

Theses on Authority in the Church

1. The Church accepts the authority of Holy Scripture only because it first believes the Gospel. This alone distinguishes Luther's use of the sola Scriptura concept from the way in which it was used in the late Middle Ages. Any attempt to set up sola Scriptura as an independent "formal principle" is thus as untrue to Luther as it is unfaithful to the Gospel.

Lutherans have always known that the sola Scriptura concept cannot be a defense of the Gospel. This is evident not only from such earlier instances as the late medieval reform movements (e.g., Marsilius of Padua, medieval nominalism) and the Anabaptists but also from such contemporary denominations as the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses. See Herman Sasse, Accents in Luther's Théology (C.P.H., 1967), pp. 59 and 82.
2. The proper use of the concept of "inspiration" is to give expression to the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the external Word. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit is determined and described in terms of the content of the Word, namely, the Gospel as deliverance from God's judgment.

John 15:26, The Spirit bears witness to Christ.
John 16:7-15 Extensive treatment of the content of the Spirit's witness.
John 20:22-23 Jesus fulfills the promise of the Spirit on the Evening of Easter Day in the context of the forgiveness of sins.
Romans 5:5 The presence of the Holy Spirit is equated with God's love.
Romans 8 Extended treatment of the Holy Spirit in the context of the Gospel. See especially verse 16.
I Corinthians 12:3 No one can confess Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.
3. The concept of "inspiration" cannot be used as a formal basis for the authority of the Holy Scriptures nor as a formal basis for limiting the canon. The "apostles and prophets" are indeed "the foundation" of the Church (Ephesians 2:20) because Jesus Christ is the content of their witness. This witness is self-authenticating to those who believe the Gospel.

The term theopneustos is a hapax legomenon and the context does not clarify the use and meaning with certainty. In any case, the graphee can hardly refer to our present canon, since the general decisions about the canon did not take place until the 2nd to the 4th centuries A.D. Even so, writes Hermann Sasse, "there has never been full agreement in Christendom on what belongs to the canon of Holy Scripture. The fact that a book is inspired can be believed only on the basis of an internal criterion. This was for Luther the famous Was Christum treibet. A Biblical book that does not have Christ crucified for its content is not canonical in the strictest sense even if it is in the Bible and read in the church. So there remains an element of uncertainty concerning the borders of the canon. But this was so at all times, in the synagog as well as in the church -- in every church. One has only to think of the fact that East and West do not have the same Old Testament and that even the apostles did not use the same Old Testament text. Luther's thesis that we have only an interior criterion for what has to be accepted as God's Word, namely, the Gospel of Christ and the 'inner testimony of the Holy Spirit,' was a great discovery and shows how necessary and fruitful his great thesis is. Holy Scripture can be understood only from its content, which is Jesus Christ communicated to us in the external Word." Sasse, ibid, pp. 86-88

4. A concept of "inspiration" which is used to distinguish Holy Scriptures formally rather than materially from other ancient literature derives not from the Holy Scriptures themselves nor from a Biblical and confessional doctrine of the Holy Spirit, but rather from a pre-Christian Greek culture in which certain individuals were thought to have lost control over themselves in mantic siezures and thus to have been transformed into oracles of divine revelation. Such a concept of "inspiration" entered the Christian tradition through St. Augustine and has since been widely accepted in various denominational traditions. What is needed is a re-grounding of the authority of the Bible in a Biblical and confessional doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the content of Whose witness is Christ and the Gospel.

See Hermann Sasse, ibid, pp. 88-91.

See also Sasse's Letters to Lutheran Pastors, #14, #16, and #29.

In the Augsburg Confession as in Luther's Catechisms, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit appears in the closest possible connection with the reaching about the means of grace. See especially Article V of the Augsburg Confession where we confess that in order to confer justifying faith God has instituted the Holy Ministry, that is the Gospel and the Sacraments. "Through these as through means He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel." No doctrine of inspiration can be formulated in implicit or explicit opposition to this central teaching. Also significant is the fact that Luther develops material rather than formal criteria to test the presence of the Holy Spirit in his opposition to the "Enthusiasts." See Regin Prenter, Spiritus Creator (Fortress, 1953).

5. To reject the truthfulness of the witness of the Holy Spirit to the Gospel is to reject the Gospel itself. In this sense, the witness of the Holy Spirit can be said to be "inerrant." The concept of "inerrancy" cannot be used to claim that all references in the Bible which seem, on the surface, to be references to historical occurrences must, in exegetical practice, be regarded as such.

Thus, St. Paul's apparent historical description of a pneumatikees akolouthousees petras (a spiritual rock which followed them) in I Corinthians 10:4 is based on a late Jewish legend.

Similarly, Jude's reference (in verse 9) to the archangel Michael contending with the devil for the body of Moses is based on a Jewish pseudograph work entitled "The Assumption of Moses." Indeed, the widespread popular belief that Moses, like Elijah, had been bodily assumed into heaven may be related in some way to the account of the vision on the Mount of Transfiguration.

