

The Holy Scriptures—Source and Norm of All Doctrine

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Dear brothers in the Lord Jesus,

First of all, let me say that I, along with Pastor Janke, rejoice to be with you on these days to study God's Word together and in this way to put into practice the blessed fellowship in Christ that we share. My prayer is that we will be strengthened in our faith in Jesus whose death and resurrection we have so recently again remembered and also that, as we study God's Word together, we will be drawn even closer together in the Christian fellowship we share.

When Lars Engquist wrote about the agenda for this meeting at Biblicum, he asked that I would prepare a lesson on how to handle doctrinal questions. This, of course, is a very important matter. You, and we also, want to teach and preach and defend only correct doctrine. The first question to ask, then, even before asking about how to handle doctrinal questions, is this one: How can a person and a church body know what correct doctrine is? And that is what I propose to speak about to you under the topic, **The Holy Scriptures as the Source and Norm of All Doctrine.**

To do this is in keeping with the principles of the Reformation. One key principle is that of **sola gratia**, grace alone. This is sometimes called the "material principle" of the Reformation, that, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, all "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (v 24). It is not by our works but by grace, God's undeserved love and mercy toward undeserving sinners, that we sinners are justified, or declared not guilty. God in his grace let another pay the ransom price. He has redeemed us, ransomed us, bought us back, "not with perishable things such as silver or gold...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pet. 1:18,19).

A second key principle, sometimes called the "formal principle" of the Reformation, is that of **sola Scriptura**, Scripture alone. The point of the **sola Scriptura** principle is that nothing else than the Scriptures dare establish articles of faith. The writers of the Formula of Concord understood this very well. The introduction to the Epitome of the Formula begins with the 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, as it is written Ps. 119:105: 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.' And St. Paul: 'Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,' Gal. 1:8" (*Triglotta*, p 777).

In so writing, the authors of the Formula of Concord were echoing Luther, who again and again emphasized the **sola Scriptura** principle. For example, in his exposition of 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, where Paul uses the phrase, "according to the Scriptures," Luther writes: "There you hear St. Paul adducing Scripture as his strongest witness and pointing out that there is nothing stable to support our doctrine and faith except the material or written Word" (*SL* 8,1110).

Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone, that is the principle. Not Scripture plus tradition, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. The Second Vatican Council, which met from 1963-65, reconfirmed this as the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The Documents of Vatican II state: "Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church" (*Constitution on Divine Revelation*, p. 117).

Nor is the principle Scripture plus reason, even though our ability to reason is a marvelous gift of God. But reason, properly used, will always be our servant in the interpretation of the Scripture, not our master. In Luke 5:4 Jesus tells Peter to do something that Peter's reason doesn't agree with. He tells Peter, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." It was morning, the wrong time of the day for fishing, and deep water was the wrong place to fish. But what did Peter say? "Because you say so. I will let down the nets."

Luther comments on this scene with this statement: "No matter what reason says, there is God's Word and command; I will let it go at that" (*SL* 13a,759).

Nor is the principle Scripture plus new revelation, as some of the cults of our time, notably Mormonism, falsely teach. The last book the Holy Spirit caused to be written, the book of Revelation, closes with the words, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Rev. 22:18,19). As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1,2). Through those whom his Son chose, his apostles, God speaks to us yet today through his Son, his final revelation to the world.

The principle is **sola Scriptura**, Scripture alone. As Luther put it in a sermon on Matthew 2:1-12: "We should learn to put out of sight church, fathers, temple, priesthood, Jerusalem, God's people, and everything, and listen only to what God tells us in his Word" (*SL* 13b,1559).

We look first at

1. Why the Holy Scriptures are the Source and Norm of All Doctrine

We will look at five reasons why we speak of the Scriptures in this way. First of all, the Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of all doctrine because

The Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant Word of God

We cannot say that about any other literature. "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16), writes Paul. It is the product of God's breath. Peter writes, "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). Again and again the prophets of the Old Testament preface their writings with words such as "thus says the Lord." In the New Testament the Apostle Paul likewise asserts: "We thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13).

Since the Scriptures were written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it should not come as a surprise to us that Jesus himself speaks of their inerrancy. "The Scripture cannot be broken," he asserts (Jn. 10:35). We can trust the Holy Scriptures as source and norm of doctrine because every word is God-breathed.

