

CONVENTION ESSAY

JESUS – **THE FINAL WORD FROM GOD**

by

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“Jesus!” Is there any other greater name under heaven? For us as believers Jesus Christ is the most wonderful Person – period! “The Word!” Is there any other greater book under heaven? For us as believers the Holy Scriptures is the most wonderful book – period! When we say “wonderful,” we don’t mean number one on some long list of personalities or books. We aren’t identifying “Jesus” and “the Word” as the best liked or the best seller out of many. Both “Jesus” and “the Word” are in a class by themselves. The Bible is God’s Word and Jesus is God’s Word. Both are God speaking to us in a most wonderful way about a subject that is more than wonderful – our salvation.

Nor can we ever separate Jesus and the Word. Without Holy Scripture we would know nothing about Jesus. He whose birth divides human history, whose teachings transform peoples’ lives, whose work prepared pardon for sin, peace with God, and promise of eternal life, would be unknown to us without the Word. In history, as humans recorded it, we find only one reference to Jesus. The Roman author Tacitus, writing about 112 A.D. makes passing reference to the crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate. There is nothing more without the Word; nothing more about him who is our Savior. Nor does Jesus walk among us visibly to speak to us as he did to those first disciples. There is no daily e-mail from him updating us on the latest kingdom news, no regular visits asking us how it’s going. Just the Word, the Word which God has given us in written form, his Word, to tell us about Jesus Christ the Savior who is God’s Word in the flesh. And without the message of Jesus, the written Word would have nothing to say. Pull the scarlet thread of Christ Jesus out of Scripture and its fabric falls apart. Pluck out the central message of salvation through Christ and the Bible’s reason for existing vanishes.

Begin to see where our essay is heading? Your assignment to me was to lead you in a study of how Jesus is the final Word from God. You’ve asked me to show how in Jesus God has revealed his saving will to us, of how complete that revelation is in Jesus, of how we therefore have in Jesus what we have needed for the past 150 years of our synod and the past 25 years of your district and what we will need for the new millennium, both for our salvation and for our blessed work of spreading that salvation. And that cannot be done without talking about those two wonderful items – “Jesus” and “the Word.” So let’s look at what the Word says about Jesus and what Jesus says about the Word.

The Inspired Word

The God of the Bible is a God who speaks. From creation on he reveals himself by speaking. Unlike idols, he does not remain silent, but expresses his nature and thoughts, his will and plans, his work past, present, and future. In the Garden of Eden he spoke directly to Adam and Eve in a fellowship that one day will be fully ours again in heaven. When sin ruined that relationship, he spoke again, lovingly and graciously, the first promise of the Savior who would come from the woman’s seed to crush Satan’s head. Note he spoke to save!

He came seeking sinners who scurried around in the Garden attempting in fright to hide from him. He came to reveal his loving plan of salvation to blind sinners who had not even the faintest inkling of it or the slightest ability to ferret it out.

Beginning with Moses he spoke through his written Word. Again the purpose was the same. He spoke through the written Word to save. That's why he guided those human authors in ways we do not fully understand, moving them to write, directing their thoughts, and recording their words in exactly the form he wanted. Of course, there were human elements involved. Luke did research (1:1-4); Ezra cited the records of the king of Persia (Ezra 6); but many things came by direct revelation as Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 2:9,10, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit." The authors used their own language, vocabularies, and styles, but God provided the impulse to write, the message to be conveyed, and the words to do it. Through these human authors God was speaking to us just as if he were standing at our side, speaking his words in our ears, his exact words which can only all be true.

We call this important "verbal inspiration", using a word found only once in Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (one word in Greek-theopneustos). But this is not the only passage nor the only word about this supremely important subject in the Bible. Every prophetic utterance that begins with "Thus says the Lord," every passage that tells us God spoke the message, emphasizes verbal inspiration. Again and again the Bible speaks on this subject, more times or at least as many times as on any other teaching. Moses and the prophets, the evangelists and the apostles were men who "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). They wrote, not according to their own will, but the will of the Spirit. Some critics point out that Peter used the word "spoke" instead of "wrote" in this passage. For Peter, as well as elsewhere in Scripture, these two words "spoke" and "wrote" are interchangeable. In 1:19 Peter said, "We have the word of the prophets made more certain," and in 1:20 he refers to the prophecy of Scripture. The prophets were long dead; Peter had their words not in oral, but written form. But to him they were God's words and God's words were true.

How reliable is the written Word? So reliable that Paul could take a single statement of the Old Testament (Genesis 15:6) and use it to establish an important truth in Romans 4:3, "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness." So reliable that Paul could take a singular form in Genesis 12:7 and say of it in Galatians 3:16, "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds', meaning many people, but 'and to your seed', meaning one person, who is Christ." So reliable that Jesus could take a single word in Psalm 82:6 and remind the Pharisees accusing him of blasphemy in John 10:34-36, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods? If he called them 'gods' to whom the word of God came - and the Scripture cannot be broken - what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world?' Jesus was right, "The Scripture cannot be broken." It is God-breathed, his own word for all the ages to come, absolutely reliable down to every word.

