



“Inerrancy” and “Verbal Inspiration”: The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod Views on the Bible

by Rev. Dan Hooper ■ March 2004

The LC–MS still holds views about the Holy Scriptures which are not shared by all Lutherans, although enjoying a long and respected history. But many fundamentalists might concur with these views.

In 1932, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod adopted “A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.”¹ In its section “Of the Holy Scriptures”² the LC-MS maintains the doctrinal position regarding the Bible which:

- holds to the verbal inspiration of the Bible (the Holy Ghost gave to the human authors the exact words to write);
- teaches the inerrancy of the Bible (containing no errors or contradictions and conveying infallible truth);
- believes the Bible is the sole source from which and sole rule by which all teachers and doctrines are evaluated;
- rejects the idea that the Bible contains “the word of man” which (might contain error) in addition to the word of God.

Other Lutheran bodies in this hemisphere, at different times, embedded similar concepts and language in their authoritative documents. With the various mergers of ethnic and national Lutheran synods into fewer churchbodies, culminating in the formation of the ELCA in 1988, this language has been reformulated to acknowledge the Scriptures as inspired and authoritative for doctrine, while avoiding the ideas of verbal inspiration and infallibility.

In 1973, the LC-MS adopted “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles”³ which explains the Synod’s official distinction between Law and Gospel in the Bible:

We believe that the two chief doctrines of Holy Scripture, Law and Gospel, must be constantly and diligently proclaimed in the church of God until the end of the world, but with due distinction (FC, SD, V, 24).⁴

The Law, as the expression of God’s immutable will, is to be used by the church to bring men to a knowledge of their sins as well as to provide Christians with instruction about good works (FC, SD, V, 17-18).

The Gospel receives the primary emphasis in the ministry of the New Testament, for it is the message that “God forgives them all their sins through Christ, accepts them for His sake as God’s children, and out of pure grace, without any merit of their own, justifies and saves them.” (FC, SD, V, 25)

Theologian Carl E. Braaten (Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I, First Locus, 4, “The Holy Scriptures”) explains that this position is entirely consistent with that of 17th century Lutheran orthodoxy,

which went to great pains to erase the distinctions taught by Luther. Two brief passages illustrate the problem:

Luther . . . made a fundamental distinction between the books by applying a christological canon of interpretation: the gospel of free grace and justification through faith alone. This is the truly apostolic standard. It cannot be overemphasized that for Luther what counted was the material contents of the book and not its formal position within Scripture. . . . This “canon within the canon” (Käsemann) is not something that Luther brought to the biblical text out of his subjective experience. Rather, it is to be found as the clear center of the main books of Scripture itself.

The authority the Scriptures possess in [the period of Lutheran] orthodoxy is of an authoritarian kind, commanding blind faith and obedience. This is so because it is affirmed that they are to be believed not because of what they say, but purely because they say it. The Scriptures are endowed [in this view] with causative authority, so that in the language of orthodoxy it is said that the Scriptures create faith and obedience; the Scriptures create assent to the truths to be believed. This type of language indicates that the distinction between the Holy Spirit, who alone according to classic Christianity possesses such creative, regenerative, and illuminative power, and the Holy Scriptures has virtually collapsed.

Braaten’s thorough discussion is instructive about the post-Reformation split in Protestant theology, with varying points of view in Calvinism, Lutheran orthodoxy and later Pietism.

The doctrine of inspiration continued to grow as the controversy with the Roman Catholics continued. All the weapons of Protestantism seemed to hang on this one doctrine—the absolutely inspired text of Scripture, down to the last syllable and punctuation mark. The result was the divinization of the biblical texts, the ascription of attributes which nearly rival the attributes of the Almighty. The faith and obedience which the New Testament refers to God, Christ, or the Gospel are now transferred to Scripture as the Word of God. . .

In the theology of the Reformation we are thus faced with two doctrines of the authority of Scripture. For Luther and Melancthon and their closest pupils the authority of Scripture is grounded in its witness to Christ. The Scripture is to be believed on account of Christ, its essential content. The other doctrine holds that Scripture is trustworthy because of the testimonies that prove its divine origin by means of inspiration.

If such authoritarian views at one time served as a barricade against the Enlightenment, they remain in place today in resistance to much of modern thought. We would do well to re-examine Luther’s and Melancthon’s insights as solid ground on which to seek refuge from the more dangerous extremes of verbal inspiration and inerrancy.