While our Lutheran Confessions do not have a separate article on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, since that was not a matter under debate at the time, it is clear that the various authors assumed that the Bible was inspired by God and therefore true and without error in all its parts. They use phrases such as "the Holy Ghost through the mouth of the holy apostles" (*Apology* 28:14) and "the manifest Scripture of the Holy Ghost" (*AC* 28:49).

The Confessions also assert the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The Epitome of the Formula of Concord states that "God's Word is not false, and does not deceive" (*FC*, Epitome 7:13). In his Large Catechism, Luther, writing about infant baptism, says, "The Word of God cannot lie" (*LC* 57). On another occasion, in a sermon on John 16:16-23, Luther remarks that "St. Augustine, in a letter to St. Jerome, has put down a fine axiom—that only Holy Scripture is to be considered inerrant" (*SL* 13b,1976).

There is a second reason why the Holy Scripture serves as the source and norm of all doctrine:

The Scriptures are authoritative

The authority of the Scriptures rests upon their source. If, as we firmly believe, the source of Scripture is God himself and that every word is a product of the Holy Spirit's breath, then it is only logical to infer that there is no authority higher than the Scriptures. A stream cannot rise higher than its source.

The Scriptures assert this authority for themselves. We are told in Isaiah 8:20: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn." This is the way to determine whether a teaching is correct or incorrect. There is an authoritative standard or norm with which to compare it, "the law and the testimony," that is, the Word of God. Jesus directed his followers to the same standard: "If you hold to my teaching," he said, "you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:31,32).

The divinely inspired Apostle Paul claims the same authority for his teachings, both oral and written. This is seen clearly in the way he writes to the Thessalonians: "Stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess. 2:15). Again, he tells them: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6). Listen to what I say, Paul urges; do what I say. He can speak with such authority because God has given him his message. It is therefore backed up with the very authority of God.

Both hearers of the Word and teachers of the Word need to constantly turn to the Scriptures as the one authoritative measuring tool to determine whether a teaching is true or false. This is what the people of Berea did when Paul brought the gospel to them on his second missionary journey. How would they know whether the message Paul brought to them was to be trusted? We are told that "they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

Teachers of the Word are to be just as careful to make sure that all they say corresponds to the one authoritative norm and standard of doctrine, as we read in 1 Peter 4:11: "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God." In one of his sermons Luther commented on this verse: "It is the duty both of preachers and of hearers first of all and above all things to see to it that they have clear and sure evidence that their doctrine is really the true Word of God, revealed from heaven to the holy, original fathers, the prophets and apostles, and confirmed and commanded to be taught by Christ himself" (*SL* 12,615).

Our Confessions state this also. The Smalcald Articles, for example, state: "Let not the authority of any avail more than the Word of God" (SA, Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope, V, *Triglotta*, p 507). "Scripture alone," writes Luther in response to the papal bull threatening him with excommunication, "is the true lord and master of all writing and teaching on earth. If this is not to be; of what use is Scripture to us? Then we had better reject it and be satisfied with the books and teachers of men" (*SL* 15,1481). In his exposition of John 6:63, Luther bluntly states: "If anything comes before you that appears to be so beautiful and holy that you think it is positively angelical, then take it and compare it with God's Word; see if it is grounded in Holy Scripture and if God has commanded and enjoined it. If it is a mere notion, a private opinion, and a good idea, but without God's Word, then spit at it" (*SL* 7,2388f).

Why must the Holy Scriptures serve as the sole source and norm of all doctrine? First, because the Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant Word of God. Secondly, because the Scriptures are the authoritative Word of God, the only source of that which we know is always true. Thirdly,

The Scriptures are sufficient

By calling the Scriptures sufficient we mean that they tell us all we need to know. They don't always tell us everything that we might want to know. In his exposition of Genesis 1:1, Luther says, "If we want to walk safely, let us accept that which the Word prescribes and which God himself wants us to know. Other matters, which are not revealed in the Word, let us disregard. For what business of mine is it, or how can I find out, what God did before the world was made?" (*SL* 1,17).

Above all, the Scriptures reveal everything that we need to know for salvation. John writes at the end of his Gospel: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by

believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31). "The holy Scriptures," Paul tells Timothy, "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

The Scriptures also reveal to us everything we need to know regarding our lives as Christians. Paul reminds Timothy and us that the Scriptures are "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. 3:16,17). Note the words "every good work." There is nothing outside of the Scriptures that we need to know to become equipped for serving our God with a life of good works.

