

The Battle to Preserve the Doctrines of the Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture in American Lutheranism

By John F. Brug

You have invited me to speak to your group about the doctrines of biblical inspiration and inerrancy. This is a very good choice for a topic, since this is one of the most critical issues facing any Lutherans who are trying to restore, maintain, or establish a Lutheran church which will be faithful to all the teachings of the Bible. Without a doubt, the most important doctrine of the Bible for Lutherans is justification by grace alone through faith alone. This is very properly called the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. But the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible ranks very close to this in importance. In fact, history has proven that where the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy is lost, the doctrine of justification is soon endangered and lost too.

In my seminary's continued education program for pastors, I teach a 30-hour course on the subject which you have asked me to speak about. So obviously in the short time we have today we can only summarize the most basic points.

The Doctrines of Inspiration and Inerrancy

The Bible does not contain the words "inspiration" and "inerrancy," but like the word "Trinity" these are words which the church has adopted to summarize teachings which are clearly presented in Scripture.

"Inspiration" is the miraculous process by which God the Holy Spirit called the writers of the Bible to write and supplied them with the exact thoughts and words which they were to record. The term "inerrancy" confesses that since the content of the Bible was provided by God himself, the Bible contains no errors, even though it was given through human beings.

Christians call the Bible the inspired Word of God because of passages like Timothy 3: 16, "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (In all cases I am translating the passages literally from the Greek). In English versions of the Bible this has traditionally been translated "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God."

We also called the writers of Scripture "inspired" on the basis of passages like 2 Peter 1: 21, "No prophecy was ever carried in by the will of man, but as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God." In his Latin Bible Jerome introduced the tradition of translating this verse, "Inspired by the Holy Spirit, men spoke from God."

Actually, the English expression "inspired" is weaker than the original Greek expressions "breathed out by God" and "carried along by the Holy Spirit." In English usage a beautiful sunset or an emotional event can "inspire" a person to write a poem. The poet is motivated to write the poem by something outside of himself, but the ideas and words used in the poem are his own. Critics of the Bible, who believe that it is full of errors, sometimes try to apply this looser definition of "inspiration" to the Bible. They do this to deceive people by keeping the word "inspiration" even though they deny the "inerrancy" of the Bible. But the church's definition of "biblical inspiration" cannot be determined by a wider range of meaning permitted by English or Finnish words for "inspiration." It must be determined by what the Bible itself says about the way in which it was inspired. The Bible's very words were "breathed out by God," that is "supplied by God." Its writers were "carried along by the Holy Spirit." This definition of inspiration is supported by many other passages of the Bible.

The Bible says that the Spirit of Christ in the prophets foretold the suffering of Christ (1 Peter 1:11) and that David prophesied in Spirit (Matthew 22:43). Both of these expressions are very close to the English word "in-spiration." Prophecy was given by God through the prophet (Matthew 1:22).

Paul says, "We do not speak in words taught by human wisdom, but in [words] taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual [truths] with spiritual [words] (1 Cor 2:13). Jesus sometimes based arguments on the exact wording of a passage (John 10:35). These passages make it clear that God gave the exact words to be written.

Inspiration means that the Bible is not simply human thoughts and words about God, but God's own words. In English we call this verbal inspiration (word-for-word inspiration) or plenary inspiration (full inspiration).

Scripture therefore defines biblical "inspiration" as the process by which the Holy Spirit gave the writers the exact words which they were to write. Since the exact words were given by God, who make no errors, all the words of the Bible were without error. Though the Bible was not written to be a history book or a science book, everything it says about history and about creation is true.

Sometimes the inspired writers heard a voice or saw a vision, but at other times they did not hear or see any outward sign of inspiration, as for example when Paul wrote his letters.

Inspiration does not exclude the inspired writer's use of his memory (John), research (Luke), or written sources (in Kings and Chronicles), but this process too was directed by God. Sometimes some one other than the inspired writer collected the writings together (Proverbs 25:1).

Inspiration does not exclude the Holy Spirit making use of the writer's personality, emotions, or natural style in the writing of Scripture.

Inspiration does not exclude the use of figurative language in Scripture. Inspiration does not exclude the presence of copying errors in the many manuscripts of Scripture. (More about this in the next lecture.)

Inspiration is an Article of Faith

We can make some reasonable arguments in favor of the inspiration of the Bible, but inspiration cannot be proved by human reason. We believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture because the Holy Spirit has worked faith in us. We have had God's Law and Gospel preached to us. The Holy Spirit has worked faith in Christ in our hearts through the words of Scripture. The Holy Spirit has given confidence in Scripture. Belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is ultimately a matter of faith, not proof. Belief in the inerrancy of Scripture rests on the testimony which the Holy Spirit has given through Scripture.

