

# THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

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## I. WRITING FROM:

In contemporary Lutheranism, it is necessary to situate oneself. I am writing as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In America, Lutheranism has absorbed elements of American frontier-pietism, of biblical fundamentalism, of rugged religious individualism which can produce expressions of Lutheranism with views of the authority of the Bible radically disparate from those in this paper. I represent a more classical/traditional Lutheranism verging on the interpretation of Lutheranism as an evangelical confessional movement in the Church catholic.

Such a situating means that my views on the authority of the Bible from a Lutheran perspective are contextualized by being set in the midst of the larger “catholic” ecumenical Church. However, as will be evident, there is both a certain “Lutheran” approach to the context (evangelical Christological) of the Bible, and a paradoxical Lutheran “openness” to the expanding horizons of the Gospel.

## II. WE’VE ALWAYS USED IT THIS WAY BEFORE: THE BIBLE IN THE LIFE OF AMERICAN LUTHERANS

**It is preliminarily instructive to notice how contemporary Lutherans “use” the Bible. A sign of the authority of the Bible** in Lutheranism is enacted in the life of Lutherans. Lutherans start from the Bible. Although we do not have a mandated liturgy, yet our rootage in the Western Mass means that our worship order largely consists of biblical texts and references. Being a church which uses a lectionary for the Sunday and daily worship readings, Lutherans hear the Bible read on a regular basis. Even in our day, Sunday School and catechetical classes memorize scripture texts. Most Lutheran pastors’ conferences, synod annual assemblies, and biennial Churchwide Assemblies include Bible studies as an element of the agenda. Daily devotions centered on biblical texts is a part of the traditional piety of Lutherans which many of the

faithful, but far from all, continue. Most statements of the Church feel “incomplete” (or perhaps incompetent) if biblical references are missing as a basis for their reflection and conclusions. Classically, when Lutherans preach, they are exegeting a biblical text. Most Lutherans may not carry their Bible with them on a daily basis, or even into Lutheran meetings, but biblical references are an expected part of Lutheran discourse. With Lutherans, it is not just verses in the heart but in the head. Our most basic theological convictions are biblically warranted. While the altar is architecturally central and always the most prominent element in our sanctuaries. The reading lectern and pulpit, with a Bible often on each, are the flanking “holders up of the arms” of adoration, praise, and formation in the faith.

As reported in the September, 2001 *The Lutheran* (p. 9), “A recent Gallup poll found that those who believe the Bible is the actual word of God declined from 65 percent in 1963 to 27 percent today. An ELCA 2001 survey shows 72% of ELCA members believe the Bible is either the inspired word of God, containing no errors, with verses sometimes taken symbolically (50 percent), or is the inspired word of God, but may contain historical and scientific errors (22 percent). Another 22 percent also consider it the actual word of God, to be taken literally.”

Seminary professors and pastors may validly complain about the lack of biblical knowledge among their sisters and brothers in the ELCA. However, the orientational-commitment to the centrality of the Bible and its attributed (but perhaps not exercised) authority is very strong among Lutherans.

Of course, historically, Lutheranism arose out of the biblical and personal faith tremors of Martin Luther. Lutheranism, indeed the Reformation, is a movement based in books and texts. Its history is bound up with the invention of movable type for printing and the capacities to widely distribute reproducible text materials. Within this commerce in books and thought in sixteenth century Germany, there was an illiterate population with probably only 5% being able to read much at all. However, the Lutheran movement attempted to spread the “Word” as well as the words through translation into the language of the common people so they could hear, even if they could not read. The Bible was the central referenced document in the movement of Lutheranism.

Luther was a German University professor who because of rank could have taught in many areas of scholarly or theological interest. However, a great bulk of Luther’s written words (or

words attributed to him by student scribes and others) were lectures on the Bible. Luther's theology was really a biblical theology, or at least an intentionally biblically-based theology.

From its inception, the Bible has been central for Lutheranism not just in its doctrinal theology but more basically in its practical piety and liturgical life. In the Lutheran tradition, preaching has always aspired to be biblical preaching.

In addition, from its origins in the university world, Lutheranism has always (at least in most places) had a catechetical emphasis. For Luther, and Lutherans, instruction in the faith was always part and parcel biblical instruction.

