

The LUTHERAN CHURCH PAST AND PRESENT

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fellowship with ecumenical Christianity. This is an exact return to the historical hour of the Reformation: mutual reference to each other and working together in brotherly fellowship for the work of one church in our present world.

The historically-based essays in the first part of the book have shown us the stages of Christian unity. The divisive forces had been set in motion, although an interim relationship prevailed for a long time between the "two Catholic churches." Today, in the wake of the ecumenical movement and the missionary movement linked to it, there has arisen, through the Second Vatican Council a new opening among the confessions, which contains the possibility of a present interim relationship for the unity of the church. The forces converging today could prepare for the new historical hour, where each will recognize the re-unification of the church and will effect unity in the Holy Spirit.

Such a reconciliation of the diverse charismatic gifts does not oppose the specific confessionality of the Lutheran church. It is not a loss of identity but rather a realization of the original call of the Reformation for the renewal of the whole of Christianity on earth. This is how the ecumenical note, struck in the second part of this book, should be interpreted. The Lutheran church's ecumenical contribution thus becomes evident: in all those churches which confess the name of Jesus Christ, which proclaim his Gospel and administer the Sacraments ordained by him, the one, holy catholic and apostolic church can be found, which we confess with the creed of the early church. Astonishingly enough this specific *confessionality* of the Lutheran church affirms a universal church and provides an opening for ecumenism. To repeat this self-understanding concerning our own churches is the most important task of these essays.

CHAPTER 5

INGE LÖNNING

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

The Scriptural Principle of the Reformation

There are certain historical pictures which are indelibly imprinted on the memory of Christendom. Among these is the confrontation scene at the Diet of Worms in 1521, with emperor, empire, and church on the one side and the solitary monk on the other side, alone with the Holy Scriptures.

As striking as this picture may be, its historical effect is nonetheless ambivalent. The modern era sees here its ideal of the free, moral personality, the individual who, freed from all ties to external authorities, sees himself bound only to his own conscience. The Lutheran Orthodoxy of the 16th and 17th centuries saw in the figure of Luther at the Diet of Worms a firm and unshakable representative of the absolute authority of Scripture and, on the basis of this authority, of the truth of divine revelation. Luther's own self-understanding, meanwhile, corresponds to neither of these two versions. According to tradition his momentous response at the Diet of Worms contains three main concepts: "Word of God," "the Holy Scriptures," and "conscience". To determine the peculiar theological character of the Reformation scriptural principle is to define the inter-relationships of these three concepts. It is perhaps here that the origin of one of the permanent inner difficulties of the Lutheran tradition is to be seen.

We consciously placed the scene from the dramatic breakthrough period of the Reformation at the beginning of this

discussion. Anyone wishing to understand the true nature of Reformation theology must above all take into account the situational quality of theological thought. Every step in Luther's development can be seen as a theological response to the immediate emergency situation of the church, and not as produced by well thought out theoretical, ivory tower philosophizing. Decisive conclusions, precisely in the realm of the scriptural principle, are forced on Luther by theological opponents like Cajetan (Augsburg 1518) and Eck (Leipzig 1519). The insights he achieved "internally" by intensive biblical study received their actual theological clarity through the "external" confrontation with ecclesiastical reality.

The scriptural principle of the Reformation grew out of the constant effort to achieve a correct interpretation of the Scripture. This development was introduced with the increasing concentration by Wittenberg University theology on scriptural interpretation as *the* theological task pure and simple. With Luther's theses against scholastic theology (1517), the ideal of scriptural theology was clearly expressed as the basis for a thorough reform of theological study: true theology is only possible as scriptural interpretation. An important historical precondition for realizing this ideal was the edition of the Greek New Testament by Erasmus (1516) as well as the general humanistic interest in the history of the ancient world and in the biblical languages. What gradually appeared as a methodological renewal, a new programmatic manner of doing theology, was at the same time an expression of a new conception of the *nature* of theology. The understanding of the nature and the method of theology cannot here be separated from one another.

In the Preface to the first edition of his collected writings in Wittenberg in 1539 (WA 50, 657-661) Luther describes "a proper way to study theology." According to this description a true study of theology consists of: prayer (*oratio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and temptation (*tentatio*). Viewed formally this definition is not particularly remarkable. It is remarkable, however, that Luther connects these three characteristics of valid theological study exclusively and as a matter of course with the task of scriptural interpretation. He justifies this connection with a simple reference to the uniqueness of the Bible's content: whoever would study theology must above all know that the Holy Scripture turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness. One will therefore never solve the problem of scriptural interpretation with human wisdom and reason. The theological task is

per definitionem polemical, with the polemic directed against the theologian himself. The exclusive binding of theology to Scripture is thus the necessary and permanent presupposition, because only Scripture is capable of surmounting the human wisdom of the theologian.

