

The State Of The Church In Respect To The Doctrine Of Scripture

[The Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture and Antitheses, River Forest, Illinois]

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This paper is to deal specifically with the attacks, which in our day have been made, against the inerrancy and the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. Now the best defense of Scripture is Scripture itself, and it would appear that we ought to begin with a restatement of what the Holy Bible has to say about its own nature and origin. However, since all those who are full registrants at this free conference have declared their wholehearted and honest acceptance of the *Brief Statement*, it would seem unnecessary to treat the Biblical doctrine of inspiration on the basis of the voluminous Biblical evidence that can be adduced in its support, even though such a review would be beneficial to our faith and would surely strengthen us for the battle that lies before us. If we had the time and if it did not seem to be a matter of bringing beer to Milwaukee, nothing would please me more than to be permitted, at this time and in this place, the privilege of laying before this body once more the Scriptural testimony to the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Word of God, the Holy Bible.

One thing is certain. If we believe and teach that the Bible is inerrant and verbally inspired, we should do this on the basis of what the Scriptures themselves teach. It will not do to say that I trust the Scriptures in the same way in which I trust my wife. While we may applaud the man who speaks this way and be glad for his testimony to the inerrancy of the Bible, yet we ought not to be blind to the fact that this is the sort of enthusiasm, Schwaermerei, that is the prelude to Pietism. If this is the ground on which we stand, we hold a fortress that is impossible to defend. We must take our position on the simple words of Holy Writ, and nowhere else.

Twenty-six years ago the writer of this paper took a course called, simply, "Inspiration" under Dr. P. E. Kretzmann at our seminary in St. Louis. At that time Dr. Kretzmann told his class that in the next twenty-five years the doctrine of the plenary, verbal inspiration of the Bible would become a battlefield for the Lutheran Church of America. In our naivete we students did not doubt that PEK was a good prophet, but we felt that the issue would be a clear-cut struggle between the ULC and the Synodical Conference. Who of us would have believed at that time that in the Missouri Synod itself voices would be raised against this Biblical teaching? As we contemplate the issues confronting us today many of us, I am sure, wonder often how such a thing as this could have happened so quickly to a church which had learned its theology from a Walther and a Pieper and an Engelder.

Well, now we are in the battle and it behooves us, with all meekness, with fear and trembling and with an earnest prayer to the Lord of the Church, to conduct this struggle with all our might, knowing that it is only the grace and mercy of God that can restore to our church what we are in the process of losing. To this end may God bless this paper and this whole conference, so that our children and grandchildren may enjoy the spiritual blessings that were ours in the Missouri Synod in days gone by.

YEA, HATH GOD SAID?

The present subtle assaults on the doctrine of the Word may appear to us as something new. There can be no doubt that the inerrancy and inspiration of the Holy Scriptures were the common doctrines of the church throughout the centuries of its existence. St. Augustine confessed it; the

Roman Church gave at least lip service to it; Erasmus did not doubt it; and after the Reformation, Luther, Calvin, and the pope would have had little difficulty in drawing up a document on inspiration and inerrancy which would have been more satisfactory than the pronouncements of many a Lutheran seminary faculty today.

The opponents of the Scriptural doctrine in our midst, on the other hand, seek to make it appear that the doctrine of inerrancy is a new heresy and to this end they call attention to the fact that the word “inerrancy” was not applied to the Scriptures until the nineteenth century. In the April 4 issue of the *Lutheran Witness*, which certainly represents a new “low” in Missouri Synod history, one of the professors at our seminary in St. Louis makes much of the argument that the word “inerrancy” is not found in the Bible. By such strife about words, however, they only reveal their own lack of scholarship, if not their downright dishonesty. Technically they are correct, but what they fail to tell us is that the word inerrancy, in the sense of “not subject to error,” was not in use until the nineteenth century. We could hardly expect the term to be used in connection with Holy Scripture during the centuries when the word was not current in English speech. Moreover, even if the word was not used, these men surely know that the thought, which it conveys, was clearly expressed long before the nineteenth century. We will say nothing here of what the Scriptures themselves assert, but we would call attention only to the fact that Augustine wrote of the Scriptures, “I do not doubt that their authors made no mistake.” (Letter 82). Erasmus said in his *Enchiridion* that although men may lie and err, the Scripture “neither deceives nor is deceived” and that it is “not blemished by any blot of error.” (*Advocates of Reform*, pp.303.305.) And you all know that Luther said that the Holy Scriptures have never erred.

