

What do we mean when we say: So says the Word of God?

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The theologians among us will recognize that this essay, according to its title, has to do with the principles of **hermeneutics**. And having thus paid my respects to the word, I promise not to use it again in the course of this essay. Not that there is anything wrong with the word itself. It is an old term, that goes back ultimately to the messenger-god of the Greeks, Hermes by name, that messenger of the gods whom the Lycaonians of Lystra thought to have come among them when Paul and Barnabas appeared among them and performed a miracle in their midst. "And they called Barnabas, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercurius (Greek *Hermes*), because he was the chief speaker." (Acts 14:12) Since Paul apparently was the spokesman of the apostolic pair, it is easy to see why the Lycaonians identified him with the messenger of the gods, since this messenger would have as his chief assignment the task of interpreting the will of the gods to men. From this connection the word soon came to be used of interpretation in general. In the Greek New Testament it is often used of translation as in Acts 9:36; Matthew 1:23; Mark 5:41; but even here we find the meaning "interpretation, telling the meaning of," as in Luke 24:27 and I Corinthians 12:30. Despite its ancient origin and most venerable associations, this learned and classical word for the science of interpretation bears certain disadvantages in its very bosom. I have heard otherwise very able and learned men speak the word with awe and trembling: "What I don't know about that subject would fill a library!" In other ways they demonstrate that they know a great deal about both the theoretical aspects of the subject and its practical applications, but the word itself creates a mental block. Hence we have agreed not to use it any more. It is really too bad that it is so, but human nature being what it is, I think we are wise to bow to the inevitable. Something of the same nature has happened to the idea of learning the Greek language. People generally believe that this language is a very hard one to learn. Just the opposite is the case. If I had to teach a person who was a total stranger to it a new language, I should many times rather undertake to do that with Greek than with any other tongue. Yet, Greek is supposed to be so dreadfully hard. Why? I blame William Shakespeare. Long ago he had someone in one of his plays say of something that he couldn't understand: "It was Greek to Me," and since that time people in general and beginning students of Greek in particular feel that they are treading on ground on which only a few of the choicest and most gifted souls should feel at home.

Just as I feel that the acquiring of the Greek language is something that anyone with average intelligence can accomplish, so I feel that the principles of interpretation have the appearance of a topic difficult of approach only when they are masquerading behind the above-mentioned learned name for the subject. For essentially the principles of interpretation must be simple. We apply them, basically, every time the thought of another being is conveyed to us. In interpretation we do not always deal with words. Symbols also need to be interpreted. A number like "40" on a metal shield along the highway, a steady red light at a street-crossing, a flashing yellow one in the same place, when the tongue is extended a short way beyond the lips and then air is forcefully expelled around it - all these are not expressions of thought in the strict sense of the word, and yet in most cases it would be neither sensible nor safe to ignore the thought that some other being is in symbolical fashion here trying to convey to me.

Even when words are used to convey the thought of another being to us, we need constantly to apply sound principles of interpretation. I used to think that I knew pretty well what the English words "dig," "cool," and "square" meant. But since listening in on some teenage conversations lately, I woke up to the fact that I need to change some of my half-century old ideas of the language that Americans of today are speaking. In other words, we must be keenly aware that our principles of understanding and interpretation may need to be

revised and brought up to date in order to keep up with the demands of present-day living. And as soon as we shift our areas of work or interest or living we once more have to adjust our principles of interpretation. At Milwaukee County Stadium, the home of one of the three things Wisconsin is proud of, the word "rhubarb" arouses considerably more excitement than it does in my backyard or at our family breakfast table. In Kentucky, New Mexico, and Arizona the word "cave" will mean one thing; among my prairie-farmers on the tornado-inviting plains of South Dakota it meant something quite different. To our janitor at the Seminary at Thiensville, "heat" means one thing; to the police-wanted hoodlum it spells quite a different story.

To sum all this up, the only way another being can communicate his thought to me is to use a word or something that I can recognize as the equivalent of a word. Words of the same sound or same spelling, even symbols of the same general appearance will not always be intended to convey the same meaning. In every case it is up to me to try to discover precisely what the thought is that this other being is trying to convey to me. When I do that, I am, whether consciously or unconsciously matters not, developing and applying sound principles of interpretation. In matters of everyday life, we generally understand without too much trouble the ideas that others are trying to convey to us. But as this speaker or writer is removed from us in time or in space or in area of thought, the problem of understanding him becomes greater as the distance between us increases and I have an increasingly greater need of developing, consciously, a set of principles which I will have to follow if I am going to understand the thought he is trying to convey to me in the way in which he intended me to understand it. And when that Speaker is the Eternal God, when that word is the Book of Holy Writ, and when that essential message is the Thought of Mercy for the salvation of sinful man, then the demand comes to me with increasing emphasis, especially since the word here meant was spoken and written long ago and in a place far away, **THAT I READ THAT WORD ARIGHT, THAT I UNDERSTAND IT IN THE WAY IT WAS INTENDED TO BE UNDERSTOOD.** By putting the matter in this way I have already indicated where I feel the emphasis needs to be put when we speak of principles of interpretation in the study of Holy Writ. Here God is speaking to us. Every word he uses has one and only one divinely intended meaning. There may be several fulfillments of a prophecy; there may be any number of practical applications of a principle. But the meaning of the Word of God in general, and of the several statements in it, is always single, simple, direct. We may have our difficulties as we strive to interpret the Scriptures today. But that fault lies not with the Word of God, but it lies with us, in our own ignorance of the words, and very often too, of the matter spoken of. All the more reason why we need diligently to study the Word. But whether we call it studying, or interpreting, or expounding, or giving an exegesis, the point we need to remember is that **WE ARE ALWAYS READING**, no more, no less, in order that we may discover what that divinely intended single thought is which the Holy Spirit wants to convey to us "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction" in Christ-like living, in Spirit-guided thinking, in God-inspired work in His Kingdom.

Anyone who hears these matters discussed for the first time cannot help wondering why this simple principle of understanding God's Word should ever have been neglected or ignored. Surely since God is speaking to us in His Word, is trying to convey His Thought to us, the most natural thing in all the world, one would think, would be to respond to that Word the way men respond in everyday life to any communication and try to arrive at the simple, direct meaning of the words used. This does not mean that figurative language is in any way ruled out: in everyday life, as in Scripture, which to a great extent used the language of everyday life, figures of speech are common. When we say of a boxer that "he tapped him on the button," at least two figures of speech are involved. But anyone interested in the sports pages of our newspapers will understand the direct, simple thought that is to be conveyed. In the Holy Scripture we read: "Judah is a lion's whelp" (Genesis 49:9), and no one is in doubt as to what Jacob meant to say by these words. Nevertheless, the fact that the words of Scripture have one meaning in one place, the fact that these words will convey the thoughts of God to us if we will but say as did Samuel of old: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth" (I Samuel 3:10), the fact that Scripture has a single simple sense, this fact was ignored and violated by interpreters of Holy Writ from right after the days of the apostles until the days of the Reformation by Martin Luther. In fact, when we view the matter

aright, Martin Luther's basic contribution to the Church consisted in this that his work brought about a revolution in the principles of interpreting the Bible. This is not at all to deny the blessing that Luther restored to the Church when he forcefully and clearly preached that basic Gospel doctrine of the justification of the sinner by faith alone. Nor is it to ignore the fact that through Luther the Church was restored in doctrine and church practices to the purity it had known in the days of the Apostles. Indeed, Luther did all these things. But he could do them because he insisted upon something that had been heard on only the rarest occasions for about fourteen hundred years: that the words of Scripture are to be understood as they read. So Luther says, for instance, in his *Foreword to the Sermons on Genesis* (quotations from Luther are on the basis of the St. Louis edition; translations unless otherwise noted are the writer's). "I have often emphasized that he who would study Holy Writ must always be intent on abiding by the simple words wherever that is possible, and not depart therefrom unless an article of faith demands that the passage be taken otherwise than in the literal sense" (3:20). If in the centuries before Martin Luther men did not seek the direct, simple sense in Scripture, how then did they interpret it? The common ancient and medieval approach to the words of Scripture was by way of **allegorizing** the text. This means that they tried to make it **say something else from what the words actually meant**. In so doing they did **not merely apply in a practical way** the great principles set forth in a Biblical text as we might do in a present-day sermon, where we show precisely what the words of the text mean, what the underlying thoughts of the text are, and then apply these thoughts and these principles to ourselves in our lives in this present world. To do this latter is not allegorizing: we might call it **principlizing**, and in doing it we would be following the example set for us by the Apostle Paul in so many of his references to the Old Testament and by the Author to the Hebrews, who in his eleventh chapter shows in instance after instance how the heroes of the Old Testament were guided in what they did by the principle of faith, faith in that Promised One, who should carry out God's plan of salvation for sinful man. But Paul and the Author to the Hebrews have, in every instance looked very carefully at the very words of the Old Testament text, have asked of these words, "What do they say?", "What do they mean?", and finally, "What do they mean to me?" It was precisely this latter approach that the allegorical interpreters ignored. To them the text became a pretext, an opportunity to expound their own ideas without reference to what the sacred writer whom they were pretending to expound was saying. So an early Christian writer was considering the story found in Genesis chapter 14, the narrative of Lot's capture by the enemy kings and his rescue by Abraham. In the 14th verse of this chapter we find the words: "And when Abram heard that his brother was taken, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan." The early writer comes to speak of the number 318. We would think that he would have been interested in this figure as indicating the size of Abraham's striking force (whether it was large or exceedingly small as armies went in those days is beside the point at the moment). But no, not this worthy! To him it means something altogether different: Jesus on the Cross. For the letter "T", which has the shape of a cross, is also the Greek symbol for the numeral "300"; the first two letters of the name "Jesus" when used as Greek numerals represent "18"; hence the interpretation: The "318" means "Jesus on the Cross."

That early Christian writer at least used his Biblical text as a starting-point for his exegetical meanderings. This is a lot more than can be said for much of the wild leaping off into space that passed for Biblical exegesis especially on the part of representatives of the allegorizing school of interpreters, whose chief center was Alexandria in Egypt. Allegorizing of a revered text was, of course, nothing new in that world. The rabbinical interpreters of Judaism indulged in it freely, though they too at least always used the Bible text as a starting point. The allegorizers among the pagan Greeks, whose great center of learning at one time was the University of Alexandria in Egypt, were not nearly so restrained. There was a great practical reason behind their allegorizing. The books which told the old pagan many of the things they believed about their gods and goddesses (especially the poems of Homer) included much that would have been unworthy not only of gods and goddesses but even of ordinary mortals like you and me. The result was that men allegorized these

plain-speaking stories about their divinities into "highly poetical talk about the weather." As they interpreted them, what the stories meant had absolutely nothing to do with what the words in them **said**. Then when Alexandria became one of the great centers of Christian learning and scholarship, the old pagan habit of allegorizing its religious poetry carried over into the methods adopted to interpret the divinely inspired Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Indeed there were voices raised against this farcical procedure. The school of Christian interpreters that had their center at Antioch in Syria protested against the allegorizing habits of the Alexandrians and insisted that the approach to Scripture must be by way of a study of the words, of the documents, of the history of the things recorded. In other words, Antioch insisted that the Bible should be read in order to find out what God said in it. The work of this school at Antioch was to bear good fruit in the days to come, for it was the basic principles of the Fathers of Antioch that Luther insisted on. But for the moment their influence faded, principally, it seems, because of accusations raised against them in the Arian controversies. At any rate, Antioch went into a state of eclipse, and Alexandria had its way, calmly allegorizing Scripture into a fourfold sense. For, said these men, every word of Scripture has a four-fold meaning. The later Middle Ages drew this doctrine up into a Latin verse which went like this:

Littera gesta docet;
quid credas, allegoria.
Moralis, quid agas;
quo tendas, anagogia.

