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"The Log in Your Own Eye"

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“The Log in Your Own Eye”

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Judge not, that you be not judged. . . . How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye. (Matt. 7:1-5)

Jesus was responding to the investigations which the religious authorities, first from Galilean synagogues and then from Jerusalem, were directing against Him and His disciples.

To the investigators it seemed a great vice that Jesus did not properly respect the Sabbath, or insist that His disciples wash hands before meals; even worse, that He promised apostates and sinners a full share in the Kingdom without regard to strictures of law. To His critics Jesus must have looked like a “liberal,” quite careless of law and discipline. Though some things He said and did were indeed good, He needed correction. There was that dangerous speck to be removed from His eye.

As Jesus saw it, however, these investigators, for all their seriousness and piety, were themselves afflicted with a malady far worse than the one they detected in Him. They had a *log* in their own eye, and it disqualified them as speck-removers. They treasured their Bible and law, but they did not know God or how to listen to Him. They could not comprehend a mercy by which God would both raise valleys and lower mountains — a mercy which would gather the outcasts of Israel back into God’s family, while at the same time calling the righteous to let go their claim to higher places and enter the Kingdom

on the highway of mercy alone, hand in hand with the worst of sinners!

Who would dream that pious Judaism, represented in priesthood and Pharisee, could have a log like that in its own eye? Who could imagine that leaders so concerned to strain out gnats from their people’s soup were themselves swallowing camels? Or that those who called Jesus devil-possessed were themselves possessed by *seven* devils?

Yet that is how the father of lies returns to deceive the people of God from within their own piety, not only in old Israel but equally in the church. Where things look most pure, that is where Satan plants the log. “Judge not, that you be not judged.” The day came when those who judged Jesus found themselves on trial. The investigators became the investigated. The eager surgeons had to face surgery.

It is painful for me to write what I am about to write — about the log in the eye of my own church. I am not blind to some of the specks or even logs which concern many of my brothers. Every confusion and diffusion and diminution of the Gospel deeply disturbs me. But our first concern has to be the log in the eye of those among us who assume they are qualified to do eye surgery on their brothers. The Lord’s judgment has a strange way of beginning at Jerusalem.

“The one holy Christian church,” says AC VII, “is the assembly of all believers among whom *the Gospel is preached in its purity,*” that is, “in conformity with a *pure*

understanding of it."* We have to know what that means. If a log in the eye is a valid and healthy condition, no one would dream of removing it. To recognize the log we must first know the healthy eye.

Let our resource be the Lutheran Confessions to which we have committed ourselves, especially the Augsburg Confession. Only specks and logs have reason to be uncomfortable with the proposition that this is for Lutheranism our "sound eye," by which our "whole body will be full of light" (Matt. 6:22). What makes the Confessions such a treasure to us is that they see, express, apply, and defend the truth of the Gospel as the Spirit reveals it through Scripture and into the hearts of sinful men. By that Gospel the Lord not only set our confessing fathers free, but also removed from their eye one speck after another which had been implanted by the tradition of the medieval church. A series of such surgical souvenirs is displayed in the section of the Augsburg Confession which deals with corrected abuses. Their log is removed. The confessors "see clearly." Standing on the sure Word of the Gospel, which is the source of their wisdom, life, and freedom, these fathers of ours seek as tenderly as possible to remove the speck still in their brother's eye.

I. WHAT IS THE PURE GOSPEL? (The Sound Eye)

The Gospel as our confessing fathers knew it embraces four distinct and indispensable themes. They are like stopping

* I shall quote from Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). The Augsburg Confession is quoted from the translation of the German text, unless the Latin is indicated.

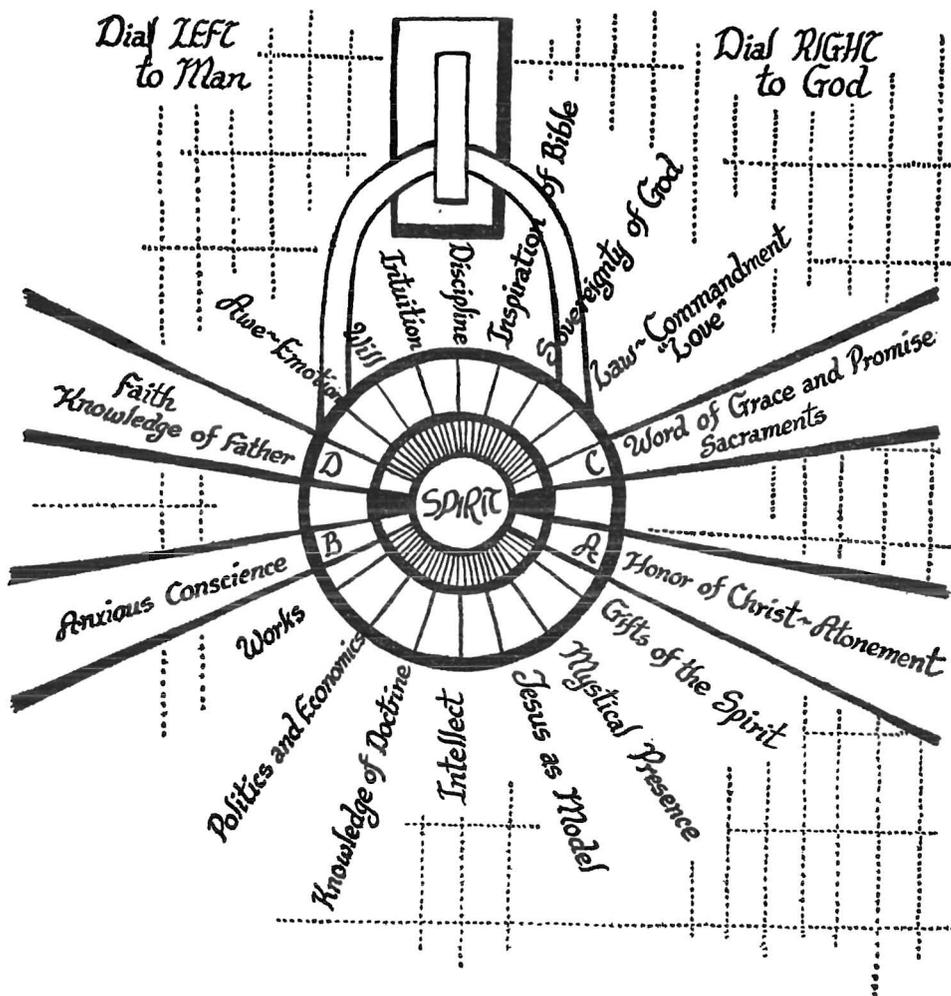
points on a combination lock. When the dial has turned properly to each of them, the Gospel is pure, the lock opens, and the prisoner is set free. When any is omitted, or blurred, or when false stopping points are substituted or interposed, then the Gospel is *not pure*, prisoners are not freed, the eye is not sound, and division is created in the church. (I am shifting metaphors for the moment—the true combination, the healthy eye. In substance they are the same reality.)

The discovery and defense of this combination is the glory of the Lutheran Confessions. To have the pure doctrine of the Gospel is to know this combination. False doctrines or false Gospels are always false combinations. To know this combination is also to know the Scriptures, for that is what the Bible is all about. To know it is to know and be filled with the Spirit of our Risen Lord and of our Living Father.

A. *The Honor of Christ (Solus Christus)*

The first two positions on our dial are frequently mentioned together in the Apology, as a kind of matching pair which between them provide a critical test for what is truly the Gospel. Thus in Ap IV 2-3 "justification" is called "the main doctrine of Christianity" which "illuminates and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings pious consciences the abundant consolation that they need. Our opponents," the confessors continue, "confuse this doctrine miserably, they obscure the glory and the blessings of Christ, and they rob pious consciences of the consolations offered them in Christ."

Both themes are prominent in the Augsburg Confession, though not in such deliberate juxtaposition. Our first concern is with the honor of Christ as the AC pro-



- A. Dial RIGHT to the honor of Christ (*solus Christus*)
- B. Dial LEFT to the anxious conscience (*sola gratia*)
- C. Dial RIGHT to the Word of God (*sola Scriptura*)
- D. Dial LEFT to faith (*sola fidei*)

claims and defends it. The Pelagians hold "that natural man is made righteous by his own powers, thus *disparaging the sufferings and merit of Christ*" (AC II 3). "Whoever imagines that he can merit grace, *despises Christ* and seeks his own way to God, contrary to the Gospel" (AC

XX 10). Traditional opinions on the Mass "depart from the Holy Scriptures and *diminish the glory of the passion of Christ*" (AC XXIV 24 *Latin*). When "the invented spiritual life" of the monks is presumed to "make satisfaction for sin," "what is this but to *diminish the glory and honor*

of the grace of Christ and deny the righteousness of faith?" (AC XXVII 38). "Those who would be justified by vows are severed from Christ and have fallen away from God's grace, for they *rob Christ*, who alone justifies, *of his honor* and bestow this honor on their vows and monastic life" (AC XXVII 42-43). "*The glory of Christ's merit is blasphemed* when we presume to earn grace by such ordinances." (AC XXVIII 36)

In all of this the confessors express the substance of clear and familiar Biblical texts, such as John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Gal. 2:21. Yet more is involved than merely a recitation of proof passages. Even these texts testify to a *history*, the history of Jesus' Passion. The honor of Christ is not only a doctrinal proposition. It is a *visible event*.

I can sketch it here only very briefly. Jesus came to Jerusalem to confront the nation in its leaders with a last call to repentance before the day of the Kingdom brought utter destruction, but the city did not repent. Zealotic crowds with high expectation of the Kingdom hailed Jesus as the greater David, and waited enthusiastically for the flash of revelation and angelic intervention which would inaugurate the final conquest of Israel's enemies. Caiaphas, seeing the threat of fanatical insurrection surging around Jesus and dreading the inevitable Roman retaliation, formulated his cold and scarcely arguable strategy, "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (John 11:48-50). The scene was set on the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:3-9) for the confrontation between the little band of loyal disciples with their two swords on the one

hand, and the battalion of armed officers on the other—but the glory of God and the 12 legions of angels did not appear. Jesus rejected the sword, surrendered Himself, and the disciples fled.

Thus Judas and his coconspirators delivered Jesus up to Caiaphas, Caiaphas to Pilate, and Pilate to those who performed the crucifixion. Thereby the disciples, the temple and nation, even many Romans—all of whom would have perished in the crushing consequences of a misguided revolt—were saved, by the death of one man. Yet Jesus did not go to the cross as a martyred victim. He delivered Himself to that death, in love for God, for His disciples, for Jerusalem and the nation, even for His enemies. Caiaphas' strategy was really God's. God His Father gave Jesus that cup to drink, but with it a promise. Jesus would not lose His life, but find it. The Father would raise Him up on the third day (Hos. 6:2) and, in defiance of death and of the wisdom and verdicts of men, give Him the Kingdom.

