

# **The Doctrine Of The Word Of God**

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We are living in an age of doctrinal confusion and doubt. So deep is the doubt and so dark is the confusion that the very existence of the living God is being brought into question by men who call themselves Christian theologians, and who claim for themselves the right to instruct the youth of the Christian church. When these men call themselves “Christian atheists” and expect to be taken seriously, we might well wonder how long it will be before men begin to speak of square circles and of triangular squares. The Bible named these men for what they are when it said long ago, “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” If men object to this characterization as a failure on our part to take seriously and to listen respectfully to the pronouncements of learned and scholarly men, we will remember that two thousand years ago the apostle Paul already spoke of those who become fools while professing to be wise. If anyone doubts the relevance of Scripture to our own time, let him ponder for just a few moments on these two assertions of the Holy Bible made two and three thousand years ago.

These so-called “death-of-God” theologians are saying nothing new that has not been said many times before this in many different ways. But what does seem to be new is that these things are being said in the Christian church by men who claim a right to be heard as spokesmen for the Christian religion. The men who denied the existence of God in days gone by did not pretend to be theologians nor did they call themselves followers of Christ. They were at least honest enough to stand before the world for what they were—enemies of the Christian faith and blasphemers of God’s holy name.

We ask in amazement how this development could possibly have come about. How are we to account for the toleration which these ancient heresies and blasphemies have found in churches which still call themselves by the name of Christ? Why has not the Christian church openly, unreservedly, and unanimously repudiated these men for what they are? Why are Christian laymen willing to allow the gifts that they bring out of love for the Lord Jesus to be used to pay the salaries of such men? Why is it that men who call themselves Lutheran pastors are not averse to describing the “death-of-God” theologians as earnest men who have something constructive to say?

The answer to all these questions may escape us for a long time until we realize that in our day something is happening to the Christian church and also to the Lutheran church that will eventually make it impossible for members of the church to stand fast against any heresy. The Bible, which is the only standard by which the church can judge the truth and validity of any teaching, is rapidly being shunted aside as nothing more than a compilation of ancient beliefs, many of which are no longer acceptable to modern, educated men. About fifteen years ago, a writer in a Protestant church paper called for a rewriting and a reediting of the Bible, which would leave out much that is written there; and he predicted that unless this was done, “the younger generation of educated people, the college boys and girls of yesterday and today, will continue to scoff at the vast amount of matter which is still presented as inspired of God, but which insults their reason.”

Once this view of the Bible is adopted, all the doctrines of the church will become private and personal opinions, and unless we want to claim omniscience for ourselves, we shall have to

grant to all others in the church and outside the church the right to believe and to teach whatever they please. Thus the chaos and the confusion of the days of the judges of Israel, when every one did that which was right in his own eyes, will once more settle over the church. In many respects these days are already upon us.

Sad to say, this confusion has also crept into the Lutheran church and even into sections of Lutheranism which once stood firm in their testimony to the truth of God's holy Word. When we in the Wisconsin Synod see how those who once stood shoulder to shoulder with us in the defense and proclamation of the Gospel have turned aside from their former position, we need to take warning from their example and remember the words of the apostle, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." What has happened to others can also happen to us.

Conscious of this danger, you have elected to study the *Doctrine of the Word* at this convention. The topic was intentionally kept broad so that we might select and emphasize some of the aspects of this doctrine with which we must be acquainted if we are to understand the issues that we face as we confront the modern attacks on Scripture. While it is important and basic that we should turn again and again to Holy Writ and listen to its testimony concerning itself, so that through the study of the Word the Holy Spirit may strengthen us in his own doctrine of the Word, yet at this time we do not intend to review the teaching of the Bible in this subject. Rather, I would invite you to examine some of the attacks being made on this doctrine by men who call themselves Lutheran.

#### **THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS.**

It may be well to begin with an argument that is often heard in Lutheran circles in our time. It is said that in this matter there is room for doctrinal disagreement in the Lutheran church because there is no article in the Lutheran confessions, which deals specifically with this subject.

While it is true that there is no article dealing with the doctrine of the Word in the Lutheran confessions, yet the conclusion that therefore there need be no agreement between Lutherans on this teaching displays a Romanizing tendency unworthy of any Lutheran. It implies that no teaching of the Scripture is binding on a Lutheran until the church has ratified and validated such a Scriptural doctrine by including it as an article in the Lutheran confessions. But the Lutheran confessions themselves assert, "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel" (SA II, ii, 15).

Even more vicious is another conclusion that has been drawn from the fact that the confessions contain no "specific" article on Scripture. It has been said by men in high position in the Lutheran church that professors and pastors and teachers who deny the verbal inspiration of the Bible and the inerrancy of God's holy Word cannot be subjected to church discipline because they have not violated their confessional oath. That such an argument sets aside the Lutheran principle of *Sola Scriptura* does not need to be pointed out.