Luther has some wry comments on this sort of exegetical sleep-walking; he says in his Commentary on Galatians 4:26 (IX 574). "The unlearned monks and the school doctors... taught that the Scripture has four senses: the literal sense, the moral sense, the allegorical sense, and the mystical sense; and according to these senses they have foolishly interpreted almost all the words of the Scriptures – as: this word "Jerusalem" literally signifies that city which was so named; morally, a pure conscience; allegorically, the Church militant; mystically, the celestial city or the Church triumphant. With these trifling and foolish fables they rent the Scriptures into so many and diverse senses that poor simple consciences could receive no certain doctrine of anything." And in his *Interpretation of Genesis 15:7*, Luther writes, after having noted the four-fold sense of Scripture demanded by the medieval scholastics and having granted that he, Luther, could still believe that one who went in for the four-fold sense of Scripture might still stand right in his heart on this, if we would treat Scripture properly, that we determine the simple, straightforward, and certain historical sense" (*einfaeltigen rechtschaffenen und gewissen historischen Verstand*).

Despite Luther's insistence that the only proper way to treat Scripture was to read it in order to arrive at the single, simple sense of the words, an insistence that was merely following the example set by the Apostles, hence by Scripture itself, the Church after the days of Luther has done many things with Scripture., but only rarely did it read it aright. It ought to be said here that the strictures we are noting in this connection ought not be placed on the great dogmaticians of the Lutheran Church, those teachers of the Church who, in the generation after Luther, were intent on stating the doctrines of Holy Writ as completely and precisely as human language can do so. They always based their teachings on the words of Scripture, and their writings are full of passages in which they carry on long exegetical investigations on the individual passages used in order to arrive at the precise meaning of the words in the connection quoted before using these passages as "proof-texts" for the doctrines being studied. In fact, as we today study their works, we sometimes have the feeling that they could have, in good conscience, been a little briefer in their detailed investigations of the exegetical matters in connection with the passages cited. But the point we want to learn from them is this one: that God is speaking to us in the Bible, and only then can I say: "Thus says the word of God" when the meaning I find in a passage is the one the original writer intended to convey to the original readers. I know what the teaching of Scripture is only when I have applied sound principles of interpretation to that same Scripture.

Now the Bible itself does not give us a set of detailed rules of procedure to be used in interpreting this same Bible. In this matter, the theological discipline that has to do with the principles of Biblical interpretation must proceed in a manner different from that used in other theological studies. In the latter one can begin with the Bible and ask it what the Word of God has to say about this particular subject. So it is for instance with the study we call "pastoral theology," that study that is intended to help (especially in a practical way) prepare the student for the work in the parish ministry. A basic topic here is the matter of the call into the ministry. Naturally here we turn to Holy Scripture to learn what it teaches concerning the call, concerning the church that calls, concerning the requirements placed upon one who accepts such a call, and the qualifications necessary in the work into which a divine call is issued to a candidate for the holy ministry. In all these matters we naturally first of all ask: "What say the Scriptures? What does God have to tell us here?" But in the matter of principles of Biblical interpretation we will look in vain for direct regulations on how the Bible is to be read and studied. We could hardly expect it otherwise. When we read the Bible we could scarcely expect to be instructed by the Bible itself on how it is to be read. Rather, we must develop our principles of Biblical interpretation out of the very nature of the subject itself: what is revelation? how has the revelation of God come to us? What we understand the Bible to be will spell out for us the way in which we approach the study of the Bible.

The story of the Church since the days of Luther can almost be written in terms of the manner in which men from that day to this have read (or mis-read) Scripture. In the days when Orthodoxy became orthodoxism, men did not read the Bible for its own sake, but read it in order to find passages that would support their particular contention of the moment. We will not accuse them in every case of distorting Scripture; the results may have been valid and correct, but the method was wrong, and would lead to improper as well as to proper conclusions. For the Bible was a book that was intended to be read, not something to look things up in, like a dictionary. There followed in the history of the Church an age that we know as the Time of Pietism. In this period all emphasis was placed upon the religious personality as an individual. How the individual thought and felt and acted became the all-important considerations. What the Church of the past had thought and felt and done came in for slight evaluation only. "We want deeds, not creeds!" was the battle-cry. The study of doctrine was denounced as leading to cold formalism ("dead orthodoxy" was the Word then used as though true orthodoxy, that which God is really teaching us, can ever be dead). The charge was raised that all life had gone out of the services of the church, a charge that may have had a certain truth to it, since the churches spoken of were state-churches. The way in which young men were prepared for the ministry was roundly denounced as intellectual, cold, and as producing merely theologically correct machines. What the pietists of that age wanted was above all **edification**. Whatever was preached or taught must have, they said, immediate and direct bearing upon their spiritual lives. And they were mighty impatient about the "immediate" and the "direct." But let us not be understood as saying that nothing that the age of Pietism produced was good and lasting. Rather the opposite is the case. True, pietism did not produce any great dogmaticians; in fact, it didn't even produce a dogmatics, since its interests lay elsewhere. But it did give to the church a lively sense of missionary responsibilities, it fostered Christian education and stressed pastoral work with the individual; many of the hymns in our hymnals today were written originally by men of the pietistic era, and the very form of the congregations in which we worship today (so-called "gathered churches") was the form of church government advocated by these men of the era of Pietism. We cannot condemn everything they did; but we must see that they took too narrow a view of what the Christian life means. They made the often-repeated human mistake of seeing everything in Church life from one narrow point of view. That point of view is that of the religious personality. Let us never underrate the importance of personality, least of all of the religious one. But to see all problems of the present from the point of view of a single consideration and to ignore all the Church has thought and done in the past, is to lay oneself open to the extravagances and vagaries of which Pietism made itself guilty. Pietism's attitude toward the study of the Bible hinged directly upon its single, all-consuming preoccupation with the wants and needs of the religious individual. Hence its sole interest in the Bible was the answer to the question: "Does it edify me?" Naturally, we seek direct, personal benefit from our reading of the Bible. We don't study in the detached

manner in which we might scan the logarithmic tables. But deriving personal benefit from Bible study is one matter,

Transforming university classrooms and lectures into occasions for revival meetings is quite a different matter. With such an approach men have forgotten that they always need to see things religious too in the way that is best couched in the phrase: "Seeing life steady and seeing it whole." To stress the qualities in Scripture that edify to the detriment of its other qualities is not to read Scripture aright. When we read the Word of God from that point of view we can be sure that we will not always be right when we say: "So says the Word of God."

Following the age of Pietism came the age of Rationalism, the age in which all interest was still placed on the human personality but now, not upon the religious one, but upon the **enlightened personality**. Man sought to live by reason alone, to understand and explain the questions of this world and our life in it, of time and eternity, of God and men, entirely by means of the use of man's natural powers of reason and understanding. It would perhaps be more nearly correct to say that the men of the age of rationalism sought to solve all problems, answer all questions, and satisfy all inquiry without an appeal to faith of any kind, including the Christian faith. Where Pietism had been impatient with much that it found in the Christian Church, rationalism now moved in to destroy that Church. We may wonder how ideas like those of the Rationalists could make headway in the Church of Christ. To understand this matter we must remember how the theologians of that day were trained in Europe. Theological seminaries in our sense of the word did not exist; these were the product of a later day, and of American Christianity. But commonly at that time, in Europe, the future pastors and theological professors and parochial school teachers got their professional training at the large public universities, where, among the other subjects taught, that of theology was entrusted to the theological faculty. All other subjects were commonly taught at that same university. Small wonder then that the radical unbelieving ideas of un-Christian philosophers would soon affect also the students working under the theological faculty and that soon men thoroughly imbued with these radically unbelieving ideas came to occupy the pulpits in the churches and the chairs of theology at the great universities of Germany in particular. It wouldn't take much of an imagination to realize that the sound principles of Bible interpretation would suffer at the hands of Rationalists. But without reading the facts of history even the wildest imagination would find it hard even to guess as to what happened during the age of rationalism to the Bible and to the proper reading of it at the hands of the intellectual lights of this age.

In these days men seemed to forget entirely that there was such a thing as a set of principles of interpretation that we ought to follow when studying the Bible. Each interpreter took up the study of his particular book without paying too much attention to the question of just what the rules of procedure ought to be in a case like his. The truth of the matter is that in their thinking the interpreters did not begin with the Bible at all. Each one was obsessed by some purely human philosophy, some system of thought that literally argued the God we worship out of the universe, and then proceeded to try to make the Bible say the things that would agree with his particular philosophy. I am not going to bother you here with a discussion of the philosophy of a Kanto and a Hegel or of the theologies and methods of interpretation of a Schleiermacher or a Ritschl dependent on these philosophies, but I do want to say a word about the negative, destructive **source-criticism** that, under the guise of deepest wisdom and highest scholarship, and in response to the demands of the philosophies popular in those days, now began to dominate the entire field of Biblical scholarship. Men denied the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible in any sense in which you and I would recognize it and operated with the Bible as though it were from beginning to end an utterly human book, that came into being as the result of a purely earthly, quite materialistic, and completely understandable process of evolution, whose development was to be followed according to the principles laid down in the popular philosophy of the day. Anyone who still professed to believe that holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost was laughed out of court as being too naïve to be accorded further consideration. To the rationalistic interpreters of the Old and New Testaments the Bible became literally a sort of wastebasket of original documents. That is, in only a few cases did they believe that the Biblical books were written by the men of whom it was believed that they had written them and at the time and under the circumstances which the Church of previous ages had always

accepted as the believable setting for the composition, under Divine Inspiration and Guidance, of the several Biblical books. In those days it became the height of wisdom to declare that the books of the Bible, most of them at least, were not unities at all nor were they written by the men whose names they bore: Moses, David, Peter, James, John. But it was considered to be the ultimate goal of theology to "discover" that what stood in the Bible as one single book was not really that at all. That it was really composed of many separate parts originally written by who knows whom that had for a shorter or longer period been floating around among people interested in these things. The several parts had then been picked up by some generally unskilled individual who had then pieced the parts together without succeeding too well at hiding the seams and who had then passed this conglomeration off under the name of some man who was well known in Bible history. We can easily see that if we had asked the rationalistic interpreters of the Scripture what they meant when they said: "So says the Word of God," they would in some way have had to evade the question entirely because they didn't sincerely believe that God had ever spoken to men in the first place, but that the Bible was nothing but man's word to men put out in the guise of having in some way or other come from God. The Age of Rationalism had no Principles of Interpretation of Scripture because it really had no Scripture!