What Has This to Do with Reconciling Ministry?

While such firmly grounded doctrines about the Scriptures as verbal inspiration and inerrancy may give comfort to some Christians who want to rely on the absolute truthfulness of what God is saying to humanity in the Bible, these doctrines—when inflexibly enforced—consciously reject several alternative views, subvert key insights, and burden the consciences of some believers, to the point of losing faith.

- “Verbal inspiration” not only compromises the centrality of the Gospel of Christ as the true ground of biblical authority, it ignores the place of Christian spiritual experience of the Gospel, guided by the Holy Spirit, and scholarly insight into the circumstances of the author’s times, milieu, challenges and purposes. But without the contribution both of Christian

spiritual experience and of scholarly dedication over centuries of faithful work, even the ancient texts of the Bible would not be available or intelligible to the Christian reader today. To discount these things as having little value is to insult the faith and commitment of prior generations of faithful believers.

- There is no complete original manuscript of the Bible—since it was copied by hand for more than thirteen hundred years before the invention of the printing press—and there are significant variations between the texts of dozens of the most ancient and reliable manuscripts in existence. To ignore these differences in order to hold to a “verbal inspiration” makes a mockery of human intellect and credulity, introduces unnecessary doubt, weakens faith and actually creates, rather than resolves, conflict in the church.⁵
- Biblical “inerrancy” as propounded above means that the Bible has no errors or contradictions, not only in matters of faith and our relationship to God, but no errors in any way: “Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10:35.”[“Scripture cannot be broken.”⁶] This implies, for example, that every inconsistency or contradiction can be reconciled satisfactorily and completely.
- The LC-MS’s teaching about the Bible as the “sole source” and “sole rule” is development of the Reformation principle *sola Scriptura*, taken to mean that true Christian doctrine contains nothing which is not grounded in the Bible. But understood in this way would mean that modern understandings of human nature and psychology, the sciences, medicine, history, etc., are overruled and deemed irrelevant to faith by the Bible’s understandings of human nature, psychology, the sciences, medicine, history, etc. Such a view essentially forecloses on all intelligent discussion of issues which are, or seem to be, treated in the Bible.
- By holding that the Bible contains only the Word of God and does not contain (mingled in with the divine Word) the wisdom, ignorance or prejudices of human authors, such a position requires believers to attribute solely to Almighty God, for example, an array of irrational acts, emotional states, prejudices, cruelty and senseless killing that is found in many texts, and to accept them as revelation of God’s immutable will.

Clearly, there have developed two radically different views of Scripture, even within the Lutheran witness to Christian faith. That view which holds to verbal inspiration and inerrancy is now closely aligning itself with contemporary Christian fundamentalism, quite a distance apart from the insight of Luther and the 16th Century Reformers.

Our contemporary debates over issues of human sexuality are, to some degree, simply convenient pawns in this larger battle, since anyone who steps forward with a differing or emerging insight regarding the meaning or significance of biblical texts may be dismissed as a “Bible doubter.” It is no slight matter that those who are most adamantly opposed to accepting gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians as their brothers and sisters are the ones who claim that taking a fresh look at the “clobber passages” and whether they are applicable today is tantamount to undermining the authority of Scripture.

The danger of this view goes far beyond that of putting the Bible on a lofty plane. To sustain this teaching requires a casuistry that would resolve every conceivable interpretive question—even of

issues not pertaining to matters of faith—with authoritarian exactitude. It thus elevates the work of official interpreters to the same lofty status, when all interpreters of the Bible would better echo the humility of St. Paul, at 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, that none of us now understands perfectly or fully, but sees as if in a dim mirror; and it ignores the admission, at 2 Peter 3:15-16, that there are things in scripture which are hard to understand.

When humility and caution with the Scriptures are swept aside, and issues of history, geography and secular matters are elevated to the same level as that of grace, faith and Gospel, then the material authority of the Word in the Bible is undermined. Instead of leading people to faith, it may lead many away from faith which—this view demands—must accept errors, ancient prejudice and bigotry, and trivial ideas which are so opaque as to obscure the far greater truth that Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God’s “precious and very great promises” (2 Peter 1:4). Whether we would attribute this to the contemporary state of human knowledge or merely to modern cynicism, there are many who will never put their faith in Christ if they must also put equal faith in every single word in the Bible, including its geography, its medicine and science.

