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HOW IS THE LUTHERAN CHURCH TO INTERPRET AND USE  
THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS?

Lecture I: The Divine Origin and Unity Principles

- 1 There is no more pressing and appropriate study for the Lutheran Church today than the assignment you have given me for the lectures during the Festival of the Reformation, 1973. Throughout her history the Church of the Reformation has been threatened by attacks from without and within against the principles of sola gratia (salvation by grace alone) and sola fide (justification by faith alone without the works of the Law). These attacks came from Rome, the enthusiasts, the Reformed and even by Lutherans. Today the third great principle of the Lutheran Reformation is under attack, the principle of Sola Scriptura. The principle is articulated as follows in our Confessions: "We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm (die einige Regel und Richtschnur) according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged." (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3; Cf. FC Epit., Rule and Norm, 7). These assaults against the Reformation principle of Scripture as the only source and norm of Christian theology are not new. For over two hundred years, since the time of the Enlightenment these assaults have been carried on. And the germs of such rationalism were already found among the Jesuits and Socinians of the Reformation era. But today the threat is greater because the denial of the authority of Scripture is now found in almost all the larger Protestant denominations, including those that were formerly conservative and biblically based.
- 2 The attack against biblical authority is today, however, less overt than two and three generations ago. There is less of the brazen rationalistic rejection of miracles and fundamental articles of faith. Today the attack is more subtle, directed against the interpretation of Scripture which is the heritage of Lutheranism, against the exegetical conclusions of Luther and our Confessions, against the most basic rules of interpretation commonly assumed to be correct and necessary by evangelical and confessional Lutherans. In short, the entire Christian faith is attacked or questioned by means of a rejection of biblical and Lutheran hermeneutics. This is no exaggeration. Today Lutheran practitioners of the so-called historical critical method of interpreting Scripture have by the use of their method questioned every article of the Christian faith: the historical facts underlying our redemption (e.g. virgin birth, resurrection) are said to be unauthentic or improbable and the facts underlying our doctrine are reduced to mere myths, parables, value judgments, theological constructs or metaphors.

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3 This is how serious the situation is today. A few years ago Rev. Kurt Marquart said during his Reformation Lectures at Bethany College, "It seems to be appropriate to refer to the present total war (in theology) as the Prolegomenistic Controversy. It clamours to be settled by a new Formula of Concord! The real issue at bottom is of course the authority of Holy Scripture, that which the Reformation expressed in the battle-cry: 'Sola Scriptura'."<sup>1</sup> Marquart is right! The battle centers in the authority of Scripture. But even more precisely it centers in hermeneutics, i. e. in our approach and interpretation of Scripture and in how this impinges upon biblical authority.

4 And so to answer the question posed in this essay we must do two things. 1) We must re-examine our Lutheran hermeneutics and reaffirm its total sway among us. 2) We must seek to understand, analyze, and assess what is going on today in biblical studies, and compare all this with the evangelical Lutheran interpretation of Scripture. These two things I hope to do in these lectures. The results of such studies will reveal a great gulf between two definite forces at work in the church today; the one a Lutheran, evangelical and eminently biblical exegesis of Scripture, and the other a sub-Christian, naturalistic, pagan approach to Scripture and exegesis.

## A. THE LUTHERAN INTERPRETATION AND USE OF THE SCRIPTURES

### I. INTRODUCTION

5 The Question, "How is the Lutheran Church to Interpret and Use the Old and New Testaments?" can only be answered by consulting the one normative standard for what is Lutheran, the Lutheran Confessions. The Lutheran Reformation represents a clear and definite evangelical hermeneutic or approach to Scripture. This is true also of the Lutheran Confessions which, like the ecumenical Creeds, see themselves as expositions or at least summaries of sacred Scripture.<sup>2</sup> How often does our Book of Concord claim that what is taught in the churches is "based solidly on the divine Scriptures" (Tappert, p. 3), is "the pure doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Marquart, Truth and/or Consequences, essay delivered at Bethany Lutheran College, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> This has been the firm conclusion of the most competent students of the Lutheran Confessions. Holsten Fagerberg, Die Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften von 1529 bis 1537. Tr. by Gerhard Klose. Göttingen Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965. p. 14ff. Edmund Schlink, Theology of the Lutheran Confessions. Tr. by Paul F. Koeneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961, p. xvff. Ralph Bohlmann, Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968. This is also the conviction of the older commentaries on the Confessions. For instance, George Mylius insisted that the authority of the Confessions is directly dependent upon their being scriptural, and it is only out of this conviction that Lutherans subscribe them and identify with their doctrinal content. See Augustanae confessionis quae ecclesiarum evangelicarum novissimi temporis augustissimum symbolum, & doctrinae lutheranae lapis vere Lydius est: explicatio. Jena, 1596. p. A3. Cf. John George Walch, Introductio in libros ecclesiae lutheranae symbolicos observationibus historicis et theologicis illustrata. Jena, 1732. p. 754. Abraham Calov, Commentarius apodictico-elenchiticus in augustanam confessionem. Leipzig, 1646. pp. 14-16.

of God's Word" (*ibid.*, p. 4), "the unalterable truth of the divine Word" (*ibid.*, p. 5) and "not contrary to the Word of God", that it represents "the truth of the divine Word" (*ibid.*), that it is "agreeable and conformable first of all to the Word of God" (*ibid.*, p. 8) and "in accordance with the pure, infallible and unalterable Word of God" (*ibid.*). This is the bold claim throughout our historic confessions, that the saving doctrine presented is biblical, the result of exegesis.

6 This bold assumption of the Confessions themselves is certainly a chief reason for subsequent Lutherans subscribing the Confessions with utter seriousness not merely as historic relics of the past, but as living and contemporary Symbols for every age, and why they have given their willing subscriptions with a quia formula: "because the Confessions agree with the sacred Scriptures".

7 A Lutheran today, therefore, if he wishes to subscribe the Lutheran Confessions in the sense and spirit of their original intention will need to pay some attention to the exegesis of the Lutheran Symbols and satisfy himself that the Symbols' exposition of Scripture is correct. It is of course the doctrinal content of the Symbols he subscribes, not every exegetical detail of etymology, grammar or choice of proof passages.<sup>3</sup> But he realizes that Christian doctrine is, on Lutheran terms the result of exegesis. And so he must satisfy himself that our Confessions are scriptural if he is to subscribe them.

8 It is just at this point that rather little study has been done in our Lutheran Confessions: few students of our Confessions have dealt with the way in which the Confessions read and apply the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> It shall be the purpose of this study first to summarize the various approaches of the Lutheran Confessions to the Scriptures and trace some of the hermeneutical principles of the Confessions in practice, thus answering the question, "How is the Lutheran Church to interpret and use the Old and New Testaments?" Then we shall be able to compare these principles of interpretation with what is commonly practiced in biblical theology today. A couple of assumptions lie behind this survey of our Confessions.

9 First, I am assuming that, with the exception of the three Creeds, all the Lutheran Confessions, although dealing with the Scriptures in a great variety of ways, see themselves as biblical and spring from the same hermeneutical backdrop. There is no difference between the hermeneutical presuppositions and norms of Luther and Melancthon and the writers of the Formula of Concord who

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<sup>3</sup>See C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church?" in Concordia Theological Monthly, XVIII, 4 (April, 1947).

<sup>4</sup>An exception is Ralph Bohlmann, op. cit. In the present brief study I shall attempt not to overlap Bohlmann's many valuable contributions in this area of research.

were their students.<sup>5</sup> This means that we can meander freely through the Confessions and the writings of Luther according to a sort of analogia confessionum, and find consistent hermeneutical assumptions and practices. Our task then is merely to note what seem to be the most obvious and important hermeneutical canons used by the Confessions and comment on them.

10 Second, biblical interpretation as carried out or assumed in the Lutheran Symbols is a cognitive enterprise, consisting of both exegesis and application. The basic rules for such interpretation fall into two classes: 1) those rules which are common to the interpretation of any and all literature (e.g. grammatical and historical analysis, clarity, analogy, etc.), and 2) those principles derived exegetically from Scripture itself, but at the same time unique to Scripture as the Word of God (e.g. the necessity of the Spirit's guidance to the exegetical task, the Christocentricity of Scripture, the Law-Gospel motif, etc.). It is my conviction that there is and can be no conflict at all between the first and second classes of principles: there is nothing esoteric or reductionistic about the second class of principles; they are in every case based upon sound exegesis. For instance, if the article of justification is indeed the chief article (praecipuus locus) of theology "which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures. . . and alone opens the door to the entire Bible," as Melancthon says (Apol. IV, 2 German), then it occupies this eminent position because Scripture teaches so. What I have just said will in this study be proved in the case of six basic theological principles employed in our Symbols. But first a preliminary comment.

