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HERMENEUTICS IN THE INTERNATIONAL LUTHERAN COUNCIL:

A Paper Presented to the Lutheran World Federation in April 2017

by Roland Ziegler

1. Introduction

EVERY TIME BIBLICAL TEXTS are preached, taught, and used in pastoral care, there is the expectation that this is not only a human act, but that God himself is speaking. For Lutherans, this is rooted in their conviction that the Scriptures are the word of God not only in a causal sense, but also in a present sense; that they are inspired.¹ God speaks through these writings today, convicting human beings of their sin, and creating faith in the good news of free forgiveness for Christ crucified. God guides his church through the Scriptures in the controversies of the time and keeps her in the one, true faith.

These are the expectations. The Scriptures, though, seem not to be able to keep the church together; rather they seem to be open to not only diverse but contradictory understandings. Hence, Louis Bouyer could write that the Scriptures need to be preserved “from degeneration and alteration by the presence of Christ’s mandatories,” that without them “the Word of God preserved in Scripture is just a lifeless text, defenseless before the wildest interpretations.”² Is it because they themselves are an assembly of

contradictory statements, so that, in the words of Ernst Käsemann, the canon of the New Testament is not the foundation of the unity of the church, but the foundation of the multitude of denominations?³ The unity of Scripture, and thus the Scriptures’ ability to be the judge of all doctrine, seems to vanish. But the contention that the Scriptures do not only have different types of soteriology and Christology, but contradictory and mutually exclusive ones, leads to the problem that such a position implies the experience of different gods and thus denies the unity of the God of Scripture.⁴ Thus, the so-called Scripture principle seems to be in a crisis.⁵ In the hermeneutical debates, this becomes an issue of whether the Scripture should be interpreted in such a way that its parts agree with each other or whether statements of Scripture in one place can be criticized as false from the central aspects of Scripture, or, in shorthand, from the gospel. The unity of Scripture thus becomes a hermeneutical issue.

Catholicism (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 58. The book was first published in 1960 and thus reflects the pre-conciliar view.

³ Ernst Käsemann, “Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche,” in *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, ed. Ernst Käsemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 131: “Der ntl. Kanon begründet als solcher nicht die Einheit der Kirche. Er begründet als solcher, d.h. in seiner dem Historiker zugänglichen Vorfindlichkeit dagegen die Vielzahl der Konfessionen.”

⁴ Jörg Baur, “Scriptura—historisches Erbe und bleibender Auftrag,” in *Sola Scriptura: Das reformatorische Schriftprinzip in der säkularen Welt* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1991), 40. Baur does not hold the position that there are no contradictions in Scripture, but sees the unity in the whole of the presentation of the story of man as creature to be reconciled.

⁵ See the overview of the discussion on the Scripture principle in Germany in Friedemann Stengel, *Sola Scriptura im Kontext. Behauptung und Bestreitung des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 9–18, and Reinhard Slenczka, “Die Auflösung der Schriftgrundlage und was daraus folgt,” in *Neues und Altes*, vol. 3 (Neuendettelsau: Freimund, 2000), 253–61.

¹ The words of Reinhard Slenczka, “Die Heilige Schrift, das Wort des dreieinigen Gottes,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 51 (2005): 185–86, may serve as a start for a discussion on inspiration, “In the right sense, directed by Scripture itself, it [sc. Inspiration] is about the Triune God being subject in the Holy Scriptures and that his holy Spirit dwells in them and works through them. It is the miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Scriptures came about, that they are distributed and preserved in the entire world and that they are interpreted and understood to this day. Miracles of the Spirit are every day occurrences, but mostly inconspicuous.” —“Im rechten, von der Schrift selbst geleiteten Verständnis geht es dabei jedoch darum, dass der dreieinige Subject in den Heiligen Schriften ist und dass sein heiliger Geist darin wohn und dadurch wirkt. Es ist das wunderbare Wirken des Heiligen Geistes, dass die Heiligen Schriften entstanden sind, dass sie in aller Welt verbreitet und bewahrt werden und dass sie auch heute ausgelegt und verstanden werden. Wunder des Geistes sind alltäglich, aber meist unscheinbar.”

² Louis Bouyer, *The Word, Church and Sacraments in Protestantism and*

The Lutheran Confessions do not contain an explicit article on hermeneutics, but model a faithful reading that starts with *sola scriptura* and trusts that the Scriptures are true and will lead to Christ.

Lutherans have a common hermeneutical heritage. That starts with *sola scriptura*, the emphasis on final authority of the Scriptures against all later churchly tradition. Church traditions can be helpful, but they also can be unhelpful. They have to be tested at the bar of the Scriptures, and thus the Scriptures are not only in the church, but also above the church.⁶ They nevertheless do not operate with a “nude Scripture,” rather because Lutherans are a creedal church, they acknowledge certain dogmatic decisions of the past as theologically correct because they agree with Scripture. Thus, the Book of Concord or parts thereof play a role in the church’s task of understanding Scripture, along with the emphasis on the centrality of Christ and/or the article of justification for the understanding of Scripture, and an emphasis on the literal understanding of the biblical text—even though that did not rule out some allegory in preaching, as long as it conformed to the “analogy of faith” (Rom 12:6). Lutherans share also in a rather unique view of the canon, insofar as they acknowledge that in the received canon there is an edge, namely the antilegomena in the New Testament. They emphasize Scripture as the word of the present God, in which he speaks in law and gospel, convicting of sin and forgiving sin. Where Lutherans differ—among other things—is first, on the question of historical criticism and its use and limitations, and second, on the question of how Scripture speaks to certain contemporary issues.

2. The Confessions and Hermeneutics

The confessional basis of the ILC states that the churches of the ILC “proclaim the Gospel of Christ on the basis of an unconditional commitment to the Holy Scriptures as the inspired and infallible Word of God and to the Lutheran Confessions contained in the Book of Concord

⁶ That goes against an Eastern Orthodox understanding as it is articulated by John Zizioulas, *Being in Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 189: “The apostolic kerygma of Christ needs to be constantly placed in the Spirit in order to be life and not just words. It cannot be an objectified norm in itself, something that judges the community of the Church from above or from outside.”

The authors of the Book of Concord thus see the Scripture as the word of God that is source and judge of all doctrine and which clearly articulates the articles of faith. Christ and his salvific work are the central content of Scripture.

as the true and faithful exposition of the Word of God.⁷ There is therefore a double commitment: to the Scriptures and to the Book of Concord; though the commitment to the Book of Concord is secondary, it is because (*quia*), not insofar (*quatenus*), it is “a true and faithful exposition of the Word of God.” Can the Confessions serve as a guide to hermeneutics? Confessional subscription assumes the correctness of the biblical interpretation in the Confessions. If we do not want to assume that the

Confessions arrived at their interpretation with a faulty hermeneutics by some felicitous inconsistency, then the Confessions could serve as an example of a good reading of Scripture in what they say and how they read it. The Book of Concord, though, does not have an article on hermeneutics and the interpretation of Scripture. Since the method of understanding should be appropriate to its object, some remarks on the view of Scripture in the Confessions are appropriate.

a. Scripture in the Book of Concord

There is no article on Scripture in the Book of Concord.⁸ Unlike Trent and some Reformed confessions, Scripture is presupposed, but not defined. Part of the reason could be the character of the Confessions as occasional writings. Thus, the Augsburg Confession does not deal with Scripture itself, since the authority of Scripture was not controversial, but rather with the relation of Scripture and tradition. What was controversial, too, was the proper understanding of Scripture. If there is no explicit article on Scripture, there is implicitly a doctrine of Scripture. “Word of God” can be used interchangeably with “Scripture,” though the semantic range of “word of God” goes beyond Scripture.⁹ Scripture is a divine book

⁷ “Constitution/Guiding Principles International Lutheran Council,” no. II, “Confessional Basis,” *International Lutheran Council*, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://ilc-online.org/files/2011/10/ILC-Constitution.pdf>.