If the Reformation principle, *sola scriptura* was a steadfast anchor for the Reformers, its misuse, through extreme expressions of fundamentalist loyalty to the text of the Bible, verbal inspiration and inerrancy, has become an impediment to proclaiming the Gospel.

From here in this Lutheran “orthodox” view, it is not a great stretch to insist: that everything can be known in this errorless, contradiction-free Bible; that every word is clear and every meaning explainable with precision. Even in matters of human sexuality, human psychology, science and personal experience, there is no room for uncertainty, for the Bible’s texts must mean precisely what [the *inerrantist authority* insists that] they say. So, there is nothing to discuss. Only the duty remains to read and obey.

It is ironic, if not tragic, that such a strong and unwavering view about the Bible itself, which claims to reconcile all possible discrepancies, errors or contradictions in the Bible, in fact leads to a position that cannot reconcile with other Christians. A doctrine of the Bible which is so calculated to alienate other Christians, who cling to Jesus Christ by faith not infallible intellect, cannot be true doctrine.

A literal Bible presents me with far more problems than assets. It offers me a God I cannot respect, much less worship; a deity whose needs and prejudices are at least as large as my own. I meet in the literal understanding of Scripture a God who is simply not viable, and what the mind cannot believe the heart can finally never adore. —Bishop John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism*

You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. —John 5:39-40

Endnotes

1. Available on the LC–MS web site at www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=523.
2. A portion of the above document, available at www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=563.
3. The 13pp. document is available at www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/LCMS/astatement.pdf.

4. Citations in parentheses refer to the *Book of Concord*, the “Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration”, adopted in 1580.

5. Slight differences in the biblical text can lead to significant differences in moral theology. In Matthew 5:32, Jesus said, “everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress.” In Mark 10:11-12 is a significant variation: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” At Luke 16:18, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” There are significant differences between these texts, even if Jesus’ intent is quite clear that a husband and wife are joined together by God for life. Christian thinking has produced a wide range of opinion because of this variation, especially in permitting the re-marriage of the so-called “innocent party” in the case that the spouse has been a “guilty party” through unchastity.

Two millennia of discussion have not distilled uniform, precise guidance on this matter among Christians. But if there are no errors of any kind in the sacred texts, and if the Holy Spirit dictated every word to each of the evangelists, which moral view is correct, and which one was “dictated” by the Holy Spirit?

6. The interjection “(and scripture cannot be broken)” which concludes verse 35, has been a popular phrase for generations—translated in these words at least since the King James Version—and thought to convey that Jesus is saying one cannot find a flaw in the Bible. The meaning here is far from certain, however, and is now translated in several ways, such as “scripture cannot be annulled” (*New Revised Standard Version*); “scripture cannot be set aside” (*New Jerusalem Bible, New English Bible*). In the heat of the debate, vv. 31–38, it is not certain if Jesus is referring to all of the Holy Scriptures—the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament—or just to the passage he was citing, Psalm 82:6.

The Greek word is *lyein*, literally, “break, set aside.” Biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown translates the phrase “scripture cannot lose its force,” but notes “Often this passage is assumed to reflect a reverence for the details of the Law (Scripture) which are not to be set aside,” but cites careful linguistic work by R. Jungkuntz [“An Approach to the Exegesis of John 10:34-36,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 35 (1964), pp. 556-565, 559-60] to suggest the words refer to the fulfillment of scripture. So the sense would read “scripture cannot be unfulfilled” or “scripture cannot be kept from fulfillment” (Brown, §36, p.410) It can be argued that the phrase did not mean anything close to how it is utilized today, that is, “scripture has no flaw.”

Indeed, Jesus does not “set aside” the law or scripture (Cf. Matthew 5:17-18), but subsumes the requirements of the Law and the meaning of all Holy Scripture into himself and his message, as we have noted above from John 5:39-40. If anything, this phrase at John 10:35 lends no real support to the view that the Bible is inerrant in all things, including “those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters,” but supports the claim that Jesus Christ is all-sufficient, making the concept of “inerrancy” irrelevant to Christian faith and life.