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Kyrios Jesus

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The author, pastor of a 2500-member congregation, provides a perceptive and pastoral analysis of the key issue before the Synod.

No other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 3:11)

When the apocalyptic thunder of Russian artillery in the East signaled the terrible final months of 1944, the last bishop of the Lutheran Church in Estonia, Waldemar Thomson, wrote to his brethren in the West about an even more ominous end. "Because I personally know Christ as the living Lord, and not only I, but thousands like me; because God has created me as a member of the German people, and I am therefore also responsible before God for everything that happens among us, I dare not simply watch indifferently and mutely when my people are in danger of becoming a tool of that law which has no future—that is why it is my duty to tell you this." [1]

It was not only the awesome moral dilemma of which Thomson wrote. He saw the failure of the established church as more than a tragic concomitant, as one of the actual causes of the final "collapse." "We have been busy establishing the visible form of the church, that system of assurances and security which we strive to emulate according to the example of the world—a closed doctrinal system, an established cultus, a casuistic moral law, a materialistically grounded piety, and a governmentally guaranteed right to worship." [2] Thomson had been one of the first on the continent to warn the church against "a preoccupation with establishing its security socially and systematically," especially if it should become "a church under pressure." [3]

Bishop of a relatively obscure diocese, Thomson was deeply loved by his people for his genuine pastoral concern and great personal kindness, and highly regarded by his colleagues in both the Eastern and Western communions for his profound and devout theological insight.[4] In a paper delivered at a meeting of Lutheran theologians in Sondershausen in 1939, Thomson spoke of his personal discovery "that the doctrinal content of the Good News in Christ Jesus can never be separated from His living being. . . ." We must remember, he said, that Christ uses the Christian community to spearhead His offensive on the world. "This is our main concern. Can the world see who He is; can the world see Him in and through us? Doesn't it see only a secularized church, doesn't it simply run into a hard, virtually incomprehensible doctrinal system? Doesn't our ecclesiastical institution contain a bit of opposition to Jesus? One thing we must note very carefully: Christ wants us to examine ourselves to see whether we are not actually engaged in opposition to Him, whether we are really bearers of His Spirit in what we say and also in how we say it. There is a big difference as to whether I say something because I have recognized it as right, or whether I dare something because I have recognized it as right, or whether I dare something because the love of Christ constrains

[1] Gotthard Hoerschelmann, *Waldemar Thomson—Ein Lebensbild des letzten Propstes fuer das deutsche Kirchenwesen in Estland* (Hamburg: Harry v. Hofmann Verlag, 1965), p. 41. All translations are by the writer.

[2] Ibid., p. 36.

[3] Ibid., pp. 25, 29-31.

[4] Ibid., pp. 28, 44.

me."[5]

Thomson's urgent appeal that the church commit itself to the living Christ, and his sincere feeling of responsibility which compelled him to speak frankly against a Procrustean doctrinal system correspond to the very concerns which move many within our own church body to speak and write most seriously.[6] Once more, and under curiously similar circumstances, the theologian who may be accused of *theologie nouvelle* has realized that it is precisely the demand for theological centralism, for a formalist *sacrificium intellectus,* which leads not only to a sterile apologetic but finally also to a *sacrificium Christi,* reducing exegesis to theological impotence and dogmatics to schematic unreality.

THE MEDIA IS NOT THE MESSAGE

In the Word of God, given by the testimony of men, theology finds its creative ground and its life. It is such *theo-logia* which speaks of God only insofar as it hears His Word and responds to His Word, oriented to it and measured by it. But the exegetical task of the church, crucial in maintaining the church's *raison d'etre,* has become very difficult.

