

The Seminary's Unchanging Foundation in a Changing World: *Sola Scriptura*

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[This is the second in a series of three essays presented at the 125th anniversary convocation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on Friday, April 22, 1988. The convocation's theme was "The Seminary's Unchanging Foundation in a Changing World: *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide.*"]

God demonstrated his grace to you and me, to the church and to the whole world of sinners by giving us his Word. From the time of Moses on, he had it put into writing so that you and I might turn to the written Word and learn to know him as our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Through the gospel in the Word and the sacraments the Holy Spirit brought us to faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior, strengthens that faith daily as we search the Holy Scriptures, moves us to live lives that honor God and also assures us of a place with Jesus Christ in glory.

That this is the purpose of Scripture is confessed clearly by our synod in *This We Believe*:

We believe that God has given the Holy Scriptures to proclaim his grace in Christ to man. In the Old Testament God repeatedly promised his people a divine Deliverer from sin, death and hell. The New Testament proclaims that this promised Deliverer has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Scriptures testify of Christ. Jesus himself says of the Scriptures that they "testify about me" (Jn 5:39).¹

Article II of the Constitution of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) leaves no question as to where our synod stands, what position it takes. There we read: "The synod accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the divinely inspired and inerrant word of God and submits to this word of God as the only infallible authority in all matters of doctrine, faith and life." Note the word "inerrant," which tells how we understand the word "inspired"; then the word "only," which takes up the *sola* in *sola scriptura*; and finally the word "all," in "all matters of doctrine, faith and life." We now ask: Is this also the position taken by our seminary? It is important to face this question because whenever a church or denomination strays from Scripture, that usually begins with those who call themselves theologians. Let us then examine

The Stand of our Seminary

The stand our seminary takes over against Scripture becomes evident in what the members of the faculty write and publish, what they say at pastoral conferences and synodical meetings, what they proclaim in the sermons they deliver and in what they teach in their classrooms. That our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and its professors do accept the Scriptures as "the divinely inspired and inerrant word of God" and as "the only infallible authority in all matters of doctrine, faith and life" will become very clear as we now quote words written by past and present professors.

Dr. Adolf Hoenecke, director of the seminary from 1866 to 1870 and again from 1878 to 1908, in *his Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* writes:

Holy Scripture, the sole source of the knowledge of religion, theology and dogmatics, is nothing less than the Word of God, written through inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the prophets,

¹ *This We Believe. A Statement of Belief of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod* (printed for the Commission on Doctrinal Matters by Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1967), I, 4; p 4.

evangelists and apostles, in order that sinners may derive from it the knowledge of life everlasting.²

Again: “The holy writers were moved to write by God himself and wrote by divine mandate.”³ “All and everything contained in the Holy Scripture is inspired by God.”⁴ And finally: “Also the individual words were given to the holy writers by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”⁵

Speaking of the relationship of reason and Scripture, Prof. August Pieper in the January 1910 issue of the *Theologische Quartalschrift* wrote:

To sum up, Scripture is God’s inerrant Word from the first to the last letter. Therefore Scripture is the sole and absolute teaching authority. Human reason is merely the outward organ whereby we hear what God has spoken. As soon as reason wants to be more, it corrupts theology. May God give us the grace and spirit to recognize the dreadful arrogance of our human reason more clearly and to learn to take it captive ever more completely under obedience to Christ; only then will our theology remain pure.⁶

Zeroing in on *sola scriptura*, Prof. Max Lehninger in a 1950 essay entitled, “The Development of the Doctrinal Position of the Wisconsin Synod during the Century of its History,” wrote as follows:

It was after the turn of the century when an incident which called for a reorientation relative to the doctrine of the Church and Ministry brought this home to us. Two men in our synod, J. P. Koehler and Aug. Pieper, professors of our theological seminary, were alerting us to the danger of trying to settle a disputed point of doctrine by quoting the words of a prominent teacher of our Church, which were biblically correct when spoken to controvert a specific error with which he then was concerned. They averred the basic unsoundness of a procedure which wants to prove a point of doctrine by quoting human authorities, even the Confessions and Luther. They reminded their fellow Lutherans to show themselves true pupils of Luther by recognizing no other authority than the holy Scriptures. They stressed the self-evident maxim, theoretically acknowledged but so often forgotten in practice, that we Christians must always go to the only fountainhead and source of faith and knowledge, the well of living water, the Bible, as the norm by which all things in the Church, doctrine and life, must be judged.⁷