However, it would seem to be necessary to point out that while the Lutheran confessions do not contain an article dealing with the doctrine of the Word, they everywhere take the verbal inspiration of the Bible as well as its inerrancy for granted. We do not have time at this convention to consider this point in detail, but a very brief glance at Luther's Small Catechism should suffice to make this clear. Luther says, for example, concerning the benefits 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 he goes on to ask, "Which are such words and promises of God?" It is evident that Luther here considers the words and promises found in the Bible to be the words and promises of God, and whoever agrees with Luther here has already in principle accepted the whole doctrine of verbal inspiration. It is

obvious also that Luther assumes that if these are the words and promises of God, then we are to believe them with all confidence, for, as he says so often in his other writings, God does not lie.

It is very likely no accident, in these days when the doctrine of verbal inspiration is under fire in every major Lutheran church body beside our own, that the new translation of Luther's Small Catechism, produced under the auspices of the old National Lutheran Council and the Board for Parish Education of the Missouri Synod, changes Luther's phrase, "as the words and promises of God declare," to "what God has promised," and the question, "Which are such words and promises of God?" is changed to "What has God promised?" Tappert, in his new translation of the Book of Concord, had already prepared the way for this beclouding of this teaching of the confessions, that the words and promises of the Bible are the words and promises of God, by rendering this question, "What is this Word and promise of God?" even though Luther had written, "*Welches sind solche Worte und Verheissungen Gottes?*" These mistranslations, by their very departure from the actual wording of the original text are not only an instance of slovenly scholarship but they help to underscore what the confessions actually say, and they serve as a barometer by which we can to a certain extent measure the difference in spirit between the ancient confessors of the Lutheran faith and their modern translators.

As we said, we cannot at this time make an exhaustive study of the testimony of the confessions to the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. Anyone who knows only the Small Catechism of Luther knows that the great reformer bases his whole presentation on the premise that the words of the Bible are completely reliable. Can anyone imagine that a man, who did not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, would have written in the sixth chief part, "He that believes *these words* has what they say and express, namely the forgiveness of sins?" We will cite only one other remark of his. In the Large Catechism he spoke of the threats found in the Bible against sin, and he wrote, "Let everyone be careful not to regard this as if it were spoken by man." (Tappert, p. 370).

#### **VERBAL INSPIRATION AND THE OTHER DOCTRINES OF THE BIBLE**

This, after all, is exactly what we are aiming for with our doctrine of verbal inspiration. We do not want men to regard the teachings of the Bible as something that was spoken by men or invented by men. We want men to listen to this book as though God himself were speaking to them with his own voice. We want them to believe what this book says as if God himself were visibly present to pronounce these words in their ears. And for ourselves, we ought to listen to the threats of the law which are written in this book with fearful and trembling hearts, knowing that it is the wrath and the anger of the living God that is being expressed in these words. By the same token, we ought to hear the promises of the Gospel with confident joy, because we know that it is God himself who says through John the Baptist that Jesus is the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world; it is God himself who tells us through the apostle John that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin; and if our sinful heart still is not sure of forgiveness, we will remind ourselves that God is greater than our heart and knows all things, and he says to us all, as he once said to the man sick of the palsy, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee."

This is the focal point toward which the teaching of the verbal inspiration of the Bible must always be aimed. This doctrine should help us to lead lives of confident, victorious faith. Standing by itself, divorced from the other teachings of the Bible, this doctrine does not show us the way to heaven, but joined to the other doctrines of Holy Writ, it strengthens, enforces, and validates every one of them. When the doctrine of verbal inspiration is attacked and rejected, the very foundation of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is undermined and weakened, for we still

sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so." When modern Lutheran theologians tell us that the spirit of this little song, which we learned in our childhood, is not Lutheran but fundamentalist, because the conviction that Jesus loved us must be worked by the Holy Spirit and not by the dead words of a human book, we might ask them whether they were in earnest when, at their ordination, they knelt before the Lord's altar and took their confessional oath, which bound them to the principle enunciated in the Smalcald Articles, "Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil," and "God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word." (S.A. III, viii, 10.3)

One of the basic and distinctive doctrines of Lutheranism is the teaching that faith is created and sustained by the Gospel, written in the Scriptures, preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in the absolution, or made visible in the sacraments. Whatever of faith or Christian assurance or confidence is found in the heart of a child of God has been placed there by the Holy Spirit indeed, but only through the means of grace. Men learn to say with conviction that Jesus loves them only because the Holy Spirit tells them this in a hundred ways in the words and promises of God found in the Bible. May God therefore grant that from childhood to old age we may continue to sing with childlike confidence, "Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so." Only when the doctrine of verbal inspiration has helped us to become more certain of the love of Jesus and more convinced that for the sake of Christ God has fully forgiven us all our sins, only then has it found its proper place in our theology and in our hearts.

#### **THE INSPIRED WORD AS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH.**

The inspired Word is not only the means by which our faith is engendered, it is also the basis on which our faith rests. Modern neo-orthodox Lutherans seek with might and main to combat the notion that the Bible is the foundation of our faith. "Our faith must be in Christ" they say, "and not in a book." This pious-sounding but utterly false antithesis is a classic example illustrating Shakespeare's assertion that often times to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence. Not one of us will deny that our faith must be in Christ. He is the chief cornerstone on which we build.