But though we who defend the inerrancy of Scriptures are charged with a “new heresy,” because we are using a relatively new word, we will not raise a like charge against those who oppose this doctrine. Rather we ought to see the objections, which are raised in our day against the truth of Scriptures as an expression of the doubt and denial implicit in the question by which our first parents were led astray in the garden. Usually when men today raise the question, “In what sense are the Scriptures the Word of God?” they are in reality asking again, “Yea, hath God said?”

The obvious reply to that question, “In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?” is to say that the Bible is the Word of God because the words spoken in the Bible are the words of God. The Bible is the Word of God because what is said in the Bible is said by God. When, therefore, men feel the need to ask, their testimony to Scriptures with the introductory phrase, “in this sense,” as is done also in the St. Louis faculty statement on the form and function of Scripture, they make themselves suspect. One wonders why the whole faculty cannot speak as simply and as clearly as Dr. Preus does in the same issue of the *Witness*. There is no lack of clarity in his words; but in the faculty statement the trumpet gives an uncertain sound. We will not condemn everything in the faculty statement, but just here, it seems to me, is the place to take note of the danger that lurks in the argument that is put forth in defense of the critics of Biblical inerrancy. We are often told that there is much truth in what they say. I would rather be inclined to describe their treatises, in the words of Goethe, as “*Viel Irrtum und ein Fuenkchen Wahrheit*,” “Much error and a particle of truth.” But, be that as it may, it is to be noted that much of what the devil said to Eve in the Garden of Eden was also true. Their eyes *were* opened and they *did* know good from evil, just as the devil promised. The Savior has told us that false prophets come in sheep’s clothing and even Shakespeare knew that

“oftentimes to win us to our harm
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray us

In deepest consequence.”

God grant that we be not deceived, for our first parents lost the Law as a consequence of their unbelief, but if we succumb to this temptation that comes to us, it will cost us the Gospel; and if the Gospel is lost there will remain for us only a certain fearful looking unto judgment.

WHAT THINK YE OF CHRIST?

We are often told the stakes in this conflict are not so high, however. What does it matter, men say, if we lose an infallible book and an inerrant Bible? After all, they continue, our faith must be in a person and not in a book, and even if large portions of the book are taken from us by the processes of “modern” and “scientific” criticism, the “Christ of faith” will still be left to us. But the real Christ, the Christ in whom you and I believe, cannot be divorced from the book in such cavalier fashion; and eventually the question, “What do you say about the book?” brings us face to face with that other question which goes to the very heart of our faith, “What think ye of Christ?”

Well, what do we think of Christ? Shall we believe what he says? He gives all the weight of his authority to the Holy Bible when he tells us that “the Scriptures cannot be broken”, and in the context, as you all know, the whole of the argument turns on one single word of the Old Testament.

But our opponents tell us that we are here again operating with an atomistic use of Scripture and tearing a statement out of its context. A careful reading of the text, they say, will make it clear that the Savior was using an *ad hominem* argument, that is, his words here express not his opinion but the inadequate views of rabbinic Judaism. It is true that the words quoted occur in a conditional sentence, but it is also true that the verb is in the indicative mood, which ought to be evidence enough to convince any Greek student that the Savior assumes that his words “The Scripture cannot be broken!” are a statement of fact.

