

Gospel and Scripture

The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology

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PREFACE

Lutheranism has always emphasized that the center of its faith and theology is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The historic Lutheran Confessions as well as theologians in every age have taught that God's justification of the sinner by grace for Christ's sake through faith is the "chief article" of the Christian faith and the "article on which the church stands or falls." Because of its central role in faith and theology, some theologians have described the Gospel as the "material principle" of Lutheranism.

Lutheranism has also taught that the only source, rule, and norm for its doctrine and life is Holy Scripture. Because it accepts the Scriptures as the very Word of God Himself, Lutheranism has refused to recognize any other norm for its theology or to put any other writings on the same level as the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments. This insistence that the Scriptures alone are the source and norm for our doctrine has been called the "formal principle" of Lutheranism. [1]

As the President of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod noted in his address to the 1971 Synodical Convention there has been increasing confusion within Lutheranism in recent years concerning the proper interrelationship of Gospel and Scripture. [2]

Two problems in particular merit our careful attention. One is the impression sometimes given by those who defend the authority of Holy Scripture that they have in effect made the Bible, rather than the Gospel, the heart and center--the "material principle"--of their faith. Such a view is frequently criticized as "fundamentalistic" or "biblicistic." The other problem is the impression that sometimes the Gospel is used as the norm of theology in such a way as to suggest that considerable freedom should be allowed within the church in matters which are not an explicit part of the Gospel. This view is sometimes criticized as "minimalistic" or "Gospel reductionism."

For a number of years the Commission on Theology and Church Relations has been involved in discussions on the proper relationship of Gospel and Scripture. Its previous documents have upheld the authority of Scripture while emphasizing that all Scripture is to be interpreted from the perspective of the Gospel. However, it has been apparent for some time that this topic should have a more comprehensive treatment and should deal with the question particularly on the basis of our historic Lutheran Confessions. Already in 1969 such a study was requested by the President of the Synod.

New impetus to the study was given in 1970 when the English District referred to the CTCR a memorial calling for a reaffirmation of the primacy of the Gospel. In addition, the question continues to surface in other areas of study, particularly in those dealing with Biblical interpretation and church relations.

In view of the problems relative to the interrelationship of Scripture and Gospel, this study addresses itself to the following questions:

I. What is meant by the statement that the Gospel is norm in the Scriptures?

II. In what sense is Scripture source and norm of the Gospel?

The present study is offered to the church in the hope that it will provide guidance in the study and discussion of an issue that is vital to the church's life and work. It is an attempt to chart a course that avoids the pitfall of biblicism on the one hand and of Gospel reductionism on the other.

ABBREVIATIONS

AC-Augsburg Confession

Ap-Apology of the Augsburg Confession

Ep-Epitome of the Formula of Concord

FC-Formula of Concord

LC-Large Catechism

SA-Smalcald Articles

SC-Small Catechism

SD-Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Citations from the Lutheran Confessions are either from **Concordia Triglotta, The Book of Concord** (Tappert ed.), or our own translation.

GOSPEL AND SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

The affirmation that "through faith, men obtain remission of sins and through faith in Christ are justified" is called by the Apology of the Augsburg Confession "the chief topic [article] of Christian doctrine" (IV, 1-2). While Article I of the **Formula of Concord** refers to the doctrines of creation, incarnation, sanctification, and resurrection as "the chief articles of our Christian faith" (SD 34-38), Article III says that the "article concerning

justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the chief article in the entire Christian doctrine." (6)

No one who understands the Lutheran Confessions would see a conflict between the statements quoted above. The Symbols are saying that "the Gospel, to wit ["which teaches"; German, **welches da lehrt**] that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake" (AC V, 3) is the foremost article of the total Christian doctrine and the very heart of the Christian faith. [3]

But while they are saying this, they are at the same time saying that the Gospel which "is properly the promise of the forgiveness of sins and of justification through Christ" (FC SD V, 27) is not the only article, or even the only **important** article of the Christian faith. The Symbols are saying that among the chief articles of the entire Christian doctrine, the article which teaches that men "are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith" (AC IV, 1) is chief of all. The Symbols affirm the **primacy of the Gospel** (Ap IV, 178; SA II, i, 1-5), but not in such a way that other articles of the Christian doctrine are accounted unimportant.

Jonas's translation of the Apology notes that the doctrine that we are justified freely by faith when we believe that God for Christ's sake is reconciled to us is "the **principal** matter of all Epistles, yea, of the entire Scripture" (IV, 87). In view of this statement and of what the Symbols say about God's alien and His proper work (namely, that God judges in order to show mercy; cf. Ap XII, 51, 158; FC Ep V, 10; and SD V, 11) it is fully in accord with the Symbols to hold that Scripture has been given to us **primarily** for the sake of the Gospel. While one cannot defend the view that according to the Symbols only the Gospel is God's Word, [4] it is true that the Gospel is the final word that God speaks to us in the Scriptures.

The heart, center, and ultimate message of the Bible is that God wishes to be gracious to sinners for Christ's sake. Unless one hears this voice of the Gospel (Ap IV, 257, 274; XII, 39), that is, the voice from heaven speaking absolution to terrified consciences (AC XXV, 3; Ap XII, 99), the whole point and purpose of the Scriptures has been missed. That is why the Apology says that the Gospel "is of especial service for the clear correct

understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures... and alone opens the door to the entire Bible." (IV, 2, German)

I. GOSPEL AS NORM IN THE SCRIPTURES

A. In What Sense the Gospel is Norm in the Scriptures

When the term "Gospel" is used as the Lutheran Symbols use it, namely, to mean "the gratuitous promise of the remission of sins for Christ's sake" (AP IV, 186; cf. FC Ep V, 5 and SD V, 27), then in a very real sense it is norm in the Scripture. For example, passages which speak of rewards must not be understood to mean that men can merit God's favor (AP IV, 367 ff.). It is a foregone conclusion that any doctrine or practice which robs Christ of His honor, buries the Gospel, and abolishes the promises, cannot be in agreement with the Scriptures.

