

The Problem of Scriptural Proof

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When your President and your Committee requested a paper for this convention, it was with the understanding that it should have some bearing on the problems that have been confronting our Synod during recent years, particularly since the last meeting of our general body at Saginaw. When this assignment was accepted, and it became necessary for your essayist to formulate the topic for the convention program, it was with this same thought in mind. While it is therefore my purpose to discuss the problem of Scriptural proof, it is not with the intention of covering the entire field suggested by this wording, to state all the principles, to explore all the applications, etc. The intention is rather to discuss this question of Scriptural proof in so far as it has become a problem in the area of our immediate fellowship, the constituent synods of the Synodical Conference.

It may sound like treason to say this of a body that has had such a splendid tradition of simple and united acceptance of the Word, a body that offers such an inspiring example of the power which this Word has exercised to bring men of widely different antecedents to a point where they stood shoulder to shoulder in their valiant defense of a common confessional stand. And yet it has quite obviously become a problem. In presenting our position on issues in controversy between our sister synod, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and ourselves, we have sincerely tried to base our case on Scripture. The 1951 Convention of our Synod, held in this very auditorium, is the outstanding example of this procedure. The Scripture that was quoted was pertinent and ample.

Nevertheless this effort did not meet with the recognition one might have expected. Answering the action of the Norwegian Synod of last summer, and anticipating a similar action on our part, Dr. J. W. Behnken, President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, stated with regard to both: “It is one thing to make charges; it is another thing to furnish convincing evidence from the Word of God. *The latter definitely is lacking.*” (*Lutheran Witness*, Aug. 2, 1955, p. 6.) After our Saginaw Convention he wrote as follows: “Undoubtedly our Synod will consider these charges on the basis of God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions and will express itself at the 1956 convention. However, we sincerely hope that the charges which are against us will be properly documented, and we will earnestly request *that clear, pertinent passages of Holy Writ be furnished as proof.*” (*Lutheran Witness*, Sept. 13, p. 6.) Making due allowance in behalf of the venerable President for the emotional reaction which would naturally follow upon the severe criticism voiced by two sister synods, we still find ourselves asking: Were the Scripture passages which we adduced over a period of years so unclear, so irrelevant, that they failed to prove the points that we were trying to make? A searching inquiry is certainly in order, even though much of the previous tension may have been removed from our mutual relations by the conciliatory nature of the Missouri reply.¹ If we have failed in this elementary phase of intersynodical discussion, we have much to learn, and a conscientious review of this whole matter of Scriptural proof must follow. If on the other hand our proof has been valid, any doubts as to this should be speedily removed, lest they grow into a doubting of the Word itself.

Not only the past, however, but also the future invites, yes, demands such a study. According to present indications, a resumption of discussions between the synods is more than likely. The conciliatory action of Missouri has made it possible. A corresponding reaction by our Synod will make it a reality. How shall we conduct ourselves under these new and different conditions? Our flesh is quick to suggest the policy of reasonable compromise, of give and take. To take a little here, to give a little there! This seems to be the essence of sound common sense, the sensible solution to all our troubles—until we remember that these are matters in

¹ As quoted in our report of the St. Paul Convention of the LC-MS, particularly Res. 15 of Com. 3. See our October issue, p. 294f.

which the Word of God is involved, the Word which stands as an Absolute, far beyond such petty policies of “give and take.” Let us review our proof. If it was faulty, if our points are not truly Scripture-based, then let us yield them quickly, ungrudgingly, without asking anything in return. On the other hand, if our review of our procedure shows that our claims, our arguments, yes, our charges *are* based on the Word of God, then let us stand our ground with boldness and conviction, sure of the fact that our God can and will use such testimony effectively to serve His wonderful and gracious purpose.

With this thought in mind, let us address ourselves to our study of

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I shall today try to discuss some particular aspects of this problem. Tomorrow we shall, God willing, see how we have met them.

I

We are inclined to approach those situations that call for the use of Scriptural proof with cheerful optimism, concerned only about having the necessary passages at hand, confident in the strength of our position. That is as it should be, if our position is truly the Scriptural one. For we have those wonderful assurances concerning the Word, namely that it is clear and true, a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Ps 119:105), and that it is quick, and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12). All this seems to promise speedy success. And yet this optimism needs to be tempered with some sober realism. There was certainly nothing lacking in the manner in which our Lord presented Himself to His people. By training and experience that group of elders of Israel, which was called the Chief Council, was certainly well qualified to understand. And yet it was only one of them who came to say to the Lord: “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (John 3:2). And even this man was quick to voice the objections of his natural mind when confronted with God’s Word, spoken by Him who in fact *was* the Word. For when Jesus had said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,” the objection followed almost automatically: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” There the obstacle emerges: the perverse natural mind of man, this natural reason with which also Christians must contend as long as they live, this natural reason, this flesh which makes us so awkward and bungling in the use of the blessed Word, and which so often makes it so hard for us to accept that Word. This is the reason why, especially in times of controversy, he who bears the burden of proof bears a burden indeed.