The Battle to Preserve the Doctrine of Inerrancy in American Lutheranism

We will now turn to the sad story of how this important teaching of the Bible has been lost in much of American Lutheranism. Hopefully, some of the lessons learned in that battle, can also serve as an example and warning to you in the similar struggle here in Finland.

Lutherans in America

Before we discuss this battle concerning the inerrancy of the Bible in American Lutheranism, it is necessary to briefly review the major groups in American Lutheranism. This is a very simplified version of a very complicated history.

The Lutherans who migrated to America founded dozens of Lutheran church bodies or synods, because they were divided from each other by differences of doctrine, language, style of worship, and church government. Many of the Scandinavian groups who had disagreements with the beliefs or practices of the state churches, but who remained in the state church in their homeland, formed their own independent churches in America. However, as language differences disappeared, these synods began to join together to form larger Lutheran churches. Today two large Lutheran church bodies, one medium-sized body, and about 15 small church bodies remain.

The Evangelical-Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with more than 5 million members, is the second largest Lutheran church in the world. Only the state church of Sweden is bigger. The ELCA is the final result of many mergers which began already in the 1800s. In 1988 two churches which were already the result of many mergers joined together to form the ELCA. These two churches were the more confessional American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the more liberal Lutheran Church in America (LCA). The ELCA has taken in most of the Scandinavian Lutherans in America. The Suomi Synod, the largest Finnish church in America (36,000

members) joined the LCA in 1963, and thus was merged into the ELCA in 1988. The ELCA is the church body which has departed the farthest from confessional Lutheranism. Some of the churches which merged to form the ELCA began to use the historical-critical method of studying Scripture and to deny the inerrancy of the Bible already in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS) has about 2.6 million members. This church was strongly confessional in its early years, but has accepted more doctrinal difference in recent decades. The LC-MS grew through the gathering of confessional Lutheran immigrants from Germany and through very energetic evangelism. Most of the congregations of the Finnish National Church (12,000 members) joined the LCMS in 1964.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), the synod of which I am a member, has about 400,000 members. Like the LC-MS, it grew through a combination of German immigration and mission expansion. It remains the most strongly confessional of the Lutheran Church bodies in America. WELS congregations in Upper Michigan have a significant number of Finnish members, including one of the congregations of the former Finnish National Church.

One predominantly Finnish group remains independent of any of these larger churches, namely, the Apostolic Lutheran Church in America. It was founded by Finnish immigrants influenced by the Laestadian revival and preserves the main emphases of that movement. It has about 7000 baptized members.

The Denial of Biblical Inerrancy in the ELCA

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy was deliberately rejected in the official doctrinal confession of the ELCA, even though this doctrine had been confessed in the constitution of one of the churches which joined to form the ELCA, namely, the American Lutheran Church.

ELCA's confession was carefully worded to allow the belief that there are many errors in Scripture. This confession speaks highly of the Bible's ability to bring people to faith, but it says nothing about the Bible's truthfulness or its historical accuracy. Because those who deny the inerrancy of Scripture try to use clever language to conceal their rejection of Scripture, it is necessary for us to look carefully at the statement of the ELCA. Their confession says:

The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world. COF 2.02

This statement may not sound too bad, but it is designed to deceive the unsuspecting. It calls the Bible "inspired," but it does not clearly state whether Scripture actually contains true statements from God or whether it simply tells us about the religious experience of its writers. The statement does not specifically say the Bible has errors in it, but neither does it say that the Bible is free from errors. It avoids dealing with the very point which was being disputed. The confession is trying to give the impression that it upholds the inspiration of Scripture, but at the same time it allows the belief that the Bible is full of errors.

When the confession says the Bible "records and announces" God's revelation, it means something different from the traditional statement that the Bible is revelation from God. The ELCA confession says the Bible tells us about the religious experience of the writers. In this view the "revelation" is limited to the experience of the writer. When we say the Bible is revelation from God, we mean that the words of the Bible are themselves still revelation from God today.

The ELCA statement also implies that the only content of Scripture which must be accepted within the church is the information which creates faith in Christ as our Savior. The confession implies that the power which the Bible has to create faith in us is important, but it allows the opinion that we do not need to believe all the other things which the Bible says. For example, Christians are not obligated to obey the moral

commandments given in the Scripture, such as the warnings against homosexuality, adultery, and divorce since these are not part of the “gospel core” of the Bible.

