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DOCUMENTATION

The Authority of Scripture

KENT S. KNUTSON

The staff of the CTM presents this study of the authority of Scripture by Kent S. Knutson as a contribution to a better understanding between two major Lutheran church bodies. The paper was originally delivered at the seventh annual Institute on Theology in Practice Today at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, on June 17, 1968. At that time Dr. Knutson was professor of systematic theology at Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. He has since been elected president of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa.

We in the American Lutheran Church hope and pray that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in Denver will take that step which is necessary for full altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. As we understand it, you have already decided in convention assembled that the basis for such fellowship exists, but you must take this one more step. We are all acquainted with the complexities of American Lutheranism in the last hundred years, and we all know some of the misunderstandings and some of the real disagreements which have been among us in the decades of the past. But it is our view that the time has come to put *some* of the past to honored rest. Some of those controversies, some of those great personalities, some of those real concerns belong to the past. We must live in this generation as God has led us to live, and we must work and organize and recognize one another in the ways in which He has shown us for our time.

There is, of course, a certain amount of theological diversity in American Lutheranism. There always has been in Lutheranism. In fact, that very honored document, the Formula of Concord, as we know, is really a peace document, a compromise, an armistice. It was written to bring clear continuity out of the early Reformation and out of the chaos of the second and third generation of Lutheranism in order that certain freedoms might be guaranteed as well as certain commitments required for all concerned. It is my conviction, from my knowledge of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church, that the spectrum of theological speculation, the variety of theological moods, are no wider in the American Lutheran Church than in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Further, I am convinced that the kinds of questions you discuss and debate are the same kinds that we discuss and debate, both of us working within the limits of the Lutheran Confessions.

We both know that we must live sometimes with one foot in the past, and we know there are generation gaps for all Lutherans today. But it is our prayer that we will have the courage and the trust in one another that is necessary to take this new step, which I believe will bring in a new age for American Lutherans.

The subject of my presentation is the authority of the Scriptures or the concept of authority in relation to the Word of God. I speak, of course, as a systematician, for that

is what I am. My style, my interest, my emphasis, my knowledge are within that discipline, and I suppose I speak of authority differently than someone who speaks out of a Biblical discipline or even a discipline in practical theology.

I have nothing new to bring you. You have heard many lectures in your time on the authority of the Word. If there's any value at all in my being here, it's simply that of presenting once again from my perspective and with my style and with my vocabulary and growing out of my history a view of the authority of the Word that will have some interest for discussion and provide the opportunity, it is hoped, for further understanding between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church.

I want to begin by what I call "putting up the tent," that is, by positing some general statements about how I approach the question of authority before discussing the meaning of authority and inspiration. The main task will be to construct specific theses through which I build up my understanding of this great question of authority.

The Word of God in its most proper sense is God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. This is the Bible's own definition which we find in the prolog to the Gospel of John: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Everything else depends upon this great act of revelation, where in the very person and work of His Son God gave His last, final, complete, and greatest communication to man for his salvation. That I would understand to be an evangelical statement. The Word of God in its most proper sense is God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.

Having said that much, certain implications appear. First, this definition means that God's Word is always from God to man; that is, it has a divine character. The Word of God is that which God does; it comes from Him, it belongs to Him, it is something that is a gift from Him to us; the initiative lies in God, the power lies in God, the source is in God. The Word of God is God's Word to men and can therefore be called divine. But, second, I'm also saying that God's Word is man's word about God; that is, God chooses to come to man in such a way that His Word is always within the historical schema. God's Word is always in time and in space; God's Word is always spoken in such a way that men, limited by their existence, by their history, by their minds, by their receptivity, can hear. Although God's Word has a *divine* character, I would say it is not *supernatural*. I make a distinction between those two words. God's Word is always within history; it is not outside history, it is not in heaven, it is on earth. It has a historical character.

Third, God's Word to man is always through men and a Man. Not only is the Word of God in history and part of the historical phenomena and within the limits of man's existence, but it is also always a Word through men spoken by men from one man to another. Jesus Christ is, of course, the great personification of this concept that God's Word is always through men. That is also to say that God does not speak to us in our day directly. His Word is always mediated. He always speaks through a form. There *are* forms through which God speaks.

Now we can say that the Word of God comes to us in our day in three contemporary forms. First, there is the written form, the Bible, the inspired witness to God's

redemptive actions and His self-disclosure. We can hold the Bible in our hand, we can put it on the desk. There *is* a written form; ink on paper in the English language, in the German language, in the Greek language, in the Hebrew language. There are varieties of Word within that form, but a written book itself is a basic form through which God speaks to us today.

