

God's Word - A Heritage To Guard

[48th Biennial Convention – WELS : Michigan Lutheran Seminary : Saginaw, Michigan :
August 5 – 9, 1985]

by James J. Westendorf

During the first thirty years of its existence the synod had drawn pastors from many sources. As early as 1866 the synod had severed its relations with Basel, “because of the sad experiences with the pastors sent from there,” but it had not seen fit to establish its own seminary, the only remedy for its manpower shortage. The hope of relieving the situation by affiliation with the General Council was never realized. The synod called pastors from Krischona, from the synod affiliated with the Council, from Wuerttemberg, and at last from Hermannsburg and Kropp. In this manner, however, the synod would never be a unified body. The constant changes and the difference in theological background and position made uniformity in doctrine and practice almost impossible.

President Eberhardt repeatedly called attention to the need of an institution for the training of pastors. In 1884 the synod took cognizance of this need in the following resolution: “That the importance of training pastors be considered, because we must rely on ourselves for such training instead of on others; and that the time is at hand for the practical realization of this desire.” Michigan Lutheran Seminary was founded in 1885.¹

With these words our Synod's centennial publication, *Continuing in His Word*, describes the need which the old Michigan Synod felt for training its own pastors, thereby providing itself with confessionally sound men whose ministries in the congregations which they served would bring about a real Christian fellowship based on God's word. It shows the very important role which this school played in meeting that need. And it reveals the very close connection between the multiple anniversaries which are being observed here this year.

One of the reasons why the Michigan District of the WELS, the successor of the Michigan Synod, on the occasion of its 125th anniversary can join representatives of its sister districts in the Synod under the theme, “God's Word is Our Great Heritage” is because the Lord of the church blessed Michigan Lutheran Seminary and enabled it to carry out the program for which it was created. From its inception 100 years ago faithful teachers at this institution such as Pastors C. Eberhardt and F. Huber and Teacher E. Sperling gave men their theological training who in their ministries kept the Synod faithful to God's word. Men like Fred Krauss and John Westendorf who were enrolled in the first class of the school became influential leaders to the Synod and later also in the Joint Synod. Then 75 years ago when the Michigan Synod rejoined the Joint Synod after a decade or more of unrest, this school became a preparatory school of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. Under the leadership for many years of its first director and teacher, Director O.J.R. Hoenecke, (one need only to have graduated from this school slightly over 20 years ago to have met him personally in the hallways) the work of this institution continued, no longer as a theological seminary, but still playing its role in the training of full-time workers for the Lord's Kingdom. Michigan Lutheran Seminary continues to carry out the responsibilities handed down to it by former generations, and the Lord continues to bless

that work and the Synod which it serves. The investment which the Synod has just now made on this campus is a clear answer to the question of whether the WELS values the contribution of this school to kingdom work or not.

But in this anniversary year let us not forget the theme of this convention. It reminds us that although we thank God for those who formerly led and taught us, they were marvelous gifts to the church, men are not our heritage. Although this writer who is of the third generation of his family to have sat in the classrooms of MLS and others who have graduated from here are grateful for the education and guidance which they received, institutions, even Christian institutions, are not our chief inheritance from those who went before us. Nor is the Christian fellowship which we enjoy in our congregations, districts or Synod the lasting heritage we possess. Men, institutions and church bodies change or pass away altogether. God's word alone remains. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away," Jesus reminds his disciples (Matt.24:35). God's word, that is the real treasure which has been committed to us for safekeeping that we might be able to pass it on in the same pure form in which we received it to those who follow us. Therefore we wish to consider in this first of two papers to be presented at our convention the following aspect of our theme:

God's Word - A Heritage To Guard

under the following headings:

- I. Our Heritage Defined
- II. Our Heritage Guarded from Evils Without
- III. Our Heritage Guarded from Dangers Within

I. Our Heritage Defined

What do you think of when you hear the words, "God's word?" Is there any doubt in your mind what is being referred to? I believe that almost without exception we would all immediately identify God's word with the holy scriptures, the 66 written, canonical works that make up the bible. We are not surprised when a pastor calls the text he has chosen for the Sunday sermon a portion from God's word. We know exactly what he is talking about.