The world in which we are living today, outside of our own confessional Lutheran church, is in matters of Biblical interpretation still strongly under the influence of the Rationalistic approach to the Bible. In fact, what men like to call the "assured results of criticism," that is, the conclusions of the negative, destructive critics, are in most circles foregone conclusions. Nor are influences from the Pietistic side of the picture entirely lacking. Otherwise unbelieving scholars still like to talk about the "great religious and spiritual values" of the Bible without actually believing in it. They argue that what we have in the Bible is not really truth, but the representation of truth, that is, some human being's notion on what was true; and they feel that this representation of truth is still so noble and ennobling, so spiritual and fine (though utterly human, of course) that it ought to be given consideration right along with all the great literature of the world. The insidious part of the picture today is that men have begun to express their own rationalistic, philosophically-based thought in words that are borrowed from the Orthodox Theology that you and I have learned. They prate at length about "the theology of the Word," "the Mediator," "Redemption," "Sin," and when we first meet these discussions, we could easily be misled into believing that the world had suddenly become orthodox and believing. Nothing could be farther from the truth. This school of thought is sometimes referred to as the "Neo-Orthodox." To say that this is a misnomer is to perpetrate the prize understatement of the year, for what we have here is nothing new - it's the same old rationalistic philosophy - and it is anything but orthodox: "Paleo-Heresy" would be a much more nearly accurate term. In connection with this modern movement a system of Biblical interpretation has gained considerable vogue and is being discussed in our day. It is called "Demythologizing." By this term interpreters mean to say that they believe that the entire world-picture, the view of God and man and the world in which we live, that is presented in the Bible is basically myth and therefore needs to be interpreted away. They tell us that if we want to know something about the origin of the world, we must go to the specialist in these things, the geologist, certainly not to the opening chapters of Genesis. They insist that if we have thoughts on the virgin birth of our Lord, we should have a confidential talk with the specialists in the field, our medical men, who understand such things, for they will insist that the writers of the New Testament spoke as they did because they were strongly influenced by a myth and that therefore what they said about the miraculous things in our Lord's life are not to be understood as having happened in any real sense, though perhaps one might find certain elements of spiritual truth in them. Furthermore, our present-day liberal interpreters of the Bible declare that the greatest obstacle of all in arriving at a true understanding of the Bible is our adherence to our age-old creeds. This insistence is nothing new: it was hammered repeatedly in the days of Pietism. But the modernistic school of thinkers on the topic repeats the demand that we must approach the Bible without any presuppositions whatsoever, that when we come to the Bible our minds must be like a page upon which nothing has yet been written, as the Latins said, a *tabula rasa*. One of the men who have been loudest in this demand for an approach to the Bible without any definite creed behind it has been the German scholar Bultmann. To him the basic mistake in theology is to approach the study of the Bible with some foregone conclusions as to God, man, the

world, sin, grace, redemption, eternity. Because we have such ideas in our minds and in our hearts, says Bultmann, we do not read the Word aright. We must read the Bible without any presuppositions whatsoever; we must in every case approach the Bible unaccompanied by any of the articles of our Christian faith, he contends. "It is impossible to do that!" you will object. And correct you would be. For men have gone through the writings of the presupposition-less Bultmann, and found that in spite of his protestations to the contrary he does have a very definite creed. The set of presuppositions with which Bultmann approaches the Bible is merely the denial of each and every one of the Articles of the Apostles' Creed!

No. There is a God, who shall be to eternity what he has been from eternity, whether I can understand this and whether the philosophers will agree, or not. This God has given me this world as my present abode. But above all he has revealed himself to me as the God of all grace, whose one great thought from all eternity has been the salvation of the man whom he created (I Timothy 2:4). As a believer I have the blessed assurance that God has set his gracious purpose upon me from all eternity (Ephesians 1:3-10). To realize his gracious will he sent his Only-Begotten Son Jesus Christ into the world, and in the days that had gone before and during the century in which Jesus lived gave, by the mouth and hands of fallible men, indeed, gave us those sacred books of the Old and the New Testament that are today gathered together into what we call **THE BIBLE**, in order that men might know the way to salvation which God provided, that men might know, in theological terms, the Vicarious Atonement, or as Paul and Luther preferred to put it, that we might come to know **CHRIST**.

Just how we shall understand and explain that process by means of which the Bible was given to us we shall never know. Nor do we feel this inability as a hindrance or a lack. Rather we rejoice in the truth that the Eternal God called men into his service in order that they might speak His Word to men. They retained the full use of their faculties; they read and studied as do other literary workers (Luke 1:14). But it was God who gave them not only the material, the thoughts, that they expressed in their writings, but it was God who gave them the very words which they used (I Corinthians 2:13), so that when we read the Bible it is God who is speaking to us. **THEREFORE THE ONLY CORRECT METHOD OF STUDYING THE HOLY SCRIPTURE IS TO READ IT AS THE DIVINELY-GIVEN WORD, WHOSE CENTER IS CHRIST JESUS, WHOSE PRINCIPAL THOUGHT IS THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE SALVATION OF SINNERS, AND IN EVERY CASE ALWAYS TO READ THAT WORD FOR THE PURPOSE OF ARRIVING AT THE THOUGHT WHICH THE ORIGINAL WRITER INTENDED TO CONVEY TO HIS ORIGINAL READERS.** When we faithfully read the Bible in this way, always praying: "Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth!" and in every word, every passage, every chapter, every book, yes, in the entire Bible as such constantly ask ourselves: "What is this sacred writer trying to tell those to whom he spoke and for whom he wrote?" then we can be certain that our principles of interpretation are correct, for they are drawn from the very nature of God's Word itself; then we can rest assured that of our interpretation of Scripture it can also truthfully be said: **SO SAYS THE WORD OF GOD.**

I don't think that we can overstress the point that in interpreting the Bible we are not doing anything else than **READING**, and in the case of the Bible reading:

- I. AN ANCIENT TEXT;**
- II. AN HISTORICAL DOCUMENT;**
- III. A SACRED SCRIPTURE.**

In interpreting the Bible, then, we are but reading it with the aid of all the learned helps at our command. And we shall choose to discuss the principles of Biblical interpretation from this point of view of reading an ancient text, an historical document, and a sacred Scripture, rather than giving a series of laws or rules governing such interpretation. If we think in terms of laws or rules, we are prone to get a distorted picture of the whole situation. To speak of rules and the like is to leave the impression that here we have a specific set of requirements, and that if we can meet them and count them off as having been fulfilled, then all that is needed has been done and the resulting interpretation will have to be correct. We can proceed in this fashion with a

problem in trigonometry but hardly with the kind of living and life-giving document that the Holy Bible is. It grew out of the life of the Spirit and it speaks to the spirit of Christ in us. The greatest mistake we of the New Testament Church could make is to assume that for us the Bible is a set of rules, a legal Code. Rather than imposing upon us a set of regulations that can be memorized and then checked off, the Bible is to us the evidence of the new life in the spirit, something that is ever new, something whose requirements are much higher and much more intricate than would be the case if we had here merely a set of regulations. Paul sums up the situation nicely when he says Romans 12:2 "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." and Ephesians 5:8-10 he says in a similar vein: "Now are ye light in the Lord; walk as children of light; (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) proving (that is, as Christians you must ever keep on testing) what is acceptable unto the Lord."

Our principles of interpretation then dare not become a static, external, coldly mathematical consideration, that have a certain worth and validity of and by themselves. Rather, they are merely taking seriously and putting into practice what we believe Holy Scripture to be. And, naturally, when we say that in studying the Bible we will always bear in mind that we are reading an ancient text, an historical document, a sacred Scripture, that does not mean that we will or even can see in interpretation a three-fold task that can be taken up and finished one after the other. Least of all does it mean that the third part coming last is to be relegated to the status of an after-thought or otherwise given step-motherly treatment. Rather here it is as it always is in an ecclesiastical procession: the most important personage comes last. And while we cannot get along without the other two thoughts, we do have other ancient texts and historical documents but for us there exists but one Sacred Scripture. In doing the reading that constitutes the essence of interpretation all three processes are naturally always going on at the same time. The textual critic who forgets that he is dealing with a Sacred Scripture, the theologian who ignores the fact that in the books of the Bible he is in every case dealing with an historical document - such people are not faithful to their responsibilities as interpreters, and of the results of their labors it cannot reliably be said: "So says the Word of God."? But in discussing these matters we must divide them for the sake of ease of treatment and clarity, and therefore shall remind ourselves that in interpreting the Scriptures we are always

I. READING AN ANCIENT TEXT.

It can be said that the main reason for studying the principles of interpretation is to reduce the distance between us and the original author. The greater the distance, the more we must be aware of sound principles of interpretation and practice them, But where that distance is reduced to a minimum, there the problems are likewise greatly reduced. We today are not in the same position that Moses was in at the Burning Bush or Paul on the road to Damascus. Matters of language and wording and various habits of thoughts and expression create for us real problems when we read the Bible. In reading the Bible we will always bear in mind that it was first given in three ancient languages quite strange to us today so that our common Bibles are modern translations of the original texts. Even we theologians must bear in mind that the language used in the Bible is not always the same as that same language spoken, say four hundred years earlier; and surely today we cannot avoid coming face to face with the truth that the very words of the Bible were for many centuries transmitted not by means of printing but rather by means of being hand-copied with the result that various changes and alterations have crept in. But we do not feel that these matters, difficult as some of them may be, present a real hindrance to our understanding of the Word. Rather, as we work with them, we are but led to a deeper appreciation of what it means that in the Scriptures God is still speaking to us.