But from this it does not follow that our faith should not be in a book. Far from being Lutheran, the argument that our faith should not be in a book because it ought to be in Christ is an echo of the old Baptist argument that we ought not to say that baptism saves anyone because it is only Jesus who can save. When we build on Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone, we build also on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Faith in Christ is always faith in the words and promises of God. The two simply cannot be separated. When St. Paul described the faith of Abraham, he wrote, "Being not weak in faith he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb; he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully persuaded that what he had promised, he was able also to perform" (Ro 4:19-21). Abraham's faith was the certainty of his heart that God's promise would be fulfilled. And this is true not only of Abraham. When the Bible, in Hebrews 11, calls the roll of the great heroes of faith from Old Testament times, it describes them as men who "all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb 11:13).

The teaching that faith, true faith, Christian faith is the conviction that the promise of God will come true is so self-evident to those whose thinking is guided by the Scriptures that it may seem almost a waste of time to emphasize this once more and surely there ought to be no dispute here between men who on the day of their ordination took an oath to let all their teaching

conform to the Lutheran confessions. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession says that when we speak of justifying faith we must always keep three things in mind: 1) the promise, 2) the fact that the promise is free, and 3) the merits of Christ (Apology IV, 53). Faith in the true sense, says the Apology further, is that which accepts the promise (IV, 113). Where there is no promise, there can be no faith. The confessions say, "Amid the terrors of sin, a human being must have a very definite Word of God to learn to know God's will, namely, that he is no longer angry. (Apology IV, 262).

These promises of God, which we accept by faith, are given to us in the words of the Bible. Whatever weakens the validity of those words and casts doubt upon their truth will eventually also weaken and perhaps even destroy the confidence that we have in the promises of God on which our hopes for salvation rest. "The mouth of the Lord has spoken it" is still the footing of the Christian's firm and unwavering confidence. And if men say that many of the things that are written in the Bible have nothing whatever to do with the promises of salvation, we can only call their attention to the words of our Lord, "If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" (Jn 3:12). When Christian pastors and teachers argue about whether the world was really created in six days, or whether Balaam's ass really spoke, or whether the sun really stood still for Joshua, or whether Moses really wrote the first five books of the Bible, there are always those, and some of them are well-meaning souls, who imagine that these things have no relation to our salvation and that those who dispute about them are guilty of theological hairsplitting. We are told that men can deny all these things and still believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior.

We will admit that this may be so, but if a man believes that Jesus is his Savior and at the same time denies the truth of any statement of the Holy Bible, he is in the position of a man who is sitting on a branch which he is sawing off behind him. Perhaps it is true that he will not be dashed to the ground immediately but, very likely the only thing that will keep him from being killed is that he is called to supper before he finishes the job. The man who denies the truth of anything in the Scriptures, whatever it may be, is biting the hand that feeds him; he is attacking the very thing by which his faith is brought into existence, for the Bible says that we are born again by the Word of God (1 Pe 1:23) and that faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Ro 17); he is undermining the very foundation on which his faith rests, for the Bible says that he who does not believe the record that God gave of his Son makes God a liar (1 John 5:10); he is vitiating the very thing by which his faith is nourished and strengthened, since the Bible says that the Word of God worketh effectually also in those who believe (1 Th 2:13).

Because of this, modern, neo-orthodox theologians, who deny the verbal inspiration, the inerrancy, and the infallibility of the Scriptures, have no real foundation left for their faith. One of the most famous of this new breed was fond of describing faith as a "leap into the dark" and "stepping out over the abyss." These have become classic terms in which neo-orthodoxy speaks of faith. Several years ago a conservative Lutheran professor in another Synod was engaged in a controversy with some of the other members of the religion department at the school at which he taught. He defended the truth and the inerrancy of the Bible as best he could, while his Colleagues asserted, in the words of George Gershwin, that the things that you're li'ble to read in the Bible just ain't necessarily so. After the department meeting, one of the men with whom he had been disputing came to comfort him and said, "Look, why are you so worried that everything will go to pieces if the Bible is not true. Even if the Bible is full of errors, God will never let you down." To a man of this stripe we might well say, "How do you know that God

will never let me down? Did God tell you this? Or did you dream it? If I can't believe what Peter says and what Paul says, why should I believe what you say?"

These men, who describe faith as a leap into the dark and a stepping out over the abyss, often claim that this is the true Lutheran position and they cite a favorite saying of Luther to prove their contention. They say that Luther often said that when we are confronted by all sorts of occasions and temptations to doubt, we should just close our eyes and believe. At first blush, it may seem that these words, which Luther does use often, would harmonize very well with the concept of faith as a leap into the dark. But what they conveniently forget or intentionally fail to tell you is that many times when Luther says that we should close our eyes, he tells us also that we should open our ears and listen to what God says in his holy Word. Far from being a stepping out over the abyss of darkness, Christian faith for Luther was a moving from the quicksand of human reason and human wisdom and human opinion to the firm foundation of God's infallible Word of which he said often that it has never erred. Luther's thought is a long, long way from Emil Brunner's contention that the church invented the concept of a divinely inspired and infallible Bible in order to find the certainty that she was never intended to have. (Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1946, p.8).