## II. DIFFERENT EXEGETICAL APPROACHES IN OUR CONFESSIONS

11 There is no single exegetical approach in our Lutheran Confessions, but a great variety of approaches to the Scriptures. 1) The Augsburg Confession in its first part presents a brief summation of exegetically based doctrinal assertions in a credal form. This it does with a minimum of biblical citation, and in certain cases inadequate according to what we in retrospect might have wished. In many of the articles no citation is offered from Scripture, although unquestionably deep and penetrating exegesis underlay Melancthon's assertions. Similar is the approach of FC IX to the article of Christ's descent into hell, as well as much of the SA. 2) FC SD VII on the Lord's Supper offers brief but very careful arguments from the context, history and genre of one basic pericope for the Lutheran doctrine, and on the basis of such arguments dogmatic conclusions are drawn. 3) In FC SD II we are offered the broad induction from the entire sweep of all Scripture, Old and New Testaments alike, on the question of fallen man's spiritual powers prior to conversion. Here is a splendid example of what

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<sup>5</sup>Again little thorough study has been given Luther's hermeneutics. A recent attempt to trace Luther's mediaeval background in exegesis is James Samuel Preus, From Shadow to Promise, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969. By far the most thorough study of Luther's exegetical methods is E. Thestrup Pedersen, Luther Som Skriftfortokler, København: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959. I am assuming that the method of Luther was that also of Melancthon, Chemnitz, and other framers of our Confessions, although Luther was less systematic, more bombastic at times, and bound to certain traditional approaches. But his way of reading Scriptures was certainly also theirs. See Robert Preus, The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970-- Vol. I and II.

came to be the loci theologici method in "dogmatics" which was in those days really a branch of exegesis, somewhat similar to "biblical theology" today. Another example of such an approach is FC SD VI as it traces the flesh-spirit (Old Adam-New Man) motif in the New Testament. 4) FC SD I presents a sort of commentary on the history recorded in Gen. 3 in the light of Rom. 5 and the analogy of Scripture. 5) In the Large Catechism with its specific purpose a different approach is discernible: a homiletical, practical application of texts and pericopes to specific needs of the day. But again there is no doubt that a profound exegetical understanding of Scripture as a whole and of the pericopes underlies Luther's doctrinal statements. 6) There are also examples in our Confessions of intensive grammatical and historical exegesis of pertinent passages dealing with a single theme and also of the interrelation and agreement of these passages. The finest example of such procedure is Melanchthon's discussion of justification by faith in Apol. IV.

12 The Lutheran Confessions therefore make use of the Scriptures from a variety of approaches, each valid and significant according to its own perspective and purpose, thus presenting a Scriptural theology which is broad in scope and eminently convincing. Such exegesis, while eschewing allegorization and specious questionings for hidden meanings (Apol. 24; 35; FC SD, 7; 45, 92; SD 11, 93) is more broadly based than the more atomistic, strictly analytical approach of our day as typified in much of the use of the so-called historico-critical method. But more significant, such exegesis invariably leads to doctrine ("We believe, teach, and confess.") and application. This is the very purpose of exegesis, particularly as it is employed in Confessions. Again we see the crucial function of right exegesis which alone can lead to what our Symbols call the coelestis doctrina, die reine evangelische Lehre, die Lehre Gottes Wort, die unwandelbare Wahrheit göttliches Worts, or simply evangelium Christi (Bekennnisschriften, p. 3-5). In some cases our Confessions identify the truth of the Scriptures with the truth of the doctrine drawn from the Scriptures (Bekennnisschriften, 4. 5).

13 Doctrine, dogma, is the goal of exegesis. This position is clearly assumed and operative throughout our Lutheran Confessions (e.g. FC SD XI, 12) and Luther as a principle of exegesis. The principle is most apparent as Luther and our Confessions struggle with adversaries concerning such crucial issues as justification by faith and the Sacrament of the Altar.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the polemical historical occasion was the immediate cause to drive Luther and the other Reformers into the Scriptures for proof of their position. But in their entire theological enterprise which they considered to be simply biblical exposition the purpose of exegesis was to lead to doctrine.

14 As a matter of fact there was no dogmatics in the modern sense in those days. Melanchthon's Loci Communes, often called the first Protestant

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<sup>6</sup>This seems to be an underlying thesis of Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther the Expositor (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. 8ff. 41, 45 passim. Pelikan has a formidable bibliography of research into Luther's exegetical method. A classic case study of Luther's exegesis for the purpose of church doctrine is found in Hermann Sasse, This Is My Body, Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), p. 215ff.

dogmatics, was the product of his exegetical lectures on Romans. The early Lutheran dogmaticians (Chemnitz, Hutter, Gerhard), so called, following in the train of the Reformation, did not separate interpretation of Scripture from the doctrine of the Scriptures. The interpretation of Scripture, learned from Scripture itself, was a part of biblical doctrine, like Scripture's clarity, perfection, authority and divine origin.

15 This position, that exegesis yields and must yield doctrine, although sounding like a trite truism, is most important for us to be aware of today, if we are to understand how we as Lutherans ought to interpret and apply the Scriptures. For the position is not a popular one today, or even a viable one for many theologians. Not only have certain exegetes of the past depreciated dogmatics because they have separated doctrine from exegesis (J. P. Koehler?), but proponents of the historical critical method of exegesis today have virtually outlawed the very concept of dogma in the sense of pure doctrine. Thus exegesis is given a purely historical function and purpose.

16 Another aberration common in Lutheran circles today which more obliquely threatens the historic Lutheran principle concerning the purpose of exegesis is voiced by those who claim that Lutherans are not bound by the exegesis or exegetical conclusions of our Confessions, but only to the doctrinal content. This aberration, sometimes defended by a distortion of Walther's position on Confessional subscription, again completely misunderstands or distorts the relationship between exegesis and doctrine as understood and practiced by the early Lutherans. The position that we are bound only to the doctrinal content, not the exegetical conclusions, of the Confessions is absurd and utterly un-Lutheran, for it implies that we are bound by the doctrine of our Symbols even if we are unconvinced that that doctrine is drawn from Scripture by proper exegesis. But our Symbols clearly and everywhere seek subscription from no one who is not convinced that the doctrine set forth is drawn from the Scriptures. To accept the doctrinal content of our Confessions is to accept the exegesis and all the exegetical conclusions of our Confessions.

17 Exegesis invariably leans to Confession (Bekennen and Bekenntnis), doctrine. This is the burden of all exegesis for a Lutheran.

18 I shall now summarize six principles of Hermeneutics common to Lutherans and essential to them as they exegete the Scriptures. I shall omit those principles of interpretation which are common to all literature (grammatical and historical exegesis, sensus literalis unus est, etc.) and confine myself to those principles unique to the interpretation of Scripture as a unique book.

### III . SIX HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES AT WORK IN EXEGESIS

#### A. The Principle of Divine Origin

19 The divine origin of Scripture, its authority and sufficiency for all doctrine taught in the Church is assumed by Luther and throughout our Confessions as a fundamental principle underlying all exegesis, but more than that, as a working principle of hermeneutics. We have already seen how to Luther and our Confessions doctrine is true and divine because it is "drawn from the Word of God" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 3, 13; Epit. Rule and Norm, 2).

20 It is the divine origin and authority of all of Scripture which Lutherans bring to bear on all their exegesis. The Holy Spirit is the author of all of Scripture, and therefore nothing there is of no importance. In debating against Romanists who will not face up to the implications of certain passages which they thought could be argued away Melancthon asks, "Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares?" (Apol. IV, 108; cf. Apol. Preface 9). All of Scripture must be studied and searched as God's Word, carrying with it God's authority and truthfulness. Luther says, in speaking about the length of the creation days which seem trivial to some, "If you cannot understand how it was six days, then do the Holy Spirit the honor that he is more learned than you are. For you must deal with Scripture in such a way that you consider that God Himself is speaking there. And if God says it, it is not for you irresponsibly to bend His Word to where you want it." (W<sup>2</sup> III, 21).

21 The entire practice of Luther and our Confessions as they exegete the Scriptures gives witness to their total commitment to the divine authority and inerrancy of Scripture. They not only call Scripture "eternal truth" and insist as they exegete that "God's Word can neither err nor deceive" (FC SD Rule and Norm 13; LC IV, 57; V, 76; cf. also Preface to the Book of Concord, p. 8), they not only presuppose all this for exegesis, but every passage and pericope of Scripture is read and interpreted in just this light as God speaking. The divine authority of Scripture and exegesis are correlatives: they entail each other.

### B. The Unity Principle

22 The Lutheran Confessions view and interpret the Scriptures as one Book, the product of one author, the Spirit of God, testifying to one God and Christ, presenting one unified Gospel and doctrina coelestis. This is more than a Christian presupposition. It is a working principle drawn inductively by our Confessions from the Scriptures themselves and accepted on the authority of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> The unity principle is observed in the Confessions chiefly in the persistent use of the so-called analogia scripturae (the agreement of Scripture with itself): the New Testament sheds light on the Old, and the Old on the New, and the entire Scriptures must be brought to bear on any theme, motif or article of faith. Let me illustrate how this analogy is operative throughout our Confessions as they do exegesis.

#### 1. Analogical Exegesis

23 Analogical exegesis in the first sense means thematic exegesis, tracing a theological theme or article of faith throughout the Scriptures. An excellent example of such a procedure is found in FC SD VI where the theology of Rom. 7 on the relation of flesh and spirit in the regenerate man to the law is discussed, but in the light of massive Old and New Testament parallel data.

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<sup>7</sup>See Bohlmann, op. cit., p. 69ff. Cf. Robert Preus, "Guiding Theological Principles, A Lutheran Confessional Approach to the Doctrine of Creation," in Rock Strata and the Bible Record, ed. Paul Zimmerman, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970, pp. 15-16.

