A response to 'Canon, creeds, and confessions: an exercise in Lutheran hermeneutics'

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I would like first of all to thank Dr. Hultgren for his thoughtful and stimulating paper which I have had the happy occasion to read and reflect upon. I would also like to thank the Lutheran Church of Australia for extending their invitation to me to attend this symposium, and also the opportunity to respond to the material he has presented. I share his concern for the current trajectory of Lutheranism as a whole and the continual need to reaffirm a commitment to the Lutheran Confessions as a hermeneutical guide and theological norm for the church.

In being asked to contribute in some small way to this discussion on the role of canons, creeds and confessions in the church, I feel that in some respects what I can offer is only something akin to bringing owls to Athens. I mean by this that I myself have for some time looked to the historical achievement of the United Evangelical Church in Australia and Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia in their joint production and adoption of the 'Theses on scripture and inspiration', foundational documents for the present-day LCA, as an example of another 'third way' which overcomes the inherent weaknesses, or extremes, which can arise in the two other Lutheran approaches. Hultgren characterises these other approaches as 'Orthodox Lutheran', on the one hand, with its 'appeal to theories of divine inspiration and inerrancy', and an approach which results in the 'slippage' between Scripture and the Word of God on the other hand. In this approach we find ourselves picking and choosing what is to remain authoritative teaching in the church today. What the UELCA and the ELCA achieved in this union is remarkable when considered alongside the general trend towards the breaking of fellowship which characterised many other Lutheran churches at the time of the formation of the LCA. Lutheranism in all of its forms and places throughout the world has been, to be sure, radically polarised over the understanding and confession of the doctrine of Holy Scripture. It is common in many Lutheran circles to speak of two camps, that of the 'liberals' and that of the 'conservatives.'[1] A characteristic of the 'conservative' approach is to emphasise the divine nature and inerrancy of the Scriptures in all matters, while a 'liberal' approach recognises the human authorship of

1 I use these terms here because they are the ones that I most hear in common parlance, though I personally consider them somewhat inadequate at the level of theological analysis. I believe they often have more to do with certain socio-political tendencies which can be found within these two camps, tendencies which can often drive theological agendas in damaging ways.

the Scriptures and is acutely aware of its apparent internal contradictions and the need to employ critical faculties and a reading which is historically-aware. But a chief insight of the Theses and the theological work which surrounded them is the Christological analogy, the recognition that the Holy Scriptures, as the very Word of God, participate in a manner of speaking in the nature of that to which they testify, the incarnate God-Man, Jesus Christ.[2] This insight in its own way already provides a theological ground for a hermeneutical 'third way', if it is given some scope for application.

Hermann Sasse, a chief architect behind the Theses, once described the basic implications of the Christological nature of the Scripture as follows:

> If we must say of the Bible with all seriousness and without any reservations that it is God's Word and the Holy Ghost its author then we must declare no less seriously, on the other hand, that the books of the Bible are genuine man's word, written by ... human authors. If we deny the first, the Bible loses its character as Holy Scripture and becomes a haphazard collection of documents from man's history-of-religion, a collection of which a person is unable to imagine why they should have any normative dogmatic significance. If we deny the human character of the Bible, then the human-ness and naturalness of the biblical texts become mere appearance... (75,76).

And so a Christological 'third way,' to employ by analogy the language of classical Christology, is that which deliberately and consciously navigates between a 'Nestorian' approach and a 'docetic' approach to the Scriptures. A Nestorian approach results in an implicit or explicit denial of the complete interpenetration of the divine and human character of Scripture, and a methodology which does not go beyond a mere historical-critical reading and application of the text with a concomitant failure to extend authority to the entirety of the Scriptures. Contrariwise, with a docetic approach sound hermeneutics is lost to a simplistic, supernaturalistic view of the Scriptures, since the Bible is not understood as genuinely and entirely *human* literature that is written by human authors in their own historical context and ethos. *In fine*, 'the Holy Scripture is God's Word. The Holy Scripture is man's word. But the Word of God and the word of man are not two Holy Scriptures ... but *one* Holy Scripture' (Sasse: 76). To carry the Christological analogy further, then, just as sound Christology requires both a Christology from below and a Christology from above,[3] so also, the interpretation of Scripture in the church

2 'We confess that Holy Scripture as the Word of God written by men is at the same time both divine and human. In defining the relationship between the divine and human side of the Bible we could use the analogy of the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate...' (TA VIII 8).