⁸ The closest one gets to an article of Scripture is the introduction to the Epitome and SD, the “Binding Summary.”

⁹ See Holsten Fagerberg, *Die Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften von 1529 bis 1537* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1965), 15–18; Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 34–35, lists the different meanings of “word of God,” e.g., Christ (AC III, 1); as instrument of the Holy Spirit (Ap XXVIII, 10); as gospel in the narrow sense (SD II, 2). “Word of God and Scripture are used in a parallel way,” (AC conclusion of part 1). The

whose author is the Holy Spirit (Ap IV, 107–8).¹⁰ It is, as the word of God, the eternal truth (FC SD Binding Summary, 12). God’s word cannot deceive or lie (LC IV, 57; V, 75). It is pure, infallible, and unchangeable (Preface to the Book of Concord). Scripture is contrasted to all human books. The distinction between human traditions and the divine word is one of the main points of contention (Ep Binding Summary 2, 7; SD Binding Summary 9).¹¹ The Lutherans claim that their doctrine is founded solely on Scripture (Preface to AC, 8; AC Conclusion of Part I, 2; SA II, 2, 15).¹² If one preaches and teaches human doctrine as God’s word, one breaks the Second Commandment.¹³ Scripture is the pure, clear fountain of Israel, that is, the source of doctrine and proclamation (SD Binding Summary, 3). Scripture therefore has a foundational function for the church of all times. The Epitome takes up Romans 15:4 and states that everything that is written is written for our instruction (Ep XI, 16). The Scripture of the Old and New Testament is the “one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers

word of God can be read (SD II, 57). Scripture and word of God are used synonymously (SD XI, 12). Fagerberg, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, 18: “Die Formel Gottes Wort steht immer in irgendeiner Verbindung zur Bibel, entweder als ein anderer Ausdruck für die Bibel oder als Bezeichnung für ein bestimmtes Bibelwort.”

¹⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, references to the Book of Concord are from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 10th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), hereafter referred to as *BSLK*. Ap IV, 107–8 (*BSLK*, 182). “Profecto mirum est, adversarios tot locis scripturae nihil moveri, quae aperte tribuunt iustificationem fidei, et quidem detrahunt operibus. Num frustra existimant toties idem repeti? Num arbitrantur excidisse spiritui sancto non animadvertenti has voces?” Melancthon talks about the “Scripture of the Holy Spirit” in the Preface to the Apology when he says that the opponents have condemned certain articles contrary to the “manifestam scripturam spiritus sancti.” Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 110, referred to subsequently as Kolb-Wengert, translates it as “the clear writing of the Spirit.” The German translation/paraphrase of Justus Jonas reads “öffentlich helle Schrift und klare Wort des heil. Geistes” (Ap Preface, 9 [*BSLK*, 143]). Scripture is called “divine” (Preface to the Book of Concord).

¹¹ SD Binding Summary 9 (*BSLK*, 837, 10–15), “daß alleine Gottes Wort die einige Richtschnur und Regel aller Lehr sein und bleiben solle, welchem keins Menschen Schriften gleichgeachtet, sondern demselbigen alles unterworfen werden soll.”

¹² SA II, 2, 15 (*BSLK*, 421, 23–25), “Es heißt, Gottes Wort soll Artikel des Glaubens stellen und sonst niemand, auch kein Engel.”

¹³ Melancthon argues against masses for the dead that they “nulla habent testimonia, nullum mandatum ex scripturis. Neque vero est leve peccatum, tales cultus sine mandato Dei, sine exemplo scripturae in ecclesia instituere, et coenam Domini institutam ad recordationem et praedicationem inter vivos transferre ad mortuos. Hoc est abuti nomine Dei contra secundum praeceptum” (Ap XXIV, 89 *BSLK*, 373, 39–48). Luther writes, “Allermeist aber gehet der Mißbrauch in geistlichen Sachen, die das Gewissen belangen, wenn falsche Prediger aufstehen und ihren Lügentang für Gottes Wort dargeben” (LC II, 53 *BSLK*, 573, 25–29).

and teaching are to be judged and evaluated” (SD Binding Summary, 3).¹⁴ Scripture can be principle and judge in the church because it is clear. The clarity of Scripture is not a special topic in the Confessions, rather it is presupposed and shows itself in the way the Scriptures are interpreted.¹⁵ Thus, the Confessions quote clear passages for their position.¹⁶ The Confessions state expressly in the context of the discussion on the Lord’s Supper that this and all other articles of faith are based on the clear word of God.¹⁷ There is no reflection on clear and dark passages in Scripture and their relationship in the Confessions. The unity of Scripture is not specially discussed either, but just like clarity, is one of the presuppositions of the exegesis of the Confessions. All of Scripture is divided into law and gospel (Ap IV, 5; XII, 53). The Old and the New Testaments proclaim one way of salvation: faith in Christ (Ap IV, 57–59; XXIV, 55).¹⁸ The doctrine of justification

¹⁴ Kolb-Wengert, 527. The Scripture is called “judge” in Ep Binding Summary, 769.

¹⁵ Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 57, thinks that the “rein” and “limpidissimum” of SD Binding Summary, 3, refers to the clarity of Scripture. I think that goes too far. What is affirmed here is that Scripture is not adulterated by falsity so that it can serve as a guide and rule.

¹⁶ See the list in Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 58: Against the sacrifice of the mass for the dead (Ap XXIV, 94); for communion under both kinds (AC XXII, 2); for marriage of priests (AC XXIII, 3–9); against the necessity of human works for salvation (AC XXVIII, 43); for the distinction between civil and spiritual righteousness (Ap XVIII, 10); for justification by faith (Ap IV, 314); for divine monergism in conversion (SD II, 87).