All this might seem most discouraging, were it not for the fact that this same Nicodemus eventually, and in spite of the most trying circumstances, became a confessed follower of that Lord who had just been crucified. Nor was he to be the only one. The Book of Acts speaks of “a great company of the priests” which subsequently came to faith (ch. 6:7). Not all of them, indeed. An Annas, a Caiaphas, and others were not to be convinced even by the Resurrection itself. Yet God’s Spirit works His miracles of grace—where and when *He* will. We have no reason to revise our method, to give up our procedure, to renounce our faith in the clearness and truth as well as in the power of God’s Word. But we must learn also in this particular respect to rest in the Lord, to wait patiently for Him.

Patience is indeed required, in great measure. There are probably few if any pastors here who have not at some time in their dealings with lodge members been faced with a stubborn and defiant challenge, where such a person says, “Pastor, show me one passage of the Bible which in plain words says that it is wrong to belong to a lodge, and I’ll quit mine tomorrow!” This is usually said with a certain cock-sureness, for he knows as well as you do that there is no passage in Scripture that says this *in so many words*. The Bible does not mention the lodge, just as it does not mention Scouting, chaplaincies, and similar issues. The Bible does not use the word “Pope” in its prophetic description of the Anti-Christ, just as little as it mentioned the name “Jesus of Nazareth” in its prophecies of the true Christ, the Messiah who was to come. The Bible does not use the words “Trinity” or

“triune” in explaining why it speaks of one God, and yet attributes Godhead to three individual persons. That is simply one aspect of the problem of Scriptural proof.

Yet we do not give up in our admonition of lodge members for lack of such a specific word. We show them what Scripture says about the lost condition of all men, and that there is salvation in no one but Christ alone. We show them that all prayer is vain if it is not in His Name. We tell them of the Lord’s word: “No one cometh to the Father but by me.” We warn of the denial of Christ that is involved when one joins in acts of ritual and prayer which are based on an exclusion of the Savior’s name, or which distort the Biblical picture of the Redeemer in those cases where a measure of lip-service is at times rendered to the name of Christ. And should he come with the same demand for a Scripture passage that clearly mentions the lodge, we try the foregoing procedure again and again if necessary. Perhaps nothing will ever come of it. But perhaps we may some day witness a change of heart, a sinner coming to repentance. Perhaps we may hear the same man who before had adhered so stubbornly to his demand for a clear word of Scripture now make the frank admission that I was once privileged to hear: “Pastor, I knew all the time that I was wrong. I just couldn’t bring myself to admit it.” Yes, the fact that a specific issue may not be mentioned in Scripture in so many words does constitute a problem. But it does not mean that Scripture has not the answer for it. Scripture offers proof, full and adequate proof. The difficulty lies entirely in the perversity of our human reason. And this the power of the Word of God can and does overcome, where and when He wills it.

Another problem, of quite a different nature, is caused by the fact that many of the principles with which we must operate are so broad and general that they are derived from many different passages of Scripture, each of which contributes something that is essential to the overall picture but none of which covers the entire matter. Take the principle of church fellowship as an example. One looks in vain for a few specific passages that would set forth in a brief, cut-and-dried formulation all the things that God’s Word has to say about this wonderful subject. Here is manifested the divine wisdom of that great Teacher whom the Lord promised to His disciples (John 14:26—He shall teach you all things), the Comforter who would *guide* them into all truth (John 16:13). We learn these things step by step: First how through faith the Holy Spirit unites us with our God and Savior; then through Him with all other believers in the invisible bond of the *Una Sancta*; then how through confession of this faith He enables fellow Christians to recognize each other—as individuals and in groups, as Christian congregations; how He leads them to edify and strengthen each other by mutual confession of faith in their acts of worship as well as their manner of Christian living; how in all of these manifestations there is one single fellowship which is at work, the fellowship of a common faith. And even as this is the single factor that makes this fellowship a reality, so there is one thing that disrupts it, namely the injection of error, of disobedience to the Word upon which this faith must rest. Where that arises, where that cannot be removed by all the efforts of Christian patience and love, there the basis for Christian fellowship no longer exists, and Scripture itself gives the directive of separation. Since all of these statements are based on clear words of Scripture, we speak of them collectively as “the Scriptural doctrine of church fellowship.”

The very attempt to present this principle in the form of a brief survey shows how great the entire subject really is. And closer scrutiny shows that it is all of one piece, like the seamless robe of Christ. There is no patchwork in its make-up. The blessed work of the Holy Spirit, who without any merit or worthiness on our part has brought us to saving faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, to full assurance of our personal possession of the salvation that He has won for us—that is the very warp and woof of its fabric.

