

A Lutheran “Op-ed” for Bible Reading in the ELCA, Part IV

Colleagues,

Today’s ThTh #546 is Part IV, the last batch of Werner Elert’s theses on Lutheran hermeneutics for reading the Bible. Prior postings #543, 544, 545 gave you the specs on where they came from. Here’s the last set of “Feste Sätze” (solid sentences) from Elert’s Chapter Two: “The What and How of God’s Revelation.”

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

#17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures

1. Just what is the authority of the Bible? That question confronts each individual Christian. It also confronts the total church, the church at large. What is its authority for me as an individual believer, what is its authority for the church in its common life and work?
2. [For the individual person] The OT and NT scriptures gain their authority for individual Christians as God’s word of law—in all three aspects: God as creator, as legislator, as judge—speaking directly to them, and as God’s word of Gospel meant for them.[In Elert’s dogmatics book, “The Christian Faith,” this thesis is followed by several pages on the “shortcomings of the doctrine of scriptural inspiration.” That was what I was taught—in catechism class—growing up in the Missouri Synod. It is still a cornerstone of much of American Christianity.]

A. Elert begins by noting that there is no “doctrine”

about scripture at all—let alone a doctrine of its “inspiration”— in Luther’s theology, nor in the Lutheran Confessions. The Roman Church formulated one at the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century and the Reformed Confessions, following the example of Calvin, attached great value to such a doctrine about the Bible itself. Lutheran theologians in subsequent centuries following Calvin’s lead thought they needed to fill in the blank that Luther and the Confessions had left empty.

- B. But in doing so they made a fateful shift away from the Augsburg Aha! Namely, the Lutheran Confessors’ claim that Christian faith is ALWAYS a faith that trusts Christ’s promise, and the Gospel is just such a promise. That is where the Gospel’s authority comes from. Christ himself is the grounds for trusting what he says. The issue of authority is not “is the Bible trustworthy?” but “is Christ trustworthy?” And that is, of course, where you might begin to wonder. Is Christ trustworthy when he says: “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven (or) Come unto me all you distressed folks and I will give you rest (or) Today you will be with me in paradise”? Many who heard those words when first uttered did NOT think they were trustworthy. At least not without additional evidence that he had “authority.” So folks not convinced asked for additional “signs.” Specifically something miraculous that would make it “perfectly clear” that he had God’s authorization. But when pressed for just such signs, he said no. There’s a parallel here to the doctrine of inspiration. Once you begin to think that you first have to establish the Bible’s authority before Christ is trustworthy, you have

already turned your back on the Augsburg Aha! Possibly even turned your back on Christ's offer. It's a slippery slope. All inspiration doctrines seek to "add" something to Christ's own authority, to shore it up, to make it REALLY credible by showing that it comes straight from God (through human writers, yes, but with no human interference) and therefore must be 100% reliable. Such an "add on" to Christ's own authority—grounded in his cross and resurrection—is of the same sort as "add ons" to the Gospel message itself. "Besides trusting Christ you gotta be circumcised if you're a male (Galatians)." "You gotta be a tongues-speaking charismatic to be 100% Christian (Corinthians)." You gotta believe in the authority of Biblical inspiration before Christ's promise is credible. And if you don't believe in that doctrine of Biblical inspiration, then your Christian faith is defective. Trusting Christ alone doesn't do it. You gotta, you gotta, you gotta.

When Christ's trustworthiness depends on something else that "guarantees" his words to be true, we are encountering an "other" Gospel. Faith is not believing Biblical doctrines, even doctrines about Christ. Even less is it believing a doctrine about the Bible. Christian faith is trusting Christ's promise. That's it.

- C. Elert examines the two classic NT texts that use the word—2 Timothy 3:16 (All scripture is inspired by God) and 2 Peter 1:21 (Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God). In these two texts it is only the Old Testament that existed at that time, so these texts refer only to that—and not at all to what we

call the New Testament. But NT apostles now and then claim their message to be the product of the Holy Spirit, and thus inspired too. There is no argument with such claims of inspiration. When you deduce a "doctrine" of the Bible's authority from the inspiration of the Scriptures, you undermine precisely what the apostles are claiming when they speak of scriptural inspiration—both for OT texts and for NT texts. The whole point of the apostles' claim for the Holy Spirit active in scriptural texts—both in the OT and in the NT that these very apostles are creating as they do their writing—is that here too the Holy Spirit is at work doing the Spirit's single-focused job assignment. And what is that? It is an assignment coming from Christ himself: "The Holy Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you." The Spirit's "job" is not communicating divine doctrines—otherwise unknown to us—for us to believe. It is instead "pushing Christ" for us to trust. The fundamental flaw in the doctrine of inspiration is what it says about faith. Elert's own words: "The inspiration doctrine adulterates and destroys faith in the NT sense. The compelling element that leads someone to faith in the Gospel is always and only the person of Christ. That was true for his first apostles. They needed no doctrine of inspiration to urge them to trust Christ. When in their writings we hear them say: 'We appeal to you, be reconciled to God through Christ,' they do not appeal to their own inspiration. Instead they urge us to trust Christ, not because they were inspired, but because they bear witness to Christ as they themselves heard and saw Him. Strictly speaking, this is the only way that WE today can connect with

Christ. The apostles' writings which we have today, just like their oral proclamation of long ago, are the medium—but not the foundation—for faith in Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit in these apostolic writings—call it their inspiration—resides solely in the Christ-promise that they are urging upon their readers. If we try to get back behind this Gospel-center to ground our faith on some earlier inspiring act of God that then urges us to trust Christ, we are pulling the rug out from under faith itself.”