- 24 Analogical exegesis, however, is not merely an analytical sifting of all the biblical data pertaining to a specific theme or article of faith.
- 25 a) Analogy can actually shed light on unclear passages of Scripture by applying grammatically and historically clear passages dealing with the same subject matter or article of faith, or it can add to our understanding of Scripture passages (Apol. IV, 87-101; Tr. 23; LC I, 64). For instance, Melanchthon ranges all over the entire Scriptures to set forth clearly, against all misunderstanding, the doctrine of justification by faith (Apol. IV). Luther too in his Galatians Commentary carries out the same practice as he exegetes Gal. 3:13 and many other passages (See WA 40, I, 432-447).
- 26 b) Analogical and thematic exegesis can mitigate what seems to be the force (but is not) of biblical assertions and injunctions. For instance, Gal. 1:20 and 2 Cor. 1:23 mitigate what seems to be a universal prohibition against swearing in Matt. 5:33-37 (LC I, 65). Again Melanchthon uses Acts 5:29 to mitigate in a similar way a universal implication which the papists had attached to Matt. 23:3 (Apol. XXVIII, 21). And he employs the same principle of analogy (ibid. 20) to modify with Gal. 1:8 ("If any one preaches another Gospel, let him be accursed".) a too stringent interpretation of Heb. 13:17 ("Obey your leaders").
- 27 c) Analogical exegesis may produce a total thematic summary of a biblical subject. Melanchthon, for instance, offers a vast discussion of marriage, woman's calling, sex and related subjects, based upon data drawn indiscriminately from all over Scripture (Apol. XXIII, 7ff.). Again this is not a purely analytical enterprise, for his entire discussion is subjected to the article of the Gospel and developed in the light of it (according to what may be called the Hauptartikel Principle which we shall discuss later). The same kind of procedure may be observed in Melanchthon's discussion of sacrifice in Apol. XXIV, 16ff which draws from Old and New Testament data, but always from the perspective of the Gospel of Christ as sacrifice. In this entire approach we see the seed of what later became systematic theology (loci theologici) in the Lutheran Church: the attempt to summarize the entire sweep of Scripture as it pertained to the articles of faith and to arrange them and view them from an evangelical perspective.
- 28 d) The analogical reading of Scripture results often in relating the articles of faith (of Law and Gospel) organically. In discussing original sin the FC says, "When it is presented clearly from and according to the Word of God and is purged of all Pelagian and Manichaeian errors, then (as the Apology declares, I, 44, 46) we are led to understand better and to magnify more fully Christ's benefits, his precious merits, and the Holy Spirit's gracious activity. Furthermore, we are extolling God's honor properly when we carefully distinguish his work and creation in man from the devil's work, the corruption of human nature" (FC SD, I, 3). The thought here is that all Christian theology is a unit, and therefore the articles of faith, drawn inductively from Scripture, are organically related. Obviously there is no thought of mitigation at this point: the law does not mitigate the Gospel; sin does not mitigate grace; or vice versa. Otherwise Law and Gospel would be hopelessly confused as seen in legalism and antinomianism (FC IV, V, VI). The point here is that only when law and sin are taught clearly "according to the Word of God" (i.e. Scripture) will the proper framework, context and preunderstanding for the teaching of the Gospel be present. Otherwise, to quote Melanchthon, Christ is completely



buried (Apol. IV, 81). Not only a corruption of a Sacrament (which is Gospel) contaminates the Gospel itself (Ap. XXXIV, 91), but a false teaching regarding sin or the law may completely destroy the Gospel (Ap. IV, 110, 121, 223; XII, 77). A misreading of law texts as Gospel or Gospel texts as law may result in a complete misreading of Scripture (Ap. IV, 7, 29ff; 224ff.). Thus we see that the articles of faith, although related to each other and complementing each other, do not mitigate or conflict with each other. A Scripture passage dealing with obedience to authority (Heb. 13:17) may indeed be mitigated by another passage concerning the priority of preaching the Gospel (Gal. 1:8), Apol. XXVIII, 20. But this is not the case with the articles of faith which have been drawn, using analogical exegesis, from the Scriptures. For instance, the doctrine of universal redemption clearly articulated in FC SD; XI, 15 does not and cannot mitigate the doctrine of particular election which is taught throughout the entire article, although logically the two articles cannot be harmonized. Each article is Gospel and each must be taught with integrity as it is drawn from Scripture and in organic relation to the other.

## 2. Drawing Inferences in Exegesis

29 The unity principle in interpreting Scripture will often lead to inferences in exegesis. And these inferences are valid and as binding as biblical statements themselves. For instance, the biblical teaching that Christ is the propitiator who has reconciled us to the Father leads to the conclusion that we cannot appease God's wrath by setting forth our own works. (Apol. IV, 80). Since the forgiveness of sins is something promised for Christ's sake, it can only be accepted by faith (*ibid.* 84. cf. *ibid.* 17). Since the natural right to contract marriage is the result of God's created order, it is a divine right which must always remain (Apol. XXIII, 9ff.). Acts 15:9 (Apol. IV 284) which teaches explicitly that hearts are purified by faith may be used to prove (by inference) that bishops have no right to burden consciences with human traditions. Such examples of valid inferences or conclusions drawn from clear passages of Scripture could be multiplied indefinitely. But all is done within the circle of the organic unity of Scripture. Obviously there are illicit (but logical) inferences which cannot be drawn from Scripture passages, simply because such inferences would run counter to definite articles of faith or other clear Scripture passages. For instance, the necessity of faith for salvation does not infer that baptism is not objectively valid for one who does not believe (LC IV, 58, 60). It is extremely important that inferences and conclusions drawn from Scripture have the force of doctrine for a confessing church which wishes to use the Scriptures alone as a source of Christian doctrine. But it is equally important that such inferences be drawn according to the analogy of Scripture.

## 3. Exegetical Meaning

30 There is nothing in the unity principle which would ever do violence to the meaning of a given text or pericope. The unity of Scripture is not imposed upon Scripture but found there.

31 The meaning of a passage or section of Scripture, according to the approach of our Lutheran Confessions, always inheres in the text itself, and

is a constant.<sup>8</sup> There is for the Lutheran Symbols no possibility of thinking in terms of "meaning then" and "meaning today",<sup>9</sup> or of a "history of meaning". For then there could never be definite and permanent pure doctrine and certainly no "single, universally accepted, certain and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe. . ." (FC SD Rule and Norm 10 passim) which is the goal of the confession making process as well as of biblical exegesis.

32 Furthermore, the basic question addressed to a text in Lutheran theology is always, What does it say? What does it mean? What is its intention? (Apol. IV, 231, 264, 267; XII, 84, 138). The question is not, What did the Israelitish audience or Paul's original readership understand by it or what was its "meaning" to them? We must understand at this point that the entire exegetical enterprise was quite different for the writers of the Lutheran Confessions than for at least many exegetes today. This does not imply that even in that bygone day the writers of the Confessions were not interested in the context of a book or pericope or verse of Scripture, in the so-called Sitz im Leben. It is just that they constructed the Sitz im Leben out of necessity (because of their limited knowledge) and from principle (because of their understanding of the meaning and application of the sola Scriptura principle) from the text and context itself. And their belief in the unity principle and in the continuity of God's revelation in Scripture culminating in Christ (including the New Testament apostolic Word) compelled them to see a much wider context and Sitz im Leben for a given passage or promise, namely the entire history of God's dealing with His people, the entire biblical witness. This means that, although the meaning of a given passage from the Old Testament is already there and is one and constant, the New Testament can indeed shed light on that meaning.

33 It is very important to understand precisely what is meant and implied by Lutherans when they speak of the unity of Scripture and unity of doctrine which is drawn exegetically from Scripture. They mean, first of all, that Scripture does not teach contradictory theologies, but one Gospel. The articles of the faith may not agree with each other according to our logic, but neither do they contradict each other; that would result in doctrinal chaos and inability of the church to confess her faith.

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<sup>8</sup>Fagerberg says, op. cit., p. 18: "Der Gedanke, die Worte der Bibel könnten grundsätzlich verschieden gedeutet werden und in ihrem Sinn variieren, kimmt gar nicht auf. . ."

<sup>9</sup>See Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. New York: Abingdon Press, 1962. pp. 418-432. The so-called "descriptive approach" to Scripture, espoused by Stendahl, speaks in terms of "layers of meaning" in the history and transmission of biblical texts and therefore operates with the categories of "meaning then" and "meaning now". A text like Hab. 2:4 consequently could have a variety of meaning in the Old and in the New Testament. Cf. also James Barr, Old and New in Interpretation. London: SCM Press, 1966. p. 27 passim. The older "conservative" (and liberal) view which held that each passage or pericope had one definite meaning (sensus literalis unus est), although capable of different interpretations and later elaboration, is summarily and aprioristically rejected by Stendahl.

- 34 Since the articles of faith, all drawn from Scripture, agree with each other and complement each other, an error in one article of faith will often result in an error in another article and even in the undermining of the entire Christian faith. For instance, Luther's Bondage of the Will was written to show how an error concerning the doctrine of man will result in heresy concerning the Gospel of justification itself. In a well known statement on this issue Luther says, "In philosophy a very small error in the beginning is very serious in the end. So also in theology a little error overturns the whole doctrine. . . Doctrine is like a mathematical point. It cannot be divided, that is, you cannot take away from it or add to it. . . Therefore doctrine must be one continual, round golden ring in which there is no break; if even the least break occurs, the circle is no longer perfect." Again, still commenting on Gal. 5:9, Luther says, "One article is all articles, and all the articles are one; and if one is laid aside all are lost." (WA 40, II, 46ff.)<sup>10</sup>
- 35 Luther is not speaking of any systematic or logical unity here. This is not what the unity of Scripture yields in terms of one doctrine. He is speaking rather of an organic unity where each article retains its place and integrity in God's economy of salvation. Luther believed that there were lacunae, gaps, paradoxes in the doctrine drawn from Scripture, and the articles of faith therefore should be held in tension with each other. It is false exegesis which would seek to understand or explain the mysteries of faith. In this sense Luther was no reductionist. Every article of faith must be drawn from the cognitive source of theology, Scripture, and that through responsible and regenerate exegesis.
- 36 Nowhere does Luther's insistence upon this issue come out more clearly than in his debate with Zwingli on the Lord's Supper. Zwingli was a Gospel reductionist. There were two reasons why he could not believe in the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. First, he did not think it possible physically, and therefore thought it wiser to accept the words of institution in a tropical or figurative sense. Second, he held that it was not necessary to believe in the real presence because the Gospel of justification, accepted by him and Luther, did not demand it. To Luther this kind of exegesis, based upon a false understanding of the unity of Scripture and of doctrine, was an abomination. To him each article must be based upon the Scriptures of God and drawn from Scripture by sound exegesis. Against Zwingli and his opponents he says, "I for one cannot admit that such clear words present a problem. I do not ask how Christ can be God and man and how His natures could be united. For God is able to act far beyond our imagination. To the Word of God one must yield. . . I do not want to hear what reason says. I completely reject carnal or geometrical arguments, as e.g. that a large body