If this does not convince those who insist on casting doubt on the absolute truth of Scripture, we would ask *them* to take a look at the context. There is nothing in the immediate context that would in any way indicate that the Savior is merely using as the major premise of his argument a rabbinically attested axiom, which he himself did not accept. Moreover, the whole context of the four Gospels ought to persuade anyone who reads them fairly and honestly that the Savior did ascribe to the Scriptures the truth and inerrancy that these words assign to it. Three times he met the temptations of the devil with his simple but majestic, “It is written”. In his controversies with the religious leaders of the Jews he constantly appealed to the Scriptures. Heaven and earth would pass away, he said, but his words and the words of the Old Testament would stand forever. “The Scriptures must be fulfilled”, this was his oft-reiterated assertion, and when he said it, he did not mean that vaguely generalized spiritual truths symbolized by “the myths” of the Old Testament would remain eternally valid, but that actual, historical, real events would take place because they had been specifically foretold in the words of the prophets. And just in this connection we might remember that he said on the Day of Judgment he would be ashamed of those who were ashamed of his words.

What think ye of Christ? He said. “Thy Word is truth”. Did he himself speak the truth? And if we are not willing to believe what he says about the Scriptures, why should we believe what he says about himself, about sin, and redemption, and salvation? And even if men are not consistent and do believe what he says about these matters, the fact still remains that by viewing his attitude toward the written Word of God as inadequate, they claim the right to sit in judgment on the Judge of all the earth.

“But”, the opponents say. “We are not sitting in judgment on Christ. Rather we ask only the right to examine the documents scientifically and critically to determine who Christ is and what he

has actually said and done. The documents are human documents, subject to error, and an adequate determination of what is factually correct and what is not factually correct requires the best of reverent scholarship". So we are back once more to "Yea, hath God said?" And plainly visible behind the facade of reverence is the old desire to be as gods, knowing good and evil.

But once more we are confronted also with the question, "What think ye of Christ?" If we cannot rely on the documents when they tell us what Jesus said, how shall we trust them when they tell us what Jesus did? When men cut themselves free from the Scriptures, the Christ they believe in becomes a product of their own imagination, and any resemblance between Jesus of Nazareth who meets us in the pages of Holy Writ and the "Christ of faith" becomes purely coincidental. The moment that we give to human scholarship the right to determine what Jesus said and what he did not say, what Jesus did and what he did not do, what his acts mean and what they do not mean, we have entered upon a course which, if it is logically and consistently traveled, can lead only to spiritual shipwreck. We will finally have a Christ who is not much different from the Christ who is confessed in the creed of the Community Church of Glenview, Illinois, which says, "I believe in Jesus Christ, loveliest of his many sons. our Friend, who was born of the mother Mary, suffered under the systems of men and was crucified for the sake of truth and right. Yet he lives again in lives made beautiful by his truth. ascending into the hearts of men," and so on. It is this same approach to Scripture that made it possible for Dean Loomer at the University of Chicago to tell his class in the Philosophy of Religion "The resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Jesus is dead and stayed dead, but Christ is risen." It does not take a great deal of intellectual acuteness to see that the two questions, "Yea, hath God said?" and "What think ye of Christ?" are inextricably interwoven with each other and a wrong answer to the one will, in the end, always bring with it a wrong answer to the other. Either Jesus is what the Bible says he is, or he is someone whom we can never know. Either God reveals himself to us in the Bible, or he does not reveal himself to us at all as the Redeemer of the world, and if we lose the inerrancy of Scripture, we will also eventually lose the infallible Christ.

He is already being lost. It has become the fashion in our day to draw a parallel between Christ as a divine-human person and the Bible as a divine-human book, and the opponents of the inerrancy of Scripture do not tire of accusing those who hold that there are no errors in the Bible of Docetic tendencies. But in doing so, they only succeed in revealing themselves as being in the grip of Nestorian heresy and they show that they understand neither the doctrine of the communication of attributes nor the doctrine of original sin.

Those who will not admit that there are errors in the Bible, they say, will not let the Bible be a human book. They ridicule an inerrant Bible as one that would have had to fall fully written from heaven. Since the book is human, said the *Lutheran Quarterly* a decade ago, "it must contain inaccuracies, mistakes, and contradictions." This, too, is an old heresy, which every Lutheran rejected on the day of his ordination. The first article of the Formula of Concord lays down the Biblical principle that original sin is not part of the essence of man, that is, a person does not need to be a sinner in order to be a human being, and that while it may be true that "to err is human," one can no more say "to be human is to err" than one can say "to be a quadruped is to be a horse."