All of this, and much more, belongs to and can be seen in the history. Yet in and above that history stands still another dimension of reality, evident in the faith and testimony of Jesus and the apostles, but after that beyond further historical penetration. For this climactic day was more than a human event. It was the very day of the Kingdom whose imminent coming John the Baptist and Jesus had proclaimed. It was the Day of the Lord, of judgment and of salvation. The books were opened, and the Lord God looked at the scene before Him, the division of mankind on right and left as sheep from goats. At His left stood the whole mass of ungodly humanity—not Gentiles only, but also Jews,

not only apostate Jews but those who had appeared most righteous, not only Jews who rejected Jesus but even His own disciples! None was righteous, not one (Ps. 14:2-3) — save Jesus only, the one man at God's right hand, the beloved Son, who loved and trusted and served the Father with all His heart. Shall the Lord go through with His judgment, turn loose the fury of His wrath for the destruction of the whole world, and give the Kingdom to that one righteous Son who is ready to inherit it? His steadfast love will not allow it. "I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." (Hos. 11:9)

So the Father speaks to the Son, and Jesus consents to drink the cup of the wine of wrath poured out for Jerusalem and all nations (Jer. 25:15-29). Thus the salvation He purchased by His blood in the evident political realm is in reality cosmic. What threatens the world is not merely zealous war and bloody Roman retaliation. The real threat is the ultimate and universal wrath of God, and it is this which Jesus swallows up in His own dying. This one death is therefore both sacrifice and atonement. It is the end of the world and its beginning, the end of the Old Testament and the birth of the New. It is the source of life and redemption not only for Israel but for the world, and not only for that generation but for all generations. This is the glory of God, which we see in the face of Jesus Christ, a glory not of law and wrath but of grace and truth. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, making Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.

Jesus' resurrection speaks the verdict, opens the Scriptures, pours out the Spirit,

lifts the disciples out of death into life, and sends them as God's ambassadors to the whole world. The substance of their message is the honor of Christ, and the glory of God's mercy in that cross, and the invitation to know God and belong to His people, sharing the inheritance and serving God in everlasting freedom, love, and joy.

We give Christ His honor when we return to that event in Word and Sacrament, so that through the eyes and experience of those immediate witnesses we see the glory of Jesus lifted up and drawing all men to Himself. An event is *visible to the eye*, intelligible, memorable. "We have seen with our eyes" (1 John 1:1). To those who asked for a sign one sign was indeed given, the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:39). But a sign is something *seen*. An event belongs to sight, not to faith. In or out of the event comes the Word to which faith clings, but the event in itself is visible. Christian proclamation and doctrine did not create the event, neither can doctrine defend, preserve, or authenticate the historicity of the event. The event is historical because it really happened, and it is historical the way it really happened. Out of that visible and experienced historicity comes the proclamation and the doctrine.

If the event, and not merely a doctrine, is what gives Christ His honor, then Lutherans have a great stake in the historical study of Jesus, particularly in recovering and making visible again, by every rational method of historical inquiry, that critical hour of the Passion in which Christ's honor as Savior shines. The historical process is indeed complex, sometimes unsettling, subject to many a mistaken inference. Nevertheless the cause of Christ's honor is not

served by fearing or resisting it. Doctrinal assertions concerning Jesus' historicity cannot make Him historical. To foreclose historical questioning out of some mistaken rationale associated with the doctrine of the Bible's inspiration, is to make even Jesus' *historicity* a matter of "faith" rather than of "sight." The result is to turn Jesus from a genuine investigable, historical figure into an unknowable, transcendent, halo-enshrouded myth. Then the *doctrine* concerning Jesus has usurped the place of Jesus Himself, and the honor that belongs to Jesus the Person is attached rather to our doctrinal construct of Him. "We wish to see Jesus," some Greeks said to Philip. It is a legitimate request. Jesus' response tells us where to look for Him above all—in the history of His Passion. (John 12: 21-23)

The cross belongs to history, to history's very center. It is in Jesus Christ crucified that we know the Father and the glory of His redeeming mercy. "This is life eternal for us, to know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). If this were only a doctrinal assertion, it could be evaded as merely the subjective religious "opinion" or "myth" of a sect called "Christianity." But if the event itself proclaims the doctrine out of its own essential and utterly unique historical reality, then the message (the Word) is truly *flesh*, humanly real, moving, inescapable, and full of glory.

The history itself demands that Christ have His full honor. There is no history like it. Jesus is no myth or symbolical representation, whose glory lends itself to diffusion over parallel symbols. We evade and lose His real glory if we attach His essential honor to His teaching, or to His

works of love, or to His splendid miracles, or even to His incarnate deity. The *cross*—that is where His glory must be seen! That is why the Sacrament continually takes us back to the cross, with the demand and invitation to eat and drink the body and blood of that one death. Jesus is not one name among many, one religion among many, one truth among many, one love among many. All such suppositions evade the history and detract from His honor. But when the honor of the Son is compromised, then the knowledge of the Father is lost with it. For the Father invites us to see and know Him in His Son, and declares that apart from that Son no man shall know or come to Him.

This is our heritage in Scripture and Confessions. It belongs to that essential combination of the Gospel, by which the lock is opened and prisoners are set free.

B. *The Anxious Conscience (Sola Gratia)*

The dial turns back now, twice around to the left, as it were, and stops at the anxious conscience. We are a long way from the honor of Christ. The reality before us is the inmost personhood of the sinner—his conscience, his heart. For it is to the terrified heart that the Gospel speaks its consolations.

That is a dominant note in the Confessions. Note the following passages from the Augsburg Confession:

True repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or *terror*, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution . . . and this faith will *comfort the heart* (Latin *conscientia*) and again *set it at rest*. (AC XII 3-5)

It is a matter of *experience* that *weak and terrified consciences* find [this teach-

ing] most comforting and salutary. The *conscience* cannot come to rest and peace through works, but only through faith . . . when it is assured and knows that for Christ's sake it has a gracious God. . . . (The Latin text adds) This whole teaching is to be referred to that *conflict of the terrified conscience, nor can it be understood apart from that conflict.*

In former times this comfort was not heard in preaching, but *poor consciences were driven to rely on their own efforts*, and all sorts of works were undertaken. Some were driven by their conscience into monasteries in the hope that there they might merit grace through monastic life. (AC XX 15-20)

Such traditions have turned out to be a grievous burden to *consciences*, for it was not possible to keep all the traditions, and yet the people were of the opinion that they were a necessary service of God. Gerson writes that many fell into despair on this account, and some even committed suicide, because they had not heard anything of the consolation of the grace of Christ. (AC XXVI 12-13)

Before we can speak meaningfully of the *anxious* heart, however, we must retreat a step and examine the heart of the sinner from a prior perspective, that of "original sin." "All men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust (Latin, *concupiscentia*) and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God" (AC II 1). Again, "Without the grace, help, and activity of the Holy Spirit man is not capable of making himself acceptable to God, of fearing God and believing in God with his whole heart, or of expelling

inborn evil lusts from his heart." (AC XVIII 2)

The Confessions recognize the sharp line the Bible draws between the righteous man and the sinner, between natural man in his old flesh and man in the Spirit, between those who belong to and know God and the outsiders who do not know Him. This is the same line that divides true worship from idolatry, and church from world. Notice, however, where the line is drawn — not in man's outward appearance, but in his heart, in the depths of his secret selfhood. The heart has no natural capacity to know and serve God, as the Confessions and many Biblical texts show (Jer. 17:9; Gen. 6:5; Matt. 15:19; Rom. 8:8; Ps. 51:5, 10). A new and clean heart comes only by God's creation, redemption, and call. God calls Israel out of Egypt, and names him His son and heir. That is Israel's righteousness, just as our call in Christ is our righteousness. It is the character of the righteous, who belong to God and to God's people, to know God, to love Him with *all their heart*, to fear and love and trust their one God above anything else.

Yet the righteous, like Adam, keep falling back into sinnerhood. The story of the fall in Genesis 3 offers our clearest exposition of the meaning of original sin. Instead of *knowing God*, the sinner *knows good and evil*. That is his new and substitute *wisdom*. Thus what the sinner *loves* now (wants, covets, lusts for, desires) is not God above anything else, but whatever *good* thing attracts him and offers him some advantages (the fruit). What he *fears* now (does not want, avoids) is not God's wrath, but whatever *evil* thing he regards as a threat to him. What he *trusts* now is not God's Word and promise, but

his own "opened eyes" and the distinctions he makes by his own judgment and whim between the desirable and the undesirable.

The righteous man sings, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is nothing on earth that I *desire* besides Thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25-26). But the sinner lives by what he sees "on earth." He chooses his own treasures, makes up his own mind. Life to him consists not in serving God, but in getting what he desires and avoiding what he fears. Desire and fear, that is the force of covetousness, or concupiscence, or the passions and lusts of the flesh. The sinner thinks freedom is to be his own master, to have his way without inhibition or interference. He does not know that he is a slave to his own sin and to the devil's deceptive "wisdom." The wages he earns with all his striving is futility, death, and the laughter and derision of God.

It is not hard to trace the connection now between the heart of man in original sin and that same heart as it becomes *anxious* and filled with *terrors*. The sinner has cast himself in the role of God. His own sight and judgment is his highest authority as he determines to seek good for himself and avoid evil. But that imposes on him an enormous burden. He is not very successful in being "like God," for he cannot see very far. The good he pursues eludes him or fails to yield the anticipated satisfaction. His flight from one evil often catches him in another. So the sinner becomes anxious. He invents a "god" to help him, inquires of that god, harnesses it to his own purposes. Yet his god is an idol, and only adds to the com-

plexity of the burden the sinner must bear. But if the sinner decides that his god is an illusion and not worth maintaining after all, he is right back where he started—forced to be his own god, creator, and savior.

The sinner assumes responsibility for his very survival. He cannot accept life as freely given by God, or receive it with humility and thanksgiving. He must defend his life and dress it up. If he suffers reverses, he must find demons in the world to blame for it. "What shall I eat . . . drink . . . wear?" These are his anxious questions.

Even if he achieves security and riches for the moment, the sinner does not escape anxiety. Now he must worry about his worth. He wants to be important. He assumes he is worth more than dirt, but has to prove it to himself and the world. To be exposed as or treated like dirt is devastating. Therefore he must wrap himself in symbols of his importance, maintain his poise, cling to his tenuous fig leaves, for it is by these that he props up his precarious dignity—an anxious business indeed!

The sinner finds himself in conflict with other people, all of them also striving to have the good as they see it and avoid the evil. He must adjust to the reality of society, form alliances, isolate and repel enemies. He finds satisfaction in looking down on those he has surpassed, but those who surpass him become an occasion of envy and anger. The people closest to him are the occasion for greatest tension.

Now the sinner faces also the problem most specifically associated with "conscience." He is aware of being judged. People are looking at him, enforcing their

expectations and judgments on him, rendering verdicts. The sinner is self-conscious, anticipates the verdict, manipulates for approval. He counts a favorable verdict as a great good, to be pursued with all diligence. A negative verdict is an evil, to be dreaded and avoided and resisted at all costs. Behind his conscience, whether he knows it or not, stands the hidden God, doing His alien work (Is. 28:21, Ap XII 50-51). There is no escape from the awareness of being judged. Man the sinner is always "under the Law" (Rom. 6:14), and no other possibility is known to him. The only response he can make is to maneuver for the favorable verdict. This is the *opinio legis* (Ap IV 265) "which clings by nature to the minds of men" and drives them to seek excuses and evasions on the one hand, while piling up laudable works on the other—in total ignorance and contradiction of the *sola gratia*.