And the Scripture is God's living word. Christ and the apostles regarded the Old Testament not as something just inspired in the past, but as God speaking today. Over 40 times Old Testament quotes are introduced not with "He said," but "He says" (Matthew 22:43, Romans 10:11, Hebrews 3:7). The word that goes "forth from God's mouth" (Isaiah 55:11) is "living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). No wonder the author of Hebrews urges, "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks" (Hebrews 12:25). Here, too, in the power of God's living word lies the answer for critics who accuse us of arguing in a circle when we use Scripture's own statements to prove its inspiration.

The Pharisees hurled the same charge at Jesus. "Here you are, appearing as your own witness, your testimony is not valid," they snapped at him, only to have him answer, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I came from or where I am going" (John 8:13,14). We know from where that Word has come and what it has done to our hearts. Just as we believe the sun shines because we see its light, we believe the Word is his because in it we have met the living God who saves us.

Some have argued that only when Scripture speaks about salvation it is God speaking. When it deals with history, science, geography, astronomy, they say it presents man's dated, fallible thinking. How presumptuous for man to strive to superimpose his puny mind on God's Word. Scripture is God's inerrant Word, no matter how far the subject matter seems removed from its central theme of salvation. How arrogant for man to judge what of Scripture directly or indirectly has a bearing on his salvation when God has told us plainly why he speaks to us. Though standing alone, the doctrine of verbal inspiration does not save us, yet it serves to enforce and validate all of Scripture teachings, including its central theme of salvation. To attack verbal inspiration is to attack our salvation for we correctly sing, "Jesus love me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." As someone pointed out, the doctrine of salvation through Christ runs like a scarlet thread through all of Holy Scripture, but the doctrine of verbal inspiration is the silken thread that gives strength of the Bible's fabric.

The Incarnate Word

Not only did God speak to mankind by his inspired, written Word, but also by his Son. In fact, God's greatest, clearest act of communication came in the ministry of his Son on earth. That's why the Bible calls Jesus come into the flesh the Word. Such an expression for us might seem like a strange way of speaking. We don't usually think of a word being a person, but a sound in audible form that we use to convey a concept. Yet the expression, though beyond our grasping, fits eminently. Jesus is the Word, God's personal message to us. An old Greek proverb states, "A word is the image of the soul." From a man's words we gain insight into his thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Just as we use words to show others what's in our heart, so God showed us his heart by sending his Son into this world. Jesus came to earth not to bring a new revelation, but to be the revelation of God. In Jesus, the incarnate Word, we sinful human beings can see and know the invisible, unapproachable God. To see Jesus is to see God. To hear Jesus is to hear God. To look at Jesus is to look into God's heart, overflowing with love and grace for lost sinners. In fact, all who would know God must come to know him through Jesus.

But let's allow Scripture to speak. Particularly does the Apostle John, who walked and talked with Jesus, describe our Savior as the Word. John begins his Gospel with sentences that soar off the page. "In the beginning was the Word," he writes, already telling us that Jesus is God because only God existed in the beginning. "And the Word was with God," he continues, using a preposition that meant face to face with God in the closest relationship possible. "And the Word was God," he concludes. From the beginning Jesus was together with God and was God, second person of the Holy Trinity, one with the Father. What this means John then details in verse 18, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." In Jesus the eternal, invisible God has graciously stepped into our world to speak to us. The Apostle Paul picked up this same theme in Colossians 1:15 where he wrote of Christ, "He is the image of the invisible God." The word "image" means not just like God, but the perfect expression, the perfect revelation of God. That's what Jesus is, God revealed for our salvation.

John also began his first epistle with the thought of Jesus being the Word. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1:1). Notice John writes "that", not "who", referring not only to the person, but the message. And notice what he calls God's revelation in Christ come into the flesh; he calls it the "Word of life." In Jesus, God's message to the world was a message of life, glorious, eternal life in heaven.

In his last book, the book of Revelation, John came back to the same thought. Of that rider on the white horse, he wrote, "He is dressed in a robe, dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God" (19:13). "Word" ... "Word of life" ... and now here and only here in Scripture "Word of God." Jesus is God's Word to us, showing us in person especially God's thoughts of salvation for us. He who once said, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34), was God's mouth revealing clearly God's saving heart to us.