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<sup>10</sup>This concern was voiced also by the later Lutheran teachers. David Hollaz (Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum. Rostock and Leipzig, 1718), Prol. II, p. 14, I, 46 says, "Like the parts of a human body the dogmas of the faith are closely and mutually connected with each other. For this reason we are wont to call faith one connected entity (una copulativa). No article ought to be taken from the chain of faith; for if a single link of the faith is unfastened, the entire perfect chain will be broken. The harmony between the articles of faith ought to be strict and correct, lest one dogma of faith be made to oppose another, since all should be reliable and certain. Hence nothing should be allowed that could disturb this harmony."

could not fill a small space. God is above and beyond all mathematics, and His words are to be adored and observed with awe. God, however, commands: 'Take, eat; this is my body.' I request, therefore, a valid proof from Holy Writ that these words do not mean what they say." It is clear that Luther will get his doctrine of the real presence only from clear passages of Scripture, not from any reductionistic analogy with other articles of faith. Again in this context Luther challenges Zwingli, "I have a clear and powerful text. Do justice to the text. What I have been waiting for all the time is that you prove what you ought to prove."<sup>11</sup>

37 Luther refused to allow any idea of the analogy of faith which would mitigate or alter the understanding of any article of faith drawn from Scripture. One must simply be bound by the sense and meaning of the text upon which the article is based. Against the reductionist Zwinglians who insisted that one must use a teaching and relate an interpretation of Scripture to the Gospel before one need accept it, Luther replied that only the Scriptures can tell you what an article of faith is. He said (WA 23, 24), "If they [his opponents] had insight into the faith, they would know that the highest, the sole virtue of faith is that faith does not seek to know why that which is believed in is of use or why it is necessary. For faith does not wish to set up boundaries for God or call upon Him to render account as to why, for what purpose and for what necessary reason He commands a thing. Faith would rather be foolish, give God the honor and believe His Simple Word." Again Luther says (*ibid.*), "In like manner our mother Eve also had God's Word that she was not to eat of one single tree. Then the enthusiast false god came to her and said, 'Why did God give you such a command like that?' As if he means: 'What is the use of this command? Why should that be necessary?'" This is a clear cut at Zwingli's Gospel reductionism by which Zwingli protested that the real presence was not necessary and divisive because it had no basis in the article of justification. Such reductionism is sheer enthusiasm to Luther because it does not take the Word seriously, that is, the written text of Scripture as understood through exegesis.

38 To Luther no article of faith must be held because it is used or demanded by some other article, but only because of itself, because it is Scriptural, that is, drawn from Scripture. He says, "Every article of faith is in itself its own principle and receives no corroboration [proof] by means of another [article of faith]."<sup>12</sup> If one will not accept every article because of itself, because God has revealed it clearly in Holy Writ, he despises God, according to Luther, and is in danger of rejecting every thing God has said in His Word. "He who makes God into a liar in one of His words and blasphemes, saying that it is unimportant if He is despised and made out to be a liar, blasphemes God in His entirety and considers all blasphemy a trifling thing." (WA 23, 85).

39 From all the foregoing we see that Lutherans read the Scriptures as one book, with one divine author and one way of salvation and doctrine, a fact

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<sup>11</sup>Sasse, *ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>12</sup>Walter Koehler, Das Marburger Religionsgespräch 1529. Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1929. p. 34.

which in no way conflicts with the literal sense of any biblical pericope but is supported by all of Scripture. This is not only fundamental to all exegesis and right reading of Scripture, but it is fundamental for a Confessional Church to carry out its mission. Peter Brunner speaks correctly and with keen perception on the relation between Lutheran exegesis and confession when he says, "But if the New Testament no longer harmonizes, if in the canonical writings of the New Testament a consensus is no longer heard regarding the Gospel that is to be proclaimed, then a confessional commitment has become fundamentally impossible. In the same measure that the Church loses the concrete authority of the Holy Scriptures, she also loses a binding consensus in regard to the content of the Gospel proclamation."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Peter Brunner, "Commitment to the Lutheran Confession — What Does It Mean Today?" in The Springfielder, XXXIII, 3 Dec., 1969, p. 7.

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by

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HOW IS THE LUTHERAN CHURCH TO INTERPRET AND USE  
THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS?

Lecture II: The Centrality of Justification by Faith

C. The Hauptartikel Principle

- 1 An interesting example of Melanchthon's exegetical method, using the Unity principle, is seen in his argumentation for justification by faith. He argues for justification by faith from the fact that Christ is mediator (Apol. IV, 69). Melanchthon clearly sees himself as doing exegesis at this point. But it is an oblique way of making a point which could have been made by clear passages dealing explicitly with justification by faith. Why does he do this? He is employing a hermeneutical principle which we might call the Hauptartikel Principle. He is subjecting certain biblical data to the scrutiny of the chief article of the Christian faith, the heart of the Gospel, the fact that Christ is mediator and propitiator.
- 2 Again Melanchthon says, "We conquer through Christ. How? By faith, when we comfort ourselves by firm trust in the mercy promised because of Christ." Now just how does Melanchthon prove this point? In the same way as mentioned above. "We prove the minor premise as follows. Since Christ is set forth to be the propitiator, through whom the Father is reconciled to us, we cannot appease God's wrath by setting forth our own works. For it is only by faith that Christ is accepted as mediator. By faith alone, therefore, we obtain the forgiveness of sins when we comfort our hearts with trust in the mercy promised for Christ's sake." (Apol. IV, 79-80). Again it is shown in the context that Melanchthon regards his procedure as strictly exegetical, for two paragraphs later he follows with passages which explicitly prove his point.
- 3 The Hauptartikel Principle is commonly employed or alluded to in our Confessions. In Apol. IV 2 (German text) Melanchthon speaks of the doctrine of justification by faith as "der höchste, vornehmste Artikel (praecipuus locus)" which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasures and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible. Later in this same discussion the Hauptartikel is simply said to be Christ the propitiator and mediator. In a highly significant statement in the Smalcald

Articles (II, I, Iff.) Luther speaks of Christ and faith in Him as "der erste und Hauptartikel". "The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification' (Rom. 4:25). He alone is 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). 'God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all' (Isa. 53: 6). Moreover, 'all have sinned,' and 'they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus by his blood' (Rom. 3:23-25). " Luther then goes on to say that all this is to be believed and apprehended by faith.

4 Now in every case, whether we speak of justification by faith or of Christ as He is apprehended by faith, the same Hauptartikel is referred to. And it has the same function. Luther illustrates its function throughout the Smalcald articles. This article is to dominate and inform the entire Christian doctrine, it is the center of Christian and biblical theology to which all the other articles point (Cf. the structure of the AC and Apology where all the articles of faith either lead to or from the central article of Christ and justification), it functions theologically in assessing the church's doctrine and practice and hermeneutically in assessing the church's understanding and reading of the sacred Scriptures. Luther uses this article as he goes on to assess various practices in the Roman Church, the mass, invocation of saints, chapters and monasteries, the papacy, etc., but also the article on repentance and other articles which the papists alleged to draw from the Scriptures.

5 It is instructive to note that in Luther's discussions of these abuses and false doctrines specific Scripture passages are not often marshalled to show the unscriptural and wrong nature of such practices and teachings, but rather an article of faith, der Hauptartikel. In attacking the invocation of the saints Luther does indeed mention that it has no precedent in Scripture (which in itself would not preclude its practice for Luther), but that is not the prime concern; the burden of Luther's condemnation is that "it conflicts with the first, chief article and undermines the knowledge of Christ." (SA II, II, 25). Melancthon argues in the same way when he contends that Roman doctrine of justification by good works buries Christ and obscures the Gospel (Apol. IV, 70, 81, 110, 120, 149, 150; XII, 77). Now it is clear again that Luther is doing exegesis here. He is ranging all over the Scriptures and citing biblical themes and practices and bringing them to bear on the subject, but the use of the Hauptartikel is his ultimate weapon in the debate, his final exegetical proof.

6 Is Luther here imposing something on Scripture by such a method, something alien or extra-biblical? Does such a practice conflict with the historical-exegetical method which he obviously uses and defends as an exegete?<sup>14</sup> Not at all. And this can be said for two reasons.

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<sup>14</sup>See Luther, W<sup>25</sup>, 456: "The first concern of a theologian should be to be well versed in the text of Scripture, a bonus textualis, as they say. He should adhere to this first principle: in sacred things there is no arguing or philosophizing; for if one were to work with rational or probable arguments in this sphere, then I could twist all the articles of faith as easily as Arius, the Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists have done. No, in theology we must merely hear and believe and be convinced in our heart that God is truthful, no matter how absurd that which God says in His Word may seem to reason." Cf. W<sup>2</sup> XVIII, 840. Cf. E. Thestrup Pedersen, Luther som skriftfortolker. Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959. p. 290ff.

7 First, never in our Confessions does this overriding Christological principle violate the intended meaning of a biblical passage or pericope. Never do Luther or Melanchthon or the writers of the Formula of Concord use such a principle to interpret a text grammatically or historically. Never is their procedure a substitute or shortcut for the grammatical exegesis. Second, the Hauptartikel is itself subject to all the rigorous canons of grammatical exegesis. This is clear from the fact that the article of Christ or justification is ordinarily included (AC, Apol., SA, FC) in a series of articles all purporting to be drawn from Scripture and to be a summary of Christian doctrine. Luther's statement (SA II, II, 15), "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel," applies to the Hauptartikel as well as any other article of faith. Furthermore, the longest discussion in the Confessions (Apol. IV) centers in a defense of the Hauptartikel, justification by faith. And here Melanchthon clearly draws his conclusions from the Scriptures. It is true that he expresses his Hauptartikel Principle (IV, 2, German) before he proves it from the Scriptures, and he employs the principle throughout as he argues how the papists by their insistence on merit bury Christ, etc. But he does indeed exegete those passages dealing with justification, and he does so to establish the doctrine itself and its centrality (Apol. IV, 107, 293-4). He specifically says, "What we have shown thus far, on the basis of the Scriptures [et testimoniis Scripturae] and arguments derived from the Scriptures [et argumentis ex Scriptura sumptis], was to make clear that by faith alone we receive the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, and by faith alone are justified, that is, out of unrighteous we are made righteous and regenerated men." (ibid. IV, 117. cf. FC SD I, 44).