The Scriptures, then, are absolutely sufficient for everything pertaining to the Christian's faith and life. Moses told the people of Israel, "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it" (Deut. 4:2). We do not have to add anything to the Scriptures because whatever we need is contained in them, and we dare not subtract anything from them because we need everything in them. The Apostle Paul was well aware of this truth. That is why, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, he was very careful to say, "I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen" (Acts 26:22). The Scriptures are sufficient.

This means that we need to be careful on two counts. First, we need to take care that we do not call anything that the Scriptures teach an "open question," as though we are free to accept it or not. To cite just one example, there are some, also in the Lutheran Church, who would make an open question of the teaching about the millennium, who say that it makes no difference if one teaches that Jesus will come back to earth and rule for 1000 years before the world comes to an end. Since the Scriptures clearly teach that when Jesus comes back the world as we know it will be destroyed and the new heavens and the new earth will be created, we cannot call the false teaching about the millenium an open question. Secondly, we need to take care that we do not make a doctrine out of anything which the Scriptures do not clearly teach. The WELS Statement on Scripture puts it this way:

We believe and teach that where Scripture has not spoken decisively or is silent, differences of opinion may be held without violating Scripture or breaking the bonds of fellowship. Such matters fall into the area called "open questions."...The term "open questions" may legitimately be used where the Scripture language leaves open the precise scope of a passage, or where linguistic, textual, or historical problems make the perception of the intended sense difficult. But where Scripture has spoken, there God has spoken, whether it be on a central dogma or on a peripheral point; where Scripture has not spoken, the matter must forever remain open" (*Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, p. 58).

Fourthly, the Holy Scripture is the source and norm of all doctrine because

The Scriptures are clear

The psalmist says to the Lord, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Ps. 119:105). The purpose of a lamp and a light is to illuminate, to show the way. So, says the psalmist, God's Word is like a lamp and a light. It clearly shows the way, both the way to salvation and to a life of sanctification. It is so clear that even a child can understand what it is saying, as the psalmist declares: "The entrance of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Ps 119:130). Writing to Timothy, Paul reminds him, "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures" (2 Tim. 3:15).

God's purpose in giving the Scriptures was not to obscure whatever pertains to the world's salvation, but to reveal these truths. That is why he chose to address us in human language rather than in the kind of "inexpressible words" which St. Paul heard when he "was caught up to Paradise" (2 Cor. 12:4). Since we cannot rise to his level, in love he chose to descend to our level and speak to us in words we can understand. While it is true that there are "some things that are hard to understand" in the Scriptures, as the Apostle Peter says in his second epistle (2 Pet. 3:16), this does not deny the clarity of the Scriptures but simply points to our human weakness to grasp all that God has clearly revealed to us. "For everything that was written in the past," writes

St. Paul to the Romans, "was written to teach us" (Rom. 15:4). That which is not clear cannot teach; that which is clear can teach. And that is why God has given us the Scripture, and made sure that, objectively, externally, its message is clear: so that through it he might teach us.

We note how again and again the Scriptures simply assume the clarity of the Scriptures. Jesus warns his followers, "Watch out for false prophets" (Matt. 7:15). How can one watch out for false prophets if the Scriptures do not clearly describe what a true prophet is? In Romans 16 Paul urges us 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" (v. 17). He assumes, as he writes this, that we can clearly distinguish in the Scriptures what the correct teachings are so we can turn away from teachers and teachings that run counter to the truth. "What you heard from me," Paul tells Timothy, "keep as the pattern of sound teaching" (2 Tim. 1:13). Again Paul is writing under the assumption that the Word of God Timothy heard from Paul was clear. Otherwise, such an exhortation would be pointless. One cannot hold to that which he has never come to know.

The Lutheran Confessions also assume the clarity of the Scripture. They mention its clarity directly, speaking of, e.g., "the clear word and teaching of the apostles" (*Apology*, VII,VIII:25); "the most clear and certain Scriptures" (*Apology* XXIV:95). What is more, the very fact that the Confessions in their totality are drawn from the Scriptures is based on the assumption that the Scriptures are so clear that one can determine what they say. Because of the clarity of Scripture, it is possible, as Prof. Carl Lawrenz puts it, "to determine the correctness of any statement of Christian doctrine. The Holy Scriptures do clearly set forth every point that the Lord deems necessary for us to know for our Christian faith and life" ("The Clarity of Scripture," essay printed in *This Steadfast Word*, 1965. p. 111).

