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Documentation: A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies

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DOCUMENTATION

At its meetings on October 6—8, 1966, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod adopted two reports titled A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies *and* The Witness of Jesus and Old Testament Authorship. *The text of the reports is reproduced below. Together with these documents the CTCR issued an invitation to readers to submit their reactions and constructive criticisms. Comments in response to these reports may be submitted to the Office of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 210 N. Broadway, St. Louis, Missouri 63102.*

THE EDITOR

A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies

PREAMBLE

When The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod instructed the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to "conduct a comprehensive study of Biblical hermeneutics" (1965 *Proceedings*, Res. 2-07, page 95), it did not thereby declare a moratorium on Biblical study and scholarship throughout the Synod. On the contrary, the church's scholars, wherever their calling finds them, as well as all other members of the church, are expected to continue their daily searching of the Scriptures as vigorously as ever. The special study assigned to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations is simply a part of and, hopefully, a useful contribution to the effort in which we are all engaged together.

As this common effort goes on, however, the question has been raised in various quarters: How do we approach and carry on our personal study of Scripture in a time like this when the whole field of Biblical scholarship seems, at least to many, a confusing riddle marked by extravagant claims and counterclaims, charges and countercharges, novel views, and ancient axioms?

The only justifiable purpose for applying the best techniques of scholarship to the study of Holy Scripture is to enable students of the Bible better to understand the Word of God. Clarity, not confusion, is the proper goal of scholarship. When this goal is not achieved, something has gone wrong — either with scholarship or with those whom scholarship is to serve.

The document which follows is a serious attempt to make plain the essential elements that characterize sound Biblical studies in our time and a Lutheran stance toward such studies. It does not intend to offer definitive answers to specific scholarly questions in the area of Biblical study. What it does aim to furnish is a clear perspective on the nature of the question in the light of our history and theology, and also in thetical form a brief description of the Christian interpreter's attitude toward contemporary Biblical studies in terms both of presupposition and of method.

Part One

THE QUESTION IN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Throughout her history the Christian church has had to face and deal with questions relating to her faith and her life, her existence and her purpose, her message and her authority. Because of the frailty and imperfection of her members and because of the powerful and relentless assaults of Satan, the church has been compelled to engage in unremitting struggle to remain faithful to her Lord and to her divinely given task. While the church has always had the assurance of the authority and beneficent presence of the Lord Jesus Christ through the promised activity of the Holy Spirit, the church herself, consisting as she does of sinful human beings, has never in her history been able to provide faultless and completely adequate solutions to her besetting problems. That is to say, while the church has always had recourse to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures as the Word of God and the full assurance of her divinely wrought faith, nevertheless she has never been able to attain a perfect and complete comprehension of the divine revelation, nor a perfect and complete formulation of her response to the Word of God (1 Cor. 13:12; Rom. 11:33 f.), nor an abidingly adequate and valid defense against all attacks. Here, as in all other aspects of her existence and mission through the ages, the church has had to confess her weaknesses and failures and continue to live and labor in total reliance on the forgiving, strengthening, and protecting grace of God.

While the difficulties plaguing the church have not always been the same in detail, and while different problems have been more acute in one age than another or in one branch of the church than another, it is always the church as such that is involved. Since the church is one, what troubles one part of the church must ultimately affect all other parts. This is true also and especially today as the church is inevitably affected by the global breakdown of barriers in time and space, in language and communication. While it may have been possible in the past for some segments of Christendom to live and perform their churchly functions with little or no contact with other Christian groups, such isolation is extremely difficult today.

Two of the major questions under discussion in church circles today are (1) the nature, structure, and function of the church herself, and (2) authority in the church. The latter concerns itself particularly with the Sacred Scriptures. This is certainly not a new issue. Christian writers in ages past have had much to say about this matter. Certain aspects of the doctrine concerning the Scriptures have indeed become especially acute in more recent times. Within all major church bodies much time and study have been devoted to a thorough investigation of such topics as the origin, form, and function of the Biblical writings, revelation, inspiration, inerrancy, nature and scope of Biblical authority, and the principles of interpretation and application.

A number of factors have contributed to the raising of these issues and to the necessity of dealing with them. It must be conceded that both in the past and in the present various forms of rationalism and secularized approaches to Scripture have been

destructive of the authority of the Word of God. It must also be acknowledged, however, that the labors of unnumbered scholars, many of them humble and consecrated Christians, have very significantly enlarged the store of Biblical knowledge and advanced the horizons of genuine Biblical scholarship. For all new evidence and insights regarding the meaning of the Biblical text the church must be grateful and must make intelligent and constructive use of every aid God has provided for a fuller understanding of His Word.