Anyone who has compared the Revised Standard Version of the Bible with the King James Version will have noticed that the differences between the two are not only differences of language. Sometimes the original text on which the translation is based is different the one from the other. The notes in the RSV will commonly bear this out. This fact will confront every interpreter with the task of deciding which is the text of Scripture

which he will interpret. Let it be said at the outset that we are not here dealing with a topic where anything like mechanical, mathematical certainty enters the picture. No one can demonstrate to another person in terms on a par with the multiplication table that the one reading of a text is to be accepted, the other rejected. The task is quite a different one. The problem is not related in the first place to doctrinal theology but rather to church history. And despite all the fuss that has been made, especially in connection with the appearance of the RSV, about the variant readings especially in the New Testament, let us remember that the passages in which we are really confronted with a textual problem are extremely few in number and no variant reading of any manuscript vitally affects, once it is properly evaluated, a single doctrine of Scripture. The matter of the variant readings is much like that of the different translations in the several versions of the Bible. They are a help rather than a hindrance in the understanding of the matter. Least of all ought any one be disturbed by some of the loose talk that has been bandied about in late years to the effect that we needn't be so concerned with what the Bible teaches since we could not be sure of the very wording of the Bible text anyway. Talk like that is vicious nonsense. When we calmly evaluate the matter we realize that we **do** know what the divinely inspired words of Scripture are, not with the mathematical certainty of a vernier caliper but with the Spirit-wrought certainty that is based on faith. The fact that we have literally thousands of manuscripts of the New Testament alone but gives us a clearer picture of the original text. It is much like the case of a portrait picture of a single person. From a single professional portrait of a person we would get a pretty good idea of what that person looks like. But the photographer may have retouched that photographic plate radically, erasing blemishes, toning down double chin, and the like. But if we have several portraits made by as many professional photographers, plus a whole string of amateur attempts, candid shots, and the like, then we would have a much clearer picture of the actual appearance of the subject. The manuscript copies we have of the Biblical books are like these various photographs: skilled professional jobs, hastily-made amateur efforts, deluxe editions worthy of a king's palace, raw inexperienced-looking writing that reminds one for all the world of a school-boy's first efforts. But because we have all these many manuscripts on parchment and now on papyrus, early translations, quotations in early Church Fathers, and other allusions, we today know literally hundreds of times more about the text of the Greek New Testament than we shall ever know about any other ancient book. Judged by the standards that we think are pretty good for the Greek classical writers, Plato, Sophocles, Euripides, Xenophon, and their kind, the text of the first Greek New Testament ever printed, the so-called Textus Receptus, or the Byzantine Text, is still a most excellent text. It was the text that was used in the Eastern Orthodox Church for many centuries. Being the text used in church, it naturally underwent some slight changes. But all in all, it is still a thoroughly respectable text, and people ought not look down their noses at Luther's German Bible or the King James English Version just because these are based on the first printed Greek New Testaments. That later ages have brought new materials goes without saying. But here a careful comparison of the materials at hand will lead any devout reader of the Bible to chose that reading which is the correct one. The problem is not nearly as esoteric as it has been made to seem. While naturally the task of establishing the text is the work of professional textual scholars, every professional interpreter must possess sufficient awareness of the problems involved to have an independent judgment of the results of the textual labors of others, and every non-professional reader will want to learn enough of the problem so that he is not disturbed by the untruthful claims of the unbelieving critics surrounding us today. We can be absolutely certain that that same Divine Providence that brought these writings into being in the first place and that has since gathered them together into what we call the Old Testament and the New Testament Canons, this same Providence was operative also in the long centuries of repeated hand copying of the words of the Bible and has preserved for us in the words of the Bible the very Word of God. For centuries men were satisfied that there was really no textual problem because they felt no need to look beyond

the accepted Byzantine text; about the turn of the last century men thought that now all textual problems had been solved, for some great and very old manuscripts, hitherto unknown, were discovered. "The readings of these old manuscripts are no doubt the original wording," they proclaimed. But since then many more and still more ancient copies of Scripture or of sizable portions of it have been brought to light, some dating back to within a century and less of the lifetime of the Apostles themselves. Textual critics are no longer so sure that there is a single, simple answer to all their questions. They are now at work on a world-wide scale gathering together into one place all of the materials with which they work. Perhaps when all the evidence is in we shall be able to get a still clearer picture than we now have of precisely what has happened to the text of the Greek New Testament in particular from the time it left the Apostles' hands until it was printed in the days of Luther. In the mean time we shall bear in mind that the text with which we commonly work is a superb text of God's Word, and as we do in all matters of interpretation, we will always strive to take a calm view of the entire situation and then select that alternative that seems best to accord with the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Here we need to apply what Luther has to say *De Servo Arbitrio* XVIII 1681: "I readily admit that many passages in the Scripture are dark and hidden, not because the matter is beyond us, but because we do not know the words and are not adept enough in language, but these passages do not hinder our knowledge of all things in Scripture. For what could still be too deep for us in Scripture once the seal has been broken and the stone has been rolled away from the door of the grave and the highest mystery of all has been revealed, that Christ, the Son of God, became man, that God is a triune and yet one God, that Christ suffered for us and will reign to all eternity? Take Christ out of Scripture, and what else can you find in it?"

Having the text of Scripture before us, how shall we proceed to answer the question: "What does the Lord say to me here?" In the first place we shall naturally ask of the individual words what they mean, whether we are dealing with a modern translation, or are as professional interpreters operating with the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek text. In either case we will read the words so as to arrive at the simple, natural, direct meaning. Luther often spoke of this matter, as he does for instance in his *Tischreden* XXII 577: "The great lack has been that the Scripture was not read in higher schools of learning. And even where it was read, there the notion prevailed that it had to be interpreted according to the understanding of the Papal See. Sheer child's play! But I fondly hope, many people were saved who simply remained with the plain text and clung to it alone. For it is the text of Holy Writ alone that is of real substance. Ambrose, Augustine, and other fathers do not provide that!"

When we inquire as to the meaning of individual words, we are always confronted with two factors. The one is the story of that word itself, as it was used by the peoples in the past who have spoken this language. The elements of many of the words that we use in our speech today go back from the English, to the Norman French, to the Latin, and beyond that to languages and peoples whose detailed history is not known and most likely never shall be. But the point is, words, like people and nations, have each a history of their own. Sometimes the meaning of a word remains pretty much the same throughout its long career. In general the word "father," so far as I know, has always meant pretty much what it means in common use today. Some words rise in the social scale, others fall. Some become narrower in their application, others become broader. Take the word "hussy"; once it meant merely "housewife", but no housewife would feel that she is being addressed as such if the word were applied to her today. Our word "deer" once meant any animal, mice included, for these were spoken of as "small deer". The Greek word that came to be used technically of a soldier's spear is the same word that we have in "tree." The "tree" part no doubt referred to the spear's shaft, and then the part was named when the whole was meant. It has even happened that words have come to mean the direct opposite of what they once meant. Our expression "bye and bye" may serve as an example. In Shakespeare's day it means "right away." We can see how that change came about. So many people used the expression for "right away" when they actually came only "after a while" that gradually the latter became the only meaning and the one we regularly accept for "bye and bye."

I am saying all this about the study of the meaning of individual words mainly as a warning lest in interpreting Scripture we be carried away by what words once meant and do not pay attention to what words meant at the time they were used in the text before us. Surely, the study of words is interesting and always illuminating, but the etymology (that's the word for the history of the meaning of a word) of a word must always serve merely as the background for the study of the meaning of the word in the writer before us and in his own time. There's the Greek word *hypēretēs*. It is also a New Testament word, and is one of the words used for "servant" in the Gospels. But in the history of the Greek language it had an altogether different background. Literally it means "under-rower," probably referring to the man who sat on a lower bench and pulled at an oar in the days when boats were regularly propelled by rowers seated in banks one above the other. So far as I can see, the idea that the Gospel word for "servant" once had reference to a man who pulled an oar while seated on a lower bench is interesting enough, but to ride it hard would certainly be beside the point, for instance in interpreting Matthew 5:25 where the "servant" is obviously a servant of the law, a sort of policeman who carries the condemned criminal away to jail, and where the idea of a boat-trip is quite out of place. In common Greek usage in the ancient world, this *hypēretēs* was the regular word for policeman, so far as there was an ancient equivalent of this phenomenon.

The same word may appear in different languages with quite different meanings. There is the Old Testament Hebrew word *lamad*, meaning to stand, to be firm. But in the Syriac translation of the New Testament (this is the language spoken in Syria in the early days of the Church, related to Hebrew, and much like the Aramaic spoken by Jesus and his contemporaries) this same word, spelled and pronounced the same way, means **baptism**. Just how that development came about, men are not agreed. Some think it was because the candidate stood while he was being baptized; others think that the word was used because by baptism the person was **confirmed** or **established** in the faith.

All this can mean but one thing for us in the interpretation of the Bible. We cannot merely look at the ideas that were once connected with a word and then, in the manner of handling a theorem in geometry, by a series of logical conclusions arrive at what we may feel is a good thought. A logical and good thought it may be, but it will not be **interpretation**, because human language (and let's never forget that the Holy Ghost is speaking to us in a human language) does not work that way. There is always the great danger for those who take the Bible seriously to fall into this error: deriving certain concepts out of the history of the words used and then operating with them in checker-board fashion until the meaning wanted is arrived at. We can say of a passage: "So says the Word of God" only when we find those meanings for the individual words in it which were the natural, the common meanings for the divinely-inspired writer who first penned them and for the believers for whose eyes and ears they were first intended. Let us always remember that the writings of the Old and the New Testaments were intended to be understood as they were heard or read. The meanings intended for the words were the commonly accepted ones: the first readers did not go scuttling off to consult some etymological dictionary in order to find out what, for instance, Paul was trying to tell them at Thessalonica in the days of their great troubles there. It is the direct, the common, the contemporary use of a word that must receive first consideration from us as interpreters.

How important a consideration of contemporary usage of a word can be will become clear from a brief look at the word *synanamignysthai* in II Thessalonians 3:14. The KJV translates "have not company with," reading the imperative form, rather than rather than the better attested and preferable infinitive. The word has been translated to mean: "have absolutely nothing to do with," "break off all fellowship immediately with." But let's take a closer look at the word itself and a few passages in which it occurs. The word is a present tense of the so-called Greek middle of the word for "mix, mingle," and it is compounded with one adverb indicating association and another indicating completeness. If we were to translate this form together with the preceding negative quite literally we should come up with something like: "so as not to continue to be utterly commingled with." But what can "continue to be utterly commingled with" mean? The word occurs in only one other passage in the New Testament, I Corinthians 5, where it is used twice, once in verse 9 and again in verse 11. The context here is such as not to throw much definite light on the precise meaning of the word in that age. In a

case like this the next step is to ask: "Does the word occur in other writings, those outside the New Testament, but of the same age?" Often contemporary secular documents tell us a good deal about the connotations that a word had in that first century Hellenistic world of the Mediterranean basin. So, for instance, it is with the word translated "**They have** their reward" (Matthew 6:2). Usage in contemporary business documents shows that this Greek word (*apechein*) has a very special force when used of receiving one's due. There it means: "I am issuing this receipt for value received and relinquish all claim to anything further due me." With this knowledge we can see how forceful Jesus' word in Matthew 6 becomes. Those who give their alms, he says, and then sound a trumpet before them that they may have glory of men, they already have had all the reward for this alms-giving they can expect; by their very act they have issued a receipt: "Paid in full; nothing more due me!" - Our word *synanamignisthai* is not nearly so frequent as the receipt word *apechein*, but it does occur in writings that are roughly contemporary with Paul, and the study of a couple examples should show us not only what was the meaning (the definition) of the word, but also what were its connotations, the feelings associated with it. The first example comes from an Egyptian Papyrus of the end of the second century (A.D.180-192). It is quoted in Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (s.v. *synanamignymi*) and appears among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (P OXY IV 718). The word here appears in the adjective form *synanamignos* ("commingled with utterly") and is used of a four-acre plot of ground that someone claims is part and parcel with a larger fifty-three acre section. The passage is translated by the editors: "I (He) stated that these 4 *arourae* (acres) of Crown land were included in the 53 *arourae* belonging to me." Here we see that the connotation of the word is not merely that of casual relation. The four acres spoken of go together with the 53 to make one larger unit. Here lies the emphasis, not merely on the point that they lie close to one another, are similar in certain respects, and the like. Evidently here "being utterly commingled with" means **identification so far as the point of view of those on the outside is concerned**. The writer knows that the four acres are not the same as the fifty-three. But to an outside observer there will be no distinction; so far as the latter is concerned, the 4 acres and the 53 will make one plot of ground.