In fact, the clarity of Scripture is such that all believers are able to understand it. Recall again the people of Berea who "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). These were not theologically trained people. They were lay persons. A theological education, while helpful in many ways, is not a necessity for a person to understand the Scriptures. As one dogmatician has put it: "Whatever pertains to a spiritual person may be regarded as belonging to all children and members of the church....For he that is spiritual judges all things" (Gerhardt).

The Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant Word of God. They are authoritative; they are sufficient; they are clear. And, fifthly,

The Scriptures are powerful

They possess not just an external, objective clarity but also an inner clarity as the Holy Spirit works through them. Jesus told his disciples, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (Jn. 6:63). This, above all, is what makes the Scriptures so valuable. Not only do they clearly, sufficiently and authoritatively reveal to us everything necessary for our salvation and for a life of sanctification; they also, by the power of the Spirit, accomplish in us that which they clearly, sufficiently and authoritatively teach.

"The word of God is living and active," the writer of Hebrews says (4:12). "You have been born again...through the living and enduring word of God," Peter tells us (1 Pet. 1:23). "The gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes," writes Paul to the Romans (1:16). Also in Romans he says, "Faith comes from hearing the message" (10:17). "Our gospel came to you," Paul tells the Thessalonians, "not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:5). "The word of God...is at work in you who believe," he reminds these same Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:13).

Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. It is not without reason that Luther and the other Reformers fervently clung to this principle and refused to permit doctrines to be derived from any other source or measured by any other norm. Only of the Scriptures can one say: They are the inspired, inerrant Word of God; they are authoritative; they are sufficient; they are clear; they are powerful.

Now, how does one go about drawing doctrines from the inspired, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, clear and powerful Scriptures?

II. How to Draw Doctrines From the Scripture

If we want to correctly draw doctrines from the Scriptures, we will need to observe carefully two basic principles of biblical hermeneutics, or interpretation: 1. Remember that each passage has but one intended meaning; 2. Let the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures.

Remember that each passage has but one intended meaning

God's purpose in giving the Scriptures was to reveal the truth, not to conceal it under various layers which must first be stripped away before the real truth can be discovered. As Luther wrote: "The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and on earth. Therefore his words can have no more than one, and that the most obvious, sense. This we call the literal, or natural sense" ("Reply to Emser," *SL* 18,1307f).

Figurative language

This does not mean that the writer cannot speak figuratively. The "I am's" of Jesus in the Gospel of John, for example, are clearly metaphors, through which the writer describes the unknown in terms of the known to bring out a comparison between them. When Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep," he does not mean that he is a literal gate, but that he is the way by which people enter into life with God. Jesus himself makes that clear when he says, "Whoever enters through me will be saved" (Jn. 10:8,9). In John 15 Jesus calls himself the Vine. Once again it is obvious that he does not want us to look upon him as a literal grape vine. The point that he makes is that just as branches are dependent on the vine for life and fruit-bearing so we are dependent on him for spiritual life and bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Jn 15:1-5).

In one place, Galatians 4:21-31, the Scriptures speak **allegorically**. An allegory is simply an extended metaphor.

At other times the Scriptures use **similes** to make a point. A simile says that something is like something else. Jesus' parables generally are set in the form of extended similes. Many a parable begins with words such as, "The kingdom of heaven is like...." It is clear from the way Jesus speaks that he doesn't want us to take what follows literally: but rather to determine his point of comparison and from that draw out the lesson he desires to teach.

The Scriptures will at times speak symbolically as they do, for example, in much of the book of Revelation. A symbol is something that reminds one of something else. We see a cross, for example, and are led to think of what it stands for. When symbolical language is used in the Scriptures the task of the interpreter is to seek to determine the meaning behind the symbol. In this he is helped by turning to other places in the Scriptures which speak of the same subject in a non-symbolical way. This we will speak of in more detail below.

In his course notes on New Testament hermeneutics, Prof. David Kuske of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary lists several other figures of speech which the Bible writers at times employ:

Metonymy and synecdoche...are figures of association.... **Metonymy** is the use of one word for another which the former readily suggests: Luke 16:29: "They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them," and 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup...." **Synecdoche** uses the part to designate the whole, or vice versa: Acts 2:26: "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices."