It should surely not be hard to see what havoc is wrought when this great unit of the truth concerning the fellowship of believers is divided and subdivided into countless fractions, and each of these is then treated as an isolated subject, for separate treatment and consideration. Yet, isn’t that just what happens when the concept of fellowship is divided up into the categories of Altar, Pulpit, and Prayer-fellowship? That these are separate and distinct manifestations of fellowship, we will indeed grant. Yet it is one and the same fellowship that is being manifested: the fellowship of faith. That under certain conditions these three categories may have to be named very specifically, for the sake of completeness, we will also grant. It was wise foresight to do that in the first Synodical Conference Resolution that dealt with these issues, in 1940. But when this distinction is made for the sake of allowing the one form under conditions which admittedly would prohibit the others, then the very fabric

of which we spoke before is being rent and torn, confusion enters where simple truth should reign, and the problem of bringing Scriptural proof is made many times more difficult than before. But again the fault does not lie with the Word, but in the wayward mind of men.

We have the same situation when a heavy emphasis is placed on the first word in the term “*church fellowship*,” as though men may allow themselves greater freedom of action in this matter as individuals than if their church is involved. We have it again when it is argued that *occasional* joint prayer does not necessarily constitute prayer fellowship. But this particular point need be carried no farther. The important thing is that, while recognizing difficulties, we do not because of them falter in our purpose, nor lose our confidence in the power which this Word has, also under such trying conditions. Let us continue in that Word, also in our faithful use of it, knowing that our Lord will use also our halting efforts, where and as it pleases Him.

Still another aspect of the problem comes from controversies that sometimes arise between church bodies which are in basic agreement concerning the major part of some particular doctrine, but which differ in regard to some specific point pertaining to it. The difficulty increases when the significance of this point is traceable to the part that it played in an earlier controversy, involving an entirely different set of participants, so that the history of the matter plays a vital part. We believe that this is precisely the situation with regard to the Common Confession, which was presented as a settlement of issues that had caused a major split in the Synodical Conference over 70 years ago. As soon as this is claimed, the historical element is injected, and dare not be disregarded. We could and can agree quickly with Missouri that forgiveness of sins and objective justification are fully synonymous terms, and that the one implies everything that is meant by the other. We cannot agree, however, that therefore a correct statement concerning *forgiveness of sins* appearing in a doctrinal formulation accepted by the American Lutheran Church means that the old controversy concerning *objective justification* has been settled. For ALC theology has always been careful to reject the equating of these two terms. A closer study of the history of this particular controversy reveals that nothing had been settled by the acceptance of the Common Confession, at least as far as this particular point is concerned.

It becomes evident that under these conditions Scriptural proof brought against the error itself will not convince those who do not admit the historical existence of the error, or who fail to recognize the various forms under which it has appeared. We accept a further burden of proof in this matter. But it must also be recognized how much this adds to the problem.

Another difficult decision must be made in this respect. Shall one, in a matter where only some particular point is involved, treat the entire doctrine, including the furnishing of Scriptural proof, item by item, or would it be better to confine oneself to the affected area? In the first case we may create the impression of not being able to stick to the point at issue. In the other case one may be charged with omitting some vital matters. There is no simple answer to this question. Circumstances may sometimes indicate the one procedure, sometimes the other. Each has its advantages; each can become a case of further misunderstanding. In our next section I shall try to show how we have sought to meet this particular problem.

The underlying thought in all the foregoing is that in discussions, particularly of a controversial nature, there are certain factors, inherent in our human nature as well as in the situation itself, which present real and substantial difficulties when we undertake to bring Scriptural proof. This is said not with the intent of discouraging further effort, if further opportunity should offer. Nor is it said for the sake of making excuses for past failures. The purpose is rather to lead to a better understanding of the true scope of the problem, something that should be helpful in coping with future difficulties of a similar nature. But especially it should help us to understand how it can happen that after our prolonged and patient efforts in this direction, we are still being met with statements like the ones quoted in the introduction to this paper.

Before leaving this subject we should not fail to mention one more factor, which, next to a final hardening of hearts, may well prove to be the most serious obstacle to the bringing of Scriptural proof. This is the fact that, perhaps without being aware of it, Christians are nevertheless often influenced by other interests than by the Word of God alone. Whether these be the material things of life, the desire for the approval of the world, the natural attachments of friendship and family ties, or the instinctive urge to conform to one's environment; whether they be interests of ambition or expediency, personal antagonism, or any of the other

considerations which arise out of the flesh, they can create a condition where the eye of our spiritual discernment is no longer single in its attention to the Word of God, but where confusion and havoc is created by the attempt to focus on two things at the same time. If we note this condition in others, great patience and understanding are certainly required, to say nothing of an even greater measure of skill, if we are to cope with the delicate task of removing this mote from the brother's eye. But the greatest need is that of relentless self-scrutiny, to remove the beam from our own eye, lest our failure in this respect make us unfit for the rescue role that we are attempting, and thus become the decisive cause for the failure of an undertaking that is not only permissible in itself, but the fulfillment of a solemn duty before God. God, make us fit and faithful for this task!