The Gospel provides a rule of thumb, or norm, applicable to all of Scripture, namely, that Scripture cannot be against Christ or be in conflict with the chief article concerning the free remission of sins by grace through faith in His sole mediatorship. [5]

B. In What Sense the Gospel Is NOT Norm in the Scriptures

1. It is Not Norm In the Sense That It Abrogates God's Law and Ordinances

No Conflict Between Gospel and Bible

The Gospel which Paul preached did not keep him from saying, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph. 6:1). Paul's Gospel does prohibit teaching that children ought to be subject to their parents **in order to merit salvation**, but it in no way forbids teaching that children ought to be subject to their parents.

It is important to observe that the Symbols ask two questions concerning a given doctrine or practice: (1) What does it do to the Gospel of God's free grace toward sinners in Christ Jesus? (2) Does it have Biblical foundation?

The Apology rejects invocation of saints both on the grounds that it robs Christ of His honor (XXI, 14) and on the grounds that it is "without proof from Scripture" (XXI, 10).

Luther rejects the Mass as a horrible abomination because it runs in direct conflict with the chief article of our faith (SA II, ii, 1), but he holds that in the Holy Supper the bread remains bread simply on grounds that this teaching "is in perfect agreement with Holy Scriptures," namely 1 Cor. 10:16 and 11:28. (SA III, vi, 5)

While the Symbols are always concerned about how a doctrine relates to the Gospel, [6] they do not hesitate to appeal directly to the Scriptures to prove a point because they

know that a doctrine firmly founded on the Scriptures cannot possibly be inimical to the Gospel. They are confident that Scriptures given to us for the sake of the Gospel do not teach doctrines contrary to the Gospel. Whatever is truly Biblical does not negate the Gospel. The true and genuine Gospel does not negate whatever is truly Biblical.

Gospel Does Not Abrogate Law

When one's "gospel" is such that it makes void the Lord's directives for his children's individual and community life, it would seem that his "gospel" is different from the one taught by Paul and the Lutheran Symbols. It is easy to see why such directives are incompatible with a "gospel" that speaks of redemption in terms of what God is doing **now** in the sociopolitical structures, instead of inviting us to trust in what He did once for all on Calvary . [7] When such a "gospel" supplants the Scriptures as norm of doctrine and life, then it is awkward to call anything wrong, since whatever is going on is somehow what God is doing now. But it is not a denial of the **Scriptural** Gospel to teach that men ought to obey God and to hold that expressions of His will in the Sacred Scriptures are still normative for the behavior of His children and church.

When the Symbols say that "to know Christ is to know his benefits" (Ap IV, 101) and that we must "make use of Christ" (Ap IV, 291, 299), they do not mean that to know Christ is to understand what God is doing **now** through Him in the process of continuing creation, nor do they mean that we ought to "use" Christ by being open to the future; that is, by accepting change in social and political structures as redemptive "advance into novelty." [8]

When the Apology says that "God will certainly accomplish ["fulfill," Latin: **praestet**] what he has promised for Christ's sake" (IV, 101), it is not talking about change which God has promised to bring about through Christ in social and political structures, and through which He will effect salvation in terms of the culmination of a cosmic process. The Apology means simply that God according to His promise will certainly forgive those who trust in Christ and who believe the promise spread throughout the world by the Gospel, namely, that God will be gracious to those who trust in the name of Christ who is "the price on account of which we are saved." (Ap IV, 99)

The Symbols mean that we know Christ only when we know that in Him we have remission of sins and that we must continue to rely on Him completely for salvation (Ap IV, 238-239). So we know His benefits, and so we continue to make use of Him. The Gospel, which is "properly that command which enjoins us to believe that God is propitious to us for Christ's sake" (Ap IV, 345), does not permit us in the name of Christ to alter God's ordinances and call it celebration of our freedom under the Gospel!

Believers Are IN the Law

Freedom under the Gospel is not freedom **from** God's holy, immutable will revealed in the Law, but freedom to obey it **freely**, that is, without compulsion, fear, or the need to earn God's favor thereby. The Formula of Concord describes the function of the Law for Christian life and conduct as follows:

It is true that the law is not laid down for the just, as St. Paul says (I Tim. 1:9), but for the ungodly. But this dare not be understood without qualification, as though the righteous should live without the law. For this law of God is written on their hearts, just as the first man immediately after his creation received a law according to which he should conduct himself. On the contrary, it is St. Paul's intention that the law cannot impose its curse upon those who through Christ have been reconciled with God, nor may it torture the regenerated with its coercion, for according to the inner man they delight in the law of God. (SD VI, 5)

The Formula also states:

Although truly believing Christians, having been genuinely converted to God and justified, have been freed and liberated from the curse of the law, they should daily exercise themselves in the law of the Lord. ...For the law is a mirror in which the will of God and what is pleasing to him is correctly portrayed. (SD VI, 4)

The same article emphasizes that believers "require the teaching of the law so that they will not be thrown back on their own holiness and piety and under the pretext of the Holy Spirit's guidance set up a self-elected service of God without His Word and command."

(20)

But are not believers guided by the Holy Spirit? The Formula explains:

Although true believers are indeed motivated by the Holy Spirit and hence according to the inner man do the will of God from a free spirit, nevertheless the Holy Spirit uses the written law on them to instruct them, and thereby even true believers learn to serve God not according to their own notions but according to His written law and Word, which is a certain rule and norm for achieving a godly life and behavior in accord with God's eternal and immutable will. (SD VI, 3)

While believers are no longer **under** the Law, they are **in** the Law. The Formula explains: "Thus though they are never without law, they are not under but in the law, they live and walk in the law of the Lord, and yet do nothing by the compulsion of law" (18), but "from a free and merry spirit." (17; cf. SD IV, 17)

2. The Gospel is Not Norm In the Sense of a Basic Principle From Which Other Doctrines Are Developed

When Lutherans speak of the material principle of theology, they do not have in mind a basic principle according to which a body of doctrines may be **developed**. This means that for Lutherans the Gospel or material principle is not normative for theology in the sense that each generation has the liberty or even the duty to develop from this "basic principle" a doctrinal system, perhaps even a system compatible with the dominant secular world view.