If the argument that since the Bible is a human book it must contain errors is to stand, it will not be long until men will say that since Jesus is a true human being he must be a sinner. We are already close to this in the Lutheran Church. Far and wide in our church, we hear voices raised against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and here and there also against the Messianic character of Old Testament prophecy, and when we call the attention of those who hold such views to the words of our Lord "Moses wrote of me," we are likely to hear the blasphemous rejoinder,

"Well what of it? Jesus was a human being. He could make mistakes." Shall we keep on asking them "What think ye of Christ?"

We said that such people are in the grip of Nestorianism. The Nestorians would not let one and the same person be both God and man. Rather they held that in the human Jesus dwelt the divine. So these modern opponents of Scripture will not let the Biblical statements be both human and divine at the same time. They tell us that what men say here and what God says in this book is not really the same thing; the divine meaning is hidden within and beneath the inadequate human words. It is the old heresy that the finite is not capable of the infinite. The sharp distinction, therefore, that they draw between the Word of God and the words of men written in the Bible, which prompts them to ask again and again, "In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?" and to answer that the Scriptures are the Word of God only in a derivative sense (Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, p. 67.) is an echo of the Nestorianism which divides the person of Christ into two parts and finally says that God did not die on Calvary. There may be more connection than we realize between the modern denials of the inerrancy of Scripture in our midst and the motives that prompted us twenty years ago to change "O sorrow dread! Our God is dead," to "O sorrow dread! God's Son is dead."

WHAT IS TRUTH?

So it is that one error always brings other errors with it. One lie always requires another lie to make it plausible. And the denial of the inerrancy of Scripture makes men fall into one error after another, and when they are finally caught in the web of their own weaving, they seek to escape by destroying language itself so that it becomes impossible for men to communicate with each other because of a confusion of tongues worse confounded than that which took place at Babel. There the languages were changed so that men could no longer understand each other's tongue, but the confusion that has taken place today is such that we can no longer understand our own language when it is used by our theologians.

One of the most dangerous developments here in the theology of our day is the attack on the very meaning of the word "truth". "What is truth?" they ask with Pilate and the answer they give is just as cynical as his question. The truth, we are told, is not to be found in propositional statements. Truth they say, is a quality to be found in persons and is not to be confused with factual precision nor to be sought in correspondence with reality

Our Lutheran theologians did not discover this new wisdom on their own. They are, in their desire to be recognized by the world and in the circles of unbelieving scholarship, simply echoing what they have heard others say. When I attended the University of Chicago about ten years ago, one of the men on the faculty assured me that he accepted the Bible as the truth, and when I reminded him that he had told us in class that Moses had perhaps never lived and that the stories of Abraham were legends, he said, "But, of course. When I say that the Bible is the truth I do not mean that it is historically true. I mean that it is true to life."

Neo-orthodoxy has been telling us for years that God can make his truth known to us through human untruths. What this means, of course, is that we should preach the Bible in all its glorious falsehood. It is this sort of violence done to language that makes it possible for a professor at our seminary to say that Matthew was guilty of a factual mistake in placing the ascension into Galilee, but that we should not accuse him of error because he had theological purpose in locating it there instead of in Judea. The same man said that the number of Israelites given in Exodus as leaving Egypt was "beefed up," that is, deliberately exaggerated, presumably to make the act of God in delivering his people so much more glorious. In other words, one may lie and tell the truth

at the same time, if only one's purpose in recounting events without factual precision is to glorify God or help one's fellowmen.

It is this same approach to truth which makes it possible for Bishop Pike to say that he never denied the *doctrine* of the virgin birth while he clearly and unequivocally denied the historicity of that event. One should preach the virgin birth, these modern deniers of the virgin birth say, because it is so indicative of the holiness and uniqueness of Jesus and the purity of what he taught, but at the same time we should not insist that it ever really happened. One wonders if these men know what honesty is. A word like "mythological" may confuse the issue but it will not hide the basic dishonesty of this approach.