The authority of the Bible has been inbred in Lutherans from the font in the practical piety of the Lutheranism, in its evangelical proclamation of justification by grace through faith, in its liturgical grounding in the western Latin Mass, in its faithfulness to biblical preaching, and in its evangelical witness and pedagogy.

Is all well? Definitely, not! Counter claims could all be substantiated to show that Lutherans might nod toward the Bible but are not immersed in it. Baptists can quote chapter and verse from memory (including the chapter and verses and red-lettered texts) better than most Lutherans. We are as capable of eisegesis as of exegesis. It is a common experience for Bible Study speakers to come into a Lutheran Pastors' Conference or Synod Assembly and find only a few persons among hundreds with a Bible near-to-hand. Bible reading in Lutheran homes in America is not exemplary. BUT the Bible is revered. Lutherans feel uneasy if the Bible is not near-at-hand and explicitly referred to in preaching, teaching, and witness.

### **III. WE HAVE STAKED OUR LIVES ON IT AND PUT IT IN WRITING: LUTHER AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONAL TRADITION:**

"I should prefer all my books to perish that only the Bible might be read, for other books take up attention and make us neglect the Bible." Martin Luther<sup>1</sup>

In some respects, it can be argued that Luther clung to the authority of the text of the Bible against on the one side the proclamations and authority of Councils of the Church and pronouncements of popes, and on the other hand, against the mastication of the text of the Bible through glosses and commentaries by theological and humanist scholars. For Luther, the Bible was the authority by which these others must be judged.

Luther's own grappling with the text of the Bible on the basis of his own guilt and his agony before the judgments of God provided him with the revelatory and theological-spiritual conversion experience in his realization of the actuality of God's justifying grace, freely given in Jesus Christ. Luther's searching of

the biblical text was the heart and fountain of his life. Thus, the authority of the biblical text was a freeing authority for him which he proclaimed to others. He did not find the releasing of himself into complete engrafting by the Holy Spirit into Christ in any other authority but that of God's grace sacramentally realized in his encounter with the Bible.

For Luther, the revelatory power and authority of the Bible were so immediate and evident that it was self-authenticating through the Holy Spirit because it most immediately bore "the Word" - the living crucified/resurrected Jesus Christ. As he put it, the Bible is the manger in which the Christ is present (made present again and presented) to us. Thus, for Luther, the primacy of the words and witness (these may be related but distinguishable) of the scriptures effectively trump the methods of their interpretation which he had carefully learned in his study, especially the famed fourfold method of biblical interpretation. For Luther, the Bible was the authority over the interpreter, although he was not naive about how the two must interact and interpenetrate in a finite world.

These convictions about the authority of the Bible are carried forth in the Lutheran Confessions. While it takes four "articles" of The Augsburg Confession (1530) before the Bible is directly quoted, yet this is the heart of the Confessions, the Article on "Justification." Here Romans 3: 21-26 and 4:5 are referenced.

Immediately following is Article 5 on "The Office of Ministry." In this Article, there is frequent reference to the "Gospel." As we will see, the "Gospel" means more than the Bible and the biblical text to Lutherans. This Article encapsulates the sacramental orientation of Lutherans that the Holy Spirit enables the grace of God to work faith and work in and through faith by grace primarily in mediated rather than immediate ways. "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel . . . Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

It may be considered a curious thing that in the central historical Lutheran Confessions there are very few references to "The Bible." The Confessions talk about: "the Gospel," "the

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<sup>1</sup> Preserved Smith and H. P. Gallinger, eds. and trans. *Conversations with Luther*. (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1915), p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans. *The Book of Concord*. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 31.

Word,” “the Word of God,” and “the scriptures.” Certainly, the Bible is assumed and quoted. For the Lutheran reformers, the text of the Bible was not at issue. They accepted the text used in the Church, even as they were open to the critical apparatus being developed by the Humanists and other scholars. Luther himself worked with the Vulgate, Erasmus’ Greek text (1519), and Reuchlin’s Hebrew Grammar (1506). Erasmus probably used no ancient manuscripts of the biblical text before the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. The text of the Bible as such was not in dispute in the Lutheran Reformation. What was in dispute was the proclamatory evangelical center of the biblical text/proclamation, namely justification by grace through faith. The medium of that revelation and proclamation was the Bible! It was actualized for hearing, feeling, and knowing initially, powerfully, and convincingly in no other place. The sacraments derivatively and ingrafted into the biblical proclamation have this power also, but they must not be separated from the Bible. If they were so separated, they would seek to be the primary sacramental media of the Gospel.

