

# The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

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A Report  
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study  
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,  
Lutheran Council in the USA,  
During 1972-77

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Quotations from *The Book of Concord*, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

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# Part 5

# Biblical Interpretation

# The Historical-Critical Method and the Method of the Lutheran Confessions

By Duane A. Priebe

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“. . . the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm, 1).

All other writings “should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times” (FC, Ep, R&N, 2). Hence, “other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and exposi-

tions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned” (FC, Ep, R&N, 8). In this way the Confessions seek to maintain the distinction between Scripture and all other writings so that “Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong” (FC, Ep, R&N, 7).

The Lutheran Confessions do not state an explicit doctrine of Scripture, nor do they advocate an exegetical method as such. This fact, interesting in the face of the heavy emphasis on Scripture as the authoritative Word of God, may re-

flect a basic concern for presenting what Scripture itself actually says rather than reflecting on the nature of Scripture (in contrast to other periods) and may also reflect the conviction that Scripture itself has persuasive power without needing to be defended.

Scripture must always be the hermeneutical norm for interpreting and evaluating the content of the Confessions and Christian tradition rather than the reverse. This statement is required by the Lutheran insistence on the exclusive authority of Scripture as the sole rule and norm by which doctrines are to be judged. If other traditions or documents were the hermeneutical norm for interpreting Scripture, they then would be in-

vested with final authority over doctrine. The hermeneutical contribution of the Reformation was that Scripture interprets Scripture; this was in contrast with the Roman accent on the doctrinal tradition of the church as the normative interpreter of Scripture. The emphasis on the clarity of Scripture was an aid in maintaining the hermeneutical function of Scripture.

Statements about the Bible as the Word of God or about the inspiration, efficacy, and unity of Scripture, as well as statements about the sufficiency, perfection, and inerrancy of Scripture, are confessional/doxological statements and do not provide information about the nature of the Bible or the process by which it came into being, information of the sort that would allow these statements to become hermeneutical principles.

Doxological statements are statements necessitated by our being encountered by God's revelation or saving action and power and that are offered up in praise to him.<sup>1</sup> They do not, however, provide information that can be used as the premise for deriving further conclusions without slipping into the realm of speculation. Even when the Bible itself speaks about inspiration, it does not describe the process involved or its relation to human thought or other processes in history. Confessional/doxological statements can only be given concrete content—to whatever extent this is possible—by conforming their meaning

strictly to what the Bible is in its concrete actuality and to the process by which the Bible came into being that can be discerned in the Bible itself. The statements cannot be taken as hermeneutical principles that are then imposed onto Scripture without violating the Scripture principle.<sup>1</sup>

The Confessions identify the central content of Scripture as law and gospel, Christ, or justification by grace alone through faith alone (for the sake of Christ alone). The focus on the central content of Scripture is reflected in the statement that Luther's Small and Large Catechisms "contain everything which Holy Scripture discusses at greater length and which a Christian must know for his salvation" (FC, Ep, R&N, 5). "All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises" (Apology, IV, 5).

This understanding of the content of Scripture is a hermeneutical aid in exegesis in that the whole of Scripture must always be the content for interpreting particular passages. But one's presupposition as to the central content of the whole of Scripture must not become a hermeneutical principle that subordinates and suppresses the content of the particular passage under consideration.

On the one hand, any particular passage must be interpreted within its narrower, immediate literary and historical context. On the other hand, it must be interpreted within the context of the whole of Scripture. But if one's understanding of the central content of the whole of Scripture becomes a prin-

ciple that is imposed onto the particular passages under consideration, Scripture loses its normative function, and one's understanding of the content of Scripture as a whole becomes the standard to which Scripture itself must be subordinate.<sup>2</sup>

Our understanding of the central content of Scripture is the result of exegetical study. It is an aid to exegesis, and as a presupposition for further exegesis it has the character of a hypothesis whose validity must constantly be examined and tested by exegetical study.