Hebrews chapter one echoes the same thought. The unnamed author was writing to Christians tempted to turn away from Christ in order to avoid persecution. Trying to show them what a supreme treasure they had in Christ, one that they surely would not want to discard, he gets right to the point in the opening verses of the epistle. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways," he begins. That was God speaking, he said, in various forms of law, history, poetry, prophecy, used by Moses through Malachi. But their message had been incomplete. More was to come, not to cancel what had been divinely recorded, but to finish it. "You must listen to him," the great Old Testament prophet Moses had said of the greater prophet yet to come (Deuteronomy 18:15). And then it happened. "In these last days," in this New Testament period of time in which we live and after which comes only eternity, God "has spoken to us by his son" (Hebrews 1:2). Through the prophets and now through his son, God was speaking. The prophets spoke for God; the Son spoke as God. That Son, come into the flesh to be the Redeemer, is the one to whom the Old Testament pointed. Even more, he is the ultimate Word and the perfect revelation of God. To reinforce this glorious thought the author or Hebrews describes Jesus as "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (1:3). "Radiance" is an inner brightness which shines out like the sun in the sky with its streaming light. All of God's attributes radiate forth in Jesus. To see Jesus is to see the God of glory just as to see the light is to see the sun. Jesus is the "exact representation of his being." An exact representation is some exact impression made by a tool, like a coin stamped by a die. So Jesus exactly represents the Father. To know Jesus is to know God's nature or glory. "God in focus" we might call Jesus. The Savior expressed it much better when he said in John 14:9, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

The point is clear. In and through the incarnate Christ man has the most complete revelation of God. And what a revelation it is – one of grace and mercy and love. No wonder Paul wrote, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20). But note carefully where we find the incarnate Word. Not only is Christ Jesus, God's Word in the flesh, the heart and fulfillment of Holy Scripture, but he also is found only there – in the written word.

The Inspired Word and the Incarnate Word

When Jesus, God's incarnate Word, spoke, he spoke exactly what God spoke in the written Word. The written Word spoke of Jesus and Jesus spoke in accord with the written Word. Christ and Scripture speak as God to man and both say the same thing.

Let's examine briefly how Christ used the Scriptures. Again and again he turned to Holy Scripture, under differing circumstances, but always as the final authority. Those who count and tally tell us 10% of Christ's daily conversation was words from Scripture. In Nazareth near the beginning of his ministry, he read and expounded Isaiah 61:1,2 to the people (Luke 4:16f), the only time the Bible records Jesus as actually reading the Old Testament. Other times he quoted from memory or referred to something he or his hearers had read in it. His life, work, and speech were saturated with Holy Scripture, knowing it, using it, quoting it, so that many marveled, "How did this man get such learning without having studied" (John 7:15). Interesting, isn't it, that he who spoke with divine authority as God's eternal Word used and bowed to Holy Scripture without reservation. Interesting also what this fact has to say about our attitude toward the written Word. After Jesus' resurrection it was still the written Word. On the way to Emmaus in that Bible class in which we wish we could have participated, Jesus didn't dazzle those two disciples with his risen person, but pointed them patiently and convincingly to the Word. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" those disciples marveled after Jesus broke the bread at their table (Luke 24:32). A bit later, in that locked room in Jerusalem with the others, it was still the Scriptures. "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms," he reminded those cautiously rejoicing disciples. Then "he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44,45). The Incarnate Word used the Book for himself and for his disciples. He was not only the great message of that Book, but also its great teacher.

Always when Christ used Scripture, it was with dynamic testimony to its inspiration and authority." The Scripture cannot be broken," he testified (John 10:35), stating an indisputable fact. Words that come from God, every one of them, must be true. "Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will be any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished," he asserted (Matthew 5:18). Words that come from God must be eternal, every one of them. For Jesus accounts, like the creation of the first couple (Matthew 19:4,5), the murder of Abel (Luke 11:51), Noah and the flood (Matthew 24:37), Sodom and Lot's wife (Luke 17:29,32), the manna in the wilderness (John 6:31,51), the bronze serpent (John 3:14), Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:26), Jonah and Nineveh (Matthew 12:40,41) were not human myths, but historical facts. Almost it seems that Jesus deliberately authenticated many of the passages of Scripture under attack today.

Especially did Jesus demonstrate how the Scriptures were written to testify of him. Referring to the Old Testament in his sparring with hostile Jews, he said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). They 'testify about me,' he claimed, using a strong word that originally came from the law courts and that implied truthfulness and honesty. To those same Jews he also said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:46). Easter eve, as we quoted earlier, in order to give the key to the Bible to confused disciples, he said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). The Old Testament, to which those terms referred "were written about me," he said.

The Old Testament centered in Jesus. So does the New Testament. Luke wrote his Gospel to set forth "all that Jesus began to do and to teach until he was taken up to heaven" (Acts 1:1). Paul refused to know anything "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" when working among the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Timothy learned from infancy in his mother's house "the Holy Scriptures which were able to make him wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15). And John had one purpose in mind when he penned his gospel, "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

God's written Word is Christocentric. At its center is the Savior. All it contains revolves around him. Though it covers other topics and conveys other blessings, though it speaks of sin and shame as well as of faith and faithfulness, yet in one way or another it connects all with Christ, its center. Luther said it well, "God is concerned with the revelation and knowledge of his Son throughout the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; it all concerns his Son."

Where else can mankind learn about God's Son, its only Savior? The written Word and the Incarnate Word cannot be separated. Faith in Christ is also and always faith in the words and promises of God. To believe in Christ is to believe in the Bible and to believe in the Bible is to believe in Christ. The Incarnate Word teaches this when in his high priestly prayer he asked his Father, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message", referring to the Word spoken by those who would go out in his name (John 17:20). With Peter, Christians turn to the Christ of Scriptures confessing, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 61:68).

