

Luther on Inspiration

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To The Reader

The following paper was read to a student group at Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on March 21, 1960, by the author. It was his intention to draw the attention of his young friends to the very words of Dr. Martin Luther, and this accounts in great measure for the style of the paper.

Moreover, because of limitations of time, some things which are also important for an understanding of Luther's position on Scripture were not included, and certain sections of this paper were not read to the students. In this latter category belong large portions of the section with the subtitle "Luther's Use of the term 'The Word of God'," and the entire section on "Scripture is Always the Word of God."

At least two other topics ought to have been included for a fuller presentation of Luther's views on inspiration. First something should be said about the Word and the acts of God. In the modern view of inspiration and revelation, it is often said that God reveals Himself in His deeds which are then interpreted by the "prophet." Luther held that the revelation took place in the words, and that the deeds of God are unintelligible without the words of God.

Secondly, the passages from Luther which are quoted in support of a liberal view of inspiration might have been treated in detail. These few ought to be interpreted in the light of the many passages in which Luther defends the inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible.

This paper is being made available at the request of a number of those who heard it read at Fort Wayne. May it help in a small way to help us retain the Biblical, Lutheran view of inspiration.

Luther On Inspiration

The doctrine of inspiration has become one of the great battlefields of the Christian Church in our generation. In this respect, however, our situation is not unique. The inspiration of the Holy Scriptures has been denied implicitly by every unbeliever since the beginning of the world. In the modern denials of this doctrine and the hidden, sophisticated attacks on it in our time, we only hear the echoes of the hissing of the serpent in the garden, which led our first parents astray, by bringing them, first to doubt whether the words by which they were to guide their actions were really the words of God, and, then, to reject in unbelief the words of the Lord that threatened them with death. It was the failure to take the words of God seriously and to believe what He had said that brought sin into the world and death to all of us. "Yea, hath God said?" is a question still asked by the devil in our time. The sheep's clothing of professed reverence for the Word of God in which our modern deniers creep in unawares and unnoticed does not entirely succeed in covering up the cloven hoofs and the forked tail of the old dragon, and those who have noses to smell will still know, as Luther would have put it, *wie dem Teufel die Hosen stinken*.

As followers of Luther, we are all aware that the question of Luther's views on inspiration is not the most important one that must be answered, not even in the Lutheran Church. If verbal inspiration has any validity at all, and if God has indeed spoken to us in His Word, the Holy Bible, then the first question must always be, "What does the Bible say about itself?" No human judgment and no rational argument, no matter how cogent, fitting, and persuasive it may be, can ever have the weight and the force of the Scripture's own testimony about itself.

And yet, as members of the Lutheran Church, who are proud to bear the name of the great man of God who said, "Councils have erred and popes have erred. Prove to me out of the Scriptures that I am wrong, and I will submit, "we would be happy to have Luther on our side in this battle for the inspiration, truth, and inerrancy of the Bible. Unfortunately every Protestant has that same desire in some degree at least, and so we

have men of such divergent views as Theodore Engelder and Emil Brunner, both claiming Luther as their champion. It is significant that of these two, Brunner has had to admit that he was wrong in imagining that Luther held to the neo-orthodox view of inspiration and revelation. In 1951, Paul King Jewett wrote his dissertation at Harvard on “Emil Brunner’s Concept of Revelation.” Bernard Ramm, who takes note of this unpublished work in his *Types of Apologetic Systems*, writes,

Jewett traces in Brunner’s works—Brunner has written over three hundred periodical articles—the first affirmations of Brunner that he and Luther saw practically eye to eye till in his latest works in which Brunner has come to admit that Luther was more of a traditional orthodox and fundamentalist (sic) than he imagined him to be at first.¹

At least we must give Brunner credit because he has had the honesty and the decency to admit that he was wrong, when further study convinced him that Luther held the view of Scripture that has been the traditional and ancient view of all Christians, be they Lutheran, Reformed, or Romanist. Sadly, however, people still read Brunner’s early works and conclude from them that Luther was a liberal in his view of the Holy Bible. It is my conviction that if men would only read Luther long enough and study his writings diligently enough, they would very quickly come to the conclusion to which Brunner has come. Much of the confusion in the church over Luther’s position on the inspiration of the Holy Bible comes from the fact that men do not read Luther, but instead they read the works of those who write about Luther, who in turn often simply repeat the erring conclusion of those whose books about Luther they themselves have read. And so the same old arguments are repeated, the same old words quoted out of context are cited again and again, often, I am sure, by men who did not even take the trouble to verify the correctness and the fairness, of the quotations. It is my considered conviction that anyone who holds that Luther had a liberal view of Scripture either has not read Luther, or else he has used his sources dishonestly, or else he has come to the study of Luther, as Luther himself would have said, with a pair of colored glasses before his eyes, so that he could not see what was there.

God Is The Author Of Scripture

What we need to do is to let Luther speak for himself. This is what I intend to do this evening. Luther lived in an age when the verbal inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible was generally held. The doctrine was emasculated and rendered ineffective, indeed, first, by the allegorical method of interpretation, and secondly, by the principle that the Church alone could interpret the Scriptures infallibly, but that it was taught is made clear, for example, by the *Enchiridion* of Erasmus, which says,

All Holy Scripture was divinely inspired and perfected by God, its author...divine Scripture...contains nothing idle...Believe none of those things which you see with your own eyes and handle with your own hands to be as true as what you read there. It is certain from the divine words that heaven and earth will pass away...Although men lie and err, the truth of God neither deceives nor is deceived.²

Luther had no fault to find with this aspect of the church’s teaching. In fact, almost every word and every phrase that is found in this passage from Erasmus can be duplicated somewhere in the writings of Luther. This was the doctrine that he had learned from his teachers in Erfurt. When he returned from the Heidelberg disputation in the spring of 1518 and came through this city where he had gone to the university, he stopped to see his old teacher Trutvetter. To show his displeasure with Luther, the old gentleman refused to see his former student, and Luther wrote a poignant letter, in which he said, “You were the first one to teach me that one is

¹ Wheaton, Van Kampen, 1953, p. 70.