When we have become used to this sort of thing, we begin to understand how it is possible for one of our professors to say that he never denied the *doctrine* of the inerrancy of the Scripture even though he asserted that factual mistakes were made in the Bible. The *doctrine* of inerrancy should be taught, he is now willing to concede, but nowhere and in no way has he retracted, by one single word, at least in the public Synodical releases in this matter, any of the charges of factual inaccuracy which he had made against the Holy Bible. When men no longer operate with the definition of truth which says that the truth is that which corresponds to reality, then we can expect no truth to issue from their lips, and all their expressed yearning for truth manifests only delight in deception. All we can say of their truth is that this truth is certainly stranger than the facts.

And what they have done with the word "truth", they have done also with the word "inspiration". There are few theologians who will not speak gladly and willingly of the inspiration of the Holy Bible, and in the Missouri Synod there is no one, so far as I know, who is willing to attack the doctrine of verbal inspiration directly and openly. All the words are inspired, they say. But at the same time we are expected to grant that these inspired words do not mean what they say. What they say is not factually correct, but they are God's words nevertheless. How it is possible for them to speak in this way becomes clear when we read in the *Cresset* of Valparaiso University, over the signature of one of our pastors, "These are not God's words because God gives them to men. They are God's words because men give them to God.... Word by word, just as they stand, the words are God's because he has called them so". (*Cresset*, Feb. 1961, XXIV, 4, p.6.). How this agrees with the Scriptural doctrine I need not point out to you, but to those who are easily misled, this sheep's clothing can be very deceiving. It is no wonder that we no longer know what truth is. It is evident we scarcely know any more what honesty is.

When we have said all this, we must, of course, keep in mind that this does not solve every problem that we meet in our study of the Bible. We do not deny that there is such a thing as figurative language, but this does not give any man the right to read everything in the Bible as though it were figurative. If this were the case we should begin by apologizing to the Zwinglians and the Calvinists for our persistent adherence to the Real Presence. The statement "Herod is a fox" is a Biblical statement, and the man who would use such a statement to prove that the Bible is not factually correct is downright vicious. The Bible would be wrong and untrue if this statement did not correspond to reality, that is, if Herod had not been a sly and deceitful person but an open, honest, straightforward man. A little honest good-will here will soon place this problem of literal and figurative language into proper perspective.

HOW READEST THOU?

The neo-orthodox definition of truth makes it possible for men to read anything they please into the Scriptures and to read out of it anything that does not suit them. One of the great contributions that Martin Luther made was this that he called the church away from the allegorical method of Bible interpretation back to the historico-grammatical exegesis of Scripture. Erasmus

said that he preferred those commentators who departed farthest from the literal sense, and in this he was a spokesman for the theologians of his time. But Luther laid down that rule that "*die natuerliche Sprache soll Frau Kaiserin sein*," "the natural speech shall be empress", in other words, the Scriptures shall be understood to say what the words mean. Luther does not say that everything should be read literally, but "naturally", as it would ordinarily be understood.

But our neo-Lutherans, with their mytho-poetical interpretation of Scripture, are seeking to persuade us that what the words say is relatively unimportant so long as we learn the truth that the Holy Spirit wants us to see behind the words. So far we in the Lutheran Church are being told only that the first chapters of Genesis should be read in this way. The story of creation, as told in Genesis 1, so they say, must not be read as though any of these things happened just in this way. All we are to learn from this is the majestic truth that behind the world as we see it today there is a creative personality. This is all that the Holy Spirit wants us to believe, so we are told. Adam and Eve must not be looked upon as historical personages, but the story of their fall only serves to point out to us the reality of human sin. The scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages, too, felt that the story of the Fall was much too simple for learned men to believe and so they said that Adam is man's reason and Eve is all his lower faculties and the Fall teaches us that rational man is always led astray when he begins to listen to his lower instincts. And our modern scholars, in their blind pride, have the gall to assure us that their way of reading Scripture will appeal to the twentieth century scholar and serve to make the Bible relevant to our time. If we follow them we shall only drift back once more into the theological method of the Middle Ages that made the Bible a closed book; and where all this will end when the method is applied to the New Testament is not hard to predict. If the words no longer mean what they say, and if we must look behind the words for the great truth hidden there, every man may with equal right find there exactly what he pleases.