We agree.⁸

Turning to the present faculty, we will confine ourselves to two remarks in recent issues of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. In the Winter 1988 issue, Prof. Armin J. Panning, president of the seminary, states: “Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is a confessional school. It is bound by the Scriptures and thus committed to teaching all of God’s Word, but only God’s Word.” Then he continues:

Hence, it would be inconsistent to tolerate unscriptural teaching in the classroom. The second paragraph of the Catalog’s purpose expands on this by saying: “The Seminary carries out this purpose by training all of its students. . .in accordance with the Holy Scriptures as the verbally

² Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909), I, 329. This and all other translations from the German are by this essayist.

³ *Ibid.*, p 336.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 340.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 340.

⁶ *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 7, No 1 (January 1910), p 75.

⁷ *Quartalschrift, Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No 2 (April 1950), pp 101f.

⁸ An excellent article by Prof. Joh. P. Meyer reveals his full commitment to Scripture. Entitled, “*Die Schrift kann nicht gebrochen werden*,” it appears in the July 1931 issue of the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, pp 173–198. It is worth reading!

inspired and inerrant Word of God and in conscious agreement with the historical Confessions of the Lutheran Church.”⁹

Closing this section, we quote the prayer with which Prof. Wilbert R. Gawrisch closes “Foreword, 1987” in the Winter 1987 issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*:

By God’s grace WELS theology today, too, has its source in the Scriptures. *Sola scriptura* is the priceless heritage that it has received from the fathers. May God graciously preserve this heritage in the synod and at the seminary as the future becomes the present and then the past!¹⁰

We join him in this prayer.

This Stand is Truly Lutheran

Sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide is the foundation of the Lutheran Reformation. The Roman Church, then as today, placed the decisions of the papacy and the church councils on a par with, if not above, the Scriptures, insisting that the apostles had not put everything into writing but had given much to the church by word of mouth, which was then passed down to subsequent generations and was just as trustworthy as Scripture. That, of course, left the door wide open. Luther, however, studying the Scripture, came to realize that Scripture alone must be used as the basis for doctrine, and that the moment something else is used, the grace of God in Christ Jesus is undermined, and thus the salvation of mankind is endangered.

Luther has much to say about this. In quoting Luther, however, we must be careful. There is the time element involved, and also another point. We note that Luther at times is very critical when he refers to Epistles such as James and Jude. Is he thereby setting Scripture aside? Not at all. For Luther this was not a problem concerning inspiration, but a matter of which books belonged to the canon. These, of course, are the passages most often used by liberal theologians in claiming that Luther actually did not take the position which orthodox Lutherans take today, namely, that everything in Scripture, down to the words, is the Word of God, is inerrant.

In quoting Luther, then, I would like to turn to what he said when for him it became an either-or as he stood before Emperor Charles V and the Diet at Worms at his second hearing on the evening of Thursday, April 18, 1521, and was asked whether or not he would recant. This was his answer:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures that I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.¹¹

Sixteen years later, in 1537, when the pope was calling for another church council, the Lutheran princes and theologians met in Smalcald. Luther, expecting to die before a council would ever convene, prepared what we today call the Smalcald Articles. In a sense they were his last will and testament to the church, for he states:

These are the articles on which I must stand and, God willing, shall stand even to my death; and I do not know how to change or to yield anything in them. If any one wishes to yield anything, let him do it at the peril of his conscience.¹²

⁹ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No 1 (Winter 1988), p 13.

¹⁰ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No 1 (Winter 1988), p 5.

¹¹ *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Muhlenberg, 1956–1986), 32, p 112f.

¹² *Concordia Triglotta*, p 501.