² Spinka, *Advocates of Reform*, Library of Christian Classics, Philadelphia, Library of Christian Classics, 1953, XIV, 303-305.

obliged to believe only the canonical books, but that all others one should judge, as St. Augustine, yes, Paul and John command us to do.”³ From William of Occam, whom he called the greatest of the scholastic teachers, he had learned to respect the authority of the Holy Scriptures. About this there never was any question in the mind of Luther. It was only at Leipzig in 1519, in the debate with Eck, however, that Luther learned that the doctrine of the infallible authority of Scripture is meaningless as long as we look upon popes and councils as the infallible interpreters of the Bible. But from Leipzig on there is never any doubt about where Luther will stand. It was at Leipzig that the Scriptures really came into their own in Lutheran theology, and the Lutheran Church owes to John Eck a debt of gratitude for opening Luther’s eyes to his own position and all its logical consequences.

There is no question that Luther held firmly and unreservedly to the divine authorship of the Holy Scriptures. The Holy Scriptures, he says, is “the Holy Spirit’s book.”⁴ Commenting on Psalm 119:92, he wrote,

No other book, doctrine, nor word, except this book alone which teaches us God’s Word, can comfort us in need, anxiety, misery, death, yes, in the midst of devils and in hell. Therein God Himself speaks to us, as a man speaks to his friend.⁵

“The Holy Scripture did not grow on earth,”⁶ this was his striking way of saying that this book had not come into existence as ordinary books do, but that it is truly a gift of God from heaven. In the light of these words, it should be crystal clear to everyone that Luther would certainly not have been pleased with those who ridicule the doctrine of the divine origin of this book by saying that surely God did not let the Bible fall directly from heaven. While such a statement is literally true, it usually comes tripping along on cloven hoofs.

When Luther read the Scriptures, he was conscious, and he wanted others to be conscious, of the fact that God spoke, not only through this book (this an unbelieving modernist and a docetic neo-orthodox theologian would be willing to admit), but *in* this book. In his commentary on the 51st Psalm, he marvels at the insight into repentance and forgiveness of sins which is displayed here, and he writes, “What man could speak of repentance and forgiveness of sins as the Holy Ghost speaks in this psalm?”⁷ He makes the remark in one place that he is accustomed to saying repeatedly that the Holy Spirit is the teacher of this book. And the context makes it very clear that he is here not speaking of the guidance of the Holy Ghost given to those who read and study the Bible, but he means that the things that are taught here are taught by the Holy Ghost.⁸ Anyone who reads much in Luther must soon come to the conviction that Luther treats whatever the Scriptures say with the greatest reverence and respect. He insists over and over that statements most contradictory to human reason must be allowed to stand, that no effort should be made to resolve paradoxical statements by human interpretations. There is only one way in which this attitude of his can be understood. Luther himself was always conscious of something of which he urged all readers to be mindful when the Scriptures are read. “In dealing with Scripture,” he says in one of his early sermons on Genesis, “you must remember that it is God Himself who speaks.”⁹ And he never changed his mind. In one of the last works to come from his pen, *The Last Words of David*, issued in 1543, he wrote, “The Holy Scripture is spoken by (*durch*) the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

If it were not for the unreasonable objections of modern theologians, it would hardly be necessary to take note of the fact that Luther was, of course, perfectly aware of the truth that the Scriptures were spoken and written by men. But he saw no conflict between this so-called human side of the Scripture and his repeated assertion that it is God who speaks in the Bible. He says,

³ 15, 413 (All references are to the St. Louis edition.)

⁴ 9, 1775

⁵ 9, 1787f.

⁶ 7, 2095

⁷ 5, 474

⁸ 2, 566

⁹ 3, 21f.

¹⁰ 3, 1895

Damned unbelief and the cursed flesh will not let us see or notice, that God speaks with us in the Scripture, or that it is God's Word, but they think that it is Isaiah, Paul, or some other ordinary man, who has not created heaven and earth.¹¹

He insisted that even though it was written by men, yet it is not the word of man. In a famous comment on Matt. 24:15, he wrote,

Mark well what you read. For you are not reading the word of a man, but the Word of God the All-highest. He wants scholars who diligently pay attention to it, and take note of what He says. And if it is properly said that one should read the letters of princes three times since they must write prudently lest they be considered fools, how much more should one read God's letters, that is, the Holy Scriptures, three, four, ten, a hundred, a thousand, yes thousands of times.¹²

In his thinking about the Scriptures, he submerged the human instrument so completely, that he goes so far as to say that it is not an angel nor any creature that speaks to us in what is written here, but God Himself.¹³

The fact that the Word is spoken by men does not make it any less the Word of God. In fact, Luther held that even when the Scriptures state simply that God spoke to one of the patriarchs prior to the time of Moses, the words actually were spoken by some man as God's spokesman. In the commentary on Genesis he says, "Many things of which Moses writes that God said them, were said by Adam."¹⁴ But just the same, it is still in every respect the Word of God, for he continues, "For even if the Word of God is spoken by men, it is nevertheless God's Word."¹⁵ There are times when Luther ascribes the words of Scripture to men, and then quickly corrects himself in what seems to be a completely unnecessary way. In one place, for example, he writes, "These are the sayings of St. John, or rather of the Holy Ghost."¹⁶ He does this very same thing in another place where he says, "We see how Moses, yes, the Holy Ghost Himself, describes the most trivial works and sufferings of the patriarchs."¹⁷