In a second, more proper, sense God comes to us through this book in a substantive message that we call the Gospel. The phrase "The Bible is the Word of God" is a phrase that I accept and that our tradition accepts, but it is a phrase that needs some explanation, because to say the Bible is the Word of God does not automatically make the Bible Gospel. The Bible must be interpreted. Merely accepting the *presence* of the book does not make it the Word of God. The word must be heard! The Bible must be interpreted, and it must be interpreted as Gospel. It must be made kerygmatic, it must be made proclamatory; it must *say* what it says in order to be what it is. All kinds of religious traditions say the Bible is the Word of God, but not all of them hear the Gospel in the Book. The Word of God is Christ made present. This is what we call the Gospel. The Word of God is always also the message of the book.

The third contemporary form is what we call the ministry of the Word, the Word in proclamation and sacrament, the Word in its dramatic form, the Word in its active form, the Word in its communicative form. Not only is the Bible the Word of God; not only is the Gospel, the message, the Word of God; but the Word of God is also that Word in action, in communication, that which we call Word and Sacrament. A sacrament is that event, that drama in which God works and speaks in a particular form that involves elements and action. Preaching or speaking or witnessing is that particular form in which God speaks to us using language.

Having said this much we are prepared to add three more ideas in order to enlarge the meaning of this fundamental stand. The first is that in these contemporary forms God Himself becomes present. God is not someone who is far away and sends a message to a people far away, but rather He becomes present among His people. The Word of God must be understood as the making-present-of-God. It is not the making-present-of-God in the sense that God was absent before and suddenly comes into being because of the Word; rather the God who was always present now emerges, now communicates, now makes Himself known. He becomes present *for us*. The reality of God is communicated by and made present through these contemporary forms. Second, the Bible, this written word of God, is heresy apart from the second or kerygmatic form. The Bible is heresy without the Gospel. The Bible without interpretation, the Bible without being what it is, is the Bible without Christ and therefore not His Word in the proper sense at all. Whatever information or interest the Bible may have outside of its witness to Jesus Christ is of no more use to men than Shakespeare or the Koran. It may be of great interest and of some help, but it is not what it wants to be; without the Gospel it is not what it is. If the Bible is interpreted to be something else than what it is, it is being used heretically.

I argue, further, that the second form of the Word, the Gospel, is ineffective without

what I have called the third form, the ministry of the Word — without the proclamation, the drama, the action of the Sacrament. The Gospel must be preached, it must be dramatized, it must be communicated. Unless the Gospel is communicated, it is ineffective. It is not the Gospel in its effective form if it simply is written, if it simply is in a constitution or in a confession or in a library. The Gospel is a living message that must always be about the business of communication in order to be effective.

These three forms, the written Word, the Gospel or kerygmatic Word, and the communicated or serving Word, can be talked about in these rather distinct ways. But this separation is made only theoretically, for these three forms are completely interdependent. You cannot have the Word dramatized unless you have the Gospel. You cannot have the Gospel unless you have it in its written form, the Bible. You can go backwards through this order I have given to you as well as forward.

Let us now turn to the two questions, What is meant by authority? and, What is the relation of the word "inspiration" to authority? In the New Testament, the word "authority" is a translation of the Greek word which we translate in two ways, sometimes by the word "authority" and sometimes by the word "power." In both the Old and the New Testament the ultimate authority is understood to be God. His authority may be conferred, His authority has forms through which it comes, but God is the ultimate authority. "All authority comes from God." "There is no authority except from God." You know those Biblical verses. He not only has authority, He is not only the source of authority, but He *is* authority, He *is* power, He is Lord, He is authority in Himself. It is something, therefore, which is exercised and living. Authority is not something conferred upon Him, not something by which He is described, not something He has by virtue of someone giving in to Him. Nor is authority in relation to God something purely formal. Authority and power in the Biblical understanding is something which is done, something which is exercised — God in His action, God in His being, a being that communicates something that is living. God's presence, therefore, always is presence with power; God's presence is always presence with authority. If there is Word of God, there is always power. If the Word of God is God's self-disclosure, God making Himself present, God emerging and communicating Himself, that in itself is already an understanding of authority and of power. Authority is not something that is added to the Word. Authority is something that the Word is because it is the Word from God.