The other contemporary example is found in the Jewish-Greek writer and philosopher Philo. In his *Life of Moses* (I 278) he is in a fanciful and curiously rationalistic way telling the story of Balaam of Numbers 22-24. Balak has summoned Balaam to curse the Hebrew people for him. But Balaam replies (translation of Loeb Classical Library, Philo, vol. 6, pp. 419 and 421): "I shall not be able to harm the people, which shall dwell alone, not reckoned among other nations; and that, not because their dwelling-place is set apart and their land severed from others, but because in virtue of the distinction of their peculiar customs **they do not mix** (*me synanamignymenos*) with others to depart from the ways of their fathers." Once more, the connotations of the word *mē synanamignysthai* are quite plain. Balaam recognizes that the Hebrews are not one with those in whose midst they dwell. It is not that the Hebrews have absolutely nothing to do with their heathen neighbors. They do business with them, they live as neighbors to them, but "by virtue of the distinction of their peculiar customs," the rites and practices peculiar to the Hebrew people, they are constantly serving notice on their immediate world that they are not one with that world, "they do not continue to be utterly commingled with it to depart from the ways of their fathers." The Hebrews are always serving notice to anyone concerned with their status that, whatever the superficial appearances might be, **they are not to be identified with the peoples among whom they dwell**. It would seem then that *mē synanamignysthai* is a very strong word and has reference to the identification that fellowship and communion means in the eyes of a third party who observes that relationship from the outside.

In determining the meaning of individual words, then, the general familiar usage of a writer, of his age and environment, is all-important. The fathers who loved the learned expressions, here spoke of the *usus loquendi* of a writer and his age. A good rule to remember when we run into difficulties in reading the Bible is in the first place to keep on reading. Our natural inclination perhaps would be immediately to turn to lexicon, commentary, or other outside explanation. I believe it wise if we will give the author a chance to explain himself. He himself may give a definition of an otherwise difficult word, as Paul does in II Timothy 3:17 with the word "perfect," for he continues and thereby explains the word, "thoroughly furnished unto all good works"

(KJV). The immediate context may help in the understanding of a word. So with the idea of “being born again” in our Lord’s conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus goes on in John 3:8 to say more about the idea and thus to make clear to Nicodemus what he means. Jesus here kept on talking to Nicodemus. Let us take the hint when problems arise as to meanings of words, in the first place to keep on reading. The nature of the subject treated may help us in determining meanings of words. In II Corinthians 5:1-4, for instance, Paul used various words in speaking of the body as the dwelling place of the soul. And in the 4th chapter of Galatians Paul is speaking of the Christian's relation to the requirements set up by the Old Testament law, and therefore the word "elements of the world" (KJV) in the third verse must have something to do with this relation and ought not be translated with something like "elemental spirits of the universe," which refers to the idea that the stars of the heavens were great and powerful spiritual beings, who had a strong influence on the well-being of men on this earth. Taking the word in the latter way would make Paul guilty of sharing in the superstitious views of the benighted heathenism of his time or at least of talking as though he shared these views (Accommodation). In deciding upon the meaning of a word in the Bible we have also the help of the earliest translations of Scriptures, the several Greek translations of the Hebrew Old Testament, and, from Christian times, the Syriac and Latin translations of the entire Bible. Still here too we need to exercise care and caution. The ancient versions stood much closer to the original text than we do, but still they often went wrong. So we commonly believe that the word which in ancient versions and in the KJV was rendered "they digged down a wall" really has reference to the hamstringing of oxen! (Genesis 49:6)

Finally, in thinking of the meanings of individual words, we must remember that in the Bible too we have synonyms, that is, two or more words for the same idea, but that only rarely are these several words absolutely identical in meaning and connotation. There will at least generally be a different feeling attached to the one word from the feeling found in the other. Compare our “house” and “home.” So in Matthew 9:17 there are two Greek words representing the word "new"; the word for “life” in Mark 12:44 is a different one from that used for instance in I John 5:20; and the two words for "love" in John 21:15-17 have repeatedly caused lively discussion among us.

When we now think of interpreting words in combination one with another, the study of what we call syntax, for the New Testament in particular the last fifty years have brought us much new light. Today we realize that the language spoken and written by the New Testament writers is still indeed the Greek of Fifth and Fourth Century Athens, but it has been strongly modified in many respects. It is now no longer merely Greek, it is Hellenistic Greek, a language spoken by Greeks by birth and by those who have not a drop of Greek blood in their veins. It is a language, this so-called Common Dialect Greek, that in many ways stands midway between the well-known ancient Greek of the Classical Age and present-day spoken Modern Greek. This will hardly be the place to go into the details of the matter. But the thought will be very clear to anyone that it would be a grave mistake to interpret the words of Luke or Peter or Paul as though they had been spoken by Demosthenes or Aristotle several centuries before. It would be about the equivalent of trying to read this morning’s newspaper in the light of the language used by William Shakespeare in his plays and poems.

In reading this ancient text, then, we will always bear in mind that we are seeking the grammatico-historical sense, that is, what these words in their place must mean. And it will be of great help to us in interpretation if we remain constantly aware of this that words and groups of words have but one meaning in one place, and that this meaning will regularly be the simple, the direct, the common one, understood of course in terms of the people and the life of the times in which they were written, for the utterances of prophet and apostle were meant to be understood when heard or read.

The Bible as an ancient text presents another characteristic that we dare not overlook. This is the prevalence of figurative language. To admit that there are figures of speech in the Bible does not go contrary to the thought that we must always take the Bible in its **literal** sense. The latter means to take the Bible as the words demand that it be taken. It is part of the literal understanding of Scriptures that we recognize and correctly interpret the figures of speech in it. For **literalism** is one thing, **letterism**, is quite another. The latter

is a coldly mechanical, intellectualistic and materialistic approach; the former is to read the text as it wants to be read.

Now, figurative language is common to all languages of all times, but it is especially common among the Semitic peoples. Hence its frequency in the Old and New Testaments is entirely to be expected. Not that we do not use figurative language constantly ourselves. How dull indeed life would be if we could no longer call our "sweetheart" "honey," if the school-boy couldn't think of his teacher as an "old bear," and if we could not any longer pride ourselves on having given our opponent an intellectual "kick in the pants." The everyday language of common folk is always picturesque, hence figurative. I have heard a few juicy examples of your Western talk myself. But whether the figurative language is used by the author in his study or by the common laborer who is trying to express approval or disapproval in the strongest way he knows how, its appeal will always remain because it speaks to all sides of our mental makeup and therefore makes a stronger impression than if the appeal were made to the intellect alone.

We need not try to explain the extensiveness of the use of figurative language in the Bible by appealing to a single factor. It is enough for us that we recognize that the language of both Old and New Testaments is often figurative and that we have a responsibility to interpret it properly. Our Lord's teaching and preaching must have been richly embroidered with figures of speech, but the same is true of the other Biblical writers. Paul for instance in a single verse (Ephesians 4:14) employs a whole succession of figures that range in reference from pediatrics to navigation, from gambling to the police-court. Here we would be missing Paul's thought entirely if we failed to recognize the fact that his language is figurative and that he stays with one figure just long enough to get across his point and then moves on to another. It would be a grave mistake to carry the thought of one figure over into the next. Rather, Paul moves on and we must move with him. How disastrous if we brought pediatrics into the police-court!

Since the purpose of figurative language is to clear up an unknown relation by reference to a similar one in a known field, two items become clear at once. The one is that to understand the figure fairly I must familiarize myself with the natural conditions portrayed: the facts vital to farming, fishing, wine-making; I must know something of the habits and usages prevalent **in that** day: just how a lamp worked and gave its light; what a race-course in the Graeco-Roman world looked like; what a triumphal procession of a returning victor meant. And I must be rather well acquainted with the world-view of the day: how did men feel about property, labor, capital, slavery, and how did they customarily act on these feelings? With the picture thus in mind, I will, secondly, try to discover that feature which stands in the center of attention. Judah is like a lion's whelp in one, and only one but that very important, aspect. What is it? Having discovered this one feature in the focus of attention that both things being compared have in common, what I know about the one side of the matter will help me understand what stands on the other side. It is most important that I become clear on what this feature in the center of attention, **point of comparison**, is. The context will regularly show me where that point lies. When my Lord instructs me to make myself "friends of the mammon of unrighteousness" (Luke 16:9) there is one feature which the picture and the lesson have in common. As a good interpreter I must discover it. There may be other elements in the picture that will elaborate it or make it more vivid, but that will not make for a better understanding of the lesson aimed at. Then I must be careful not to pull these elements out of the background or framework of the picture into the focus of attention, giving them undue emphasis and missing the real point of the comparison.

A detailed study of the various kinds of figures of speech belongs in the study and classroom rather than here. We need but remind ourselves that there are **figures of lively presentation**: similes, where the comparison is stated ("this is **like** that"), and metaphors, where the comparison is implied but not stated (Judah and the lion's whelp is a good example); there are allegories, which are sustained metaphors, and parables, which are sustained similes. Secondly, there are **figures of brevity**: ellipses, like that in I Corinthians 6:13 ("meats for the belly") where essential words are purposely omitted but where the omission makes the expression all the more forceful, brachylogy (abridged form of speech), where an essential element of thought is omitted, but where the whole is still very clear, like I John 5:9 "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater;" the

zeugma is also a figure of brevity, for it draws together two things for purposes of emphasis that do not properly belong together, as when Paul in I Corinthians 3:2 says (according to the Greek text): "I have given you to drink of milk and not of solid food." You see, the man who said lately, while standing out in a downpour: "I am under the impression that it is raining, and my umbrella!" was using the zeugma without knowing it. Thirdly, there are **figures that aim to soften or to emphasize an expression**: thus the euphemism uses a mild for the harsher expression - Acts 7:6 "fell asleep" for dying. On the other hand the litotes, by means of a clever little device, greatly strengthens the expression. For here one says the opposite of what he means and then puts a negative in front of it. But the resulting double negative is not merely a positive; it is a great big positive. For when I say of someone: "He's nobody's fool!" I don't just mean that he is able to hold his own. I regularly mean that he is a mighty clever individual who will give a good account of himself under any circumstances. In algebra a minus times a minus is a plus: in language it's a great big plus. In the Bible too there are **ironical** expressions, like Galatians 5:1; Matthew 23:29; Mark 7:9; Paul expresses sarcasm in I Corinthians 4:8; John 21:25 is obviously an hyperbole, a rhetorical overstatement, and in the Bible too, **metonymies**, that is, the transference of a word from one thing to another with which it is closely related, are very common. The use of the Greek word for spear-shaft for the spear itself is a case in point. It is through this figure of speech that words get a variety of meanings and because of it, finally, we need dictionaries.