¹⁷ “Nun ist ja kein so treuer noch gewisser Ausleger der Wort Jesu Christi, denn eben der Herr Christus selbst, der seinen Wort und sein Herz und Meinung am besten versteht und dieselben zu klären am leichtesten und verständigsten ist, welcher allhie als in Stiftung seines letzten Willens und Testaments und stets währender Bündnis und Vereinigung wie sonst in allen Artikeln des Glaubens und aller anderen Bund- und Gnadenzeichen oder Sakrament Einsetzung, als der Beschneidung, der mancherlei Opfer im alten Testament, der heiligen Taufe, nicht verblümete, sondern ganz eigentliche, einfältige, unzweifelhaftige und klare Wort gebrauch, und damit ja kein Mißverständnis einfallen könne, mit den Worten ‘für euch gegeben, für euch vergossen’ deutlicher erklärt, lässet auch seine Jünger in dem einfältigen, eigentlichen Verstand bleiben und befiehlt ihnen, daß sie alle Völker also lehre sollen, alles das zu halten, was ihnen, den Aposteln, befohlen hat” (SD VII, 50, *BSLK*, 988, 12–34). The clear words of Christ are also transmitted clearly without change by the apostles and evangelists. “Derhalben auch alle drei Evangelisten ... und S. Paulus, der nach der Himmelfahrt Christi daselbige empfangen, 1. Cor. 11, einhelliglich und mit einerlei Worten und Syllaben diese helle, klare, feste und wahrhaftige Wort Christi: ‘das ist mein Leib’ ganz auf einerlei Weise von dem gesegneten und dargereichten Brot ohne alle Deutungen und Änderung wiederholen” (SD VII, 51, *BSLK*, 988, 44–989, 7).

¹⁸ To this pertains also the christological interpretation of the Old Testament, see Dan 4:27: Ap IV, 262; Hosea 13:14: Ap XII, 140; Isa 53: Ap XX, 5; XXIV, 23; SA II, 1, 2, 5; Num 28:4–8 is understood as a type of Christ: Ap XXIV, 36; the omnipresence of Christ’s human nature is prophesied in the Old Testament (Ps 8:6; 93,1; Zech 9:10): SD VIII, 27.

as the chief article unites all of Scripture (Ap IV, 2; SA II, 1).¹⁹ Does the doctrine of justification have a hermeneutical function in the Confessions? Fagerberg denies it to avoid a reductionistic understanding of law and gospel.²⁰ The German translation of Apology IV, though, states: “But since there is such a dispute on the highest, most prominent article of the entire Christian doctrine, as very much depends on this article, which also serves preeminently the clear and correct understanding of the entire holy Scripture” (Ap IV, 2).²¹ Since the message of justification articulates the central meaning of Scripture, one can speak of a “hermeneutical guiding function.”²² But justification cannot be used as an axiomatic principle or a criterion of elimination.²³ The doctrine of justification is the explication of Christology into soteriology. Therefore, to speak of justification as central for Scripture means to speak of Christ as the center of Scripture.²⁴

b. Hermeneutics in the Book of Concord

The authors of the Book of Concord thus see Scripture as the word of God that is source and judge of all doctrine and which clearly articulates the articles of faith. Christ and his salvific work are the central content of Scripture. The debates in the time of the Reformation are at their center debates on the right interpretation of Scripture, and thus one can see in the Book of Concord a way of interpretation that distinguishes itself from the Roman Catholic and Zwinglian/Reformed.

What Lutheran exegesis looks like can be seen *e negativo* from the criticism of the Roman Catholic exegesis in the Apology.²⁵ Melanchthon accuses the authors of the Confutation of only considering some parts of the Scripture (Ap IV, 183); distorting Scripture, since they practice eisegesis instead of deriving the meaning from the text (Ap IV, 224); careless exegesis because they add or omit words (Ap IV, 264, Ap IV, 357);²⁶ distorting quotations or not considering the context (Ap IV, 286; XXIV, 15); neglecting or despising grammar (Ap IV, 283; XII, 106, 163); not following the common usage when investigating the meaning of a word (Ap IV, 357); and arguing contrary to logic and sophistically (Ap IV, 222, 335, 360), for example, when they make the consequence into a cause (Ap XX, 13), so that Melanchthon can ask in frustration: “Who taught these jackasses such logic?” (Ap XII, 123).²⁷

This means positively the entire Scripture must be considered, that no passages may be ignored that pertain to the issue. Any interpretation must be derived from the text—texts are to be understood in their context. The rules of grammar and logic apply, the meaning of words is defined by common usage; in other words, the common rules of language also apply to the biblical texts. In principle, one should assume the literal sense of a text. This is especially emphasized in the controversy with the Reformed and their view of the words of institution as metaphorical.

Because of all of these things, we are bound to interpret and construe these words of the eternal, reliable, and almighty Son of God, our Lord, creator, and redeemer, Jesus Christ, not as embellished, figurative, exotic expressions as would appear in line with our reason. Instead, we should accept the words as they stand, in their proper, clear sense, with simple faith and appropriate obedience and not permit ourselves to be drawn away from this position by any objection or human counterargument spun out of human reason, no matter how attractive it may appear to our reason (SD VII, 45).²⁸

Of course, the authors of the Book of Concord know that there is figurative speech in the Bible. But there is no

¹⁹ Ap IV, 2 (BSLK, 159, 1), “Pracipuus locus doctrinae christianae.”

²⁰ Fagerberg, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, 38–39.

²¹ BSLK, 159, 3–8, “Diweil aber solcher Zank ist über dem höchsten fürnehmsten Artikel der ganzen christlichen Lehre, also da an diesem Artikel ganz viel gelegen ist, welcher auch zu klarem richtigem Verstande der ganzen heiligen Schrift fürnehmlich dienet.”

²² Gunter Wenz, *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1966), 1: 180.

²³ With Wenz, *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften*, 180. Hartmut Günther, “Das Schriftverständnis in der Konkordienformel,” in *Bekanntnis zur Wahrheit: Aufsätze über die Konkordienformel*, ed. Jobst Schöne (Erlangen: Martin Luther-Verlag, 1978), 32, rejects the thesis that in the FC the article of justification is “canon in the canon.” Wenz uses “canon in the canon” positively, but this does not describe how, for example, Melanchthon interprets James. He does not argue that James indeed does contradict Paul, but that this does not need to disturb a Christian, because what James says is not binding because of the canon in the canon. Rather, he refutes the claims of the opposing side with a detailed exegesis (Ap IV, 244–53). Luther uses the chief article in SA II to criticize not Scripture but ceremonies that have no basis in Scripture. Thus, he criticizes for example the invocation of saints because it contradicts the chief article and because there is neither command nor example in Scripture (SA II, 2, 25).

²⁴ Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 73: “One can speak of the centrality of the doctrine of justification by grace in the Scriptures, or one can speak simply of their Christocentricity, for the person and work of Jesus Christ is the *sine qua non* of justification.”

²⁵ The following according to Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 78.

²⁶ Ap IV, 264, against Jerome’s interpretation.

²⁷ “Quis docuit istos asinos hanc dialecticam? Sed haec neque dialectica neque sophistica est, sed est sycphantica” (Ap XII, 123, BSLK, 278, 2–5).

²⁸ Kolb-Wengert, 600–601.

detailed discussion on the question of when one should deviate from the literal sense.²⁹ The example of Abraham who does follow the word that commands him to sacrifice his son, even though it seemed to contradict reason and an article of faith, is positively used for the humility that honors God by believing him (SD VII, 46).