The allusion to Pauline expressions as well as the theme of the revaluation of all values through God's revelation in Christ according to 1 Corinthians 1-2 is here unmistakable. From the fundamental thought of the opposition of divine and human wisdom arises for Luther an indispensable scriptural principle. Not on the basis of any given observations of a formal nature, but only on the basis of the message of the Holy Scripture as heard and believed can the unique quality of the Bible be recognized. The gospel of God's justice not only lies outside the thinking capacity of man, but must "crucify" man in his existence as sinner. Through the proclamation of the gospel, which continually reaches the person anew from outside himself, the Spirit of God creates faith and thus brings about a new creature. The proclamation, however, remains bound to the Bible, because the necessary *extra nos* of the gospel is only maintained when the gospel remains, so to speak, safe-guarded in Scripture.

Thus no one should approach the Scripture without praying for the Holy Spirit. For the interpreter of the Bible there is according to this only one "method": to meditate. Luther explains what this means in a surprising way in the already mentioned Preface: "that is, not only in your heart but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them." Whoever practices this theological method gets into the middle of the great battle for the human soul, where God (the Truth) fights for the conscience with the Spirit of Lies (Satan). Temptations are characteristics of theology's proper situation as scriptural interpretation. Where God's Word is at work in this world, the enemy of God is also always at work. Through his attacks the scriptural interpreter becomes paradoxically a theologian of experience who, in his condition of being tempted, really learns "how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting" the Word of God is. Thus arises the certainty of the tempted faith, which only then makes true theology, that is, true discourse about God, possible.

When Luther expresses the opposition of divine and human

wisdom with the contrasting concepts "Word of God" and "human teaching," it is clear from this background that one should not think of the difference as that between perfection and imperfection. Then the task of Scripture interpretation could be achieved through an increase in human understanding. The mysterious statements of the Bible would then be seen in comparison to everyday human statements as especially profound (and thus hard to grasp) truths of the same kind. If one conceives of the uniqueness of the scriptural statements in this manner, then the logical and only correct method of scriptural interpretation would be the allegorical method. Through this method the expositor is able to leave behind the external, everyday, literal sense of the letter in favor of the deeper, spiritual sense. The human form of the Scripture is thus a first step, the literal sense of the scriptural statements is to be understood as a transitional stage on the way to arriving at the actual divine quality. The concept "human teaching" has however for Luther nothing to do with the human form of the Scripture. Because God really became man in Christ, the human form can in no way be inconsistent with the Word of God. Rather, the human form corresponds exactly to the content of the Scripture, the message that God became man. If "human teaching" is to "Word of God" as water is to fire, then it is only because it has a theological content that is opposed to the good news of God becoming man. "Human teaching" encloses the conscience in the prison of religious works righteousness; the "Word of God" sets the conscience free.

The principle *solā scriptura* is theologically necessary in order to avoid "human teaching" and to safeguard the non-derivative nature of the gospel. For Luther this principle is thus deeply connected with his conviction of the clarity of the Scripture. Rooted in the same context is also the increasing concentration in the third decade of the 15th century on the literal meaning of biblical statements and ever sharper criticism of allegorical exposition. As the doctrine of various meanings of Scripture crumbles, so does that of the exclusive right of the ecclesiastical teaching office to interpret the Scripture authoritatively. The traditional conception of the Holy Spirit as the author of Scripture receives here an unusual interpretation through the assertion that there is no more simple author in heaven or on earth than the Holy Spirit. His words can have only the one, simple, everyday, historical sense, and as witness to Christ they possess exactly in this sense the clarity that frees the conscience because they create certainty.