The confession declares ELCA’s loyalty to Scripture as the inspired Word of God. This may deceive the unsuspecting, but anyone who looked at the history of the churches which merged to form the ELCA could see that this wording was a deliberate rejection of the article concerning Scripture in the ALC constitution, which had included the term “inerrant.” There were pleas by some members of the ALC to keep the concept of biblical inerrancy in the ELCA confession, but they were decisively rejected.

The comments of an ELCA theologian make it clear that their confession was deliberately designed to hide the real beliefs of the church’s leaders.

What is the ELCA’s specific view of the authority of Scripture? The confession simply affirms that the Bible is “the inspired Word of God.” Some Lutherans are disappointed that there is no claim that the Bible is infallible, inerrant, or non-contradictory. But it serves us well not to rush by “inspired” without considering its strong claim. The ELCA affirms that God has spoken and still speaks through the Bible to bring us to faith. Adjectives are not piled up to emphasize the meaning of “inspired.” Instead, the confession makes a sweeping claim about the Bible’s function. (*The Lutheran*, Nov. 23, 1988, p. 17.)

Notice that this statement says that what the Bible does (its function) is more important than what it says (its truthfulness). But how can the Bible create true faith in us unless what it says is true? For example, how can Jesus’ bodily resurrection give us confidence of our resurrection if it never happened?

Why Those Who Deny Inerrancy Hide Their Unbelief

ELCA’s confession is clearly intended to reject the full verbal inspiration of Scripture, but it had to try to conceal this because many of the laypeople, especially in the ALC, still believed in the inerrancy of the Bible. When the LCA and the ALC were formed in the early 1960’s, many people wondered, “Why two Lutheran churches instead of one?” One reason was disagreement about Scripture. Many people in the ALC insisted that their constitution should keep the doctrine of Scripture expressed by their forefathers in their 1919 and 1930 confessions, which described the Bible as “the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God.”

The LCA constitution, on the other hand, showed the influence of the historical-critical approach and rejected inerrancy.

It is clear which approach won out in the 1988 ELCA confession. The more liberal LCA approach was clearly the winner. However, the victory did not require much of a battle, because it is now clear that the 1960 ALC confession was a trick intended to deceive confessional pastors and laypeople. From the beginning the ALC’s 1960 confession of scriptural inerrancy was merely a deception designed to lure the conservatives into going along with the merger. Even while the leading theologians of the ALC were putting the word “inerrant” into their constitution, they were publicly rejecting its real meaning. In spite of the statement of inerrancy in the ALC constitution, its leading theologians did not believe or teach inerrancy. On the contrary in their seminaries they taught that the Bible has many errors and denied many doctrines of Scripture. When the ALC merged with the LCA to form the ELCA, they felt the time had come to openly admit this.

Since the ELCA merger, a strong effort has been made to inform the lay people about the negative critical view of Scripture and to win them over to this viewpoint. This effort has been only partly successful. A recent poll in *The Lutheran* revealed that about 60% of ELCA lay people believe in scriptural inerrancy in some form, but 80% of the pastors believe that there are historical and factual errors in the Bible.

How Those Who Believe in Inerrancy Lost the Truth

The biggest losers in the ELCA merger were the conservatives in the ALC who believed in inerrancy. Many voices in the ALC were raised against the ELCA merger. The Fellowship of Ev. Lutheran Laity and Pastors and the Iowa Committee for Lutheran Co-operation opposed the merger or tried to influence it in a more conservative direction. More than 800 ALC congregations voted against the merger, but only about 40 ALC congregations refused to enter the merger when the majority accepted it. Why this great difference?

The conservative, confessional movement in the ALC failed to have any significant effect on the new church because it was a house-divided from the very beginning. It was a shaky alliance of orthodox Lutherans, fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, neo-orthodox, and people alarmed by the promotion of sexual immorality in the LCA and ALC. They all were disturbed by certain doctrines and practices of the new church, but they themselves had no true agreement on the nature of scriptural inerrancy nor on the principles of church fellowship. A few of those who held the strongest views on Scripture refused to join the ELCA and formed a new church body, the American Association of Lutheran Congregations (AALC), but this group is now suffering divisions because they did not have a common, clear understanding of inspiration and inerrancy, nor were they united in doctrine.