Ellipsis and brachylogy...are figures of brevity. **Ellipsis** is the omission of an element necessary to the construction. The most abundant example is the omission in Greek of a self-evident verb (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:13; 2 Cor. 5:13). **Brachylogy** is the omission of an element necessary to the

thought. In 1 John 5:9 we read, "We accept man's testimony; God's testimony is greater." The unexpressed thought we naturally supply is that therefore we surely also accept God's testimony. Figures which soften or emphasize also appear. Peter used a **euphemism** to soften his statement about Judas when he said in Acts 1:25, "Judas left to his own place" (Acts 1:25). Paul used an understatement (**litotes**) to emphasize God's anger against the Jews who killed Jesus and the prophets when he said very simply in 1 Thessalonians 2:15, "They displease God." Jesus was speaking **ironically** in Mark 7:9 when, while he was condemning the Jewish leaders for their hypocritical piety, he said, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions." John is using a **hyperbole** to emphasize the many things Jesus said and did which were not recorded by him when he said in John 21:25, "If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."

Sometimes **personification**, which represents a thing as a person, is used to make a point in a lively fashion. In Matthew 6:34 Jesus says, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." Sometimes a thing is addressed as a person: 1 Corinthians 15:55: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O grave, is your sting?"

Non-figurative language

And yet, even as we allow for these many types of figurative speech in the Scriptures, we need to listen carefully to Luther's words of caution that a figure of speech should not be admitted in any place of Scripture "unless evident contextual circumstances or the absurdity of anything obviously militating against an article of faith require it.... We must avoid as the most deadly poison all figurative language which Scripture itself does not force us to find in a passage" (*Bondage of the Will*, SL 18,1820).

The words of Genesis chapters 1-3, for example, require the biblical interpreter to take them in no other way but literally. Moses is recording history here. He is speaking in clear, non-figurative, non-symbolical language. To interpret Genesis 1-3 in any other way, e.g., to make lengthy periods of time out of each day in Genesis 1, is to go against the principle that the Scriptures must be taken literally unless they themselves make it clear that a particular passage is to be taken symbolically or figuratively. Likewise, when Jesus says, "This is my body.... This is my blood" (Mk. 14:22,24), there is no indication whatever that he is speaking metaphorically. Luther, commenting on the Words of Institution, writes:

Even if I were a Turk, a Jew, or a heathen, who thought nothing of the Christian faith and yet heard or read this scriptural account of the Sacrament, I would still have to say: "I do not believe the Christian doctrine, of course, but this I must admit: if they wish to be Christians and maintain their doctrine, they must believe that Christ's body and blood are physically eaten and drunk in the bread and wine" (*LW* 37:359).

Exegetical questions

Before moving on to the next principle of biblical Interpretation, we should note that though it is true that each scriptural passage has but one intended meaning, it is at times difficult to determine what that intended meaning is. In Matthew 11:2ff we read about the disciples of the imprisoned John the Baptist being sent by John to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 11:3). The question is: Who was going through a period of doubt, John or John's disciples? The text itself doesn't seem to answer this question for us. As a result even God-fearing, Bible-believing exegetes will differ on this matter. Obviously, only one conclusion is correct. Either John the Baptist doubted or he didn't. The biblical interpreter will have to reach one conclusion or the other; but he should not then look down upon another exegete who

doesn't reach the same conclusion he does, as long as both interpretations are linguistically and grammatically acceptable and do not contradict either the narrower or the wider context of the Scriptures.

Another example of such an "exegetical question" is found in 1 Thessalonians 4, where St. Paul says that "each of you should learn to control [literally, "gain possession of"] his own body [literally, "vessel"] in a way that is holy and honorable" (v. 4). Does Paul mean by "vessel" one's body or does he mean one's wife? Paul, of course, knew what he meant. This passage, too, has only one intended meaning. But it is difficult for us to determine for sure what Paul did mean.

In the matter under discussion, how to handle doctrinal questions, we should remember two closely related things about "exegetical questions." First of all, no doctrines should be established that are based solely on such passages. Secondly, differences in interpretation of such "exegetical questions," though only one interpretation can be the correct one, are not divisive of fellowship.

Prof. Lawrenz writes:

If someone derives a truth from a faulty interpretation of a specific biblical statement, but this truth itself is clearly taught in other passages of Scripture, then such an unwarranted interpretation does not become a matter which is divisive of Christian fellowship, as long as the individual who propounds it does not in principle want to say anything else than what Scripture says. Likewise, if a fellow Christian still fails to see a truth of faith and life in a Scripture statement in which it is clearly set forth, but indeed holds to that truth on the basis of other Bible passages, his weakness as an interpreter in a given instance also does not become a divisive matter ("The Clarity of Scripture," *This Steadfast Word*, p. 121).

