

COMMENT: READING LUTHER CRITICALLY

John F. Brug

This sermon demonstrates an important point about reading Luther, which is applicable to this volume and to all the other volumes that are being added to the American Edition. Though they are a storehouse of spiritual treasures, Luther's works must be read critically.

Luther's works are a wonderful testimony to biblical doctrine, but they are not themselves a second source of doctrine. No doctrine can be established from Luther's writings unless it can also be derived directly from Scripture. The authors of the Formula of Concord make it clear that, strictly speaking, the church has only one *canon* (the Greek term) or *norm* (the Latin term), namely, the Holy Scriptures.

1. We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard (*regulam et normam*) according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone (*Triglotta*, p 777).

For other writings, including the Confessions, they prefer the term "witnesses," rather than norm.

2. Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, which are to show in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.

7. In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, (*iudix, norma, et regula*) according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.

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

It is clear therefore, that the Introduction to the Formula of Concord does not allow any writing except the inspired writing of Holy Scripture to have the status of a doctrinal norm in the church. They do not even grant the title *norma* to the Confessions themselves, preferring to call them testimonies or witnesses. The Confessions are able to serve as a secondary norm (*norma normata*) only because they agree with Scripture. The authors of the Formula, however, seemingly would not approve of our title *norma normata* for the Confessions. At any rate, no doctrine can be established from Luther's writings or the Confessions which cannot be established from clear testimony of Scripture. The confessional statement, "Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, which are to show in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved," is clearly intended to exclude the private writing of Luther from the status of being a norm.

None of Luther's writings have confessional status except the Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles. It is becoming more common of late for some who wish to be confessional Lutherans to suggest that when the Lutheran Confessions cite writings of Luther and other fathers of the church, they confer a confessional status or at least a deuter-confessional status on the work cited.¹⁶ The statements above make it very clear that the confessors did not intend to give Luther's writings a status as a norm or a second source of doctrine and did not intend to give confessional status to any of his writings except those specifically named, that is, the two catechisms and the Smalcald Articles.

Another problem which one must be aware of when using Luther's private writings as a doctrinal resource is that some of his writings are not carefully edited documents from Luther's own hand. Many are reproduced from the notes of students or other listeners. Most theologians would not want to be judged by what their students thought they said during the last hour of class on Friday or at an informal evening gathering.

There are also some problems with the transmission of the text, including even the occasional accidental omission of a needed negative from a sentence, making the sentence say the exact opposite of what Luther intended to say. The carefully edited Concordia edition should give readers an opportunity to evaluate this sort of problem in Luther's

¹⁶See "Norma Normata Normata" in *WLQ*, Spring 2004, p 139-144. Contrast with *Concordia Journal*, April 2005, p 150-152.

writings. But don't expect an errorless production. Some years ago we were publishing a letter of Luther in the *Quarterly* and were puzzled by one sentence which made no sense unless one added a negative to it. We traced the letter back through versions including the St. Louis edition, all the way back to the first German publication in the mid-16th century. None of them had the negative. So we inserted the negative into the sentence and included a footnote explaining that Luther's line of thought required the addition of the negative. We later found out that Luther's original letter had been in Latin and that the Latin version had the needed negative. The error had apparently been transmitted for nearly 500 years without detection.

Luther's views changed and matured as he grew older. (This change is not always for the better, as is evident in his writings concerning the Jews.) Also one must pay close attention to the question which Luther is addressing, so that the mistake is not made of comparing apples with oranges. For a well-rounded view of Luther's doctrine of the ministry one must consider both his earlier writings against Rome, which emphasized the priesthood of all believers in contrast to Rome's hierarchical views, and his later writings against the Enthusiasts, which emphasize the need for a call to public ministry. People toward one end or the other of the spectrum of views on ministry often try to set one group of writing against the other (most often claiming that Luther's later writings partly undo some of this earlier writings on the priesthood of all believers). Others quote selectively from whichever group of writings can best be harmonized with their own view.

Are any of these issues apparent in the brief selection printed above?

First of all, this work is presented as a sermon on Matthew 8:1-13, the healing of the centurion's servant. This sermon is really not a sermon based on that text but a defense of infant baptism which latches on to one aspect of the gospel narrative, namely, that the servant was healed in response to the request of the centurion, not as a result of his own request. It then uses this as a springboard to discuss the relationship of the faith of a baptized infant to the faith of the church and of the child's sponsors. The discussion cannot be said to be properly derived from this text. The numbering suggests that this may be only a part of Luther's sermon on the text, not its entirety, but be that as it may, this sermon cannot be said to be textual or a model of how we should handle texts.