Our sainted and revered fathers sought to follow this course. Any casual perusal of our church's periodicals and books will discover considerable amounts of space devoted to a critical evaluation of the theological scene in the church at large. From the vantage point of a wholehearted commitment to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and their dedication to the promulgation and preservation of the Gospel in its purity, the fathers unhesitatingly employed whatever products of Biblical scholarship they considered valid and in conformity with their loyalties. It is true that our synodical fathers were generally more negative and condemnatory in their evaluation of both the methodology and the conclusions in the Biblical studies as they came to know them; but this was the case largely because much, if not most, of the Biblical scholarship of their time appeared to proceed from presuppositions at variance with sound Biblical and confessional orientation and was, therefore, quite frequently biased and destructive. Wherever the same circumstances prevail today, our church must continue in the same judgment.

Further, the church has always been inescapably involved in the consideration of the Word of God. Our church too must critically examine the methods and products of modern Biblical scholarship. It is a matter of record that in recent decades there has been a shift away from the crass theological liberalism that was rampant earlier in this century in the direction of a more conservative, more Biblical theology. With this shift has come, on the part of many Biblical scholars, a more responsible use of the historical-critical method of Bible study. It is therefore not a foregone conclusion that all the presuppositions and conclusions of current scholarship are necessarily the same as those against which our fathers rightly protested. Hence it must not be assumed in advance that our church's present judgment needs to coincide at all points with that of the fathers, although it should indeed proceed from the same theological perspective. Rather, the church is called upon to distinguish between sound and unsound presuppositions, between proper and improper methods of scholarly investigation, and between valid and invalid conclusions. Our church must approach the methods and results of modern Biblical scholarship objectively, appraise them critically, and use them discriminately and constructively. (1 Thess. 5:21)

All depends on the perspective from which the church approaches the study of the Scriptures. Our church is unalterably committed to the divine Word that proclaims God's mighty acts, His steadfast love for a world that merits His wrath, above all His revelation in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, as summarized and confessed by Christians in the Trinitarian Creeds of the ancient church and as expounded in the

Symbols of the Lutheran Church. In conformity with the Lutheran Symbols our church confesses and acknowledges the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures to be the Word of God given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, submits unreservedly to them as the sole source, norm, and authority for the church's teaching, and confidently uses them as the powerful vehicles of the Holy Spirit's continuing operation. Securely anchored to this position, our church may then proceed to a calm analysis and constructive use of all the facilities of competent scholarship. In the process our church will exercise a true critical function with respect to both traditional and new principles and practices, adopting, discarding, or modifying either the old or the new, as the Biblical evidence itself may require. In the process, too, our church and individuals in the church will manifest their human frailties and limitations and will, as in the past, make mistakes. Some may fail to say all that the Scriptures themselves say and thus will fall short of the Biblical witness. Others may say more than the Scriptures permit them to say. In either case Christian scholars must live, as in all other areas of their life in Christ, by the daily forgiveness of sins also with regard to their scholarly procedures and products. They will live and work within the circle of the precious fellowship of faith and love together with their brothers in Christ, ever striving to manifest the mind of Christ, in honor preferring one another, bearing one another's burdens, admonishing one another, ever ready to accept the loving expression of fraternal concern and instruction from their brothers and equally ready to lend the hand and the voice of fraternal love and strength to their brothers. The goal of all Christian life and activity, including Christian study and scholarship, can only be to edify the church, to promote growth in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, to hallow God's name, to let His kingdom come, and to let His will be done, that God in all things may be glorified through our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, before the return of our exalted Lord to judge the quick and the dead, this goal will never be perfectly achieved. Meanwhile Christians must live in the tension of having the perfect righteousness of faith and a very imperfect righteousness of life at the same time. As a result of this tension there will be controversies in the church, and the church's members will fall short of a completely pure and full witness to the Word of God.

Our Lutheran Confessions, to which we are all committed, suggest a constructive way to deal with differences as they arise among brothers in the faith.