When there is an insistence upon a hermeneutic which demands assent to the principle that in the form of Scripture we simultaneously receive its content, the church is left in an impossible situation. When it is stated that "one may not have any level of authority beyond or behind the text," God's Word is limited to the dimensional and temporal mold of the human media.[7] We are thus reduced to using as a standard of interpretation the very vehicle—the form—to which we want to apply a control. In regard to the Old Testament for example, the question occurs: Beyond *which text* must there not be any level of authority—the Hebrew canon, or the Septuagint which, after all, is quoted by Jesus, Peter, James, Matthew, Mark, and Luke in Acts, and occurs more often than the Hebrew in the Catholic Epistles. What lends interest to this question is the fact that there are instances where the Hebrew manuscript and the Septuagint do not agree, such as the notable variations, omissions, and additions in Esther and Daniel. Furthermore, it is quite essential to remember that when man applies language, he abstracts. Any word is an abstraction; in fact it describes only some of the characteristics of the larger situation. It has always been part of the mainline theology of our church to maintain that we have received the form of Scripture through a divine accommodation to our human apprehension, but—contrary to Semler's evisceration of the content of the Scripture by explaining doctrinal passages as accommodations to the prevalent thought-patterns of the Biblical writers—that there is no accommodation in the content or matter of Scripture.[8]

[5] Ibid., p. 37.

[6] The tragic and unhappy distinction of the present "discussions" is that scholarly detachment and Christian love have not infrequently given way to a childish peevishness and downright rudeness. Surely the Pauline injunction, "But not as an enemy, treat him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:15), has something to say to even the most correct of theologians among us.

[7] *Report of the Synodical President to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,* p. 29. (Sept. 1, 1972)

[8] Gottfried Hornig, *Die Anfaenge der historisch-kritischen Theologie: Johann Salomo Semlers Schriftverstaendnis und seine Stellung zu Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), pp. 220-22. A distinction between the content and form of Scripture, as well as the recognition that there is a divine accommodation in form but not in content, is articulated already by the dogmaticians John Gerhardt, John Quenstedt, and David Hollaz in their *loci* on Scripture, as compiled by Heinrich Schmid in *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1899), pp. 42, 48.

We must remember the temporal and qualitative priority of content over form. It is technically impossible, of course, to obtain a knowledge of the content of Scripture without an approach through its form. The direction in development of the original Scriptures is from content to form. And human apprehension works through form into content. The sober awareness of these priorities of development and approach is part of the perspective of a humble faith. Nevertheless, the exegete, who is to be a linguist, is unable to use some of the most basic tools of his specialty if he cannot go "beyond or behind the text." Because there *is* an authority beyond and behind the text, namely the lowest common denominator of the entire message, the essential soteriological character of the Scripture and its teleological significance, which may legitimately be used to safeguard the entire message from fragmentation and metastatic interpretations.

The deductive or thematic study of the fundamental perspective of Scripture provides an analogical approach to the original *kerygma,* as well as a formal theological unity which binds our interpretation to the content of Scripture and not its form. That is why the Reformation principle *scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres* is vital to Biblical studies. And, *apropos,* it might be well to note that this principle does not prohibit proper "critical" study of the Scripture.[9] Two understandings are basic to this principle. The first is that Biblical study is possible only if it is determinate, and it is determinate only if the meaning of the Scripture is one. The second is that Biblical study is possible only if the Scripture, that is, its entire, essential message and thus its Christological unity, is used to interpret its texts. It follows then that all understanding and exposition of Scripture must be in conformity with the Scripture's fundamental perspective, its soteriological, Christ-bearing nature.[10]