Jesus made faith in him dependent upon faith in his Word. He told the Jews, "Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?" (John 5:46,47). In his high-priestly prayer, he said to his heavenly Father, "Neither pray I for these alone but for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (Jn 17:20). In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, he put these words into the mouth of Abraham, "They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them.... If they believe not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:29,31).

St. Paul also recognized this very clearly. He knew that the only way to find Christ is through the Word. In Romans 10, he writes, "The righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above;), or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead). But what saith it? The Word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart, that is, the word of faith which we preach" (Ro 10:6-8). In other words, Paul tells us very plainly that it is impossible for a man to find Christ anywhere but in the word that he and the other apostles and the prophets had preached and which is written in the Holy Scriptures for our learning and salvation.

### **CHRIST AND THE INSPIRED WORD.**

Moreover, when men say that our faith must be in the living Christ and not in the dead words of a book, they not only undermine the foundation of our faith, but they rob us of Christ himself. What happens to Christ under these circumstances is perhaps best made clear by a concrete example. A number of years ago, your essayist took a course called "The Philosophy and the Psychology of Religion" at one of the outstanding universities of the middle west. The instructor of the course was an ordained Baptist minister, who had been brought up in a home in which Jesus was honored as the Son of God and the Savior from sin, but he had the reputation of being an outright unbeliever. In one of the very first class sessions, however, he stated, "The resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith." I am sure that most of us would consider those words to be a clear confession of faith in the Savior. Listen to the words again. "The resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith." Is this not exactly what St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain"?

In the days that followed he repeated these words many times, "The resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith." And then one day one of the students in the class asked a question about the resurrection of Jesus. The instructor, instead of answering the question, asked the students, "What do you mean by the resurrection of Jesus?" and the student replied, "Well, you said that the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith," to which the instructor answered in a rough tone of voice, "Why don't you keep your ears open. I did not say resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is dead and stayed dead. I said that the resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith."

When he was then asked to explain the difference between the "resurrection of Jesus" and the "resurrection of Christ" he did so in words that went something like this: "Jesus was a great man. He was perhaps the greatest man who had ever lived up to that time. He was the 'highest product of evolution to date'. He had especially one great characteristic. He was able to take men of diverse backgrounds and from different cultural levels of society and weld them into a community of individuals who lost sight of their own wants and desires for the common good of all. Though their previous training had not been directed to this end, yet under the guidance of Jesus they developed a true spirit of community, so that they thought as one, they felt as one, they acted as one. This spirit of community, of togetherness, of all for one and one for all, is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a person, but this attitude which was created by the presence of Jesus. Jesus, however, was so far ahead of his time that he incurred the wrath of the ecclesiastical authorities and was put to death on the cross. The disciples were dismayed and the close fellowship that Jesus had caused to exist between them began to break apart. Judas was gone and so there were only eleven left. Thomas began to absent himself from the group and so only ten remained in fellowship on that first Easter Sunday. If this situation had developed along these lines without interruption, the group would very soon have broken into twelve individuals unconcerned with each other. But on the third day after the crucifixion of Christ, or rather of Jesus, a wonderful thing happened. The disciples noticed that the old feeling of togetherness was back. It was risen from the dead, and whether you call it the risen Christ or the Holy Spirit makes no difference because it is the same thing.

"Now the disciples were unsophisticated and uneducated men, who lived in a prescientific age, and they reacted in the terms of the age in which they lived. They had always before this time associated this feeling of community with the presence of Jesus. When they now experienced the presence of this spirit in their midst, they naturally assumed that Jesus must be with them in the room even though the doors were locked and no one could come in. In fact, some of them were so thoroughly convinced that Jesus was present that they even thought they saw him, and so they began to speak of Jesus as though he had risen from the dead; but it was not really Jesus, it was Christ that was alive in their hearts. It is this risen Christ, the Holy Spirit, that still draws people together today in community and fellowship, and perhaps the greatest example of his living presence among us is the building of the World Council of Churches, and the United Nations."

It is obvious that when these men speak of Christ and of the resurrection of Christ they have emptied those terms almost completely of their traditional content and they do not mean by those terms what we mean by them. Any resemblance between their Christ and our Christ is purely coincidental. And what is the basic difference between them? The one is the Christ of the Bible, the other a false Christ spun out of human imagination. The Christ in whom we believe is the Christ who is described in the words of the Book, the Christ whose coming is foretold in the Old Testament and whose advent is recorded in the New. He is the Christ who was called the

Seed of the woman in the Garden of Eden and the Seed of Abraham in a later prophecy. He is the Christ who was born of a virgin. He is the Christ who changed water into wine, who cleansed the lepers and healed the sick with a word, who made the lame to walk, the blind to see, the dumb to speak and the deaf to hear. He is the Christ who fed five thousand men with five loaves and two fishes, who walked on the water, who stilled the storm and raised the dead. He is the Christ who rose from the dead himself in a bodily, physical resurrection, who showed himself alive by many infallible proofs, who ascended into heaven and will someday come again to judge the world in righteousness. This is our Christ.