3 By Christology 'from below' I mean a Christology which proceeds from an initial consideration of Christ's human history and teaching, as presented in the Gospels and their application of the OT—an Antiochene Christology—and asks how this man Jesus might be shown to be the Son of God. Christology 'from above' is the counterpart to this, a Christology which begins with the pre-existent Logos who descends into our world (John 1:14)—an Alexandrian Christology—and asks how is it that the eternal Word of God has taken on a fully human existence. Thus Christologies 'from below' and 'from above' do not equate to 'low' and 'high' Christologies (O'Collins: 16,17).

must proceed both with a 'hermeneutics from below' and a 'hermeneutics from above'. Taken together, the hermeneutical process becomes an iterative and historically-aware process that moves ever towards a coherent and unified reading of the text, yet, paradoxically, has the unified message of the Scriptures already always in view. I suppose this process is akin to the so-called 'hermeneutical circle'. With this understanding of the doctrine of Scripture serving as my ground, I would like now to comment on several aspects of Hultgren's paper which itself sets forth a hermeneutical 'third way' that seeks to preserve Scripture's canonical unity, while still acknowledging diversity within Scripture and the need to distinguish between primary and secondary matters.

Hultgren's first concern, that one initially proceeds mindful of the canonical unity of Scripture, with Christ and the doctrine of justification at the centre of interpretation, and a regard throughout for Law and Gospel as a correct understanding of the Scripture's message, corresponds, I think, to a 'hermeneutics from above'. It seeks to make sense of the Scriptures as they confront us in their radical *humanness* without scandal, or falling into the docetic tactic of simply explaining away the mere human appearance of the Scriptures, which often do not present themselves in a way that we would expect of a divine book. Contrariwise, his second concern, where one begins with the frank acknowledgement of the diversity one finds in Scripture and seeks for a unified reading, corresponds to a 'hermeneutics from below'. I presently would like to address in more detail this issue of diversity within Scripture, and the need for reconciliation of 'contradictions' which, as Hultgren notes, is something which is more likely to be contested within ecclesial communities which have committed themselves, in some form, to the inerrancy of Scripture.

Firstly, Hultgren cites Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession as an instance where the Lutheran Symbols acknowledge an element of 'diversity' within Scripture, and attempt to distinguish between primary and secondary matters. I am unconvinced, however, that the language of 'primary' and 'secondary' are adequate terms here for, in agreement with Hultgren's later observations, making such a distinction is not really the intent of AC 28. What is being rejected here is the Roman assertion, made on the basis of passages such as John 16:12,13, that bishops who presently rule in the churches have the authority to institute ordinances regarding food, festival days, the keeping of the canonical hours and so forth.[4] Though authority in the church is granted to bishops for the sake of order, such authority does not 'have power to institute or establish anything contrary to the Gospel.'[5] The issue here is therefore not the reconciliation of contradictory New Testament ordinances by means of a distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' matters. The concern is simply to make clear the distinction between ordinances which are instituted by divine authority and sanction, or more precisely which are of *dominical* institution, and those which are instituted on the basis of human authority. And so when a bishop (or even an apostle) establishes an ordinance apart from Christ's own mandate, it is nevertheless still legitimate *de jure humano* and therefore observed out of Christian

4 AC 28.30–32 (Tappert: 85,86)
5 AC 28.34 (Tappert: 86)

love and for the sake of order, but it is non-binding.[6]

Nevertheless, there still remains the broader matter of Scriptural diversity in general.[7] To proceed in a docetic manner which assumes that because the Scriptures are inerrant they are therefore incapable of manifesting theological diversity is to proceed by means of a rationalistic axiom rather than the full confession of the mystery of the condescension of the Word.[8] In Scripture, doctrine is proclaimed from within the variety of world-views and cosmological frameworks of the authors and their audiences. The texts speak within history. Especially now, through the achievements of historical studies and analyses, we have grown in our awareness of Scripture's ancient contexts, and this necessitates becoming more sensitive to the existence of diversity within the Scriptures. One example would be the development in our understanding of the period of Second Temple, or 'middle', Judaism (c 300 BCE to 200 CE) which has proven to be replete with a plurality of systems of Jewish thought and ideologies, often in active competition with each other.[9] The New Testament must now be studied and read from within the circle of this historical knowledge, and such knowledge might make more transparent some of the very real differences one encounters when moving from, for example, Paul, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, to texts such as Jude and 1 and 2 Peter with their several allusions to the Enochic literature. In time, I believe we will become more sensitive to the existence of diversity at this sort of level within the Scriptures. But such divergent cosmologies and ideologies which underlie the intellectual and social backgrounds of the various authors of Scriptural texts do not necessarily constitute disunity at the level of doctrine. Part of the hermeneutical task is to navigate a path which neither engages in the wholesale demythologization of the Scriptures nor the dogmatization of the attendant world-views one finds in them. This, to my mind, is all simply an elaboration of what one finds already in the Theses of Agreement.[10] As historically-conditioned human writings the Scriptures are bound to manifest a diversity of views. But even at the level of difference in the cosmologies, world-views and