The Gospel is not normative for theology in the sense that beginning with it as a fundamental premise, other items of the Christian system of doctrine are developed as provisional, historically conditioned responses to a given situation which will need to be revised for another situation. The whole body of Lutheran doctrine is always represented as "taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein" (FC SD Summary, 5) "supported with clear and irrefutable testimonies from the Holy Scriptures" (*ibid.*, 6), and based "on the witness of the unalterable truth of the divine Word" (Preface to **The Book of Concord**, p. 5). Lutheran doctrine is therefore called "unchanging, constant truth" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 20) which "is and ought to [must] remain the unanimous understanding and judgment of our churches." (*ibid.*, 16) [9] Especially with reference to the Bible do Lutherans reject the idea that the Gospel serves as a core to which other teachings of the Bible are related as a mere set of deductions relative to that particular time and culture. Lutheran theology does not

appeal to the Gospel in such a way as to relativize the rest of the Scriptures. Gospel is not norm in the Scriptures in such a way as to make only the Gospel the norm of theology. This is a "Gospel reductionism" that Lutherans condemn as a repudiation of the authority of the Scriptures.

3. The Gospel Is Not Norm In the Sense That It Permits a Method of Bible Study Which Questions Lutheran Presuppositions Regarding the Bible

All Scripture Is Authoritative

When Lutherans say that the Gospel is the norm in the Scriptures, they do not mean that so long as the Gospel is not negated it is permissible to employ a method of Bible study which calls into question Lutheran presuppositions about the kind of a book the Bible is, or which in any way qualifies the authority of **all** Scripture. As our commission explained in an earlier document, Lutherans indeed "hold that all theological questions raised by any interpretation must be posed and answered with reference to this central concern of the Scripture," that is, a "right understanding of the Gospel." However, Lutherans add that "in conformity with the Lutheran Symbols our church confesses and acknowledges the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures to be the Word of God given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit [and] submits unreservedly to them as the sole source, norm, and authority for the church's teaching." Lutherans confess that "the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the inspired source and norm of all Christian preaching and teaching" and recognize that "there is a qualitative difference between the inspired witness of the Holy Scripture in all its parts and words and the witness... of every other form of human expression." [10]

The Bible Is God's Book

The following quotations accurately reflect the very definite and clearly stated presuppositions of the Lutheran Symbols about the kind of book the Bible is. The Bible is called the "Scripture of the Holy Spirit" (Ap Preface, 9). When the opponents disregarded "passages in the Scriptures," the Symbols asked: "Do they suppose that these words fell from the **Holy Spirit** unawares?" (Ap IV; 107-108; emphasis ours). The Augsburg Confession refers to Scripture passages which forbid "making and keeping human regulations," and asks: "Is it possible that the **Holy Spirit** warned against them for nothing?" (XXVIII, 49; our emphasis)

Because the Bible is the "Scripture **of the Holy Spirit**" it is "**divine** Holy Scriptures" (AC XXVIII, 28, German; Latin: "Scriptures of God"; see also AC XXVIII, 43, 49). The Apology says that when the opponents manipulate "Scripture passages" they "twist the **Word of God**" (XII, 122-123). Since Scripture is the Word of God, "no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it" (FC SD Summary, 9; see also Ep Comprehensive Summary, 2; all emphases ours Note the obvious implications of this contrast between Scripture and "human being's writings").

In sharp contrast to the writings of the fathers in which there is "great variety" [**magna dissimilitude**, that is, great difference or diversity], since "they were men and they could err and be deceived," the Symbols regard "passages of Scripture" as "clearer and surer" (Ap XXIV, 94-95). The Symbols do not expect to find in the Scriptures the contradictions which characterize the writings of fallible human authors. In the single instance where the Symbols refer to a seeming contradiction in the Scriptures, they offer a solution which completely removes the difficulty (Ap XXIV, 28). The Symbols do not grant that Jeremiah contradicts Moses. The Symbols, therefore, have no need to account for contradictions in terms of the Bible's historical dimensions or to adopt a view of Biblical authority which holds that since the authority of the Bible resides exclusively in the Gospel, discrepancies here and there in the Scriptures are of no consequence.

The Gospel Is the Center of Scripture

According to the Lutheran Symbols the Gospel **is** the center of the Scriptures. For that reason they see everything in the Scriptures as related to the Gospel in such a way that they can say: "Everything in the Word of God is written down for us... in order that 'by steadfastness, by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope' (Rom. 15:4)." (FC SD XI, 12)

Because all of Scripture is God's Word written down for us that we might have hope, the Symbols say, "It is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent." (FC SD XI, 92)

The Gospel Does Not Limit Biblical Authority

Relative to the role of the Gospel as norm in the Scriptures, however, it is important to observe that it is one thing to say that it is contrary to the Holy Spirit's intent when Scripture is interpreted in such a way that the Gospel is obscured; it is quite another thing to say that since the Holy Spirit's intent in the Scriptures is to proclaim the Gospel, it was never His intent that His Word in Genesis 1-11, for instance, should be understood as relating facts of history, or to say that in view of "the perpetual aim of the Gospel" (AC XXVIII, 66; Latin) apostolic directives for the church's life may be set aside. It is one thing to search the Scriptures to discover ever more fully how they witness to Christ and relate to His Gospel; it is quite another thing to explore the implications of the Gospel for freedom in handling the Scriptures. The interest of one is to see the richness and the glory of the Gospel to aid preaching; the interest of the other is to explain the alleged limitations and flaws of the Bible in a way that avoids the embarrassment of defending it as God's very own inerrant Word while at the same time upholding and affirming its authority. The Gospel is the norm in the Scriptures in the sense that it absolutely prohibits understanding any passage to teach salvation by works. It is **not** norm in the sense that the center of Scripture becomes a device to sanction a view of the Bible and a method of interpreting it which virtually denies that the **whole** Bible is God's inspired, authoritative Word on all matters concerning which it speaks.