But the Christ of modern unbelief, which parades before the world in the guise of Christian theology, is a different Christ. When modern, neo-orthodox theologians deny the verbal and plenary interpretation of the Bible and assert that it is full of errors, or at least mistaken notions, they soon feel free also to reconstruct Christ to suit themselves. Some of the things that the Bible tells us about Christ they will accept, others they feel free to reject, and still others they reinterpret and demythologize to their hearts content. Every one is free to conceive of Christ in such a way that he meets his existential needs of the moment. The process of decay usually starts gradually, but picks up speed as it goes along. It usually begins with some such question as to the virgin birth and men begin to say that while they themselves still accept the virgin birth, yet they believe that we ought to be willing to recognize as brethren men who find it difficult to confess the historical truth of the virgin birth. Unlike the liberalism of a generation ago, which rejected the virgin birth out of hand because it was miraculous, these theologians are perfectly willing to accept the miraculous if they consider it to be necessary for the Christian faith and they ask whether the virgin birth is necessary in this sense. While the end result of the process will be exactly what it was in the old liberalism, yet their whole approach to the questions at hand is different. "Suppose that those parts of the Bible which tell us the story of the birth of the Savior are not historically true," they will say, "Will that really make any difference to our faith in Christ?" Soon thereafter they will say, as your essayist heard a Lutheran pastor who soon after that became an instructor at a Lutheran seminary, say, "Jesus was a human being. He could make mistakes." And then men begin to assert that the only historical parts of the creed are the words, "He was crucified, dead, and buried." And if you then argue that if this is true, then the words "on the third day He rose again" do not record a historical event and nothing really happened on the third day, they will assert that this is not a proper conclusion, for something did happen on the third day. The account of what happened as we find it in the Gospels, is so confused that we may no longer be able to determine just exactly what it was that happened, but surely all Christians believe in the resurrection of Christ, even though some of them may believe that the bones of Jesus may still be moldering in some unknown Palestinian grave.

This is what happens when men want to believe in Christ and at the same time be free to reject the plain statements of Holy Scripture. They may very well end with a confession of faith such as that which is used in the Community Church of, a city in northern Illinois, in which the members of the congregation confess, "I believe in God, the Father, all-loving; Maker of all that is; and in Jesus Christ, loveliest of his many sons, our friend; who was born of the Mother, Mary; moved by the Spirit of God; suffered under the systems of men; was crucified, and died for the sake of truth and right. Yet he lives again in the lives made beautiful by his truth, ascending into the hearts of men, and working at the right hand of God, the Father, who works all that is good. I believe in the Holy Spirit of truth, beauty, and goodness; the ministering Christian Church; the communion and cooperation of good men with God and with each other; the destruction of sin

by righteousness; the worth and beauty of human personality; and the everlastingness of the life that is in God. Amen.”

The Christ in whom our modern neo-orthodox theologians profess to believe is a Christ who may not have been born of a virgin, who very likely did not turn water into wine nor feed 5000 with five loaves and two fishes, a Christ who probably did no miracles in the commonly accepted sense of that term, and the ashes of whose body may still be lying in some cave in the land of Israel. He is not the Christ of the Bible. What shall we say when ecumenically inclined Lutheran leaders ask us to recognize these men as followers of the same Lord whom we want to follow and believers in the same Christ in whom we believe? How can honest men ask us to be partners in such deception?

### **THE INSPIRED WORD AND DIVINE REVELATION.**

When we protest in this way, we are told that we do not understand the whole matter of divine revelation. Revelation, they say, is not propositional, that is, the revelation of God does not come to us in words and sentences. When God reveals himself to us, they tell us, he does not give us all sorts of information about himself, but he gives himself to us in personal communion. Because of this, believing in Christ does not mean to believe all sorts of statements about him, but to give ourselves to him in earnest commitment.

But when we take up our Bibles we find that it is full of statements about God, and statements about men, and statements about their relationship with one another. The Bible tells us who God is, what kind of God he is, and what he has done for our salvation. No one will deny that this is so, but neo-orthodoxy asks us to recognize that the Bible is not itself the revelation of God. It is rather a human record of God’s revelation of himself. It is the record of how God in the past gave himself to men in personal communion and how men responded to this self-giving on the part of God.

According to this view the revelation of God takes place through mighty acts in which God breaks through the silence of eternity into history to make himself known to men. Stated abstractly in this way this statement does not sound particularly dangerous—it might even be understood correctly, for we do say, for example, that the Lord Jesus through his deeds reveals himself to us as the Redeemer of the world. But again the similarity is more apparent than real, for when we say this, we always assume that in the Bible we have a divinely inspired account of these deeds, which is historically true and inerrant in all its details. But just this assumption is challenged in the neo-orthodox view of the Bible.

What neo-orthodoxy really means by the assertion that the Bible is not the revelation but only the record of and witness to the revelation will become clear if we look at a concrete example of the application of this principle. It has often been said that the proponents of neo-orthodoxy that the greatest “word” of God in the Old Testament, that is, the greatest of the mighty acts of God by which he made himself known to the children of Israel in Old Testament times was the exodus from Egypt. A closer look at the neo-orthodox view of the exodus should be fruitful for our purposes.