In Article II he then states:

It will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers; . . . We have, however, another rule, namely, . . . : The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel.¹³

This is not only the position taken by the Smalcald Articles, but by all the other Confessions to which we and our seminary subscribe. It is true that neither the Smalcald Articles, nor the Augsburg Confession, nor the Apology, nor the Catechisms contain specific articles on Scripture. All of them, however, consistently base their statements on Scripture.¹⁴

After Luther's death serious doctrinal controversies again threatened the unity of those who had declared themselves in agreement with the Augsburg Confession. That, of course, is nothing new. Satan is always eager to attack those who seek to hold to the truth. But God is able to bring good even out of such controversies. In 1577 these controversies led to the writing of the Formula of Concord, which contains a number of statements concerning the Scriptures.

The Epitome (Summary Content) of the Formula of Concord begins with these words:

We believe, teach and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone. . .

Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses which are to show in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.¹⁵

The church today may face problems that are new, heresies taking different forms from those of old, but in 1988, as in 1577, it can find the correct answers only if it turns to the Scriptures. We thank God that that is the position our seminary takes. That is being truly Lutheran.

This Stand is Truly Biblical and Christ-like

Our Savior and Lord lived by the Scriptures; in fact, he came to fulfill them. Listen as he says in Matthew 5:17, 18: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

As we study the Gospels, we find that Christ is well acquainted with the Scriptures from Genesis to Malachi. Whether it is Moses or David or Isaiah; whether it is Adam and Eve, or Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; whether it is Noah and the Deluge or Jonah in the fish's belly—Christ accepts all that Scripture says as the very truth of God.

¹³ *Trig.*, p 467.

¹⁴ The Augsburg Confession closes by saying: "If there is anything that any one might desire in this Confession, we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures" (*Trig.*, p 95). In the Apology we read: "Thus far, in order that the subject might be made quite clear, we have shown with sufficient fulness, both from the testimonies of Scripture, and arguments derived from Scripture, that by faith alone we obtain the remission of sins for Christ's sake" (*Trig.*, p 155).

¹⁵ *Trig.*, p 777. In the Thorough Declaration, the Formula of Concord states: "First, then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged" (*Trig.*, p 851). The Catalog of Testimonies closes by saying: ". . . the true saving faith is to be founded upon no church-teachers, old or new, but only upon God's Word, which is comprised in the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles, as unquestionable witnesses of divine truth" (*Trig.*, p 1149).

Scripture was also the source of his strength in his ministry and in his Passion. No sooner was he baptized by John the Baptist than the Spirit led him out into the wilderness to be tempted of Satan. Three times Satan challenged him, and three times he overcame Satan with Scripture, saying, “It is written.” In the synagogue at Nazareth the leaders brought him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read the words of Isaiah 61:1, 2 and then said to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). They rejected him and sought to throw him down the cliff. That Scripture will face them on Judgment Day. Later, when the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him, his answer simply was: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Mt 22:29).

We note also that Christ in preparing his disciples for his Passion repeatedly told them: “The Son of Man will go just as it was written about him” (Mt 26:24). When he ordered Peter to put his sword back in the sheath, he said to him, “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” (Mt 26:53, 54). To find comfort in his deepest sorrow on the cross Christ turned to Scripture, to Psalm 22:1, and prayed, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46), and then waited for the moment when he could say, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Lk 23:46).

His commitment to Scripture did not change with his resurrection. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus’ answer to two deeply troubled disciples was: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And Luke continues: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Later they said to one another: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:25–32). That is the kind of preaching we expect from those trained at our seminary, preaching based on Scripture and causing our hearts to burn within us. It will take place only if our professors and students hold to the *sola scriptura*, even as Christ did.

Taught by Christ, the apostles followed in his footsteps. What is more, their writings, the books of the New Testament, are on the same level with those of the Old Testament—inspired by the Holy Spirit. Paul brings that out very clearly in his letter to the Ephesians, where in chapter 2:19, 20 he states: “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

Naturally, the apostles in quoting Scripture quoted the Old Testament. Both the accounts of their addresses (sermons) and their individual writings demonstrate that their teaching, even though it emphasized the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and thus went beyond them, nevertheless was built on them—*sola scriptura*. Read Peter’s address to the multitude on Pentecost (Ac 2) and his words to the centurion Cornelius (Ac 10). In the latter note especially what Peter says about the prophets: “All the prophets testify about him [that is, about Christ] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v 43)—even this Gentile Centurion.

