserted and a mistake of some kind in illustrative details. 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.

I now furnish some examples of the point now being made.

EXAMPLE 1:

There is the problem of the cleansing of the temple. To deny that there ever was such a cleansing, I hold, would be an attack on the authority of the Scripture. But I do not hold that the authority of the Scripture demands that we must hold that there were two cleansings (although I should not think of declaring such a reading of the Gospels impossible). The facticity of the cleansing is not denied, objectivity of the accounts is not lost, if one were to hold that there was only one cleansing, that John is right, and that the Synoptics put the cleansing at the wrong time, possibly because they report only one visit of the adult Jesus to Jerusalem in any case.

EXAMPLE 2:

Can not both Acts and Galatians give a basically true picture of Paul's early contacts with Jerusalem after his conversion, without being completely harmonizable? Galatians as the primary source is undoubtedly the better one, the one with which the picture in Acts must be fitted or from which it is to be understood.

EXAMPLE 3:

Does the very, very peripheral problem of one or two asses affect the basic historical (in its fullest sense) character of the various narratives? Do the accounts have to be harmonized lest we lose both inerrancy and inspiration?

EXAMPLE 4:

The quotation used by Matthew in connection with the betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver is right both in its quotation and in its intention, even though it has been inadvertently ascribed to the wrong prophet.

EXAMPLE 5:

The truth attaches to what the sacred writer is concerned with who writes the creation account of Gen. 1, even though he may use the inaccurate scientific knowledge of his day in the process (firmanent).

EXAMPLE 6:

The principle of clean and unclean foods of Leviticus 11, even though one or the other of the animals mentioned may be wrongly classified, is clear enough.

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EXAMPLE 7:

2 Peter could still be regarded as an apostolic writing and hence of the canon of the New Testament, even if one were to hold to the pseudonymous character of the letter.

This drawing of a distinction between the central thing talked about, asserting its basic truth, facticity or what have you, and matters on the periphery where **in exactitude** or mistakes of various kinds may be found, it seem to me, does not undermine the authority nor the basic reliability of the Scripture. I do not say that there must be error on the periphery, and I hold that the believer in the inspiration of the Scripture will be more likely, and rightly so, to find harmony wherever he can rather than to be zealous in picking out as many mistakes as he can, but I do say that if there is error on the periphery this is not an attack on the truthfulness of the Scripture, so that we can still speak meaningfully and without prevarication of authority. Inspiration is not, I hold, involved. 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 recognize it by study, and this must stand also. On the other hand, to deny what is quite plainly and categorically claimed and asserted as of the very nature of the narrative, the Virgin Birth, many of the miracles and so on – this is undoubtedly to attack the truth of the Scripture; authority and inspiration are undermined. A book I can't trust in its statements I have no right in reason or faith to call inspired, and if I do, I am making a meaningless statement. Then an inspired book is no different from an uninspired one, and the claim to inspiration has no valid meaning.

I know that the Constitution of LCA, the Theses of Agreement, and the Document of Union all solemnly commit themselves to the inerrancy of the Scripture. But the vocable is not the sacrosanct thing, it is the matter that counts. It should be plain that I am concerned about the vocable in VIII: 10 and not about what the vocable is said to mean. I am not in any way attacking what is confessed in that paragraph. I don't propose excision of the term from the venerable documents but simply neglect of the term in future preaching and teaching in the Church. As a term it is a nuisance and causes endless trouble. None of the Biblical statements about itself, its truth, reliability, its authority causes as much trouble as this particular term. It is interesting that the famous paragraph VIII: 10 finishes with a sentence which while using the term 'inerrancy' in effect neglects it.

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 Holy Scripture is the book of divine truth which transcends everything called truth by the wise men of this world (1 Cor. 1:17 ff, 27; Col. 2:8) and is thereby able to make us 'wise unto salvation' (2 Tim. 3:15).