4. The Gospel Is Not Norm In the Sense That It Permits Disregard of Lutheran Principles of Interpretation

The Scriptures Give Accurate Information

Lutherans say that the Gospel of forgiveness for Christ's sake through faith is the key that opens the Bible because this Gospel is, after all, the heart and center of the Bible's message. But this must not be understood to mean that as long as this central message is not lost or distorted it is immaterial how the student of Scripture regards and interprets the literature which is the medium of the message. The purpose of the Scriptures is to make us wise unto salvation. At the same time Scripture also intends to give us information about other matters. (2 Tim. 3:15-17)

The fact that the four Gospels, for instance, are confessions written as history by no means excludes the possibility that they are genuinely true and accurate records of history written as confessions and ought therefore to be read and understood as factual

reports about the life and ministry of Jesus. It is true that reports of the words and deeds of Jesus come to us in documents that contain the early church's preaching. However, this fact cannot be used with the least degree of logical force as the major premise of an argument which concludes that therefore these reports were never intended, in every case, to present facts about what Jesus actually said and did, and that at least in some instances they must be regarded and interpreted as inventions to meet certain needs in the primitive Christian community. Such conclusions are neither logically nor theologically compatible with the Lutheran confessional attitude toward the Scriptures and confessional principles for interpreting the inspired Word of God.

Abuse of the Law-Gospel Principle

Melanchthon states the attitude of Lutherans toward the Scriptures in these words:

"They have greater respect for the Word of God than for anything else" (AP XXIII, 71).

That is why Lutherans disapprove when their opponents in interpreting the Scriptures

"pick out garbled sentences to put something over on the inexperienced" (Ap IV, 280),

"twist many texts because they read their own opinions into them instead of deriving the

meaning from the texts themselves" (Ap IV, 224, 286), and "accept only what agrees

with human reason and regard the rest as mythology." (AP VII, 27)

Respect for God's Word compelled Lutherans to object to "the way these good-for-

nothings quote the Scriptures" (Ap XXVII, 29) and clown with Bible narratives (Ap XII,

10). It is therefore a foregone conclusion that no amount of study of Apology IV or other

sections of the Symbols will ever yield a hermeneutic that permits similar abuse of

Scripture among Lutherans. When Melanchthon emphasized that the distinction

between Law and Gospel is fundamental to a correct understanding of the Scriptures,

he at once indicated the passages to which this rule specifically applies. He said: "The

rule I have just stated interprets all the passages they quote on law and works." (Ap IV,

185)

A rule intended to prevent misinterpretation of those passages of Scripture which urge

good works ought not to be invoked to permit latitude in interpreting passages that deal

with other subjects. Particularly, Melanchthon's rule must not be changed to read:

"Since it is the primary purpose of the Scriptures to proclaim Law and Gospel, the **only**

legitimate question to address to a Biblical pericope is: 'How can the text be used to confront the sinner with God's judgment and mercy?'" It is an abuse of Melanchthon's rule when it is interpreted to mean that as long as Law and Gospel are proclaimed, the Bible student may regard and treat the Sacred Scriptures as though they were historically conditioned human writings which contain conflicting traditions and diverse theologies from which no absolutely reliable historical information or permanently valid doctrine can be derived.

The Meaning of the Biblical Text

It is a basic principle of interpretation that a Bible text has but one meaning. It is not in keeping with this principle when different meanings are ascribed to a text at various stages of its history even if it is held that the whole development always was intended to serve the proclamation of the Gospel. When a text is thought to have a tradition history that made its meaning vary from one situation to another, then it becomes a highly questionable procedure simply to quote a Bible passage as though its entire content were a "**Thus** saith the Lord." By seeing multiple meanings in a text based on its alleged precanonical use, it may happen that interpreters "make passages of Scripture mean whatever **they** want them to mean." (Ap XII, 106; emphasis ours)

To operate with hypothetical precanonical sources and traditions as determinative of the text's meanings instead of "deriving **the** meaning from the **texts themselves**" (Ap IV, 224; our emphasis) as they have come to us in the canonical Scriptures, is to cut away and depart from the very text that is to be searched to see how it testifies to Christ. As our commission stated in an earlier document,

The authoritative Word for the church today is the canonical Word, not precanonical sources, forms, or traditions--however useful the investigation of these possibilities may on occasion be for a clearer understanding of what the canonical text intends to say.

[11]

Every Text Is Related to the Gospel

It is the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures **alone** that were written down for us in order that we might have hope, and it is precisely because of that fact that every question about the meaning of these Scriptures is a "Gospel question." Every Biblical text is

related to the Gospel in such a way that the interpreter has lost sight of the purpose of the Scriptures if he regards concern for any aspect of the text as not on the level of a "Gospel question," or considers interest in such things as the accuracy of the history reported in the text as somehow irrelevant and beside the point.

About a piece of patriarchal history Paul asked, "What does Scripture say?" because he saw a relationship between the Gospel he preached and the incident reported. For Paul it was a "Gospel question" whether or not Abraham cast out Hagar (Gal. 4:30). Every question about what Scripture says or teaches is already a "Gospel question" simply because it is a question about Scripture given to us by God **for the sake of the Gospel!** To dismiss any question about Scripture as though it had no bearing on the Gospel is to forget what the Scriptures are for.

II. SCRIPTURE AS NORM OF THE GOSPEL

The key that opens the Bible is itself derived from the Bible. While it is true that the Bible was given to us for the sake of the Gospel, it is equally true that we have no Gospel but that which comes from Scripture. True, the Bible is norm for the sake of the Gospel, [12] but the Bible is also norm for the Gospel.