On the one hand, the confessors considered it their duty "on the basis of God's Word, carefully and accurately to explain and decide the differences that had arisen with reference to all articles in controversy, to expose and to reject false doctrine, and clearly to confess the divine truth" (Preface to The Book of Concord, Tappert, p. 6). To achieve this result, "they took to hand the controverted articles, examined, evaluated, and explained them in the fear of God, and produced a document in which they set forth how the differences that had occurred were to be decided in a Christian way" (ibid.). "Such an explanation must be thoroughly grounded in God's Word so that pure doctrine can be recognized and distinguished from adulterated doctrine . . ." (ibid., p. 13). It is clear

that the writers of the Lutheran Confessions were totally committed to the Scriptures. They themselves were not indifferent to any departure from God's Word, nor did they approve of such indifference in others.

On the other hand, they carefully distinguished "between needless and unprofitable contentions (which, since they destroy rather than edify, should never be allowed to disturb the church) and necessary controversy (dissension concerning articles of the Creed or the chief parts of our Christian doctrine, when the contrary error must be refuted in order to preserve the truth)" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 15; Tappert, p. 506 f.). A glance at the articles of the Formula of Concord (Original Sin, Free Will, The Person and Work of Christ, Law and Gospel, Faith and Works, The Lord's Supper, God's Eternal Election, etc.) and the way in which these matters were treated shows what the framers of the Formula had in mind when they spoke of "necessary controversy." All of these issues had a bearing on the Gospel itself.

Similarly Melanchthon, in discussing the prerequisites of unity and concord in the church, distinguishes between that which necessarily disrupts this unity and that which does not. The foundation is described as the true knowledge of Christ and faith. On this foundation many weak people and even the holy Fathers sometimes built perishing structures of stubble, that is, "unprofitable opinions." But these unprofitable and even erroneous opinions did not overthrow the foundation. The church was not indifferent to these errors but tried to correct them; however, it did not regard them as divisive of church fellowship. (Cf. Apology VII and VIII, 20, 21; Tappert, pp. 171 f.)

The church today will do well to follow the pattern set by the Lutheran Confessions in the face of contemporary problems and differences of opinion. The church will never be indifferent to or condone departures from the truth of God's Word. From its vantage point of total commitment to the Gospel the church will know how to distinguish between the chief parts of the Christian doctrine and differing opinions, even when these are unprofitable, and in a patient, fraternal fashion seek to correct them in the light of the Gospel.

Part Two

SUMMARY STATEMENTS

From this same vantage point of the Gospel, Lutheran theologians view every question of Biblical interpretation. Also concerning any given methodology of interpretation they ask above all: How does it relate to the understanding and proclamation of the Gospel?

Mindful, then, of the basic theological principles and the historical background sketched in Part I, we offer to the church the following guidelines for developing a soundly Scriptural and Lutheran stance toward contemporary Biblical studies.

A. *Our Presuppositions*

1. As Christians we come to the interpretation of Holy Scripture in the assurance of our Baptism as the event from which we derive our new nature and perspective. Hence our Biblical study can be properly begun and carried through only as we continually

make our own the grateful confession: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. . . ." (Cp. also Large Catechism, IV [Baptism], 49: "God has sanctified many who have been thus baptized and has given them the Holy Spirit. Even today there are not a few whose doctrine and life attest that they have the Holy Spirit. Similarly by God's grace we have been given the power to interpret the Scriptures and to know Christ, which is impossible without the Holy Spirit.")

2. In the joy of this faith and with praise to God we affirm our unconditional loyalty and commitment to the inspired Scriptures as the written Word of God.
3. We pray that the Lord who has preserved among us a reverent attitude toward the Sacred Scriptures will continually enable us to stand with trembling awe and holy joy before the God who addresses us in both judgment and mercy through the Biblical Word.
4. We express our praise to Almighty God for all new information and fresh insights into Scripture that have been made available to the church through the intensive investigations and research of Biblical scholarship in recent times as well as throughout her history.
5. Since the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the inspired source and norm of all Christian preaching and teaching, we hold ourselves committed to the diligent and unremitting study of the written Word through the responsible use of every appropriate means and method that God has provided as an aid to our understanding of the Scriptures.
6. In hearty agreement with the Lutheran Confessions we affirm that the right understanding of the Gospel (including the proper distinction of Law and Gospel as grounded in the article of Justification) is the key that finally unlocks the meaning of Sacred Scripture (Apology, IV, 2-5, German; FC, SD, V, 1). We therefore hold that all theological questions raised by any interpretation must be posed and answered with reference to this central concern of the Scriptures. We also hold that those technical questions involved in interpretation which neither aid nor impair the right understanding of the Gospel (in its full sense) ought not become a matter of controversy in the church (cp. Apology, VII, 20 f.; FC, SD, Summary, 15). Not that technical questions as such may be dismissed in advance as trivial. On the contrary, the Christian interpreter is bound to deal seriously and soberly with all questions that arise in connection with the interpretation of any and every part of the Scriptures, precisely to enable him to judge correctly whether they aid, impair, or are irrelevant to the right understanding of the Gospel. (Cp. the CTCR's "A Response . . .," point C, 6, LCMS *Proceedings*, 1965, page 297.)