"Spirit", "witnessing to Christ", and "clarity of the Scripture" belong for Luther necessarily together. Historically this is viewed as follows: in the work of Jesus God has completed everything necessary for the salvation of mankind; the work of the Holy Spirit consists thus of "promoting Christ", that is, of distributing the saving gifts of the work of Jesus to faith. In faith the person is revealed as God's creation and thus for the first time as really human, when he honors God the Creator and lets Jesus be Savior. Since Pentecost this happens through the preaching of the Gospel, which founds the church; God's plan of salvation, which was sealed in the "Scripture" (that is, in the Old Testament), was brought to light by the oral proclamation of Christ through the apostles. In the apostolic Christ-proclamation (but also through it) the Scripture became clear, and remains so in the continuation of this Christ-proclamation in the preaching of the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Thus the New Testament is to be understood not as "Scripture" but as *revelation of the Scripture*, and Luther can thus with complete logic refer to the Epistle to the Romans in his preface to the September Testament of 1522 as "a bright light, almost sufficient to illuminate the entire Holy Scriptures" (LW 35, s. 366). Thus it can be said that the church is no *Federhaus* (pen house) but a *Mundhaus* (mouth house), and that it is actually not New Testament-like to write books.

This insight was once again exegetically produced. From the opposition between "letter" and "spirit" in 2 Corinthians 3:6 Luther discovered (in sharp contrast to the traditional use of the same passage as the justification of the theory of the two-fold meaning of Scripture) the opposition and thus the necessity of distinguishing between the old and the new covenant, the Law and the Gospel, the obedience to the Law and the obedience to the Gospel. The written word as characteristic of the Law and the spoken word as characteristic of the Gospel are more than formal and external characterizations, they are based on the two different but related functions of the Word of God. The written word corresponds to the mortifying function of the Law, the spoken word to the Gospel's function of making alive. These two functions are not simply to be identified with the two parts of the Christian Bible. The New Testament Gospel indeed unveils the Old Testament Scripture. The apostolic Christ-proclamation contained in the New Testament first made possible the distinction between the two functions and thus presented future theology (i.e., the biblical

exposition of the church) with its permanent task.

From this background the peculiar freedom that characterizes Luther's judgments in matters of the New Testament canon can be understood. The scientific presuppositions of this freedom were present in the general historical findings of the theology of the 16th century, with its humanistic influence. One had also become conscious of the complications of canonical history and tried with historical and literary-critical argumentation to establish and theologically to actualize the ancient church's distinction between uncontested (*homologoumena*) and contested writings (*antilegomena*, i.e. the seven books - James, Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Revelation). The goal of these efforts was to determine with greatest possible accuracy the limits of the New Testament (that is, the limits of apostolic writing). It is above all peculiar to Luther's development of humanistic canonical criticism that this was not his intention. In the first edition of his German translation of the New Testament this becomes clear already in the table of contents: unnumbered, and separated from the other books by an open space, stand four of the traditional *antilegomena*: Hebrews, James, and Jude, as well as the Revelation to John. In the prefaces to these four books little use is made of the traditional arguments. Decisive are neither literary critical observations nor the historical traditions of the church. The decisive factor is the theological criterion of "promoting Christ," (*Was Christum treibt*), which is all that distinguishes "apostolic" from "non-apostolic." If one puts the question whether Luther intended the four separated books to be considered as outside the canon, one finds no well-grounded answer. In later editions the table of contents of the New Testament was standardized, although the conspicuous new ordering of the writings remains to this day in Lutheran editions of the Bible. Nevertheless, Luther never changed the theological judgments formulated in his prefaces to the September Testament of 1522. They soon became so offensive to his followers, however, that they preferred to publish the translation without the prefaces.

To the confessional uniqueness of later Lutheranism belongs the phenomenon paradoxically described in the modern era as an "open scriptural canon." Within the consolidated Catholic theology of the Counter-Reformation the humanistically-colored canonical criticism was dogmatically put to an end by the decree on the canon of the Council of Trent in 1546. The authentic writings were all decided, the Old Testament according to the

Greek canon of the ancient church, the New Testament with the explicit description of every single one of the 27 writings as apostolic. Most of the confessional writings of Reformed character that arose during the 16th and 17th centuries contain parallel definitions of the Holy Scriptures, but with the characteristic distinction that the Old Testament is here established according to the Hebrew canon. In none of the Lutheran confessional writings can one find a doctrinal statement concerning the extent of the Holy Scriptures. In the practice of its Bible distribution the Lutheran tradition has never taken a firm position on the controversy of the Old Testament canon. Thus the problem of the exact extent of the Bible has theologically speaking remained an *adiaphoron* to this day.