According to this view, the children of Israel were really delivered from Egypt by God’s intervention in history. However, the Biblical account is not historical, that is, it is not a factual record of what transpired. The plagues of Egypt were all natural events. Some of the neo-orthodox theologians would object to the use of the word “natural” in this connection, but at least they would agree that the plagues were all events for which there would be a scientific explanation. When the waters of the Nile turned to blood, this very likely was the result of extraordinary erosion of red soil in the upper reaches of the river, or perhaps it was due to the

rapid growth of some polluting organism. All the other plagues were just such natural events. There was nothing miraculous in them, at least, not in the sense in which the church has traditionally used the word "miraculous." When the children of Israel finally left and came to the Red Sea, they experienced some difficulty in crossing, but there was no parting of the waters such as that which is described in the book of Exodus, which, by the way, was not written by Moses but was composed in its present form only after the Babylonian Captivity, centuries after the time of Moses. The children of Israel very likely were able to escape from Pharaoh's pursuing hosts because Moses knew a way through the swamps. The soldiers of Pharaoh had no such expert leadership, and as a result they lost their way and very likely some of them perished in the quicksands of the swamps. When the Israelites reached the desert, the manna, too, was no miraculous gift from heaven, but very likely nothing more than the sweet exudation of several types of plant lice which is still produced in the Sinaitic peninsula and to this day used as food by the Arabs of the region. This manna is produced only for a few weeks every year, but probably saved the Israelites from starvation at some crucial moment. The proponents of this view hold that in the account of Exodus the number of Israelites leaving Egypt is grossly exaggerated. There were very likely no more than 6000 people in all, rather than the 600,000 men of the Biblical record. As proof for this number, Wright, for example, uses the argument that the manna that is produced in the Sinaitic peninsula today could provide food for no more than about 6000 people. The scholars who take this position are very careful (they would consider this to be the scholarly approach) not to say that this reconstruction of the events is what actually occurred. They are only sure and only agreed that it is closer to the factual truth of the matter than the Biblical account, that the Biblical account is not factually correct, and they will say that we can no longer, with the evidence at our disposal at present, be sure of what really took place.

But we do know that the exodus made a tremendous impression on the children of Israel. Somehow they recognized that the hand of God was involved in this event. And as the years went by, the story of the exodus was told and retold and passed down from one generation to another. And as the story was retold again and again, it gradually took on a prophetic cast, and supernatural details were added to make it clear that the hand of God had been experienced by the fleeing Israelites. God had made himself known to them in personal communion, and because they were a primitive, unsophisticated, prescientific people, they knew of no other way to pass on this experience of God's revelation than by inventing the miraculous details that we find today in the Biblical story of the exodus.

When they invented and added these supernatural features to the story, they were not guilty of lying or of falsifying the record. They were concerned about a far greater and more important truth than historical or factual correctness. They wanted to leave to their children a record of God's revelation of himself. If they had given their children only a factually exact record of what really happened, the children might never have seen these events as a mighty act of God. For the same reason, certain features of the story are exaggerated. If the account says that there were 600,000 men, when we know very well that there were perhaps no more than 6000 in all, we must not charge the Bible with error. The purpose of the Bible is to glorify God and not to give us factual information, and to deliver 600,000 is certainly a greater and more glorious act than to deliver 6000; to say that God fed 600,000 with manna every day for forty years is surely far more conducive to faith and trust in God than to say that 6000 happened to find a supply of food sufficient for a few weeks. This is what makes the Bible such a wonderful

book, they say. It has an added dimension that one does not find in secular histories with all their concern for factual and exact information.

Because the Biblical account contains these great insights into the actual meaning of the events, it can still serve not only as a record of revelation today, but it is also for us a medium or means of revelation, through which God makes himself known to us. If men learn from these accounts of God's concern and care for his people, that God cares for them and is concerned about them, is this not much more important than the correct census figure of the group that left Egypt? This is the way in which the Bible can be made relevant to modern men. By insisting that the miracles of the Bible were actual events and that the Biblical stories are factual accounts, we only alienate modern, sophisticated, scientifically trained men from the church. But if we give up this approach to Scripture and teach them that the Biblical record is not factual but has a dimension of depth in which we are to find great spiritual truth taught in a mythical and legendary manner, we will help modern man to find God in personal communion through the Bible.

This new manner of interpreting the Bible usually begins, at least in churches with a conservative history, with the Old Testament record, and often men seem reluctant to apply the same principles of interpretation to the account of the Savior's life and work as we have it in the four Gospels. But once this approach to Scripture has been adopted, it is like entering one of our modern high-speed limited access highways. Once you are on the freeway, there is no turning around and there may be no exit for twenty-four miles. And it will not be long before the New Testament will receive the same treatment as the Old Testament.

But once again, the New Testament stories are not attacked frontally. From that direction the seam in the sheep's clothing is far too evident. Instead the accounts are treated with what appears to be the utmost reverence. But the story is so subtly retold that those who are not well acquainted with the actual words of the Gospel may not even know that they have been sold a bill of goods.