In one of his earlier works, *On Avoiding the Doctrines of Men*, which he published in 1524, he deals with this question of the human authorship of the Word of God expressly. From the time of the Leipzig debate, Luther no longer hesitated to denounce the bulls of popes and the decrees of church councils, because, as he said, they were the doctrines of men. Some of Luther's adversaries had sought to defend the doctrines of men with the argument that Peter, Paul, and John were also men, and therefore their doctrines, too, were the doctrines of men. But Luther answers, "It is one thing when the man himself speaks. It is quite another thing when God speaks through men."¹⁸ Peter, Paul, and John were men, indeed, but "the speech of the apostles was commanded by God and confirmed and proved with great miracles."¹⁹ This last remark, by the way, is most interesting, because this point of view, which holds that the inspired Word is "confirmed and proved by great miracles," is usually in our day branded as one of the disputed assumptions of Protestant fundamentalism.²⁰

When, in this same controversy, the opponents of Luther, in defending the doctrines of men, quoted the passage, "He that heareth you, heareth me," Luther answered this argument by calling their attention to the fact that they were forgetting that this was not all that Jesus said. The same Lord who had given this promise to the

¹¹ 9, 1800

¹² 9, 1808

¹³ 9, 182

¹⁴ 1, 531

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 3, 1916

¹⁷ 2, 772

¹⁸ 19, 620

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ E. A. Burt, *Types of Religious Philosophy*, New York, Harper, 1951, p. 166.

apostles had also told them what they should preach. He points out that Jesus “does not say, God, and preach what you want, or what seems good to you, but He puts His own Word into their mouth and commands them to preach the Gospel.”²¹ “God speaks to us through the Scriptures,” he says in another place, “and through the men who teach the Scriptures.”²² What was true of the apostles was true also of Moses, “He never spoke a single human doctrine, but what God commanded him to speak, as almost all the chapters point out.”²³

In the very last paragraph of this work, *On Avoiding the Doctrines of Men*, he sums up his position in these words,

Therefore we say once more, we do not find fault with the doctrines of men because men have said it, but because they are lies and blasphemies against the Scriptures, which, although they are also written by men are nevertheless not from men but from God. Now, because they are opposed to each other, Scripture, and the doctrines of men, the one must be false and the other true. Let’s see which one they themselves will accuse of lying.²⁴

And therefore he could say in his commentary on Matthew that we should be sure that when we hear the Word of God from the apostles and servants of Christ, it is just as if we were hearing Christ Himself. And note here that he does not distinguish here between hearing or reading it. He writes,

when we hear the Gospel in the church or read it in the book, then this is equivalent to hearing God Himself in heaven in the midst of the angels. And even if there were no other profit in it, yet it would already be a great thing with our own ears to hear God Himself and the voice of God. What could be more exalted than to hear God speak?²⁵

Luther’s Use Of The Term, “The Word Of God”

In this connection a few things ought to be said also about Luther’s use of the term, “the Word of God.” If ever a theological and Scriptural term has suffered martyrdom it is this. Just as in the previous generation the term “Son of God” was so emasculated and watered down that its application to our Lord became almost meaningless, so the theologians of this generation have murdered the term “the Word of God.” What it really does mean to them is almost impossible to discover, but one thing they are sure of. The term is applied to Scripture only by a sort of figure of speech. The Word of God, they say, is the eternal Son of God, and so articles on the Bible *and* the Word of God are a dime a dozen, as though those two things were a pair of entirely different concepts, any resemblance between which is purely coincidental.

Now it is true that the Scriptures call our Lord “the Word of God” in a few places, and Luther does this too. In his comments on the first verses of John’s Gospel he says some very startling things. But Luther in these comments on the statement that “the Word was God,” says that this is an exceptional and rare use of this term. As a rule, when Luther uses the term “the Word of God,” he means the Scripture. But when one reads some of the modern treatments of Luther’s view of the Word of God, it seems that the exception has become the rule and the rule has become the exception, and the result is that Luther’s own thought on the matter is completely distorted. I am convinced that in more than 90% of the cases where he uses the term, (and I believe that this estimate is conservative), he has in mind the message of the Holy Scriptures. This is the Word of God because this is what God says to us.

²¹ 19, 615

²² 6, 80

²³ 19, 616

²⁴ 19, 621

²⁵ 7, 113

He generally uses the terms “*Schrift*” and “*Wort Gottes*” as synonymous and interchangeable terms, and while he knows as well as any Biblical theologian that at times this term, “the Word of God,” is used for the creative Word by which the universe is brought into being and kept in existence, and the personal Word of God, which is God Himself, yet when he uses it without explanation, he usually identifies the Word of God with the Scriptures. He does this in so many words when he says, “The Holy Scripture...is God’s Word.”²⁶ Early in the commentary on Galatians, he writes, “No other teaching should be presented or heard in the Church except the pure Word of God, that is, the Holy Scripture.”²⁷ In a sermon on the three ecumenical creeds, which he preached in Smalcald in 1537, he said of the Jews and Mohammedans,

When they want to interpret our Scripture, we will not permit this. They have neither the ability nor the right to do this, for it is God’s Scripture, and God’s Word, which no man can or should interpret.²⁸

It is true that Luther also uses the phrase, “*Schrift und Gottes Wort*,” Scripture and the Word of God, but it is very clear that in Luther’s idiom this is always a hendiadys, two words standing for the same thing, like “my Lord and my God.”²⁹

To him, the Scripture and the Word of God were one thing. He could become extremely vehement on this point. This is shown, for example, by a sermon on 1 Pet. 3:15-18, which was published in 1523, and in which he said,

Therefore, if the people do not want to believe, you should be silent, for it is not your duty to force them to look upon Scripture as God’s book or God’s Word. You have done enough if you have shown that what you say is based on Scripture. When you hear people who are of this opinion and say, You preach that a man should not accept the teachings of men, but Peter and Paul, yes, even Christ, were also men,-when you hear people who are so blinded and hardened, that they deny that this is God’s Word, or doubt it, then just be quiet. Do not speak one word to them. Let them go.³⁰

Now it is true, of course, that the identification of Scripture with the Word of God is so patently taught by Scripture itself and so ingrained in the whole doctrinal tradition of the whole church, that it is well-nigh impossible to find any theologian, even among the most liberal, who would deny that the Scripture is the Word of God, just as you will not find any who will deny that Jesus is the Son of God, no matter under how many rocks you look. After all, false prophets must still come in sheep’s clothing if they expect to be heard by the people of God. The denial of the truth that Scripture is the Word of God usually, in our day, comes in the form of a question, which in essence is very much like the very first question asked in regard to God’s Word, “Yea, hath God said?” The question in our time usually takes this form, “In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?” and then, in answer to this question, confusion reigns supreme.