B. *The Historical-Critical Method*

We consider the following to be basic and legitimate elements of the so-called historical-critical method (cp. "Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible" as accepted by the Ecumenical Study Conference, Oxford, 1949):

1. Establishing the text.
   This entails the sensitive use of both external and internal criteria (i. e., the evidence of manuscripts, ancient versions, lectionaries, patristic quotations; and the evidence of style, language, thought) for detecting any alterations which the text may have suffered through the process of transmission by human hands, and thus to determine the original reading as accurately as possible.
2. Ascertaining the literary form of the passage.
   This entails, as an aid to better comprehension, analyzing the Biblical passage in terms of its formal structure and character at the hand of such questions as these: Is it prose or poetry? Is it an address, a prayer, a monologue, a treaty, an edict, a letter? Is it an oracular saying, an invective, a lament, a liturgy, a proverb, a parable, a creed, a hymn? and so on.
3. Determining the historical situation.
   This entails discovering, so far as possible, the original setting — in time and place and circumstances — of the document, its author, and its readers.
4. Apprehending the meaning which the words had for the original author and hearer or reader.
   This entails careful investigation of the actual linguistic usage and idiom (together with their overtones conditioned by the social context in which they appear) of the author and his contemporaries in the light of the Biblical data and also of such extra-Biblical literature as may belong to the same social context.
5. Understanding the passage in the light of its total context and of the background out of which it emerged.
   This entails consideration not only of the text's antecedent and contemporary circumstances — religious, cultural, historical — but also of the full range of the Biblical witness in both the Old and New Testaments.

C. *Necessary Controls*

As legitimate as these methodological principles are, we regard them as being subject always to the following measures of control:

1. The authoritative Word for the church today is the canonical Word, not precanonical sources, forms, or traditions — however useful the investigation of these possibilities may on occasion be for a clearer understanding of what the canonical text intends to say.
2. The "literary form" of the text — even when it can be ascertained with reasonable certainty — is only a clue to understanding, not a criterion of truth. Moreover, the Christian interpreter reckons with the fact that God in His revelation may both modify conventional literary modes, even radically, and also create unique modes without analogy in other literature.
3. The problem of "history" needs to be handled with extraordinary sensitivity by the Christian interpreter. He cannot adopt uncritically the presuppositions and canons of the secular historian. In his use of historical techniques the interpreter will be guided by the presuppositions of his faith in the Lord of history. It is indeed true that

Christian faith rightly sees in the historicalness of God's redemptive work (His entry into and participation in our *saeculum*) a divine warrant for the use of "secular" means and methods in the study of His Word, including linguistic, literary, and historical analysis of the texts. But at the same time faith recognizes that there is more to history than can ever be adequately measured by "laws" derived exclusively from empirical data and rational observation. In other words, the Christian interpreter must continually take into account "that the Scriptures, precisely in their historical character, are *Holy* Scriptures since they are the product of the Spirit who produces in history that which is not of this world" (cf. CTCR Statement on Inspiration, LCMS *Proceedings,* 1965, page 293).

4. The undeniably necessary effort to hear a text of Scripture first of all in its particularity, its meaning "then and there," must be balanced by an equal effort to hear the text both in its integral relation to all the rest of Scripture and in its meaningfulness for all who hear it today. This effort does not require an arbitrary flattening out of the rich variety of the Biblical witness into a dull one-dimensional uniformity. But it does entail above all a firm grasp of the essential unity of both Testaments, Old and New, and of their common witness to the one Truth that is as relevant now as when it was first proclaimed.

5. Whatever cognizance needs to be taken — as indeed it must — of the connection between Biblical materials and their background in the whole complex of social, cultural, political, economic, and religious factors of their day, a clear distinction must nevertheless be maintained between the unique, divine, and revelatory character of Scripture and the sheer human and contingent character of Scripture's earthly milieu. Parallelisms between extra-Biblical materials and the form or substance of Scripture do not as such constitute causal or substantive relations. This is not in the least to deny the genuinely human and earthly dimension of Scripture itself. It is only to say that there is a qualitative difference between the inspired witness of Holy Scripture in all its parts and words and the witness, explicit or implicit, of every other form of human expression.