

The Bible and Me. A Bishop's Tale.

Colleagues,

Marcus Lohrmann is bishop of the ELCA's Northwestern Ohio Synod. We've known each other since his seminary days in the 1970s. Later on he asked me to be involved in his doctoral degree program. Later still the two of us shared the high adventure of team-teaching in Hong Kong back in 1988. We worked with students at a Chinese missionary seminary. What did we teach? A Crossings course! Its title: Relocating Authority according to the Gospel of Matthew.

Students presented research papers at the end of that course "tracking" some segment of the wall-to-wall Confucian hierarchical authority systems shaping the society (and the churches!) in their local settings. The challenge then was to practice "crossing" those Confucian "authority OVER" structures with Jesus' own "authority UNDER" presented throughout the gospel of Matthew, culminating in 20:20ff. The final task was to work out the specs of Jesus' own counsel (Crossings steps 5 & 6) for doing likewise in those wall-to-wall "authority over" structures of these students' daily lives. Unfortunately we didn't photocopy these papers for show-and-tell back home. Not smart. I'm remembering some that tackled Confucian authority in the students' own Hong Kong churches. Yes, we should have brought them home for local consumption, nowadays for sure.

Last fall one of the other ELCA synods asked Marcus to tell them how he "does Bible." Apparently the word is out among the ELCA bishops that Marcus has something worth listening to on the topic. You might even call it a case study in authority over vs. authority under, a bishop's own slice-of-life. Here's what he

told them.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE SCRIPTURES, BIBLICAL AUTHORITY, AND THE WORD OF GOD

Why this particular topic now? As a person rooted in the Christian faith, I have had a lifelong interest in the Scriptures. Throughout my life there have been few days when I have not been exposed to or read the Bible. By the power of the Holy Spirit, this reading has shaped my faith and life and pointed me unambiguously to the God who has acted for me and the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

But I am aware that others are committed to the reading and studying of the Scriptures and identify it as being formative in their faith and life. They also are committed to the notion of Biblical authority. Yet that notion does not always lead to a convergence in theological thinking or unity with respect to the understanding of a variety of matters, including the person of Christ, how one should respond to matters of war and peace, relationships between the sexes, and a host of other matters. Why is that? Even within the Lutheran tradition, there are different perspectives with respect to the role of women in the church, and the shape of interaction among Christians, among other things.

I suspect that people can use the term, Biblical authority, and mean vastly different things. We do not read the Scriptures in a vacuum. How does that impact our understanding of Biblical authority? If the Scriptures are the living word of God, how do we understand the Scriptures as dynamic with the Holy Spirit

using that living word to continue to shape the life of the church? Here I would simply cite the matter of slavery, about which there was significant division in this country and within the church with both “sides” claiming the authority of the Scriptures to justify their perspective.

The immediate reason for writing this paper is prompted by the numerous conversations I have had in recent years within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and with other Christians as we have debated matters related to the will of God and human sexuality. The vast majority of folk in this conversation would seek to ground their perspective in the Scriptures, Biblical authority, and the Word of God. Admittedly, those who disagree might not be convinced by the “grounding” of the other.

For the purposes of this paper, I’m going to approach the matter as one who has been nurtured within the Lutheran tradition of the Christian faith and who “owns” the Confession of Faith contained in the constitution of the ELCA, including those sections pertaining to the understanding of the Scriptures.

This will not be an academic paper but an effort to help the reader understand something about the manner in which this student of the Scriptures has wrestled with the Bible throughout my life in a manner which seeks to be faithful to my calling as a baptized child of God. In doing so, I seek to honor the Scriptures as the written Word of God which both confronts me with the reality of my own sin and the judgment of God but which also comforts me by the power of the Holy Spirit as that Word points me to the fullness of God’s promises in Christ and consistently opens up a future that is shaped by the “new creation” in Christ Jesus.

A secondary goal is to share with my family, with those whom I

have taught and pastored, and anyone interested, something of my faith pilgrimage as it pertains to my understanding of the Scriptures. In doing so, I acknowledge that this particular pilgrimage is not at an end.