Jesus asserts that this authority, this power, and this presence have been given to Him; in other words, He is God to man. He not only has authority, but His very presence is the presence of power and therefore of authority. It is through Him and by virtue of His presence that God's authority is made known and accessible to men. He has authority both to save and to judge (Matt. 9:6; 2 Tim. 4:1). Authority, then, as I am talking about it, is not an abstract concept, not a vague, undefinable power; it is a specific power clothed in humanity. It is seen, heard, touched, read. Power is in these words, in these acts, in this message. It is not something far away in the being of God, but it is in the very communication of God. This authority, this power, He has conferred upon the Scripture, which by His guidance becomes the medium through which He exercises

His authority to save and to judge. This means that to the Christian, God's revelation in Jesus Christ, witnessed to and interpreted by the Bible, is the authority of God. And we can talk about this in very human terms. We can talk about it in the way in which it affects us, the way in which we exhibit it in our own thinking and commitment.

Let me say a word about inspiration. The word "inspiration" comes from the Greek word that means "God-breathed," and we say that the Scriptures are inspired. This is a way of saying that God speaks through the Scripture. To me, it is the same to say the Scriptures are inspired and to say that God speaks through them. When we read and listen, we hear God speaking. The word "inspiration" does not by itself tell us anything about the form through which God is speaking; it says only that God speaks. It does not say anything about the medium through which He speaks. To say the Scripture is inspired, therefore, does not mean necessarily that the Scripture is perfect or not perfect, historical or nonhistorical, personal or nonpersonal. To say that God speaks in the Bible does not imply any necessary form for that speech. It is an affirmation of faith to say the Bible is inspired, to say that God speaks to me in the Bible. The form is as we find it. The form we accept because we believe God speaks through it. We do not require of God a particular form in order that we might hear Him speaking. He has conferred His authority on the Scriptures; the Scriptures are the way they are. If God speaks to us in the Bible, He obviously speaks to us in whatever form that Bible is, and we cannot superimpose upon that Bible the form which we think is fitting for God or necessary for God or comfortable for our reason. To demand that the Bible be this or that in order that our faith might be easier or more absolute or more respectable in the marketplace of the philosopher is to make it only man's word to God and not God's word to man.

Having put up the tent, let's talk about some straightforward theses. Theses are ways to get at very difficult and very marvelous and very profound ideas. To do things thetically means that you posit certain sentences, no one of which does the whole job. So you need a number of them. Each one, however, says something different from the other one. Each thesis approaches that which one is describing from a different angle, from a different perspective. The hope is that if one does this enough, he has gathered enough insight, enough words, enough perspectives of the reality to be described so that he has a better grasp of it than he would have if he had only one sentence. No one set of words can encompass or communicate a reality. At one of our Roman Catholic-Lutheran conversations a Roman Catholic New Testament scholar suggested a little picture that I have found rather helpful in my teaching. Imagine that any truth, any mystery can be symbolized by a circle. A circle is, of course, a perfect geometrical figure and can represent the wholeness of something, the perfection of something. Any communication of this reality through human words is something like putting a square in the circle. What is immediately self-evident is that the square always has less area than the circle. It's impossible to draw a square in a circle in such a way as to encompass in that square all the area of the circle. And it is clear that you can draw any number of

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squares in the circle. These squares overlap sometimes and always encompass some of the same area of the circle, but they also each have some different area of the circle in them. This is somewhat the description of the thetical method. Let's look at some of these theses.

1

The authority of the Word of God is self-authenticating. Now that's an old phrase, isn't it? One does not prove the power of this authority. One may examine its claim, disagree with it, deny it, seek support for it, examine its nature, but it effects its aim—Lordship over me—only in the mystery of action and response, of encounter and acceptance. This authority means nothing to the unbeliever. This does not mean that it does not have authority apart from me, objective, if you wish; it means that its authority is communicated to me in such a way that only in the encounter is the authority communicated to *me*, and the authority is authenticated in that encounter. The power of the Word of God is in the Word and becomes power in its encounter with me. In other words, the authority of the Word is not best described by talking about ideas or concepts that lie outside the encounter. The authority is best described within the encounter.

2

Authority must be talked about in personal terms; it has a personal character. It involves me. Now I may recognize the historical facticity of certain of the claims of the Scripture, but this is not in itself sufficient grounds for describing its power, or its authority. A proper description of the authority of the Word must involve me; it must have a personal dimension.

3

The context for an understanding of this authority is relational. It involves subject and object. The authority of the Scripture is not best handled when I consider the Scripture only as an object separated from me. One cannot treat the Bible as if it were a thing that sits on the table while I go around it and look at it from all kinds of angles, viewing it as something outside myself and seeing it as a separate object to be analyzed in some empirical way, as if by this procedure I could arrive at some kind of conclusion or description that by the compelling force of reason or evidence would require me as a man to submit to its authority. Rather, the context of authority is relational; it involves subject *and* object, and I am not the subject who views that object called Scripture and somehow comes to some kind of a decision about it.