6 AC 28.53-56 (Tappert: 89,90). The question thus remains, with respect to the restriction of ordination to presbyteral or episcopal offices to men only, 'Is this restriction a divine mandate?' Furthermore, the distinction between ordinances which are established de jure divino and those which are established de jure humano is not one which the Confessions impose upon the New Testament texts. It is rather a distinction already maintained in the New Testament and implicitly followed by Paul himself which becomes evident when one compares statements such as 1 Corinthians 7:25 with 1 Corinthians 14:37.

7 Thus Hultgren offers as an example the doctrine of the return of Christ, as articulated in article 17 of the Augsburg Confession, as affirming the eschatology of the New Testament in the main (exemplified by passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:23–28), while still nevertheless rejecting the particular eschatology articulated in Revelation 20:4–6.

8 This is why I think the Theses of Agreement, in their much more careful and nuanced articulation of inerrancy, offer a much-needed corrective to other ecclesial statements which affirm inerrancy, particularly where it is stated: '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' (TA VIII, 10).

9 I have in mind here the work of scholars such as James C VanderKam and Gabriele Boccaccini, who stand out among many others.

10 TA VIII, 9, 10

philosophies of the human authors, such diversity does not represent contradiction at the level of doctrine, the mystery of Christ in all its articles, which transcends the historical situations within which it is has been revealed and proclaimed. This brings us to the role which creeds and confessions play in the hermeneutical task. Where Hultgren suggests that they 'serve to distinguish between primary and secondary matters' and thus guide the church in controverted matters 'where Scripture may not be wholly clear or may even be contradictory', I would further suggest that what they serve to do is help us, as theological norms, to distinguish between what is *doctrine* in the narrow sense, and the attendant world-views which might sometimes accompany this proclamation of the mystery of Christ in Scripture.[11] They help to direct us away from mundane cosmologies, whether ancient or modern, towards interpretation that proceeds from a unified Biblical cosmology which is necessarily centred upon the mystery of Christ.[12]

As Hultgren proceeds to put his 'third way' to the test I can only but agree with his central concern. Neither our own modern, secular ideologies nor ancient ones can be permitted to trump, supplant or be grafted into the authoritative doctrine of Scripture. As he puts his 'third way' to the exegetical test with respect to 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 he suggests (quite rightly I think) that the whole matter of the theological rationale for the subordination of women in general must be addressed prior to any 'application' of the rationale to church order and the role of women. His approach highlights how deeply connected these two texts are to other appeals to the 'order of creation' in Paul and, in particular, Paul's appropriation of the narratives of creation and fall in Genesis 2-3.

At this juncture, my invitation to offer a response to Dr Hultgren's presentation cannot resist the temptation to simply offer more material for reflection. When Paul articulates, as part of the whole framework of his kerygma, an apocalyptic cosmology in which Christ's incarnation, *death* and resurrection both ushers in the new aeon and brings about the end of the old aeon, we have a truly Biblical cosmology in which the mystery of Christ, the revealed doctrine and all its articles, coheres. In this cosmological framework Paul sets Adam and Christ in juxtaposition, as type and antitype, a typology which is axiomatic (Nygren: 20). Paul interprets the entirety of Old Testament Scripture in terms of the old aeon and the promise of the new aeon, and these two aeons stand in opposition to each other. 'One is the dominion of death over all that is human, the age of Adam. The other is the dominion of *life*, the age of Christ' (Nygren: 20,21). Furthermore, Paul expounds *the present time* of the New Testament church as one in which these two

11 And so I agree with Dr. Hultgren when he states that 'one can understand Revelation 20:4–15 as containing, in part, remnants of the world-view of ancient Jewish apocalypticism, even while one upholds articles of faith regarding the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment...'.

12 That the mystery of Christ is the ultimate message of the Scriptures is foundational for the Christian faith, as Christ himself taught (John 5:39; 2 Cor 1:20, Luke 24:44-47).

aeons overlap.[13] A key aspect of Paul's theology thus concerns the present tension which arises on account of simultaneous existence in both aeons. Though God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:19) all creation still groans until now even as we ourselves do, awaiting still the redemption of our bodies in the resurrection (Rom 8:22,23). The notion of the overlapping of the two aeons thus constitutes a unified Biblical-cosmological framework in which one might ask questions about the relationship between men and women in the church and the world.