Immediately in the opening of the Formula of Concord (1580), it is stated (Part I: Epitome): “1. We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged...”<sup>3</sup> This was reiterated in Part II: The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord: “We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated.”<sup>4</sup> These later Lutherans were able to refer affectionately and practically to Martin Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms as “the Layman’s Bible,”<sup>5</sup> but only insofar as they contain what the scriptures of the Bible proclaim as necessary to know for salvation.

Thus, the Bible assumed a central authenticating actuality in the Lutheran Reformation as the proclamation of faith. In many ways, the reformers were convinced that not only was their reform in continuity with the Church but that it was authenticated by the Bible and indeed was “the” faithful re-presentation of the Gospel proclaimed biblically. There is no argument to be made by the Reformers about whether the Bible is the “right” book upon which to base faith. That is assumed. There is no substantial argument about the “form” of the Bible, although Luther and others had some questions about the proclamatory-power of some biblical books. There is no argument even about the “text” of the Bible, although the Lutheran Reformation and later Lutheranism have been open to literary, and historical developments in the location and specification of the biblical text. What was at issue was not the Bible but its powerful meaning and its God given purpose. The Reformers sought to free the Gospel as it was contained in the

Bible. Indeed, they sought to re-orient the reading of the Bible so that that reading flowed out of the energy of the center of the Gospel, the free justifying grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It might be hard to understate the simplicity and the profundity of the Reformation’s insight and proclamation regarding the Bible. The Lutheran reformers sought to reveal that the Bible was conformed to Christ as we are to be. The Bible was not to be subsumed under Councils or authorities, not even under the Church. Primarily, the Bible was the medium of the Holy Spirit, the agent of God, the manager of the living Christ for the proclamation of the promises of the Gospel, indeed for the Gospel itself! This conviction secondarily raised issues of interpretation and contextualized the book of The Bible within the living actuality of the Gospel. However, it did not relativize the centrality of the Bible. Because of their sacramental understanding, the Reformers resisted any attempts to “free” the Gospel from the Bible (and the Church and sacraments) such as might have happened in variations of the enthusiasts.

Because the authority of the Bible is the Gospel, in theory, Lutherans have an “open” canon. None of our confessional writings list the books of the Bible as is done in some of the Reformed confessional writings. Many Lutherans would find it strange to be regularly reading The Apocrypha. However, for the reformers, that is a part of the Bible, although the books might have a lesser proclamatory power. Lutherans are open to God revealing other books with a power of proclaiming the Gospel such that they should be included in “The Bible.” I think we would require some ecumenical consensus on those books, even a universal ecumenical council to confirm our convictions (perhaps). Lutherans do not look forward nor expect such additions to The Bible. However, we are open to the workings of the Holy Spirit and the Gospel.

Historical honesty compels me also to mention that there have been periods in Lutheran history when the doctrine of the inspiration of scripture (and that in all its parts) was on the ascendency. This grew into the claim of inerrancy of all aspects of the biblical text. The period of ultra-Lutheran orthodoxy after the sixteenth century saw this “inspiration” doctrine of the Bible’s authority come to the fore. The authorship of God was vigorously asserted. Luther’s nuances of the Gospel proclaimed in the Bible as the authenticating authority were lost. In Lutheran history, these

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<sup>3</sup> Tappert, p. 464.

<sup>4</sup> Tappert, pp. 503-504.

<sup>5</sup> Tappert, p. 465.

two Lutheran perspectives on biblical authority remain to our own day represented in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. Certainly in either one of these large Lutheran communions, you will find members holding the opposite theological viewpoints on biblical authority.

After the rise of ultra-Orthodoxy and in reaction to it, Lutheran pietism asserted the authority of the Bible speaking to the heart of the individual and the community. The Holy Spirit confirms in the heart the authenticity of the biblical Gospel.