The law of God mocks the sinner, drives him along on the path of independence he has chosen, gives him no rest. The Law is never satisfied. It never compliments, always accuses. The Law exposes the absurdity of the sinner's claims and boasts, and holds before him the judgment and verdict of dirt and death. Therefore the sinner cannot but hate and evade the Law. But the God of the Law is also weeping. The sinner is trapped in a prison of his own making. God wants him to be free. God wants to have him home.

In the Confessions the great clue to reaching the sinner is the anxiety of his conscience, the hidden terrors of his heart, the illusory quality of his wisdom, achievements, and boasts. "This whole teaching [the Gospel] is to be referred to that conflict of the terrified conscience, nor can it

be understood apart from that conflict" (AC XX 17). The confessors acknowledge that they speak of conscience not merely from the study of Scripture but from *experience*. The Bible's diagnosis rings true to their own hearts. It answers to what man really is—wanting to be wise and like God, yet finding himself alone, inadequate, accused, guilty, bluffing through, but secretly terrified of being exposed as neither righteous, nor worthy, nor meaningful. All the strength he displays is a vain show—and the sinner could well know it, if only he dared!

Lutheran theology has a great stake in searching and understanding, by the interplay of Scripture and experience, the striving and the despairing of the *anxious conscience*. It is an area related, no doubt, to the researches of psychology and psychiatry, yet these secular disciplines have no interest in (and indeed, hardly dare interest themselves in) that peculiar state of universal anxiety and imprisonment to which the Word of the Gospel intends to speak. "Jesus knew what was in man," Saint John testifies (John 2:25). If we have received of His fullness and breathe His Spirit, then such knowledge belongs to the totality of the gifts our Lord intends us to have (John 16:12-15). We are children of the God who "searches the hearts of men" (Rom. 8:27; Rev. 2:23). What does God see in the heart? To know God is to know that too, and to know it not only in our minds but in and by our very own hearts. Yet vital as it is to preaching and to the understanding of the Gospel, this is a neglected area of thought and study among us.

One consequence of such neglect is our susceptibility to false and superficial gos-

pels. True enough, the "whole man" includes man in his body and society, man in the use of his creative mind, man as a creature with moral sensitivity and will, man as capable of emotional feelings and responses and intuitions. But the key to all the rest is the heart, with its self-consciousness, its anxieties for worth and approval and meaning. That is where our truest humanity, our inmost personhood, our deepest fears and hungers are found. And that is where the uncompromising line cuts through that distinguishes between righteousness and sinnerhood, between freedom and slavery, between life and death, between the found and the lost.

The true Gospel is aimed for that heart. There is a place for love that strives to satisfy physical hungers and to heal social ills, but this is not the Gospel. There is a place for a structure of systematic, intellectual theology and of Bible study to be grasped by the mind and subject to testing like any secular discipline. But this too is not the Gospel. There is even a place for moral prophets who address "the conscience of the American people" and by invoking a sense of guilt prod citizens and churches to action in the interest of justice. But this is not the Gospel either. There is a place for mystery and awe and emotion, for communal experiences of worship and of Spirit which engender a sense of closeness to the reality of God. But this too is not the Gospel.

The point at which true freedom and transformation occurs, where the revelation of the glory of Christ takes hold for the vision and consolation that makes all things new, is the *anxious conscience* or *heart*. The Confessions know it. The Bible knows it. For anyone who does not under-

stand this in his own heart, however, both Bible and Confessions lose their focus and become simply a blur.

C. *The Word of God (Sola Scriptura)*

We have dialed right to the honor of Christ, then left twice, past and stopping at the anxious conscience of the sinner. Now we dial right again, once past and stopping at the Word of divine grace and promise. For the Word of God is the bridge that brings the true glory of God's mercy in Christ to bear on the troubled heart of the sinner, so as to set the prisoner free. We must know, however, what is meant in Scripture and Confessions by "the Word of God." Otherwise there is no clear vision and sound eye, no sure combination toward the task of releasing those who are bound.

The Confessions have much to offer on this theme. It is the very substance of the article on "The Office of the Ministry" (AC V).

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided *the Gospel and the sacraments*. Through these, as *through means*, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who *bear the Gospel*. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the *external word of the Gospel*.

It is a constant theme. The church is "the assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according

to the Gospel" (AC VII 1). "Baptism is necessary and *grace is offered* through it" (AC IX 1). The sacraments are "signs and *testimonies of God's will toward us* [they talk to us!] for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith" (AC XIII 1). "Through the sacrament *grace and forgiveness of sin* are promised us by Christ" (AC XXIV 30). "According to the Gospel the power of the keys or the power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments." (AC XXVIII 5-9)

The Confessions convey a sense of wonder and mystery in the presence of the Word of God.

The Word of absolution . . . is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God's stead and by God's command. . . . God requires us to believe this absolution as much as if we heard *God's voice from heaven*, that we should joyfully comfort ourselves with absolution, and that we should know that through such faith we obtain forgiveness of sins (AC XXV 2-4).

The eye sees the preacher, and the ear hears the sound of his voice. But when the content of that Word of God breaks through into the anxious heart with its comfort, the preacher and his voice fade away. What is being heard is God himself, like a voice from heaven!

The Scriptures speak that way. "I have talked with you from heaven," says the Lord of Sinai (Ex. 20:22). A prophet who declares, "Thus says the Lord" is inviting his hearers to transcend the preacher and to listen to God Himself with their hearts. The words rooted in a familiar Old Testa-

ment text, "Israel is My firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22), are to Jesus at His baptism the Father's own voice from heaven speaking directly to Him. An angel flies "in mid-heaven, with an everlasting Gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Rev. 14:6). Even if the ambassadors are men, the voice is angelic, from the center of heaven. In Ps. 46:10, for example, the preacher is suddenly transcended and forgotten. The Lord Himself is talking, "Be still and know that I am God!" What a gift to preach like that! But that's how the voice from heaven works.

St. Paul says as much, "Our Gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5). A little later he says, "When you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess. 2:13). It was truly a miracle. The Thessalonians had ears in their hearts! The words came to them by way of apostolic messengers with no dignity or authority whatsoever to commend them. Yet their words were heard as the voice from heaven, the voice of the living God!

We entrust that miracle gladly to the Spirit. Our concern here needs to be with the substance of the message. "Word of God" implies that God is talking, saying something. *What is God saying?* What is that Good News, that Gospel pronouncement, by which God takes the redemptive event of Christ's Passion and resurrection, and applies it to the anxious conscience of the sinner so as to set him free? For it is not as an intellectual doctrinal proposition,

taught him in some catechism class, that the sinner knows this Word to be God's voice from heaven. It is rather because that Word breaks through to his own heart with its wisdom and mercy, beauty and power, to make everything alive and new. When that has happened, the sinner doesn't just know *words*. He *knows God!* For he is no longer a sinner, but a *son!* And if a son, then also an *heir* of God; and if son and heir, then also the free and willing *servant* in God's household—fellow sufferer with Christ, and participant with Him in His glory. (Rom. 8:14-17)

"You are My son, My heir, My servant." Like a three-noted chord, that divine Word sings the music of divine grace into the anxious heart of the sinner, as from the harp of David, to quiet the soul and expel everything that is ungodly and evil. One note or the other may dominate at any given moment, but all three are always there together. If any one is lost, the chord is broken and what is left is already a distortion.

The foundation-note is that of *sonship*. It embraces a wide variety of Biblical language—everything that has to do with our identity within God's family, our relationship to Him and thereby to one another as members of one body. In the Confessions the dominant language is that of righteousness, justification, forgiveness of sins. The word "elect" occurs as an identity-term in AC XVII 2; for the saints in Christ are now God's special, chosen people, marked with God's name upon them by their baptism and the voice from heaven that declares them to be God's beloved son. The Word of sonship comes to us out of that moment when Judgment Day was swallowed up in Jesus' death for our sakes,

and when His resurrection brought the proclamation not of wrath and vengeance but of forgiveness and peace. The Lord's Supper also declares it, for as our eating and drinking summons us to face the horror of that death of which we and all humanity are guilty (imagine Cain drinking Abel's blood, or Herod including the plattered head of John on his banquet menu!), the voice from heaven declares our sins forgiven and our sonship given in that very death! Thus we are righteous and justified, we have a gracious God whose face smiles on and delights in us—because God in Christ, the Word made flesh, says so!

The Confessions are full of this theme.

We cannot obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God [that is, we cannot belong to God, call Him Father, know and trust Him] by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but . . . we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe [what God tells us, namely] . . . that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. (AC IV 1-2)

Is the heart anxious to be important, worth something? "You are right to be anxious," says the voice from heaven. "All those trimmings in which you boast and which so impress men cannot hide the fact that you came from dirt, return to dirt, and are dirt even now. What will you do when I strip it all from you? Do you want a real and eternal glory, a name of dignity which can never be taken from you? Get it from Me! You are My son. I said it to you once and forever in your baptism, when I made you part of the humanity redeemed by the blood of My Son. It is His name you bear. I created you, I formed you, I loved and

cleansed you. Fear not, I have called you by name; you are Mine. Nothing can cancel that Word, just as nobody could take that name from Jesus My Son — not even when they stripped Him of everything and mocked and crucified Him. Stand on that name I have given you, as on a rock. My Word to you stands forever. Nothing can shake it, or tear you away from Me.”

Or is the heart anxious because of guilt? “You are right, of course,” says the voice from heaven. “You are guilty indeed, far more than you know. If I measured you by your performance, you would know that the very best you boast of is filthy rags, an abomination to Me. But I don’t measure you that way. I see you by My own mercy, by the cross of Christ. He took that old Judgment Day away. It is over. I don’t even look at you to judge you any more, to compliment you or to expose and criticize you. I see you only in Jesus’ garment, clean, every day a new day. I even take the awful things you do, the mess you make when you fall back into the trap of living by your lusts and fears — I find mysterious ways to turn even that into good, for I don’t want it to be your ruin or anybody else’s. So don’t hide from Me, or try to impress Me with that costume of fig leaves. Just put on Christ, eat His body and drink His blood, and be Mine in the joy of His love and glory!”

That’s the note of sonship or election, the foundation note of this heavenly chord of comfort and peace. With it goes the high note, the melody note of inheritance, fulfillment, a destiny of glory. The promised land, the place with Jesus at God’s right hand, victory over every threat and enemy, even death — it is all assured by the Word of God. For the glory of life is

not the consummation of human ambition, but the wonder of a wisdom and promise that exceeds any dream and transcends any language or metaphor.

The eschatological note receives no special accent in the Augsburg Confession, for it was not in dispute. It occurs in Article III on the Son of God, in XVII on the Return of Christ, and in many a passing reference to “eternal life.” Otherwise the Confession simply assumes it.

For preaching, however, this Word of divine hope and promise is essential. It delivers the sinner from the anxiety of achieving what he thinks is “success,” as well as from the fear of “failure.” “Listen to Me,” says the voice from heaven, “You are My son; that makes you My heir. Everything I have is yours, even now, so it is foolish and unnecessary for you to grab for the illusory and transient glory of human ambition as though that could be your life. You belong to My family. I did not create you just on the day you were born. I am still creating you, every day and hour of you, through all the opportunities, blessings, and also trials through which I lead you. So let Me be your Father and God, and do the creating all the way to the completion and fulfillment of this life I give you on earth. I am your Father, who gives you all the good you need. Receive My gifts with wonder and thanks, and do not grab for what I am not ready to give you, or what I do not intend for you. Trust Me also to deliver you from evil even when I lead you through the valley of the shadow of death. Let My rod and staff be your comfort, for if you imagine you have to deliver yourself you will panic and not be able to trust and follow Me. If ever you are dismayed and afraid, and feel I have

forgotten you, look at the darkness and cross of Jesus your Brother. Hang on to Me, as He did, for the resurrection and life and kingdom I fulfilled to Him will be yours also. He will come and receive you to Himself. Then, when you look back and see in full what I have done with you, through you, sometimes in spite of you, all eternity will not suffice for you to glorify Me in the riches of your own holy joy."