Luther would have been a little impatient with a question like this, for to him the answer was self-evident. He was not a speculative theologian, and speculation he hated as he hated the devil himself. Philosophy he considered to be the greatest enemy of the Christian faith. To him, the Scriptures were the Word of God because God speaks in the words of this book. We have previously referred to a passage in the Galatians commentary in which he identifies the Scripture with the Word of God.³¹ In that same connection, he said to his class at the university, “If we could believe that God Himself speaks to us in Scripture, we would read it with

²⁶ 9, 1853

²⁷ 9, 87

²⁸ 10, 1018

²⁹ e.g. 11, 441

³⁰ 9, 1071f

³¹ 9, 1853

all diligence.”³² In the same commentary in another place, which we have also cited previously, we find, side by side, following upon one another, these two statements, “God speaks with us in the Scriptures,” and “It is God’s Word.”³³ From 1527 to 1530, he lectured at Wittenberg on the book of Isaiah. In the course of one of his lectures, he admonished his students to persevere in the constant use of the Word and not to grow tired of reading it (and who can doubt that he is here speaking of the Scriptures), because, as he said, “Pious hearts believe that it is the Word of God, and that it is inspired by God through the Holy Ghost.”³⁴ In the next year, 1531, he preached a series of sermons for Bugenhagen in the city church, and in one of the sermons in the series, he told the congregation,

If a thought comes to you, no matter if it seems so beautiful and holy that you imagine it to be downright angelic, then take a good look at it, compare it with God’s Word and see if it is grounded in Scripture, and whether God has commanded or said or ordered it or not.³⁵

God’s Word, then, is what God commands or says. This is the way he talked as long as he lived. In 1545, the year before his death, in his *Wider das Pabstthum zu Rom vom Teufel gestiftet*, he wrote, “Whoever wants to hear God should read the Holy Scripture.”³⁶ Examples could be multiplied to show that to Luther the Bible is the Word of God in the sense that what is said in this book is said by God. In this sense, much of modern theology would not be willing to call Scripture the Word of God, and it is no wonder that Brunner was finally forced to admit that Luther did not see eye to eye with him on this score.

Scripture Is Always The Word Of God

Neo-orthodoxy is willing to say also that the Bible is the Word of God, but it always, by a process of mental reservation, adds a “sometimes” to that sentence, and it prefers to say that the Bible becomes the Word of God at certain times and under certain conditions, or in other words, it is the Word of God only when God speaks to *me* through it. This is simply the old error of the enthusiasts, resurrected and dressed up in the latest style to suit modern tastes. But to Luther the Bible is always and in all places the Word of God, provided, of course, that the words are not robbed of their divinely intended meaning, for the *meaning* of the sound is more important than the sound it itself. The sound of the words may change as the Holy Scriptures are translated from one language to another, but the meaning must remain the same. If the message of the Scriptures is proclaimed, then this is the Word of God, whether men believe it or not.³⁷ “When I preach, I should not say, If a man believes, then God’s Word is true; if he does not believe, then it is false.”³⁸ The neo-orthodox theologian who holds that the Bible becomes the Word of God in the moment when God uses it to break through man’s defenses, and who claims Luther for his point of view, might well remember that Luther once also said, “Even if you would not believe that Jesus died for you, what difference would it make? The words which I hear are nevertheless true, and they will not become false or lies on account of my unbelief.”³⁹ This view of falsehood and truth which Luther here displays is anathema to many a modern theologian, to whom theology is anything but propositional truth. And the person who is still not clear about what Luther thought about any process by which human words become the words of God under certain conditions, might profitably read what Luther has to say about the other two means of grace in the *Large Catechism*.

³² 9, 1852

³³ 9, 1800

³⁴ 6, 742

³⁵ 7, 2389

³⁶ 17, 1089

³⁷ 7, 992f

³⁸ 7, 996

³⁹ 7, 1738

Many theologians with neo-orthodox leanings seek to find room for a neo-orthodox view of Scripture in Luther's remarks about "*das muendliche Wort*," the oral Word, as though the written Word were somehow inferior to it. And therefore, in an effort to escape from the bondage of Scripture and to give to the human spirit room to roam where it will, many so-called Luther scholars seek to find in Luther a distinction between the living Word and the dead Word, between the oral Word and the written Word. When Luther spoke of the living Word, he spoke of the Word which is written in the Bible, and he castigates the enthusiasts because they speak of these written words as dead letters.⁴⁰ And when his writings are studied, it becomes very clear that when he laid such emphasis on the preached Word, *das muendliche Wort*, the oral Word, he did not think of this as standing in contrast to the written Word (those two were synonymous in Luther's thinking), but he used it as an antithesis to the inner Word, the immediate Word of the enthusiasts, which Luther said was inspired by the devil from hell.⁴¹

Luther And Verbal Inspiration

Up to this time, someone may say, I have heard nothing from Luther which would indicate that Luther would go along with the *Brief Statement* of the Missouri Synod. What did Luther have to say about verbal inspiration? In this matter, too, Luther is no trumpet giving an uncertain sound. There can be no doubt where he stands on this matter. Modern theologians are fond of saying, "When we say that the Bible is the Word of God, we do not mean that it consists of so many words of God." Against such people Luther would have drawn the sword of the Spirit and he would have scourged them with the whiplash of his most vehement invective. And when we say this, we are not just imagining what he might have done if he had been faced with this question. He was faced with it, and he dealt with it just in this way.