Paul’s many words and addresses recorded in the Book of Acts deal with the Old Testament in the same way. For example, his address in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Ac 13) is a preaching of Christ based on the Old Testament Scripture. In this address Paul quotes from the Psalms, from Isaiah and from Habakkuk. For Paul the Scripture is God’s Word down to the last letter. Note what he says in Galatians 3:16: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.” This reminds us of Jesus’ own attitude toward the Scripture when he insisted that it could not be broken (Jn 10:34).

We are deeply thankful that our seminary professors and students are taking the same position, taking to heart the admonition Paul gave to Timothy: “As for you, continue in what you have learned, and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of

God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:14–17). That’s *sola scriptura* as God wants it used.

Scripture on Scripture

In *This We Believe* our synod—and thus our seminary—has summarized what the Bible says concerning itself in these words:

We believe that God gave us the Scriptures through men whom he chose, using the language they knew and the style of writing they had. He used Moses and the prophets to write the Old Testament in Hebrew (some portions in Aramaic) and the evangelists and apostles to write the New Testament in Greek. We believe that in a miraculous way that goes beyond all human investigation God the holy Spirit inspired these men to write his Word. These “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). What they said, was spoken “not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:13). Every thought they expressed, every word they used was given them by the Holy Spirit by inspiration. St. Paul wrote to Timothy: “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). We therefore believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, that is, a word-for-word inspiration. This, however, is not to be equated with mechanical dictation.¹⁶

There are some who object that it is not faith in the Scriptures, or how they were written and composed, but faith in Christ that saves. That is true; but we would not know Christ without the Scriptures. And if Scripture is subject to error, we would have no way of knowing whether what it says about Christ is true or false. Besides, then we would not be agreeing with Christ himself, who says of Scripture, “The Scripture cannot be broken” (Jn 10:35). All of Scripture—not only the gospel message—is God’s Word. All of it, down to the individual word, is completely reliable. Paul put it this way: “All Scripture is God-breathed” (inspired) (2 Tm 3:16).

This also includes all that “scholars” have characterized as being trivial in Scripture. When Paul, for example, writes to Timothy about taking wine for his stomach or asks him to bring along the cloak and parchments he left in Troas, Scripture assures us that God is even concerned about what we might call the humdrum experiences of life.

Much of what has already been said concerning inspiration also supports the fact that Scripture is inerrant. Consider how Christ speaks of the Law and the Prophets—in other words, of the Scriptures—in his Sermon on the Mount: “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Mt 5:18). We are reminded again of Jesus’ word, “The Scripture cannot be broken.”

Inerrancy, of course, applies to the original manuscripts. It does not include the many variants that have crept into the texts as they were copied. But even here we see the protecting hand of Providence: none of these variants affect any doctrine whatsoever. Translations, of course, are fallible and can err and have erred. That is another reason why we in our seminary study the Word in its original languages.

The fact that Scripture is inerrant, however, does not mean that we can always perfectly understand everything that Scripture says. This is especially true of what it tells us concerning the future, as, for example, in the Book of Revelation. We are not the first to be aware of that. Peter tells us: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the

¹⁶ *This We Believe*, I, 5, 6; pp 4,5. Also note the following: “We believe and accept Scripture on its own terms, accepting as factual history what it presents as history, recognizing a metaphor where Scripture itself indicates one, and reading as poetry what is evident as such” (I, 8; p 8).

sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Pe 1:10, 11). We must simply leave these things to the Lord. At the proper time he will reveal them.

Let us also avoid falling into another trap so many fell into when the doctrines of predestination and election were debated earlier in this century. Seizing upon Romans 12:6, “If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith,” some felt they had the right to harmonize passages that according to their understanding did not agree, even though the final result denied some other clear word of Scripture. But, let’s face it, in doing so they actually undermined Scripture. That is a serious matter.