This confessional peculiarity refers back to the character of the Reformation scriptural principle of Luther. The authority of the Bible is not to be compared (as occurs often in the ecclesiastical tradition of the church) to the authority of a law book which rests on precisely fixed assertions (paragraphs and statutes), and which requires a legally established interpreter in every new situation in order to take effect. The Holy Scripture is precisely not the law book of a Christian legal society. *Post Christum* the Scripture in the Old and New Testament accomplishes God's Word in both functions, it judges the individual and establishes him as conscience. The promoter of this effect is the Holy Spirit, who keeps the Scripture in constant movement towards verbal proclamation of the Gospel. Thus God's Holy Spirit remains solely effective through the Bible as the only one who "promotes Christ." He was active in the formation of the Old Testament writings and he revealed the Scriptures once and for all through the Christ-proclamation of the apostles. The authority of the Scripture can only be understood in its theological intention if one takes into account the expression of "the eternal will of the Gospel" (*perpetua voluntas evangelii*, CA Art. XXVIII). This expression is demonstrated by Melancthon on the example of the apostolic decree (Acts 15:28f.) to be the programmatic statement for an adequate biblical interpretation. The literal statement of the decree ("It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...") corresponds to the question of the abiding will of the Gospel, whereby the personification of the Gospel must be understood from the viewpoint of the indissoluble union between the Spirit and the Gospel.

The CA does not contain a doctrine of the Holy Scripture. None of the 28 articles of this fundamental confessional writing

of the Lutheran tradition has the scriptural principle as its theme. The earliest critics in Augsburg in 1530 called attention to this fact, as the silence seemed suspicious to them. Later interpreters tried to solve these problems with the thesis of Melancthon's church-politically motivated desire to tread softly. From the premises of Reformation theology, however, there is no reason to feel a lack; in fact the scriptural principle is implicitly present from the first article to the last. There are perhaps even grounds for viewing the peculiar formulation of the last article with reference to the apostolic decree as an explicit statement of this principle. That is precisely the question that the *sola scriptura* ("through the Word alone") answers: how does the gospel get through to mankind in such a way that faith is born which confesses and reveres God as Creator and thus brings the person as God's creature to his true being? As a formal principle, that is, abstracted from the recognized eternal will of the Gospel, the Reformation scriptural principle is not recognizable, so the "silence" of the CA may be understood.

Theology is that understanding of God and man that describes God as the justifier and man as sinner. Thus Luther defines the one inexhaustible theme of theology in his exposition of the 51st Psalm in 1532 (WA 40 II, 327ff.). This theological assertion is easy to make, but it must be constantly renewed in the school of scriptural interpretation and its temptations. To keep the church in this school of the Holy Spirit is the function of the *sola scriptura*. Far from being a rigid principle, this expresses the inexhaustibility of the theological thematic and the total tension of theological existence in the context of Reformation thought.

The Controversial Theology of the 16th and 17th Centuries: the Development of an Explicit Doctrine of the Holy Scriptures

The great controversy of the Reformation period was that concerning the proper understanding of the Gospel and the church. It was primarily conducted as a struggle for correct interpretation of Scripture and consequently for the right doctrine of the Holy Scripture. The main object of the controversy was the claim for infallible authority of interpreting Scripture maintained by the teaching office of the Roman Church. This claim had been rejected by Luther. In the first phase, around 1520, the position of the Catholic counter argument was concentrated on the proof of the necessary and indissoluble bond between scriptural authority and

ecclesiastical authority. This was negatively proved with the example of Luther: whoever starts to doubt the teaching authority of the church logically ends by dissolving the authority of Scripture (as Luther demonstrated in the prefaces to the New Testament). The church established the canon of the Bible on the basis of its teaching authority, and on the basis of this same authority only the teaching office of the church is given the right to interpret the Bible in a definite way.

This position is also maintained by the Council of Trent, 1546, although with a characteristic change of accent. As a defence against Reformation theology, around 1530 and 1540 Catholic controversial theology tended more and more to establish the necessity of the teaching authority of the church by demonstrating the material insufficiency of Scripture. The Scripture contains the divine revelation as it was entrusted to the apostles, but it does not contain the complete truth of that revelation. The one and complete apostolic revelation is mediated only through the two equal sources of knowledge, the Scripture and the oral tradition, such that it can always be present in the authoritative interpretation of the teaching office of the church.

The decretal on revelation of the Council of Trent leaves open the question of how the mutual relation of the two entities "Scripture" and "tradition" is to be viewed in the evolving teaching of the church. In the Counter-Reformation polemic, however, there is an unmistakable tendency to underscore not only the material insufficiency of Scripture but the formal inferiority of a written mode of revelation in general. The oral tradition is superior as a medium because of its living quality and its flexibility when it comes to actualizing the content of revelation.