Carl Braaten notes an additional historical development:

*While Lutheran pietism recaptured the existential personal dimension of Scripture's message, the Calvinist 'federal theology' of Johannes Coccejus (1669) read the Bible as a book of history and a series of interconnected covenants. This historical covenantal conception of the Bible had enormous influence on such thinkers as J. G. Herder, J. A. Bengel, J. T. Beck, and J. C. K. von Hofmann, all forerunners of the contemporary 'history-of-salvation' theology. In this line the authority of the Bible rests on the meaning of the historical events which the Bible reports. The Bible itself bears witness to this meaning. All the events point to Christ as the midpoint of history. This christocentric view of the Bible again gathers up an emphasis central to the theology of Luther and Calvin.<sup>6</sup>*

This perspective on the Bible along with the Lutheran interest in the historical text led into and was able to allow support by some Lutherans of the modern historical-critical and "formgeschichte" methods of biblical research. The Lutheran stance on the authority of the Bible articulated in this paper can work with contemporary canon criticism, reader response, and literary approaches to the text as background. However, for the faithful, the final arbiter of meaning is the Gospel proclamation of the Word of God.

#### **IV. WE CONTINUE IN OUR LINE: THE ELCA'S CONSTITUTION:**

The formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988 brought together three Lutheran groups themselves the products of mergers or separations: the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (primarily a group which had left the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church). These American Lutheran communions had slightly differing interpretations not of the authority of the Bible, but of its interpretation and perhaps, the authority of individual verses. In the crafting of a Constitution for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it was essential to make a statement of faith regarding the scriptures.

In stating the purpose of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

(ELCA Constitution, Chapter 4), the centrality of the Bible inevitably would be clear. The Church is defined as follows: "The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world."<sup>7</sup> Then, a list of six purposes is presented. Immediately, in the first purpose the "Holy Scriptures" are mentioned. "To participate in God's mission, this church shall: a. Proclaim God's saving Gospel of justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith alone, according to the apostolic witness in the Holy Scriptures, preserving and transmitting the Gospel faithfully to future generations."<sup>8</sup>

Other of the six purposes refer to worshiping God in proclaiming the Word, and nurturing the members in the Word of God. Obviously, from what we have stated above, for Lutherans the Word of God is intimately linked to the Bible. Interestingly, enough in the immediately following section within the "Statement of Purpose" where activities of the Church are listed, there is only passing reference to scripture: "b. Encourage and equip all members to worship, learn, serve, and witness; to fulfill their calling to serve God in the world; and to be stewards of the earth, their lives, and the Gospel."<sup>9</sup> The Church is also called to establish and care for an ordained ministry of Word and sacrament. Thus, in the activities of the Church, the reading, contemplation, study, and teaching of the Bible are largely assumed rather than made explicit. (I have perhaps overstated this curious ellipsis.)

In the central "Confession of Faith" for the ELCA in its Constitution, we must assume that the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran confessional tradition are grounding documents for the establishment of this "confession of faith." Indeed, explicitly, it affirms this grounding in the Word of God, scriptures, creeds, and confessional documents. The ordering of elements in this Confession of Faith are very intentionally placed.<sup>10</sup> In order, they include: the Triune God, Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Gospel, Jesus as the Word of God incarnate, the proclamation of Law and Gospel as the Word, the scriptures as the inspired written Word of God, the ecumenical creeds, the Unaltered Augsburg

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<sup>6</sup> Carl E. Braaten, "Prologomena to Christian Dogmatics, #4 The Holy Scriptures," in *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol 1. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Confession (1530), and the other writings of the Lutheran Book of Concord. Presumably this ordering presents an hierarchy of authority in which the Bible is only subservient to the Triune God and the Word of God as Gospel. The Gospel is called “the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.” For Lutherans, it is also the proclamation of justifying grace.