SOME THINGS ONE NEVER FORGETS

Ours was a family that tended to the Scriptures. As one of ten children born to a father who was a Lutheran school teacher and a mother who was committed to her marriage and family, I was shaped by the daily reading of the Scriptures as a part of family devotions which followed the evening meal. The reading of the Scriptures, a written reflection on that Scripture that was age appropriate, and the singing of a hymn was part of the rhythm of each day. Skipping Sunday morning worship or Sunday School was never an option. With Dad at the organ bench and directing the choir, Mom would march us to one of the front pews. If Jesus could be in the synagogue weekly "as was his custom" so could we be in worship each Sunday morning. Daily family devotions, Sunday morning worship and Sunday School, and the studying of the Scriptures and the Lutheran tradition were all givens. On the latter point, for this particular student, it was hard to imagine the Christian tradition as extending beyond the Lutheran church. Truth be told, however, I do not recall much conversation about what was read or taught. Mine was the role to receive and accept/believe that which was taught. With respect to the Scriptures, the operating perspective probably resembled the bumper sticker, "The Bible says it. I believe it. And that settles it."

The first challenge to such an understanding took place when I was about eight years old. The fact that I have recalled the story says something about how it disturbed me. Another friend and I were talking about how the world came to be. He was not too sure about the matter but he had heard something about

evolution which did not make much sense to either of us at the time. I responded with certainty that God created the world. That did not make much sense to him either. I ran home, found my Bible, showed him the first verses of Scripture that declared, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" and thought that would settle the matter. His response was, "Why should a person believe that?" That question was troubling and stuck with me for years.

I had my father as my teacher for five of my eight years of grade school. At some point during those years, he shocked me by saying, "Just because someone quotes the Bible, that does not make it true." Then with a degree of humor he quoted two passages from different places in the Bible. "Judas went out and hanged himself," and "Go, and do thou likewise." Dad must have been on a faith pilgrimage of his own with regard to the Scriptures. But with the quote he provided a simple but important lesson. "Don't be persuaded to a particular point of view just because someone is quoting the Bible." That seemed to me to complicate the earlier perspective.

THE BASICS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH, MEMORIZED AND RECITED

Catechism class introduced the basics of the Christian faith. I would not know for many years that the Small Catechism from which I learned the faith was a considerable enhancement to Martin Luther's Small Catechism using a question and answer format and considerable Biblical proof-texting for each article of faith. Truth be told, there was much good stuff to be learned and memorized, including portions that have stayed with me.

Interestingly enough, the first major section of the "Explanation" was on the Bible. "What is the Bible? The Bible is the Word of God." "Who wrote the Bible? Holy men of God wrote

the Bible.” “Why is the Bible the Word of God although it was written by men? The Bible is the Word of God because these men wrote it by inspiration of God?” II Timothy 3:16 is cited as the proof text. “What does ‘by inspiration of God’ mean? ‘By inspiration of God’ means that God the Holy Ghost moved the holy men to write, and put into their minds, the very thoughts which they expressed and the very words which they wrote. (Verbal Inspiration)” Proof texts are offered from John 17: 17 “Thy Word is truth,” II Timothy 3:16 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” and John 10:35 “The Scriptures cannot be broken.” As a child it was clear to me. The Bible is a perfect book to be “believed” in its entirety and also on an equivalent level. One verse is to be understood as authoritative as another. Yet there was an indication concerning what needed to have priority with respect to the Bible. “For what purpose did God give us the Bible? God gave us the Bible to make us ‘wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus,’ and to train us in holy living.” The explanation continues, “What use should we make of the Bible? We should diligently and reverently read and study the Bible, listen attentively when it is read and explained, believe it, and live according to it.” (Luther’s Small Catechism, Concordia Publishing House, pp. 40-42). The subsequent section introduced the concept of Law and Gospel.

For a junior high youth, this was meaty stuff. It promoted a “high view” of the Bible, of Biblical authority, and pointed to the importance of Christ. The stage was set for a perspective that begins with the “inspired Bible” that is “without error” and which moves to the task of determining appropriate teaching that is supported by “proof texts.” But for this particular youth, the Bible was primarily the source book for that which must be believed. I, of course, would be taught the correct interpretation. Readiness for confirmation was indicated by the student’s ability to answer the questions and provide the

appropriate recitation of "proof texts." In this work I could excel.

I attended Lutheran high school and continued my study of the Scriptures. With that period came the discovery that not all are Lutheran. We lived in a Roman Catholic community. I occasionally argued religion with my neighborhood friends and was soon convinced that, though devout, they had succumbed to superstition and human tradition. I do not recall talking about religion with protestant youth. If asked, I would have recalled the book Church Through the Ages which indicated with certainty that the Lutheran tradition was in continuity with the apostolic tradition and all other manifestations of Christianity were diversions. Those who held such positions surely did not read the Bible correctly.