If Scripture is the sole rule, norm, and judge of doctrine, then any doctrine of Scripture must itself be derived from what Scripture actually says and is. This is obviously required by the Scripture principle, although at times the desire to maintain the principle has enticed people to develop a doctrine of Scripture that seemed necessary for their theology even though it had little foothold in what Scripture itself explicitly said and was (e.g., some ways of talking about unity, inerrancy, and verbal inspiration). The doctrine of Scripture developed in this way could then easily become a doctrinal principle to which Scripture must be subordinated and to which it had to conform.

Any adequate doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture must take strict account of the character of the material actually contained in the Bible; the literary forms used and their function; the relation of the material to its conceptual, religious, and historical environment;

and the historically discernible process by which Scripture came into being.

Any adequate concept of the unity of Scripture must be related to and drawn from serious attention to the individual texts and units of Scripture and what they uniquely have to say. Clearly this is closely related to what has been said above about the central content of Scripture. The nature and content of the unity of Scripture cannot be decided in advance so that it becomes an abstract principle to which Scripture itself must be subordinated. Even though we have presuppositions about the nature and content of the unity of Scripture which we bring with us to our exegetical work, this unity of Scripture must always remain a question if we are to take the norming function of Scripture itself seriously. Thus even the possibility that the unity of Scripture may contain within itself divergent theologies cannot be excluded automatically.

While the Confessions do not advocate an exegetical method, they do presuppose that the true, normative meaning of a text is its literal, grammatical-historical sense; i.e., what the original author intended to say to the original hearers.

The exegetical interpretations of particular passages in our exegetical tradition or in the Confessions themselves are aids to exegesis,

but they can never be normative for exegesis. Again, if Scripture itself is normative, we can never assume that the true interpretation of any particular passage is already given to us in our exegetical tradition, even though that may be the case. To do so would be to subordinate Scripture to a normative exegetical tradition. Obviously our exegetical tradition does and should serve as a hermeneutical aid in interpreting passages, and as a presupposition it serves as a question we bring to Scripture.

The literal sense of Scripture is its simplest and most direct sense seen within the context in which it was written and to which it was addressed. Due to our historical distance from the situations that provide the most direct contexts of passages in Scripture as well as from their thought forms, conceptual world, and even literary forms, what may appear to us to be the simplest sense of a passage may have little relation to the meaning it had in its historical context. The simplest sense of a text must always be the sense it had in its historical context; i.e., its literal grammatical-historical sense, which is its normative sense.

To ascertain the literal sense of a passage we must take full account of the use and function of literary and rhetorical forms, interpreting the text in terms of the meaning these forms are intended to convey. A serious commitment to Scripture, which means a strict commitment to the literal grammatical-historical sense of the text, requires the use of all the aids available for understanding it. Such aids include linguistic and literary skills, knowledge of his-

torical linguistic and conceptual worlds, awareness of history and the history of ideas, including history of religious ideas, ability to identify historical literary and rhetorical forms and their function in conveying meaning, and understanding the process by which biblical texts and books come into being as an aid in interpreting them in their historical intention. The criterion for the validity of any exegetical method is that it be an aid in opening our eyes to what stands written in the text so that it speaks its word to us, rather than directing our attention away from a serious consideration of the text itself.

In view of the historical distance between the interpreter and the context within which the text being interpreted originated, a commitment to the literal grammatical-historical sense of the text requires the use of historical methods of interpretation. As an extensive set of tools for seeing the text in its historical/conceptual context the historical-critical method is necessary in our day.

As in the development of any exegetical tool, the questions brought to the text in the historical-critical approach may at times be different from the scope of the text itself. In addition to the purposes for which it was written, the text of the Bible can also be used as a resource for linguistic, historical, and literary questions. This use is important in developing tools for understanding the literal, grammatical-historical meaning of texts in Scripture. Such questions may include the historical setting, literary relationships

we interpret what the text says, but it also involves a movement from the text to the interpreter in which the interpreter's world and existence before God is interpreted by the text (new hermeneutic).

As the Word of God, the text of Scripture has hermeneutical power in human existence; it does not need to be protected or defended by us. The history of traditions as reflected, for example, in Gerhard von Rad's "Old Testament Theology" has shown that the material in the Bible itself reflects a history of transmission in which older traditions were reappropriated in new historical situations in such a way that the new situations were interpreted in relation to God's action by the older traditions and the older traditions in turn were seen in a new light. Clearly this process involved distortion as well as a true appropriation in the biblical period itself (e.g., true vs. false prophets). But the hermeneutical process by which biblical texts illuminate new historical situations and in turn are seen in a new light in new situations is not external to the materials themselves. It belongs to the scope of the material itself.