Antithetically to the Counter-Reformation theology there occurs a gradual explication and formalization on the part of the Lutherans of the doctrine of the mediation of revelation. The scriptural principle is thus given a new theological function in the controversy that not only tends to establish the complete material sufficiency of the Scripture, but also gives rise to an ever broader defence of the written word as divinely willed and corresponding to divine revelation. This development begins in the second half of the 16th century, above all with Martin Chemnitz and Matthias Flacius, and reaches its first culmination in the beginning of the 17th century in the theological system of Johann Gerhard. Chemnitz was the first to refer to the Old Testament Decalogue as an example of the written word as a

fundamental characteristic of divine revelation: God not only instituted the written word as a medium of revelation, he himself wrote the Law and thus initiated and sanctified the way of the written word. The Sinai story shows with unmistakable clarity that it is God's will to preserve the purity of his revelation through divinely inspired writings. Gerhard adds to this Old Testament proof a New Testament parallel: the beginning and main example of the written word in the New Testament is the apostolic decree (Acts 15:28), in which the Holy Spirit is explicitly named as the author.

Around 1600 Lutheran theology became involved in a controversy with the Catholics in which it became necessary to refer the words of the Bible directly to God, in order to prove that the written word was the only medium in which revelation was possible. Thus the scriptural statements were described with increasing frequency as *oracula Dei*, and the original Reformation antithesis between "Word of God" (Christ as our alien righteousness) and "human teaching" (works righteousness) becomes transformed unnoticeably into the formal opposition between divine and human, divine words and human words. This path leads of necessity to:

- 1) the formal identity between Scripture and Word of God,
- 2) the identification of the quality of divine revelation in the Scripture with its verifiable superhuman quality,
- 3) the concentration of all attention on the process of the revelation becoming scriptural, and
- 4) the derivation of scriptural authority from the sole efficacy of the Holy Spirit in the act of writing.

The biblical authors are referred to by Gerhard as "organs of the Spirit", "hands of Christ", and "amanuenses of God". This minimalization of human activity corresponds to the doctrine of verbal inspiration that was being further developed in the 17th century. This doctrine, which reaches its culmination in the assertion of the divine quality of every letter of the biblical writings, is bound up with the increasing formalization and intellectualization of the understanding of revelation. Where the relation between God and man is primarily understood as a problem of knowledge, and where further the opposition between divine and human is understood as a difference between infallibility and fallibility, there the infallibility of the Scripture is clearly a fundamental presupposition of all theology of revelation. It thus becomes a primary task of theology to prove and defend this

infallibility. The canonical problems of the Reformation period are dogmatically resolved through the formal distinction between "canonical books of the first order" and "canonical books of the second order" (the traditional *antilegomena*), and can thus logically be declared by David Hollaz at the beginning of the 18th century as insignificant problems.

One may characterize the doctrine of Scripture in Lutheran Orthodoxy as an antithesis to the Counter-Reformation position. This theology is structurally similar to the basic dogmatic principles of the opponent. In this pattern of thought, authority and understanding of Scripture are separated. The Reformation thesis of the clarity of Scripture is unavoidably overburdened when it alone has to make possible, by combination of oral and scriptural traditions as media of revelation, the same kind of infallible representation of the once revealed truths of faith, which the teaching office of the church claims to realize.

In the dogmatic practice of Lutheran Orthodoxy the increasing formalization of scriptural authority led to a stricter confessional doctrine of scriptural interpretation.

The Heritage of the Orthodox Doctrine of Scripture: Pietism, Enlightenment and Neo-Lutheranism

The imposing doctrinal structure of orthodox Lutheran dogmatics was vulnerable precisely in its foundation, the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. The rational understanding of revelation, the identification of God's Word and Scripture, as well as the rationalization of the authority of Scripture in the theory of the infallibility of the verbally inspired Scripture provoked irrational reaction as well as rational criticism. In relation to the established scriptural doctrine of the Lutheran tradition, Pietism and the Enlightenment may be viewed as parallel tendencies toward disintegration.