This leads me to a consideration of the very *juxtaposition* of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 and 3, two narratives in which the relationship between man and women is presented in two different ways (surely an example of 'diversity within Scripture' which cries out for a unified reading). Such a consideration, placed within the unifying framework of the two aeons, might lead to a more nuanced view of the role of women (and men) in the church today, though lacking both the space and the mandate, I do not offer here an exegesis, but rather a preliminary suggestion. Students of these texts have long noted the difference in scope and focus of the narratives of Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a and Genesis 2:4b – 3:24. With respect to each narrative's presentation of man and woman we encounter further diversity. As Hultgren notes, citing Phyllis Trible's now-classic literary reading of the narrative, the subjection of the woman to the man which arises in Genesis 3:16[14] can be read, as indeed Luther does, as the result and consequence of sin. As Trible boldly puts it, '[the man's] supremacy is neither a divine right nor a male prerogative' but the result of disobedience (Trible: 128). One need not be convinced of Trible's entire reading to appreciate this insight. Genesis 2–3 is not *just* the story of the creation and derivation of *'adam* from the *'adamah* and the *'ishah* from the *'ish*. It is also the story about the frustration of that creation on account of the fall and its consequences. It therefore speaks about reality in the old aeon, and within that aeon what is. By contrast, Genesis 1 presents a picture, from the vantage point of the old aeon, of *what ought to be*. Mankind (*'adam*) is created in the image of God.[15] Here *the equal status of man and woman before God* is indicated, for together they mutually constitute a humanity created in God's image. Nevertheless, the picture of man and woman is not one of egalitarian *sameness*. What is striking here is the more evocative terminology which is employed, not man (*'ish*) and woman (*'ishah*) as in Genesis 2 and 3, but male (zakar) and female (*neqevah*). While the etymologies of *zakar* and *neqevah* are not entirely clear, they both most certainly carry overtones of the respective roles of man and woman in sexual union and procreation, that is, the man's active role and the woman's receptive role (Sharbert: 552; Clements: 82,83). In short, the goal for man and woman is union with each other. In coming together to become one flesh each has a unique role to play; in their mutual relationship towards each other they conform to the image of God. Our canonical

13 As one commentator puts it: 'The old aeon and the reign of Sin and Death have been conquered in Christ's death and resurrection, but have not yet been terminated. But the new aeon has also been inaugurated: grace reigns in historical fact (not just in divine decree and promise to be held on to and looked for) since the death and resurrection of Jesus' (Grothe: 302).

14 'Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' (RSV).

15 Genesis 1:27: 'In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' (RSV).

Scriptures begin and end with a wedding.[16] The distinct roles which men and women play towards each other, their respective roles as male and female (*zakar* and *neqevah*), their joining together to become united as one flesh, are ultimately revealed to be a profound type of the union of Christ with his bride, the church, at the consummation of the age, just as Paul also teaches in Ephesians 5:22–33 on the basis of Genesis 2:24.[17] Man and woman in their relationship to each other, therefore, also serve as a type of Christ's proleptic coming to his bride already now in the liturgical ministry of the Word and Sacrament, here in the age of overlapping aeons, where 'grace reigns already in historical fact'.

This brings me at last to a consideration of what I take to be the central question posed by Hultgren's stimulating and challenging paper, the question of the *symbolism* which might be attached to the public office of Word and sacrament. Hultgren asks, 'What does the official, public speaking (preaching, teaching) of the woman in the church symbolize theologically?' and presents two possible theological rationales, one of which he argues is in agreement with Scripture in its canonical unity and one which is not. I think this question of symbolism, for those churches in which ordination to the pastoral ministry of Word and Sacrament is reserved for men, can also quite profitably be turned on its head. Therefore I would also ask, 'What does the official, public and liturgical ministry of the *man* in the church symbolize theologically?' If the man's speaking in the church is understood to symbolize the subjection of women to men as a consequence of the fall into sin (the old aeon) then that would go against Scripture in its canonical unity. But if the man's speaking in church is understood to symbolize the eschatological union of Christ with his bride the church (the new aeon), proleptically consummated in the Divine Service of Word and Sacrament, the very foretaste of the wedding feast to come, in which ministers act in the Bridegroom's stead and do not represent their own persons,[18] then that would agree with Scripture in its canonical unity.

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16 See Revelation 21 and 22 and the image developed there of the new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem adorned as a bride and awaiting the arrival of her husband, Christ.

17 Of this text Paul goes on to say in Ephesians 5:32: 'This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church' (RSV). The telos of Genesis 2:24 as typological prophecy, and thus by implication also Genesis 1:27, is the Gospel proclamation of Christ's eschatological union with his church.

18 Apol VII/VIII, 47 (Tappert: 177)

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