But nothing is allowed to be simple or easy in our world today. In a new work entitled *Christian Dogmatics* published by Fortress Press, the publishing house of the Lutheran Church in America, Carl E. Braaten, writes a surprisingly short chapter devoted to the holy scriptures which closes with a section entitled "The Problem of Scripture Today."ⁱⁱ The problem in his mind is what really is God's word. He identifies three different individuals or things which he says are properly called the word of God. We will discuss them later. To identify the word of God chiefly with the written words of the bible he would see at best as an oversimplification of a complex issue or at worst a case of mistaken identity. Today "God's word is our Great Heritage" will mean different things to different people. Let us see how we can legitimately equate God's word with the words of scripture.

Part of the gracious love which God has toward us is that he wishes to communicate with us. Although he is a being whose very essence is far beyond our comprehension, he condescends to fellowship with his creatures. So when Moses describes the Lord's actions following Adam and Eve's fall into sin, he speaks of him as walking in the garden. The Hebrew participle here describes an action characteristic of God. We do not know how long a time period existed between God's sanctifying the seventh day and man's fall. Luther felt that the sin took place on the seventh day. But regardless of how many times the Lord had a chance to do it in the past, his walking to meet his creatures was something which he did or intended to do often. In Genesis 18 the Lord appears to Abraham eating and talking with him.

God is pictured in the Old Testament as one who wishes to and is capable of communicating with mankind in human language in words which man can understand. In fact the very first action which is ascribed to God in the bible is that of speaking, to that speaking God performed a very basic function of human language, that of giving names to and identifying the parts of his creation.

Furthermore, God spoke to certain individuals whom he had chosen. "And the Lord God commanded the man ..." (Gen. 2:16). "But the Lord God called to the man ..." (Gen. 3:9). "But the Lord appeared to Abram and said ..." (Gen. 12:7). "God called to him (Moses) from within the bush ..." (Ex. 3:4). "Then the Lord called Samuel ..." (1 Sam. 3:4). "The Lord said to me (Isaiah) ... The Lord spoke to me again: ..." (Is. 8:15). "The word of the Lord came to me (Jeremiah), saying, ..." (Jer. 1:6). The list could go on and on.

Often this speaking to an individual was not only for that individual's benefit, but he was to serve as a messenger bringing God's words to others, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites this: ...'" (Ex. 20:22). "The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel's word came to all Israel" (1 Sam. 3:21-4:1). "Then I (Isaiah) heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' He said, 'Go and tell this people: ...'" (Is. 6:8-9a).

This entire activity of God speaking in human language to specific individuals with specific words, which we call "verbal inspiration," is clearly revealed in the conversation which the prophet Jeremiah had with the Lord:

"The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.' 'Ah, Sovereign Lord,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you'" (Jer. 1:4-6).

Very often it was the will of God that his words be recorded, written down so that what he had said would be available not only to those to whom the prophet was able to speak directly, but also for posterity. The second instance of writing recorded in the Bible has not some man writing for God, but the Lord himself writing his commandments on stone. "The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets" (Ex. 32:16). Otherwise, men wrote, often at the expressed command of God. "Moses then wrote down everything the Lord

had said” (Ex. 24:4). “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel” (Ex. 34:27). ‘Isaiah is told, “Go, now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness” (Is. 30:8), and Jeremiah reveals, “ ... this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Take a scroll and write on It all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now’ ” (Jer. 36:1b-2).

All of these Old Testament instances of this activity of God are summarized by the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament when he says, “in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ... ” (Heb. 1:1). “God spoke,” we are told. The words of the prophets were his words. Nor were they only for the forefathers as the Apostle Paul reveals when he says, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

That Paul considered the words of the Old Testament to be equal with words coming directly from God’s mouth is clear from the way he uses scripture in Romans 9:17, “For the *scripture* says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth,’ ” and in Galatians 3:8 “The *scripture* foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ ” Paul says that scripture spoke, but the Old Testament reveals that in both cases God was speaking first of all to Moses and in the second case to Abraham.

These acts could be attributed to “scripture” only as the result of such a habitual identification, in the mind of the writer, of the text of scripture with God as speaking, that it became natural to use the term “scripture says,” when what was really intended was “God, as recorded in scripture, said.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This same view of the Old Testament scriptures is held by Jesus. In Matthew 19:4&5 our Savior says, “Haven’t you read ... that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’?” But God did not speak these words directly in Genesis 2:24. Either Moses or Adam did. Yet Jesus says that to quote these words of scripture is to quote God.