In insisting on *sola scriptura*, our seminary is like the man in Jesus’ parable “building a house, who dug down deep and laid a foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built” (Lk 6:28).

Standing Almost Alone

When the question is asked of us Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: “With whom are you in fellowship?” we have to admit that there are just a few other churches with which we can practice fellowship. They are at present the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (with headquarters in Mankato, Minnesota) and its mission church in South America, the Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia), the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in the German Democratic Republic, and the WELS world mission churches. And that’s it. Very few! Why?

First of all, we do not believe that only members of the above groups are Christians. In *This We Believe* we put it this way:

Whoever believes that Jesus died for his sin and rose again for his justification (Rom. 4:25) belongs to Christ’s church...Every true believer, regardless of the nation or race or church body to which he belongs, is a member of the holy Christian church...The members of the holy Christian church are known only to God; we cannot distinguish between true believers and hypocrites...We believe that the presence of the holy Christian church nevertheless can be recognized. Wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, the holy Christian church is present, for through the means of grace true faith is produced and preserved (Isa. 55:10, 11)...¹⁷

Then why not practice fellowship with all those who call themselves Christian? This is where *sola scriptura* comes in. *This We Believe* puts it this way: “We believe we cannot practice religious fellowship with those whose confession reveals that error is taught or tolerated, supported or defended. The Lord bids us keep away from persistent errorists (Rom. 16:17, 18).”¹⁸ In that passage the Holy Spirit says through Paul: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people.”

God does not permit us to teach anything that is not taught in the Holy Scriptures; and he requires that we teach everything that is taught there, omitting nothing. Thus we cannot have fellowship with a church body that ignores what Scripture teaches or teaches something that contradicts the Scriptures or teaches about Scripture itself anything that does not agree with what Scripture says of itself.

Remaining true to the Scriptures separates us from all those who do not accept the principles brought forth in the Lutheran Reformation, principles that are founded on God’s Word. Rome has not changed since the days of Luther; if anything, it has hardened its stand. It teaches neither *sola gratia*, nor *sola fide*, nor *sola scriptura*. Though many changes have taken place in the Roman Church even during our lifetime, its attitude toward Scripture has not changed. Scripture is not its only authority for faith and life. To the Scriptures Rome adds sacred traditions and the decisions of its councils, and also asserts that when the pope speaks *ex cathedra*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, VII, 1–3; pp 17f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VII, 7; p 19.

on matters of faith and morals, he is infallible. *Sola scriptura* simply does not permit us to fellowship with a church that takes such a stand.

For us the division between Lutherans and the Reformed also still stands. The Reformed attitude toward Scripture, in fact, was better in the days of Luther than it is today. Today most mainline Protestant churches have almost sold out completely to the historical-critical method of explaining Holy Scripture.¹⁹ Committed to *sola scriptura*, we cannot make common cause with them. We would be undermining the faith that saves.

But surely we should be able to make common cause with those who call themselves Lutheran, should we not? Unfortunately, Lutheran does not necessarily mean scriptural. The formation of the new E.L.C.A.—Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—is all the evidence we need.

At first glance the item concerning Scripture in its constitution sounds very good:

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 in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world. 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.

Sounds good, doesn't it! But note the absence of the terms inerrant and infallible, an absence that undermines the meaning of the word inspired. In fact, as the E.L.C.A. Task Force on Theology admits, these words were omitted on purpose. It is clear that the E.L.C.A. does not agree with what Scripture says about itself and with what Christ himself says of the Scriptures.