As a revival movement and a movement toward ecclesiastical renewal Pietism revolved more around the use of the Bible than the doctrine of the Scriptures. The early pietistic reform of theological study can thus be understood as the restoration of the original Reformation ideal of *theology as interpretation of scripture*. Just as the Wittenberg University theology at the beginning of the 16th century, so the Halle reform at the beginning of the 18th century takes its stand against philosophically oriented theology, this time in the form of Lutheran scholasticism. The

line of biblical humanism of the 16th century is furthered positively in the concentration on the study of biblical languages and historical biblical research. Theologically there grows out of this reform a biblicism with a preference for salvation history concepts in place of the confessional systematics of orthodoxy. The tendency toward biblical positivism in this theology, as opposed to Reformation theology, is clearly seen in the occasionally quite conspicuous interest in Chiliasm.

Pietism does not directly attack the orthodox doctrine of verbal inspiration. With its biblical theological ideal and its doctrine of *theologia regenitorum*, directed against the objectivizing of the orthodox revelation theology, however, it introduces an indirect corrective in the whole orthodox doctrine of Scripture. The individualizing tendency prepares the way for the theory of personal inspiration as well as for the historical and philological interest which is related to historical-critical biblical research.

Direct and open historical criticism of the orthodox scriptural doctrine was first actualized within the Lutheran tradition with Johann Salomo Semler's three volume work on the scriptural canon in the 1770s. Semler had for a long time been dissatisfied with the doctrine of Holy Scripture in the "systems and handbooks" of the dogmatic theologians, because he felt obliged to assert the incompatibility of this doctrine with the data of canonical history. For a theological legitimization of his critical intentions, he referred characteristically to Luther and the Lutheran theologians of the second generation, as well as to the theologians of the ancient church. Viewed against the background of a theology that practiced critical freedom in an exemplary manner the orthodox doctrine of Scripture should be regarded as a regrettable historical interlude that should be brought to its conclusion, the sooner the better.

The emancipation of historical biblical research from dogmatics by Semler and his contemporaries was made possible theologically by the distinction in principle between "Christianity" ("religion") and "theology." The reproach that historical biblical criticism destroys the foundation of faith is rejected by Semler, not only with reference to this necessary distinction but further by his deriving the freedom of historical research directly from Christianity's very nature: "the Christian religion rests on the freedom to investigate and test, which all false and particular religions deny and forbid" (*Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canon*, III, 405). Thus the claim of Christianity to be the true religion leads to the right and necessity of historical

research on the Bible. Thus it follows on the one hand that the established dogmatic doctrine of Scripture must be continually corrected by ever-improving historical knowledge, and on the other hand that one has to distinguish between divine and human *within* the Scripture. The Orthodox thesis of identity between Scripture and Word of God is replaced by the antithesis that the Bible contains "more than what belongs to religion" (Lessing).

The Enlightenment distinguishes between historical and systematic theology and thus lays the groundwork for the widespread branching of disciplines in theology of the 19th and 20th centuries. Nonetheless historical investigation of Scripture receives an immediate dogmatic relevance just because of this distinction. The presuppositions for this can be seen in the Orthodox doctrine of Scripture; with its externalization of the revelational quality of Scripture it had to promote the historicizing of dogmatic questioning, which actually became the fate of Lutheran theology in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Since the last two decades of the 18th century the suppressed critical observations of Luther became once again part of the vocabulary of Lutheran theology. There was little room in the theological problematic of the Enlightenment for Reformation scriptural understanding, which was pregnantly expressed in the antithesis between "Scripture" and "human teaching". Against the background of Pietism and the Enlightenment, the profile of neo-Lutheranism became clear through the renewal of confessional consciousness in the first half of the 19th century. Against a tendency toward biblicism and criticism, the Reformation scriptural principle was expanded with a second principle that was supposed to reestablish the threatened connection between scriptural authority and scriptural understanding. Expressed in Aristotelian terms, the principle of *sola scriptura* became the "formal principle of the Reformation", and the doctrine of justification by faith alone became the "material principle of the Reformation."

Adjacent to this well-weighed doctrine of the two principles of the Reformation exists also the concept of Scripture as *norma normans* and the Lutheran confessional writings as *norma normata*; only through the derived norm of the confessional writings as correct scriptural interpretation does the Holy Scripture receive its theological clarity. Confessionally speaking it is a satisfying conclusion. It is clear, however, that it is won at the expense of one of the main concerns of the Reformation principle of Scripture: the doctrine of the clarity of the Scripture. With

this two-fold division the theological point of the Reformation scriptural principle is inevitably lost.