The writer to the Hebrews makes this same use of the written word. In the first chapter of his book he quotes Deut. 32:43, Ps. 104:4, Ps. 45:6&7 and Ps. 102:25-27, and he says that God has spoken these words. In each case, however, it was not God who spoke these words directly in the Old Testament text. Rather they were spoken to or about God. Yet the New Testament writer claims to be quoting God himself. He testifies to us that the written Old Testament can be equated with God’s word.

The same things which we have just pointed out about the Old Testament can also be said of the New. True, we do not have a later inspired witness to guide our view of these books. But the New Testament clearly testifies to its own divine origin. The Apostle Paul speaks of his being chosen as the Lord’s special messenger in words similar to those of Jeremiah:

Paul, an apostle -- sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead ... I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up, I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ ... when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb (footnote, NIV) and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus." (Gal. 1:1,11-12,15-17)

Paul lets us know what he thinks of his own message when he says to the Thessalonians, "... when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe," (1 Thess. 2:13) and to the Corinthians, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Cor. 2:13).

The writer to the Hebrews tells us through whom God's New Testament word comes to us when he says, "... in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son," (Heb. 1:2) and Peter declares how that word of Christ was to be proclaimed, "I want you to recall ... the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles" (2 Pet. 3:2). In the same letter Peter equates Paul's writings to the rest of, scripture when he says, "His (Paul's) letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16b).

All of this activity simply fulfilled the promise which Jesus gave to his disciples in the upper room, "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:25-26).

The total picture which the scriptures present is a compelling one. Miracle of miracles, God speaks to us through men! And in so doing he give us his holy word. Peter looks at the authors of the scriptures and says they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21), not against their will, but certainly not because of it. Paul looks at the unique product of their mouths and their pens and calls their writings "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). God is the real author of their words. To listen to them is to listen to God himself.

Since the words of both Old and New Testament are the words of the God who does not lie, whose Son proclaims, "I am ... the truth," (John 14:6) and prays, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth,"(John 17:17) we can confidently say that the words of scripture are inerrant and infallible. As such they are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," (2 Tim. 3:16) and we may appeal to them as the final authority as Jesus did when he quoted the scriptures to his enemies and said, "The scriptures cannot be broken" (John 10:35b). When scripture speaks, God is speaking. And that is true whether scripture speaks on things in the area of spiritual truths, science, history, chronological data or any other area of knowledge to which the scriptures address themselves. This allows them to serve as a "norm," a

standard by which all other writings and teachings maybe judged, corrected or rejected. This is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he said that the scriptures are “God-breathed,” for he follows this description of scripture with the assurance that they can be applied to teach, rebuke, correct and train (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). This surely is the judgment of the Lutheran Confessions as the opening paragraph of the Formula of Concord, Epitome states,

We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament atone, as it is written Ps. 119,105: “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” And St. Paul: “Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,” Gal.1,8.^{iv}

This is the heritage which has been handed down to us by our spiritual forefathers. They fought for and defended it, that it might remain clear and pure for us. We also are asked to guard our heritage of God’s word, not because God needs our puny efforts to preserve his inspired word, but so that our lack of effort or despising our heritage does not cause it to be lost or at least hindered in its work in the generations which, God willing, will follow us.

II. Our Heritage Guarded from Evils Without

“ ‘Where did this man get these things?... Isn’t this the carpenter?... ’ And they took offense at him” (Mark 6:2&3). With these questions of doubt and unbelief the people of Nazareth rejected the words and miracles of Jesus. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, God’s answer to all of his Old Testament promises of deliverance and restoration for his people and all nations. But they could only see the carpenter, a humble man from humble surroundings, and they rejected his testimony about himself.

In the past two centuries the bible has endured a reception similar to the one which Jesus received in Nazareth. Its detractors insist that the bible is a human book. It did not fall from the sky, a finished revelation of God. Its authors were men who lived at certain times, in certain places and under certain circumstances. Therefore, the bible can be studied like any other book of human origin. It can be no more inerrant or infallible than its fallible human writers were. It will contain errors because the knowledge of its authors was limited or at times mistaken. And sometimes men purposely tried to deceive their readers, e.g., the writer of Deuteronomy if he wasn’t Moses.