8 The hermeneutical use of the Hauptartikel principle is closely connected with the Lutheran Law-Gospel dialectic which is employed hermeneutically in the same way (Cf. Apol. IV, 2 with Apol. IV, 5; Cf. Apol. IV, 69 with Apol. IV 70). It is, in fact, by observing the distinction between Law and Gospel that we enhance the chief article concerning Christ (FC SD, V, I; I, 3). As a matter of fact, the Gospel in the narrow sense is sometimes equated with the article of Christ and His work (FC SD V, 20; Epit. V, 5).

9 In Apol. IV, 5, Melanchthon makes perhaps the most substantive statement about the hermeneutical function of the Law-Gospel dialectic. "All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines [hos duos locos praecipuos]." What does this statement mean? Clearly the statement deals with the interpretation of Scripture, with a necessary (debet) application (distribui) of all Scripture (universa scriptura). Thus far Melanchthon is speaking not of Scripture's meaning, but of our approach to Scripture. The following sentences state what actually obtains in Scripture. "In some places it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ; this it does either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for his sake, or when, in the New Testament, the Christ who came promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life. By 'law' in this discussion we mean the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures. For the present we are saying nothing about the ceremonial and civil laws of Moses." Does Melanchthon say here that every verse or pericope in Scripture is either law or Gospel, and that we are to determine this in every case if we are to read the Scriptures rightly? Surely not. Isolated verses or pericopes simply cannot be forced to assert either law or promises in the strict sense. Melanchthon knows as well as anyone that such an exegetical procedure would be an utterly wooden, arbitrary and insensitive reading of Scripture.



He does not say "Omnis scriptura should be divided . . ." but "Universa Scriptura . . ." that is, Scripture as a whole, Scripture in its entire sweep as the history of God's acts and dealings with men in terms of judgment and promise. He is saying that these two doctrines (hi duo loci praecipui) which are not the only two doctrines, pervade all the Scriptures and, as he later points out, are to be clearly distinguished and recognized as we find them articulated throughout Scripture; we must be alert to them, hear them for what they say, and never confuse them as the papists have done (Apol. IV. 7ff.). The FC SD V, 1 is even more explicit in making the function of dividing Law and Gospel the same as that of the Hauptartikel Principle; to enhance the merit of Christ and serve troubled consciences.

- 10 Let us get back to Melanchthon's programmatic statement in Apology IV, 5, concerning the distinction between Law and Gospel as a hermeneutical key for understanding Scripture. A couple more comments must be made about this significant statement.
- 11 First, we note that this statement (CF. also FC SD V, 23) is a doctrinal statement, not just a hermeneutical one. Melanchthon is speaking not merely of how all the Scriptures are to be used hermeneutically, but of what actually is taught throughout Scripture. Law and Gospel cannot be distinguished in Scripture unless they are already there, taught in Scripture. In fact, every biblical hermeneutical principle recognized and used by the Lutheran Confessions has the force of doctrine, for these principles (e.g. the unity principle, the divine origin principle) are drawn exegetically from Scripture. The rejection of these principles is therefore false doctrine. The statement of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in their recent document Faithful to Our Calling (p. 39), which says "The Sacred Scriptures lay down no rules for interpretation and prescribe no method for communicating the message of the Scriptures to successive generations of Christians," is false. It is in contradiction to the hermeneutics of historic Lutheranism and in contradiction to Scripture itself. And the statement is false doctrine, on Lutheran terms, because biblical hermeneutics, like exegetical conclusions, has the force of doctrine.
- 12 Second, Melanchthon must be taken very seriously when he says all (universa) Scripture ought to be divided into two chief doctrines. This very definitely includes the Old Testament, as the context indicates. The Gospel, not a mere formal Gospel; but the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ, is taught in the Old Testament. Again it is not imposed upon the Old Testament by some trickery of an overarching hermeneutical Hauptartikel principle, but found and taught in the Old Testament throughout.
- 13 This Christocentricity of the Scriptures, the Old Testament Scriptures, is recognized and emphasized by Luther and the Confessions. To Luther, Christ permeates the Old Testament Scriptures through and through. One misses the message of the Old Testament if one does not find Christ there. All the promises of the Old Testament point to Christ and find their ultimate fulfillment in Him (WA 57, 193; 211). The angel of the Lord who comes to the patriarchs of the Old Testament and blesses and redeems them is Christ. When one reads of Jahweh delivering His people in the Old Testament one must think of Christ, according to Luther. And Christ as Savior was the object of the explicit faith of Old Testament believers; they were not saved by some implicit faith in the power or goodness of God. Commenting on Gen. 3:15 Luther says, "Here it is written [notice he does not impose what he is to say upon the text, but draws

it from the text] that Adam was a Christian long before the birth of Christ. For he had the same faith in Christ that we have. For in matters of faith, time makes no difference. Faith is of the same nature from the beginning to the end of the world. Therefore he, through his faith, received the same that I receive. He did not see Christ with his eyes, neither did we, but he had Him in the Word; so we also have Him in the Word. The only difference is this: at that time it was to come to pass, now it has come to pass. Accordingly all the Fathers were justified in the same manner as we are, through the Word and through faith. And in this faith they also died" (W<sup>2</sup> III, 85).

14 Does Luther impose the New Testament upon the Old as he finds Christ there? Yes and no. Certainly the New Testament has alerted him to what he is to look for there and what he will most surely find. In this sense Thestrup Pedersen may be correct when he says that Luther time and time again resorts to "allegory" as he engages in his Christological exegesis.<sup>15</sup> But Pedersen already gave ample evidence of Luther consistently and insistently using "completely philological means" to arrive at his exegetical conclusions and refusing to exegete an Old Testament text Christologically when the literal sense refers it to something or someone of that day. It might be more accurate to say that Luther does not use allegory at this point at all, but merely reads the Old Testament Scriptures often in the light of their New Testament fulfillment, finding there a deeper meaning than one would otherwise find if one ignored the New Testament. This is a simple application of the hermeneutical principle of analogy. And a crucial, necessary application of that principle. If it were *merely principle* argued that Luther takes the Old Testament texts out of their historical context, he might well reply that the New Testament fulfillment of the Old Testament promise is part of the larger historical context of the Old Testament passages, for the Lord and Author of all Scripture is also the Lord and Author of all history.

15 Our Confessions totally agree with Luther's Christological exegesis of the Old Testament as an application of the Hauptartikel principle. And they give confessional status to this exegetical procedure and its conclusions. Not only is the Gospel of Christ proclaimed in promise in the Old Testament, as Melancthon said in the Apology (Apol. IV, 5-6), "But," to quote Melancthon again, "the Fathers knew the promise concerning Christ, that God for Christ's sake wished to remit sins. Therefore, since they understood that Christ would be the price for our sins, they knew that our works are not a price for so great a matter. Accordingly, they received gratuitous mercy and remission of sins by faith, just as the saints in the New Testament." (Apol. IV, 57; Cf. Apol. XII, 55). Again Melancthon says, "Of this the idle sophists know little; and the blessed proclamation, the Gospel, which proclaims the forgiveness of sins through the blessed Seed, that is, Christ, has from the beginning of the world been the greatest consolation and treasure to all pious kings, all prophets, and all believers. For they have believed in the same Christ in whom we believe; for from the beginning of the world no saint has been saved in any other way than through faith in the same Gospel" (Apol. XII, 72-73, German). The temptation of Abraham can be understood only if we bear in mind that Abraham already knew the chief article of our faith (der hohe Artikel des Glaubens), namely justification by faith, and thought the command to sacrifice his son of promise ran counter to that article of faith (FC SD VII, 46).

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<sup>15</sup>Op. Cit., p. 230.

- 16 One cannot overemphasize the cruciality of Lutheran Christological exegesis as the foremost example of both the unity principle and the Hauptartikel principle of exegesis. Here, more than at any other point, Lutheran exegesis stands in total contradiction to the exegetical method of modern historical criticism.

D. Luther's Realist Principle

- 17 Thestrup Pedersen says that Luther as he engages in Christological exegesis "sees the matter not with the eyes of a historian but with the eyes of a theologian."<sup>16</sup> I suppose we might accept such a judgment, except that Luther would not distinguish between the eyes of a historian and the eyes of a theologian, — as though they might come to different conclusions. For to Luther the mighty acts of God by which He delivers His people are historical, actual, real. Otherwise there could be no theology of redemption. The doctrines revealed in Scripture and the acts of God recounted there have a real basis, a real referent, or there could be no theology at all to Luther. This is a hermeneutical principle to Luther.
- 18 I am not attributing any kind of philosophical realism to Luther at this point, although Luther like his successors (Valentin Loescher) would surely have repudiated all forms of later Idealism (Berkeley, Kant, Hegel). Nor am I implying that his realism rendered him insensitive to the very many figurative forms and nuances found in Scripture. He was a simple realist in the sense of the early Christians in their antipathy to docetism, Gnosticism and pagan mythologies.
- 19 What I am saying about Luther is that he recognizes the realism clearly revealed in Scripture. And therefore he is a stranger to the Kantian and Ritzschian distinction between judgments of value (which were considered to be religious judgments, true judgments) and judgments of history (which were considered to be contingent and relative). Luther knows no genre of "symbolical history", he does not recognize "theological constructs" which have no basis in history or fact. A "faith-event", in the sense of an event created by the church as it recalls its past could only be considered nonsense and heresy to Luther.
- 20 True, there was not the historic sense or interest in history in Luther's day that we observe today — a very possible advantage for Luther and the Reformers as they sought to find the Spirit's meaning in Scripture. But they did believe that history and reality underlay the theology of Scripture. Election was a real decree of God (FC SC XI), not merely a theological construct. The Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism were the results of real historical dominical institution and words (LC IV, 6, 36, 53; V, 4). Our justification before God is a real verdict, not a myth (Apol. IV). The virgin birth, the suffering and death, the miracles, the resurrection of Christ are historical, having real referents in fact. Any theology of a non-event is unthinkable to Luther and our Confessions. The ascension too and the session at the right hand, although not demonstrable by any historical investigation, are real events. The right hand of God is

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 229.

everywhere, as Luther insisted, but it is everywhere. The hermeneutical principle underlying such exegetical realism is not a philosophical theory, but a conviction based upon Scripture, that God who has caused all Scripture to be recorded is indeed a living God who invades history, authors it, and reveals himself historically.