Here I first sensed the dilemma. If anything in this Bible could be challenged with respect to its truthfulness, then the whole faith system falls apart. The Christian faith is based on the premise of a perfect book. So in addition to believing the story of what God had done for me and the world in Jesus, I also needed to believe in a "seven day creation" and that Jonah was really swallowed by a whale. Any apparent contradictions in the Bible needed to be dispelled. Nothing was taught about the uniqueness of each book, the manner in which books were identified to be a part of the Bible, how the Old and New Testaments would come to be regarded as authoritative, or points of tension within different books.

That all would have to wait until seminary. For now it was important to know what texts supported particular teaching and to be able to use those texts in debate with others who might challenge this perspective.

The underlying assumption was that the Christian faith is

essentially a combination of teachings that come from the authoritative Bible. Faith was understood as believing these teachings and not questioning them. Among these teachings, the story of Jesus was obviously central and the most important. I recall the discomfort I felt in a high school religion class in which the teacher spoke with certainty about any matter that students raised. I thought to myself, "I don't believe what he is saying. I don't think he does either. If I am ever a teacher of religion and don't know the answer to a question, I am going to admit it."

THE CALL TO PASTORAL MINISTRY & THE CONTINUED WRESTLING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Throughout my life I sensed that I was being called to be a pastor. In my senior year of high school my parents called me into the kitchen and inquired, "What do you want to do with your life?" I was surprised they did not know and responded, "I want to be a pastor." My father replied, "Why don't you think about becoming a doctor or lawyer or something else." In those days I did walk a mile to the bus stop. In the darkness of one such morning, I found myself saying, "If the story of what God has done in Christ is true, it's worth staking my life upon it."

Theology and Biblical classes in junior college continued what I have come to call "the puzzle" model of theology. According to this model, one needs to get all the pieces of theology put together from an accurate reading of the Scriptures. Of course, the big piece is the story of Jesus.

In studying the gospels in detail for the first time I became aware of varying accounts of what appeared to be the same story told in different ways. I was not sure what to make of that. For a final exam I was asked to "harmonize" the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. I wrote, "I don't think I should

harmonize them. Each stands on its own." I do not recall being penalized for my response. But I do recall the anxiety traced to being asked to harmonize apparent discrepancies in the Bible. In another class taught by the college president we were considering the New Testament description of the antichrist. A substantial debate occurred concerning whether or not Martin Luther's judgment that the pope is the "antichrist" was true for every pope. Again, I found myself in turmoil. Is this another piece of Biblical teaching that I must believe to be a Lutheran pastor. When I finally asked the question, the professor reluctantly said, "No, it's an historical judgment." I was relieved but other members of the class were not so pleased with the professor's answer.

Senior college [=a separate institution for the last two collegiate years in the Missouri Synod pastoral education program] introduced me to critical thinking with the accompanying invitation to ask questions about faith and life. I now was adding Hebrew to Greek in terms of studying the Scriptures. I thoroughly enjoyed the studying of specific books of the Bible and the ability to ask questions about the text.

My seminary education would deepen my understanding of the development of the Bible, Biblical interpretation, and Lutheran theology. Professors had the ability to maintain a "high view" of the Scriptures, that is to value its authoritative nature while at the same time offering an invitation to probe the text. Students were introduced to the "historical-critical" method of studying scripture which included such matters as seeking to determine the nature of the "original manuscripts," contrasting literature that was contemporary to that of the Biblical text, literary studies of Scripture, as well as continuing to use some of the more "traditional" and accepted insights of archaeology to enhance Biblical understanding. I particularly enjoyed a course on the history of canonization, that is, how the Bible

came to be in its present form. For the first time I learned about the process of how the Hebrew writings (Old Testament) came to be, how they were determined to be authoritative. Similarly, I learned something of the contexts which shaped the writings that came to be the New Testament. I learned something about how the early church determined which books would have authority for its life together. I learned that there was not always agreement about which books would be included. As the early church wrestled with such matters, questions were asked concerning the degree to which a book could be traced to the apostolic witness and whether or not the story of the crucified and risen Christ is central to the book. I recall being startled when a professor asked concerning the letters of Saint Paul, "What gives us the right to read someone else's mail?" By asking the question he was pointing to the bigger question concerning what makes these letters authoritative for us in our contexts. Such study was accompanied by conversations concerning the work of the Holy Spirit and the matter of the inspiration of these texts. I valued the fact that God works through the human story throughout history to convey God's story.