A. What Lutherans Do NOT Mean When They Say That Scripture Is the Norm of the Gospel

1. We Do Not Mean That There Was No Gospel Prior to the Scripture

To say that for us the Scriptures are the source and norm of the Gospel's form and content is not to say that there was no Gospel prior to the composition of the Scriptures. The patriarchs comforted themselves with the promise of the woman's seed centuries before Moses, and the prophets penned their inspired prophecies concerning the coming Christ (FC SD VI, 23). Abraham, without benefit of the Scriptures, rejoiced to see Christ's day, and he saw it and was glad (John 8:56). In fact, the Symbols affirm that "the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace bestowed in Christ" was first delivered to Adam. (Ap XII, 53)

Since the Scriptures were written primarily for the sake of the Gospel, it is just as true to say that the Scriptures derive from the Gospel as that the Gospel is derived from the Scriptures. The Scriptures do not **create** the reality of the salvation events to which they witness, but they are the only authoritative witness to the reality of these events to which **we** have access. Certainly Paul preached Christ's death and resurrection out of

the reality of the "happenedness" of these events, but he proclaimed the reality of these events "according to the Scriptures." Inasmuch as the Scriptures are normative for us for the proclamation of these realities, for us the formal principle is authority for the material principle. As the Symbols point out, "Especially amid the terrors of sin, a human being must have a very definite Word of God to learn to know God's will, namely, that he is no longer angry." (Ap IV, 262)

2. We Do Not Mean That the Gospel's Verity Derives From the Scriptures The Bible Does Not "Prove" The Gospel

When Lutherans argue for the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures and insist that the Scriptures are norm even (especially!) for the Gospel, it is not their intention to establish some premise on the basis of which they deduce and attempt to prove the truthfulness of the Gospel in order to compel a mere intellectual persuasion that the Good News is worthy of all acceptance. Lutherans recognize that a conviction resting on such a foundation could well be a human logical conclusion (**fides humana**) which is hazardously dependent upon rationally satisfying evidence for the reliability of a doctrine about the Bible, instead of a faith worked in us by the Holy Spirit (**fides divina**) which clings to the voice from heaven heard in the Bible.

In Lutheran confessional theology, saving faith always has as its sole object the promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake; saving faith is always the creation of God's Spirit through the Word. The Apology chides scholastic theologians because "they interpret faith as merely a knowledge of history or of dogmas" (IV, 383). "Faith is not merely knowledge but rather a desire to accept and grasp what is offered in the promise of Christ" (IV, 227). "To believe means to trust in Christ's merits" (IV, 69). "Faith in the true sense, as the Scriptures use the word, is that which accepts the promise" (IV, 113). Again, "Faith saves because it takes hold of mercy and the promise of grace" (IV, 338). "Such a faith is not an easy thing" (IV, 250). "Faith in Christ and in the forgiveness of sins ...does not come without a great battle in the human heart. ... Faith which believes that God cares for us, forgives us, and hears us is a supernatural thing, for of itself the human mind believes no such thing about God." (IV, 303)

When the confessors said, "We are certain of our Christian confession and faith on the basis of the divine, prophetic, and apostolic Scriptures," they added at once that they

had been "assured of this in (their) hearts and Christian consciences through the grace of the Holy Spirit." (Preface to **The Book of Concord**, pp. 12-13)

The Biblical Gospel Is God's Voice

When Lutherans say that the Bible is the God-inspired norm of the Gospel, we are expressing our Spirit-wrought conviction that the Gospel we hear in the Scriptures is indeed the "voice-from-heaven" Gospel, not merely some human construction. We are confessing what we deeply believe about this Holy Book from whose pages God speaks to our anxious hearts His very own word of absolution.

Accordingly, our view of the Bible is a result of our faith in the Gospel; our faith in the Gospel is not a result of our view of the Bible. Because we have come to know that the voice we hear in the Gospel taught by Scripture is truly God's voice, we treasure these sacred Scriptures as the only source and norm of this precious Gospel. With our whole being we resist every suggestion that the Bible is something less than God's very own Word--not because we feel the Gospel needs to be buttressed by a doctrine about Scripture, [13] but because our attitude toward Scripture has in fact been shaped by the Gospel! As Dr. Francis Pieper explained. "Only after a man is justified does he take the right attitude toward the entire Scripture, believing that Scripture is God's Word (the Word which cannot be broken, John 10:35), and make diligent use of Scripture (John 5:39)." [14]

The Gospel We Teach Is Scriptural

But Lutherans do appeal to the Bible to prove that the Gospel which they teach and confess is the Gospel which **Scripture** teaches. We do not attempt to prove the Gospel by Scripture passages, but to prove that the **Gospel which we teach** is Scriptural, so that we can say with the Apology, "for this our position we have testimonies from Scripture" (IV, 29). On that account we can assert that "we hold to the Gospel of Christ correctly and faithfully" (Ap Preface, 15). We do not hesitate to claim that "this is what Paul really and truly means" (IV, 285) or that "this is Paul's position that we are defending" (XII, 84), namely, that by faith we receive the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake.

The Symbols appeal to Bible passages to prove our doctrine. That absolution is not received except by faith "can be proved from Paul" (Ap XII, 61). Divine monergism in

conversion is "demonstrated from clear passages of Holy Scripture" (FC SD II, 87). In support of the teaching that distinctions among foods are unnecessary, Lutherans add testimonies "from the Scriptures" (AC XXVI, 22). There are clear passages which forbid the establishment of human regulations for the purpose of earning God's grace. (AC XXVIII, 43)

We show abundantly by the testimonies of Scripture and arguments derived from Scripture that we obtain remission of sins and are justified by faith alone (Ap IV, 117). Remission of sins occurs through faith--as Scripture testifies in many passages (Ap IV, 273). Against the testimony of the fathers who were men able to err and be deceived, we oppose the clearest and most certain Scriptures (Ap XXIV, 94-95). Lutherans know "that it is only from the Word of God that judgments on articles of faith are to be pronounced" (FC SD II, 8). "According to the Scriptures we should and must believe" that Christ according to His human nature received divine attributes. (FC SD VIII, 60) Lutherans prove their doctrine from Scripture because they think that it is "rash" to affirm something that passages of Scripture do not say (Ap XII, 138). It is "extreme impudence" to affirm something contrary to testimonies of Scripture (Ap XXIII, 63). So Lutherans ask: how can they affirm something without proof from the Word of God? (Ap XXVII, 23); how do we know without proof from Scripture? (Ap XXI, 10); where does Scripture teach that? (Ap XII, 157).