Rather, the Bible is the subject and I am the object, and the Bible works on me and speaks to me. Its thrust, its force is toward me, and I am the object of its scrutiny. I am the one to be analyzed, I am the one to be captured. The self-authenticating authority of the Scripture works from the Scripture to me. But of course, within this framework, I am involved as a man with the Scripture, and see it and hear it and analyze it and wonder and ask questions and debate with it. There is a very thoroughgoing dialectic involved in this simple idea of the relational context.

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4

The setting for this "authority taking place" is normally communal, that is, it is in the church, in the community of God. There is no such thing as only God and me. God has already chosen to speak to me through the history of the people of God; every word of God that I hear has come to me through the witness of others. Even if I were Robinson Crusoe on an island—and of course my students always ask me that question—even then the Bible is still the gift of a community, a crowd of witnesses. The setting for the communication of authority is always communal. This is the same as saying there is always a tradition. We have sometimes emphasized too much the private interpretation of the Scripture. The confession is always a part of the whole people. I am always a part of a people. As a man I am a part of humanity; as a Christian I am always a part of a church. The church came before me; I am a child of the church; I am baptized into the church; my understanding of the Word, the authority of the Word, must be seen in terms of my encountering the Word through and in a community.

5

Authority involves decision. Of course, it involves decision. I must accept this authority in order for it to *be* authority over me, in order for that authority to be exercised. Obviously my yes, my decision, is enabled by grace, but I must say yes. I am not an object of this authority of the Scripture in the sense that I am unaware of its claims upon me, that I go through life being a Christian without knowing it, that somehow I have become somebody else besides myself when I become a Christian. I must say yes. My mental processes, my rebellion, my surrender, my listening, my fighting—all are involved. There is a decision involved, there is a commitment involved, there is a yes to God. It is a yes enabled by grace, but nevertheless it is my yes; God has said yes to me, and I must say yes to Him. The mystery of action and response, the mystery of grace and responsibility, is part of the understanding of authority.

6

This authority is unique. It is not one among many; it is unique. There is only one Christ, there is only one witness, one Gospel, only one God. The Bible is not what it is because it is more beautiful than other books or more orderly than other books or more cohesive than other books or because it has the longest history or sells the most copies, as I have sometimes read. The authority is unique; it's not an authority that can be shown, can be built up by comparisons. You cannot take the Upanishads or the Bhagavad-Gita and put them alongside the Bible and show the Hindu or the Buddhist that the Bible is better than their book and therefore they should believe the Bible. Sections in these sacred writings are excellent and in terms of literary form even exceed the Bible. So if one were going to operate on that basis, one would have a tough job. The authority is unique. It is only here in these words in this witness that the unique self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ has explicit witness. "I am the

Way." And we are lost if we try to buttress the uniqueness of the authority by some kind of lesser or secondary ways of establishing authority.

7

The authority is final. I mean by that that it is a complete authority. It is a whole authority. It is sufficient power. God has revealed His power in His Son. He has nothing to add to this. God's Word needs no extras; it needs no supports. It doesn't need help from systematic theologians or even from New Testament scholars. It needs interpretation, it needs explication, but it will not assume its authority by adding that "one thing" that Biblical writers forgot—a systematic definition. God's last and final Word to the world is that word which He spoke to it in Jesus Christ. This means (and my students sometimes argue with me) that we do not look for a new revelation; we do not look for another revelation; we do not look for direct revelations or visions. We play very loose with this, we pastors do. When we get a call to another parish we make our decision and then say that God has told us to go or not to go. Now neither we nor the congregation really knows what that means. I accept the language if we mean not that God has spoken directly but that it is the will of God in terms of our understanding of His Gospel and our call through the Scriptures and on that basis we have made the decision, which is *our* decision, and we communicate that understanding by saying that God has told us. But, you can see, it's questionable language. The layman hears this enough times, and he thinks the pastor has a special pipeline straight to God and that God gives the pastor all kinds of information that is not available to him. To say the Bible is authoritative is to say that it's the final Word—complete, whole, sufficient.

8

The authority is an infallible authority. That is, it does not fail to be what it is. If the Bible purports to be the revelation of God to man for his salvation, it does not fail to be that. It is infallible. It does not fail. It does not deceive us. God does not lie. He is faithful; one can depend on His Word. If one listens for the Gospel, one can be sure the Gospel is there. The Gospel will speak. That word "infallible" has been bandied around quite a bit, and people get all kinds of things out of that word. Of course the Scriptures are infallible; they are what they claim to be. But also here we need to remember that God has made the Scriptures to be whatever they are. It's not for us to say, "Well, God, they must be this way or that way if I am to believe they're infallible." An evangelical approach to the Scripture says they are infallible because God here reveals His Gospel. They are not infallible because of some decision man has made about what infallibility is. They're infallible because God, the ultimate source of authority and power, reveals and communicates His power here, and that power is Gospel. Therefore the Scriptures are infallible because of what God has done to them, not because of what we require of them in order to fit some dictionary definition of infallibility.