In all this it was clear that my teachers treasured the Scriptures and the process that shaped the development of the Bible as being that through which God works through human beings to tell the story of God's faithfulness to God's promises throughout the ages. It was also clear that the proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ was understood as being central to that story. My appreciation and love for the Scriptures increased. My anxiety about needing to "defend the Bible" diminished. I came to a deeper appreciation for the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, of the story of the Book of Ruth which recounts how people seek to act faithfully and lovingly in the most difficult of circumstances, of the book of Jonah which recounts human abhorrence to God's willingness to forgive even

the enemy, of the prophets who declared God's judgment on any religion that separates worship of God from matters of justice, care for the poor, the orphaned, the widow and the stranger. I came to value the uniqueness of each of the four gospels addressed to specific communities and which lift up specific accents as the story of God's action in Christ Jesus unfolds.

At the same time courses in Lutheran theology helped me to see the distinctive lens through which Lutheran Christians view the Scriptures. In the "big picture" Lutheran Christians see the Bible first and foremost as being that written word of God through which God speaks judgment on all human efforts to find purpose, meaning, and life apart from God. It unfolds the story of how God takes that judgment into God's own being through the person and work of the crucified and risen Christ and how by the power of the Holy Spirit God is about the work of creating faith and making a "new creation." Such an understanding did not come easily. I had used the "puzzle model" for many years. In my first year of seminary I was bewildered by the fact that when I would write papers a certain professor would keep pushing me to go deeper. "What is 'good' about the 'good news'?" he would ask. "What is new in this 'good news'?" Though I might be pleased with what I wrote, he was not pleased with cliches supported by Biblical verses. In the course of studying the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, I came to my own "aha" experience, particularly as reflected in Article IV. At root, Martin Luther and Phillip Melancthon faulted a theology that made use of the Scriptures and the tradition but failed to make use of the crucified and risen Christ. The result of such a theology is that one can deceive oneself and others into believing that we can manage life on our own terms. To use the Biblical image, the "wrath of God" then abides on us. One is left with self-deception and/or despair. The Good News is the story of how God in Christ Jesus enters into human existence,

bears in his person the fullness of human sin and the judgment of God and gives us "forgiveness of sins, life and salvation." Martin Luther's beloved term for that is the "joyful exchange." Jesus Christ takes upon himself our sin and the wrath of God and gifts us with his own righteousness.

I learned that Lutheran Christians would argue that this is not a novel approach but is affirmed by the witness of the crucified and risen Lord and the apostolic witness. For example, in the Gospel of John Jesus' opponents, who know the Scriptures well, question Jesus concerning his behavior and the authority by which he acts. Jesus responds, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 4:39-40) An exchange like that will get Jesus killed. Here I learned a critical lesson. One can know the Scriptures backwards and forwards. One can make all the claims in the world about allegiance to biblical authority. But if you miss out on Christ, you miss the whole point.

In the Gospel of Luke, the risen Lord greets the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They had hoped that he was the Messiah. But the blatant evidence of Jesus' weakness, his failure, his crucifixion and death dash their hopes and leads them to despair. In their sorrow Jesus responds, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Luke continues: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted the things about himself in all the Scriptures." (Luke 24:26-27) In John's Gospel to know "Moses and the prophets" and to not know Christ is to not know Moses and the prophets.

The Gospel of John offers a similar key for its own interpretation and for the reading of Scripture. Why finally does John write what he writes? John responds, "Now Jesus did

many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31)

SO WHAT?

The gift of this Christ-centered approach to the Scriptures and to Christian theology is that it always leads me to ask, “What about this text points me to the necessity of a crucified and risen Christ?” As I look at this text or face this particular situation or examine this matter related to faith and theology, how do I make use of the God who is for us in the crucified and risen Christ? In contrast, if I never get to that question, I may have an interesting class, a good debate, an inspirational message, or guidelines for life, but I have not yet shared the “good news” of the God who in Jesus, the Word made flesh, gave himself for the life of the world.

REVISITING THE CONFESSION OF FAITH OF THE ELCA

C2.02a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.

Comment: What would it take for Lutheran Christians when they hear “Word of God” to think first and foremost about Jesus Christ? How might that change our conversations? Check out I Corinthians 1:30 for a Pauline equivalent to John 1. Other verses worth consideration include Hebrews 4:12 and Revelations 19:13.

C2.02b The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in

the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Comment: I have heard such preaching all my life. At its best, what I have heard astounds me, bewilders me, convicts me, and comforts me as I am finally pointed by the power of the Holy Spirit to the God who is for me and for all humanity in Christ Jesus. This is the Augsburg “Aha.”

C2.02c The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain faith and fellowship for service in the world.

Comment: In my days of doing youth ministry, prior to our appropriate attention to “boundary” matters, I would take youth out individually for a coke and conversation. On such an occasion one very bright teen asked me, “Pastor, why do you believe the Bible is the Word of God? What really makes it different from any other book?” I don’t know that I was ever asked that question quite so bluntly. This teen would simply not “buy” an answer from the catechism of my youth.