More evidence. Some seminaries of the former Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and American Lutheran Conference (ALC) use the Braaten/Jenson *Christian Dogmatics* as a textbook. If much of what this book contains is taught as fact in these seminaries, the Christian faith of the seminarians (the future pastors) will certainly be undermined. And then sooner or later this will also become evident in their preaching and in their instruction classes. Just how unscriptural much of what is taught in *Christian Dogmatics* is will become evident from the following quotations:

The controversy over the Bible was not settled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An enormous gap has opened up within the Christian denominations regarding the interpretation of Scripture. In most denominations there is an attempt to recover the authority of the Bible in precisely the terms of seventeenth-century orthodoxy, before the rise of Biblical criticism. Fundamentalist biblicism has not receded in vigor, even though it does not enjoy great prestige in the great theological schools. Masses of laity and clergy wish to possess an uncomplicated answer to the question of authority in matters of belief and morals. The ancient doctrine of verbal inspiration survives. In some Christian groups the theory of inspiration is used to vouch for the absolute reliability of the Bible on all matters that relate to cosmology, biology, geography,

¹⁹ In a December 1987 poll of 10,000 clergymen, of whom 7,441 responded, sociologist Jeffrey Hadden put the question, "Do you believe that Scripture is the inspired and inerrant Word of God in faith, history, and secular matters?" Of the Episcopalians, 95 percent said No. This was the response also of 87 percent of the Methodists, 82 percent of the Presbyterians, and 67 percent of the American Baptists. Of American Lutherans, 77 percent likewise said No, and even 24 percent of Missouri Synod Lutherans answered No (Cited in *Pulpit Helps*, December 1987).

Consider also the Jesus Seminar. A group of some 125 New Testament "scholars" has been meeting for about five years to determine which of the statements attributed to Christ in the Scriptures were actually spoken by him. Just how far "theologians" of mainline churches will go is evident from their report.

At their first meeting the scholars voted that only three of the Beatitudes were authentic. At their second meeting they agreed that most of the parables attributed to Jesus were very likely not authentic. In their third meeting they agreed that Jesus did not speak of the end of the world nor of his Second Coming. At their fourth meeting they decided that all the words spoken by Jesus during the Passion narrative, including the seven spoken from the cross, were not authentic.

chronology and history. The Bible is used as a bulwark against the evolutionary hypothesis of modern natural science. The authority of Scripture for Luther and his followers was affirmed with respect to its chief purpose of declaring the gospel of Christ for faith and salvation. In modern Protestant fundamentalism, which ironically claims to bear the legacy of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture is extended to include fallible information on all kinds of subjects.

Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel...

The role of the Bible in constructive theology is radically qualified today by historical consciousness. Luther believed that the literal meaning of Scripture is identical with its historical content; things happened exactly as they were written down. Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place.²⁰

Concerning Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death:

It is amazing, when one takes the New Testament as whole, how little is explicitly said which gives what could be called a dogmatical explanation of the work of Christ—at least of the sort that has become dominant in the tradition. The earliest layers of the New Testament Gospel sources, the sayings sources such as Q, indicate no particular reflection on or view of Jesus' work or his fate. Jesus' death was no doubt a mighty shock, but it seems mostly to have been understood in terms of the usual fate of God's prophets: they were rejected and came to a bad end. Such rejection, of course, unmasks the unrepentant, unbelieving, and guilty stance of God's people. This early view of the life and death of Jesus is reflected also in some of the speeches in Acts, and even in some of Paul's earlier writings (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 2:14ff.). Jesus himself, though he might have and quite possibly did reckon with a violent death at the hands of his adversaries, seems not to have understood or interpreted his own death as a sacrifice for others or ransom for sin. Such interpretation apparently came as a result of later reflection. Even in their final redaction the synoptic Gospels contain little direct or explicit interpretation of Jesus' work. Mark 10:45 has Jesus say that the Son of Man came to give his life "as a ransom for many," and the accounts of the Last Supper speak of Jesus' blood as his "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24) and "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). Such passages, in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretive traditions. The same is true of the instances where Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection, such as Mark 8:31ff. and 9:31, and parallels in the other Synoptics. They are interpretations attributed to Jesus after the fact...

...Put in its most crass form,...Jesus' death is a sacrifice in which he is a substitute for us who pays the divine justice what is due for human sin and/or appeases the divine wrath. As we shall see, there is a long tradition, especially among Western conservative Christians, which has taken this line. There seems to be a virtual consensus among contemporary biblical scholars, however, that this tradition finds little support in the Scriptures, either in the Old or New Testament.