Even before the merger was completed, many of the conservatives had announced that they would go along with the merger even if their beliefs were rejected by the ELCA leaders. This certainly undermined any influence their testimony in favor of inerrancy might have had. Many charismatics stayed with the ELCA in the naive hope that their spirituality could somehow revitalize a church which had no solid doctrinal foundation. A significant reason for the failure of the conservative movement to have much impact on the merger may have been that so many of its supporters were much more concerned about personal religious experience than about sound doctrinal statements. In the end most of them placed personal ties and group loyalties ahead of the truth of God's Word. Many other ALC members sympathized with the moral and doctrinal concerns of the protesters, but they remained silent while the battle was lost. Although a few of those who remain in ELCA fight for biblical truth, a public witness for the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy has almost been silenced in ELCA. As a result every possible denial of biblical doctrine is tolerated, including even denial of the deity of Christ and the worship of the feminist goddess.

It should be clear that confessional Lutherans and the advocates of critical views of Scripture can never reach agreement in doctrine. Where there is no agreement that Scripture is the rule of doctrine, attempts to reach doctrinal agreement are useless.

Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, important as it is, is no substitute for agreement on the doctrine of Scripture, because many contemporary issues, such the inerrancy of Scripture, the role of women in the church, etc, are not directly dealt with in the Confessions. Furthermore, those who limit their acceptance of the accuracy and authority of Scripture also limit their subscription to the Confessions.

An alarming tendency among confessional Lutherans is the practice of searching the Confessions and Lutheran fathers for quotations to establish the required doctrine of the church without first going through a careful exegesis of Scripture. Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions and loyalty to their teachings is important, but it is not a substitute for establishing doctrine directly from Scripture. The confessions themselves do not wish to be a second source of doctrine, but a secondary source which testifies to the doctrine contained in Scripture. No doctrine can be established without Scripture, and in controversy confessional Lutherans should always turn first to Scripture, not the Confessions. See the introduction to the Formula of Concord for a clear statement of this principle.

A Partial Victory for Inerrancy in the LC-MS

For almost 100 years (from the 1870s till the 1960s) the LC-MS and the WELS were in complete doctrinal agreement and worked together as members of a group called the Synodical Conference. In the 1930s the LC-MS began to loosen its practices concerning doctrine and church fellowship because of its desire to work more closely with the ALC. The WELS objected to this change. After many years of unsuccessfully

admonishing the LC-MS about this departure from Scripture, the WELS in 1961 found it necessary to end its joint work and fellowship with the LC-MS.

By the end of the 1960s the LC-MS seminary at St Louis was almost completely controlled by professors who denied the inerrancy of Scripture and who practiced the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible. The LC-MS also established full church fellowship with the ALC.

Jacob Preus, a more confessional theologian, became president of the LC-MS and suspended the president of the St. Louis seminary because of his false doctrine. In protest, nearly all of the seminary professors and students left the seminary to show their support for the seminary president. They thought they could force the LC-MS to re-instate the suspended seminary president in order to get them all to come back to the seminary. Instead President Preus accepted their resignations and started to rebuild the seminary without the protesters. The protesters formed their own seminary called Seminex (Seminary in Exile). In 1976 they formed the Association of Ev. Lutheran Churches with about 100,000 members. In 1988 they joined ELCA.

When the ALC insisted on ordaining women as pastors, the LC-MS ended its fellowship with the ALC. It also refused to enter the ELCA merger. The LC-MS, however, remains very divided on many doctrines and practices because many supporters of the Seminex viewpoint remain in the LC-MS. The LC-MS continues to seek some level of cooperation with the ELCA, but not full pulpit and altar fellowship.

Because of the lack of doctrinal agreement within the LC-MS, the WELS has been unable to reestablish its old partnership with the LC-MS in spite of the fact that the LC-MS has partially regained its former position on scriptural inerrancy.

Some Lessons Learned From the Struggle Over Inerrancy In American Lutheranism

1) Theologians who reject the inerrancy of Scripture usually try to hide their unbelief from devout pastors and laypeople by using language which makes it sound like they believe in inspiration even though they believe the Bible is full of errors.

2) official statements proclaiming belief in the inerrancy of Scripture are of no value if theologians are allowed to ignore them and to teach that the Bible is full of errors. The church must remove from office those theologians and pastors who continue to deny the inerrancy of Scripture after they have been admonished.

3) If theologians and pastors are allowed to reject the inerrancy of Scripture, very soon every other doctrine is under attack, including even the doctrine of justification and the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

4) Devout Lutherans who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture cannot preserve the true teachings of the Bible for themselves, for their children, and for future generations unless they separate themselves from false teachers who deny these truths.