My response? “Beth, that is a very good question. I’ve read the Bible all my life. It claims me. I cannot let it go. I find it puzzling and intriguing. It reflects the best and the worst of human nature. I find it provides an accurate description of humanity in moments of great depravity and in moments of glorious fidelity. All of that is true. But on the deepest level it speaks to me in my doubt, and my unbelief, and my failure. It exposes my hypocrisies. More than that, it speaks of the God who is for me and for this world in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. This is the God who in Christ Jesus meets me in my failure and unbelief and declares, ‘Peace

be with you.’ And, it is. The Bible tells that story. That is why it is referred to as the written Word of God. Incredibly, it always has a way of speaking to me in a new way. I think that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

“Secondly, I believe that the Bible is the written Word of God because it is the testimony of the eyewitnesses of God’s action of judgment and mercy throughout history coming to its fulfillment in Christ Jesus. That is the word that God desires for me to believe, to trust.

“We need to keep rehearsing that story, to be reclaimed by it, as we wrestle with what God is doing in the world, in the church, and in our own lives. It provides a frame of reference at the center of which is the crucified and risen Christ who still breathes the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit.”

C2.03 This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

Comment: As we contend with what it means to be faithful, to be “transformed by Christ,” to use the language of St. Paul, this is the story to which we need to return. Not only is this the “inspired Word,” but as it points us to what God is doing through the crucified and risen Christ Jesus, it is the means through which God breathes the life-giving Holy Spirit into us.

SO WHAT DOES NOT WORK FOR ME?

Anything that begins, “We are a Bible-based church” does not work for me. Or, sometimes I read in mobility papers, “My sermons are biblically based.” Such statements do not say a thing about one’s operative theology. One can quote the Bible and miss Christ. The devil certainly does! One can speak about

Jesus as “model” and leave the hearer in despair. My father was right, “Just because someone quotes the Bible does not mean that what the person is saying is true,” either to the intent of the text or to God’s ultimate intention in Christ Jesus.

“I believe in the inspired, inerrant Bible.” The Bible is never meant to be an object of belief in and of itself. Such a statement does not guarantee a thing with respect to what one is teaching. Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witness and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod all make similar statements. Yet the theology that is offered is vastly different.

Conversations and claims about Biblical authority that are Christ-less do not work for me. In recent years I have been struck by the number of conversations about Biblical authority that never mention the name of Jesus. In my experience, such conversation is finally Law. In such cases, the Bible is being used to provide direction, usually to someone other than the speaker. But others may notice that, in the process, the one who speaks is entering into condemnation. One person recently wrote to me, “Bishop, I don’t want to hear anything more about love. This issue is about the authority of the Bible.”

Congregations and leaders who argue about the Bible but who clearly are not reading/studying it with an eye for Christ trouble me. I simply lament the fact that in so many Lutheran congregations there is an absence of pastoral teaching and a commitment to make use of the witness of the Scriptures in shaping the faith and life of individuals and congregations. Similarly, I lament the fact that in many of our congregations worship services use only one Scripture lesson. Typically what is lost includes Old Testament Readings, Psalms, and particular passages that one may wish to avoid.

SEVERAL TOOLS

Throughout the years I have found it useful to use several tools to “check out” my teaching and preaching with respect to the central task of necessitating, making use, of Jesus’ death and resurrection, as I approach a particular text or issue. One such tool was developed by two of my teachers, Edward Schroeder and the now sainted Robert Bertram . It approaches a text by asking:

1. What is the surface symptom that indicates “dis-ease”?
2. What is the deeper issue that is reflected in the situation? What illustrates the faith that is misplaced or misdirected?
3. In what way is that a “God-sized” problem that indicates our invitation to God’s judgment?
4. What has God done in the crucified and risen Christ to speak to that word of judgment?
5. How does that begin by the power of the Holy Spirit to properly locate faith in the God who has acted for us in Christ Jesus?
6. What is the spirit-given “fruit” that replaces the “dis-ease” that opened the discussion and which indicates a new reality?

Check out www.crossings.org for more details.

A second tool was developed by a friend of mine, Pastor Dennis Maurer. As he looks at a text or a situation, he asks, “What is God’s intention for us?” Then he asks, “What keeps that from happening?” His third question is, “What has God in Christ Jesus done through the cross and resurrection to move us by the power of the Holy Spirit towards God’s intention?” Finally, he asks, “What difference does that make?”

Presented: Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod (ELCA)
September 23, 2010