

Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 43

Article 25

4-1-1972

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Recommended Citation

Goetz, Lloyd H. (1972) "Let's Be Lutheran," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 43, Article 25.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol43/iss1/25>

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Let's Be Lutheran

Theses on a Lutheran Understanding and Use of the Word

LLOYD H. GOETZ

1

The Word of God is His self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. This is God's final, complete, and greatest communication to man for his salvation.

John 1:14: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

Revelation 19:13: And the name by which He is called is The Word of God.

Hebrews 1:1-2: In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son.

"Our Churches also teach that the Word — that is, the Son of God — took on man's nature." — Augsburg Confession, Art. III, 1, Tappert, p. 29.

2

God's Word is the written Word, the inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is the witness which tells us what the true Word of God is. That the Bible is the Word of God is the self-understood presupposition of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions.

3

God's Word is Law and Gospel. It judges (Matt. 11:21), exposes sin (John 4:18), pronounces woe on sin (Matt. 13), and condemns (Ezek. 18:4). However, the Apology (Art. XII, 51, p. 189) quotes Isaiah (28:21), who describes this as

God's "alien work." "The Lord will be wroth, to do his deed — strange is his deed! and to work his work — alien is his work!" He calls it God's alien work to terrify because God's own proper work is to quicken and console." God's "real work" is to give the consolation of the Gospel. And so the Word of God heals (Matt. 8:8), forgives sins (Mark 2:5), raises the dead (Luke 7:14), points to Jesus as Savior (John 3:14-21). The Word of God is Law and Gospel.

4

The Word of God is the proclaimed message of sin and grace.

a. In apostolic preaching.

1 Thess. 2:13: When ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of man, but as it is in truth the Word of God which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

Acts 4:31: And they spoke the Word of God with boldness.

b. In contemporary proclamation.

Cf. The order of Confessional Service, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 47. The order for the Installation of a Minister.

5

In establishing a priority among these meanings of "the Word of God," Lutherans state that, above all else, God's Word is

Jesus Christ, that is, God's Word is primarily the Gospel.

2 Cor. 1:19-20: For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you . . . was not Yes and No; but in Him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him.

Rom. 1:1-2: Paul . . . set apart for the Gospel of God which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, the Gospel concerning His Son.

1 Cor. 2:2: For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

6

The authority of the Word lies in its substance, not in its form. It is authoritative because in it God is speaking to man, both His word of judgment and His word of grace. The authority of the Scriptures is the authority of God Himself.

7

The Scriptures were given by inspiration of God. They came into being through the working of the Holy Spirit, and they are filled with the power of the Spirit. They are the call of God to man: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye Him." Although the Bible nowhere describes the nature of inspiration, it is, as Luther calls it, "the Holy Ghost's Book" because it bears witness to Christ; indeed, its content is Christ.

8

The Scriptures are an inerrant recital or record of God's revelation. Their value is dependent on their truth. Inerrancy is a matter of "faith created by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures themselves," ex-

pressing "the conviction that the witness of Scripture in all its parts in their intended sense is true and wholly reliable." — "Revelation, Inspiration, Inerrancy" (synodically adopted statement), p. 3.

9

In interpreting the Scriptures, the following elements of the historical-critical method are valid as guides and principles:

1. Establishing the text.
2. Ascertaining the literary form of the text.
3. Determining the historical situation.
4. Apprehending the meaning which the words had for the original author and hearer or reader.
5. Understanding the passage in the light of its total Biblical as well as non-Biblical context. — Cf. *Lutheran Stance Toward Biblical Studies, New York Convention Workbook LCMS* (1967), pp. 395 f.

10

In interpreting the Scriptures the Lutheran proceeds from faith in Christ. He considers the Law-Gospel principle to be basic to his understanding and interpretation of the Bible. In this way he follows in the footsteps of Martin Luther, at whose funeral John Bugenhagen said:

He [Luther] was without doubt that angel of God of which the Apocalypse speaks in chapter 14 — flying in midheaven with an eternal Gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth. . . . This angel said, "Fear God and give glory to Him!" Those are the two parts of Dr. Martin Luther's teaching, the Law and the Gospel, through which all of Scriptures are opened up and Christ is known as our righteousness and eternal life.

11

The formal principle of Lutheran theology is entirely Christological. The Lutheran, because he has learned to know Christ as his divine Savior, that is, because he has experienced the power of the Word upon his heart, believes in the divine character of the Scriptures.—*Cf. Religious Bodies of America*, F. E. Mayer, p. 142.

When Lutheran theologians speak of justification by faith as the material principle of theology, they merely wish to indicate that all theological thinking must begin at this article, center in it, and culminate in it. (*Ibid.*)

12

While Lutheran theology bases Christian assurance on the objective promises of the Gospel, Reformed theology seeks assurance of salvation also in a program of Christian activity.

Question 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks:

"Why must we do good works?" and answers: "That with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His blessings and that He may be glorified through us; *then also that we ourselves be assured of our faith by the fruits thereof*, and by our godly walk may bring our neighbors also to Christ." (Emphasis ours)

13

In Reformed (Calvinistic) theology the Bible is the code for correct belief for the purpose of directing man's thinking and acting in all areas of human life, such as science, culture, business, society, the home, and in politics (*cf. Institutes*, III, XXI, 3). "Lutheran theology asks: What has God done for my salvation? And finds the answer in the Scriptural revela-

tion of God's grace. Calvin asks: What must I do to the greater glory of God? And sees in the Bible the Sovereign's will for man's conduct and belief." Mayer, p. 202.

14

Lutheran theology warns against the teachings of those who say that the Spirit of God comes through means other than the external Word:

In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure.—*Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Art. VIII, 3, p. 312.

15

Lutheran theology is intensely practical. In its approach to the Scriptures it recognizes that

all Scripture, inspired by God, should minister not to security and impenitence but "to reproof, correction, and improvement" (II Tim. 3:16). Furthermore, everything in the Word of God is written down for us, not for the purpose of thereby driving us to despair but in order that "by steadfastness, by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).—*Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration, Art. XI, 12, p. 618.

It shows concern for those "for whom Christ died" and feels compelled to reach them with the Gospel, emphasizing that "any interpretation of the Scriptures which

weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent." — S. D., XI, 92, p. 632.

Its crowning glory is set forth in the following trinitarian and soteriological summary:

Concerning the righteousness of faith before God we believe, teach, and confess unanimously . . . that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely

through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit offers these treasures to us in the promise of the Gospel, and faith is the only means whereby we can apprehend, accept, apply them to ourselves, and make them our own. Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our Redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father, and are saved forever. — S. D., III, 9-11, pp. 540—41.

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