There are modern Lutheran theologians, who, in an effort to justify their own unbelief and apostasy, cite father Luther as one who did not believe in the Missouri doctrine of verbal inspiration. This, they say, was an invention of Chemnitz and Gerhardt and Calov and the other theologians of a later generation. I am amazed that any student of Luther can speak in this way. At Marburg, in 1529, Luther met with Zwingli, and the two sides discussed their doctrinal differences. They found themselves in agreement, as they stated, on the doctrine of God, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, original sin, faith, justification, the external Word, baptism, and confession. What a grand day it would be if all Lutherans could agree on those articles today! Justus Jonas could write that they had agreed in everything except the article of the Holy Supper. Can you imagine how Luther, at that time, when Protestantism was fighting for its very life, could refuse to recognize the Zwinglians as brothers just because they would not admit that "is" means "is", if he had not been firmly convinced of the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures? Luther may have been stubborn, and thank God that he was, but he was no fool. And here at Marburg, he was willing, as Erasmus would have said it, to rend the seamless robe of Christ once more for the sake of one little word.

That he was a firm believer in the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is demonstrated not only by his actions, but also by his own express words. His action at Marburg in 1529 was not a spur-of-the-moment decision. He knew what he was doing, and he did it deliberately. Six years before in a message to the Waldensians, he had written,

One must not deal sacrilegiously with God's words in this way that one gives to any word any other meaning than the natural one unless he does so on the basis of express, clear Scripture. This is done by those, who without justification in Scripture, sacrilegiously twist the word "is" and make it mean "signifies." ...But we would and should simply abide by the words of Christ. He will not betray us...If we would permit such sacrilege in one place, that one without basis in Scripture may say that the little word "is" means as much as the little word "signifies", one could

⁴⁰ 9, 1514-1516; 3, 206; 7, 992f; 7, 2388f; 8, 1110f; 12, 1603-1606.

⁴¹ 9, 1514-1516; 7, 113; 19, 615-621; 7, 2082; 3, 1889f; cp. 2, 785.

not forbid it at any other place, and the whole of Scripture would be nullified...Every word should be permitted to stand in its natural meaning, and one should not depart from it unless the creed demands it.⁴²

Luther knew very well what was at stake at Marburg. Zwingli and Carlstadt had urged him often enough not to split Christendom over such a small matter, and two years before Marburg, in 1527, in his treatise on the words of institution, he took note of these pleas not to divide Christendom and offend against Christian love over such a little thing. Luther speaks a curse on this kind of love which is willing to compromise the truth of God's Word, and then he goes on to say,

It will not help them to say, that they have great respect for God's words and the whole Gospel except only in this one place. My dear friend, God's Word is God's Word...Whoever charges God with a lie in one word and blasphemes, or says that it is a small thing that He is blasphemed and charged with lying, he blasphemes the whole God, and considers all blasphemy of God to be a trifle.⁴³

A little later, in the same work, we find words that have been frequently quoted.

If they were not such light-hearted despisers of Scripture, a single clear Scripture passage would have as much effect on them as if the whole world were full of Scripture, as is also the case. As far as I am concerned, one single passage of Scripture makes the whole world too narrow for me. But if they flit over it superficially and imagine that it is the word of men, it is possible that no Scripture will convince them...D. Carlstadt...makes a martyr out of the little word "This"; Zwingli makes a martyr out of the little word "is"; Oecolampadius makes a martyr out of the little word "body"; the others make a martyr out of the whole text.⁴⁴

Can you imagine anyone who does not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible speaking in this way? Only those who are deliberately blind could fail to see here what Luther's attitude was toward the individual, single words of the Holy Bible.

In the next year, just one year before Marburg, he returned to the same subject again in his *Confession Concerning the Supper of Christ*. If ever there was in any of the Lutheran theologians a clear confession of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, and a demonstration of holy awe before the simple words of Scripture, we certainly find it here. Zwingli had found fault with Luther because he insisted so stubbornly on what Zwingli called "five poor, miserable words." To this Luther replied,

With such remarks they testify against themselves and show what sort of spirit they have and how precious they regard the Word of God. These precious words they denounce as five, poor, miserable words, that is, they do not believe that they are God's words. For if they believed that they are God's words, they would not have called them five poor, miserable words, but they would consider even a tittle, or a letter, to be greater than the whole world, and they would tremble before it as before God Himself. For he who despises a single word of God, will certainly not consider any one to be great...We must abide by them and cling to them as the clearest, surest, most certain words of God, which can not deceive us nor lead us astray.⁴⁵

⁴² 19, 1312-1314.

⁴³ 20, 775.

⁴⁴ 20, 788f.

⁴⁵ 20, 1040f.

Lest anyone should suppose that Luther held so tenaciously only to the words of the Scripture where they dealt with the Lord's Supper, we shall refer also to other statements of his in which he breathed the same spirit. It would be necessary, really, to cite only words of Luther which all of us have memorized. You remember what he said about the benefit of baptism, "It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the *words* and promises of God declare." And in answer to his own question, "Which are such *words* and promises of God?" he quotes a passage from Scripture.