Critics have attacked this inseparable relationship between Christ, the Incarnate Word, and Scripture, God's written Word. The Word of God, they claim, is a person, not a book. For them the written Word is God's Word only when it speaks about Christ or at best when what it says has a direct bearing on Christ whom they describe as God's real Word. "Our faith must be in a person, not a book," is their learned claim. *Christian Dogmatics*, the primary textbook used in all seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, contains such a statement. The author Carl Braaten writes, "It is finally for the sake of Christ alone that the church continues to regard the Bible as a book without equal in the history of human literature. For this reason the churches that claim the heritage of Luther and of the Reformation still affirm the Bible as the Word of God. This is not meant in the fundamentalistic sense that everything in the Bible stands directly as the Word of God ... This evaluation of the Bible as the Word of God is asserted with greater awareness of the historical problems involved in Biblical interpretation ... The role of the Bible in constructive theology is radically qualified today by historical consciousness. Luther believed that the literal meaning of Scripture is identical with its historical content; things happened exactly as they were written down. Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded. What the biblical authors' report is not accepted as literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place" (Volume 1:76,77).

What a far cry from what the Incarnate Word said. In John 17:17 he prayed to his Father for his followers, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." With this prayer he asked his Father to set his disciples apart in God's truth, which is God's Word. God's Word is God's truth, the source of power, saving faith, holiness. Jesus also is the Word and God's truth. Yes, Jesus as God's personal Word is distinguished from the Scriptures, God's prophetic Word. But we dare never disassociate him from that written Word for his is its center and fulfillment. Only God's Word as we have it reveals and puts us in touch with the Savior. Use the sharp teeth of human reason on God's Word and you're sawing away at the same time at the Savior it only can bring.

Others because of our insistence upon the Bible as God's inspired Word accuse us of Bibliotry, that is of worshiping the Bible. The Jews of Jesus' day were guilty of just that. They were proud possessors of God's Word, zealous defenders of its every letter, but failed to recognize him of whom the Old Testament spoke and who was its very substance. When the Incarnate Word stood among them, they held the Bible in one hand while crucifying him with the other hand. The warning is always in place-beware of believing that the Bible is true without really believing the truth it presents. We worship not the written Word, but the Incarnate Word it presents. The Scripture reveals our Savior and leads us to him and therefore we hold it in high esteem. But Christ alone is our Savior and him alone we adore.

In summary, we quote from "The Statement on Scripture", adopted by the WELS at its 1959 convention. "God reveals himself to man primarily through his incarnate Son, whom he attests and presents to his Church through Scripture. The purpose of Scripture is to proclaim Christ as the Savior of sinners (John 5:39, Acts 10:43). All Scripture is written because of Christ and has a connection with the revelation of God in Christ, some passages directly, some more remotely. Every word of Scripture is therefore an organic part of the Scripture's witness to Christ. And Scripture is the complete message of God to sinners. By it man is freed from carnal security and self-righteousness, is delivered from despair, and regains by faith the lost image of God. (Gal. 3:26; cf. 4:31; James 1:18, 1 Peter 1:23; John 8:31,32.)

The All Sufficient Word

"Scripture is the complete message of God to sinners," we have just heard. To put it another way, Scripture is sufficient. That's not to say that the inspired Word, like some encyclopedia, strives to tell man everything he can ever know. The Creator gave the creature a mind that can be used to learn about agriculture, architecture, astronomy, etc. Need we add the thought that when the written Word does deal with such area, it is always right and we subject our reason to what it has to say. Nor does the word "sufficient" imply that the Word reveals all the thoughts and counsels of God. "Now I know in part," Paul had to admit even as he looked forward to heaven where he said, "I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

However -- and mark this well -- Scripture does teach whatever we need to know to be saved. Or to put it another way, Scripture is all sufficient to accomplish the purpose for which God gave it. Isn't that what Paul tells us in Romans 15:4, "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Isn't that what Paul told Timothy and us in 2 Timothy 3:15, "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"? With wonderful simplicity Jesus the Incarnate Word emphasized the same important truth. In John 5:24 he told the hostile Jews, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." "To my Word," Jesus was saying, to the Word which reveals the Father's saving will and already here and now brings the blessed crossing over from death to life. Later Jesus made the same point to his questioning disciples, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). What more do we need for our salvation? God's Word with its message of salvation in Christ says it all. No wonder Christ urges us to hold to his Word so that we may know the truth and be free (John 8:31,32). No wonder he also commands us to avoid those who teach otherwise (Romans 16:17), even if it were some angel from heaven preaching some other gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).