In this Confession of Faith, the scriptures are explicitly affirmed in the following manner: “The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Jesus Christ is the incarnated Word and the proclamation of the saving Gospel centered in its fullness in Christ is the Word of God. This proclamation is written centrally within the Bible. The authority of the Bible is judged on the basis of its ability to proclaim God’s justifying grace in and through Jesus Christ. Above all other written documents, the Confession of Faith says, “This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.”<sup>12</sup>

The words are carefully chosen in this Constitution. The Church **confesses** the Triune God, the Lordship of our Savior Jesus Christ, and this Gospel of judgment and mercy through justifying grace. These are gifts of God. The Church **accepts** the canonical scriptures, the Bible, as the inspired Word of God. In that sense it is authoritative. It references back to God and the Word of God Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is also the norm for the Church’s proclamation, faith, and life. Judgments regarding these, indeed their very definitions, are derived from, judged adequate, and warranted by the canonical Scriptures, the Bible. The authority of the Bible is accepted by the Church because in these written texts the Church experiences most powerfully the presence of the Word of God, Jesus Christ, and his living proclamation of God’s actuality, grace, judgment, love, and mission for the world. The authority of the Bible is not wholly self-referential to its text but to the presence of Christ with us. The authority of the Bible is open to the impact of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the Word. Thus, in theory, while the authority of “the” Bible (the book and text we know) is sure, still that library of texts is open to scrutiny, judgment of relative “power” to proclaim the Gospel, to be the Word, and capable of not amendment but addition. Luther, and Lutherans have exercised most of these interrogations of the authority of portions of the canonical scriptures.

To better understand then how this authority to “instantiate” and to “authenticate” the Gospel in the Bible works, we must look very briefly at Luther’s hermeneutical practices and those of contemporary Lutherans.

## V. THE WORDS AND THE WORD: LUTHER AND LUTHERANS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE:

In the **Bondage of the Will** (1525), Luther wrote of the essence of the Gospel:

*“In the New Testament the Gospel is preached. This is nothing else than*

*the message by which the Spirit is offered to us and grace for the forgiveness*

*of sins, purchased for us by Christ Crucified - and all entirely free, through the*

*pure mercy of God the Father..”<sup>13</sup>*

The promises and message of the graceful Triune God who in love offers the free gift of grace and salvation is the Gospel which for Luther is the primary “message.” The Bible holds, displays, and proclaims this Gospel with power. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit for that purpose.

Luther rejected the primary mode of biblical interpretation in his time, the fourfold method. Certainly, in Luther’s writings, we can find instances of his use of these methods to explicate the meanings of the biblical text on the basis of literal, allegorical, moral (tropological), and mystical interpretations. However, in his hermeneutical theory and in line with his whole theology, Luther rejected the systematic use of those methods to interpret scripture. He felt that these methods were human manipulations which obscured the plain truth of the biblical texts. As was the case with God-in-flesh in Jesus, the Word of God must be clear in the scriptures. Interpreters of the texts must not obscure it with their own manipulations.

Luther felt that we are called to find Christ and the Gospel in the texts of the Bible. The Bible proclaims the Word of God as a message, “pro nobus,” for us for salvation. We are to read scripture to hear God’s acceptance of sinners.

With this principle of the Gospel judging the texts of the Bible, Luther judged individual books of the Bible. While technically, he did not reject books from the corpus, yet he did make judgments concerning books which did not show forth the Gospel, the Word of God, clearly and powerfully (James, the Song of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 33, “Career of the Reformer, III.” Philip S. Watson, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972)

Solomon). Contrary to modern biblical theology, Luther preferred the Gospel of John over the Synoptic Gospels because he found the words of Jesus more clear in that Gospel where he felt they were given preference over the actions of Jesus. Luther would give priority to the preaching of Jesus over the miracles of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> For Luther, proclamation was the issue!

Thus, Luther might be accused of having a canon within the Canon. The Lutheran tradition is also open to such a critique. However, Lutherans would argue that what appears to be selectivity is actually acuity in hearing the Word of God. Luther had a conviction that Christ would shine through the biblical Word.

In his own meditations on the Bible and as a biblical theologian (although not a compulsive “systematic” theologian), Luther took very seriously the contents of the Bible. His lectures on biblical books illustrate this. Much of Luther’s theology arose out of confrontations with the biblical texts and confrontation with Christians and Christian groups whom he felt violated, or obscured the Gospel proclamation.

Luther often was haunted by aspects of the Bible which seemed to be clear but which he found difficult to appropriate theologically. A prime example of this struggle was the issue of God’s “work” of double predestination. We can find various attempts by Luther to explain double predestination within his theology of the grace of God. At one point, he seems to throw up his hands and say in other words, “That’s God’s business! I am only called to believe the Gospel of salvation and leave the rest up to God.” At his most radical, Luther said he would praise God even if God condemned him to hell. There are later references, however, where Luther preaches the Gospel of promise to God to be assured that Luther will not be condemned. This illustration shows that Luther wanted to say that scripture was simple and clear. It could be understood by anyone who heard it.