A case in point is the modern treatment of the feeding of the 5000. As in the case of the exodus, it is assumed that in a general way the account reflects an actual event in the life of Christ. A large crowd of people came to hear him preach. Many of these people had brought along their lunch, but they kept it hidden in their knapsacks and travelling bags, because in their selfishness they were afraid that others had not brought lunch, and if they began to eat, etiquette, would compel them to share what they had with those who had brought nothing. But suddenly Jesus announced to the assembled crowd that there was a little boy present who was offering to share his lunch with them. This announcement made the adults so ashamed of their selfishness that they opened their knapsacks and also offered to share their food; and, lo and behold, there was more than enough for all. Now comes the relevant application: "What a wonderful person Jesus is. He can move people to share their lunch!" And a still more relevant application: "We should all support the United Nations because this organization, like Jesus, seeks to persuade nations with surplus food to share it with those who go hungry." When you are well-versed in what is going on in theological circles today, you can understand what a Lutheran preacher of the neo-orthodox school is driving at when he says in a sermon on this pericope, "I am not much concerned with whether Jesus fed 5000 men with five loaves and two fishes two thousand years ago. What is important is that we believe that Jesus still feeds us today."

Who would dare to attack such a man as an enemy of the Gospel? Is it not important that we believe that our daily bread comes to us as a gift of our heavenly Father's love? But for saving faith it is much more important to know that Jesus actually performed a miracle, for by

the mighty act of feeding the 5000 he reveals himself to us as the Creator God who is almighty and whose suffering and death on Calvary is sufficient to pay for all our sins just because it is the suffering and death of God. We are concerned therefore about whether or not Jesus actually two thousand years ago fed five thousand men with five loaves and two fishes, and it seems strange that those who say that God reveals himself through mighty acts should reduce those mighty acts of God to nothing more than a psychological influence that causes men to share their lunch.

It is obvious, too, why these men, who take this attitude toward the Biblical record, do not like the doctrine of verbal inspiration. It cramps their style to be bound by the idea that the words of the Bible are truly the words of God through which God reveals himself to us rather than the words of primitive men in which they record their own views and recollections concerning the revelations which had come to them. The Bible says that Jesus took the five loaves and the two fishes and blessed them and gave them to the disciples to set before the multitude. If those words are God's own account of what happened, then who would dare to say that these people shared the lunch that they had brought to the picnic? The Bible says that a strong east wind blew all night and parted the waters of the Red Sea to permit the children of Israel to pass over on dry land between two walls of water. If these words are God's own words, recording the event, then who would dare to say that Moses found a way for Israel through the swamp? The Bible says that all the water in every vessel of wood and every vessel of stone turned to blood in the land of Egypt. If this is God's own record of what happened, then who would dare to say that the water turned red in the bowls because of erosion in the upper reaches of the Nile?

#### **THE DEFINITION OF THE TERM "WORD OF GOD."**

When we see what is happening to Christian theology in our time, we ought to realize what is really at stake in the modern attacks which are being made on the Word of God also in the seminaries of the Lutheran Church by Lutheran teachers. It is well for us to remember that these attacks on the Word are being made in the name of Christ by men who claim to be followers of the Lord Jesus. The greatest enemies of the Word of God are not found in the ranks of atheistic communion, from which may God preserve us, but they are found in the colleges and the seminaries of the Christian Church. We ought not to imagine that this is new or strange, however. The men who howled for the crucifixion of our Savior were the leaders of the church to which had been committed the oracles of God the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament.

It is important, therefore, that we should learn to recognize the wolf under the sheep's clothing. The men who are grubbing away at the foundations in Lutheranism are using the old terminology but with new definitions. They will say that the Bible is inerrant, but they will define an error as an intentional mistake made in order to deceive. Since the mistakes in the Bible were either not intentional or were not made to deceive us but to lead us into a deeper understanding of the truth, we can say that the Bible with all its mistakes is still without error. And when they speak of the Bible as the Word of God, there are many who are deceived and imagine that they are still saying what we have always said. But if we would only listen carefully, we would soon realize that this is not so.

In 1959 a book was published by what had been up to that time a conservative Lutheran publishing house, in which one of the leading Lutheran theologians of our time wrote, "Most of the time Luther, like the Scriptures themselves, did not mean the Scriptures when he spoke about the 'Word of God.' But sometimes he did, and a consideration of the Word of God as Scripture therefore belongs in any study of this component in Luther's work as an expositor. The Scriptures were the 'Word of God' in a derivative sense for Luther—derivation from the

historical sense of Word as deed and from the basic sense of Word as proclamation. As the record of the deeds of God, which were the Word of God, the Scriptures participated in the nature of that which they recorded.” (J. Pelikan, *Luther as Expositor*, St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1959, p. 67.)

We shall not comment on the scholarship of a man who can write that kind of balderdash. Any person of normal intelligence who has read Luther ought to know better. What we are interested in here, however, is the use of the term “the Word of God.” To say that the Scriptures are the Word of God only in a derivative sense, that the Scriptures are the Word of God because, they are a record of God’s deeds which are the real Word of God, is to deny the basic Scriptural meaning of the term “Word of God.”