Hebrews chapter one sounds a similar note of sufficiency. Verse one tells us, "God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways." God's message through the Old Testament authors was partial and preparatory, pointing ahead to the fulfillment of his promise of salvation in Christ. Verse two continues, "But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." God's message to us in "these last days," the time period that Jesus ushered in and that ends in eternity, is full and final. What more need our Father say than what he has said in Christ? Even the verb form the author used in Hebrews for "has spoken" points to finality, conveying the thought that God's revelation in Christ is not some continuous process, but one completed. Christ is the completed revelation of God. In him God has spoken to us fully about his love and life, his pardon and peace. In Christ we have God's final word to the world. And that final word is deposited only in Holy Scripture.

Moreover, Scripture has the power to work acceptance of salvation in the human heart. The gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). The Scriptures "are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15). "The word of God ... is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). "Through the living and enduring Word" we are born again (1 Peter 1:23). "Through the word of truth" our loving God chose to give us birth (James 1:18). These and other references remind us how God has packed in his Word not only his message of salvation, but also his awesome power to split open human hearts to believe the message. What a sufficient Word we have – one which not only conveys Christ, but also creates and continues faith in him as our only Savior. God's Word with its message of salvation in Christ has it all.

Pointing to Scripture's purpose to prove its sufficiency, as we have just done, is not merely human argument. He who gave us Scripture used the same approach. To Martha who questioned her sister's sitting at Jesus' feet, Jesus gave the reminder, "Only one thing is needed" (Luke 10:42). To the Jews who questioned him, Jesus responded, "diligently study the Scriptures, they testify of me" (John 5:39). To the Jews who believed him, he replied, "If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31,32). Through his Old Testament servant Moses he issued the strong warning, "do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I gave you" (Deuteronomy 4:2). Through his New Testament servant John he stated it even more strictly, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Revelation 22:18,19). Those who argue that such prohibitions apply to us and not to God, we reply, "Of course. God is not bound by his own decrees, but we are. God can add to these books when he pleases, but we dare not." Nor should we expect the divine Author to do so either. He has given us his Word for the express purpose of making us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. What more need he tell us? Anything new would have to agree with what he has already said in his Word. He who builds his church on the "foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" binds us to the same sufficient word (Ephesians 2:20).

Already in Paul's day it began, just a handful of years after the Master Teacher's ascension. The apostle felt constrained to warn Timothy, "The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3,4).

How necessary is Paul's warning is today. We need not look far to find those who want to mortar additional bricks into the foundation of the apostles and prophets or who want to smash brick out of that foundation. Around us are those who say the church must determine what is truth or your heart and head must help you find the truth. "Schwaermer" Luther called all those who forsake the all-sufficient word. Like a swarm of bees such enthusiasts buzz around, but have no solid foundation on which to land. Let's look at some of the errors, noticing as we do how they all point to man. Instead of letting the all-sufficient Scripture illumine man, these approaches make the colossal mistake of trying to illumine Scripture. Forgotten, unnoticed, ignored, rejected are the inspired words of the Psalmist, "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (119:105).

Today we are living in what some call the "post-modern age." The 'pre-modern age,' when thinkers believed reason and revelation brought objective truth, has been pushed into the closet. The "modern age," which followed with its stress upon reason as the only source and sifter of truth, has been swept under the carpet. Today they profoundly tell us we are in the "post-modern age," where more and more people believe there is no such thing as absolute truth. Truth is what becomes true for you. Truth is what you feel. As a result, there are no moral absolutes and what you feel as religious truth is just as valid as what others feel. How sad. Those who step off the solid ground of God's Word into the subjective swamp of the human heart can only be sucked down, down, down.

Not all have abandoned reason as the umpire of religious truth. The followers of Zwingli and Calvin live on in the Reformed churches, still measuring Scripture by their mind. Ulrich Zwingli was a contemporary of Martin Luther, but differed mightily in his approach to Scripture. While Luther was first a theologian and then a thinker, Zwingli was first a thinker and then a theologian. For Luther the Scriptures were the final authority. Reason wants a servant to be used in studying it. For Zwingli reason was the master and was to be used to judge the Scriptures. See the difference? Luther accepted what Scripture said even what I said appeared illogical. Zwingli accepted what Scripture said only when it agreed with human logic. For him and his followers what could not be understood was then no object of faith. For them infant baptism is not essential, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament not possible, divine election to salvation without also then divine election to damnation unthinkable. His followers claim to have extricated themselves from the strait jacket of Scripture only to handcuff themselves to their own mind. Which approach would we prefer? Scripture which is God's solid, sufficient Word or human reason which is flawed and fallible? Those who look into their heads for answers will find what they deserve, answers that can hardly be called God's truth or hardly serve as solid footing for eternity.

The reliance on human reason is also the driving force behind the "historical-critical" approach to Scripture. At the risk of oversimplifying, let me try to explain. This approach postulates that nothing the Bible says is to be accepted as true. Instead, the Biblical text must prove its truthfulness of the mind of the scholar. The scholar approaches the text in light of the comparable literature of its day and seek to judge its reasonable truthfulness from the harmony the text shows with such literature. For example, did Paul really speak about the headship of man as divine, eternal principle, or was he stating the passing practice of his day? Begin to see what such a "historical-critical" approach does to Scripture? It reduces it from a Book which is God's truth in all it says to one filled only with likelihoods and possibilities to be decided by the scholar's mind. Does this appeal to reason sound new and mysterious? Hardly! The approach is as old as the Garden of Eden and note who used it there, "He (the devil) said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1).