There is no compelling reason why Jesus' reference to Jonah (Matt. 12:39-41) must be regarded as a pronouncement on the historicity of the book of Jonah.

6. The Gospel, that is, the death and resurrection of Jesus by which He is our Savior, is an historical event. St. Paul grounds the necessity for the historical character of the Gospel in the nature of redemption itself (I Corinthians 15:17). He does not use the guaranteeing of historical accuracy as a secondary purpose of Holy Scripture to ground or defend his proclamation of the historical nature of the Gospel.

7. The authority of the Holy Scriptures is built into the two purposes for which it was and is "authorized," namely, the Law and the Gospel. The Gospel, the first purpose of Holy Scripture, is self-authorizing, for "it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Romans 1:16).

The secondary purpose of Holy Scripture is not to guarantee the historical accuracy of itself, but rather to do the Law, that is, to bear witness to God's own structuring and ordering of His universe by which He preserves, accuses and judges us.

"The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel." (C.F.W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel. Thesis I) The difference is of such a fundamental nature that trust in the Law as God's final Word about man (characteristic of both the Pharisee and the despairing sinner) excludes trust in the Gospel as God's final Word about man. Both cannot be trusted simultaneously. Hence to speak about faithfulness to or submission to the Bible is not yet theologically accurate enough. "Only he is an orthodox teacher who not only presents all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture, but also rightly distinguishes from each other the Law and the Gospel." (Walther, Thesis II) Commenting on this thesis, Walther wrote: "But suppose some one could truthfully say, 'There was no false teaching in my sermon,' still his entire sermon may have been wrong. Can that be true? The second part of our thesis says so. Only he is an orthodox teacher who, in addition to other requirements, rightly distinguishes Law and Gospel from each other. ... The value of a sermon depends not only on this, that every statement in it be taken from the Word of God and be in agreement with the same, but also on this, whether Law and Gospel have been rightly divided. ... All doctrines may be treated in sermons by two preachers: the one sermon may be a glorious and precious piece of work, while the other is wrong throughout. Note this well. When you hear some sectarian preach, you may say, 'What he said was the truth,' and yet you do not feel satisfied. Here is the key for unlocking this mystery: the preacher did not rightly divide Law and Gospel, and hence everything went wrong." (Walther pp. 31-32)

"The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book." (Walther, Thesis IV)

8. The Holy Scriptures are the only access to the event of the Gospel and the only infallible norm for the Church's proclamation of the Gospel. The Holy Scriptures are not, however, the only access we have to the experience of God's Law. God's Law as His preserving, ordering, accusing and judging of His creatures, is present in the whole creation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible norm for the Church's preaching of judgment and accusation and for proclaiming the fact, although not the manner, of God's preserving and ordering of the world.
9. Jesus' references to His own authority deal with His forgiving of sins (Matt. 9:1-8), his sacrificial death (Mark 10:35-45) and His sending of his disciples to make disciples through the means of grace (Matt. 28:19-20). This is the authority of the Church, namely, the authority of the Gospel, in contrast to the way "gentiles" exercise authority over each other and lord it over each other. (In addition to Mark 10:35-45 see also Luther's explanation to the 2nd Article in the Large Catechism on the meaning of "Lord.") Christians demonstrate this authority not by seeking to gain power over one another, not by firing servants of the Word through the majority vote of boards, commissions, or congregations, but by being servants of one another and slaves to all!

10. To study the Bible as a historian according to the canons and limitations of contemporary historical scholarship is a valid and necessary Christian calling. Christian historical scholars can aid other Christians in understanding something of a context which extends over many centuries, the great variety of forms, and the possible processes by which the Holy Scriptures came into being. Their newer hypotheses need to be given the same careful and critical scrutiny by other Christian historical scholars which have been given to more traditional hypotheses (e.g., that Jesus' disciples Matthew and John are the authors of the first and fourth Gospels respectively). All Christians need not be directly involved in the work of Christian historical scholars, although all benefit from such work. However, all Christians are called to recognize when one or another hypothesis is contrary to the Gospel (e.g., the hypothesis that the resurrection of Jesus probably did not take place as an historical event). Such hypotheses need to be rejected if and when they actually occur within the Christian Church, even as cultural movements which threaten the Gospel (e.g., racism, hedonism, the Playboy philosophy, religious nationalism, regarding the Church as a business) need to be rejected when these occur. The Church is not called to anticipate possible eventual anti-evangelical hypotheses of Christian historical scholars anymore than it can anticipate possible eventual anti-evangelical cultural movements. The Church needs its historians of both Holy Scripture and Church tradition so that its own traditions of exegesis, teaching, worship and organization do not blind the Church to the very Gospel of forgiveness and renewal which it needs for its life.

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