If Scripture is the source and norm of theology, the character of Scripture itself must determine the character and structure of theological thought. The unity of Scripture cannot be defined on the basis of our presuppositions about the logical unity and coherence of theological thought, but the character of Scripture itself must determine what constitutes the unity of Scripture.

The character of Scripture and the kind of unity it manifests must determine the nature of the unity of theology and the unity of the church. The unity of theology and the church is not necessarily constituted by a rationally consistent, homogeneous, uniform theology; it may include what appears to us to be diverse and even rationally inconsistent, competing theologies. Ernst Käsemann argues that denominational diversity is rooted in theological diversity within the canon.<sup>4</sup> The point that there is theological diversity within the canon is widely held in biblical exegesis, and for someone who has read Luther's introduction to the Epistle of James it does not appear to be a strange, new conviction.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not Käsemann is correct is not something that can be decided on a priori grounds (e.g., to argue that such diversity is theologically impossible or that the idea of the unity of Scripture automatically excludes it); it can only be decided exegetically. If Käsemann is right, then faithfulness to Scripture would require a modification of our understanding of the unity of theology and of the church to include a greater degree of theological diversity than has been customary for us. After all, reality does not necessarily have to conform to our canons of logical consistency and coherence. Even in the realm of physics people have had to learn to live with logically incompatible and inconsistent statements which

are necessary to describe the reality of nature as, for example, the wave and particle descriptions of reality which must both be maintained in an accurate model even though they are inconsistent.

A mosaic may be a more adequate model of the unity of theology and the church as required by Scripture than a linear, homogeneous construction. Under the impact of McLuhan and others, we are compelled to recognize that the linear logic most of us have been trained to regard as normal is only one among many ways of thinking, and taken by itself it may not even be entirely adequate. At the same time, biblical studies are making quite clear the difference between our logical way of structuring theology and the way the Bible itself does theology (e.g., von Rad's "Old Testament Theology").

If Scripture is normative for theology, then the true interpretation of Scripture is never given us already as a presupposition but must constantly be sought. The seriousness with which we take Scripture is not so much seen in our doctrine of Scripture as in our strict pursuit of the literal grammatical-historical sense of the text with the aid of every tool at our disposal. If theology is to be faithful, it can never seek to protect itself from new encounters with the meaning of passages in the Bible seen in their historical context.

## Doctrinal Position

If theology is to be faithful to a strict commitment to the normative function of Scripture in its literal grammatical-historical sense, then in our day the historical-critical method is not optional but necessary. Anything less than this would be an abandonment of a serious commitment to the literal grammatical-historical sense of Scripture as the sole rule, norm, and judge of theology. Since the Confessions bind us to Scripture as the sole norm for theology, they bind us to the use of whatever tools are available to us for understanding passages of the Bible in their historical sense.

The work of the Spirit through the understanding of the external Word to create internal clarity or understanding (faith) is not conditioned by our methodology. Although the Spirit is wrapped up in the external word and works through it, the Spirit does not require for his work accurate exegesis, only that Christ be proclaimed. While the Spirit does not require accurate exegesis, theology, to do its work, does.

- 1 To the concept of a doxological statement, cf., E. Schlück's discussion of "The Structure of Dogmatic Statements in an Ecumenical Problem," **The Coming Christ and the Coming Church** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 16-84; W. Pannenberg, "Analogy and Doxology," **Basic Questions in Theology**, Vol. I (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 211-38.
- 2 Cf., the very helpful discussion in Ralph A. Bohmann, **Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions** (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), pp. 111-24.
- 3 Cf., Hans Georg Gadamer's concept of hermeneutics as a process of merging of horizons, **Truth and Method** (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
- 4 Ernst Käsemann, **Essays on New Testament Themes** (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1964), pp. 95-107.
- 5 See Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude, E. Theodore Bachmann, ed., **Luther's Works**, Vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), pp. 395-98.