Still others abandon the sufficient word or strive to augment it with new revelations. The 17th century "Society of Friends" were the first of many in this approach. Their leader George Fox taught them to look for "inner light" rather than into Scripture for guidance. Because the receiving of such direct revelation from God was usually accompanied by shaking and physical agitation, these people were labeled "Quakers." The Pentecostals and charismatics of today are of similar stripe. Their preoccupation with special gifts and prophecies elevate current communication with God ahead of a Book from the past. Others like Mary Baker Eddy who claimed her writings as the Key to Scripture, and Joseph Smith Sr., who penned the Book of Mormon as a more valuable edition than Scripture, belong to the same camp. Note again where all those approaches center – in the subjective heart of man, a place more filled with darkness than light and where the Prince of Darkness finds it easy to masquerade as an Angel of Light.

The Roman Church has attacked Scripture's sufficiency from yet another direction. The 4th Session of the Council of Trent in 1546 described the Roman Church as the official interpreter and custodian of Scripture. Not the Word, but the church sets doctrine. Not what God has said, but what the church has said, is saying, or will say is to be believed. Let someone protest that the Roman Church has changed, we quote from its "Catechism of the Catholic Church", published in 1995 and described by Pope John Paul II as "a sure norm for teaching the faith." Paragraph 82 of that new catechism states, "The Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiment of devotion and reverence." Paragraph 85 further claims, "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, had been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome." "Thus says the Lord" has been turned into "thus says Rome."

Thank God for using her servant Luther to restore the teaching of Scripture's sufficiency. The great Reformer wrote, "Everything that is to be held, all and sufficient, is in Scripture. If it is not there, you should say, 'When did God ever say this?'" "Be it ever so good, outside of the Book of the Holy Ghost, namely Holy Scripture, one does not find Christ." "Our doctrine is in the Scriptures, therefore we should not look anywhere else, but all Christians should keep this book in daily use." By God's grace Luther's slogan "sola scriptura" is ours. Now let those who preach and teach follow Paul's example and proclaim "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27) and let those who listen search for nothing more and be satisfied with nothing less than the all-sufficient word.

Our Work With The All-Sufficient Word

"God's Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever," we love to sing and then adding the prayer, "Lord, grant while worlds endure, we keep its teachings pure throughout all generations" (CW 293). Thank God we can sing such words and know them still to be true for us and for our synod, now approaching 150 years of existence. God in his grace has more than smiled on us. While other church bodies, including some Lutherans, are working overtime squandering their inheritance and scratching around trying to justify their existence, we know what we have. But do we always TREASURE that pure Word? And do we always treasure it for the right reason? Remember it is not the Book we worship, but the Savior it brings us. Viewing the Scriptures as the inerrant, inspired Word is extremely important for us, not because that teaching saves us, but because it guarantees God's salvation to us. Teaching all its words correctly is our ongoing concern, but again remember the reason why. Every teaching of Scripture revolves around its central message of God's salvation in Christ.

When we deflect, dent, or disfigure any teaching of the Bible, we at the same time or eventually detract from Scripture's central teaching. In Scripture God has revealed his saving face to us with all its priceless love. Anything that clouds the mirror of his Word helps to hide the Savior's face. "Let me see my Savior's face, let me all his beauties trace; show those glorious truths to me which are only known to Thee," (TLH 234:2) the hymn writer taught us to pray to the Holy Spirit. And that face is seen most clearly on the pages of his pure word. Our first response to God's sufficient Word is to treasure it as a precious gift that God by his grace alone has kept on deposit among us.

Treasuring God's Word involves ongoing efforts to preserve that Word among us. As a sausage lover I was thrilled to find near our new home a meat market which had won several blue ribbons for its product. Imagine my consternation when I read in a newspaper article one day that the meat market had been fined for adulterating its product. That impure stick of sausage didn't kill me, but impure teaching can. When man's teaching is mixed in with the Word, the result is always danger for the soul. How carefully we who preach and teach must be about the purity of what we present. How carefully those who listen and read must be to examine the Scriptures, as the Bereans did, to see if what our modern Pauls are presenting is the truth (Acts 17:11). How carefully those who train our young men and women must be so that those future workers grow in knowledge of the truth and in the conviction that nothing but the truth be proclaimed to God's people. How blessed we have been in this regard. The South Atlantic District has many of the more recent products of our ministerial education system and can vouch for their concern for the Word. To treasure God's all sufficient word means to work as hard as we know how to preserve it, under God's grace and for the right reason, that our Savior's face be seen most clearly.

Our working with God's Word involves secondly TURNING to it. Psalm 1, in describing the truly happy man says, "His delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night" (1:2). Here, as in many passages, "law" refers to the whole Word of God. Notice the believer's reaction to God's instruction in the Word. He finds his delight in it. Notice his second reaction to God's Word. "He meditates day and night in it." The word "meditate" pictures the low hum as the believer half-aloud reads and rereads to himself the precious words of his God. It's a healthy interest in and regular turning to that precious Word which the Psalmist ascribes to the happy man.