Furthermore, the supernatural in scripture, if not to be out and out denied, is certainly to be strongly suspected as the fanciful interpretation by a superstitious people of events which their less scientific minds could find no explanation for. Today we know that God does not supernaturally break into and change the course of human history. If he has any impact on human history at all, it is only as an operator behind the scenes. The man of faith will, of course, perceive him there. It is like the Christian attributing the weather on a particularly nice day to God and his gracious favor. This does not mean that God brought this day about supernaturally. The weather is the result of natural causes, and yet God uses them to accomplish his purposes. Now no Christian would deny that God does operate that way. But the naturalistic critic of the

Bible insists that that is the only way in which he operates. History is a closed continuum. Every event has its natural causes which brought it about. There is no or very little room for miracles and this includes the miracle of the verbal inspiration of scripture. This attitude is clearly represented by a pioneer in the naturalistic approach to the bible, Hermann Gunkel, who wrote:

We believe that God works in the universe in the silent and secret background of all things; sometimes his influence seems almost tangible, as in the case of personalities; we divine his control in the marvellous interdependence of things; but nowhere does he appear as an operative factor beside others, but always as the last and ultimate cause of everything.^v

With these presuppositions (and they are presuppositions; notice that Gunkel says, “we believe;” this view is an article of faith with him) the naturalistic, rationalistic scholar approaches the bible. The methodology which he uses to study the scriptures is called “the historical-critical” method.

Perhaps a brief word of explanation is in order. We call our approach to the bible the “historical-grammatical” approach. In this approach the student of scripture seeks to discover the true meaning of the text, using whatever linguistic tools and other bible study aids that are available to him. Having discovered that meaning he then accepts the witness of the text as the truth, whether that truth concerns the author of the book, the time in which it was written, the events which are reported to have taken place or the teachings that are set forth. In other words the text governs the interpretation of the student.

In the “historical-critical” approach nothing which the bible says is simply accepted as true. The text must prove the likelihood of its truthfulness to the mind of the scholar who will judge the text on the basis of what he deems to be reasonable and in harmony with the way his studies tell him that other comparable literature has come into being and the way it speaks. In other words the interpretation of the scholar determines the truthfulness and reliability of the text.

Time will not allow us to go into any depth of discussion concerning the theories set forth by historical-critical scholars on the origin of the bible or to show the havoc they wreak on the bible’s own testimony to its origin and message. Volumes have been written on the subject over several hundred years. A brief outline will have to suffice.^{vi}

The first section of the Old Testament to come to the attention of the critics was the Pentateuch. Over two hundred years ago scholars began denying the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the bible. Their approach is called “source criticism.” Using various criteria such as the name which the author used for God these critics claimed to be able to separate out the various sources which were used to create the text of the Pentateuch as we have it. After much time and disagreement four sources have been set forth on which there is some, but certainly not total agreement. The critics call them J (because the author likes to use Yahweh, Jahweh in German; as his name for God), E (because its author likes the Hebrew word Elohim as the name for God), P (because its author speaks of priestly concerns) and O (because its author is responsible for the bulk of the book of Deuteronomy). J is supposed to be the oldest source written by person or persons unknown around 850 B.C. in the southern kingdom of Judah. E is likewise by an

unknown author living in the northern kingdom of Israel around 750 B.C. because its theology is more developed, comes from the time of the Babylonian captivity and D with its message of centralized worship was written or received in its accepted form in 621 B.C. to give authority to the religious reforms of King Josiah of Judah.

These sources are then theorized to have been combined by editors or redactors. J and E were supposedly combined around 650 B.C. to form JE. A priestly redactor(s) then added his material shortly after the exile, probably during the time of Ezra around 500 to 450 B.C. At this time the entire body of material was added to the book of Deuteronomy which is supposed to have been accepted as authoritative from the time of Josiah, and we have the Pentateuch in its present form.

The theologies of these alleged sources are also set off against each other. Take for example the first three chapters of Genesis. Two and three belong to J. He preserved old stories which have a primitive, almost mythological view of God and the world. He walks around on earth; he forms men with his hands and gives them life by breathing into them; serpents talk in this world, etc. The creation account of P, however, from a later time has a much more dignified view of God. He creates from heaven and does so with his almighty word. The order of events is also said to be in conflict between the two accounts. So instead of two complementary accounts of creation, we have conflicting ones.