Add now the third note in the chord of the Gospel, the middle note which fills out the chord and makes it rich and vibrant. It is God's call to servanthood, God's description of what life is going to be like for His sons and heirs, now that they are free from the prison of sin and restored to their Father. This is the word of commandment—addressed not to the sinner anymore (for then it would only expose and accuse), but to sons who know, fear, love, and trust their Father only. It is God's call to imitate Him, to be merciful as He is merciful, to forgive as He forgives, to receive His gifts with thanksgiving and turn to Him for refuge in distress.

The Augsburg Confession calls this the life of "good works" and insists that it will happen, by God's Spirit, as a fruit of faith. The new life does not qualify us as sons, or pay off a debt to God. It simply expresses our sonship and our freedom in Christ.

This faith is bound to bring forth good fruits. (AC VI 1 Latin)

Good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God's will and glorify Him. . . . When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works. (AC XX 27-29)

Consequently this teaching concerning faith is not to be accused of forbidding

good works but is rather to be praised for teaching that good works are to be done and for offering help as to how they may be done. For without faith and without Christ human nature and human strength are much too weak to do good works, call upon God, have patience in suffering, love one's neighbor, diligently engage in callings which are commanded, render obedience, avoid evil lusts, etc. Such great and genuine good works cannot be done without the help of Christ, as He himself says in John 15:5, "Apart from me you can do nothing." (AC XX 35-39)

The Confessions repeatedly expose the futility of such good works as are invented by men as a means of pleasing God, and done apart from and even as a substitute for God's own commandments.

It is no small offense in the Christian church that the people should be presented with such a service of God, invented by men without the command of God, and should be taught that such a service would make men good and righteous before God. For righteousness of faith, which should be emphasized above all else in the Christian church, is obscured when man's eyes are dazzled with this curious angelic spirituality and sham of poverty, humility, and chastity. . . . For this is Christian perfection, that we fear God honestly with our whole hearts, and yet have sincere confidence, faith, and trust that for Christ's sake we have a gracious, merciful God; that we may and should ask and pray God for those things of which we have need, and confidently expect help from him in every affliction connected with our particular calling and station in life; and that meanwhile we do good works for others and diligently attend to our calling. (AC XXVII 48-49)

That calling includes service to God within

the civil orders which God has instituted for the good of even a fallen society. (AC XVI, XXVIII)

"Listen to Me," says the voice from heaven. "I am the God who redeemed you from death and judgment through the blood of My Son, and who have set before you so great and precious promises. I have given you your life and all things. I am not a tyrant trying to trick and exploit you. I am your Father. You know Me now and are transformed into My image. It is your life and your glory to serve Me and to be part of My work and wisdom for you and your world. So listen to My commandments, and don't let the desires and fears of your natural eyesight contradict the wisdom and love I have for you. Get your dignity and hope from Me, not from your achievements and ambitions or from the measurements of men. Just take your gifts and opportunities, in the unique place which is yours alone, and do My will without arrogance and without fear. That is how your life has glory and purpose and meaning. Your neighbor is a gift from Me; even your trials and losses are a gift from Me, a part of your riches. Serve Me, be My hands, My voice, My testimony in this world. Your life is not very long, but to Me it is eternally precious. You belong to the church, the body of My Son, and to the whole of humanity of which I am God through all generations. I know the whole, and I know every part. So 'be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.'" (1 Cor. 15:58)

"You are My son, My heir, My servant." That is the voice from heaven, the Word of God, the chord of the Gospel, by which the Holy Spirit brings the glory and merit

of Christ to the anxious heart, to open the prison of sin and death and to set the sinner free. That Gospel stands in sharpest contrast to God's law, for the Law taunts the sinner, turns his very wisdom and desire for freedom into a trap from which he cannot escape, drives him on in the fruitless pursuit of his illusions, accuses him and exposes his guilt, gives him no rest. That is why the sinner hates the Law and the God who speaks it. He cannot listen to it. To save himself from terror and despair, the sinner arbitrarily decrees such a law and God out of existence (Ps. 14:1). Nothing less than the truth of the Gospel can deliver him from the truth and terrors of the Law.

The great discovery which made the Reformation and is so indelibly stamped on our Confessions was not the Bible as book, but rather the Law and Gospel content, the *res* of that book. The church knew all along that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that its words carry divine authority. The miracle of the Spirit in Luther was the discovery of *what the God of everlasting mercy is really saying* in that Book to the anxious heart. The message had been confused and garbled, as though some demonic force were broadcasting deliberate interference so as to prevent the signal from breaking through. The eye of the reader was befouled with specks and logs so that he could see nothing clearly. Now God exposed and eliminated the interference. He removed the specks and logs. The joy and freedom of the confessors was to see and hear the Bible's Gospel in its *purity*, and thus to rest their hearts in that Word alone!

That is why they speak of Scripture the way they do. Scripture means the Gospel.

The authority of Scripture is the authority of that Gospel Word of God. A *quia* subscription to the doctrinal content of the Confessions is our AMEN to the clarity with which these Confessions focus the Bible's Gospel, thus making it possible also for comforted hearts truly to know, take seriously, and fear God's wrath and law. When the confessors speak of the *pure* Gospel, they mean the clearly focused proclamation that reaches sinners' hearts to set them free. When they invoke the Scriptures, their concern is for exactly the same thing.

The confessors can and do invoke the Scriptures as a formal authority. They share such recognition with their brothers in Western Christendom as part of their common tradition. What makes the Lutheran argument unique, however, is its overwhelming concentration on the material content of the Bible, the Word of God as Gospel. *That is the issue!* It is highly significant for us that formal agreement on the Bible's authority and inspiration proved ineffective as a means of keeping the church united. The traditional formal principle was universally accepted, yet the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church splintered into fragments. For the unity of the church lies in her clear understanding of the Gospel and the sacraments as the Word of life—not in formal reverence for the Bible and its inspired authority. Note the seriousness with which the confessors at Augsburg close the first part of their Confession and appeal for unity in terms of the Bible's Gospel.

This is just about a summary of the doctrines that are preached and taught in our churches for proper Christian instruction, the *consolation of consciences*, and the

amendment of believers. Certainly we should not wish to put our own souls and consciences in grave peril before God by *misusing his name or Word*, nor should we wish to bequeath to our children and posterity any other teaching than that which agrees with the pure *Word of God* and Christian truth. Since this teaching is *grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures* and is not contrary or opposed to that of the universal Christian church . . . we think that our opponents cannot disagree with us in the articles set forth above. Therefore, those who presume to reject, avoid, and separate from our churches as if our teaching were heretical, act in an unkind and hasty fashion, *contrary to all Christian unity and love*, and do so without any solid basis of divine command or Scripture. (AC, after XXI)

The faith and delight of the confessors in the Scriptures is one and the same with their faith and delight in the Gospel. Scripture proclaims the Gospel and prohibits what is contrary to the Gospel (AC XXIV 28-29 Latin). "Divine Scripture," "Holy Spirit," "Gospel," "chief article of the Gospel," these are an indissoluble unity in the mind and argumentation of the confessors (AC XXVIII 43-52). The confessors invoke the *sola Scriptura* because the pure doctrine of the Gospel is to be found nowhere else—certainly not in the tradition of the church or the reason of man. "Scripture alone" means to them the *pure* Gospel. Anything that changes the combination, or obscures the focus, derives not from God's Bible but from some other authority—namely, from the natural heart and reason of the sinner who does not know God.

Lutherans have a great stake in the question of the *res* of that Word of God which

pierces through to the heart of the sinner like a voice from heaven. What is God really saying to our hearts? What, for example, is the "whole counsel of God" which St. Paul did not shrink from declaring (Acts 20:27)? It is vital that we grasp that wholeness lest we be found to add to the Word of God or to detract from it (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19). Surely that "whole counsel of God" cannot be defined simply by pointing to the whole Bible, or the whole Book of Concord. There is a substantive center, an active ingredient that makes Scripture and the Confessions alive with the Spirit and voice of God to our hearts. The Confessions recognize that center when they speak of the "Gospel preached in its purity" (AC VII 1) or of justification and Christian liberty as "the chief article of the Gospel" (AC XXVIII 52). The baptismal formula and the Creed set that center before us as "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Similarly Christ's commission to "forgive" and "retain" sins draws us to what is central and essential. To St. Paul Jesus Christ crucified is the whole thing. (1 Cor. 2:2)

I have amplified all this in the interest of greater clarity. I have shown that the Word of God speaks to our hearts out of the history of Jesus' cross and resurrection. The cross cannot be evaded. Christ must have His honor. Furthermore, the Word that speaks to us out of that cross is like a musical chord, all three notes of which must be played. The notes of sonship and inheritance, without that middle tone of servanthood, beget sectarian arrogance, isolation, and withdrawal—like Jonah, who waits on the outside to see Nineveh perish. But the commandment by itself, not framed

by the Word of sonship and of eternal promise, is sheer moralism, devoid of the Spirit of life. It addresses men as sinners still in their prison. It can only accuse them and drive them to escape judgment—if not by evasion or defiance, then by the accumulation of works with which to comfort and approve themselves and judge others. The backdrop for this Word of the Gospel is the law of the God who remains hidden, who controls a sinful world, brings men to judgment whether they acknowledge Him or not, and will not compromise with their sinnerhood.

Is not this what "the whole counsel of God" must mean to us? But there are other questions also.

What is the real offense (*skandalon*) of the Word of God, the stumbling-block not of the rational mind, but of the sinful heart? What is the dynamic of the heart's unbelief and enmity against God?

How does the Word of the Gospel, through the release of the sinner, effect his transformation? If the Confessions speak of human nature as being "too weak" to do good works, what does this really mean? How do good works proceed from faith? How does the new heart affect and capture the emotions, the will, the intellect, and the outward behavior? How does it transform a man's relationship to his world and to time, to God and to society?

Again, how does this Gospel, when it has penetrated the heart, transform our understanding of the *Bible*? That such a transformation occurred in the disciples is vividly testified in the Resurrection narratives. Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). What does this mean? How had they understood the Bible before, and how do they under-

stand it now? Are these alternative understandings simply subjective exegetical options? What does it mean to search the Scriptures and to discover that they do indeed testify of Jesus Christ—consistently, all over, in their genuine heart and dynamic, without forcing words to mean what they do not mean, without imposing allegories, yet with lively appreciation of the exuberant way in which the disciples, filled with the free Spirit of their risen Lord, could quote and enjoy their Bibles? Was the tragic division of Judaism from Christianity simply a squabble between Rabbis?

Again, is there any other “voice from heaven” Word of God to man, sinner or saint, than this chord of the Gospel? Is there a Word of God from heaven apart from and unrelated to the honor of Christ and the anxious conscience? Moses warned against any “word” that might be heard through Canaanite diviners, soothsayers, augurs, mediums, necromancers, and the like. Does God speak through extrasensory perceptions, or dreams, or voices? Is there anything else than its “whole counsel of God” content that authenticates true proclamation in distinction from that of alien spirits?