²⁰ Carl E. Braaten, and Robert W. Jenson, editors, *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), I, 74–76.

Scripture never speaks of God as one who has to be satisfied or propitiated before being merciful or forgiving. God is always the subject of the action, not the object.²¹

It is no wonder that some of their theologians even publicly state that Christ is not the only way to heaven, and that salvation is also available for those who know nothing of Christ, but follow their own religious principles faithfully. It is also understandable why their answers to “modern” problems such as the relationship of man and woman, the ordination of women, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality and gay ordination, are anything but scriptural. God be merciful to students taught by such theologians!

We of the WELS and our seminary by the grace of God continue to take our stand with the word found on the seminary’s cornerstone: *sola scriptura*. In the Scriptures Christ tells us: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Speaking of the Scripture, Paul wrote in Romans 15:4, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” And his very next words are basic for our own attitude on fellowship with others: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ro 15:7).

We do not stand alone when we stand on *sola scriptura*, for we stand with Christ and are ready to stand with all others who take their stand on the Scriptures.

Practical Implications for the Seminary

Sola scriptura for the seminary means that every course taught must be based on Scripture. Since the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures originally for the most part in Hebrew and Greek, a working knowledge of these languages is a prerequisite for enrollment. This is particularly important in the courses on Biblical Interpretation (exegesis). The seminary *Catalog* states: “Certain books of the Bible are taught with special thoroughness in the courses in Biblical Interpretation (exegesis). In this study every individual word, phrase and sentence is thoroughly examined on the basis of the original Hebrew and Greek texts.”²²

But more than just head knowledge of Scripture is required of those registering at the seminary. Scripture must rule their lives. Again we read in the seminary *Catalog*: “In accordance with the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, the fundamental requirement for admission to the Seminary is an unimpeachable Christian character.”²³ What is required of the students is certainly also required of all who teach them. The seminary *Catalog* states: “In every phase of its training program the Seminary strives, with the help of the Spirit, to remain faithful to the Holy Scriptures, to give evidence of thorough scholarship, and to effect professional proficiency.”²⁴

To teach their courses properly, it may even be necessary for our professors to set aside time to write their own textbooks. As we have seen, many of the textbooks on the market are anything but true to Scripture. Since some of the older textbooks, though thoroughly scriptural, do not always come to grips with the problems our pastors face today, they have to be brought up to date. This demands that our professors be ready to spend themselves, their time, their energy. But in doing so, may they remember that they are serving the Lord and his people. Knowing the members of the faculty personally, I can say that that is exactly what they are doing—doing it because *sola scriptura* requires it.

I will always be thankful to God for having had the privilege of being taught at this seminary, even though that was more than fifty years ago. Then, as now, the seminary taught its students to preach God’s Word, making sure that each sermon properly expounded the text and—vitaly important—that each sermon also brought Jesus Christ to the hearers, so that they might never be able to say that they had not been told the

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 12–15.

²² *Catalog*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1988–1989, p 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, p 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 3.

way to life eternal. That, of course, is carrying out the command of the Lord himself, who said: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mk 16:15). That is being faithful to *sola scriptura*.

Vital for the Christian Faith and Life of our Congregations

What do our congregations expect of their pastors, the graduates of this seminary? The answer is given in the questions put to their called pastor at his ordination. Here is one: “Do you believe the canonical books of the Old and New Testament to be the inspired word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice?” And here is another: “Do you solemnly promise that you will perform the duties of your office in accordance with these Confessions and that all your teaching and your administration of the sacraments shall be in conformity with the Holy Scriptures and with the aforementioned Confessions?”