21 Luther's theological realism which precluded the dictates of science, historiography, philosophy or reason criticizing or sitting in judgment of biblical assertions is shown clearly in Luther's treatment of Gen. 1-3, which he takes seriously as history and as the real basis for the Christian doctrine of providence, anthropology and sin (WA 42, 15ff.). The Protevangelium was actually spoken historically (Apol. XII, 55 WA 42, 141ff.). So, too, the discussion of the Formula of Concord on Original Sin (FC I) which is nothing more than a commentary on the history of Gen. 3 in the light of Paul's exegesis in Rom. 5. Luther's comments and those of our Confessions on these chapters of Holy Writ are not insensitive to anthropomorphism and other figures of speech in the history, but it is regarded as historia (history), as an account, a description of the living God acting; and this history gives rise to doctrine.

22 Nowhere does Luther's realism become more prominent than in his debate with Zwingli concerning the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar. The battle at Marburg with Zwingli and later with the Reformed was not merely over the exegesis of a single passage in the New Testament and whether it be taken figuratively or not. It was not merely over whether the Sacrament could be related to the center of the Gospel: ironically Zwingli failed to relate the Sacrament to justification precisely because he would not accept the real presence. It was not merely a controversy over the absolute authority of Scripture against the encroachments of physics, mathematics and logic.<sup>17</sup> To Luther and the Confessions reality, substance, history, God's acts and commands (AC XVII, 3; XX, 12; XXIII, 5, 8, 18, 24; XXIV, 3, 32) underlie the assertions and commands of Scripture. In the Sacrament one cannot remember it or even celebrate it (AC XXIV, 32) unless there is a history to remember and to celebrate.<sup>18</sup>

#### E. The Spirit Principle

23 Although there is rather little said concerning the Holy Spirit as the true interpreter of Scripture and of the necessity of His enlightening the reader and expositor of Scripture, the principle is a pervasive one throughout our

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<sup>17</sup>Sasse, p. 239 passim.

<sup>18</sup>To Luther, when God relates a history or asserts something in Scripture, even though the genre may be poetry and the phrases anthropomorphic and figurative at times, He speaks of reality and must be taken seriously, even if we have difficulty understanding how it can be. TR 1, 736: "Sic (the history of Jonah) ist schir lügerlich, neque crederem, nisi in sacris literis esset scripta." WA 40, I, 283 (on Gal. 3:20): "Paul has his own phrase or kind of speech which is not like other men, but divine and heavenly. . . And if Paul had not first used this phrase, and set it forth in plain words, the saints themselves would not have dared use it. . ."

Confessions. This observation is brought out by two facts. First, the Spirit of God is considered to be the primary author of Scripture. Scripture is clear not only because of its own coherent and consistent nature but because God's Holy Spirit has authored it. We hear Melancthon alluding to this fact when he rails against his opponents: "It is surely amazing that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith and specifically deny it to works." Thus far he could have been speaking of any clear and coherent book. But he goes on, "Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares?" (Apol. IV, 107-108). The Scriptures are clear and purposeful soteriologically because the Spirit has authored them.

24 But man is a sinner, blind to spiritual things, having no "capacity, aptitude, skill, and ability to think anything good or right in spiritual matters. . ." (FC SD, II, 12). This is the second fact that makes the Spirit Principle so important. The gift of the Spirit is necessary to understand spiritual things, including the Scriptures which are themselves clear. As the Spirit must convert a man with the Word, so He must open the heart of man to accept the Scriptures and heed them. "He opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures and to heed the Word, as we read in Luke 24:45, 'Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures'" (FC SD, II, 26. See also ibid., 55). This in no sense means that the Spirit is some sort of substitute for the normal exegetical tools necessary to the understanding of the meaning, the sensus literalis, of a given text. Any violation of the agreement or correspondence between the Spirit's leading and the meaning of the written text of Scripture would be absolute Schwaermerel (SA III, VIII, 4ff.). That the Spirit "opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures" means that He causes us to believe the Word and apply it.

25 The Spirit principle in hermeneutics is completely in harmony with the other principles of Lutheran hermeneutics which we have already discussed. The one Spirit, the Author of all Scripture, works through Law and Gospel upon those who read and hear the Word (FC SD V, 11).

#### F. The Eschatological Principle

26 The eschatological burden of the Lutheran Confessions is clear throughout these writings. But there is also an eschatological burden in Scripture and an eschatological way of reading Scripture. Just as the reading and use of Scripture which enunciates this eschatological principle of exegesis is Rom. 15:4: "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Commenting on this passage the FC SD XI, 92 says the following: "But it is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent (Meinung). " We have here not a hermeneutical norm for exegesis, strictly speaking, but

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For an excellent discussion of the twofold meaning of Scripture's clarity according to Lutheran theology see Ralph Bohlmann, "Biblical Interpretation in the Confessions" in Aspects of Biblical Hermeneutics, CTM Occasional Papers, No. 1, 1966, pp. 24-26.

rather a norm and principle for the application of Scripture. The Confession goes on to say, "We shall abide by this simple, direct, and useful exposition (Erklärung) which is permanently and well grounded in God's revealed will." And again the statement condemns all that is contrary to such "true, simple, and useful expositions."

- 27 The eschatological principle is here wedded to several other principles of interpretation. First, the unity of Scripture is seen in its purpose here set forth which is comfort and hope. Second, the analogy of Scripture is operative here in that every exposition of Scripture must be "grounded in God's revealed will". Third, the sensus literalis, the one grammatical and historical meaning, far from being overlooked, is actually sought ("We shall avoid and flee all abstruse and specious questions and disputations.") and seen to be in full accord with the eschatological principle.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

- 28 Is there a unique Confessional and Lutheran exegesis and approach to Scripture? Our Confessions would, I believe, answer no to such a question. There are, however, principles for reading Scripture, principles drawn from the Scriptures themselves in every case, which our Lutheran Confessions have discerned and employed with a certain uniqueness and consistency. These principles which I have attempted to trace are no child's play. They may be easy to discern from Scripture and to state, but often difficult to employ and apply. Yet they are crucial for the exegetical enterprise and for the evangelical orientation and activity of the church.

1973 REFORMATION LECTURES

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by

Robert David Preus, Ph. D., Th. D.

HOW IS THE LUTHERAN CHURCH TO INTERPRET AND USE  
THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS?

Lecture III: The Historical Critical Method Examined

B. HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD AND LUTHERAN EXEGESIS

- 1 Can the hermeneutical principles underlying the doctrine of our Lutheran Confessions be harmonized with the modern historical critical method as it is ordinarily applied in studying and exegeting Scripture? I believe not. One will need to reject what is essential to the older historic Lutheran hermeneutics if one is to accept and use in any consistent way the historical critical method today and apply it to Scripture. But this question can be answered satisfactorily only a) when we know what the historical critical method is in terms of its goals and assumptions and b) when we know if and where the method conflicts with the Confessional Lutheran hermeneutics which led to the doctrine of the Gospel and its articles as exhibited in the Lutheran Confessions. So let me attempt to define the method and then to answer the question at issue.
- 2 As far as I have been able to determine by examining the works of scores of reputable scholars using the historical critical method today a brief definition might run as follows. The historical method is a way of studying Scripture (or any piece of literature) by using all the criteria of scientific historical investigation. The method analyzes the text of Scripture in terms of language, literary form, redaction criticism, source criticism, as well as historical, archeological and other relevant data. The purpose of the method is not merely philological, or linguistic: namely, to learn the intended meaning of texts and verses in Scripture. The over-arching purpose of the method is historical: namely, to discover the history and background of the form and content of any given portion or unit in Scripture and to trace that history of the given unit through every step of its development until it finds its way into the text of Scripture as we have it. This procedure, essential to the method, would apply to any pericope or story recorded in the Old Testament, any parable or discourse of Jesus, any action or miracle of our Lord. The over-arching purpose (the ultimate goal) of the method, therefore, is to find the word or event behind the text of Scripture, to assess the historicity or truthfulness of what Scripture asserts, to discover the historical origin of what Scripture records.
- 3 I believe it is safe to say that whereas for Luther and the Reformers exegesis was seen essentially as a philological discipline, for modern historical

critics exegesis is a historical discipline. For Luther and our Confessions biblical and extra-biblical historical investigation was undertaken to help determine the meaning of the canonical text, the prophetic and apostolic Word as such; for the historical critic an investigation of the meaning of the biblical text is undertaken to help determine the history which may or may not lie behind the text; and "history" (historical research) in turn may be used to authenticate, verify or falsify the text.<sup>19</sup>

4 It is easy, I believe, for us to see some of the assumptions underlying this method of approaching Scripture. Assumptions regarding revelation, regarding Scripture and regarding history. The historical critical method was first conceived and worked out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by scholars who either denied the possibility of a divine revelation or at least denied that Scripture was such a revelation. These early developers of the method denied also the divine origin and inspired nature of Scripture, thus depriving Scripture also of its divine authority in the sense understood by the Reformers. They furthermore believed that all history was lived out according to principles of universal correspondence, analogy and uniformity within history; and all historical records including Scripture must be criticized according to such principles. Far reaching changes have taken place in respect to the method over the past two centuries — e.g., form criticism has been invented — but the same assumptions underly the use of the method today by all reputable and consistent practitioners of it.