Historical-Critical Biblical Research and the "Battle for the Bible" as the Fate of Lutheran Theology

The Lutheran church has been described with some justification as the "professors' church." The Reformation emerged from the medieval universities, and the new confessional church consciousness was characterized by the careful preservation of academic theology. There is a natural continuity from Luther as professor in Wittenberg to the state church structure of the universities in Lutheran states today. There is an internal structure that corresponds to the external: Luther's thesis that the literal meaning is the only meaning of Scripture, together with the related thesis of the clarity of the Scriptures, provoked an intensive concern with the task of interpretation. This task, in which Luther envisaged theology as interpretation of Scripture, could not be once and for all "fulfilled" either in the work of proclamation or in theological reflection. A theology that claims with any right to rest on Luther's Reformation can never claim to be finished with the theological task of hermeneutics.

The role of Lutheran theology in the development of modern historical-critical biblical research cannot be explained as a direct derivation from the Reformation. Both can, however, be explained with the broader historical background we have sketched here: that Lutheran theology could on the one hand assume a leading role in the development of critical research, and that on the other hand this same research created considerable difficulties within the Lutheran tradition and thus provoked especially strong reactions.

The classical doctrinal tradition of Orthodoxy had bound the authority of Scripture to the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The emancipation of historical biblical research could only be realized through a reactive disintegration of this connection; in opposition to the tendency toward identification of Scripture and revelation the humanity of Scripture had to be asserted here. When one no longer immediately connected divine inspiration with the written letter but rather with the human authors through the theory of personal inspiration, then new freedom was won with reference to the historical variety of biblical literature, without

thereby forcing one to surrender the concept of inspiration as the foundation of scriptural authority.

The dogmatic problem that is posed through historical-critical biblical research cannot be resolved by modifying the established structure of orthodox revelation theory. Insofar as the theory of personal inspiration is to be understood as such a modification, it is rather designed to veil the problem than to clarify it; one grants critical research a certain freedom by quantitative reduction of the stuff of revelation, and hopes in return to reserve a trouble-free realm for revelation. With this solution it makes no difference in principle where one draws the line between inspired and non-inspired, between God's Word and human words. The theological decision is already made with the presupposed opposition between "divine" (infallible) and "human" (fallible).

The battle between "liberal" and "positive" theology, a permanent mark of the Lutheran tradition in the second half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, can be seen in its vehemence to be a conflict determined by common presuppositions. On the one hand the conflict leads to a massive historicizing of the dogmatic problems in the expanding science of biblical introduction: such things as dating, authorship, pseudonymity, etc., are immediately treated as decisive dogmatic questions. On the other hand the conflict could lead to a pervasive separation of doctrinal tradition from biblical research, with a complete de-theologizing of biblical research as a consequence. Thus the theme of "the historical Jesus", introduced in the 19th century by the liberals as a corrective to the dogma of Christ, was neutralized for generations until it broke out of its stagnation around 1950, but now with the purpose of making visible the connection of the post-Easter kerygma with the historical Jesus.

In the long run, the historical-critical research of biblical texts allows no limitations to be set on it. With its growing historical knowledge of the biblical environment and with its ever more refined literary-critical and tradition-critical methods, it located the Old Testament in its place in the Near Eastern history of religions and the New Testament Scriptures threatened to dissolve into their disparate parts of late Judaism, Hellenism, and early Catholicism. For understanding isolated concepts and texts, the analytical process of historical research is helpful, but nevertheless in the perspective of a *scriptural principle* and indispensable discourse about *the Holy Scripture*,

the results of this research are increasingly difficult to master theologically. From this latent conflict arise to this day new confrontations that can lead to church divisions within the Lutheran tradition.

The latest example of such a confrontation may be seen as representative of the 200-year battle for the Bible in the Luther tradition. In 1973 the *Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* adopted a paper, *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, in which historical-critical research was rejected and the scriptural doctrine of orthodox theology of the 17th century was established as normative. On the strength of this statement the president of their highest theological institution was suspended by the church administration. This led to an open schism because of the solidarity of the majority of the professors and students with their president. For these theologians the only remaining possibility was to establish a "Seminary in Exile."

Such an institutionalization of the controversy is an exception that is hardly imaginable in most Lutheran churches. But as a symbol it may well serve to illuminate the problematical situation of the scientific theology. The pulpit and the rostrum no longer stand so close together as they did in the Wittenberg of Luther. One gets the impression, rather, that proclamation and research are far removed from each other. If that is so, then academic theology has had to give up its proper task in favor of a specialized existence on the borders of church life. The task of interpreting Scripture on which the proclamation of the gospel depends, is left to church tradition. It may be viewed as symbolic of a fundamental crisis in modern Lutheranism that a contemporary church administration uses arguments from that phase of tradition which separates the doctrine of Scripture from the interpretation of Scripture.