This emphasis on the Scripture as a present authority does not mean that everything in Scripture pertains to the present reader in the same manner. The law of the Old Testament is not simply the law that is preached to the church. The Decalogue is binding on the Christian, while the civil and ceremonial laws of the Torah are not (Ap IV, 6). The ceremonial law was binding for a certain time, but not for Christians, as the apostolic preaching shows (Ap XV, 32). Even the Decalogue is not simply the eternal will of God. The Third Commandment is, when it establishes the seventh day as a day of rest, part of the ceremonial law (LC I, 82). Holy Scripture itself decides what in the Old Testament was given only to the believers of the Old Testament and what continues to be preached.³⁰ In regard to the commands by the apostolic church, Melancthon understands the decree of the so-called apostolic council in Acts 15:23–29 not as a binding of the church of all ages, since it was given only for a limited time “to avoid offense.” Rejected is any understanding that this decree can be used against the righteousness of faith. “For in this ordinance one must pay attention to the chief part of Christian doctrine which is not abolished by this decree” (AC XXVIII, 65–66).³¹

²⁹ “Reason” is not acceptable as a criterion (SD II, 8; VII, 102).

³⁰ “For Holy Scripture did away with the Sabbath, and it teaches that after the revelation of the gospel all ceremonies of the old law may be given up” (Kolb-Wengert, 100). “Dann die heilig Schrift hat den Sabbat abgetan und lehret, daß alle Ceremonien des alten Gesetz nach Eröffnung des Evangeliums mogen nachgelassen werden” (AC XXVIII, 59, BSLK, 130, 12–15).

³¹ Kolb-Wengert, 100. Luther discusses in his “Ein Bericht an einen guten Freund von beider Gestalt des Sakraments” of 1528 if the church has “authority to change the ordinance of God and the Holy Spirit and to impose a new commandment, as the apostles have done then” in Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe (hereafter referred to as WA) 26, 569, 29–31. Luther interprets the passage starting with Peter’s speech (Acts 15:10–11). Peter rejects here the binding nature of the Mosaic law for the Gentile Christians and teaches salvation by faith without the law. This position was accepted by the assembly. The four commands of the apostolic council are given for the sake of love, not for the sake of conscience, i.e., their purpose is to facilitate the life together of Jewish and Gentile Christians. As such, they are temporary rules which fell into disuse already in the time of the New Testament, as 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 show (WA 26, 573, 8ff). Luther does realize that the last point of the decree is of a different nature. Fornication is still forbidden, because chastity is a fruit of the Spirit and is commanded also in other passages of the New Testament (WA 26, 573, 14–15, 32–34). Thus, Melancthon and Luther agree that the church has no

3. Formal Statements on Hermeneutics

The ILC does not have a common statement on hermeneutics. Individual churches have documents that are specifically dedicated to hermeneutics or touch on hermeneutics. Thus, the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) has adopted a statement on hermeneutics by its general pastoral conference in 2009 and its convention in 2011. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) does not have a statement dedicated solely to hermeneutics; *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, adopted by the synod in convention in 1973, is the closest to an official statement on hermeneutics of the LCMS. There are also documents by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations dealing with hermeneutical issues, but these, since they were not officially adopted, do not have the same status as *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*. An article by Edward Kettner posted on the homepage of The Lutheran Church—Canada does touch upon hermeneutical questions.³² The Lutheran Church of Australia, an associate member of the ILC and the LWF, dealt with hermeneutical issues in their *Theses of Agreement* and subsequent documents.³³ For time’s sake, I will give only a summary of *Biblische Hermeneutik* and *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*.³⁴

a. *Biblische Hermeneutik*

The document consists of a Preamble, Theological Foundation, Epistemological Considerations, Methodology, and Special Questions. The Preamble describes the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments as the “infallible

authority to change God’s law, but the authority to create ordinances for a certain time for the sake of love, not to bind consciences.

³² Edward Kettner, “Lutheran Divergences: How Lutherans Are Drifting Apart,” *Word and Deed* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 3–11, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.lutheranchurch-canada.ca/ctcr/Other%20Documents/Lutheran%20Divergences.pdf>. This is based on a presentation to the joint meeting of the Council of Presidents of Lutheran Church—Canada (LCC) and the Council of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, January 1998, as stated at http://www.concordiasem.ab.ca/academics/edward_kettner.php. This article has not been adopted as an official document. Nevertheless, as a resource offered by the LCC, it can serve at least as an example of hermeneutics in this synod.

³³ See Lutheran Church of Australia, Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, Volume 1, Part A, *Theses of Agreement*; Part B, *The Scriptures*, particularly “A Consensus Statement on Holy Scripture,” and two attachments, “Towards a Common Understanding of the Authority of Holy Scripture” and “The Extent and Certainty of the Canon,” accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/ctcr/>.

³⁴ Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK), *Biblische Hermeneutik* (2011), accessed May 26, 2017, <http://selk.de/download/Biblische-Hermeneutik-2011.pdf>.

word of the triune God, through which he speaks in history and the present to men, works saving faith and thus builds the church.” Lutheran Christians interpret Holy Scripture in faith in Jesus Christ and pray for the help of the Holy Spirit. Biblical hermeneutics instructs such a reading that is appropriate to the Christian faith and the ecclesiastical proclamation. Especially, it directs reading in such a way that Christ is known as the Lord and King of Scripture; to interpret Scripture in the certainty, that what it says and effects, is truth and reality and does not deceive; that Scripture is to be interpreted in the context of the faith of Christendom—divine service, prayer, doctrine, piety; to interpret Scripture so that God’s action in law and gospel is perceived; to interpret Scripture in the personal situation of *oratio, mediatio, tentatio*; that the interpreter is aware that he himself is interpreted by Scripture; to interpret Scripture in the framework of Scripture and the Confessions, in other words, the Scripture is foundation and rule of the church, the Confessions are a summary of Scripture and dependent as a norm on Scripture. The Confessions at the same time structure the church’s reading of Scripture in such a way that it is directed toward Christ. Such an interpretation is theologically and methodologically appropriate. Any interpretation must be accountable—its results must be checkable and accountable.

In the “Theological Foundation,” first, God speaking and acting by his word, his deeds done by the word in creation and history, the record of these deeds in the Spirit-wrought words of the Old Testament and New Testament, and finally the proclamation through which God effects faith where and when it pleases him to, have to be distinguished and kept together. The canon of Scripture is given to the church as a presupposition and as a norm, and thus the word of God in the form of the canon is the final authority for the church. Scripture authorizes the church, not vice versa. The sufficiency of Scripture for doctrine and life is affirmed. Hermeneutically, this also implies that Scripture interprets Scripture, and that there is no authority outside of Scripture concerning interpretation that is superior to Scripture.

Regarding the canon, even though there are “edges” to it, the canon as generally accepted is also received by the Lutheran church. The understanding of Scripture that leads the believer to Christ is received in faith and is not a product of human reason. Taking the canon seriously means to see Christ as the center of Scripture and reject an understanding that results in disparate theologies in

Scripture.