Of the assertions in the sermon the one that probably grabs the most attention is this statement from sections 31 and 32:

Therefore, we here speak plainly and conclude that in Baptism the children themselves believe and have their own faith, which God works in them when the sponsors intercede for them and bring

them into the faith of the Christian Church. We call that "the power of someone else's faith": not that anyone can be saved by that kind of faith, but that through it, as through its intercession and help, he can himself obtain from God his own faith by which he is saved.

So here we also say that children are not baptized in the faith of the sponsors or of the Church, but the faith of sponsors and of the Church prays for and gains for them their own faith in which they are baptized and believe for themselves.

Taken by itself this statement seems to say that babies must have faith before they are baptized and that the means of grace that produces this faith is the prayers of the sponsors and the church. Other statements in the sermon seem to support this conclusion. Luther condemns the following statement as papist sophistry:

Young children are baptized without their own faith, namely, on the faith of the Church, which the sponsors confess at the Baptism. Accordingly, in Baptism sins are forgiven for the child from the power and might of Baptism, and its own faith is poured in with grace, so that it becomes a newborn child through water and the Holy Spirit [John 3:5]. (22)

But is this statement so different than the Lutheran statement that the sponsors confess the faith *into* which the child will be baptized? The catechism with which I was confirmed stated: "Baptism as a means of grace works faith in us, and through faith we have forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation." Is Luther really attacking the idea that baptism is a means of grace which works faith, as the statements cited above suggest? Luther comments on an earlier form of the Catholic doctrine:

The holy ancient fathers have spoken somewhat more about this, though not clearly enough. They do not speak about this imaginary power of the Sacraments; rather, they speak as if the young children were baptized in the faith of the Christian Church. But because they do not explain thoroughly how this Christian faith benefits the children, whether they receive their own faith through it or whether they are only baptized on the Christian faith, without their own faith, the sophists have gone ahead and explained the words of the holy fathers to mean that children are baptized without their own faith and receive grace only in the Church's faith.

What concerns Luther is the idea that the child can be blessed by an *ex opera operato* performance of the sacrament and by the faith of the church without having a faith of its own. He is rejecting "their dream that young children receive grace without any faith only from the might and power of Baptism." This is clear from an earlier statement in the sermon.

First, we must have the foundation firm and certain that no one is saved by another person's faith or righteousness, but through his own (20).

But Luther makes further statements that suggest the child must have faith before baptism.

In short, the conclusion is that Baptism helps no one and is to be given to no one unless he believes for himself; without faith no one is to be baptized (26).

But then he hedges that statement:

Faith must be present before *or* in Baptism; otherwise the child is not freed from the devil and sins (27).

This suggests that Luther's target is not the idea that baptism gives faith, but the idea that baptism can benefit someone without faith and the idea that baptism is of no benefit to children. The sermon has many other statements that suggest that Baptism is a true means of grace.

We do not baptize thoughtlessly, as those do who give it with wanton knowledge that it does nothing and is not beneficial.

He is just as present in Baptism now as He was then. Because we Christians certainly know this, we dare not keep Baptism away from children. So also we dare not doubt that He blesses all who come to Him, just as He blessed those children. Thus nothing more remains than the thoughts and faith of those who brought the little children to Him. By bringing them, they cause and help the little children to be blessed and to obtain the kingdom of heaven, but that could not be if the children did not have their own faith for themselves, as has been said.

So we also say here that the little children are brought to Baptism by the faith and work of another; but when they get there and the priest or baptizer deals with them in Christ's place, then He blesses them and gives them faith and the kingdom of heaven, for the priest's word and deed are the word and work of Christ Himself.

What else is Baptism than the Gospel to which they are brought? Even if they only hear it once, they hear it all the more powerfully because Christ, who has commanded them to be brought, welcomes them. The adults have the advantage here in that they hear it often and can reflect back on it. Nevertheless, it also happens with adults that even many sermons do not penetrate to spiritual hearing; but then it may hit home once in one sermon, and he has enough forever. What he hears afterward either improves what he heard first or destroys it again.

In summary, the Baptism and comfort of children is in these words: "Let the children come to Me; do not hinder them, for of such is the kingdom of God" [Mark 10:14]. He has said this and does not lie. So it must be right and Christian to bring little children to Him. That cannot happen other than in Baptism.

All these statements seem to agree with the Small Catechism which states that baptism 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 that baptism is a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Luther's condemnation of the statement, "in Baptism sins are forgiven for the child from the power and might of Baptism, and its own faith is poured in with grace, so that it becomes a newborn child through water and the Holy Spirit," seems to be due to the fact that he knows what lies behind the fine sounding words, an *ex opera operato* view of the sacraments. But the statement nevertheless remains puzzling to modern readers of the sermon, and it reinforces the principle "read with care".