[9] "Critical" does not mean "judgmental." A *kritikos* is one who is able to discuss because he is able to discern. Rather than value judgment, careful study is indicated. The "Scripture interprets Scripture" principle is to guard against the imposition upon Scripture of foreign criteria, in disregard of the Scripture's uniqueness and self-authenticating nature. In all ages the church has shared a common concern for guarding the sovereignty of God against the smallness of man's mind. But the church must also share a concern for keeping the smallness of man's mind from guarding the sovereignty of God. If anything, this is perhaps the greatest contribution of the historical-critical method—we have become aware that we are not the "keepers" of the Scripture. And it must be said, and said emphatically, that since the human mind is inseparable from the functioning of symbols, the claim that there is a "safe" exegetical system is a gross presumption, because it attributes to man an understanding which is totally at variance with the limitations which are a very real part of his humanity. In the Lutheran application of "critical" Biblical study, it is taken for granted that "the direction toward us" of God's Word is perfect. But in our concern with the other direction—*our* cognitive approach—there is no such assurance. That is why faith is the principal epistemological consideration of the church. If there is a God—and, as Kierkegaard pointed out, that is a most important "if"—then we can trust His promise that his Holy Spirit will lead us "into all truth." The constant striving for the meaning behind the words, the message which the words convey, is nowhere as intense (nor as expectant) as in the exegesis of the church. Yet such work must not be naive; neither must it be gullible or obscurantistic. Proper exegesis presupposes textual and literary criticism of the document. The exegete of the New Testament has to know, for instance, whether the text upon which he works represents the original text of the autographs or the textual form of the fourth century. Literary and historical criticism of the Bible is not an evil but a necessity, and no man can do full justice to a book of the Bible till he has done the best he can to determine who wrote the book, when it was written, if its contents are authentic, and if the book is a literary unit or not.

[10] *Omnis intellectus ac expositio Scripturae sit analogia fidei.* In good conscience, therefore—in fact, joyfully, even defiantly, Luther virtually imposed a Christological interpretation upon every text of Scripture. For Luther the *analogia fidei* equaled the *analogia Scripturae,* that is, the

It is at this point that we begin to see the distinction between the so-called material and formal principles as *functional* instead of schematic. For example, shall we use Genesis primarily to enforce a certain geographic and temporal framework for the great affirmations of the First Article of the Apostolic Creed? The Gospel determines that this shall not be our *primary* intent in teaching the truths of this book. No less an impeccable theologian than Francis Pieper maintains such a stance, clearly and unequivocally, in his *Christian Dogmatics*.[11] But such determination of a qualitative priority in teaching a Scriptural text, perhaps because it intrudes upon the categorical language of dogmatics, has been called "Gospel Reductionism" (a classic misnomer). With understandable concern for conserving the faith, the question is asked: What shall we do then when a brother teaches basic content but seems to disregard the secondary intent, the historical framework, even discards entire parts of the book itself? The answer to that question must begin with a frank reminder that no one has yet had the temerity to bring charges of false teaching against Luther, who engaged in much the same activity. Luther characterized the Book of Hebrews as "nonapostolic . . . an epistle put together from many fragments"; the Epistle of St. James as "nonapostolic . . . composed of various sayings compiled by a pious man who hastily committed to writing *(aufs Papier geworfen hat)* the utterances of followers of the apostles"; the Epistle of St. Jude as "nonapostolic . . . without question an excerpt or copy of St. Peter's other epistles"; Revelation as "neither apostolic *nor prophetic*" (italics added).[12] Surely, a man who would practice such "form criticism" and reject the apostolicity of Biblical books for reasons of content would not be allowed to teach (or continue to teach) on the faculty of one of our seminaries. Nor would he be permitted to write unchallenged: "So this is the true touchstone for judging (*tadeln*, literally "censuring") all (Biblical) books, to see whether they declare Christ."[13] But when we recall the awesome odds which Blessed Martin Luther overcame with his own and unconditional *gegraptai*,[14] and the immense work he has done, based upon his profound and utter humility before God and his unrelenting trust in God's grace, we begin to understand that his Biblical "criticism" was not skepticism. He did not question one single miracle or Biblical doctrine. He did insist on the preeminence of Jesus Christ. Yet what some consider an exegetical peccadillo on Luther's part has been roundly condemned as "false teaching" in our own contemporary situation.

What shall we do when a brother in the church today says and writes

uniform teaching of Scripture about God's grace in Christ. See Luther's stance in *D. Martin Luthers Streitigkeit mit Erasmo Roterodamo vom Freyen Willen* (Leipzig: Johann Heinrich Zedler, 1733), pp. 17-18.