What of the Bible? Suppose the inspired authority of the Bible is invoked to sustain and demand intellectual assent to propositions of bare history or bare cosmology, read flat and without questioning off the face of the page—on pain of despising the Word of God, forfeiting the Gospel, being judged an unbeliever or heretic, and falling into the danger of eternal death? What has happened, then, to the honor of Christ, to the anxious heart of the sinner, and to the “voice from heaven” Gospel?

God, deliver us from our specks and logs, that we may see clearly!

D. Faith (Sola Fide)

Christ’s honor, the anxious conscience, the Word of God—the dial of our combination lock has pointed to each of these. But now that dial almost leaps to one final stopping point, so as to spring the lock open. That is *faith*, by which the conscience comes to “rest and peace . . . when it is assured and knows that for Christ’s sake it has a gracious God” (AC XX 15-16; XII 5).

In the Confessions the terms “justification by grace through faith” or “the righteousness of faith” become summary titles for the whole Gospel (AC IV; XXVII 38, 48; XXVIII 62, 64). The terminology derives particularly from St. Paul (Romans 3 and 4, for example). Though “faith” is an Old Testament concept, as Paul’s use of Gen. 15:6 and Hab. 2:4 shows, it takes on a peculiar new force and becomes (like the Holy Spirit) a distinctive mark of the New Testament era. In Rom. 9:30—10:8 “the righteousness of faith” contrasts sharply with “righteousness under the Law.” In Gal. 3:23-29 “faith came” and “Christ came” are equivalent expressions. Justification (or righteousness) has to do with identity in relation to God. In the hour of judgment and salvation which occurred in Jesus’ death and resurrection, the old marks of identity ceased to constitute a claim on God. Jesus alone is the Son of God, no one else. Blood lineage from Abraham, circumcision, the distinctive character manifested by obedience to the Law—none of this could signal election and sonship anymore. Instead the “power to become children of God” is given to all

who "receive" Jesus, who "*believe* in His name," and are thus "born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

The transition from Old Testament to New was no easy matter. Nicodemus protested against the necessity of being "born again." St. Paul knew fully what it meant to leave every old mark and claim behind for the sake of the righteousness of faith in Christ (Phil. 3:2-11). For us the "old" that must be left behind, to which we even die, is the natural flesh and prison of sin, with all its passions and fears. We die to the flesh so that we may live in the Spirit of our God.

But "faith" must have a Word. It comes by hearing. It can be understood only in terms of a specific Word of divine promise which the heart can grasp. God says something, our ears hear it, and our hearts believe it. For the hungry and thirsty heart, that Word of life and promise is like bread and water in the wilderness (Jer. 15:16; Is. 55:1-3; John 6:47-51). We hear the Word and believe it. Thereby we believe and come to know the God who speaks the Word. The lost son is kissed and clothed, and called "my son." Then he finds himself sitting in his father's house at that joyful banquet. Why did he go in there? Why wasn't he suspicious and rebellious, as he had been long ago? Not because he thought about it and made some wise, calculated decision. He didn't really think or decide at all. He only heard the Father say "Come," contrary to all prior expectations. Suddenly to come was the obvious, the only thing to do. That is faith. That is the miracle of grace and of the Spirit.

The Confessions make it clear that faith is not an intellectual assent to historical or

theological knowledge. Faith occurs not in the *mind* of a man but in his *heart*, where the Word of God breaks in to offer a remarkable way of deliverance from the anxious burden of the conscience. "The faith here spoken of is not that possessed by the devil and the ungodly, who also believe the history of Christ's suffering and his resurrection from the dead. . . . Faith is not merely a knowledge of historical events but is a confidence in God and in the fulfillment of his promises" (AC XX 23-26). In temptation faith hangs on to God's Word and promises *against* all contrary evidence of the natural senses, reason, or conscience, on which the sinner by instinct wants to depend. "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Faith knows that what appears to be light may in reality be darkness, and that what looks like darkness may truly be light. (Is. 5:20)

Lutherans have a great stake in understanding clearly what faith is and what it is not.

Faith is not a *work* or *behavior*. It is not a requirement self-consciously fulfilled and offered to God in response to the one condition He still imposes. To examine oneself in a search for one's faith by introspection is a desperate business indeed. The heart becomes more anxious than ever. It can have no confidence in God unless it first finds some true "faith" in itself. It is driven then to confirm the reality of its "faith" by works of love, feelings of sincerity, or demonstrations and protestations of faithfulness and loyalty. What a demonic perversion! The lock does not open, the prisoner is still in jail. A preacher who understands what faith is will say little about faith, but much about Christ. He will magnify the external Word. He will

become an instrument of the voice from heaven as God speaks it directly to anxious hearts. For the heart must hear a Word if it is to believe and thus find rest in the arms of a gracious God and Father.

Neither is faith an act of intellect. Faith does not come by an accumulation of knowledge about the Bible and doctrine. The strength of faith is not proportionate to the comprehensiveness of knowledge. One may know all doctrine and yet not know God. Faith is not the culmination of a series of logical inferences, founded on the first premise of the Bible's inspired authority and leading step by step through many prooftexts to the final vision that all doctrine drawn from the Bible is true.

Neither is believing the Bible the same thing as believing the Gospel. There is a "childlike faith" so-called, which boasts of its reverence in rejecting critical questions, condemns those who ask them, and considers it a mark of piety to read the Bible flat, according to its immediate first-impression meaning, confident that this must be the Spirit's meaning, for the Spirit will not deceive. However piously such "faith" may present itself, it is in reality an intellectually grounded and fear-motivated escape from the call to search the Scriptures and to think. It has nothing in common with that "childlike faith" of which Christ speaks. For true childlike faith is to hear the three-noted chord of the Gospel and to say yes to it with a joyful and uncalculating heart. By such true faith we know the Father, give up our fleshly "knowledge of good and evil" kind of wisdom, and are ready to follow our Lord and Shepherd even through the valley of the shadow of death—as Jesus did when He prayed "Abba, Father" and then delivered

Himself to be crucified. To call anything else than that "childlike faith" perverts Scripture and the Confessions, robs Christ of His honor, and seduces consciences with a false comfort.

Faith is not an *act of will* either. It is not a decision to join a church after calculating the advantages over the liabilities. It is not the product of a determination to believe because somebody pleads, "You've got to believe; you'll go to hell if you don't!" Neither is faith a product of auto-hypnosis, as when a man keeps telling himself, "Surely, I do believe! I do! I do! I must! I must!" Neither is faith puffing oneself up to "believe" that God will perform a desired miracle, so as to qualify as a candidate for "faith healing."

Faith is not a matter of *emotion*. It is not an inner feeling of peace and quiet confidence. It is not a sense of the presence of God, or a strange intuition of something good about to happen. Faith is not created, confirmed, or supported by spiritual experiences, like a "baptism of the Spirit" so-called, for only one "sign" has been given to which God invites anxious hearts to look, and that is the cross. Faith born of Christ and the cross sees God's hand in all of life, even in the hours of suffering and darkness. It depends on the Word of everlasting promise, not on special emotion-laden experiences. True faith knows and discovers and lives by the Spirit, not through preaching the Spirit but by preaching Christ. Faith in Christ delights in and does not despise the ordinary and earthly sacraments of water, bread, and wine. For these sacraments *speaks*. God talks through them, binding us to the Son in whose name we are baptized and whose body and blood we eat and drink for the

forgiveness of our sins. In the sacraments God declares us to be His sons and heirs, and invites us to know and serve Him, our living God and Father, and to love and be one with one another.

The Word of God—that is the everlasting rock to which faith clings. Heaven and earth will pass away, but that Word will not pass away. Faith builds its house on that rock.

It takes a sound eye to see specks and logs clearly. Our Confessions can yet be that eye for us, if only we know them and the Scriptures through them.

By Scripture and the Confessions we can hear and know the Gospel—not merely as dogma but as the voice from heaven to our own anxious hearts. By that Gospel we shall know our God also, and how to rest in Him and not be afraid.

II. "THE LOG IN OUR EYE"

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matt. 6:22-23)

The sound eye is the pure doctrine of the Gospel, exhibited in the Confession our fathers made at Augsburg, as they found it in the Holy Scriptures. My recapitulation of that sound eye is subject to all searching and testing. If specks are found in it, the eye that discovers them will be a sounder one than mine, and that is a gift of the Spirit to the church which any child of God will welcome with joy. For now, however, I must accept whatever capacity God has granted me to "see clearly" (Matt. 7:5), and apply it to the task of searching out what it is that has marred our vision

and made genuine healing among us so very difficult.

Satan will see to it that the eye of the church is always afflicted with specks. I have in passing pointed to many of them. Now, however, I must concentrate on the log. The log too begins as a speck, a slight distortion or deformity. It becomes a log in our eye when we invest it with so high a confidence and honor as to make it the criterion by which to practice eye surgery on our brothers. Then the saying of Jesus begins to come true, "But if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness."

Even that may not be the end of the deterioration. Suppose some who have conferred such honor on the log refuse to remove it from their eye, but cling to it as though their whole salvation depended on it! Suppose such brethren rise vehemently to the defense of their log, calling it their great "light," even insisting that the Lutheran Confessions be supplemented by this "light" of theirs! Suppose they try to force their "true doctrine" on the church by harnessing the church's institutional processes, or failing that, protest their own rightness through sectarian withdrawal! Then the tragedy Jesus describes reaches its culmination, "If then the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!"

A. *Seeing the Log*

The log in our eye has to do with our doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. The *fact* of the Bible's inspiration is not in question. Neither is the principle that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are "the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (FC and Ep 1) and

similar affirmations. The question is rather what all this *means* and how this principle is to be *used*.

There are two alternatives. It may be useful to associate them terminologically with the familiar distinction between the "formal" and the "material" principle. A definition is offered in the "President's Report" to the Milwaukee convention:

The "formal principle" is that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and the source and norm of all doctrine; the "material principle" is that Christ and His gracious justification of the sinner is the heart and center of the entire Scripture.¹

Are the Holy Scriptures our "only rule and norm" according to the *formal* principle or according to the *material*? That is the critical question. The alternatives are sharp and mutually exclusive. Here are the choices:

a. *Formal principle*. Is it as inspired Book, offering true, authoritative, reliable, and inerrant information to man's intellect (in distinction from consolation for his anxious conscience) that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule and norm of doctrine? It would follow that "true doctrine" consists in every item of information Scripture conveys (or seems to someone to convey) as a written document. Anything the Bible says on any subject qualifies as an "article of faith" to be believed (that is, accepted by the submissive intellect) without questioning.²

¹ *Convention Proceedings*, 49th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 9—16, 1971, p. 55.

² This, I think, is what "article of faith" comes to mean in the following recent statement: "The preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding of it becomes an im-

b. *Material principle*. Or is it for the sake of what our gracious God by His Spirit-filled voice from heaven declares and reveals throughout the Bible for the consolation of anxious consciences (in distinction from information for man's intellect) that the Holy Scriptures as the written Word of God are our only rule and norm?