How big is our Bible? We can only live by the part of the Bible we know. Martin Luther put it this way, "In truth, you cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read you cannot read too carefully; and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well; and what you understand well you cannot teach too well; and what you teach well you cannot live too well." Turn to the Scripture. Live in the Scripture. Study the Scripture. Listen to the Scripture. Benefits will follow. Again chief among those benefits will be seeing the Savior's face, knowing and appreciating, reveling in and responding to our salvation in him. "They testify of me," Jesus said (John 5:39). That's reason enough to turn to the sufficient Word.

The past years in the WELS have seen increased emphasis placed on Bible class attendance. For good reason. Spiritual growth comes only through the Word. "Crave pure spiritual milk," Peter urged, "so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). The more people drink the Word the more growth there will be in salvation and Christian living. With growing optimism we note that in the WELS Bible class attendance has gone up 30% in the past ten years or should we say has inched up to 14% of our communicants. But that still leaves 86% not regularly in the Word, at least in that forum.

Checking the statistics for the South Atlantic District, we find an average of almost 30% of communicants in regular attendance at Bible class. Even as we thank God for turning this percentage to his Word, we increase our prayers and our efforts for the 70% still not there.

The past years have seen a flattening in worship attendance in the WELS, plateauing at 44.7% the past two years. Again statistics aren't everything, but they do show us something. "If you hold to my teaching," Jesus said, using a word that meant to "live in his Word," "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31,32). Home is where we live, where we 'hang our hat.' God's Word with its message of freedom from sin's clanking chains and hell's consuming fires should be home for us, a place where we dwell. Thank God that 60% of the South Atlantic District members find that home each week in public worship. But what about the 40% who do not? Even as we pray and direct our efforts to them, let's also remember this. Every sermon deserves maximum effort by the one who preaches as well as the one who listens. Every worship service demands the best music and direction by those who lead as well as the best efforts by those who participate. Our Savior speaks to us in our worship services our Savior who wants us to see his face.

Turning to God's sufficient Word involves also our personal devotions. "No time," we say as we speed down life's freeway? It depends on our priorities. If I'm a diabetic, I take time for my insulin. If I'm a sports fan, I take time to watch ESPN. If I have a job, I show up at work, at least if I want a regular paycheck. If God's Word is "my joy and my heart's delight," I find time to "eat them" (Jeremiah 15:16). And it does take time. Serious Bible study requires a time exposure, not a snapshot approach. Like piano playing it takes time and practice. What benefits have we derived from our personal use of Scripture? What kind of methods or materials have we used? What have been some of the hindrances to our reading? How might our congregations help us with them? What kind of materials might aid us? How much personal use have we made of "The Peoples' Bible" series or other WELS Bible study materials?

"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly," Paul urges (Colossians 3:16). Turning to God's Word is to be no "hit or miss" affair, no "now you do it, now you don't" kind of activity. That Word is to "dwell" in us, to live in us, making its home in us. And this it is to do "richly." Our hearts and lives are to be wide open with room for that blessed Word and its powering message of salvation.

What God urges Christians to do, he repeats even more specifically those he calls into public or representative ministry. Writing to his student and co-worker, Paul stressed the need for Timothy to be "brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed" (1 Timothy 4:6). Timothy needed to be "brought up", constantly nourished in God's Word if he was going to serve others well. "To the Word," Paul was telling him, "keep on being fed by it. Don't ever stop. You need that Word if you are going to serve." In 2 Timothy 2:6 Paul stressed the same truth, though more graphically, "The hard working farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops." First the farmer needs to be nourished or else he will produce less and less for anyone else. Paul was writing to Timothy who was a pastor about concerns much deeper than farming. How basic is the called servant's need for his own personal use of the word.

Because called servants use God's Word in their daily work to meet the needs of others, they may forget about their own needs for it. Hurrying about their duties feverishly, caught up in the flurry of daily activities, they may forget something as basic as what it is they hold in their hands and how much they need it first for themselves before they offer it to others. One author put it this way, "The great peril of the minister is that of deadening familiarity with the sublime.

You will not have been long in the ministry before you discover that it is possible to be fussily busy about the Holy Place and yet to lose the wondering sense of the holy Lord. We may have much to do with religion and yet not be religious. We may indicate the way and yet not be found in it. We may be professors, but not pilgrims. Our studies may be workshops instead of upper rooms. Our share isn't the table provisions may be as servers instead of guests. We may become so absorbed in words that we forget to heed the Word. "Let me see my Savior's face" needs to be the daily prayer and practice of every called worker.