3. [For the church at large] the problem of Biblical authority divides into three specific issues: A) the authority of the NT, B) the authority of the OT, and C) the canonicity of the individual NT books [The “canonicity” question is: are they authentic, genuine, trustworthy? Do all of these 27 NT books really “belong” in the NT?]
4. Starting with issue A. The authority of the NT books for the church resides in their character as source and norm.
5. Source. The NT books are the only authentic source that exists for what can be known about God’s revelation in human history that occurred in Christ. Why? It is only eye- and ear-witnesses who could testify authentically to what was said and done [Luke 1:2; 1 John 1:1]. We today have no access to that oral testimony, but only to the written testimony they have given us.
6. Norm. The NT is the only and absolute norm for the church’s entire proclamation (kerygma), since the apostles themselves—once they had received the Holy Spirit promised to them by Christ—became organs for God’s self-revelation, and because all subsequent church life and work must be normed by this revelation. The NT functions as norm, as a yardstick, in that all proposals for what should be

proclaimed, enacted, practiced as “Christian” is measured by this test: Is it congruent with Christ’s original Gospel?

7. As the one and only source and norm for what the church does, the written apostolic witness needs no supplementary additions from other witnesses. The Scriptures are “sufficient,” they are “enough” for what the Gospel is. They need no additions from tradition in order to be made more complete. There are no “missing parts” to the Gospel that must be supplied from other sources.
8. Concerning the authority of the OT. Before Gentile audiences the apostles did not make the validity of their witness to Christ depend on any previous acceptance of the OT. This fact is significant also today for Christian mission to the nations of the world. Then as now, you do not become a Christian via a two-stage process—first acknowledging the OT and its authority (one could say, by first becoming a Jew) and then coming to Christ and following him. Faith in Christ is trusting Christ’s promise. People throughout the world are promise-trusters of one sort or another. Every “other Gospel” in the world—sacred or secular—offers a promise of some sort, and then calls people to trust that promise.. Christian mission at its most basic level is inviting people to let go of the promises they have been trusting and “switch” to trusting Christ’s promise. Faith in Christ does not call for disciples to visit Moses first before coming to Christ. Yet from the very beginning Christians did not turn their backs on the scriptures of the Old Testament. Why?
9. For three reasons the Christian church received the OT as a normative word of God. A) The God of the OT is also the Father of Jesus Christ and thereby—when we are linked to Christ—becomes our father too. B) In its promises the OT

too is testimony to Christ. The OT promises (Abraham, David, Noah) are Gospel offers calling for the receivers to trust them. They “testify” to Christ in that Christ is the fulfillment that makes them all come true. C) The OT (not in its Mosaic law, but definitely in its prophets) is God’s word, not simply witness addressed to the ancient covenant people of Israel, but also witness about all peoples and witness addressed to all peoples of the world. Example: God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3) is for everybody in the world: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

10. For the first of those three reasons above the authority of the OT in the Christian church can be understood only as derivative from the authority of the NT. What the OT says must be understood through the prism of what the NT says.
11. It is a misleading opinion to say that the post-apostolic church is the guarantor for the NT canon—for what books genuinely belong in the NT. The early church always saw itself standing uninterruptedly under the authority of the original apostles. First it was the authority of their oral testimony, when the apostles were personally active in the church’s life, and then after their death under the authority of their written testimony. The later church did not create the canon, they received it from the hands of the apostles.
12. There never was any doubt within the church about the canonicity [“They are OK. They belong in the NT collection of books”] of the vast majority of the NT writings. These books are called “homologoumena.” [Transl. “Everybody says” they are authentic.]
13. The decisive factor for their canonicity was and is the bond between their content and where they came from. The criterion for content is that all the homologoumena engage

in what Luther called “Christum treiben.” They are constantly “pushing” Christ. In contrast with all later witness within the church, of which the same could also be said that they push Christ, the homolegoumena are original witnesses. They are the first ones, derived from no previous source known to us. Wherever earlier sources are mentioned, for example, in Luke 1, we have no access to them. They are available to us only through the canonical homolegoumena that transmit them to us.

14. The question about the canonicity of the antilegomena [=New Testament books that some early Christians dismissed as not “good enough” to be included in the canon. “Antilegomena” = spoken against.] is a question that confronts the church today just as it did the church of the fourth century. From early days in church history these seven NT books were “spoken against” in some Christian congregations and were not in the NT canon at these places: Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John.
15. For interpreting specific passages in the scriptures there are two fundamental axioms. One is the ancient word “perspicuity.” From Latin, “see through clearly.” Namely, there are passages in the scriptures that present the Gospel clearly and crisply. These passages have priority. That first axiom carries with it a corollary: when there are “dark” passages, the “clear” [perspicuous] gospel passages are to be used to understand them. The second axiom is “the analogy of faith.” That means “in synch with trusting Christ’s promise.” Here is how that works for interpreting Bible texts.

Step one: *The Gospel of Christ is the great promissory Good News throughout the Bible.*

Step two: *Therefore faith-in-the-gospel is the final yardstick for measuring what scripture is saying.*

Step three: Since faith is always faith in the promise, and since the “clear” passages are the clear gospel proclamations in scripture, therefore these two axioms blend into each other.

Step four: Thus the analogy of faith means using the yardstick of faith in that “clear” promissory gospel.

Step five: Any interpretation of any scripture passage that contradicts “faith-in-the-promise” amounts to a misreading of the passage. Granted, there are Biblical texts where there is no “clear” Gospel at all. What to do then?

Step six: When we are interpreting (teaching or preaching) “unclear” Bible passages—where the Good News is “fuzzy” or there is no Good News at all—these two axioms call us to do what Melanchthon recommends in the Lutheran Confessions for such a case: “add the Gospel promise” from elsewhere in the scripture so that the Good News does come through clearly (perspecuity) and trusting that “clear” Gospel can be commended to the hearers (the analogy of faith).