This conviction about the clarity of the scriptural text is often found in Luther:

“The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth, and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest, sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense.”<sup>15</sup>

However, Luther was a professor. We can read lengthy expositions of scriptural texts. In his biblical and theological writings, we can see Luther struggling to know the meaning of some texts or to match their “simple” sense with his evangelical theology. For Luther, then, the over-arching criterion became the Gospel, variously expressed as grace alone, and Christ alone.

Luther was convinced that the Gospel in the scripture is **what “drives” us to Christ (“was Christum treibt”) and saving grace. That is the authoritative biblical Word of God.**

This hermeneutical tradition established in the style of Luther

has remained within Lutheranism to our day. The Lutheran tradition has been relatively open to the modern historical-critical methods because they are helping to establish the “text” and its history. There is a confidence that within these texts and traditions the Gospel is proclaimed. For some Lutherans, but not all, the consequent revisions of the text are not a problem if such change is done responsibly on the basis of the tradition of the text. However, if modern and post-modern biblical criticism undercut the text as Word of God by relativising it into meaningless fragmentation and discrediting, then Lutherans tend to rebel. There is a confidence that there is a canon which has authenticity as the Word of God.

So that you might have a glimpse of modern Lutheran biblical hermeneutics, I have attached a statement by the biblical faculty at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, “The Bible as The Word of God.” (Appendix A)<sup>16</sup> A few sentences from this statement indicate the continuity of modern Lutheran views of the authority of the Bible with the convictions of Luther:

*...it is very important to remember that the Word of God is alive, kerygmatic ( i.e., it is at its heart the proclaiming of God’s good news), and dynamic. It can never be limited to words on a page.<sup>17</sup>*

*...Luther’s description [of the Bible] may be more familiar to you: the Bible is the manger in which the Christ is found. Without the manger, you will not find the Christ. But you dare not confuse the Christ with the manger! Likewise, the Christ does you no good unless you pick him up out of the manger. And once you have found the Christ in the manger, how can you not tell others about him?*

*So the Word of God is preeminently the living Christ. But this Word can only be known through the Canon of Scripture...<sup>18</sup>*

*...The Lutheran position is not that the Bible “contains the Word of God,” as is sometimes assumed. The Bible, Old and New Testaments, is the written expression of the Word of God. The Bible is the Word of God. This Word of God comprises both Law and Gospel. The Lutheran Confessions argue that every sentence of Scripture is either Law, a word of demand or judgement, or Gospel, a word of freedom or forgiveness. Both are the Word of God. Both are to be read, studied, preached, and taken seriously. Both are found in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. But the Christ event proves that God’s ultimate word is Gospel... All Scripture is either Law or Gospel. The Gospel is the final word, but is[it] is not the only word.<sup>19</sup>*

*Yet the Gospel always has the last word and must even criticize, or we might say complete, some Law portions of Scripture.<sup>20</sup>*

*We train our people, and especially our pastors and teachers, to bring to this task the best tools and methods available for understanding the texts. We attempt to hear the texts first of all within their own historical setting by exploring aspects of ancient culture and politics and religion, as well as the historical development of these books. We do this historical work, however, in order that we might hear these texts speak the Word of God more clearly for us today; and we work always under the hope and conviction that in this serious and joyful work of biblical interpretation, God continues to speak God's Word to the world.*<sup>21</sup>

Characteristically, in the end, Lutheran hermeneutics throws itself upon God! We trust and hope in the Word of God. We pray to the Holy Spirit to engraft us into Christ. We live in Christ as faithful servants of the Word of God for the mission of God in the world. We do our hermeneutical work anticipating that God will speak to us, and at the same time, praying our "Lord have mercy!" The authority of the Bible is the self-authenticating authority of the Word of God as it proclaims the Word *in*, and *under* the biblical texts, and as it also judges the human appropriation and specifications of those texts as it is the Word of God *with* those texts.