3. We Do Not Mean That the Gospel's Power Derives From the Scriptures

To say that the Gospel comes to us in the Scriptures is not to say that the Gospel's **power** is derived from the Scriptures, or from the inspiration of the Scriptures. The Gospel was the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16) even before holy men of God committed it to writing. To say that the Scriptures are authority for **the way we express** the Gospel, is not to say that the Gospel derives its authority or power from the Scriptures. The **normative** authority of Scripture does not make the Gospel the living Word of God (1 Peter 1:23-25), but the formal principle, Holy Scripture, **does** tell us authoritatively what Gospel truly is **God's** living Word and pronounces a curse upon anyone who preaches a different gospel. (Gal. 1:8-9)

The Symbols everywhere vehemently resist every different gospel precisely because only the **true** Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. "Faith is conceived and

confirmed through absolution, through the hearing of the Gospel" (Ap XII, 42). "The Holy Spirit produces faith... in those who hear the Gospel" (AC V, 2). "Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in him and take him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit" (LC II, 38).

Jonas' German version of the Apology says that if there is to be a church, the pure teaching of the Gospel must be preserved (Ap IV, 256, **Concordia Triglotta**, p. 223; see also Ap IV, 119, **Trig.**, p. 155). Melancthon states that "this church is properly called 'the pillar of truth' (1 Tim. 3:15), for it retains the pure Gospel and what Paul calls the 'foundation' (1 Cor. 3:12), that is, the **true** knowledge of Christ and faith." (Ap VII, 20; emphasis added)

B. In What Sense Scripture Is Norm of the Gospel

Our Gospel Is Taken from Scripture

When Lutherans teach that Scripture is the norm of the Gospel, they mean simply that the content of the Gospel and the terms in which this content is expressed must be taken from the Scriptures. The Gospel is the effective power (**auctoritas causativa**) that begets personal faith in the Savior (**fides qua creditur**); the Scriptures are the authority (**auctoritas normativa**) that establishes and regulates the statement, confession, and proclamation of the Christian faith (*fides quae creditur*).

When Paul preached what was of "first importance," namely, the chief article or Gospel that "Christ died for our sins" and "that He was raised on the third day," he was proclaiming realities that occurred according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Even though Paul could claim that he received the Gospel which he preached by revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:12), it was always a major concern of his to show that what he believed and preached was in agreement with the **Scriptures** (Acts 24:14; 17:2; 18:28). Because Paul appealed to the Scriptures (Rom. 4:3; Galatians 4:30) and because he proclaimed what "Scripture says" (Rom. 10:11; 1 Timothy 5:18) on topics ranging from justification to a pastor's support, his doctrine could stand up under the closest scrutiny. (Acts 17:11)

Paul reminded the Corinthians "in what terms" (I Cor. 15:1) he preached the Gospel and said he delivered what he had received; moreover, he did this in Spirit-taught words (I

Cor. 2:13). [15] This leaves no room for the notion that even the way Paul expressed the Gospel, or the form in which he preached it, was his own inventive translation into first-century thought patterns of some general idea which came to him out of thin air about a benign divine intent in history. It further repudiates the idea that he then tried to communicate this "gospel" in a meaningful manner by simply borrowing for this purpose some concepts with which people were already familiar from Jewish apocalyptic literature or Gnostic mythology.

In the Lutheran Symbols too, not only the content of the Gospel [16] it but the terms in which it is expressed are taken from Scripture. In the Symbols you have not only "they teach" (see, for example, AC IV), but "**Scripture** teaches" (see, for example, AC XXIV, 28 and FC SD III, 30; our emphases) as authority for **the way the Gospel is formulated**. It is in accordance with what the apostle Paul says that the Symbols teach the Gospel in terms of substitutionary satisfaction and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner through faith (Ap IV, 179, 305 ff.). The material principle of Lutheran theology (the Gospel) is derived from the formal principle (the Scriptures). The Apology states it is axiomatic that "it is not in the power of man... to assert without a sure word of God concerning God's will, that He ceases to be angry" (IV, 262). [17] Here the material principle is tied inseparably to the formal principle, so that we cannot affirm the former except on the authority of the latter. [18]

Interdependent Formal and Material Principles

Because the Lutheran Symbols are correct expositions of **Scripture**, they teach the **Gospel** purely. Because "the adversaries are in no way moved by so many passages of **Scripture**, which clearly ascribe justification to faith," they consequently "altogether abolish the **Gospel** concerning the free remission of sins." (Ap IV, 107, 110; emphasis added).

In the Symbols the formal and material principles are very closely related and mutually interdependent. Opinions which disagree with Scripture at the same time diminish the glory of Christ's passion. When the Gospel is lost sight of, the Scriptures are distorted. Compare these two statements carefully. The first is: "Concerning these opinions our teachers have warned that they depart from the Holy Scripture and diminish the glory of

Christ's passion" (AC XXIV, 24). The second is: "This teaching [the Gospel] must always be kept in view in order to oppose those who reject Christ, destroy the Gospel, and maliciously twist the Scriptures to fit human opinions" (Ap IV, 260). The first statement indicates that there is a direct relationship between departing from Scripture and robbing Christ of His glory. The second statement indicates that there is a direct relationship between rejecting Christ and distorting the Scriptures.