And again, this is no isolated instance. In his *Kirchenpostille* he tells us that he once heard of a man who mocked the Biblical doctrine of baptism and said, "I would like to know whether a handful of water could save me." Luther charges that such a man treads the words of Scripture under foot, and he asks, "My dear sir, where do the words come from, from God, or from reason?"⁴⁶

Furthermore, in the light of the surrender to evolutionism on the part of modern ecclesiastical unbelief and theological timidity, and of the concessions made to Darwinism by the "trembling apologists" of the Christian faith, it is interesting indeed to hear what Luther had to say about the words of Genesis 1. More than ten years before he began his lectures on Genesis at the university, Luther preached a series of sermons on the book of Genesis, over a period of more than eighteen months. Notes were taken by others and the sermons were then published with Luther's permission and approval. Commenting on the statement that the world was created in six days, Luther says in one of the sermons,

I have often said that anyone who wants to study the Holy Scripture should always be careful to stay with the simple words, wherever he can, and never depart from them unless he is compelled by an article of the creed to understand it otherwise than the words read. For we must be certain of this that there has been no simpler speech on earth than that which has been spoken by God. Therefore when Moses writes that God created heaven and earth and all that is therein in six days, then let it be six days. You may not follow the gloss which says that the six days were one day. But if you cannot comprehend how they could have been six days, then give the Holy Spirit credit for being more learned than you are. For in dealing with Scripture you must remember that it is God Himself who speaks. Because God said it, it does not become you wantonly to twist His Word as you please, unless you are compelled to understand a text differently than the words read, namely, if the creed will not permit the sense given by the words.⁴⁷

This view, too, he held to the very end of his life. In his work on *The Last Words of David*, which he wrote just three years before his death, he comments on the words, "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue," and he says,

Whoever dares to boast that the Spirit of the Lord speaks through him, and that his tongue speaks the Word of the Holy Ghost, must by all means be sure of his ground. This will not be David, the son of Jesse, born in sin, but he who has been awakened to be a prophet through the promise of God. Should not he, who has such a teacher to teach him and to speak through him, compose such beautiful psalms? He that has ears to hear, let him hear. My speech is not my speech, but whoever hears me, hears God. Whoever despises me, despises God. For I see, that many of my descendants will not listen to my words to their own great detriment. Such a boast neither we, nor anyone who is not a prophet, have a right to make. We, insofar as we are saints and have the Holy Spirit, may indeed boast that we are the catechumens and pupils of the prophets, as men who repeat and preach what we have learned and heard from the apostles and prophets, and who are sure that the prophets have taught these things.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ 12, 1606.

⁴⁷ 3, 20f.

⁴⁸ 3, 1890.

What more should we say to those who insist that Luther did not hold the doctrine of verbal inspiration? If this does not convince them, we could talk from now till judgment day and we would simply be wasting our breath. When Erasmus tried to explain away the statement of the Bible that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, Luther said that we must not “twist and turn the words of God according to our will.”⁴⁹ In another place he wrote that God is the source, not only of the words, but also of the phraseology which is used by the Holy Ghost and the Holy Scriptures.⁵⁰ He says that the Holy Ghost who speaks to us in the Bible, is not a fool or a drunkard and that He does not speak one word, not even one iota, in vain.⁵¹ “One tittle of the Scripture is greater than heaven and earth,” he told his class in Galatians.⁵² “Not one letter of Scripture is useless,” he said in one of his sermons.⁵³

Because of this conviction, he always insisted that the words of the Bible should be treated with the greatest respect. In his famous open letter to the aldermen of all the cities of Germany, issued in 1524, he said, “It is very dangerous to speak of divine matters in any other way or in other words than God Himself uses.”⁵⁴ He struck the same note in the commentary on Genesis, in which he told his students, “We must speak the way the Scripture does and adhere to the words of the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁵ He said the same thing again in his treatment of the first four chapters of John,

We should not treat the Word of God with audacity. It is better for you to think, “I do not understand the words. Before I change them, or take away, or add anything to God’s words, I will rather let it go and commit it to God.” For one should treat the Holy Scriptures with respect and with great fear.⁵⁶

All of this was no mere academic dispute with Luther. This doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Bible was important to him because the words and promises of God were the foundation of his faith. Luther would never have drawn the false antithesis which is today often set up by those who say that our faith must be in Christ, not in a book. Those who say such things ought at least to have the decency not to call themselves Lutheran. How Luther felt about this is made clear by his words, found in the *Kirchenpostille*, which he himself regarded as one of his best works, and in which he says,

Let us here cling to the words, lean and settle our hearts firmly upon it, close our eyes, and say, If I had the merit of all saints, the holiness and chastity of all virgins, and the piety of St. Peter on top of it all, I will still trust in nothing I have, but I must have another foundation on which I may build, namely, on these words, “God has given His Son.”...No matter what happens, you should say, There stands God’s Word. This is my Rock and my Anchor. On it I will build, and it will stand. And if it stands, then I will also stand, for God cannot lie, and heaven and earth would first have to fall into ruins before the smallest letter or tittle of His Word should come to naught...Therefore let your conscience build on no work nor on the merit of any saint, but solely on the Word of God. He will not lie to you, but will fulfill His promise. There you will grasp God with His own words. On this you can build, base, and set your heart and your comfort.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ 18, 1823

⁵⁰ 4, 1960

⁵¹ 3, 1895

⁵² 9, 655

⁵³ 10, 1018

⁵⁴ 10, 475

⁵⁵ 1, 37

⁵⁶ 7, 1858.

⁵⁷ 11, 1086f.

This must also be the reason why we fight so vehemently for the doctrine of verbal inspiration in our day, not that we want to fight, but because we want the dead certainty of Christian faith, which Brunner says is deadly. For myself, I can testify that it was one single little word of Holy Scripture that opened the doors of paradise for me. And when the thought came to me that one little word was a poor foundation of faith, it was this doctrine of verbal inspiration which helped me to see that one word of Scripture is worth more than heaven and earth, and because it is a word of God, therefore it is more certain than the testimony of my own heart and of my senses. And with Luther, we too should say, "Let us cling to the words. They are the words of God. He will not lie to you."