To mention just a couple of other examples of so-called conflicting sources in the Pentateuch: 1.) the flood account is separated into two sources. J again more primitive and folksy in its account says the flood took place over forty days, while P's more formal and dry account (if indeed you can have a "dry" account of the flood) says that it took place over a year and 10 days. 2.) J sees sacrifice as beginning at the dawn of human history with Cain and Abel, whereas P who is trying to protect the priest's prerogative to sacrifice doesn't introduce it until the establishment of the Levitical priesthood at Sinai. Let these examples suffice.

In the New Testament source criticism also has been busy especially in dealing with the four gospels. We let Dr. Becker summarize its theories:

In a general way it may be said that, according to the most widely accepted form of New Testament source criticism, Mark, or a book very similar to Mark, copied and revised by the author of our present Mark, was written first. Since both Matthew and Luke have much material also found in Mark, they must have copied Mark or Mark's predecessor. Since they have much material in common which is not found in Mark, they must both have used a common source, called Q. Q is the first letter of the German word, "Quelle," which means source, and when the scholars say that the source of the common material in Matthew and Luke is Q, this is simply a scholarly way of saying that the source of the material that is found in both Matthew and Luke is the source. Finally, since Matthew has some material that is found in neither Mark nor Luke there must have been a third source, and since no one knows what that source was it is simply called M. And since Luke has material that is found in neither Mark nor Matthew, there must be a fourth source, which is called L."^{vii}

As in Old Testament source criticism the alleged New Testament sources are often pitted against each other and made to appear contradictory rather than complementary. So the source critic is accustomed to speaking of Petrine, Pauline and Johannine theologies as though they were opposite points of view competing for a place in the early church.

Since the early 1900s form criticism has been added to source criticism in the historical-critical approach to the bible. Form criticism theorizes that before any sources preserved any parts of the Old or New Testaments in writing, many of these parts, especially the narrative portions of the bible, existed in an oral form spread by word of mouth. These oral accounts passed through many stages as did their written counterparts later on. Often they contained a kernel of truth about the historical events they reported. But in time they were revised, enlarged (especially with miracles and great deeds said to have been performed by the central, heroic figure such as Abraham, Moses or Jesus) or reinterpreted by the community that was using them.

What we have before us in the bible then according to the historical-critical approach are oral accounts revised and reinterpreted numerous times, preserved in written sources which themselves have undergone considerable transformation. Eyewitness accounts, miracles, specific prophecy, scientific data and the history recorded in the bible are all denied or radically revised, and the question is raised whether there really is anything at all that we can know with any certainty, including facts about the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.^{viii}

Such an approach hardly allows the bible to be a lamp unto our feet or a light unto our path. The bible becomes a book of doubt and uncertainty. It is filled with likelihoods and probabilities, but no sure truth. And, of course, the idea of God inspiring certain individuals with his inerrant and infallible word is absolutely ridiculous.

This view of scripture is generally the view of the “liberal” bible scholar. And it is not just found in the ivory towers of universities and seminaries throughout our land. It also finds its way into the pulpit and the pew. After attending a seminar on Pentateuchal criticism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison several years ago a pastor of a liberal, mainline denomination said that he was so excited about what he had learned about source criticism that he was going to teach his Sunday school children how to detect the various sources that were supposed to make up the book of Genesis. Somehow I don’t think that is what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he directed fathers to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord (cf. Eph. 6:4).

But in the Lutheran church especially in the past twenty years we have found ourselves confronted with people who consider themselves “moderates.” Thus is the class into which those fall who left the Missouri Synod in the last fifteen years to form the AELC and it includes many of the theologians of the LCA and the ALC. Perhaps you recognize these three church bodies as the ones who are planning to unite to form a large, new Lutheran church body in 1988.

What is a moderate, and what is his view of God’s word, our great heritage? First of all moderate Lutheran theologians accept both the method and many of the results of the historical-critical approach to scripture. To do anything else, they feel, would be a sacrifice of the gift of intelligence, and would make it impossible to witness to modern human beings in this scientific

age. Although many of them warn of excesses in the use of the method and speak of the limits of its usefulness, all give it some kind of praise. Dr. Ralph W. Quere on the faculty of Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque says,

In modern times, the historical-critical method has helped us understand how, within Scripture, traditions are reappropriated and reinterpreted ...