Scripture as Source: Election

Probably nowhere in the Symbols does the formal principle receive more emphasis as the source of the material principle than in connection with the Formula of Concord's presentation of the article of our eternal election in Christ Jesus to salvation (SD XI). This article of faith, which is integral to the Christian Gospel, is to be set forth according to "the pattern of the divine Word" (2). The mystery of predestination (**Vorsehung**) is revealed to us in God's Word [Latin: "Holy Scripture," 43]. **[19]** In order to avoid misunderstandings this article must be explained "on the basis of Scripture." (3) When we organize our thinking about this article according to the Scriptures, we can easily orient ourselves in it (24). It is possible to organize our thoughts about this doctrine according to the Scriptures because the Scriptures discuss this article not merely incidentally and superficially, but frequently and in great detail (2), and also because "everything in God's Word [Latin: "Holy Scripture"] is written down for **us**" (emphasis ours). (12) **[20]**

Scripture itself teaches this doctrine in no other way than to direct us to the Word (**Verbum Dei revelatum**; 12). That is why we must carefully distinguish between what God has expressly revealed in His Word [Latin: "Holy Scriptures"] and what He has not revealed (52). The Formula urges: "Cling to His revealed Word" (55), "operate constantly with the Word" (56), "adhere exclusively to the revealed Word" (53). Only from God's Word are we able to learn His will toward us and to retain the foundation of our comfort and consolation. (36)

Scripture As Norm of Doctrine

The Symbols appeal to the Scriptures as the norm of doctrine not only for the article of election but also for all the articles of faith. The following are some examples of this:

1. The entire content of the Augsburg Confession, including the article on justification (the material principle), was "compiled out of the divine, prophetic, and apostolic Scriptures" (Preface to **The Book of Concord**, p. 3). The electors and princes ordered this confession to be prepared "on the basis of God's Word" (Latin: "Sacred Scriptures"; FC SD Preface, 3). The doctrine confessed in the articles and chapters of the Augsburg Confession is "drawn from and conformed to the Word of God" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 5). **[21]** The Augsburg Confession is "grounded on the testimony of the immutable truth of the divine Word." (Preface to **The Book of Concord**, p. 5) **[22]**

2. When our fathers were preparing the documents that became the Formula of Concord, they asked for suggestions as to how the Christian doctrine... might be fortified with the Word of God [Latin: "Sacred Scriptures"] against all sorts of perilous misunderstanding" (Preface, **The Book of Concord**, p. 7). The Symbols are a summary of the doctrine which Luther set forth "on the basis of God's Word" (Latin: "Sacred Scriptures"; FC SD Rule and Norm, 9). This summary of doctrine is normative because it is "drawn from the Word of God." (**Ibid.**, 10; see also 16)

3. That faith alone saves is manifest "from God's Word" (Latin: "from the testimonies of the Sacred Scriptures"; FC SD IV, 35). The Apology shows "both by testimonies of Scripture and arguments derived from Scripture... that by faith alone we obtain remission of sins for Christ's sake." (IV, 117)

4. The doctrine of divine monergism in conversion is grounded in God's Word (Latin: "has solid testimonies in sacred Scriptures"; FC SD II, 28) and is thoroughly demonstrated by clear passages of Holy Scripture. (**Ibid.**, 87)

5. The communication of divine attributes to the human nature of Jesus Christ is something that God has revealed in His Word (FC SD VIII, 53). "According to the statement of the Scriptures" divine and infinite qualities have been given to the man Christ; "according to the Scriptures" we should and must believe that Christ received all this according to His human nature (**ibid.**, 55 and 60). The Formula

affirms that wherever the Scriptures "give us clear, certain testimony, we shall [German: **sollen wir**] simply believe it and not argue." (**Ibid.**, 53) [23]

6. Errors are rejected as contrary to our doctrine which is based on God's Word (Latin: "Sacred Scriptures"; cf. FC SD VII, 107). The adversaries are rebuked for teaching as though their notion of satisfactions had "authority in Scripture" when it is "without the authority of Scriptures." They are asked, "Where does Scripture teach that?" (Ap XII, 122, 119, 157)

7. Without the authority of Scripture it is not safe to institute forms of worship in the church. (Ap XXIV, 92)

8. It cannot be affirmed that obedience, poverty, and celibacy are services which God approves as righteousness before Him when there is no proof from God's Word. (Ap XXVII, 23)

"It is written" is a motto that is found on virtually every page of the Symbols.

CONCLUSION

The Gospel is God's very own Word of forgiveness for Christ's sake to lost and condemned sinners. This Gospel Word comes to us in God's inspired Word, the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. **As bearer of the Gospel**, the Holy Scriptures are God's authoritative proclamation of pardon for fallen mankind which no power in heaven or hell can challenge or annul, and through which until the Last Day the Holy Ghost will call sinners to faith in Christ who gives life and salvation. **As God's inspired Word**, the Holy Scriptures are God's authoritative rule and norm of all that His Church teaches and does in His name.

In asking about the relation of Gospel and Scripture and about the nature of the Bible's authority, Lutherans do not formulate their question thus: Is the Bible God's authoritative Word because it proclaims the Gospel or because it is inspired? This way of putting the question falsely suggests that we must choose between mutually exclusive alternatives. A "both/and" is turned into an "either/or." Lutheran theology has always affirmed the authority of the Bible on a two-fold basis: (1) That as Gospel the Sacred Scriptures are the power of God unto salvation through which the Holy Spirit begets the faith that grasps Christ and sets men free from sin and death; (2) That as God's inspired Word

the Sacred Scriptures regulate the faith that is believed, taught, and confessed in the church.

God has joined Gospel and Scripture together in an inseparable unity. Lutheran theology which is loyal to the Confessions understands the relation between Scripture and Gospel as follows: Scripture is to Gospel as source is to summary; or, Gospel is to Scripture as summary is to source. God had given us the Gospel **in** the Scriptures. What God has joined together, Lutheran theology does not put asunder. Much less does confessional Lutheran theology pit Gospel against Scripture, or Scripture against Gospel. Can the summary be versus the source, or the source versus the summary? Can the source deny the central thought, or the central thought nullify the source? Lutheran theology lets source and summary stand together as God's very own Word to be for the Christian church both the origin of its life and the norm of its doctrine.