Examine the alternatives carefully. Which of these created the Reformation? Which captures the "sound eye" of the Lutheran Confessions? For which were Luther and his fellow confessors ready to die? Which does St. Paul have in mind when he refers to "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27)? Is the eye of the apostle afflicted with a "speck" called "Gospel reductionism"³ when he tells the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified"? (1 Cor. 2:2)

Which understanding of the Holy Scriptures as "the only rule and norm" do the confessors have in mind? They cite two Biblical texts, first Ps. 119:105, "Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my

possibility whenever any article of faith is either falsified or denied. In this sense the *pure* and *recte* of AC VII have also *quantitative* (emphasis original) significance because the Gospel that creates and builds the church ultimately embraces all articles of faith revealed in Holy Scripture." Again, "The antithesis in AC VII is between the divine Gospel and human ceremonies, and not between the Gospel and other teachings of Holy Scripture." Ralph A. Bohlmann, "Confessional Ecumenism," in *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*, eds. Erich Kiehl and Waldo J. Werning (Lutheran Congress, 1970, 2751 South Karlov Avenue, Chicago, Ill. 60623), pp. 84—85.

³ *Convention Proceedings*, Milwaukee 1971, p. 55. See Edward H. Schroeder, "Law-Gospel Reductionism in the History of the LCMS," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XLIII, 4 (April 1972), 232—47.

path." To the psalmist that "Word" is surely the *material* Word of God's promises to his heart. Is it conceivable that our fathers understood it to refer to the Bible as inspired Book? Their second quotation is Gal. 1:8, "Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed!" Surely St. Paul had in mind his *message*, not the Scriptures as Book! Could the confessors possibly have understood him to be referring to the *formal* principle? (FC, Ep. 1)

I know how this kind of discussion generates fear, anger, and a specter of deadly consequences including the subjectivizing of God's Word and the undermining of its authority. Such reactions derive from our *log*, however, not from the clear eye of our Confessions. God help us set aside such fears and judgments long enough to see what we have not seen! Our Bible is precious and our Gospel is precious. It is in the relationship between them that we face our vital question.

Which of the following statements rings true to the clear bell of the Confessions? (a) "Whatever is faithful to Holy Scriptures serves the Gospel, and whatever opposes Holy Scriptures threatens the Gospel"?⁴ Or its inversion, (b) "Whatever is faithful to the Gospel serves the Holy Scripture, and whatever opposes the Gospel threatens Holy Scripture"?

Try another. "When the Scriptures are obscured, Christ will be obscured."⁵ Would not the Lutheran confessors put it exactly the other way? "When Christ is obscured, the Scriptures will be obscured!"

Once again, which of the following captures the mind of our Confessions? "He who knows the Scripture has a divinely-given wisdom which guides him to faith in Christ and thus to salvation"?⁶ Or its inversion, "He who knows Christ by faith and thus has salvation has a divinely-given wisdom which guides him to know the Scripture"? (See Luke 24:36-45!)

My purpose is not to attack or embarrass any brother. The brethren I quote are simply representative of a long-standing problem in our tradition. I know them to be as deeply concerned for the Gospel as I am. But it is necessary to expose Satan and his trap. For it is not by chance that we formulate our sentences the way we do. The quotations are symptoms of the speck which so readily becomes a log.

There is a simple test for that speck, which anyone can take. What comes to mind *first* with the phrase "the Word of God"?

- a. The holy, inspired, inerrant Bible? Or
- b. The words God speaks from heaven out of that Bible to comfort our hearts? For God says, "Peace! Don't be afraid! Look to the cross! I have turned the darkness and blood and judgment of Calvary into forgiveness and life for you! You are My son, My heir, My servant! You have My Word for it—in Baptism and in the Lord's Supper. I do not lie! Heaven and earth will pass away (including the Bible), but this word of Mine to you will never pass away!"

Is believing the Bible the same thing as believing the Gospel? Is Bible reading and

⁴ Bohlmann, p. 84.

⁵ *Convention Proceedings*, Milwaukee 1971, p. 54.

⁶ Jacob A. O. Preus, *It Is Written* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 69.

study by itself a means of grace? Is it the glory of the Reformation that Luther restored the Bible to the church, or the Gospel? What has happened to us, when the formal principle has displaced the material in the center of our thinking?

"Ultimately the loss of the Scripture will destroy the church, nothing else,"⁷ says a recent diagnosis. According to this view the threat to the Scripture comes from "so-called theologians . . . who supposedly have dedicated their lives to Christ," yet are "actually devoting their talents, time, and lives to destructive criticism of the Bible."⁸ Is that really what threatens us with the loss of Scripture? Is it not rather that we have somehow made the inspiration of the Bible our battle line in defense of a Gospel which needs and wants no defense, but which would gladly be, if only we understood and trusted it, the greatest defender of our Bible?

It will be helpful to sketch the origins of the tradition that has taken such deep root in our eye. Then we shall also be able to confront more dispassionately a problem which had not become a serious concern when our Confessions were written, but has caused great anxieties among us—the problem of critical methodology in Bible study.

B. *The Speck and Its Growth*

The doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture was in no way a distinctive insight of Luther. It belonged to his medieval heritage. Abraham Calov (1612—86) could cite St. Augustine in support of his own rationale regarding the Bible's authority:

⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

If you grant any untruth to obtain in such a crowning height of authority (and this is done by doubting Scripture or not holding it to be absolutely sure), then not the smallest portion of these books will remain that cannot be called into question.⁹

The reverence of theologians long before Luther for every word of Scripture shows itself, for example in Nicole Oresme of the University of Paris in the 14th century. Oresme had refuted Aristotle's proofs that the earth could not be rotating on its axis, and yet was forced to yield at last to one argument that would not budge. The Scripture said, "The world is established, it shall never be moved" (Ps. 93:1). That settled it for him. The reverence of the whole church for the Bible as the inspired Word of God is reflected in the oath which Luther took when he became a doctor of the Bible, to defend this Book with his very life. All his opponents, from the Roman hierarchy to the fanatics, appealed to Scripture as their authority, as does every sectarian movement to this day.

It should not surprise us, therefore, to find Luther, too, submitting humbly to every word of Scripture, like all his contemporaries in the Roman Catholic Church. For example, in commenting on Gen. 1:6 Luther faces the difficulty that there are waters *above* the firmament, hence *above* sun and stars. The text would be more comprehensible, Luther acknowledges, if we could take the upper waters to mean the clouds *beneath* the firmament. But Moses' words are plain. "Here I, therefore,

⁹ Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 190. It is not clear whether the parenthetical comment belongs to Augustine or to Calov or to Preus.

take my reason captive and submit to the Word even though I do not understand it."¹⁰

Nevertheless it was not this traditional reverence for every word of Scripture which created the Reformation, but rather the impact of the Bible's *Gospel*. The Gospel broke through out of the Scriptures. Like a voice from heaven it proclaimed God's forgiving mercy for Christ's sake to anxious consciences. Hungry hearts devoured that Word, and in it found Spirit and life and freedom! At that point, whether the Reformers realized it or not, "faith" was no longer dependent on the "formal principle" of the Bible's inspired authority. It was altogether a response to the *res*, the substance of God's declaration of total and free forgiveness and sonship. Luther can talk about his experience exactly as St. Paul does in Gal. 1:11-12:

Your Electoral Grace knows (or, if you do not, I now inform you of the fact) that I have received the gospel not from men but *from heaven only*, through our Lord Jesus Christ, so that I might well be able to boast and call myself a minister and evangelist, as I shall do in the future.¹¹

"From heaven only," Luther says. Surely he got it from the Scriptures, and yet when it penetrated his heart it transcended even the Bible. It was the voice of God talking just to him, and with unshakable authority.

That is the sense of the divine Word which Luther captures in his explanation of the Third Article. "The Holy Spirit has

called me by the Gospel," he says, and "my own understanding and effort" has nothing to do with it. Faith in Christ and enlightenment with the Spirit's gifts are not the capstone of some logical progression founded on the Bible's inspired authority as a kind of "first premise." The *mind* does not need to argue intellectually from the general truth of the whole inspired Bible to the particular truth of the Bible's Gospel, in order for the *heart* to believe that Gospel. Such a use of reason is simply not in the picture. Rather, the message itself breaks through in the purity of its promise, freed from the encrusted traditions that had so obscured it. The heart hears God. It believes involuntarily and nonrationally. Thus the miracle of the Spirit in the Word is fulfilled.¹²

This, however, is not the same authority principle as the traditional one of the Bible's inspiration. It stands by itself, independently of the other. The heart grasps the Word of promise as a great treasure, gladly surrenders all else for it, knows God by that Word, and will not let it go. This is the authority principle that created the Reformation. It accounts for Luther's free-

¹² The curious ambivalence and confusion of our tradition on this point may be illustrated through a sentence in Ralph Bohlmann's article. He says, "Recognition of the divine authority of Holy Scripture is a fruit of faith in the Gospel." Thus he acknowledges that the Gospel is believed first out of its own inherent authority. Yet the very same sentence continues, "but the *Biblical* (Bohlmann's emphasis, meaning that the Gospel is to be found in the Bible) content of the Gospel we preach and administer is in turn our assurance that our Gospel comes from *God* and therefore expresses *His* will and *His* power" (loc. cit.). Now suddenly it takes logical inference from the Bible's inspiration to assure us of the Gospel's divine origin and trustworthiness.

¹⁰ *Luther's Works*, American Edition (Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press), 1, 26. Hereafter *LW*.

¹¹ Letter to Elector Frederick from Borna, March 5, 1522, on Luther's return from the Wartburg to Wittenberg. My emphasis. *LW*, 48, 390.

dom to express himself over against the Bible in ways that strike us as strange and even a little embarrassing, and which we have tended to dismiss as nothing more than his "carefree way of speaking and his common use of overstatement."¹³ Luther's judgment that the Epistle of James is not the writing of an apostle, for it teaches nothing about Christ, is a case in point.¹⁴

Two principles of Biblical authority are interwoven in the Reformation era, therefore, though without being consciously distinguished. For our purposes we shall designate them respectively as the "inspiration principle" and the "Gospel principle." They correspond to the formal and the material. Though they have to do with the same Bible, they are not the same. The one makes its claim upon man's theologizing *mind*, the other on his anxious *heart*, so as to set the sinner free. Luther and the reformers had no need or occasion to notice or define the distinction. Nevertheless they were able to use the Gospel principle with remarkable clarity. The Augsburg Confession appeals to the Scripture as a common ground upon which Lutherans and their opponents both stand (inspiration principle), yet in its argumentation that ground is altogether transcended by the Gospel principle. We have seen how the confessors appeal to the honor of Christ, and to comfort for anxious consciences, and to the Word of God as a voice from heaven proclaiming forgiveness and justification. The papalist Confutation hurls dozens of bare Biblical texts at the Lutheran party, and Melancthon in the Apology deals with them patiently one by one. Yet his crown-

ing argument is always the Gospel's twofold test: "Is Christ honored and are consciences comforted?" Indeed, it is only by the "Gospel principle" of authority that even the Bible's accusing and demanding Law can be known and understood.