The Inerrancy Of Scripture

Closely allied with Luther's doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Bible is his insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture. We have already noticed this in some of the words quoted previously. We have heard him say that the words of Scripture are the clearest, surest, most certain words of God, which cannot deceive us nor lead us astray.⁵⁸ He told Zwingli and Carlstadt that whoever charges God with a lie in one word, blasphemes the whole God.⁵⁹ We should let the words of Scripture stand, he says, even if they appear to us and to our human reason to be very foolish and strange.⁶⁰ The things which to human reason appear to be the greatest and most monstrous lies and fables must be believed, if they are taught in Scripture.⁶¹ Even if the fathers have not always held to the plain words of Scripture, yet the authority of the Bible must not be surrendered for their sake. They were only men and they could err. "But," he goes on, "God's Word is the wisdom of God Himself and most certain truth."⁶² In his answer to Emser, in October of 1521, he says that if Emser would quote a thousand passages from the fathers, he would still not have proved his case. The words of the fathers, he said, are the words of men, who have erred, but St. Peter's words are the words of God.⁶³ The implication is clear. The words of St. Peter, being the words of God, are not subject to error as are the words of the holy fathers.

In 1533, Luther began a series of lectures on the psalms. In his introduction to the published lectures, he explains why he selected only certain psalms for treatment. His health was so poor at the time that he did not expect to live very long. These are the words therefore of a man who believes himself on the brink of eternity. But even at such a time he is willing to make no compromise with those who are unwilling to let every word of Scripture stand uncriticized, and he writes,

The Word is so far above criticism that not even the smallest letter is in error in the law and in the divine promises. Therefore we must yield to no sect, not even in one tittle of the Scriptures, no matter how much they shout the slander that we by our strict adherence to the words violate love.⁶⁴

In view of the fact that the *Brief Statement* of our Synod says that there are no errors in chronology in the Holy Scriptures, it is interesting to note that Luther made a special study of the chronology of the Bible, and he published the results of his labors in his *Chronikon*. In explaining the method that he had pursued in these studies, he says that he had made use of the secular historians, but that where they disagreed with Scripture, he had given the precedence to the Bible. The historians, he says, were only men, but in the Scriptures the true God speaks. Therefore, he goes on, he used the historians in such a way that he is not compelled to contradict the

⁵⁸ 20, 1041.

⁵⁹ 20, 775

⁶⁰ 7, 1858

⁶¹ 1, 149

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ 18, 1361

⁶⁴ 5, 398.

Scripture.⁶⁵ It is very evident that he was not willing to let the Bible be corrected on the basis of any human evidence or testimony.

This doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture was important to Luther because of its relation to the assurance of the child of God.⁶⁶ He found in it great comfort of his own heart. In the *Hauspostille* he writes,

We should not be offended at God's Word, even if it sounds astonishing, false, and impossible, but we should firmly hold that if God has said it, it will of necessity come to pass. For no one should ask whether it is possible, but only make sure whether God has said it. If God said it, He is also mighty and truthful enough to do it. Therefore we should believe it. He who does not believe it, blasphemes God mightily. We should diligently guard ourselves against this sin of doubting God's Word (God grant it), no matter how full of lies it appears to be. For what God says is most certainly true.⁶⁷

To Luther, this confidence that accepts and believes everything that God says in the Bible is the very essence of the Christian faith. The words and promises of God, who cannot lie, are the only source of comfort and assurance that the Christian has. In the *Kirchenpostille* he says,

Real comfort can be found only in the Scripture and God's Word. Therefore God let it be written, that we should learn this from it...Whatever else there may be with which a man wants to comfort himself, however great it may be, is all uncertain. There the heart always thinks, "Who knows whether it is true? Oh, if only I could be sure of it! etc." But if it clings to God's Word, it can say without wavering, "There is God's Word. It cannot lie or be mistaken. Of that I am certain." But this is the biggest struggle we have, to keep the Word and stick with it.⁶⁸

In the same work, while discussing the doctrine of the Trinity, he strikes the same note again, when he writes,

Thank God, I have the grace that I do not want to dispute much about these matters. But when I know that it is God's Word and that God has spoken in this way, then I do not ask any more how this can be true. I am satisfied to have the Word of God, and I do not care how it agrees with our reason. This every Christian ought to do in all the articles of our holy faith. One should not be clever here and discuss much about whether it is possible. One should be careful to ask only whether it is God's Word. If it is His Word, and if He said it, depend on it with all certainty. He will not lie nor betray you, even if you do not understand His ways and His times.⁶⁹

Those, in whose hearts these words of Luther strike a responsive chord, know why it is important to them to know that God speaks propositional truth. Our assurance of salvation depends on it.

There are those who are willing to admit that the Bible is without error when it speaks of our salvation, but, they say, there are so many things in Scripture that have nothing to do with Christ, and we must not insist that everything here is inspired by God. They will even quote Luther to the effect that whatever does not bring us Christ is not Scripture. They ought to try reading these words of Luther in context. The fact of the matter is that Luther insists that the Holy Spirit is the author also of the trivialities found in Scripture, that we should look upon nothing in the Bible as unimportant, and that we should pay close attention to these trifles. If we would do this, he says, we would find great comfort and much instruction in them.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ 14, 491.

⁶⁶ 4, 136.

⁶⁷ 13a, 241.

⁶⁸ 11, 441.

⁶⁹ 12, 651.

⁷⁰ 2, 566-8; 2, 469; 2, 772; 1, 794.