The Contemporary Challenge: The Scriptural Principle in an Ecumenical Horizon

The Reformation principle of Scripture did not arise in the context of a confessional church, but is profoundly bound to an understanding of the church as *una sancta*. It is thus totally logical that Lutheran theology in the 20th century has to assume responsibility for the cause of the scriptural principle in an ecumenical context, especially considering the widespread de-confessionalizing of biblical research. Rigid and hopeless positions that were laid down in the theological controversies of

the post-Reformation era are able to be transcended, as the Montreal Statement of *Faith and Order* 1963 demonstrated, for the problematic of Scripture and tradition. New formulations of the problem, open to the original intention of the scriptural principle, do not, however, arise spontaneously.

Here lies a challenge that can be seen in the two most important documents for the Lutheran churches in the inter-confessional doctrinal conversations in recent years. In the Catholic-Lutheran study report entitled "The Gospel and the Church" (so-called Malta Report), both partners assert, with reference to the insights of modern biblical study, that the doctrine of justification is no longer a point of controversy between the two confessions -- one must however leave the question open as to what role this doctrine plays within each structure as a whole. The "Leuenberg Agreement" asserts for churches of various Reformation heritages, with similar reference to common exegetical insights, a broad agreement in traditional points of controversy, although it omits the key hermeneutical question of the relationship between Law and Gospel. There is in both cases an unmistakable demand for a truly ecumenical scriptural principle, able to bring about the connection between exegetical insight and dogmatically binding doctrine.

The Reformation scriptural principle, symbolized at the beginning of this essay in the scene of Luther's appearance in 1521 in Worms, raises for us the difficult interpretative question of how the three concepts "Word of God", "Holy Scripture", "conscience" are related to each other. The identity problem of Lutheran theology up to now was that one believed this question could be solved by a formalized doctrine of Scripture. But when the Scripture as theologically authoritative is split off from the spectrum "Word of God" and "conscience" (that is, the person as addressed by God), then the theological point of the scriptural principle is inevitably lost. Since "Word of God" is not a formal category of revelation -- Jesus Christ is the "Word of God" to mankind -- the Scripture has its incomparable and exceptional position not in the area of that which is empirically verifiable or rationally demonstrable, but rather in relation to the person as conscience. Through the Scripture as witness to Christ, the Holy Spirit drives out all "human teaching," that is, all forms of forced self-redemption, and offers the conscience the alien righteousness of Christ. Therefore the task of theology is aligned with the task of the interpretation of Scripture, because the Holy Spirit through the Scripture constantly pushes toward

the oral promise of Christ in the public proclamation and in absolution. To be the church means to live from this promise alone, and to be driven by the Holy Spirit to proclaim this promise to all people.

That is precisely what happens *sola scriptura* (through Scripture alone). It is just as inaccessible to empirical verification or rational demonstration as the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The permanent ecumenical legacy of the Reformation is to maintain the indissoluble triad of "Word of God", "Scripture", and "conscience" and to bring this principle as *the* principle of Christian theology into the consciousness of new generations.

Translated by John Hinderlie

CHAPTER 6

HELMUT ZEDDIES

THE CONFESSION OF THE CHURCH

It is thought to be a characteristic of the Lutheran church that it has a strong relationship with the confession of faith. This seems to distinguish it most clearly from other churches and denominations. "Confession," however, is given a very special meaning. It is not used to describe the direct, spontaneous witness of an individual responding to an encounter with the living Lord. Nor is it the profession of faith given at Baptism, or the Creed spoken by the congregation gathered for worship. When the Lutherans speak about the confession of the church, they mean first of all a statement of doctrine. Of course, this is implicit in any form of confession. But while in the confession of the first Christians and through the creeds of the early church doctrine was embedded in praise, witness and prayer, it soon began to grow more independent, even in the old church, and developed into a type of doctrinal confession with the emphasis no longer on the act of confession, but on the correctness of the doctrine.

Without these changes of structure, the confessions of the Reformation would not have been possible. With the exception of Martin Luther's two Catechisms which were meant for instruction within church, home and school, they are doctrinal confessions, drawn up in face of the acute danger to the faith and the church, and authentically authorized by signature. They sought to safeguard the unity of the church by a common confession. In justification of their convictions and suggestions for reform,