II

In a corner of our Seminary library you will find a simple wall-motto, unpretentiously framed, but expressing a truth of surpassing importance. It is in the Latin of St. Augustine, and reads as follows:

In ecclesia non valet: Hoc ego dico, hoc tu dicis, hoc ille dicit, SED HAEC DICIT DOMINUS.

Rather freely translated, this means: "What counts in the Church is not: This is what I say; this is what you say; this is what some other man says. The one thing that counts in the Church is: This is what the Lord says."

It is with this thought in mind that our Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union, facing the question whether we have actually supported our various contentions with adequate proof from Scripture, authorized the preparation of an "*Index of Scripture Passages Concerning the Intersynodical Issues.*" The purpose was to gather from the various official documents and publications that have played a part in our intersynodical discussions a list of the passages that were employed, to arrange them according to the several topics treated, and thus to make them accessible for all interested parties, particularly for our own pastors and teachers. This Index can then also serve as a basis for the second part of this paper, where we now are to speak of *how this problem of Scriptural Proof has been met by our Synod.*

A quick survey shows approximately 300 references. Making full allowance for the frequency with which certain key passages are quoted, this would still show that our Scripture proof was surely not lacking in quantity. The question of quality is, of course, an entirely different matter. That will depend on how well the passages were chosen, whether they are pertinent to the question under discussion, whether they have been correctly interpreted, both as to text and context, and the like. In short, it is a matter of individual scrutiny and study.

In order to facilitate such study, the passages have been grouped according to the general subject and the various topic headings, and are followed by a reference to the document where the particular passage was employed, plus a brief indication of the bearing it has on the matter under discussion.

The first general subject is of course the Common Confession, presented in 1950 as a document of agreement between the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church, and declared a settlement of certain controversies concerning the doctrines of Election, Conversion, Justification, Inspiration, the Church, and the Last Things (including the Doctrine of the Anti-Christ). The first group of passages serves to emphasize the *sola gratia* of the Reformation, particularly in its relation to the *sola fide*. This reminder that our salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, is offered not only for its bearing on the first doctrines named, Election, Conversion, and Justification, but is for the sake of a standing orientation for our entire theology. It is therefore basic that we are reminded by Rom. 4:16 of the relationship of faith and grace, namely that our salvation is not of the Law, but of faith, that it might be by grace. So likewise the Ephesians passages (2:8 and 1:4f) which trace it all to the "good pleasure of His will," and to the glory and riches of His grace, the very things that make our salvation in this manner a gift of God, and exclude all boasting of man.

The first special doctrine taken up is that of Justification. Here we have an excellent example of how our various writings supplement each other, also in the matter of Scriptural proof. For while our "Review" of 1951

as well as subsequent essays in this matter address themselves mainly to the particular question of objective justification, and in this connection then enter into the historical question of the controversy that was to be settled by the Common Confession, the very excellent article published as Tract No. 3 in the series entitled “Continuing in His Word” renders a valuable service by presenting the entire Biblical picture of justification, namely that God is the judge of all the earth, that His holy Law demands perfect obedience of all mankind, that every sin is a transgression of God’s Law, that all have sinned, that the whole world stands convicted, that by deeds of law no flesh shall be justified, that man’s merited sentence is eternal wrath;—but on the other hand that Christ came to save that which was lost, paying the debt of the whole world by His perfect obedience to the Law and by the sacrifice of His life, and that He pleads the cause of sinners on the basis of His death and resurrection. Then comes God’s verdict, acquittal, which applies to the whole world, which took place in the death and resurrection of Christ, and which therefore is an accomplished fact. That Scripture speaks of our being justified by faith in the sense that faith is the means by which we receive God’s verdict in Christ (the receiving hand, so to speak), and that this faith is in itself the gift of God—these are the thoughts that round out this Biblical picture of justification.

If therefore the question is concerning some particular phase of the doctrine, concerning the specific point at issue, namely that the justification of the sinner before God is to be proclaimed as an accomplished fact, we can refer to essays and documents in which this special phase has been treated with care and thoroughness, and with full and adequate Scriptural proof. If on the other hand it is a matter of presenting the entire doctrine, whether for the sake of completing the picture or in order to convince doubters that we are not forgetting about the personal, subjective justification of the sinner through faith, we again can point to writings in which that particular problem has been met with the full and careful consideration for which it calls.