The historical-critical method attempts to take seriously “sola Scripture” as the only source of proclamation by helping us discern what the text meant and therefore means.^{ix}

These statements might sound good if we didn’t already know how destructive the historical-critical method is of the clear, simple message of the scripture, and how it more often tells the bible rather than asks it what it means.

But the theologians of these Lutheran church bodies are moderates, not liberals. If they accept the historical-critical method, what is the difference? The difference is the teachings of the Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, and of others like Emil Brunner who joined him in championing a movement that has come to be called “neo-orthodoxy.” Barth’s teachings were labeled “neo-orthodox” because they were a reaction against the liberal approach to scripture in which he had been brought up. He rightly concluded that the liberal approach to the bible had left nothing which he could give to the people to whom he was ministering. As a result he sought to regain the word of God in scripture. But how do you do that when the historical-critical method had made mincemeat of the scriptures and denied any kind of divine intervention in the writing of them? What Barth created was a new “theology of the word.” What it attempted to do was to allow one to have one’s cake (God’s word) and eat it too (historical criticism). He used the vocabulary of the old orthodox theologians of both the Lutheran and Reformed traditions so that he seemed to be advocating a return to orthodoxy. But the return was only superficial. In fact Brunner boldly states, “Orthodoxy has become impossible for anyone who knows anything of science. This I would call fortunate.”^x

Lutheran moderates for years have used Barth to enable them to take a stand somewhere in between the liberal and biblical views of scripture. I remember when I was a seminary student having a friend who was also a student, but at an LCA seminary. His reaction was a mixture of surprise and contempt when he heard that we at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary did not use Barth’s commentary on Romans or his work on Christian dogmatics as the basis for our studies in these areas.

In this paper we will take only the main point of Barth’s theology and see its home in the moderate Lutheran view of scripture. It states: *The Word of God in the Bible is Christ.*

These words sound good at first reading even though calling Christ the “Word of God” is an extremely rare use of the phrase indeed. Professor Philip Quanbeck on the faculty of Augsburg College in Minneapolis explains that statement in this way:

While biblical statements cannot be casually disregarded, we have the responsibility and opportunity to distinguish, as Luther did, between what is more important and what is less important in the Bible. How do we do this? As Christians, we realize that the prism through which we understand and respond to the Bible is Jesus. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the central feature and primary content of the scripture.^{xi}

There is much in these statements which we can agree with. Surely, Christ is the “central feature and primary content of the scripture.” But the thrust of this assertion for Quanbeck is that therefore anything that does not refer to Christ is unimportant and unreliable, because he has said in the same article:

When we try to apply the claim of “inerrancy” to the Bible, we discover difficulties. The Bible, for example, is not an authority in matters of science or world geography. It ought not to be regarded as the norm for information on the age of the earth or the location of the continents. So the authority of the Bible in our life and in the church does not depend on its being without error in terms of science or geography.^{xii}

This type of approach to scripture is called, “Gospel reductionism.” It follows Barth’s method of dividing the category “Word of God” into three classifications. Each is less reliable than the other. The presiding bishop of the ALC, David W. Preus, in an editorial in the Lutheran Standard entitled, “God’s Word--Our Great Heritage,” says,

... God’s Word to us is first of all Christ himself, the person Jesus. God addresses and saves us through a “person” - through Jesus, the whole person, his deeds and words: God’s Word is also the “message,” both law and gospel, that centers in Christ. God’s Word is also the sacred “Scriptures,” the written record and witness of God’s revelation through Jesus Christ.^{xiii}

Again there is truth in these words. That is what makes them so dangerous. Nobody will deny that the great revelation of God is in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Apostle John himself says, “No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18). But the implication is already present in these words that it is only the witness to Christ which makes both the message and the written word God’s word, “gospel reductionism.” That Preus wishes to set the witness to Christ in the bible against the need for inerrancy becomes obvious as his editorial continues,

A subtle temptation is to think that we can believe in Christ because the Scriptures are an infallible and inerrant document. That turns things around by suggesting that if we first believe the Scriptures are true, then we will be able to believe in Jesus. That shifts the focus to arguments as to whether or not the Scriptures are true.^{xiv}

Preus’ point plain and simple is that if we believe what the bible says about Christ, we really don’t have to be concerned with anything else.