Now, we can ask: "Do Lutherans believe that the Bible is authoritative **because** it is the Word of God or that the Bible is authoritative **insofar as** it is or proclaims the Word of God? The answer is: "Yes!" The Word of God is the Gospel declaration of the Triune God most powerfully present in our living-crucified-risen Lord Jesus Christ. Lutherans confess that the Bible **is** the Word of God simple, powerful, and clear at the same time that we insist that the Word of God has **priority over** and can **judge** the adequacy of specific texts in the Bible to be evangelical proclamation.

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<sup>14</sup> Luther seems to have given priority to the Gospel of John, the writings of Paul and Peter, The Epistle to the Romans, The Epistle to the Galatians, Genesis, and Psalms in his writings.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser," in *Luther's Works, Church and Ministry I*, Vol. 39. Eric Gritsch, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 178.

<sup>16</sup> This text is also available on the Southern Seminary WEB site: <http://www.ltss.edu>

<sup>17</sup> **The Bible as the Word of God** (A Statement of the Biblical Faculty at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary). (Columbia, SC, 2000) p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Practically, in part, the above "Lutheran" stance explains why in controverted contemporary issues such as the issues surrounding Christian communions and homosexual Christians, Lutherans can both insist on a clear and unambiguous word from the Bible, while at the same time other Lutherans insist that the Gospel word of love, reconciliation, grace, and new life trump any biblical passages which seem absolutely to condemn homosexuality (or the practice of homosexual sexual relations). Both groups will proclaim: "This is the Word of the Lord!" To some extent, for Lutherans theologically, that proclamation of the "Word" is more powerful than simply waving the Bible. So the practice of biblical ethics in the Lutheran tradition is not an easy matter, but it is a necessity!

## VI. **ORIENTATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN LUTHERANISM:**

How can we further specify how the authority of the Bible "operates" within the Lutheran tradition? The following are my own formulations and do not reflect any official Lutheran documents or positions.

I suggest that there are a series of interpenetrating "orientational" dimensions which form the context within which Lutherans both experience and think about the authority of the Bible. These orientating dimensions establish the field within which Lutherans assert the authority of the Bible. I will suggest ten such "orientational dimensions" as the primary, but not the exhaustive, ones. I place this formulation forward as a thesis arising out of the more accepted content of this paper. I believe these "orientational dimensions" may evoke further discussion.

The authority of the Bible is its ability directly to communicate with power and meaning the Gospel. That authority involves at least the following dimensions:

**1. The Christological Dimension:** The Bible has authority because it bears, and reveals Christ the Savior. Radically, some Lutherans would say that, in a general manner, all elements of biblical scripture drive toward the revelation of Jesus as Christ/Messiah, in both Law and Gospel. Even the quality of authority ascribed to a text within the canon ultimately is determined on a Christological basis.

**2. The Referential-Evangelical Dimension:** The authority of the Bible is evident because it is evangelical. The Bible is the preeminent witness to the Gospel of God's justifying grace freely given in the life, death, and resurrection of our living Lord Jesus for the mission of God which includes the life/salvation of the world. The biblical text powerfully refers to the meaning communicated by the Word of God because it is immediately the Word of God.

**3. The Contextual/Spiritual Dimension:** The Bible has authority because the Holy Spirit breathes deeply in these texts. They are in-spired, in-breathed with the grace of God. The Bible re-presents in our midst Christ. It is sacramental. The Bible reveals the context of our life hidden in Christ before the face of God. Thus, it is authoritative because immediately it communicates to us where we stand in living and whose we are. The Bible gifts us with our constant awareness of God and God with us.

**4. The Situational Dimension:** At first, the Bible brings us up short by placing us before the face of God, which has Law dimensions, and then situates us in Christ, the Gospel. This is authoritative because it discloses to us the actuality of our existence. Authoritatively, the Bible communicates our situation even as it situates us before the Triune God, and God in Christ.

**5. The Performative Dimension:** In our encounter and living with the biblical text(s), the Gospel not only addresses us but “reads” us, calls us, places us before the face of God, makes Christ present, and engrafts us into Christ. The Bible has authoritative power because it enacts, makes actual, the state of being “Gospel-ed.” In the encounter with the Bible, Gospel proclamation happens and the presence, judgment, and grace of God are actual. The biblical text meaningfully conveys and enacts the power of the Gospel, the power of God’s saving grace.