The Confessions direct the understanding of Scripture in the way Christ and the apostles understood it, especially in the distinction between law and gospel, the self-verification of the words of God and the proper relation between the Old and New Testaments in promise and fulfillment, type and antitype, the double effect of the word of God in faith and unbelief, understanding and hardening of hearts, and the insight that the Scriptures aim at the proclamation of faith and love, justification, and sanctification, thus affirming that the intended aim of God’s word is the justification of the sinner for Christ’s sake. The gospel is seen at the same time in the history of God’s dealing with Israel and the Gentiles, the life of Jesus, the sending of the Spirit and the eschatological future, manifesting the faithfulness of God’s promise. Such an approach takes up impulses of the canonical approach to interpretation.

In regard to “Epistemological Considerations,” the document affirms that Holy Scripture bears the marks of its historical origin and that understanding and interpretation are also in the framework of history. Thus, the situation of the reader influences his understanding to a different degree. The task is thus to maintain the identity of the given word of God in its present reception. Thus, different interpretations are to be evaluated by the biblical word of God. Since understanding is not without preconceptions, any preconceived notions have to be evaluated by Scripture. A proper pre-understanding in the Lutheran church is that the reader expects from the totality of Scripture that it leads to Christ and reads it in the context of the creeds, prayer, and divine service of Christendom. A reading of Scripture as a document of the history of religion or under the guidance of ideas foreign to Scripture is inappropriate. The truth of Scripture is bound to the person of Christ. Truth is, in this context, that which opens truth to us, that which puts us into the light of truth and what involves us in the effect of divine truth. Truth thus is about the relation of us to the one who is the truth. This truth reveals itself in interpretation and preaching whose goal is faith and love. Such interpretation is done trusting in the reliability and clarity of Scripture. Such understanding of faith is not individualistic, but in the framework of the church of all times. Thus, such a hermeneutical approach is contextual, in the context of church, with the aim to articulate the faith of the one holy, Christian, and apostolic church. This hermeneutical process is effected by the Spirit, with a use of

human logic. The human intellect has a ministerial function and acknowledges humbly that nothing is impossible with God. Thus, a hermeneutic that operates as if there were no God is excluded. The instrumental use of reason serves the accountability/plausibility of faith. As such the limitations and the possibilities of all hermeneutical methods are to be tested.

This means that philological and historical methods are legitimate and necessary in the interpretation of Scripture, as the “Methodology” chapter explains. The acknowledgment of the canon means also that human reason is not above Scripture. Since methods have to be appropriate to the texts, this means for the interpretation of Scripture that its texts have to be understood in the context of the canon ordered toward the goal of the proclamation of Christ. The way of interpretation has to be accountable and transparent to general understanding. Hypotheses have their place in the effort to solve problems concerning the text and content, though they have to be minimized. Clear passages are to be used to interpret darker passages. Diachronic methods should serve the understanding of the present text in its canonical context. The history of interpretation is to be used critically. Different methods can be helpful and appropriate, such as textual criticism, form criticism, linguistic methods, social and historical research, redaction criticism, history of interpretation, and word studies.

In the chapter “Special Questions,” the first issue is the edge of the canon, i.e., the issue of the Septuagint, of textual variants, and the antilegomena. Christian doctrine has to be taught from the homologoumena. Christ as the center of the canon does not establish a canon in the canon, but rather enables the integration of the biblical texts, its richness, and its different weight. This allows a fuzzy edge, since everything can contribute to the whole. In regard to the historical reference of the biblical texts, God interacts with men and thus “makes” history, as the Old Testament in the history of Israel and the New Testament in the person of Jesus shows. Extrabiblical documents are used in the effort to shed light on the background and the reality of biblical texts. Historical methodology is appropriate for an understanding of the texts, since God’s word came to men in men’s word with the historical situatedness of human existence. However, the truth and reliability of God’s word is not questioned when historical research judges differently, for example, when a reconstruction of a certain event is no longer possible. Historical research can neither confirm nor

refute the truth of biblical proclamation. The account of historical events in Scripture is in the context of an interpretation of the promise of God and its eschatological fulfillment, in which also history will find its completion.

Concerning the Christian life, the distinction between law and gospel has to be maintained. The third use of the law, as in the Ten Commandments, the prophetic admonitions, the commandments of Jesus (for example, the Sermon on the Mount), and the paraenesis of the apostles, has a place under the rule of the gospel for the baptized, believing, and justified Christian. The imperfect works of the Christian are not works of the law, but fruits of the Spirit, though they conform to the divine commands given in Scripture. Thus, the law in this context means the immutable will of God (FC VI, 17). The will of God is expressed in the Bible in a multitude of textual genres. Biblical directions are, just as the historical narratives or doctrinal passages, binding for the church. They are to be interpreted and applied in the present following the premises in this paper, especially the distinction between the Old and New Testament and between law and gospel. According to the New Testament, the laws concerning the cult and the political and social law of the Old Testament have ended in Christ and are thus not simply binding in the church. On the other hand, the Decalogue and individual regulations from the holiness code and the primeval orders are applied to the life of the church. Regarding the time-bound character of instructions in the New Testament, the context of the passage, its terminology, and its specific linguistic form have to be taken into account. Thus, there are mandates like the means of grace and the office of the keys, binding for the church of all times.

In Paul, there are mandates that he transmits as commandments of the Lord, but also personal opinions or churchly customs, which still can be examples to later times. The ethos of following Christ and of the *Haustafel* both complement each other and the commandment to love one’s neighbor is made concrete in the individual Commandments, as in the Decalogue. Commandments are not to be seen as restrictive, but as describing the space opened by baptism in which the Christian life is lived under the blessing of Christ and under the guidance of the Spirit. Interpretation and application of the Commandments is proper when it leads to the return to baptism and to life conforming to this reality.

There is a legitimate aspect to reader-response criticism since God’s word aims at reception and since

the promise given in Scripture correlates to faith as the intended response. Nevertheless, the primacy of God's self-communication has to be maintained. The response does not constitute God's self-communication, but reader response as a description of human processes of communication can help to understand how communication happens and can lead to an appreciation of the activity of reading and hearing.

Concerning the multiple meanings of the word of God, there is already in the Bible the phenomenon that texts are interpreted beyond their historical meaning. The history of interpretation shows how different texts are differently understood. There is a certain openness of texts to different interpretations. There is, therefore, a certain polyvalence of the text. Criteria for appropriate responses are canon, rule of faith, and church, and thus limit interpretations.

What about non-literal or typological and allegorical interpretation? There are such interpretations already in Scripture. To avoid arbitrariness, the analogy of faith has to be maintained. Typological and allegorical interpretations can illustrate and promote, but not establish, the faith of the church.

Contextual interpretation can make readers sensitive to the polyvalence of a text. It has to be criticized when it assumes that the context established the text. Contextual interpretation is structurally similar to homiletical interpretation and its expectation that the text has a specific message in this situation. Needed is a reflection on why certain implications of a text are perceived differently at different times.

b. A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles

As stated in the introduction, the closest the LCMS gets to a formal statement on hermeneutics is *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, one of the few theological documents adopted by the synod in convention. The historical context of this document is the dispute in the LCMS in the 1960s and 1970s on the use of historical-critical exegesis. *Scriptural and Confessional Principles* was adopted in 1973 to counteract certain theological positions in the LCMS. It is therefore not a complete statement on hermeneutics, nor does it engage some of the hermeneutical questions of a later date that *Biblische Hermeneutik* addresses. The synod in convention stated that it is "Scriptural and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions, and therefore a formulation which derives its authority from the Word of God and which expresses the

Synod's position on current doctrinal issues."³⁵ As such, it is on the same level as the Confessions, but members of the LCMS are asked to "honor and uphold" its doctrinal statements, which "means not merely to examine and study them, but to support, act and teach in *accordance* with them until they have been shown to be contrary to God's Word."³⁶ Thus, there is a provision for the eventual rejection of such a statement that is not in place regarding the Book of Concord.