Merely to illustrate Luther's method in dealing with the "trivialities" in Holy Scripture we append a few selections from Luther's writings: In the *Hauspostille*, he refers to the prophecies which say that no bone of the passover lamb shall be broken and that Christ would be pierced. He comments, "The Holy Spirit says nothing uselessly and for nothing (*vergebens und umsonst*)" 13a, 485. In regard to Jacob's action in dividing his flocks in preparation for the meeting with Esau, he writes,

We see how Moses, yes, the Holy Ghost Himself, describes the most trivial works and sufferings of the patriarch with such great diligence...Therefore the Holy Ghost does not consider it improper to spend so much time on domestic and agrarian (*Hirten*) pursuits and passions. (2, 772)

In Gen. 30:14-16 we have the account of Rachel and Leah quarreling over the mandrakes picked by Reuben. Luther says of this story,

This is an extremely ridiculous and childish thing. One could speak or write nothing more worthless or more trivial. Why, then, is it written nevertheless? Answer: One must always keep in mind, as I am accustomed to say repeatedly, that the Holy Spirit is the teacher (*Meister*) of this book. It pleases Him to play and jest in this way and to describe such trivial, childish things which are worthless. These things He sets before us that we should teach them in the church with great benefit...One should not superficially pass over them, much less *should* we despise them, as though they were filthy or worthless, as the papists do...The Holy Spirit and God, the Creator, condescend to us in this way, and it pleases Him to have His fun with His saints and play games with them in such trivial affairs...So we will understand that the Holy Spirit has not uselessly set this before us that we might read, teach, and believe it. (2, 566...560)

Commenting on the fact that Jacob walked to Haran without escort, without camels, or silver or gold, Luther, in his comments on Gen. 29:1-3 writes,

You dare not imagine or wonder why it pleases the Holy Ghost to describe such simple and lowly deeds. Listen to what Paul says in Rom. 15, "Whatsoever was written before, was written to teach us, in order that we through patience and comfort of the Scripture may have hope." If only we believed firmly, as I do, although my faith is weak, that the Holy Ghost Himself, and God, the Creator of all things, is the real teacher of this book (*der rechte Meister dieses Buchs*) and of these simple and lowly events, which seem so simple and trivial to the flesh, we would find the greatest comfort in them, as St. Paul says. (2, 469)

In another place he writes,

Whoever reads and studies Holy Scripture with diligence will consider nothing in it to be of such unimportance that it cannot at least serve to improve our life and behavior, since the Holy Spirit has seen to it that it was described (*dieweil es der Heilige Geist hat beschreiben lassen*). (1, 794)

Luther And Plenary Inspiration

We should perhaps also say a few words about plenary inspiration. It is already evident from what has been said that Luther considered the whole Bible to be inspired. When he says, as he does so often, that nothing in the Scripture is useless, that the Holy Spirit has not spoken in vain, that not a letter, not a tittle, not an iota of

the Bible is to be criticized, that whoever charges Scripture with error in one word blasphemes the whole God, it is clear from these remarks of his that he held unreservedly to the plenary inspiration of the Bible. When he defends the trivialities and trifles which were so often despised by the scholastic theologians, he demonstrates his adherence to the whole of Scripture. And in so many words he states his position clearly when he says, in *The Last Words of David*, “We give the Holy Spirit credit for the whole Scripture.”⁷¹

In this connection it is interesting to note Luther’s translation of 2 Tim. 3:16. He translates the Greek words *πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος πρὸς διδασκαλίαν* “*alle Schrift, von Gott eingegeben, ist nuetz zur Lehre*,” which, of course, would be in English, “All Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine.” Personally, because of the *καὶ*, I prefer the King James translation here, and if I may be permitted to venture a guess, I would say that Luther in this place was influenced by his phenomenal memory. He knew the Latin text of the Bible well and many editions of the Vulgate omit the *et*, so that the text reads, *Omnis Scriptura divinitus inspirata utilis ad docendum*. Grammatically speaking, Luther’s translation is possible, and it is even possible to translate, “Every Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine.” But even this translation, which is preferred by those who have a doctrinal bias against the plenary inspiration of the Bible, does not by any means set aside the meaning of St. Paul. If one translates in this way, it is impossible to tell whether St. Paul taught the plenary inspiration of the Bible in this passage or not. What Paul meant will depend on whether you look upon “given by inspiration of God,” as a descriptive or a limiting phrase. Even if it were translated in this way, it would still mean, in Paul’s theology, that every single passage in the Scriptures, since it is given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine. Here, too, the context must decide, and that this was the position of St. Paul is evident from his words in Romans, where he says, “Whatsoever was written for our learning.” And that this was also Luther’s view is clear from the fact that he translates, “All Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine.”

The question of the extent of Scripture is an entirely separate question. The whole Bible is inspired. This Luther held. But which books belong in the Bible, is an independent question, which must be answered on different grounds. Much is made of the fact that Luther rejected James. In his earliest preface to James, he even wrote, “I do not want him in my Bible.” But if men would pay close attention to what Luther says, his rejection of James becomes another evidence of Luther’s adherence to the inerrancy of Scripture. His first reason for rejecting James is that he contradicts Paul in regard to justification. But there is no question about the inspiration of Romans and Galatians. Since the Scripture cannot contradict itself, and since Romans is Scripture, and since James contradicts Romans, therefore James cannot be canonical. It might be noticed here that Luther is using a test of canonicity which God Himself proposed through Moses when he said that a prophet who came with a message contradicting previously established truth should not be accepted as God’s messenger.

Conclusion

We have said little in this paper concerning the passages from Luther which are quoted on the part of those who would like to show that Luther did not hold the conservative position. There are in Luther only about five or six such passages, which are quoted again and again. While some of these words of Luther, when viewed out of context, have a strange sound, yet in not one of them does Luther directly and in so many words reject either the plenary nor verbal inspiration of the Bible nor does he admit that there are any errors in the Scriptures. With a little good will, and even a small understanding of Luther’s style, it is a simple matter to show that they do not in any way overthrow the position that Luther demonstrates in hundreds of passages. It would be interesting to deal with every one of these passages in detail, but it seemed to be more important to give you the plain words of Luther in the light of which the few unclear passages ought to be understood. May God grant you all a rich measure of the spirit of Martin Luther and make you all staunch defenders of His truth. Amen.

⁷¹ 3, 1889