9

The authority is efficacious. Its ability is its own; it is not our faith that makes the Bible authoritative. It is not some kind of perfection that makes the Bible authoritative. It's not our ability to establish certain historical events that lie behind it that makes the Bible efficacious. It is efficacious because the Spirit effects the work. The "efficaciousness" belongs to the Word itself and not to the definitions we have about it.

10

The authority is material, not formal. When I use the word 'formal' I do not use it as meaning Scripture itself, as I understand some do in the Missouri Synod. For me this distinction between material and formal means rather that we ask the question: Does the authority lie in the substance of what it is or in its form, in a definition of what it is, its functions? Some in the past, without thinking very clearly about these kinds of distinctions, have believed that the authority of the Scriptures is best communicated or even believed in terms of the definition of what it is rather than in the substance of what it is. The authority is material, not formal. The Bible is not authoritative because we have formulated some definition and by applying it to the Scriptures have given it authority. The authority is not in the medium, in the form, in the instrument; the authority is in the substance, God's acting through, God's speaking. The substance is in the Gospel, not in man's appraisal of the necessity or the sufficiency of this mode. One could say many things here. One practical example is this. The Bible is not authoritative in the church because the constitution of the church says this or that. As a matter of fact, if we were to get down to that kind of talk, the ALC has a much more stringent and literalistic and absolute definition of the Scriptures than the Missouri Synod; in fact we could call you liberals! I don't like our definition very well, but if we're going to compare the orthodoxy of churches on the basis of how well they define Biblical authority, the ALC would win hands down! But of course you don't work in this way. Authority does not lie in man's ability to define authority, for his definition is historically conditioned by his age, his generation, his prejudice, and who his grandmother was. The authority is in its material principle, in its substance, not in the character of its form. In the Scriptures God speaks to us His judgmental and His redemptive word, and we hear Him speak. That is the power. That is the authority.

11

The authority is neither rational nor irrational. That's a strange kind of thesis; I'll have to explain. The authority of the Scriptures does not commend itself to the judgment of common sense, although it is verified in human experience. It does not speak to us in riddles. The witness of the Scriptures is a public event, using human language with all the grammatical rules or lack of them that English teachers or Hebrew teachers have fashioned for us. It talks about mystery; it defines mystery, but it does not take away the mystery. It is neither rational nor irrational. It is not completely subject to the analyses of logic, it is not altogether outside such analysis. It can be

analyzed; there are empirical events to look at; there are questions to be addressed to it. One can deal with the Scriptures as one deals with any other object in the universe and apply to it all the rules of analysis and all the powers of reason we have because it is *there*. But it does not yield to these efforts altogether. On the other hand, it's not irrational. It is not gibberish, it is not heavenly or supernatural language, it is *our* language, the language of men who live. The fundamentalist is the one who puts the Scripture into a rational box. He says the Scripture *must* harmonize; it *must* conform to scientific history; it must follow a certain kind of logic. He can understand the Scripture only if it falls within his epistemology and within his way of thinking. The liberal, in the old-fashioned sense of the word "liberal," thinks of the Scripture as containing many irrational elements, which he has to remove. He has to make everything in the Scripture meaningful. So he removes these "irrationalities" from the Scriptures. I'm trying to escape both of those extremes by not cataloging the Scriptures either way. There are some things that you do not understand, and you must lay them aside temporarily. The things that you understand best are often the most mysterious, the most profound, and not subject to analysis in the way in which other things in the world are so analyzed.

12

The authority is both hidden and revealed. The Scripture is both clear and mysterious, both simple and profound. The Word is revealed to babes and hidden from the wise, it is foolishness to the Greek and the power of salvation to the believer. Every time one reaches out to grasp this written Word, every time one tries to summarize its thousand pages into three sentences in some constitution, one discovers, if he has his ears and eyes open, that it is always beyond his grasp, it is always beyond his ability to capture. And yet when he is not trying to define it, when he's not trying to catalog it, when he's not worrying about what the constitution says, the hiddenness in it reveals itself, and God speaks.

The Word of God in its most proper sense is God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Everything else depends on this great act of revelation, where in the very person and work of His Son God gave His last, final, complete, and greatest revelation to man for his salvation.

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