Once again the doctrine is accepted and applied, not just proclaimed by leaders, often with sad results. I once had a woman who is a member of one of the merging Lutheran church bodies tell me that it didn't matter to her at all whether Adam and Eve were historical characters or not or whether that part of Genesis was true. She believed in Jesus Christ as her Savior. Then she said she was preparing to teach an adult bible class on Romans, apparently unaware that by dismissing the second and third chapters of Genesis as unimportant, she was also dismissing Paul's teaching concerning Christ in Romans, chapter five, where he calls Christ the second Adam who came to undo the damage done by the first. Sometimes you cannot have your cake and eat it too.

It might also be pointed out in this connection that even though Christ seems to be highly honored in the neo-orthodox view of things, his divinity suffers along with the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Carl Braaten says, "Modern theology continues to show a marked preference for stressing the humanity of God in Christ . . . ,"^{xv} and with good reason, for Christ believes in verbal inspiration, otherwise he would not have used the scriptures the way he did. Was he mistaken? Was his knowledge limited in this area? Did he just go along with the mistaken ideas of his contemporaries? All of these solutions to the problem have been suggested by modern theologians. No wonder they emphasize the humanity of Christ, and in effect deny or at least compromise his divinity.

An example of such compromise is to be found in the report of our Commission on Inter-church Relations in the Book of Reports and Memorials for this convention. There the sad situation in the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church in East Germany is described:

... examples of such historical-critical principles now tolerated ... are the following: a) the contention that Christ was both fallible and infallible; fallible in historical, natural science and literary matters; infallible in matters pertaining to salvation; b) the contention that biblical statements regarding historical facts may in principle be subject to correction on the basis of historical proof, that statements of Jesus and his apostles, for example, concerning certain people and events in the Old Testament are true only in their spiritual context, but not as having actually occurred; c) the contention that there are statements of Jesus based on his contemporary human knowledge of the time, but that such contemporary-conditioned knowledge of the time can never claim binding authority in the church for all times.^{xvi}

The words seem shocking; to cut the Savior in half in this way. And yet it is simply the next logical step that must be taken when you are trying to have it both ways as the neo-orthodox, moderate, Lutheran theologians have tried to do.

Can the same thing happen to the WELS? Do we need to guard against such a mediating stance over against scripture? Let us only say this: If the church body which only a half century ago was faithful to the bible-based teachings of its forefathers, such as Walther, Stoeckhardt, F. Pieper, Engelder and others has now raised and nurtured those who now have formed the AELC, the very same thing can happen to a very short time to the church body of Hoenecke, Koehler, A.

Pieper, Schaller and Meyer. We need to resist with all the strength that the Lord can give us the ever-present allurements of giving into rationalism and in so doing lose the precious heritage that is ours.

Perhaps a brief word ought to be added here concerning the need for church discipline when it is proper. A mediating view of God's word has arisen in our midst in the past, and there is no good reason to assume that it will not happen again in the future. When that happens and all other steps to rectify the situation have failed, it will be the responsibility of those charged with supervision of doctrine and practice among us, namely, the Conference of Presidents, to take the necessary steps to discipline such groups or individuals. We need pray for and choose men for these positions of such courage and conviction that they will act when circumstances call for it and take the necessary disciplinary action even if it is unpopular at the time. Other Lutheran church bodies have often lacked such men, and their position on God's word has suffered as a result.

III. Our Heritage Guarded from Dangers Within

As is usually the case when we become aware of the speck that is in somebody else's eye, we tend to overlook the plank in our own. Lest we forget, what are some of the dangers that threaten us from within as a bible-believing church body which accepts the bible as God's verbally inspired word?

The first danger that comes to mind is pride. It is so easy to play the part of the Pharisee and looking at the beliefs of other churches say, "God, I thank you that I am not like all other men ... " There is no room in a proud church for repentance or correction. A proud church is also not a witnessing church because its attitude is, "I've got it. If you want it, you come and get it." Since pride is an inherent part of our sinful natures, all of us must remember the words of the Lord spoken through Moses to Israel, "Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people" (Deut. 9:6).