In regard to hermeneutics, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles* affirms that law and gospel "must be constantly and diligently proclaimed in the church of God until the end of the world, but with due distinction."³⁷ The *usus elencticus legis* and the *tertius usus* are named, rejected is that either the gospel is the "norm or standard for the Christian life" or that the Christian does "no longer need the instruction of the law." Rejected also is that "what God's law declares to be sinful (for example, adultery or theft) need not be regarded as sinful in all times and situations."³⁸ Article IV on Holy Scripture affirms in its first part, "The Inspiration of Scripture," that "all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit," that therefore "God is ... the true Author of every word of Scripture." Rejected is a view that sees no qualitative difference between biblical inspiration and the inspiration of all Christians, a view of inspiration as mere guidance of the human authors, inspiration limited to that which directly pertains to "Jesus Christ and man's salvation" and that "portions of the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ contain imaginative additions which had their origin in the early Christian community and do not present actual facts."³⁹

The second part on "The Purpose of Scripture" states that the Scriptures, since their "primary purpose is to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus

³⁵ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Resolution 3–01 of 1973, quoted in *Guiding Principles for the Use of a Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles with Special Reference to the Expression of Dissent: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations* (November 1973), 5, accessed May 26, 2017, www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=2296.

³⁶ LCMS, *Guiding Principles*, 6, the formulation from Resolution 2–21 of the LCMS convention in 1971.

³⁷ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.lcms.org/doctrine/scripturalprinciples>.

³⁸ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, Study Edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 12.

³⁹ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 18.

Christ,” are only rightly used “when they are read from the perspective of justification by faith and the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.” But since the saving work of Christ was achieved in history, “we acknowledge that the recognition of the soteriological purpose of Scripture in no sense permits us to call into question or deny the historicity or factuality of matters recorded in the Bible.” Therefore, an understanding of what Scripture says without relating it to Christ and his work is not an adequate understanding of Scripture. Since Christ is at the center of Scripture, the Old Testament “read on its own terms,” bears witness to Christ. Rejected is the view that the “historicity of events or the occurrence of miracles” can be denied, as long as law and gospel are distinguished properly and that as long as the primary purpose of Scripture is maintained, questions of fact, such as if Christ was truly born of a virgin, are irrelevant.⁴⁰

In the third section on “The Gospel and Holy Scripture,” the gospel “of the gracious justification of the sinner through faith in Jesus Christ” is affirmed not only as the “chief doctrine of Holy Scripture and a basic presupposition for the interpretation of Scripture,” but as “the heart and center of our Christian faith and theology,” as material principle. The Scriptures are the formal principle. The gospel is that to which the Scriptures bear witness; the Scriptures direct the Christian to the gospel. A false description of the relation between gospel and Scripture is when the acceptance of the Scripture, not the gospel, is made the heart of the Christian faith; when the gospel, not the Scriptures, are made the norm for judging doctrine; when it is deemed acceptable to question the “historicity or facticity” of certain events, as long as the gospel is not distorted; or that “Christians need not accept matters taught in the Scriptures that are not a part of the gospel.”⁴¹

The authority of Scripture is described as twofold: a causative authority, that is, the power to create faith, and the normative authority, “to serve as the church’s sole standard of doctrine and life.” The authority of Scripture is accepted by faith. Thus, the authority of Scriptures is not only in what they do, but in what they are as the inspired and inerrant word of God. Rejected is the view “that the Christian community in every age is directly inspired by the Holy Spirit and is therefore free to go beyond the doctrine of the prophets and apostles in determining the

content of certain aspects of its faith and witness.”⁴²

In the section on “The Canonical Text of Scripture,” the present canonical text, not any precanonical forms, is affirmed as the authoritative text for the church today. This implies that degrees of authority in the canonical Scriptures based on what is deemed historically “authentic” is rejected, just as it limits the use of extra-canonical sources in interpretation and their authority.⁴³

The infallibility of Scripture is described as inerrancy. “We therefore believe, teach, and confess, that since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, they contain no errors or contradiction, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth.” Ruled out by this understanding of infallibility is any accommodation to error in the Scriptures and error in what the Scriptures affirm to be the case.⁴⁴

The unity of Scripture means that in the variety of Scripture there is a unity in the “same doctrine of the Gospel, in all its articles.” Rejected is the position that in the Bible there are “conflicting or contradictory teachings and theologies.”⁴⁵

Regarding Old Testament prophecy, the Old Testament contains Messianic prophecies which are predictive and are correctly interpreted in the New Testament.⁴⁶

The section on “Historical Methods of Biblical Interpretation” is the longest in the document. It affirms that God reveals himself in history and that the biblical writings are historical documents written in specific settings. Thus, the Scriptures “invite historical investigation and are to be taken seriously as historical documents.” But the interpreter of Scripture

cannot adopt uncritically the presuppositions and canons of the secular historian, but ... will be guided in his use of historical techniques by the presupposition of his faith in the Lord of history, who reveals Himself in Holy Scripture as the one who

⁴⁰ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 20.

⁴¹ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 23.

⁴² LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 26.

⁴³ Therefore, it is wrong to rank material that is viewed as “authentic,” i.e., the “authentic” words of Jesus, as having greater authority than “non-authentic” statements. It is rejected that “certain pericopes or passages in the canonical text of Scripture may be regarded as imaginative additions of the Biblical authors or of the early Christian community and therefore need to be accepted as fully authoritative”; that extracanonical sources “may be used in such a way as to call into question the clear meaning of the canonical text” (LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 29).

⁴⁴ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 31–32.

⁴⁵ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 34.

⁴⁶ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 36. See Ap IV, 5; FC SD V, 23.

creates, sustains, and even enters our history in order to lead it to His end.

A secularist and naturalistic view of history is rejected, as is the view that if the use of historical methods “leads to conclusions at variance with the evident meaning of the Biblical text,” then such conclusions can be held “without violating the Lutheran view of Scripture or our commitment to the Lutheran Confessions.”⁴⁷

4. Hermeneutics as Church Dividing: The Example of North America

The issue of historical criticism remained a problem between the LCMS and other Lutheran churches in the United States. “The problem of historical criticism of scripture dogged the deliberations of the council [sc. Lutheran Council in the USA (LCUSA)] through its life.”⁴⁸

In the discussions in LCUSA, there was agreement that Scripture is the word of God and that it testifies to Christ; that every exegetical method is historically conditioned and thus changeable; that there is no exegetical method that will prevent human error; that every method reflects the philosophical and theological presupposition of its practitioner; that any method can be abused, but is therefore not by itself illegitimate; that all human efforts are subservient/ministerial “to the God who encounters us in scripture through the Holy Spirit.” The disagreements between the LCMS and the ALC/LCA participants were on questions of if the Scriptures, since God is their primary author, are without error in what it says and that historical criticism therefore “contradicts the Spirit’s connection with the Bible’s origin,” the very definition of historical criticism; the distinction between magisterial and ministerial use of reason, and the Scriptures as not only causative authority, that through them the Holy Spirit works faith in human hearts, but also the normative authority, “that the scriptural texts provide a God-given infallible norm for the proclamation of the Gospel”; and that historical criticism undermines the normative authority and ultimately also the causative authority.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 39.