In the later 17th century these two principles of Biblical authority began to pull apart. The medieval heritage of an inspired and authoritative Bible asserted its claim independently of the Gospel principle, which had been the governing genius of the Reformation and of its Confessions. The spirit of Christian humanism was perhaps a major factor, and with it the desire to express the Lutheran and Biblical faith in a logically structured way, for systematic study and refutation of heresy. Aristotelian logic suggested the importance of starting with first principles. It did not occur to dogmaticians that the first principle for Lutheranism might be the "Gospel principle" of the Bible's authority. They reached back into their medieval heritage and established as their first principle the "inspiration authority" of the Bible. "The doctrine of Scripture," says Preus, "is generally the first article to be considered in Lutheran dogmatics. The reason for this arrangement is a purely practical one; the orthodox Lutherans felt they ought to establish the source of theology before they engaged in theology."¹⁵

The era of orthodoxy corresponded to an age of great perplexity in scientific thought. Every long-accepted understanding of reality was being shaken. The "firmament" to which the heavenly bodies were fixed or on which they traveled in paths, as well as its more sophisticated counterpart, the Ptol-

¹³ Robert D. Preus, p. 21.

¹⁴ *LW*, 35, 396.

¹⁵ Robert D. Preus, p. 256.

emaic spheres, evaporated. The dome of sky that appeared to be there wasn't really there! Spontaneous generation proved an illusion. Dung does not generate gnats, or the ground snakes, or the waters fish. New theories of reality exploded everywhere, and men began to feel like fools who knew and understood nothing for sure. "How do we know that we know anything at all?" That was the tormenting question in the arena of the sciences. With science groping in epistemological uncertainty, theology at least could claim certainty and offer men a sure and stable foundation. Theology had as its *principium cognoscendi*, its source of knowledge, not nature but an inspired and infallible Bible, the gift of God's Holy Spirit. The Bible is "a sure source of knowledge, more sure and certain than heaven and earth and all empirical evidence."¹⁶ Because theology offered certainty, whereas science did not, theology was queen. Pious scientists paid it their regular and ample respect.

Thus the intellectual "formal principle" assumed foundational significance in later Lutheran orthodoxy. All doctrine was derived from Scripture and established or "proved" by quoting Scripture. For when the Bible clearly says a thing, that is the "proof" of it. If it has thus been proved, it belongs to the "true doctrine" and therefore is to be "believed" with all confidence. That is the logic. The orthodox method conferred on the "inspiration principle" of the Bible's authority the prominence which in the Confessions belonged to the "Gospel principle." Faith now follows "proof."

The first demand upon "faith," however, is that it know and trust the foundation

on which all else rests. According to the inspiration principle, the foundation is not Christ (1 Cor. 3:11, the "Gospel principle"), but a kind of subfoundation under Christ, namely God's revelation in Holy Scripture. That subfoundation must be established as firm and reliable. Thus Calov says:

For if the source of theology (divine revelation) is not always infallible, incapable of being doubted and wholly beyond human criticism, but in some matter or other is only probable and of limited authority, then there can be no theological conclusions that are infallible and not subject to doubt. For a conclusion cannot be more certain than its genuine, adequate and single source.¹⁷

The authority and certainty of the Scriptures rests on the fact that the Bible is the Word of God.

God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18), but is absolutely reliable and entirely infallible in those things He reveals. Consequently, every word of God, no matter what it deals with, is certain and infallible.¹⁸

In the Confessions the term "the Word of God" is applied to the Scriptures for the sake of the "Gospel principle." In the dogmaticians, however, it is applied to the Scriptures for the sake of the "inspiration principle" — yet with no awareness of how drastically the meaning of the phrase has now changed!

The shift in commitment from the "Gospel principle" to the "inspiration principle" shows itself also in the way the later orthodox dogmaticians defined the relationship between the Scriptures and the Lutheran

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 190.

Confessions. I have shown at length how faithfully the Confessions capture the heart of the Bible. They express, focus, and defend the message of comfort and peace which God Himself is proclaiming out of the cross of Christ to the heart of the sinner by the Spirit. The Gospel of Scripture and the Gospel of the Confessions is one and the same self-authenticating Gospel. To hold to the Confessions and to hold to the Scriptures is one and the same faith! That is what a *quia* subscription to the Confessions ought to mean.

But the later orthodox fathers do their primary thinking in terms of the *formal* principle rather than the material. They are constrained, therefore, to uphold the authority of Scripture *over* the Confessions. "Scripture is the *norma normans* of theology; tradition and the Symbols are a *norma normata*."¹⁹ "Only Scripture is self-authenticating."²⁰ Obviously a theologian will want to work with Scripture as his primary resource, so that he may speak from the original rather than a derived authority.

For the most part the Lutheran dogmatics was worked out without any subordination to the Confessions. Although the terminology is often the same, the Confessions are rarely cited in most of the works in systematic theology, not nearly as often as Luther and the church fathers. . . . In other words, there is a deliberate attempt, while never departing from the spirit or theology of the Lutheran Symbols, to *work independently of them* in producing dogmatics.²¹ (Emphasis added.)

The shift in accent from the material principle (Gospel authority) to the formal (inspiration authority) is a sad fruit of such "independence." Theological argumentation was no longer done from the confessional test, the honor of Christ and the comfort of consciences. Rather it focused on the formal authority of the Bible and on questions of interpretation. Obviously in such matters the dogmaticians would find little help in the Symbols, as Preus acknowledges:

The symbols could not be appealed to as often as the orthodox party might have liked, and this because the Confessions did not touch on many of the issues under debate (e.g., the inspiration of Scripture; the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament) except in passing.²²

Given the awareness and regret of such a "lack" in the Confessions, we readily appreciate the desire of many to supply what is missing (if not by adding to the Confessions themselves, then at least in the official doctrinal position of a church body) — namely, a clear, unequivocal, and binding statement on the inspiration, perfection, and authority of the Scriptures.

Such is the pattern of thought that has governed our Synod's tradition. It is well expressed in a statement like the following:

Yes, our Synod is particular about its view of Holy Scripture so that it may be faithful to what the Scriptures teach. Thereby it guards, under the Spirit's power, all the other doctrines including the central doctrine of justification and reconciliation by faith in Jesus Christ.²³

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 38. In English, "norming norm" versus "normed norm."

²⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

²¹ Ibid., p. 37.

²² Ibid., p. 39.

²³ Paul Zimmerman, "We Are Ambassadors for Christ," *Convention Proceedings*, Milwaukee 1971, p. 76.

The Scriptures need to be defended so that the truth of their Gospel may shine clearly. That is the great concern, as Robert Preus observes repeatedly in his study of post-Reformation Lutheranism. Yet in such statements the "Gospel principle" of the Bible's authority appears to be unrecognized and unknown. The Gospel is not regarded as a mighty two-edged sword, piercing through to the marrow, exposing and comforting hearts in its very proclamation, so lively a weapon of attack that it needs no defense, authenticating itself in the "experience" of "weak and terrified consciences" which "find it most comforting and salutary" (AC XX 15). Rather the Gospel is a doctrine that sits in the Bible surrounded by many other doctrines and needing the "inspiration principle" to guard its truth. We need not question the genuinely evangelical concern of the orthodox fathers, or their capacity for evangelical preaching. There is a speck in the eye, however. A speck is inevitably an impediment to the Spirit. It may even become a log.

Thus in orthodoxy the formal principle assumes a position of priority. Everything depends on the inspired authority, reliability, and infallibility of the Scriptures as the very Word of God, the *principium cognoscendi* of theology. That raises a critical question, however. *How do we know that the Holy Scriptures are so sure and firm a foundation?* We must know and be very certain of this, our first premise, for if it should totter, everything we build on it will totter with it. The earnest struggle of orthodox systematicians to answer so vital a question can be gleaned from Preus's study. Here follow the major arguments. How do we know?

a. "The inspiration of Scripture is the doctrine of Scripture itself." Nor does this beg the question, Preus argues (following Schertzer), for "one proves God from God, the sun from the sun, color from color, and the divine origin of Scripture from itself."²⁴ In the case of Scripture, however, the "proof" does not derive from such an axiomatic impression on the eye as the analogies might suggest. The proof lies rather in particular "proof texts," above all 2 Tim. 3:16 and 1 Peter 1:21. Even here the overriding material concerns of the holy writers receive no attention. The texts are invoked solely for what they can contribute in support of the formal principle. Thus they are made to "prove" a way of structuring theology which itself derives not from these texts at all, but from philosophy.

b. The dogmaticians offer a series of "external" and "internal criteria" (eight each) by which one may become convinced of the authority of Scripture. The external criteria can at most "break down some of the barriers that hinder the unbeliever from accepting Scripture" and thus "pave the way for Scripture to testify concerning itself." As for the internal criteria, most Lutheran theologians maintain that they "can work only a human faith in Scripture's authority." Hollaz and Osiander, however, affirm that the internal criteria "are able to bring about a true faith and divine certainty in the divine origin and authority of Scripture." One of these internal criteria suggests the "Gospel principle" of Scripture's authority, namely "the power of Scripture to bend the hearts of sinful men

²⁴ Robert D. Preus, p. 282.

and give them hope.”²⁵ That would be Scripture’s word of forgiveness and grace to the anxious conscience, to which the heart clings in faith.

Notice, however, how many different meanings are now being attached to the word “faith.” In addition to the simple faith in God’s promise, by which the heart knows God, there is “human faith,” and a “true faith in the divine origin and authority of Scripture,” and after this, by implication, a willingness to believe everything the Bible says. Little wonder that pious Christians begin to confuse faith in the Bible with faith in the Gospel, as though they are the same thing!

c. The Scriptures are self-authenticating. “Scripture is able to fix in a believer a firm confidence in its divine message,” says Preus, and quotes George Calixt: “Scripture is absolutely self-authenticating and self-demonstrative.”²⁶

d. Associated with the above is “the inner witness of the Spirit.” “Scripture must convince us of its own authority . . . the Holy Spirit works through the Scripture to convince us that Scripture is the Word of God and authoritative.” Hülsemann is quoted: “The ultimate reason why we believe this Word with a Christian certainty and a divinely awakened faith, and believe that this Word in itself is true, is God, who reveals and who authenticates His revelation.” And Hollaz summarizes by saying “that the believer truly feels that the Word of God has been communicated to him by God Himself.”²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 300—301.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 155 f. Similarly Calov, p. 191.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 302 f.

There is a fatal fallacy here. Properly speaking, the term “the Word of God” has to do with what God is actually saying to human hearts for their judgment (Law) or deliverance (Gospel). That is what the whole of Scripture wants to proclaim. But to the dogmatists the Bible as such, of which that message is considered only a part, has been crowned with the name “the Word of God.” “Scripture IS *Deus loquens*; it is God speaking to me today. . . . There is materially no difference between Scripture and the Word of God,” Preus summarizes.²⁸ But there *is* a difference. Scripture is the Word of God. The Gospel is the Word of God. But Scripture as such is not the Gospel.

The Gospel possesses a Spirit and a self-authenticating power of which the Lutheran confessors are deeply aware when they speak of the “experience” of comfort which weak and terrified consciences find in it (AC XX 15). That Gospel is the Bible’s single, central message. For the sake of that message, together with the Law by which God drives hard hearts deeper into pride or anxiety, the Bible is appropriately called the Word of God. But if the phrase “Word of God” means the Bible with a content broader than the Gospel, whose range of inspired intellectual and informational “truth” is to be security for the truth of its Gospel, such a Bible does *not* authenticate itself. Mere historical or geographical information and storytelling does not work “faith.” To call the Bible the “Word of God” in that formal sense is to treat it as a medicine bottle which “contains” a healing medicine. The medicine, if taken, does indeed authenticate itself. But there

²⁸ Ibid., p. 265.

is no self-authentication in swallowing the bottle.²⁹

e. The question is still before us: "*How do we know* that the Holy Scriptures are so sure and infallible a foundation?" Now the answer is: "By faith." We simply believe it. And we believe it by self-renunciation, as though what we renounce is the Old Adam which never wants to submit to the Word of God.