This method, it is true, will remove the offense of the cross and the foolishness of the Gospel and do much to make the message of the Church appealing to the modern man, but the Church will then no longer function as God's messenger to the world, but it will become instead the vacillating voice of human philosophical thought, and it will discover in Scripture just exactly what it intends to find. As long as it still clings blindly to some of the great truths received by tradition from the fathers, it will continue to find some of these things in the Bible, but when the theological capital that this generation has inherited is spent, we will have nothing left to give to our children. If we keep on sowing this wind much longer, we shall certainly reap the whirlwind of apostasy and unbelief. A word of caution, however, is in place. We, who wish to stand foursquare for the doctrine of the truth and inerrancy of Scripture and who are justly displeased with those who want to say less than the Scriptures say, must also be careful not to read into the Scriptures more than they assert; nor ought we to make the mistake of claiming inerrancy for every interpretation of which we happen to be persuaded. If a man will admit, for example, that the sun really did stand still over Gibeon and that it did not go down for a whole day, I will be satisfied with his loyalty to Scripture. The mechanics of the miracle are not explained in the Biblical text. The explanation of the miracle ought not to degenerate into a debate between the followers of Ptolemy and the Copernicans. According to modern views, neither one happens to be right but even so, perhaps the movement of the heavenly bodies has nothing to do with the miracle at all. The same phenomenon might have been accomplished by a fraction of the light rays from the sun. We simply do not know how it was done and the method of the miracle ought not to become a matter for debate.

And we ought to keep in mind, too, that verbal inspiration does not mean that we have a complete and verbatim report of what was said, nor does it mean that a story can be told only in one set of words. All that verbal inspiration means is that we have a report of the events of sacred

history in words taught by the Holy Ghost who is well able to quote what men said correctly even without using any of their own exact words and who may know a thousand correct ways to report the same event.

Nor does the inerrancy of Scriptures mean that there are no difficulties in the Bible or that we can solve every apparent contradiction. But once we have stood at Calvary's cross and have seen how wonderfully God there reconciled law and gospel, which, as Luther says, are more contradictory than contradictions, we need not be disturbed if we do not know all of the answers. If we see something wrong in Scripture, it may just be possible that we need new glasses, and we ought always to give the Holy Ghost credit for being more learned than we are.

CONCLUSION

There is a great deal more that needs to be said about this subject of the truth the inerrancy, and the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. We might take note of the attacks that are made on this doctrine on the basis of the variant readings in the manuscripts and the variations in the translations, which we have. We might consider the philosophical appeals that are made to the dignity and the freedom of man against the truth and accuracy of the Holy Scriptures. If there is anything that demonstrates the perversity of the arguments against the inerrancy of Scripture it is the charge that such a view of Scriptures destroys the freedom of man and turns him into a machine. And we ought to recognize that when men accuse us of a mechanical theory of inspiration this is exactly what they have in mind. They do not mean that we teach that there are no variations in the style of the Biblical books nor that we hold that the writers were mere automata. But they say that if these men could not err then they were no longer free personalities. One might just as well say that the holy angels lost their freedom when they were confirmed in their bliss, or that God is not free because he cannot lie.

But while we cannot treat all of the negative arguments in detail and do not have the time here to treat the positive Biblical evidence for the truth, the inspiration, and the inerrancy of Scripture, yet it should be clear to all of us that the situation in Synod is such that we who love our church and who love the truth must act firmly and courageously under God to do what we can to stem the tide of unbelief which threatens to engulf us. God be merciful to us. Amen