**6. The Communal Dimension:** The biblical witness is surpassingly communal. Through our encounter with and living in the Bible, God makes us a people of God. We are not individualized even though we are named and identified by and in Christ. There is a communal dimension to the authority of the Bible. It is Gospel (good news) for us as it “is” that in a community. We cannot sit alone with the Bible isolated and have it be our authority. Its very interpretive proclamation of the Gospel requires that the Bible be met and lived within a community even as it forms that community. The “book” becomes “Bible” and is authoritative Word of God in and through communal worship, prayer, confession, teaching, ministry, and service.

**7. The Orientational Dimension:** The Bible is authoritative because it is trustworthy. Not only does it situate us in actuality before the face of God, it ingrafts us to Christ as our generative ground and expanding horizon. God, the Spirit working through the Bible, and Christ present in it provide us our place in life and a “map” to indicate the way. Authoritatively, the Bible turns us (repentance), saves us, nourishes, and sends us. Our directionality in living mission, rooted in God’s mission, is even more a style of life than a prescribed and concretized route. For us, the authorita-

tive orientation of the Bible is “personal” as we(communal) are identified and “personed” in Christ.

**8. The Pastoral Dimension:** The Bible is authoritative for us, for the whole community, because as we read, contemplate, and dwell in these texts, they minister to us as through the Holy Spirit, the Bible “reads” us. The disclosive impact of the biblical witness revealing the life and acts of God and the life of the cosmos, God’s creation, cares for us. The Bible gathers us up into the community of God’s people, holds us in Christ’s love and healing grace, and equips us to be God’s people serving the mission of God.

**9. The Theological Dimension:** Encountering and living in the Biblical text(s), the authority of the Bible is the Spirit’s ability to use this medium theologically to bring together in a living relationship words, text, evoked images and thoughts, stories, parables, teachings, songs, history, lamentations, prophecies in such a manner that the deepest feelings and most evocative “coring” symbols are correlated with the structures and thoughts of our lives. In the Bible, the living Word of God takes on rhetorical, literary, and thought-forms which communicate to us the unity of both “The” power of Life and the possibility of meaningful life. In part, the authority of the Bible is its terrible, healing, joyful and awesome “making sense.” It initiates the “logos” of God-thought and godly life.

**10. The Ethical Dimension:** Powerfully presenting the Savior’s saving grace while meaningfully communicating the will of God for living in Christ, the Bible has the authority to evoke and impel Christian (Christ-like) living as what God’s people naturally do. Thus, we are freed in Christ from moralism and released into Christ and christic living which is both loving and redemptive. Authority is authorization to be in a manner which unites act and being. Such fulness of life enabled by the biblical witness is authoritative because it manifests and enables authenticity, “the way, the truth, and the life.”

The above rather abstract assertions only begin to hint at the multidimensional nature of the authority of the Bible in the Lutheran tradition and the life of Lutherans and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We are bold to imagine that many of these probings and assertions are meaningful for the Body of Christ ecumenical.

## VII. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

When I was a parish pastor, I used to tell my Junior High School confirmands that I “made” them memorize Bible verses, creeds, portions of the Catechism, et cetera against the day when

the books would be burned. Of course, they could not believe or know completely what I meant. There have been times in Christian history, even in our day, when Christians have been persecuted, driven underground, and all their books burned. The survival of the faith among that people for that time depended on people knowing the texts and the stories. For those years, they were the living Bible.

We are a people of "The Book." Christianity has spread in part because we have no "holy language." We do have a "holy" book, the Bible. The Bible can be translated into many languages. Its primary power is in the reading of the texts and the dwelling in them. The Bible is the Gospel . . . good news! It must be published and proclaimed. It is a living Word of God. In Lutheranism, as in Christianity, the Bible is "an" authority under and in God.

Lutherans have understood the Bible, that is "stood under the Bible," as the Word of God, the proclamation of the Gospel of justifying grace in Jesus Christ. The Bible is sacramental in presenting Christ, the Word of God. There are no other "primary" texts and witnesses which are greater than the Bible except the living, died, resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. For Lutherans, all other witnesses' authority is subjected to, judged by, and empowered in Christ, the Gospel, and the Bible. For Lutherans, even our feeling of the Holy Spirit speaking directly to us is an authority below Christ, the Word of God, the Gospel, and the Bible.

All in all, solely for the glory of God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Amen!