5 I need only mention that the results of the historical critical method have at crucial points contradicted the doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions. Lutheran exegetes using the method have denied the historicity of all God's activities recounted in Scripture until the time of Abraham, they have denied the authenticity of many of Christ's sermons and discourses, and in some

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<sup>19</sup>See Sverre Aalen, "The Revelation of Christ and Scientific Research" in The Springfielder (Dec. 1970), p. 210: "A closer analysis shows that the so-called 'historical-critical' research in the form in which we know it today, where it concerns the more important motifs of the contents, is a child of the modern time and has drawn its motifs from the spirit of the modern time. Its agreement with humanism or even with the existentialism of our time is obvious and perhaps denied by no one. That the decisive motifs with which this theology labors, cannot be relevant to the material, reveals itself among other things also in this, that the principle element is not sought in the words of the text, but as was stated above, behind the words, even at times in direct contradiction to the text." Aalen is opposed to the historical critical method, but the same judgment is made by Pannenberg (Basic Questions in Theology. London: SCM Press, 1970, I, 196) who favors the method: "What is needed is precisely the historical quest, moving behind the kerygma in its various forms, into the public ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself in order in that way to obtain in the Christ-event itself a standard by means of which to judge the various witnesses to it, even those actually within the New Testament." Cf. 197 and passim. Pannenberg frankly disagrees with the Reformation "unity principle" mentioned above (Ibid., 194). I think one can see that to Pannenberg and modern historical criticism the intended meaning of the canonical text is only a means often to get to the historical fact or word behind the text, and the authority of the text as such is relativized: not the text, but the history behind the text becomes authoritative for doctrine.



cases they have denied His deity and every miracle performed by Him. All this as the result of employing historical critical research. Regin Prenter, a relatively conservative Lutheran, who uses the method, but inconsistently, says quite frankly,<sup>20</sup> "That it is the Creator Himself who is present in Jesus' humanity has always been an impossible idea to historical criticism. Therefore historical criticism necessarily collides with everything in the tradition concerning Jesus which ascribes to Him such divine majesty."

6 This statement of Prenter's, a practitioner of the method, is significant in that it suggests that one consistently using the historical critical method cannot come to the same conclusions concerning the articles of our Christian faith as did our Lutheran Confessions. Why is this? Not only because of the different assumptions regarding revelation, Scripture and history. Not only because the method has different goals from those of the Reformers as they engaged in exegesis. Ultimately the reason for modern historical critical research coming to different conclusions from our Confessions concerning doctrine rests in the fact that historical critical methodology has a different idea of what it is dealing with as it goes about its task.

7 Let me try to make this point clear. Any method of doing anything is determined by the subject with which the method deals. That is always the case, whether we think of a method of managing a corporation, a method of cutting meat, a method of researching historical data, or a method of reading a book. If this is true, then the nature of Scripture as God's revelation of Himself and His will cannot be ignored or discounted at any point by any method, old or new, seeking to deal with Scripture in terms of its form or content. According to historic Lutheran theology, as typified in our Confessions, Scripture's form is its revelatory character as God's Word. Scripture's content is God Himself — He is the one spoken of everywhere in Scripture — God, His will, His actions among people, etc. In the nature of the case one cannot use the same method for reading, understanding and applying Scripture that one uses for understanding any other merely human book which recounts merely human events and ideas. This, I believe, is a principle of the Lutheran Reformers as they read and seek to understand Scripture in contrast to their method of reading Caesar's Gallic Wars or the so-called Donation of Constantine. To illustrate how this principle would work today one might say the following: a historical critical method is probably quite adequate and proper for understanding and analyzing Caesar's Gallic Wars. The historian will immediately recognize, according to his principles of universal correspondence and analogy within history, that Caesar is a responsible and serious witness to events and a good historian in terms of his day. The critic will therefore accept Caesar's statement that his army built an elaborate and complicated bridge and crossed the River Rhine. But the critic will recognize Caesar's limitations as he comments on the flora and fauna of Britain and Caesar's tendenz as he speaks of his great victories over the barbarians. But Scripture, though written by inspired men and reflecting their style of writing, thought forms, convictions, cultural milieu, etc., is not a human book or record like Caesar's Gallic Wars. The Spirit of God is the author of Scripture, and the Spirit does not have any tendenz which may be corrected according to any

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<sup>20</sup>Creation and Redemption. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 433.

theory concerning continuity and analogy within history. Furthermore — and this is Prenter's point, as it is Luther's and the Confessions' — unlike Caesar's Gallic Wars which deals with the activities of Caesar, a man, the Scriptures witness to the mighty acts of God, acts which transcend space, time, secondary causes, historical analogy and everything else within our created order. The reader of Scripture, as he confronts the content of Scripture, God Himself and His mighty acts, can only accept the witness of the Spirit who testified through the writings of prophets and apostles to these revelations of God's judgment and grace.

- 8 Having seen now what the historical critical method is in terms of its goals, presuppositions and consequences, we must ask whether it is compatible with the biblical and evangelical hermeneutics of the Lutheran Church and whether it may be used by a Lutheran exegete. That there can be no reconciliation between the historic Lutheran evangelical method of reading Scripture and the historical critical method the historical critics today would be the first to point out. They would of course recognize that Luther or Bengel could be used today with benefit and acknowledge this fact, just as those of us who identify with evangelical exegesis would find benefit in the studies of a Bultmann or a Kaesemann today. But the two approaches are utterly incompatible. The historical critical method conflicts with evangelical hermeneutics at every single point we have discussed in these lectures. Let me now try to illustrate this fact in order to show the gravity of the situation today and the cleavage that obtains between two radically opposite hermeneutics.

#### I. THE PRINCIPLE OF DIVINE ORIGIN

- 9 R. H. Lightfoot, conservative practitioner of the historical method, has said,<sup>21</sup> "So long as the view of inspiration prevailed, the four Gospels could only be regarded as of equal value, historically and otherwise. . . It chanced, however, that just as their belief began to crumble, the discovery was made that one among the four gospels was quite definitely on a superior historical level. . . and the discovery that there were good grounds for finding in St. Mark a chief authority for the gospel of St. Matthew and St. Luke gave birth to the hope that in St. Mark's Gospel above all we might hope to discover that Jesus of History." Lightfoot is only repeating in terms of synoptic studies what was dogmatically asserted one hundred years before him by Christoph Ernst Luthardt<sup>22</sup> when he insisted that the exegesis and criticism of his day had demolished the doctrine of inspiration and no reputable scholar could any longer hold to the Reformation doctrine. This confidence is still echoed by

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<sup>21</sup>History and Interpretation in the Gospels, pp. 10, 12.

<sup>22</sup>Compendium der Dogmatik (Liepzig, 1866), p. 237. For further evidence of this position of the higher critics in the nineteenth century see Robert Preus, "Walther and the Scriptures", *CTM*, XXXII, 11 (Nov. 1961), pp. 669-691. This article will abundantly show that Walther was waging the same battle for the Lutheran hermeneutic as we are doing today who oppose the historical critical method.

conservative Lutherans today who use the historical method and defend it as necessary and scientific. Regin Prenter, who must use the method inconsistently inasmuch as he believes in the Virgin Birth, the Deity of Christ and the Resurrection, dogmas which the method does not yield, claims,<sup>23</sup> "The advent of modern natural science and historical research showed (my emphasis) that the Bible is not inerrant in the sense of the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The historico-critical method and later the history of religions methods of research investigated even the biblical writings and showed (emphasis mine) that they originated in the same manner as other source documents of religions." This is a highly significant statement, made as it is by a conservative dogmatician. Significant first because it concisely typifies the position of all critical scholars outside the Missouri Synod in their attitude toward the Bible. I say outside the Missouri Synod because in Missouri there is among many a curious schizophrenia which asserts the divine origin of Scripture while at the same time insisting that all the so-called techniques associated with the historical critical method must be employed.<sup>24</sup> No one to my knowledge outside Missouri has ever confessed the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and at the same time used the historical critical method. Prenter's statement is highly significant in the second place because, even though he uses the method with modifications and inconsistently, he is forced to break with the Reformation principle of sola Scriptura and resort to a kind of sola revelatio or solum kerygma principle, a radical kind of reductionism. To Prenter the kerygma is the norm of doctrine, not Scripture; the historical critical method can find errors and correct Scripture, but never the kerygma.

- 10 One more point ought to be made before leaving this matter. To affirm the divine origin (verbal, plenary inspiration, inerrancy) of Scripture is to affirm the divine origin of the doctrine (theology) revealed in Scripture. Those in Missouri circles who use the historical critical method while affirming or giving lip service to the divine origin of Scripture are incapable of using the divine origin principle hermeneutically as they do exegesis. A classic example of this is found in a study of "The Biblical View of Sexual Polarity" by Dr. Ralph Gehrke.<sup>25</sup> Gehrke affirms the verbal inspiration of Scripture and insists

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<sup>23</sup>Creation and Redemption, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup>See Faithful to Our Calling, p. 41: "Basically all the techniques associated with 'historical-critical' methodology, such as source analysis, form history, and redaction history, are legitimated by the fact that God chose to use as His written Word human documents written by human beings in human language." The adoptionist position underlying this statement about Scripture (as though God made existent human documents His Word) is probably the result of hurried and sloppy thought on the part of the faculty. What is perhaps more significant is that the declamation is an absurd non sequitur. From the fact that God condescends to reveal Himself in no way implies that we can use the most radical methods of exegeting Scripture, methods which deny in principle that Scripture is God's Word.