⁴⁸ Maria Erling, “The Americanization of American Lutheranism: Democratization of Authority and the Ordination of Women, Part I,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 11, no. 6 (October 2011), accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/186>.

⁴⁹ Naomi Frost, *Golden Visions, Broken Dreams: A Short History of the Lutheran Council in the USA* (New York: Lutheran Council in the USA, 1987), 20–21.

The theological differences that led to the end of church fellowship between the LCMS and ALC in 1981 were the authority and interpretation of Holy Scripture, the meaning of confessional subscription and its implications for the interpretation of Scripture and limits of theological diversity the Confessions set, and the nature and basis of church fellowship.⁵⁰ At the convention in 1981, fellowship was terminated because of “doctrinal differences,” among them the

inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of Holy Scriptures; the meaning and implications of confessional subscription; the nature and basis of fellowship; the ordination of women to the pastoral office; membership in ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches; and varying practices regarding anti-Christian organizations.⁵¹

5. The Hermeneutical Question Pertaining to Women’s Ordination

In 1963, a group of Lutheran pastors in Germany sent out a manifesto against women’s ordination. Bishop Lilje of Hannover wrote in his answer to them, “He who believes that this use of Scripture is possible, has left the ground of the interpretation of Scripture according to the reformation.”⁵² Here the dissent on women’s ordination is clearly described as a hermeneutical one. The same observation was made in the discussions in the United States. When the churches of the Lutheran Council in the United States discussed women’s ordination around 1970,

the Lutheran churches in their study of the biblical passages concerning women stumbled into significant disagreement over the biblical passages in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, and in the letter to the Ephesians, that told women to be silent, to obey, to refrain from any teaching role. But in conducting the study, and in commending the matter to the churches, Reumann and his committee determined that differences among Lutherans were hermeneu-

⁵⁰ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: A Statement of Doctrinal Differences,” *Forward in Remembrance: 54th Regular Convention St. Louis, August 3–10, 1981, Convention Workbook*, 397–402.

⁵¹ LCMS, *Forward in Remembrance*, Resolution 3–01; 153–55. “Anti-Christian organizations” refers to lodges like the freemasons.

⁵² “Wer diese Verwendung Heiliger Schrift für möglich hält, hat den Boden reformatorischer Schriftauslegung verlassen,” quoted in Dietrich Kuessner, *Die Braunschweiger Landeskirche in the 70er Jahren und ihr Landesbischof Gerhard Heintze* (Wendeburg: Verlag Uwe Krebs, 2014), 42.

tical and not exegetical.⁵³

But what were these hermeneutical issues? John Reumann summarizes them thus:

If one argues by proof texts, certain individual verses seem to exclude women from ordination—and from engaging in many functions in which they commonly participate in our churches nowadays. If a rigorous criticism is applied, some of these texts most frequently cited against ordaining women can be excluded (as glosses) or demoted in value (as deutero-Pauline). If the entire mass of biblical evidence is considered, it is possible that there are seemingly conflicting views, even in the verses claiming to be from the same writer, Paul.⁵⁴

Besides these biblical issues, Reumann also wants the history of the church to be taken into consideration and today “one finds oneself compelled to take into consideration also a host of other factors besides the biblical and historical factors.” What the “other factors” are, Reumann does not specify. Is that where sociological questions enter the hermeneutical endeavor? Reumann mentions a last point pertaining to hermeneutics: “Does a central gospel or do individual texts—and if so, which ones and how interpreted—prevail in reaching a decision?” For Reumann, the hermeneutical questions are therefore:

- Is it legitimate to argue from “proof text” or “individual passages”?
- Is it legitimate to exclude certain parts of the canonical Scriptures as glosses?
- Is it legitimate to entertain the possibility of contradictions in Scripture and even in one author?
- Can the “central gospel” have the last word against an “individual passage”?

An essay by Krister Stendahl, who played an important role in the discussions on women’s ordination in Sweden and in North America, published originally in Swedish, was translated as “The Bible and the Role of Women” with a new subtitle, “A Case Study in Hermeneutics.”⁵⁵ For him, the exegetical result is, that in the New Testament, when speaking about the role of women in the church, “we have found that when a reason is given, it is always

by reference to the subordinate position of women in the order of creation.”⁵⁶ This subordinate position concerns not only the church, it is not even church specific, but is a structure in church and society. Thus, the emancipation of women is just as against the New Testament as women’s ordination. For Stendahl, there is a “straight” path for the church:

[O]ne can maintain that every form of emancipation is foreign to the biblical view. ... Then the question of ordination of women would not arise. Such a view is consistent and honest. ... The question is whether it is truly biblical or whether it is merely an attempt to play “First-Century Bible Land.”⁵⁷

Here his criticism of the Scandinavian exegesis of his time, which he calls “realistic exegesis,” comes in. “When the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* helped us to accept the primitive, the Semitic, the collective, the cultic, the eschatological in the New Testament, realistic biblical study was seen to strengthen the respect for a vigorous and colorful orthodoxy or neo-orthodoxy.” But the problem of such a school of interpretation that is strictly descriptive may lead to a new Biblicism, if the hermeneutical question is not raised. “As a hermeneutical principle it may lead to a denial of history as God’s history. For it is highly doubtful that God wants us to play ‘First-Century Semites.’”⁵⁸ This critique of “realistic exegesis” frames his rejection of the option to simply follow or imitate the New Testament. Since repristination is not an option, one should accept emancipation of women “with enthusiasm.” “It could be argued that such an attitude is quite in accordance with our obedience to the Bible, provided that those elements in its witness which point beyond what was actualized in the first century are permitted their full and creative force.”⁵⁹ Taken with the remark before, this probably means that women’s emancipation is “God’s history.” Thus, the hermeneutical issue is:

- In what way is the worldview of the New Testament binding on the present church?
- In what way is a rejection of modern developments a rejection of “God’s history”?
- In what way should the church develop elements of the biblical tradition that are in harmony with present societal development and reject those that are

⁵³ Erling, “Americanization of American Lutheranism.”

⁵⁴ John Reumann, *Ministries Examined: Laity, Clergy, Women, and Bishops in a Time of Change* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 98–99.

⁵⁵ Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

⁵⁶ Stendahl, *Role of Women*, 38.

⁵⁷ Stendahl, *Role of Women*, 40.

⁵⁸ Stendahl, *Role of Women*, 17.

⁵⁹ Stendahl, *Role of Women*, 41.

not in harmony with society?