[11] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, I* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 137-38. Contrary to this enlightened approach, many of our older adult instruction manuals began with a chapter which stressed the absolute inerrancy of the Scripture, also in matters of science. The implication was that the convert must *therefore* accept the following chapters on Law, Gospel, Baptism, and so forth. The argument that systematic theology has always, and properly, begun with a *locus* on Scripture does not apply. There is a world of difference between the rarified atmosphere of a dogmatics text and the crucial immediacy of an adult instruction manual.

[12] *Dr. Martin Luthers Saemmtliche Schriften*, Vierzehnter Band (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1898), pp. 126-41. See also Kurt Aland's comments in regard to Luther's New Testament translation in his *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1962), p. 30.

[13] Ibid., p. 129.

[14] Matt. 4:4.

things which seem to rend the seamless robe of formal Scripture? Dr. Theodore Graebner gives the best answer in his monograph *The Historic Lutheran Position in Non-Fundamentals:* "To this let me say that we do not depend upon discipline for our preservation in the truth. Discipline, supervision, censorship, are external means and easily become a species of tyranny or at least of compulsion so that the fear of the loss of position is what will keep more liberal spirits in line. This is thoroughly unevangelical and un-Lutheran. We intend to trust in the power of the truth and the love which it creates in its adherents rather than in discipline. We shall not forget the inherent power of the truth and the Christian's love of the truth." [15]

We must realize that no discipline, no amount of "lower criticism," hermeneutic formulae, or subscriptions to "the pure Word," will ensure that exegesis becomes a reliable and "safe" handmaiden of church dogmatics. Numerous sects have appealed to an inerrant Bible as the basis for their aberrations. Such sects have also separated an already anemic Christology from any vestige of an *analogia Scripturae.* Only the essential Gospel of forgiveness through Jesus Christ "leads in a preeminent way to the clear and proper understanding of the entire Holy Scripture, it alone points the way to the inexpressible treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and it alone opens the door into the whole Bible." [16]

THE PRESENT UNDER THE ASPECT OF THE *TELOS*

The *consummatio saeculi,* the *synteleia* of Matthew 13, reminds us of the "not yet" of all of our formulations and life. In the war's extremity of pain, destruction, and dissolution of all ecclesiastical structure, Waldemar Thomson clearly saw the evanescence of everything that people call "church," of all definitions of what is accepted and "correct." Only Christ is real. "Since Jesus offers man real life in His love and through His divine person, wooing, forgiving, recreating, fulfilling man's deepest longings, and revealed immediately in His words—not in the abstract of doctrinal formulations—he takes from us humans our former so-called security, our former so-called life." [17] What Thomson felt so keenly during wartime should really be part of our constant eschatological awareness. Because of the call, demand, and promise of the New Testament *arneisthai,* the Christian is truly a *homo viator* and part of the *ecclesia semper reformanda et reformans.*

The Gospel is the great disturbance of our life here on earth. The coming of Christ is the intervention of God in the course of "our world" and its order. God's action is revolutionary, not in any political, economic, or social sense. Men have known many such revolutions in our time, but the *decisive event* is missing: man's essential nature is not changed. In the Gospel, however, Jesus Christ breaks the apparently immutable laws of selfishness and death. He begins *His* rule, and rules in such manner that what happened to His body happens to the believer—death and resurrection.

In the face of this there can be no *ecclesia docens* that does not have to be continually an *ecclesia audiens, discens, studens.* Among the proud are the enemies of God. But the *Kyrie eleison* of the church is the song of those who have found their worthiness in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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[15] Theodore Graebner, *The Historic Lutheran Position in Non-Fundamentals* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), p. 31. Of interest is also footnote 2 on page 8 in regard to Luther's stance.

[16] Apology, Art. IV, 2 (German).

[17] Hoerschelmann, p. 43.