<sup>25</sup>Ralph Gehrke, "The Biblical View of Sexual Polarity," CTM, XLI, 4 (April 1970), p. 195-205.

it must be taken seriously.<sup>26</sup> But as he traces the theme of sexual polarity in Scripture his exegetical conclusions are always that what Scripture says on the relation between men and women is simply ancient Israel's thinking on the subject or Paul's theology, not God's Word or ordinance. This is in complete contrast to Melanchthon's discussion of the subject in Apology XXIII.

## II. THE UNITY PRINCIPLE (THE HAUPTARTIKEL PRINCIPLE, THE SPIRIT PRINCIPLE)

11. The historical critical method arose only after scholars had convinced themselves that they could find no underlying unity in the Scripture, no unity in terms of Scripture's single divine Author, no unity in terms of doctrine, Law and Gospel, covenant, or Christology. Not only did they find errors in Scripture as it touched upon matters pertaining to history and nature, but they thought they found differing and contradictory theologies in Scripture. And their methodology was calculated to explain all this usually in terms of the development of thought and doctrine traced historically. All this is fundamental to historical criticism today. The various nineteenth and twentieth century reductionisms (Harnack's Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of man; Troeltsch's purely scientific philosophy of history; Bultmann's, Kaesemann's, Tillich's Existentialism) sought some kind of unity in religion, but only because they could not find any unity in Scripture. Today this rejection of any analogia Scripturae which can be used hermeneutically is fundamental to historical criticism. Thus we find entire books being written to point out the disunity of Scripture. John Charlot in the book entitled New Testament Disunity<sup>27</sup> seeks to show that there is no way to find any kind of unity in the New Testament. The New Testament misunderstands the Old, he says. The evangelists misunderstood and distorted the message of Jesus. Even the Pauline corpus has no unity. Charlot's book is valuable in that he brings evidence of massive support for his position from historical critics, conservatives and liberals alike. Even Pannenberg contends,<sup>28</sup> "The assertion of a doctrinal unity of the biblical witnesses has been made impossible by the work of critical historical research." Again Pannenberg says,<sup>29</sup> "As historical investigation of Scripture progressed, the biblicistic harmonizing procedure of interpretation

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<sup>26</sup>Ralph Gehrke, "Genesis Three in the Light of Key Hermeneutical Considerations", CTM, (XXXVI, 9), Aug. 1965, pp. 534-560. One of Gehrke's conclusions in this essay which uses the historical critical method is that the genre of Gen. 3 is didactic story which leaves the historicity of Adam and Eve and their Fall an open question. This in contradiction to the evangelical hermeneutics in our Confessions which teach a real historical Adam and Eve and Fall.

<sup>27</sup>John Charlot, New Testament Disunity (New York: E. D. Dutton & Co., 1970).

<sup>28</sup>Basic Questions in Theology (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 194.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 193. Cf. also ibid., p. 7: "For our historical consciousness, the 'essential content' of Scripture which Luther had in mind, viz., the person and history of Jesus is no longer to be found in the texts of Scripture themselves, but behind them."

controlled by the analogy of faith became increasingly questionable, and its distance from the literal sense of Scripture, which according to it was supposed to be normative, became ever clearer. Historical research showed (emphasis mine) that the contradictionless doctrinal unity which had been presupposed was not in fact present in the New Testament writings." Again he says, "The New Testament witnesses not only contradict themselves on details, such as the accounts of the day of Jesus' death, but in addition they exhibit considerable differences and even contradictions in the theological conceptions that occasionally leave their imprint on an entire book and cannot be removed from its individual formulations. These contradictions cannot be understood as complementary parts of an organic unity." All in all, a total repudiation of the Reformation hermeneutical principle of the unity of Scripture. And again asserted with complete confidence, if not arrogance.

12 It is clear that historical criticism with its denial of the Lutheran principle of the unity of Scripture cannot arrive at any unified dogma, at any exegetical conclusions in the sense of pure doctrine. Everything becomes an open question. The transfiguration and the resurrection may be confused accounts of the same idea. So also with the ascension into heaven and the session at the right hand of God. The Virgin Birth may be no more than a didactic story, a midrash or theological construct. The empty tomb may not be a part of the doctrine of the resurrection. Everything becomes hypothetical, dubious.

13 Again, it is clear that with its denial of the unity of Scripture that the criticism of the historical critical method is not criticism in the purely neutral sense, as has been frequently asserted by its practitioners. For in principle the historical method may question on historical grounds the origin and therefore meaning of any assertion or event recorded in Scripture. Thus the meaning of any text (Gen. 3:15 or John 3:16) may be placed in question. And ultimately all in Scripture is relativized or made hypothetical, also the meaning of those pericopes which have led to our credal statements.<sup>30</sup> We have shown that fundamental to the evangelical Reformation hermeneutics was the fact that exegesis leads to doctrine. This is fundamentally impossible for the historical critical approach to Scripture.

### III. THE PRINCIPLE OF BIBLICAL REALISM

14 The chronic inability of the historical critical method to reach definite exegetical conclusions having the force of doctrine affects inevitably the understanding of the nature of the Christian revelation. History is contingent, relative, according to historical critical methodology. Therefore historical science applied to Scripture (like any other book) can yield only tentative conclusions. What event or doctrine recorded in Scripture has not been questioned

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<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith, Tr. by James W. Lietch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 43: "It leads only to obscuring the nature of the problem when the critical historical method is held to be a purely formal scientific technique entirely free from presuppositions, whose application to the historical objects in the theological realm provokes no conflicts and does no hurt to the dogmatic structure."

as a result of the historical critical method? The dominical institution of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar are questioned on historical grounds. This can only result in a questioning of the very sacrament itself as a means of salvation. The historicity (reality) of the Fall is denied by the critics, and thus the reality of original sin is questioned. Gen. 3 and Rom. 5 as they refer to Adam and the Fall are only didactic stories showing us what we are like today. The appearances of the risen Christ are found to be hopelessly confused, and Paul is said to be ignorant of the empty tomb which was a later legend anyhow. And so the resurrection itself is questioned as nothing more than a didactic story. And it is denied as a real event. This is precisely the position of Ernst Kaesemann as he seeks to prove on historical critical grounds that none of the miracles of Christ really occurred, and he begins with the Resurrection of our Lord. His conclusion is that there is no real, ontological, historical, objective basis for the Christian Gospel at all.<sup>31</sup> And this conclusion is inevitable for the consistent practitioner of the historical critical method.

- 15 Omnia dubitanda sunt: all things must be doubted. This fundamental Cartesian assumption, this scepticism which refuses to begin with the given of a real, historical divine revelation, underlies both the notion of history and of criticism as we observe the historical critical method at work today. This method of doubt was not applied to history and biblical studies in Descartes' day, but a century later it was—with a vengeance. Descartes' method was joined by Leibnitz' principle (following Aristotle) that truths of history (existence) were only contingent. The result was that at just the time when historiography was being developed as a science, history itself and historical events were in principle thought to be only contingent and therefore relative. This meant that when the so-called historical method was applied to Scripture as a historically conditioned collection of writings not only the historical but the doctrinal content of Scripture was relativized. It meant that Christianity no longer has a "privileged position". "Christianity itself becomes part of the immense interplay of historical forces, a mere movement in the flux of historical events and interrelationships. Like all other history, it is to be considered a development at a certain time, in a certain place among certain people, part of the general cultural history of the world. There are no unique events, no occurrences of absolute and revelatory significance. The history of Israel is part and parcel of the general history of the Middle East, the history of the church part of the history of the Roman Empire — nothing less, nothing more. In sum: everything is the part of one overall historical continuum."<sup>32</sup> Again the inevitable result of historical science with its prejudices and philosophic presuppositions as it is applied to the Scriptures.

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<sup>31</sup>Ernst Kaesemann, Essays on New Testament Themes (Naperville, Ill.: A. R. Allenson, 1964), p. 48ff.

<sup>32</sup>Isaac C. Rottenberg, Redemption and Historical Reality (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), p. 40. Rottenberg is summarizing the theology of Troeltsch at this point and his entire discussion is most revealing of the devastation wrought by the historical critical method as consistently applied by Troeltsch and others.

- 16 There is no way out of the sceptical cul de sac into which the historical critical method leads. No way out, if we wish to retain the historic Christian faith. Of course, one may seek to reinterpret or reduce Christianity to a religion of ideas or truths which are not based upon historic facts or reality (Hegel, Straus, Troeltsch, Ritzschl, Harnack, Idealism, Classical Liberalism). Or one may retreat into subjectivity (Kirkegaard, Tillich, Bultmann, Kaesemann and the post-Bultmannians), or Schwaemerei (E. Brunner, K. Barth). But in both cases one has departed from historic Christianity which is based upon the reality of a living God acting in real history.
- 17 And there is no way, no possible way, to reconcile the modern historical critical method with the evangelical hermeneutics of Lutheranism. The two different approaches to the Word of God clash at every point, and the results of the two approaches are ultimately two different religions. Nothing less than the Christian Gospel itself is at stake. And therefore the evangelical Lutheran must reject the historical critical method as the great heresy of our day, a heresy which has affected Christian doctrine at its Gospel center and at every point.
- 18 The Roman poet Ovid coined a phrase, principiis obsta: resist the beginnings, resist something wrong at the very outset. It is the great tragedy of the last two and a half centuries that Lutheranism was unable to do this in respect to the historical critical method. The devastating program of Richard Simon, Johann Semler and all the other inventors of historical criticism was not, with a few exceptions, adequately attacked at its roots by the Confessional Lutherans of that day, particularly not in Europe. In America we fared better until recently. But since World War II most of Lutheran exegesis has uncritically fallen prey to the method.
- 19 Today those of us who wish to retain the Gospel and our evangelical Lutheran identity have one clear course of action open to us. We must restudy and reaffirm our evangelical Lutheran hermeneutics. We must reaffirm the true Reformation principle of sola Scriptura. And we must on doctrinal grounds and on the basis of a biblical and Christian idea of history reject as such the historical critical method of investigation in the Scriptures.