Without question the outstanding type of figure of speech employed by our Lord in his teaching was the **parable**, a story that tells of things that really happen in everyday life that at the same time is to point a great spiritual lesson. It will in every case help us to determine, if we can, on what occasion Jesus told this parable. What prompted him to teach thus? We will try to look **behind** the story. At the same time we will try to see what Jesus was aiming at in telling this parable. We shall inquire as to the scope of the story, thus trying to look **ahead** of the story. No specific rules for the interpretation of parables are possible, but sound sense and discriminatory judgment just guide the interpreter. We must here too, as Dean Madsen of Mankato, Minnesota, once expressed it, constantly employ "sanctified imagination." We must think ourselves into the spirit in which Jesus spoke the parable. Otherwise, figures, and parables too, still make blind the eyes of those who will not see, but "whosoever hath, to him shall be given and he shall have more abundance." We regularly show our degree of spiritual insight into Scripture by the way we handle parables. That is what our Lord taught Matthew 13:10-17. Jesus himself interpreted in detail two parables for us: that of the sower and his seed (Matthew 13:18-23) and that of the tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:36-43). From these examples we can generalize on the order of procedure we might follow in most profitably interpreting parables: we might first determine the historical occasion on which the parable was first spoken. What events or conversations had gone before to which the parable in question was a response? Then, what was obviously the Lord's purpose in this teaching? Were the disciples to be taught a lesson concerning the Kingdom of God? Were the enemies and critics of Jesus being set aright? In other words, what is the scope of the parable? Next, the narrative of the parable should itself be studied and an accurate analysis of the subject matter be made. What is the nature and what are the properties of the things employed in the imagery? Then the expositor will be able to interpret the several parts with strict reference to the general scope and design of the whole so as to preserve the harmony and maintain the unity of all the parts and yet make prominent the great central truth, that to which the point of comparison relates.

We have already noted that no specific rules for the interpretation of parables can be given. But we can note here that parables fall generally into several types according to the degree to which details of the picture are taken over into the interpretation. It is pretty obvious that there are some parables in which the main idea is enlivened by details of the picture, but where these details are not to be taken over into the interpretation. Such a lively detail, for instance, is the matter of the birds that nest among the branches of the mustard-tree in the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13). The presence of the birds in the picture makes the narrative much more lively for us, and it adds the thought that the plant that grew from the mustard-seed is indeed a very large one, otherwise the birds would not be able to build their nests there. But are these birds to be taken over into the interpretation and be made to mean what the birds of another parable, that of the Sower and His Seed (Matthew

13:4 & 19), represent according to the interpretation of Jesus himself? We can see from this that we cannot proceed in the mechanical way: birds in parables mean the devil! Rather we must proceed according to a principle that will have to be decided on for each parable we interpret, and in those of the leaven (Matthew 13:33), the hidden treasure and the pearl (Matthew 13:44-46), the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:3-10) recognize that no matter how intriguing the vivid details of the picture may be, they must remain part of the framework of the story and not be carried over into the interpretation. Let it also be said here that every interpreter will have to decide for himself which parables he wishes to include under each type, and I should be far from maintaining that different points of view in this regard are out of the question.

There is, however, a second type of parable in which certain elements are added to the main idea to strengthen, define, elaborate, and deepen it and which obviously are to be carried over into the interpretation. In the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Matthew 21:33-44) are the "servants" and "the son" of verses 35-37 only a part of the picture or are they not rather to be interpreted of the prophets of the Old Testament and of Christ Himself? In the Parables of the Entrusted Talents and Pounds (Matthew 25:14ff & Luke 19:12ff) it would seem self-evident that expressions like "enter into the joy of your Lord," "outer darkness," and the like, must be interpreted to have reference to God and man, heaven and hell, and not be kept as mere enlivening details of the picture. Just how far one may go here depends upon the spiritual tact of the interpreter. But always he will let the main idea prevail and keep the details of his interpretation in close relation to it.

The familiar parables of the sower, the tares, and the net in Matthew 13 are obviously representative of still a further type of parable. Here most of the details of the picture express an idea that is in close harmony with the main thought and are to be interpreted.

Finally, there is another type of parable which has an element so unusual in it that some interpreters deny the nature of parables to these stories and insist on calling them "illustrative stories." I do not hesitate at all to include them among the parables. They may not fit the Greek scholar Aristotle's definition of a parable, but it would have been strange indeed if Jesus had felt himself bound by literary definitions set up by a pagan literary man who lived three centuries before his time. The people who heard Jesus' parables were used to the teaching of the Jewish rabbis, and these were much more flexible in their habits than Aristotle ever dreamt of being. At any rate, this group of parables are narratives that include a detail so independent of the rest of the picture that it cannot easily be fit into that picture but which, and this is the point, carried a very emphatic point in the whole teaching. The first such story is that of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19ff). The extraneous detail is that of the teaching concerning Moses and the prophets, and who would say that there is not a very vital point set forth here? The second story here is that of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11ff). The outside feature is the part about the elder brother. Personally I feel that the part of the story that concerned the villainous elder brother was Jesus' real purpose in telling the story rather than the lost son who returned. For Jesus' Jewish enemies and critics were to see a picture of themselves in this elder brother. The third story of this type is the story of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:2-14). Here the matter of the guest who came in without the wedding garment is surely a detail foreign to the picture itself but still a most important part of our Lord's teaching concerning the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is things like the foregoing that come into consideration when we read Holy Scripture and bear in mind that we are reading an ancient text.

II. READING AN HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

In each book of Scripture we have a literary document that came into being, under Divine Inspiration, in a definite historical setting, in a particular literary form, and written by an author who wrote from a certain historical point of view. It is this consideration that we have reference to when we say that the Word can be understood fully only in the light of its history. As the revelation of the Eternal God it naturally contains elements that go far beyond what we would call historical. But where God has spoken to man in Scripture, there the lines of eternity and time have met, there the limitless God has communicated His Truth to us in terms that are intelligible according to our most limited categories of understanding, and here the Timeless One has entered time. In other words, from one point of view the several books of the Bible are all what we might call "historical documents." Therefore when we read them we must see the author against his historical background, since to a certain extent he is also a product of his environment. In order to appreciate properly the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, for instance: we must realize that here we have before us the work of a priest and a highly skilled literary personality who did his work not in the home-land of the Jews but among the exiles in far-off Babylon. So will the Fourth Gospel be read aright only when it is seen as the literary product, late in his lifetime, of the Beloved Disciple, who after years of faithful service to his Lord especially in the church at Ephesus in Asia Minor now finally set down in writing, being moved by the Holy Ghost, the story of that most wondrous life that had ever been lived, the story of the Son of Man and the Son of God, a story in which he, John, has played such a prominent role. The time, the place, the circumstances, and the prevailing view of the world and of life in general will naturally color also a sacred author's writings. The Epistle of James is a good example here. The Gospel he has to preach is certainly the same as the one Paul preached, but his point of view, and consequently his approach and his emphasis, are different.

In reading a text as an historical document the interpreter will then make it a point to get to know the author, his character and temperament, his intellectual and religious characteristics, the circumstances of his life. Naturally, this information is best gained from the author's own writings.

The interpreter will become acquainted with the speakers who are introduced in the various books of the Bible. He will have to determine just who is the speaker to whom some speeches are to be referred, as for instance, the words John 3:16-21. Furthermore, personages like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, Job and his friends, the class of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees, the guild of the scribes -all must be made objects of special study. The better they and what they stand for are understood, the better will their words be understood.

Since every Biblical author too lives and works in a certain environment, the interpreter must know the social circumstances which the author shares with his contemporaries. He must strive to become ever better acquainted with the geography of the Holy Land and of the other lands of which the Bible treats, the lands of the Mediterranean basin and of the Fertile Crescent. Their seasons and meteorology; the products of the land, forests, mountains, and waters; their cities; their villages; the manner of life of prince and peasant; the highways that businessmen, thieves, philosophers, pilgrims, and missionaries traveled; the plains where grow the lillies of the field and that were once referred to as "white unto the harvest" - all these the interpreter must know, for the people of the Bible were for the most part Orientals, and the men of the East are very close to nature.

The faithful interpreter of the Bible will wish to become as well acquainted as he possibly can with the political circumstances of the times of which his text treats. Here the New Testament presents quite a different picture from the Old, one for which the interpreter is unprepared unless he has made a study of the inter-testamentary period. Now he finds the Romans in power, and Idumaeans are serving as rulers of the Promised Land with the sufferance or connivance or blessing of Rome as the case may be. Parties unheard of before have arisen. One would in this year practically have had to make a hermit of himself in order to avoid some contact with the last point, when every new month has brought some important publication on the much-discussed Dead Sea Scrolls and the light they throw on the Jewish sectaries of about the time of Jesus. The interpreter of

historical matter in the New Testament will also have to be prepared to see the Sanhedrin still deciding matters of extreme importance, though the Romans rule the land.

A thorough knowledge of the religious life of Israel during the various periods of its national life will also be required of the interpreter. This life did not always move on the same high plane of spirituality. There were times of religious exaltation, when the religion of Israel was literally on the heights, as at the time of Hezekiah's Reformation, but there were also periods of deep moral and religious degradation, like the time of the Judges, which was a time of religious syncretism. And the period just preceding the birth of Christ, the time after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Captivity, became under the leadership of the legalistic scribes and the Pharisaic rabbis an age when true religion degenerated into a cold formalism and a dead orthodoxism.

Besides knowing the general circumstances that surrounded the sacred authors and their writings, the interpreter will acquaint himself studiously with the **special** circumstances which influenced them. He will wish to learn all he can learn about the character of the original readers and hearers. For surely an insight into the geographic, historical, and social position of the people addressed in the Epistle to the Galatians will help us better to understand Paul's words to them. To know something of the incipient Judaizing Gnosticism that was making headway in the cities of Asia Minor will greatly help us understand things Paul says to his readers in his Epistles to the Colossians and to the Ephesians, and in his First Letter to Timothy. The Corinthians lived in a city of great industrial and commercial importance. But it was not the old Corinth of the classical age of Greece. That Corinth had been destroyed. The Corinth that Paul knew had been rebuilt as a "New Rome" by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. The bloody fights in the arena were as common in this New Rome as they were in the old one, and to them Paul alludes in I Corinthians 15:32. In this new Corinth pagan altars reeked with the smoke of offerings brought to the old gods of the state, a fact that will help us better understand II Corinthians 2:14-16. The Athenians addressed by Paul in Acts 17:19ff were far from being citizens of the kind of city that had defeated Persia at Marathon and Salamis centuries before, and yet the Athenians possessed certain educational and social advantages, which Paul takes into account when he addresses them and which we too need to be aware of when we read Paul's words. It will also always help us the better to understand the words spoken in the Bible when we bear in mind the kind of people these were who were thus addressed. For instance, the joyous note that pervades Paul's letter to the Philippians certainly reflects their sincere and unwavering devotion to him.