Jürgen Roloff in his commentary on 1 Timothy states, “The admission of women to the office is founded finally on a fundamental *hermeneutical decision*, which therefore cannot be shared by representatives of a strict Biblicism.”⁶⁰ Roloff can endorse women’s ordination because the argumentation in 1 Timothy 2 following Jewish exegesis of Genesis 2 and 3 is “artificial and problematic.” But the decisive point is that *Sachkritik* has to be exercised, not least because of the reception history of the text in centuries of Christians’ history that led to the discrimination and marginalization of women in the church. But this *Sachkritik* is not motivated by social issues, it is founded on the total witness of the New Testament and how it talks about the dignity of women and the position of women in the church. Since this text wants to be an interpretation of the gospel, it has to be evaluated by the gospel and has to be judged as lacking and also as a wrong interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3.⁶¹ The hermeneutical issues raised by Roloff are thus:

- Is the interpretation of the Old Testament by the New Testament authoritative on the church?
- Should the New Testament writings be evaluated by the gospel and the overall witness of the New Testament?

Some of these hermeneutical questions are addressed in statements by churches of the ILC.

In regard to the question of if it is legitimate to entertain the possibility of contradictions in Scripture and even in one author, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles* denies this.

We reject the view that Holy Scripture, both within and between its various books and authors, presents us with conflicting or contradictory teachings and theologies. We regard this view not only as violating the Scripture’s own understanding of itself but also as making it impossible for the church to have and confess a unified theological position that is truly Biblical and evangelical.⁶²

Biblische Hermeneutik does not address the question directly. But its emphasis on the canon and the positive

view of the canonical approach in exegesis leads at least in a direction that would make it difficult to talk about contradictions in Scripture.⁶³ Since Christ is the center of Scripture—not the “canon in the canon,” “the entire biblical text in its different textual genres, its richness and in its different weight” can be integrated.⁶⁴

Is it legitimate to exclude certain parts of the canonical Scriptures as glosses? Both Scriptural and Confessional Principles and *Biblische Hermeneutik* emphasize the authoritative nature of the canonical text of Scripture.⁶⁵ *Biblische Hermeneutik* has a discussion on textual questions and the canon. Just as the canon has an edge (for example, the Old Testament apocrypha, the New Testament antilegomena), so also in regard to textual questions there is an edge, so that there can be a discussion on textual variants. This does not need to be problematic, as long as they are integrated through the center of Scripture, that is, Christ. This seems to imply that strictly speaking, a *canonical* passage of Scripture cannot be excluded as a gloss, though there can be more than one option concerning a textual variant that is acceptable.

In what way is the worldview of the New Testament binding on the present church? *Scriptural and Confessional Principles* rejects the opinion

that the Biblical authors accommodated themselves to using and repeating as true the erroneous notions of their day (for example, the claim that Paul’s statements on the role of women are not binding today because they are the culturally conditioned result of the apostle’s sharing the views of contemporary Judaism as a child of his time).⁶⁶

This does not speak generally to the question of worldview, but it strongly suggests that the worldview of the New Testament is indeed binding on the present church. *Scriptural and Confessional Principles* rejects also the view that the position of Paul on women in the church is not binding on the church today because his views reflect the opinions of contemporary Judaism.⁶⁷

The document *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice* by the LCMS places the

⁶³ SELK, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 2.2; 2.4.

⁶⁴ SELK, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 5.1.

⁶⁵ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, IV, E, 29; SELK, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 2.2; 2.4; 5.1.

⁶⁶ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, IV, F, 31.

⁶⁷ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, IV, F, 31.

⁶⁰ Jürgen Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus* Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 15 (Zürich: Benziger, Neukirchener-Verlag, 1988), 146.

⁶¹ Roloff, *Brief an Timotheus*, 147.

⁶² LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, IV, G, 34.

discussion on women's role in the church in the framework of the order of creation and the order of redemption.⁶⁸ The order of creation means that God "has given to that which has been created a certain definite order which, because it has been created by Him, is the expression of His immutable will. These relationships belong to the very structure of created existence." The order of redemption "refers to the relationship of the redeemed to God and to each other in the new creation established by Him in Jesus Christ."⁶⁹ The order of redemption does not abolish the order of creation. Hence, Paul can argue with creation and the law in 1 Corinthians 11:7–9; 14:34, and 1 Timothy 2:13–14. Spiritual equality does not preclude subordination (*hypotage*). Galatians 3:28 speaks about baptism. "However, the oneness of male and female in Christ does not obviate the distinction given in creation. Galatians 3:28 does not mean that the identity of man or woman can be exchanged any more than that Greeks can become Jews or *vice versa*."⁷⁰ This document implicitly addresses thus the question of proof texting and arguing from individual passages. It does refer to individual passages, but sees them in a larger biblical context.

In what way should the church develop elements of the biblical tradition that are in harmony with present societal development and reject those that are not in harmony with society? *Biblische Hermeneutik* addresses the tension between the time-limited nature of biblical commands and continued obligation, but gives only inner-biblical criteria (Old Testament–New Testament, context) and the overall purpose of Scripture. Interpretation of commands and paraenetic passages is appropriate when it leads to a return to baptism and a life that conforms to baptismal reality.⁷¹

Is the interpretation of the Old Testament by the New Testament authoritative for the church? Scriptural and Confessional Principles discusses this question in the context of the understanding of prophecy in the Old Testament and answers the question affirmatively when it rejects the view "[t]hat the New Testament statements about Old Testament texts and events do not establish

their meaning."⁷²

Should the New Testament writings be evaluated by the gospel and the overall witness of the New Testament? If this means that there are statements contradictory to the gospel in the New Testament and that therefore the gospel is used as canon in the canon to eliminate sub-gospel passages, then this would not be in harmony with either *Scriptural and Confessional Principles* or *Biblische Hermeneutik*. *Scriptural and Confessional Principles* explicitly rejects the position that the question of women's ordination should not be decided by Scripture as a whole.⁷³ When it rejects the opinion that the "gospel" should be the basis of ordaining women and puts "gospel" in quotes, it indicates that a gospel that is used in such a way is in some way a distorted form of the gospel. Implied in such a statement is the rejection to use the gospel as a principle from which articles of faith are to be deduced.

6. Conclusion

This paper could only discuss some aspects of biblical hermeneutics in the ILC. Using formal documents, a picture of hermeneutics in the ILC is less than complete. For a fuller picture of hermeneutics in the ILC churches, an investigation into how Scripture is interpreted in sermons, pastoral care, and in the liturgical rites used is necessary. Then the hermeneutics of the ILC churches of the global south that do not have formal statements on hermeneutics could be part of the discussion on hermeneutics.

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⁶⁸ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (September 1985), accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=316>.

⁶⁹ LCMS, *Women in the Church*, 21.

⁷⁰ LCMS, *Women in the Church*, 26–27.

⁷¹ SELK, *Biblische Hermeneutik*, 5.3.3.

⁷² LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, IV, H, 36.

⁷³ LCMS, *Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 23: "That the Gospel, rather than Scripture, is the norm for appraising and judging all doctrines and teachers (as, for example, when a decision on the permissibility of ordaining women into the pastoral office is made on the basis of the 'Gospel' rather than on the teaching of Scripture as such)."