When servants turn to the Word, they will be the first to benefit. Through the word the Spirit will renew them in the faith "that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting man's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Through the word the Spirit will convince them of the glorious truth "that one died for all and therefore all died" and then commit them to the glorious task that "those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14,15). Or as Paul put it even more personally in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." Such truths each servant needs desperately for himself before taking them to others. And these are the truths which will aid him in serving others. When spirits sag and energy vanishes, God's servants turn to the Word. There in the message of God's grace in Christ they find both reason and strength for ministry. When problems persist and people perplex, God's servants turn to the word. There in the message of God's grace in Christ they find new vitality and renewed zeal. When work becomes stale and ministry bland, God's servants turn to the Word. There in the message of God's grace in Christ they find again privilege in serving where he has placed them as bearers of his sufficient Word.

Our work with God's sufficient word involves thirdly TRUSTING its power. That truth is so basic and yet so often smudged over or even forgotten. The words Jesus has spoken are "spirit and life" (John 6:63). God's Word is "fire" and "a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces" (Jeremiah 23:29). His word is "living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow" (Hebrews 4:12). His gospel is the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). In his Word is power, the only power of which he promises, "It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). If God's people are to grow and then go, it can only happen through the power of the Word.

Problems arise when we try to tell the Word where to go and how it should cause people to grow. We forget that God, whose seed the Word is, is also the only One who makes it grow. Because we forget this basic truth, when the seed doesn't seem to take root or bear the kind of fruit we expect, we are disappointed. Or even worse, we begin to distrust the seed and seek to supplement its strength. That's the fatal flaw of the "church growth movement." It distrusts the divine seed and shifts some of the trust to the efforts of the sower. Of course, we can keep our church grounds attractive and our buildings in good repair. We can meet people in the parking lot and greet them warmly at the door. We can follow up our visitors right away on Monday and seek to form friendships with our neighbors. We can analyze communities before we plant and do ethnographic interviews with those of another culture. Such efforts are prelude to sowing the word, not attempts to power it. Watch out, though, when human efforts and gimmicks get in the way or seek to replace the word. Only God's Word, as powered by the spirit, works in the human heart. And it will work where and when God, whose Word it is, wants it to. "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God make it grow," Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:6. So must we. Our job is to sow and sow as best we know how.

Our job is to trust the Word to work as God promises it will. How discouraging sowing the seed of God's Word would be if it fell only on stony, shallow, or weed infested soils. What keeps us going is Jesus' promise that some seed will fall on soil which will produce a crop, no, not all the crops with the same size yield, but a crop nonetheless.

Don't we have a good example of this in your South Atlantic District? The Seed has worked. Those people, and there are a few, who have been here the full 25 years might have wondered more than once. Those who are newer and striving to sow with might and main might still wonder. But growth has come. Like children whose steady growth we don't always notice because we seem them day after day, until some visiting relative remarks, "My, how you've grown" or like some classmate whose waist line has expanded almost unnoticed till some smart aleck remark by someone at a class reunion, so the South Atlantic District has grown. In 1973 there were 21 congregations, today 55. In 1973 there were three schools, today nine. In 1973 there were 2,257 baptized members, today 8,924. In 1973 there were 62 children baptized, last year 283. In 1973 there were 54 adults confirmed, last year 285. In 1973 there were 383 in Bible class, last year 1986. And yes, we'll add it because we believe the Lord causes this also. In 1973 average offerings per communicant were \$237.30, last year \$903.17. Only the Lord can see the hearts involved in the statistics just quoted. Even more so, only the Lord can see the inner growth involved, that invisible growth in faith and knowledge, in comfort and confidence, in enthusiasm and energy for service which his all-sufficient word brings. Today we thank him for that growth even as we ask for increased zeal to sow his word and renewed trust in its divine power.

Lastly, our work with God's sufficient word involves TAKING it to others. Mission work is not just something our 150 year old synod does. It's not just something our mission congregations do. It's not just something our missionaries do in Tallahassee and Miami, Sharpsburg and Antigua or Cameroon and Canada, South East Asia and South America. It's something every believer does. With David who said it first and Paul who repeated it, for us, too it's "I believed, therefore I have spoken" (2 Corinthians 4:13). The children in our own family and in our church families are not just children. They are souls. Those who live next door to us are not just our neighbors. They are souls. Those five billion plus in the world's booming population are not just so many ciphers. They are souls. Those increasing numbers of citizens in our land of other cultures and from other countries are not just different. They are souls. The questions still rings out, "Can we whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high, can we to those benighted the lamp of life deny?" Let our answer ring out even more loudly, "Salvation! Oh, salvation! The joyful sound problem till each remotest nation had learned messiah's name" (CW 571:3). While our Lord leaves us here, let one eye be on his heaven and the other on the work he has given us, privileged work which he has entrusted to our hands along with his all sufficient word with which to do it.

Today, just as 150 years ago when the WELS began and centuries before that when the first sin brought those horrible shadows into Eden, dying sinners need to live, despairing sinners need to be comforted, doomed sinners need to learn of forgiveness. Today, just as 150 years ago when the WELS began and centuries before that when a loving God spoke to our sin-ravaged ancestors, only one word is sufficient for the task, JESUS – THE FINAL WORD FROM GOD.