The conditions prevailing among the people addressed in a New Testament writing will also often explain many of the individual features of that writing. So we can better understand I Corinthians 3:20-23 when we recall that this congregation was rent into a number of factions. We will properly understand Paul's violent words Galatians 5:2 ("Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.") only when we recall the peculiar condition prevailing in the Galatian Church. In order to understand Paul's thoughts on circumcision, as such, we need to read not only this passage, where his utterances are definitely conditioned by certain local circumstances, but we also need to read Galatians 3:2, where he tells the Galatians that because of conditions prevailing then he did not countenance the circumcision of Titus, a Greek, on the journey made by him with Paul to Jerusalem. And we shall also need to read Acts 16:3, where we are told that, in response to conditions prevailing then, Paul took and circumcised Timothy, a half-Greek. Even the historical reading of the New Testament will remind us that while things in and of themselves are important, the circumstances under which they are met and the people concerned with them are also vitally important. To Paul indeed living the new life in the Spirit was not a code of things that could be set down and memorized. Rather, it was a constant testing of what was pleasing to the Lord; here is oft-repeated evidence that he was following the one rule he laid down for others for Christian living and then followed in such exemplary fashion himself: "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

In agreement with his awareness that he is dealing with an historical document the interpreter will ascertain the general purpose of the book he is reading. Sometimes he will find that purpose expressly stated, as it is in Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; Revelation 1:1; and I Peter 5:12. In other instances the purpose of a book as such will be recognized only after one has repeatedly read it, as with the Gospel of Matthew. Sometimes set

phrases which occur again and again will reveal the plan and purpose of a book, like the oft-repeated *eleh toledoth* ("these are the generations") of Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9, and repeatedly so. In his Gospel, John also shows the plan and purpose of his book by multiplying his references to the way the disciples were led to faith and the way others turned away from Jesus in unbelief (2:11; 6:64,68; 7:38; 12:16; 14:1; 16:31; 17:8; 20:29).

Again, since the books of the Bible were written by men living in this world, it is but to be expected that their writings will be influenced by their time of life and frame of mind. The Paul who wrote Galatians was no longer, in earthly and human respects, this same Paul who wrote Timothy. The Peter who wrote the Second Epistle that bears his name was quite the old man compared to the Peter whose speeches are reported in the Book of Acts. David's early psalms show us the young and vigorous warrior; his last words, II Samuel 23:1-7, reveal the monarch ready to lay down the dignity and the burden of his office.

And yet, while we may and must speak of things historical when thinking of the Bible as being composed of so and so many separate documents, and while we cannot over-stress the truth that these words, while the very Word and Truth of God, are yet also men's words, spoken by and to and for men living in this world, still, all the books of both the Old and the New Testaments bear loud testimony to the truth that at the point where man and God - or God's Kingdom - meet, there not only three-dimensional space and unidimensional time must be reckoned with, but always also that great Fourth Dimension, the Will of Him who performs all things according to the dictates of His Gracious Purpose, The Will of Him Who is the Sole Creator of All Reality.

This latter thought is also reflected in the literary forms which the Writers of the New Testament documents employed. Indeed we may learn much from studying the productions of contemporary literary and some not-so-literary men of the period. We can learn something by studying the stories of the lives of great men written in that period, and we can learn much from studying the letters they wrote to one another. But in writing their Gospels and Epistles the sacred writers created their own literary forms as circumstances required and as the Holy Spirit prompted them, or, as it was in the case of the Revelation of John, as Christ directed him to write. For the essential difference between our Gospels and Epistles and all other writings though perhaps somewhat similar in nature is this: The former are all basically New Testament preaching. Paul and the others write their letters only because they cannot deliver their message in person.. What was written in the Gospels was what that generation of the Apostles had been preaching of the birth and life, the work and words, the death and rising again of Him Whom his followers knew as their Lord, their Savior, and their God. Despite repeated modern efforts to the contrary, we shall always recognize the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament as first-class literary products, given by inspiration and speaking the very Word of God, that speak unto us the way of salvation. Surely, in form as well as in content, they are in a class by themselves.

Just as the general plan and purpose of each writing will have to be kept in mind if I want to be able to say: "So says the Word of God," so will I as a good interpreter of God's Word also have to pay most careful attention in each and every passage within each work to its particular context and scope. I shall have to look carefully at the connections both to the right and the left, to what came before immediately and more remotely and to what is to follow. As the setting of the individual parable is most important, so is the context of every passage. The same may be said of the **scope** of the individual passage. No secular writer, and no sacred author either, is **always** driving at **everything all the time**. He takes up his points one by one and disposes of them in view of the general aspect of the subject he is treating. So in the separate passage we must always ask ourselves: "Just which particular point is the author trying to make here?" In his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul's grand topic is: The Glory of the Church of which Christ is the Head. But in 2:11-22 he is speaking of this that God in His grace brought the Ephesians too, who by birth were Gentiles and pagan, into this Church, and united Jew and Gentile in one Glorious Church. To ignore the particular scope of this passage and to read it only in the light of Paul's larger theme, would be to miss the point of it drastically. Let it be said here that often the scope of a passage will be the only thing that will help us decide between two varying interpretations of that passage. We may have before us the results of the labors of two men who are believing and learned interpreters. Both of them have correctly sized up the context of the passage. The separate words have been carefully studied and can

mean either what the one interpreter reads in them or what the other finds. What will decide for us? Here, I feel, we should lay all personal preferences, our likes and dislikes, aside and turn to that consideration which so consistently holds the key to the whole situation: the scope, the particular intention, of that passage. In I Thessalonians 5:22, for instance, "Abstain from all appearance of evil," the word translated "appearance" may mean either "looks," "appearance" or "kind," "species." Luther and the KJV translate in the manner quoted. Dictionary, grammar, and the context will not determine anything for us, but I believe that the scope of the passage demands that we translate "Avoid all kinds of evil." This does not mean that avoiding the very appearance of evil is not good theology and something taught in God's Word. I firmly believe that it is taught there, but not in I Thessalonians 5:22. So, if the author's one divinely intended meaning is to be arrived at, both scope and context must be kept firmly in mind.

One more item in this connection: while we think of the Bible as a number of individual documents that came into being in a way we might also describe as historical as well as divine, we must not forget that in the history of the Church, and by Divine Providence, these several books were gathered together and then accepted by the Church as its one norm of faith and life. The interpreter will naturally also need to know what is called the history of the canon, the story of that historical process whereby the 39 and 27 books were gathered together to form the old and New Testament canons. Naturally, there was no specific divine directive for making this collection. It grew out of the missionary needs of the church, and, as is true also of the very principles of interpretation we are studying, out of the nature of Divine Revelation and of the Biblical books themselves. If from a reading of the books of Scripture properly men could say: "So says the Word of God!" it was self-evident that they would want and need to have these 66 books gathered together into one single place. When this gathering was made, the Biblical canon was formed.

III. READING A SACRED SCRIPTURE

When we remind ourselves that in reading the Bible we are always reading a sacred Scripture, we assume the blessed truth of the verbal inspiration of Holy Writ. The doctrine of verbal inspiration is a very comforting and, for all theology, admittedly a most basic one, but in a study of the principles of interpretation, in an effort to know what I mean when I say: "So says the Word of God!" the matter of inspiration will have to be assumed rather than set forth. Yet the fact that the same Holy Spirit has inspired all the words of all the Bible leads us to the following conclusions.

First, every true interpretation of the Bible must view the Old and the New Testaments as constituting a unity. This is saying nothing different than to repeat what Luther and all true Lutheran theologians have always insisted on, that the Bible contains Law and Gospel, the one to speak to my Old Adam and show me my sins, the other to speak of the salvation wrought for me in and by Christ, to create a New Life within me, to strengthen and mature that life so that I too may arrive at that maturity which the Lord Jesus had in utter perfection (Ephesians 4:13 "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."). Any method of reading or studying or interpreting the Bible that ignores this truth of the unity of the Old and New Testaments and of the fact that both teach both Law and Gospel will wind up either in the error of antinomianism, an ancient misguided approach that tried to insist that in the New Testament church there no longer was any room for the preaching of the Law, thus leaving out of account the fact that our flesh is flesh so long as we live; or it will fall into the error of conceiving of the New Testament as a *nova lex*, a New Law, a code of right and wrong to be enforced in rigoristic, legalistic fashion.

This principle of the unity of the two Testaments will teach us that the doctrine of redemption is the same in the Old as in the New Testament. The faithful of the Old Testament were, on death, carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom by virtue of the same faith that was in martyred Stephen, who cried (Acts 7:56): "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God." Stephen was saved by faith in a Christ who had come and done his work and returned to heaven. The believers of the times of the

Old Covenant trusted as firmly in a Christ who was to come according to the Promise made to their Father Abraham. Nor was the true Israel "isolationistic" in its religious attitudes, as many modern writers like to make out. Rather, the true believers among Israel looked forward to the bringing of the Gospel of Salvation to all men. Many examples of this attitude of heart could be quoted, but we need here refer only to Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple, in which Solomon speaks: "Moreover concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name's sake ... Hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for, that all people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as do thy people Israel" (I Kings 8:41 & 43). And surely the main thought of the Book of Jonah is not that connected with the big fish but rather the missionary thought of preaching repentance to Nineveh, "that great city." Accordingly, the difference between the Old and the New Testaments is purely relative, not absolute. The two are related as type to anti-type; as the bud is to the flower; as the incomplete to the perfect. Indeed, what we have is a progressive revelation, not in the sense of those modernists who insist that the same Spirit who spoke the words of the Bible is still speaking to them through their own Inner Light, something entirely separate from the revelation of Scripture. But God's revelation to us is progressive in the sense that step by step, from age to age, the word of the Promised Seed of the Woman became steadily clearer and more definite, until at last John the Baptist, the last of the Old and the first of the New Testament, could point with his finger directly at the Promised One and say: "Behold, the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

As a result, the Old Testament will often offer the key to the right interpretation of the New or will serve to illustrate New Testament passages, John 3:14-15 becomes clear only when we have read Numbers 21:8-9; Romans 4:9-13 bases upon the account of Genesis 15; Hebrews 13:10-13 obviously wants to be interpreted in the light of Leviticus 16:27. Conversely, the New Testament often serves as a commentary on the Old: Acts 2:29-31 on Psalm 16:10; Matthew 11:10 on Malachi 3:1; Matthew 21:42 on Psalm 118:22f; and Galatians 4:22-31 and the entire Epistle to the Hebrews on various passages in the Old Testament. With this in mind, the interpreter will guard against minimizing the Old Testament and estimating it only as "the fruit of historical development" of Israel's national religion, not at all on a par with the New. At the same time he will beware lest he read too much into that Old Testament, or as one of my colleagues loves to instruct his students: "Don't dive into the Old Testament and come up in the New." What is meant is this: it would certainly be highly improper procedure to read the Twenty-Third Psalm and the Tenth Chapter of the Gospel of John as though both came from the same or successive pages in the Bible. True, the Lord, who is My Shepherd, is also the Good Shepherd of His sheep, but that does not mean that the two chapters can be read without recognizing the differences in reference, time, and the like. Finally, in considering the basic unity between the two Testaments, the interpreter will always bear in mind that each Biblical book serves a special purpose in God's economy of salvation.