ENDNOTES

[1] In this study the terms "formal principle" and "material principle" are used as Dr. F.E. Mayer used them. With regard to the formal principle he wrote: "The source of doctrine, or the formal principle of Lutheran theology, is **sola Scriptura**, the Scripture alone." He described the material principle as follows: "When speaking of the material principle of theology, Lutherans do not have in mind a basic principle according to which a body of doctrines may be developed. The material principle of Lutheran theology is in reality only a synopsis and summary of the Christian truth. When Lutheran theologians speak of justification by faith as the material principle of theology, they merely wish to indicate that all theological thinking must begin at this article, center in it, and culminate in it." In **Religious Bodies in America**, 4th rev. edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 144 and 146. See also his "The Formal and Material Principles of Lutheran Confessional Theology," **Concordia Theological Monthly**, XXIV, 8 (August 1953), 545 and 548.

[2] President Preus stated that "today there is a frequent confusion of these principles, with the result that the Gospel, rather than the Bible, is employed as the norm of our theology." As examples of this confusion, he noted that some

"reject the factual claims of a given text on the grounds that it does not involve the Gospel" or "assert that interpretations of a Scripture passage need not be rejected if they do not harm the Gospel." In **1971 Proceedings**, p. 55.

[3] Throughout this paper the term "Gospel" is used in the strict or narrow sense in which it is used in this quotation from the Augsburg Confession. Note how the Formula of Concord distinguishes between the Gospel in this strict sense ("solely the preaching of God's grace") and the Gospel in the broad sense ("the entire teaching of Christ, our Lord, which in his public ministry on earth and in the New Testament he ordered to be observed"). See FC SD V, 3-6.

[4] For a suggestion to this effect see **Concordia Theological Monthly**, XXIV, 8 (August 1953), 595, where the Apology, XXIV, 69 is quoted as evidence. But see the Apology, IV, 257 and XII, 34, where the Law is called the Word.

[5] This rule of thumb does not constitute license in interpreting Scripture just so long as we do not corrupt or deny the Gospel. This rule tells us how a passage or pericope must **not** be understood; it says nothing about the way it **may** or **ought** to be understood. Other factors come into consideration at this point.

[6] See AC XXVIII, 66, 70; XXVI, 29; XXVII, 23.

[7] LC V, 31: The work "was accomplished" (**geschehen, peractum est**) on the cross. LC II, 61: "Creation is past and redemption is accomplished" (**die Schoepfung haben wir nun hinweg, so ist die Erloesung auch ausgerichtet**). "The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, and resurrection" (ibid., 38).

[8] This expression is employed by some advocates of what is usually called "process theology."

[9] For the force of **soll** and **debeat** in the Symbols, note what Dr. A. C. Piepkorn has written with regard to the meaning of these terms in Augsburg Confession VI and XIV: "The verbs in AC 14 (**debeat/soll**) allow no option; they are the same verbs which describe the indispensable relation of good works to faith in AC 6. They have the force of the modern English 'must' rather than 'should.'" (In **Lutherans and Catholics in Dialog IV--Eucharist and Ministry**, 1970, p. 113.)

[10] **A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies**, published by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, 1967, pp. 8, 5, 8 and 10. This document is available from the office of the commission, 210 N. Broadway, St. Louis, Mo., 63102.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

[12] Schlink, Edmund: **Theology of the Lutheran Confessions**, trans. by P.F. Koehneke and H. J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 6.

[13] The truthfulness of the Gospel does not depend upon the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Because the Bible is inerrant, it teaches the truth of the Gospel inerrantly. Biblical inerrancy assures that the Gospel (which is true **per se**) is correctly presented in the Scriptures. An errant medium might distort the message. Since the truth of the Gospel is communicated to us in words which God Himself provided, matching terms to content (I Cor. 2:13), the content did not suffer perversion in the process of transmission by men who were able to err and be deceived. (Note the inescapable implication of Ap XXIV, 94.)

[14] Francis Pieper, **Christian Dogmatics**, II, trans. by W. F. Albrecht and others (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 424. See also F.E. Mayer, **Religious Bodies in America**, 4th revised edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 145-146.

[15] Note also that Timothy is urged to "follow the pattern of sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13) and that Paul thanks God that the Romans "have become obedient to the standard of teaching" (Rom. 6:17). In the case of the Gospel, **what** is said and the **way** it is said go inseparably together.

[16] "The content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, himself bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through him alone we re-enter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally," FC SD V, 20.

[17] See Ap XV, 17; XXI, 10.

[18] See how Luther ties Scripture and Gospel together: "Whence do they know of forgiveness, and how can they grasp and appropriate it, except by steadfastly believing the Scriptures and the Gospel" (LC V, 31).

[19] Attention is drawn here and in numerous other places in this study to the fact that when "God's Word" appears in the German text of the Formula of Concord, the Latin translation frequently reads "Holy Scripture." This, together with a comparison of the German and Latin texts of AC XXVIII, 35, makes it very doubtful that Ap XXIII, 28 "intends" to distinguish between Scripture and God's Word as has been suggested in **Concordia Theological Monthly**, XXIV, 8 (August 1953), p. 594, and XXIX, I (January 1958), p. 2, footnote 5.

[20] The Latin text has **nobis proponuntur**, literally, "set forth" or "prescribed for us."

[21] The Latin text reads: **E Verbo Domini est desumpta et ex fundamentis sacrarum litterarum solide exstructa.**

[22] The Latin text notes that the Augsburg Confession is built on solid testimonies of truth which is immutable and is expressed in God's Word. This manner of speech indicates that the Symbols think that truth is taught in the Scriptures and that this truth is immutable. The Symbols therefore claim that "we base our position on the Word of God as the eternal truth" (FC SD Rule and Norm, 13).

[23] Also here the force of the German **sollen** is "must" rather than "shall." See footnote 9.