Remember that each passage has but one intended meaning. This is a first basic principle as we seek to draw doctrine from the Scripture. The second principle is this:

Let the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures

Since, as we have established earlier, the Scriptures are clear, they should be able to interpret themselves. Just from reading the Scriptures Christians should be able to perceive what God wants them to know.

If we want to let the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures, we need to do three things as we study any particular Scripture passage: We need to interpret it in the light of its immediate context, in the light of parallel passages, and in the light of the wider context of all of Scripture.

Interpret in the light of the immediate context

First, we need to interpret a passage in the Scripture in the light of its immediate context. Luther put it this way in one of his sermons:

We must handle and apply Scripture with care. From the beginning the Word was given in many ways. We must not only see whether it is God's Word, whether God spoke it, but, much more, to whom he spoke it, whether it applies to you or to another person. There the difference appears, a difference as great as between summer and winter.... The Word in Scripture is twofold: one is of no concern of mine and does not apply to me; the other does apply to me. And on that which applies to me I may boldly act and rely, as on a solid rock. But if it does not apply to me, I should do nothing about it" (Sermon of August 27, 1525; *SL* 3,12f).

As an example of what Luther is referring to, think of the advice that Job's "friends" gave to Job after Job had lost nearly everything. It was in many ways faulty advice. Eliphaz said to Job, "Is it for your piety that

he rebukes you and brings charges against you? Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?... If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored" (Job 22:4,5,23). Eliphaz strongly insists that if a person is doing what is right, God will never allow such problems to come upon him. These words are written in the Bible, but the immediate context makes it clear that that this is wrong advice. We should listen to God, not to the advice of people such as Eliphaz who think that they understand the cause of tribulations in a person's life, but who really do not understand. If we had not looked at the immediate context to see who was doing the talking, we might have been led to the wrong understanding that all sicknesses, etc., are a punishment of God, and that if we repent, our sickness and troubles will go away.

One needs to look carefully at the immediate context, the verses before and after each passage as well as the purpose and aim of the book the passage is in. Note the speaker, the ones spoken to, the reason for the statement, etc.

Interpret in the light of parallel passages

Secondly, if we are to let the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures, we must take care to examine a Scripture passage in the light of parallel passages. To determine what the Scripture says about a particular subject, it is wise to gather together all the passages that speak of the same subject. As Luther said in his exposition of Psalm 37: "It is indeed true that some passages of Scripture are dark; however, they contain nothing but precisely that which is found at other places in clear, open passages" (*SL* 5,335). Prof. Lawrenz puts it this way: "All the truths for our faith and life are not expressed merely once in Holy Scripture, but are taught again and again in a great abundance of texts, not to mention at all that they are clearly illustrated by a wealth of examples" (*This Steadfast Word*, p. 119).

For an example of the problems caused by a failure to gather parallel passages together, think of the number of false doctrines pertaining to Christ's second coming, or eschatology, that abound today: a double resurrection; a rapture of the saints prior to the time of the great tribulation; a thousand year reign of Jesus on earth; a mass conversion of all or nearly all the Jews; a rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem; a political Antichrist; a physical battle of Armageddon, to name just some of the fanciful teachings on the doctrine of eschatology. Such false teachings arise because of a failure to consult parallel passages and in this way to let the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures. In particular, this false doctrine arises from a failure to interpret the figurative in the light of the literal, the difficult in the light of the simple, the obscure in the light of the clear.

A good share of false teachings on the subject of eschatology are the result of a faulty understanding of the book of Revelation, admittedly a difficult book to interpret because of its figurative, symbolical language. But our Lord doesn't require that we find out what will happen at the end of the world simply through a study of the book of Revelation. In fact, the place to begin is not the book of Revelation, but the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke. There, in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13 and Luke 21, Jesus, in literal, clear and simple language, explains to his disciples what will be the signs preceding the end of the world and what will happen when he returns. When one studies figurative, symbolical books such as Revelation or sections of Daniel and Ezekiel, one needs to turn to the parallel passages in the Gospel accounts to help him in understanding what is being said.

This is not to say that the Scriptures are clear in only certain places, but rather that our weaknesses hinder our understanding of the Scriptures. It is a great blessing of God, therefore, that no major doctrine of the Scriptures rests on any one passage, but that the Holy Spirit has seen to it that each doctrine is taught in several different places.