Naturally, every interpreter will reserve for himself the freedom of interpreting Scripture as he understands it. He will naturally be expected to operate within the limits of good exegetical procedure. He will bear in mind what the basic thought of all Scripture is: Christ or the Vicarious Atonement. He will read his text paying due heed to the meanings of words, to the principles of grammar and syntax. He will look at the context of the passage in both directions and faithfully consider its scope. But within the limits of his passage, he certainly has the right, nay, rather, as one of God's spiritual kings and priests, is **expected** to read that Word of God as he sees it, unbound by the magisterial pronouncements of scholars however learned they be, and unfettered by the demands of others upon himself, who believe that he should do what they do and what that charcoal-burner of old felt he must do: Believe what the church believes! Let me illustrate what I mean: In Ephesians 4:9 we have the reference to "the nethermost parts of the earth," and Christ's descent to it. Good, sound Lutheran theologians have understood this to refer to our Lord's descent into hell. I don't think that the passage means the descent into hell at all. I believe it refers to the Incarnation of the Son of God. Not that I don't sincerely believe that our Lord descended into hell as the Church in the Apostles' Creed has always confessed that He did. But I don't believe that the Bible speaks about that matter in this passage in Ephesians. And I shall insist upon my freedom to interpret this passage as I read it. But at the same time I shall remember another responsibility. And that is my responsibility to the Church. For what would happen if we were to go

around the country lecturing on that point, that Ephesians 4:9 does not teach the descent into hell? The most natural result would be that the notion would go abroad that I myself do not believe the age-old doctrine of the descent into hell; those who have always denied the doctrine would be strengthened in their unbelief; and many believing souls would be disturbed in their hearts. Hence, while exercising my freedom of interpretation I will always bear in mind my responsibility to the Church.

In this connection another question is often asked: "What about such differences in interpretation? When does a difference in interpretation become a difference in doctrine?" In arriving at clarity by way of an answer to this question, two matters will have to be borne in mind. The first is: differences in interpretation and differences in doctrine do not lie on the same plane at all. You and I may disagree radically on how a certain passage is to be read and understood. But that difference in interpretation will be one in doctrine only then when one of us shall insist that the doctrine in question is not taught in the Scriptures at all! I deny a Scriptural doctrine only when I maintain that the Bible does not teach it anywhere. But certainly no one can make a heretic out of me for failing to see a certain doctrine in a passage which he sees in it. He may doubt my abilities as a linguist, a grammarian, an exegete; he may even feel like reaching for the butterfly net; but on the basis of interpretational difference alone he cannot make a heretic out of me. To take any other attitude would be to put all Scripture into an exegetical strait-jacket.

However, in this matter, I fear that often when we speak of differences in interpretation, we do not mean differences in interpretation at all. What there is by way of interpretation we are agreed on. Where we differ one from another is in the matter of the **application** of the principles that the interpretation has brought out. "Applications are many; interpretation is one." - Thus reads a good, old, and almost universal maxim. Having arrived at the Scriptural truth taught in a passage, we would like to bring that same passage to tell us just when and how and with what intensity we ought to put into practical application the truth taught in it. Here we need to remind ourselves that when we expect Scripture to tell us these latter things, we are expecting something of Scripture which it does not furnish us, not in the New Testament Church. For to us the Bible is not a legal code. Christ has given us a new Commandment, only one, and that in the very nature of it, is not a commandment at all, for it reads: "Love one another." In the matter of carrying this "command" into practical application in the affairs of everyday life, we dare not operate with absolute terms. Let us remember Paul and his circumcision of the one helper and his refusal to circumcise the other. The entire Epistle to the Ephesians is a beautiful illustration of this same principle. When Paul there speaks of the facts of our salvation, his terms are absolute; there are no "ifs" or "buts." There is one God; there is one Mediator; there is one way to heaven. But when Paul comes to speak of the application of the Christian principle to everyday living, there he has moved out of the realm of absolute terms; there all things are to be tried, tested, weighed, and each case decided on its own merits. What final results are to be aimed at, Paul can well say. General methods of procedure, too, can be outlined, as in 5:4: "Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath." But just how that final result will be achieved and what precise practical method is to be followed Paul does not teach. That he has to say in the second half of Ephesians accords well with his statement in Romans 12:2: "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

In thinking of the Bible as a Sacred Scripture, the interpreter will also realize that beside the direct, there is often also an implied sense of Scripture. The natural world about us is related to the spiritual; the way God dealt with his people in days of old is an indication of how he will deal with us; the life that now is stands in relation to the glories of the world to come. So Paul (Ephesians 5:22-33) points to marriage here on earth as indicative of the relation between Christ and His Church. For God has revealed Himself in words, but also in **facts**. And the facts of sacred history may have a symbolical significance for us. (Note: a symbol is really one of the two halves of a tally, the one serving to identify the other. Only when I have the other one does this one have its full meaning and value to me.) So the change of Jacob's name to Israel in connection with his wrestling with the Angel (Genesis 32:24-32) is treated symbolically by our Lord when he says of Nathanael (John 1:47): "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"

The facts of sacred history may also have a typical significance. (Note: whereas a symbol is a sign, an indication of something else, a type is literally a stamp made by a die, and therefore a pattern or an image, a

picture, of something else, and as a type refers to something real coming in the future.) Thus there are typical places, the Holy of Holies; typical things, the bronze serpent in the wilderness; typical persons, David; typical rites, the slaying of the Passover lamb; typical facts, Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac. We will all immediately recognize the New Testament anti-type that corresponds to the Old Testament type named. Types, being pictures, will, like parables, not bring us the great doctrinal facts of Scripture by themselves, but like all pictures they will enliven and clarify what has otherwise been taught in so many words. And as there may be more than one application of a Scriptural principle, so types may have more than one fulfillment, for instance, one in Christ, another in the New Testament people organically connected with Him.

Since Scripture is an organic whole and inspired by God, then not only the direct statements of Scripture but also its implications must be regarded as Word of God. Jesus recognized this truth when he deduced from the name the Lord gave himself at the burning bush the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead, Matthew 22:23-33. Widely-held doctrines of the Christian church that are deductions from statements of Scripture (and about which we are inclined to forget that they are deductions) are the doctrines of the Trinity and the baptism of infants. But when deductions from direct statements of Scripture are made and are set forth as Scriptural doctrines, they must, as Dr. Adolf Hoenecke insists in his *Dogmatik* (Volume I p. 333ff.): be logical; they must never in the least contradict any of the statements of Scripture; their premises must be taken from Scripture; and they must take nothing for granted that does not already lie implied in Scripture.

Quotations from the Old Testament in the New also illustrate the unity of the Scriptures and the fact that the Scriptures interpret themselves. Occasionally they present problems all their own. Such quotations are of the following kinds: some show that Old Testament predictions were fulfilled in the New Testament (Matthew 2:17); others quote Old Testament passages to establish a doctrine, as when Paul in Romans 3:9-19 quotes several passages from the Book of Psalms to show the universal depravity of man; on other occasions the New Testament quotes the Old in order to rebuke the enemy, as Jesus does in John 10:34-36. And some Old Testament passages are cited in a literary way, for rhetorical purposes or to illustrate some truth, not to establish that truth. Paul in particular uses this type of reference to the Old Testament frequently. Often there is in Paul apparently little regard for the connection in which the words originally occur in the Old Testament. Sometimes Paul has been charged with quoting arbitrarily or even loosely or inaccurately from memory. That Paul does not quote Scripture loosely or carelessly, or like a Jewish rabbi, or from memory, goes without saying. He was too well versed in the writings of his people and had too profound a respect for the inspired Word of God to treat it in such cavalier fashion. Commentators have not always done too well by Paul in these passages either, like Ephesians 4:8 and Romans 10:6-8. We shall generally be able to improve on the commentaries if we will proceed as follows: Remember that Paul does not quote "proof-passages" in our sense, but that he rather has reference to a whole context instead of to a single phrase or word in it. Then Paul reduces that context aptly to summarize the context and to illustrate the thought that he is expressing. Above all, we need to remember that Paul's quotations from the Old Testament are Christ-Centered.

Since the divinely inspired Scriptures are a unity, the difficult and obscure passages in it will be interpreted according to the less difficult and obscure, the clear and plain. We will reveal everything that Scripture has to say on a topic. When we take the other and clear passages into account, the difficulties are cleared away. While there may be difficult passages, the Scriptures themselves are clear and plain, "like the light of the sun itself," says Luther (V 334). The Great Reformer comes often to speak on this very point, for he says again in *De Servo Arbitrio* XVIII 1742: "This fact must be recognized and utterly certain among all Christians that the Holy Scripture is a spiritual light much brighter than the sun itself, especially in matters which pertain to our eternal salvation, or which every Christian must necessarily know." But what to us difficult passages there are, they do not teach anything different from what is contained in the clear passages. In observing this principle of "the unclear by the clear" we are proceeding according to what the fathers called the Analogy of Scripture.

Finally, we have all heard something about what is called the Analogy of Faith. By this is not meant what the moderns call the "view of the totality of Scripture." By the latter they commonly mean a point of view

that is strictly their own and which they do not find directly stated anywhere in Scripture nor which can be logically deduced from such direct statements but which, they feel, stand in general agreement with the spirit that stands behind Scripture. Most of the modern reform movements and many of our -ism base ultimately upon such a view of what the totality of Scripture might be. But when we say that our interpretation will always be according to the analogy of faith, we do not mean anything that stands apart from Scripture at all. By the analogy of faith we mean the sum total of the revealed articles of faith, the total we arrive at when we add together all the passages that speak about a certain doctrine of Scripture. For that is the way we formulate our doctrines. We realize that a single Bible passage does commonly not tell us all that the Bible has to say on a topic. In other words, to interpret according to the Analogy of Faith is to interpret according to the Scriptures themselves. Sometime difficulties will arise when we gather all that Scripture has to say on a certain topic. Then as good interpreters it becomes our duty to show just where the difficulty lies, to adjust the matter if we can according to good exegetical procedures, and if we cannot, frankly admit so, and let the two seemingly discordant statements stand side by side. Since both stand in Scripture, they are not really discordant. They only seem to be so to us. Further information may reveal how they are to be reconciled. But whether they will be reconciled here in time or not, eternity will reveal that the problem has all the while been with our own puny understanding and with our lack of real knowledge.

But so long as we are carrying on our responsibilities as interpreters in the Church here in this time, it remains our duty to let the Scriptures speak for themselves. For what the Bible says, that for us is Scriptural doctrine. And for us, such a doctrine will be everything that the Bible has to say on the topic, no more and certainly no less. Since we are human beings, still living in this flesh, we shall constantly need to be on our guard lest we overemphasize one or the other feature of a Biblical teaching to the detriment of the other features. Think, for instance, of what would happen if someone “went overboard” in his interpretation of the command of Jesus Matthew 28:19: “Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” Exaggerating one feature of this command beyond all due proportion and treating it in an absolutistic way, I’m sure he would drown the very first baby that would be brought to him. But only the first baby. I’m equally sure that no other babies would be brought.

Instead, we will always pray for Heavenly Guidance so that our interpretations will be in accordance with the Analogy of Faith, always taking into account everything that the Scriptures say and allowing every single passage to come to its full right. Then the separate passages will be used to construct the great Biblical principles, and the great Biblical principles as such will throw light on the individual passages. For thus does the Analogy of Faith work. Finally, you see, it is not we who interpret Scriptures, but it is Scripture that interprets itself, moving ever in this exegetical circle, with Christ at the Center. Proceeding thus, we may be sure that we can say of what we read in Scripture: **"SO SAYS THE WORD OF GOD."**