Our congregations expect their pastors to lead them to Christ. The only way pastors can do that is by leading us, their members, into the Scriptures, which put us in touch with the Lord Jesus. And it has to be *sola scriptura*, for if they were to use any other additional sources, perhaps their own ideas, the Christ with whom they would put us in touch would probably not be the Christ of Holy Scripture, for Christ says in John 5:39: “These are the Scriptures that testify about me.” Only through the Scriptures can pastors meet the needs of their congregation, of all their members, the little ones, the young people, the grown-ups and the older members. *Sola scriptura* is the only source of real strength in days of health and days of illness, in days of plenty and in days of less than enough. We, the members, look to our seminary to prepare men of God who will guide us to walk hand in hand with our Savior. Therefore we continue to pray that our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will continue to take its stand on *sola scriptura*, in addition to *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Only if we cling unflinchingly to the Word of God can we, whatever our lot in this world, say with Paul: “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life”—nor anything else—“will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ro 8:37–39).

That is not only important in 1988 as we observe the 125th anniversary of the founding of the seminary, but it was also recognized as essential on September 5, 1928. That date marked the opening of the seminary’s final school year at Wauwatosa. A few weeks previously the cornerstone of the present seminary building had been laid, and Prof. Joh. P. Koehler used the occasion of the opening service to speak on the words engraved on the cornerstone. He used as his theme: “*Das gute Bekenntnis von Christus als Grundlage und Mittel unserer kirchlichen Bauarbeit.*”²⁵ Permit me to quote from his address, translated, of course, into English:

To express this our Lutheran Church, which compared with other churches is a doctrinal and confessional church,...coined three short Latin expressions which set forth its confession in the same way in which in times past all believing Christians inwardly expressed it...These words, which we have engraved on our cornerstone,...are *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*... The gospel of the *sola gratia* we possess solely from Scripture, *sola scriptura*. Scripture is the word of the holy men of God, who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. That is why Peter calls Scripture the word of the prophets made more certain and exhorts us to give attention to it as a light shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star arises in our hearts. Therefore Paul also says that the Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation, because they are God-breathed and therefore useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. Only in this way can one become a man of God who stands for God as God has stood for him. Only in this way can one become a proper theologian, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This Scripture also and this Scripture alone is the basis not only of our faith in the forgiveness of sins, but just because of this faith the foundation for our entire life, a life that in all things should flow forth from faith. Not human reason,...also not the essays of the ancients, nor the works of

²⁵ “A good confession of Christ as the foundation and means of our building work in the church.”

the church fathers, not even the Lutheran Confessions, no matter how highly we otherwise regard them, decide for us the questions of salvation, but solely the Word of God, as it is given us in our Bibles for all, especially for the simple. Therefore this Scripture, strictly speaking, is the only fountainhead for study in this school and the standard by which every other writing and any other human assertion must be assessed...

Especially for us who are to proclaim the gospel professionally from Scripture nothing can be more pertinent than to dig ever deeper into the Word of God, not only to gain all kinds of information, but to read it in such a manner as one would otherwise read something we consider most precious. Yes, here we want to teach and learn to use Scripture in such a way that we will derive all our attitudes, our thoughts, our speech and discourse, our hopes and wishes, our life goals and strength from Scripture, without first permitting the Scriptures to be changed by other sources—all so that errors and false concepts may not creep in, but that the water of life may remain pure and clear.²⁶

We therefore rejoice to read Prof. Wilbert R. Gawrisch's closing words in the opening article of the Winter 1988 *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*:

Over the years the needs of the church have changed, but the seminary's purpose of preparing shepherds for God's flock remains unchanged. The cornerstone of its curriculum is still *sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*. God granting his grace, that will not change!²⁷

It is my prayer that this will indeed never change, and I have a very personal reason for saying so. One of my grandchildren, three-year-old Amelia Jo, every once in a while spends a few days at our place. One of her favorite activities is to walk about the house singing a favorite of hers. It is "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so." As she grows up and attends Christian day school and confirmation class, she will need a pastor who believes that himself and will lead her through the Scriptures to the feet of Jesus who loves her. I am looking to our seminary to provide such pastors. I need them, my children and grandchildren need them, God's people need them, the world needs them. May God's Holy Spirit ever keep our seminary and our synod, its pastors and individual members faithful to the *sola scriptura* and also to the *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, all inscribed on our seminary's cornerstone and on our hearts. God grant it!

²⁶ *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 25, No 4 (October 1928), pp 225–230.

²⁷ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No 1 (Winter 1988), p 6.