The second danger is that of traditionalism. That is the danger of leaving the bible sit on the shelf while we turn simply to what Luther, the confessions or our forefathers and teachers had to say about what the bible teaches. Somebody once complained that too many people simply are satisfied to read books about the bible, rather than the bible itself. God did not give us his word so that we could read what somebody else has to say about it. Jesus encourages us to "search the scriptures." In this vein Dr. Becker comments,

In order to find some kind of evidence to support such theories concerning the origin of the gospels and of the Pentateuch, the books of the bible are studied in meticulous detail, and we must admit that at times the amount of work that these men expend in a task whose aim, whether conscious or unconscious, is to discredit the Bible, often puts to shame the zeal of those who confess that in the bible we have the very words of God.^{xvii}

I remember when this same sainted doctor preached for a joint Reformation service in the old part of this building sometime back in the late sixties or early seventies. His message was that every age must recapture the truths of scripture for itself. It cannot just rely on what some past age believed and taught: Scripture must convince each and every generation. Anything else is traditionalism in its worst form.

This means that we cannot say that the battle over verbal inspiration was won by the dogmaticians of the 17th century, and that we need only read what they said. It means that the struggle over fellowship is not ended because it was waged in the 1950s and we can simply read what went on there. The dangers are still present, and so must be the ongoing searching of the scriptures so that the Lord may guide his church today as he has in the past.

The third danger is one of inappropriate concentration on the doctrine of inspiration. By this we do not mean to belittle this biblical truth in any way. But the doctrine of verbal inspiration is not the truth by which we are saved although it vitally supports that truth. When the jailer at Philippi asks Paul what he must do to be saved, Paul did not answer, “Believe that the bible is the verbally inspired word of God.” He rather gave him the message of that word, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved ... ” (Acts 16:31).

Again we turn to the words of Dr. Becker,

The inspiration and the inerrancy of the Scriptures are important to every one of us. But it is possible to emphasize inerrancy at the expense of the central message of the Gospel. I find it sometimes very difficult to understand how conservative Lutherans can participate in organizations which defend biblical inerrancy but which are dominated by men who deny the real presence, baptismal regeneration and the efficacy of the means of grace. After all, biblical inerrancy is above all important because it undergirds our conviction that the words and promises of God which tell us of our salvation in Christ are absolutely reliable.^{xviii}

Finally, of course, we must never forget that God did not give us his word so that we could treat it like a moon rock, cover it up with glass and simply look at it with awe and amazement. The scriptures were given to us to use. The Evangelist John says, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

So let us use it to grow in faith and obedience, to guide us to unity of doctrine and practice even in such contemporary issues as the role of man and woman which continues to gain our attention, and above all let us take it out to the world which needs to know that God has spoken to us in his word with words of comfort, deliverance and healing.

Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Tim. 1:14)

Endnotes

-
- ⁱ M. Lehninger, ed., *Continuing in His Word* (The History of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod Wisconsin and Other States, 1850-1950), Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1951, pp. 93 & 94.
- ⁱⁱ Braaten, Carl E., *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 73-78.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Warfield, Benjamin B., *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948, pp. 299-300.
- ^{iv} Concordia Triglotta, FC, Epitome, p. 777.
- ^v Gunkel, Hermann, *The Legends of Genesis*, New York: Schocken Books, 1964, p. 9.
- ^{vi} Two excellent articles on the historical-critical method are to be found in the WLQ:
Becker, Siegbert W., *The Historical-critical Method of Bible Interpretation*, Vol. 74 (1977), pp. 13-35, 132-56.
Kuske, David P., *An Analysis of Three Approaches of the Historical-critical Method of Interpretation*, Vol. 81 (1984), pp. 83-122.
- ^{vii} Becker, opus cit., p. 28.
- ^{viii} And so Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.
- ^{ix} Quere, Ralph W., "The Doctrine of the word in the Lutheran Church," (The Response of a Historical Theologian), *Occasional Papers on Theology and Ministry* (from the ALC Division Theological Education and Ministry), No. 1 (May 1984), p. 7.
- ^x As quoted in Ryrie, Charles C., *Neo-Orthodoxy*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1956, p. 45.
- ^{xi} Quanbeck, Philip, "Lutherans and the Bible" *The Lutheran Standard*, Oct. 19, 1984, p. 15.
- ^{xii} Ibid.
- ^{xiii} Preus, David W., "God's Word -- Our Great Heritage," *The Lutheran Standard*, May 18, 1984, p. 29.
- ^{xiv} Ibid.
- ^{xv} Braaten, opus cit., p. 75.
- ^{xvi} BoRaM, pp. 144-145.
- ^{xvii} Becker, opus cit., p. 28.
- ^{xviii} Becker, "Luther and Inerrancy," WLQ, Vol. 81 (1984), p. 130.