5) Loyalty to the Lutheran confessions is an important mark of true Lutheranism, but it is not a substitute for a clear stand on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

6) The crucial first step for any group of Lutherans trying to restore and maintain sound confessional Lutheranism, which holds to all of the teachings of the Bible, is to be sure that they share a common understanding of the inerrancy of Scripture. This understanding must be based on Scriptures own statements about its origin and character, not on human opinions. Such a group must be sure that they are committed to this belief as the necessary foundation and rule for all of their other efforts to establish and maintain agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture.

In our second lecture, later today, we will see how the rejection of biblical inerrancy is joined with the higher critical method of studying the Bible in order to undermine nearly all the doctrines of the Bible.

Appendix 1: Additional descriptions of the ELCA view of Scripture from ELCA Leaders

Church leaders defend ELCA's rejection of inerrancy by claiming that inerrancy is un-Lutheran, and that it does not matter if the Bible has historical and scientific errors as long as it retains its power to produce faith in Christ.

"The framers of the [ELCA] confession, following the insights of many Lutheran theologians, believe that [inspiration without inerrancy] is a more accurate understanding of God's intention for the Scriptures than the term inerrancy. The non-Lutheran, 19th century concept of inerrancy leads to many unhelpful misunderstandings and questions like inerrant in what way? Is the Bible inerrant in matters of history? geneology, astronomy? These questions lead us directly away from the Scripture's purpose, which is to declare Christ, that we might believe and be saved. The Bible is the source and norm of the church's life, not because it gives us unerring information, but because God continues to speak through it. (*The Lutheran*, July 13, 1988, p. 46)

The ELCA's chief bishop has publicly declared that Scripture merely gives us guidance or suggestions concerning how we should answer doctrinal and moral questions. We do not have to obey everything it says. We merely use the Bible as one of several sources in making decisions concerning what Christians should believe and practice.

"The prescriptive method (of using Scripture) is based on the assumption that Scripture is used to discover final answers to questions. Thus, when confronted with a particularly thorny issue, one could go to Scripture, study carefully every text that addresses the issue and come up with a conclusive response. Scripture as "norm" means Scripture as answer book.

I suspect that most of us in the [ELCA] come at these matters from the descriptive method. We see Scripture as no less important But for us "norm" means "guide" rather than "rule." Having informed ourselves of what Scripture has to say, we go on to ask questions about other ways in which God may be trying to enlighten us." (*The Lutheran*, March 21, 1989).

According to this view Scripture does not reveal facts about God which are the basis for our faith, but it merely tells us about the faith experiences of the early church so that we can have the same experience they had. This makes Scripture less than the "very words of God." (Ro 3:2)

ELCA theologians still call the Bible the Word of God, but by this they do not mean that it actually records the words of God, but only that God can communicate with us through the Bible.

In modern Protestant fundamentalism [ELCA's name for groups like the WELS and LC-MS], which ironically claims to bear the legacy of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture is extended to include infallible information on all kinds of subjects. Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry.. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel. Non-fundamentalist Protestants [i.e. ELCA] also accept the Bible as the Word of God in some sense, but they point out that the concept of the Word of God, as Barth made clear, cannot be confined to the Bible. (I, 79, 75)

Today it is impossible to assume the historicity of the things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place. (I, 76)

The disastrous effects of this approach upon any attempt to write a summary of Christian doctrine are exposed by the following statement:

Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrong-headed, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus. (I, 77)

Appendix 2: Comparison of WELS and ELCA

Scriptural Teachings Maintained by the WELS

Sample of the False Teachings Tolerated in ELCA

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| 1. The Bible is the inspired,
errorless Word of God. | 1. The Bible contains many
errors. |
| 2. Jesus' words and actions as
are many of the things true history. | 2. Jesus did not do or say reported in the Gospels
reported in the Gospels. |
| 3. Adam and Eve were real people. | 3. Genesis 1-3 are myths. |
| 4. Jesus' death was a true payment
for all of our sins. | 4. The theory that Jesus'
death was a payment for
sin is one of several
theories which could
explain his death. |
| 5. Eternal life is possible only
through faith in Christ. | 5. It is possible to be saved
without faith in Christ. |
| 6. Sex outside of marriage and
homosexuality are sins. | 6. Sex outside of marriage
and homosexuality may be
alright if practiced in a
loving relationship. |
| 7. Churches must agree on all
doctrines of Scripture before
they can practice church
fellowship together. | 7. It is not necessary or
possible for churches to
agree on all doctrines of
Scripture. |