We might look at just one more example, one referred to above. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he said, "This is my body.... This is my blood" (Mk. 14:22,24). That alone makes it clear. We need no more than these words to be sure that in the Lord's Supper Jesus gives us his body and blood. But God has graciously given us a parallel passage in 1 Corinthians to reinforce for us the fact that Jesus was not speaking metaphorically when he said, "This is my body. This is my blood." St. Paul writes: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break

a participation in the body of Christ?" Through a parallel passage God's Holy Spirit places added emphasis upon what we today call the doctrine of the Real Presence. Thus parallel passages shed light on and reinforce the truth God's Holy Spirit desires to reveal in the Word.

Interpret in the light of the wider context

Thirdly, we let the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures when we interpret an individual passage in the light of the wider context of all of Scripture. If a passage appears to say what the Scripture in its wider context clearly does not say, then it is evident that one's understanding of the passage is faulty. Scripture does not contradict Scripture.

The "analogy of faith"

Our Lutheran dogmaticians speak of interpreting Scripture according to the "analogy of faith." The "analogy of faith" principle is simply this: that nothing is to be taught which is contrary to the sum total of what is set forth in all the statements of Scripture clearly dealing with the specific matter under discussion.

As an example of this principle we might think of James 2:14-26, especially verse 24: "A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." This sounds very different from Romans 3:28, "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." The "analogy of faith" principle, which accepts all the Scriptures as coming from God who does not lie and does not contradict himself, tells us: "The James passage must be understood in the light of the Romans passage, since what is said in the Romans passage is what the Scriptures say consistently from beginning to end." So, although when this passage is taken out of the wider context of the whole Scriptures, James might appear to be saying here, "You are going to get to heaven by your works," when it is seen in the context of all of Scriptures it is clear that James is not saying this at all.

One is led then to study the immediate context of the James passage to ascertain just what James is saying. James himself makes it clear when, in verse 17, he says, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." James is emphasizing sanctification in this passage. He is telling us that true faith is alive and reveals itself by a life of love for one's neighbor. This is just what St. Paul told the Galatians: "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (5:6). One who says, "I believe," but whose life in no way demonstrates this fact, has not truly passed out of death into life. He is not a believer. In this sense then, that true faith will always be active in a life of good works, James says, "A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone."

Christians under the New Covenant

Interpreting individual passages in the light of the wider context of the whole Scriptures also means recognizing that not all of the Scriptures apply in the same way to believers who live after the time of Christ, and thus are under the New Covenant, as they did to believers who lived before the time of Christ, and thus were under the Old Covenant. Unlike the Old Testament believers, we are "not under law, but under grace," as Paul tells the Christians at Rome (Rom. 6:14). Paul reminds the Ephesians that Christ has "abolished in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations" (Eph. 2:15). That is why St. Paul tells the Colossians and us, "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Col. 2:16,17).

We have been set free from the law. St. Paul, accordingly, urges us, "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). Christians are not under any law except the moral law of God, the holy, immutable will of God that applies to all people of all time. Jesus summarized this will of God in answer to a certain lawyer's question, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the

first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:37-40). In Romans 13 the Apostle Paul amplified what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself: "Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, do not steal, do not covet" (Rom.13:9).

There are no specific legal precepts that Christ has given to his New Testament Church apart from the holy, immutable will of God. We need to take care that we do not make rules where the Scriptures do not make rules and thus fail to enjoy the wondrous freedom in Christ the Gospel has given to us. A tendency of Reformed theology is to make precepts out of what are simply biblical examples. The Reformed will look at the way it appears that New Testament congregations were structured, for example, and conclude that this is the way that congregations today must also be structured.

We, too, need to be on guard that we do not interpret Scriptures in such a way that we establish legal precepts where the Scriptures do not do so. For example, it is clearly God's will for his Church that his Word be preached; but how this is to be done, what offices the church will establish to publicly proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments, has been left a matter of Christian freedom. The New Testament mentions many different offices, e.g., apostles, prophets, elder/overseers, deacons, evangelists, pastor/teachers, teachers.

Each of these offices included the public administration of the means of grace. The church today is likewise free to create the forms of public ministry it needs that the Word might be preached and Sacraments administered in the name of and on behalf of God's people.

As we interpret passages in the light of the immediate context, in the light of parallel passages, and in the light of the wider context of all of Scriptures, we will be led by the Holy Spirit to clearly determine what the true doctrine of Scripture is in whatever matter we are studying.

Now finally, we want to look briefly at

III. The Role of the Lutheran Confessions in Establishing Doctrine

We will confine our discussion to two points: 1. The Holy Scriptures are **norma normans**; the Lutheran Confessions are **norma normata**; 2. Formulation of doctrine, then, must always begin with the Scriptures.