A line of argument which is very similar to that of the author just cited sets forth the idea that the primary meaning of the term “the Word of God” is Christ, and that the Scriptures are called the Word of God only because they tell us about Christ and when they tell us about Christ. While it is true that there are times when the Bible uses the term “the Word of God” as a name for Christ, yet this is done only in a few passages and Luther is absolutely right when he says in his comments on the first chapter of John’s Gospel that when John used the term “Word” as a name for Christ, he was using “odd and obscure expressions which lack clarity in any language.” (*LW*, 22, 115)

While it is also true that the term “Word of God” does not always mean the same thing in the Bible, for sometimes it designates Christ, and at other times it denotes the word that God speaks in the silence of eternity but by which all things are created and preserved and governed, yet ordinarily when the Bible speaks of the Word of God it denotes what God says when He speaks to us in the words of the Bible. Primarily the Word of God is the message which, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, was spoken and preached by the apostles and prophets and which, under that same inspiration, was written down in this book, which we call the Word of God not in any derived or in any figurative sense but literally. When men therefore say, “When we call the Bible the Word of God we do not mean that it consists of so many words of God,” we could not disagree more wholeheartedly. This is exactly what we mean by this term.

One of the great and basic differences between orthodox Lutheranism and neo-orthodoxy might be said to be this that to orthodox Lutheranism the Word of God is primarily what God says to us in the words of the Bible, and to neo-orthodoxy the term “the Word of God refers most exactly to what God does to reveal himself, to the mighty acts of God which have been interpreted for us in the human fallible record of that revelation as we find it in the Bible, expressed in more or less mythological terms.

When one understands this difference, one can also understand why neo-orthodox theologians say so often that the greatest word of God in the Old Testament is the exodus from Egypt. Surely that sort of claim sounds strange to those whose thinking is conditioned by what the Bible says. I am sure that there is not one of us here who would not agree that the greatest word of God in the Old Testament is the promise of the Savior. St. Peter says, “To him give all the prophets witness.”

Since, for neo-orthodoxy, God reveals himself in mighty acts, whose meaning becomes clear as men with “prophetic insight” meditate on them, the revelation in Christ could not really take place until after God had acted in the birth and death of Jesus of Nazareth. To find the Word of God in the Old Testament, we must pay attention to the events that are recorded and interpreted in the Old Testament. Something has to happen before it can be a revelation of God

to men. It sometimes seems that neo-orthodox teachers are for this reason more inclined to speak of Christ as an event rather than as a person.

Because of this, also, neo-orthodox spokesmen have a tendency to deny the direct and predictive Messianic character of Old Testament passages. The more radical of them will actually say, "There are no Messianic prophecies in the traditional sense in the Old Testament. Messianism is an intertestamental development, and the idea of a divine Messiah, who would come to save his people, became a commonly accepted Jewish view only after the Old Testament canon was complete. The Old Testament believers knew nothing at all about a Messiah as the Savior from sin. When Jesus said, 'Moses wrote of me' and 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day', he was simply echoing the common view of the time, which he, as a child of his time, subject to all the misconceptions of his age, also shared. He was a human being and could make mistakes. The Old Testament believers were not saved by their faith in Christ but by a simple faith in a forgiving God." And when they are asked whether this God forgave sins without any reference to the vicarious atonement of Jesus, they will answer, "Why not?" Understanding this, we can also see why some modern Lutherans are beginning to say that faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation today and that it would be a travesty to try to convert a pious Jew to Christianity.

Not all neo-orthodox theologians are willing to go this far. They content themselves, for the present, with attacking the Messianic character of the passages which they still let their children recite in the Christmas Eve service as prophecies of the coming of Jesus. The words of God to the serpent in the garden of are nothing more than a mythical expression setting forth the natural antipathy of men for snakes. The prophecy concerning the virgin birth refers only to a child that was born in the days of Isaiah to a young married woman, very likely Isaiah's wife. The words of the Psalmist, "Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive," is not a prophecy of the ascension of Jesus of Nazareth but part of a poem written to celebrate the enthronement of one of the kings of Judah and expressing the hope that this king would be victorious in all his battles. The words of Zechariah, "Behold, thy king cometh unto thee" refer to the entry of Alexander the Great into Jerusalem and nothing more. Thus we see in this development another example of how Christ himself is lost when the orthodox, conservative, Biblical, and traditionally Lutheran doctrine of the Word of God is surrendered. If we should ever lose our conviction that God himself speaks to us in the Bible, if we should ever surrender our Lutheran doctrine of the verbal, plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, it will not be long before we lose Christ, our only Hope and our only Savior.

#### **CONCLUSION.**

It would perhaps have been more profitable for you and it would certainly have been more enjoyable for your essayist if we had reviewed what the Bible has to say about itself. After all, the best defense of Scripture is its proclamation. If we had done this, your essayist would only have repeated much of what he wrote in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* of January and April, 1964. However, it is important that we should understand the enemy against whom we are engaged and that we should be aware of what is really involved in the controversies about the Word which are raging in the Lutheran churches of America and of the whole, world. Thank God that by the grace of God alone our Wisconsin Synod still stands firm and united on this old foundation. Pray God that it may always be so.

God's Word is our great heritage  
And shall be ours forever;  
To spread its light from age to age

Shall be our chief endeavor.  
Through life it guides our way,  
In death it is our stay.  
Lord, grant while worlds endure,  
We keep its teachings pure  
Throughout all generations. Amen.