**The Holy Scriptures are norma normans;
the Lutheran Confessions are norma normata**

The Scriptures are **norma normans**, that is, they are the absolute authority, or rule, according to which a doctrine or practice is established. They are the standard according to which truth and error can be distinguished.

The Confessions, on the other hand, are **norma normata**, that is, they are standards which are drawn from the Scripture and which derive their authority from the Scripture.

The introduction to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord is very careful to maintain this distinction. It begins with the 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." It then asserts that "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" (*Triglotta*, p. 777).

If the Scriptures alone are **norma normans**, then what need is there for confessional writings? This need arises when Satan stirs up controversy in the church. The three Ecumenical Creeds, the Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian, were formulated, the Formula says, "because directly after the times of the apostles, and even while they were still living, false teachers and heretics arose." The distinctly Lutheran Confessions, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology and the Smalcald Articles, likewise were formulated, say the writers of the

Formula, because of "the schisms in matters of faith...which have occurred in our time." "And because such matters concern also the laity and the salvation of their souls," says the Formula, "we also confess the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Luther...wherein everything is comprised which is treated at greater length in Holy Scripture, and is necessary for a Christian man to know for his salvation" (*Triglotta*, p. 777).

To each of these confessional writings, together with the Formula of Concord, the reformers and we subscribe, not **quatenus**, insofar as they agree with the Scriptures, but **quia**, because they agree with the Scriptures.

Yet the Formula of Concord is insistent to maintain that

the Holy Scripture alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.

But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned (*Triglotta*, p 779).

That leads, then, to this conclusion:

Formulation of doctrine must always begin with Scripture

Luther writes, "Nothing except the divine words are to be the first principles for Christians; all human words are conclusions drawn from them and must be brought back to them and approved by them" ("Defense of All the Articles of Martin Luther Condemned by the Recent Bull of Leo X," W 7,96ff). Scripture is the first principle. We do not accept the Scriptures because they agree with the Confessions. That would be making the Confessions the first principle. Rather, we accept the Confessions because they agree with the Scriptures.

Our first call as Christians is to search the Scriptures, to mine their depths, to let the Holy Spirit of God speak to us through them. Then, when we turn to the Confessions, we will see how what God has clearly revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures on a particular subject is nicely summarized in the Confessions.

But we should add that the Confessions do not speak directly about every doctrine taught in the Bible. They speak about the doctrines that were questioned at the time the Confessions were formulated, 1530-1580. Certain doctrines were accepted by both sides and therefore are not brought up in the Confessions.

Some Lutherans today maintain that if a particular doctrine is not dealt with in the Confessions, then it remains an open question. Take the doctrine of creation, for example. It is especially since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 that the creation-evolution controversy has been troubling the church. Just because the Confessions don't touch directly on this subject doesn't mean that we are therefore free to teach this doctrine as we please. The Scriptures, which are the **norms normans**, do teach clearly the doctrine of a six-day creation through the power of God's almighty Word. Since the Scriptures have spoken, we are bound to this doctrine even though no article of the Confessions can be cited to back up what the Scriptures say. The Holy Scripture alone, not the Confessions, closes questions or leaves them open.

Take one other example. Though the Confessions assume the inspiration and inerrancy of Scriptures, there is no separate article on this subject. Again, some Lutherans see this as freedom to deny Scripture's inerrancy, a freedom which the Scriptures themselves, the **norms normans**, by no means gives them.

While we thank God for the Lutheran Confessions and confess our allegiance to them, and while we thank God also for the writings of Luther and the early Lutheran dogmaticians, the Scriptures alone remain the source and norm of all doctrine. It is to the Scriptures above all that we must turn. We must become more and more familiar with their every word. With this Luther himself would whole-heartedly agree. In reply to the papal bull, "Exsurge, Domine," Luther wrote:

I may say with a clear conscience that I desire nothing more than the destruction of all my books. I have been obliged to publish them merely to warn people against these errors and to lead them into the Bible so that they obtain an understanding of it, and then let my books disappear" (*SL* 15,1462)

We can thank our gracious God that he has not let the books of Luther disappear. We can thank him that he has preserved for us the Lutheran Confessions. But above all we thank him for his promise that "the word of the Lord stands forever" (1 Pet. 1:25). Therefore, "like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk [the milk of the Word], so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pet. 2:2,3).