Any and every attempt to reduce or condition the authority of Scripture constitutes the open resistance against God and defiance of His lordship of which all men are so terribly prone. . . . The only possible response to God speaking is faith. And this response always involves casting down reasonings and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God; it always involves the painfully humiliating, mortifying *sacrificium intellectus*, so repugnant to all men. To bow to the authority of Scripture often means believing in what the natural reason of man considers absurd. . . . Therefore it is absolutely necessary for us to take our mind and thoughts captive to the Scriptures.³⁰

"Captive to the Scriptures"! What a tragic perversion! St. Paul in 2 Cor. 10:5 speaks of taking "every thought captive to obey *Christ!*" But now the Scriptures and their formal authority have usurped the honor that belongs to Christ alone!

"Faith" is also perverted. The only *faith*

²⁹ Consider what happens to a man who takes seriously orthodoxy's assurances that Scripture will authenticate itself, that a reading of its contents will convince any rational person of the divine truth and accuracy of the narrative! Jaroslav Pelikan tells the tragedy of Johann Salomon Semler, who tried it and found that such reading produced the very opposite effect in him. *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 88 f.

³⁰ Robert D. Preus, p. 298.

the Bible and the Confessions know is the anxious heart's joyful grasping of the Word that proclaims liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind. But now "faith" means submitting to everything the Bible as Book, quite apart from the permeating Gospel, says or seems to say — and that against reason and without questioning! Confused saints are even led to believe that such "faith" is necessary for salvation, for without it they are rebels against God!

Still another evil! The dogmaticians, without knowing it, have derived their doctrine of Scripture, not from Scripture, and not from the Confessions, but from *tradition* — the tradition of late Western Christendom! They have also put that doctrine to *use*. And the use to which they have put it derives, not from the Scriptures, and not from the Confessions, but from their own *reason and intellect!* They have *invented* an altar, and they now demand that every brother make the *sacrifice of his intellect*, not in submissive servanthood to Christ, but on the altar they have invented. That is idolatry. With that demand the speck in the eye becomes a log.

f. The dogmaticians still have not answered our question. How shall we *know* that the Bible is the kind of absolute foundation they say it is? If we are simply to "believe" it, *how* do we believe it? "Self-authentication" or "inner testimony of the Spirit" are themselves distorted concepts, quite unable to create such "faith." In the end the only answer the dogmaticians have left is *necessity*. We simply *must* believe it. Thus Calov declares (the italics are mine):

Every Word of God . . . *must be believed* per se simply because it is the Word of God, because God has declared it and said

it, even though our reason may not understand or grasp it. This is *demanded* by divine authority and the unfailling truth of the divine Word. . . . It *must be accepted by faith* per se, not on account of something else, because God cannot receive authority from another. Because it is the infallible truth of God, our *faith must be grounded in it unquestionably*. Everything recorded in Scripture is the Word of God. If it says in Scripture that God became man, that Christ made atonement for us, that the Son of God made reconciliation, we *must* by all means *accept that* as the Word of God and *put our faith* in it *because it is contained in Scripture*.³¹

In the same vein Preus declares, "The authority of Scripture is that property by which it *requires faith* and obedience to all its declarations."³²

But this makes "faith" a response to *law* and *demand*, not to the Gospel. You believe because you *must*, because the authority *demand*s it and enforces its demand with threats of bitter consequences if you don't. Such a "must" has nothing to do with the inner compulsion of sonship and servanthood reflected in Jesus', "I must be about My Father's business" or "I must work the works of Him that sent Me." It is the *must* of law.

It is not *God's* law either. This law belongs to the tyranny of man-made ordinances. It corresponds exactly to "the invented spiritual life of the monks" against which our confessing fathers protested. If in Luther's day monastic vows were praised more highly than Baptism (AC XXVII 13), our orthodox fathers fell into the trap of praising faith in the Bible

more highly than faith in Christ. Calov's argumentation (above) makes that very clear. First we must believe in the Bible. Then because the doctrine of Christ is in the Bible, we must "accept that" and "put our faith in it because it is contained in Scripture." Thus the "Gospel principle" of Biblical authority has been lost. Scripture should authenticate itself, so that one may believe the Gospel. But that it is the Gospel alone which authenticates itself, and thus *needs no subfoundation*, Calov does not seem to know.

You *must* believe it, you've *got to!* That is the argument of desperation, when the wheat has been lost and all that remains is chaff.

Why, then, did the orthodox fathers themselves believe so firmly in the Bible as the first principle? It was not for any of the reasons they adduce. It was rather because the doctrine of inspiration *was there*, in the tradition of the church. It belonged to their religious and cultural heritage. In the piety of their time they accepted it, as Luther had, without finding occasion to evaluate either the principle itself or the use they made of it.

Once they had made the inspiration authority of the Bible their foundation and the *principium cognoscendi* for all theology, upon which everything else was built, it became an absolute necessity to defend it. Without realizing it they had laid another foundation than "that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). They had constructed their theology on the formal principle rather than on the material, on the Bible as Book rather than on its voice-from-heaven Gospel.

Holy Father, what is coming? We're afraid!

³¹ Ibid., p. 297.

³² Ibid., p. 296.

C. *The Log Under Surgery*

The Lord cannot always deal tenderly with the church He loves. When His people see and know Him only through the log in their eye, when they build on a foundation other than that which He has laid, when they seek to save themselves by their own wise devices in the illusion that they are trusting and serving Him — then He may have to tear down in order to build up again. Perhaps the Lord will speak to His people in a foreign language, as in the days of the Assyrian invasion under Hezekiah (Is. 28:11), and thus do a strange and alien work among them (Is. 28:21). Sometimes the holy temple must be destroyed, so that God may raise it after 3 days, purged of its sins.

Later orthodoxy had laid its foundation and built its wall. The foundation was not Jesus Christ, but the inspiration of the Bible. The attack came from people speaking a foreign language, the language of science.

Immanuel Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in 1781, helped scientific thinking reach maturity by answering the nagging question, "How do we know that we know?" Kant distinguished between two elements in knowing — the perception of phenomena by our senses, and then the mental process by which we draw connections between our varied sense impressions so that they become intelligible to us. We conceptualize phenomena by imposing on them certain mental tools (categories) like cause and purpose, time and space, quantity and quality. If six dimes lie on a table, their six-ness (quantity) is not inherent in the phenomenon. The dimes don't know one another, have no indispensable relationship to one another. It is our mind

that groups them under the category of number so as to encompass them in one sweep and thus know them. Any phenomenon that cannot be related by such a mental process to other phenomena remains an unknown. We may suspect that it is an illusion, like a flying saucer.

The mind may err in the way it categorizes phenomena. It may interpret relationships falsely, impose categories which subsequent evidences contradict. Things turn out to be not what we thought. That is a source of embarrassment sometimes, or of humor, or of tragic injustice. Nevertheless knowledge is possible. Man learns to be suspicious of his initial impressions, that is, of his impulse to accept the very first construction his mind offers. He seeks more evidences, devises tools to expose aspects of phenomena beyond the immediate reach of his senses. When the totality of evidence has been taken into account and integrated by the mind in the simplest and most coherent way, when what is now understood even makes additional phenomena intelligible and predictable, then the mind becomes satisfied that it knows. We do not know absolutely, for new evidences may enter to upset our scheme and demand its revision. Nevertheless, once we understand why knowledge can never be absolute, we accept that risk and regard the open pursuit of better understanding a great challenge.

By the end of the 18th century science was reaching maturity. It understood its own processes, its possibilities and its limitations. If certain phenomena remained unintegrated and therefore not fully understood, science no longer referred the "unknown quantity" to God. There had to be a rational explanation, some way to make

fuller sense out of the evidences. It belonged to the very nature of the scientific mind to suspect traditional assumptions, to be dissatisfied with forced or selective explanations, and to challenge any "truth" which depended on some hallowed "authority" rather than on evidences and hard thinking. Thus science cut the apron strings that had bound it to the authority of theologians. Never again would a thinking man look upon Ps. 93:1 as proof that the earth does not move, or on Gen. 1:7 as proof that the sky is a hard dome (firmament) with waters above it. Theology was no longer queen.

For the church it was a time of terror and dismay. Kant also refuted the traditional (Aristotelian) arguments for the existence of God, which had become commonplaces in orthodox prolegomena. Cause, for example, is a category, a tool of thinking. Therefore to "prove" that God exists by pointing to the logical necessity of a "First Cause" is simply to project large a category of thought and label it "God." Kant seemed to be promoting atheism. Pastors, we are told, took what vengeance they could. They named their dogs Immanuel Kant.

The time was past when theologians could assign the world of nature to scientists and keep the Bible for themselves. Critical thinkers discovered that the Bible too belongs to the world as a phenomenon subject to investigation. The first impulse of the new freedom was to expose the premise of the Bible's perfection and infallibility to ridicule. More soberly, however, as the new science of critical history grew, the Bible became a historical source of first magnitude. But it was critical history now. Familiar first impressions were

automatically suspect and subject to testing. No longer did Bible history consist of laying stories end to end and harmonizing divergent accounts. Discrepancies in wording and detail were not to be patched over in the name of reverence with easy and self-comforting explanations. They became prime evidences, to be fully accounted for in any reconstruction that hoped to recapture the meaning both of the Book as document and of the history it recorded. Suddenly the Bible was being seen and read three-dimensionally — not flat but in stereoscope. There was no way to recover the history of an event without simultaneously entering into the mind of the writer who recorded it. Many times it turned out that the mind of the author (why he wrote what he wrote the way he wrote it) had greater significance toward understanding the text than the story itself which, in a flat and uncritical reading, attracted the most immediate attention.

There was no inevitable prejudice for or against the Bible in such a process. This was no conspiracy intent on destroying Christianity. Prejudices of any kind have a way of exposing themselves. Every critic becomes subject to criticism. No authority counts, except the authority of a reconstruction so comprehensive in its evidences, yet so simple and coherent in linking evidences together, that it persuades and convinces out of its own merit. The historical process is long and difficult, however, with many pitfalls and blind alleys. It is far from over.

This was indeed an invasion by "men of strange lips and with an alien tongue" (Is. 28:11). The Bible was no longer the exclusive domain of theologians. It belonged now to the phenomenological world, a legitimate object of study for thinkers

to whom the premise of its inspiration, perfection, inerrancy, and the like was simply irrelevant. There was no way for the church by any imaginable invocation of authority or by any cry to God to call a halt to that invasion. Indeed, the invasion was not demonic after all. It was the Lord's way of calling His people to surrender and to trust Him. The Lord was performing a painful but necessary surgery, to get the log out of the church's eye.

Meanwhile the Bible had ceased to be a source book for the understanding of nature. Once the scientific revolution had occurred, there was no returning to categories of thought by which men had integrated phenomena and made them comprehensible in earlier ages. That is why Charles Darwin could not take the Biblical record into account as evidence, still less as a prior and authoritative answer to the questions he faced as a biologist on his visit to the Galapagos Islands. Darwin assembled a massive and remarkable array of facts, gleaned by close observation. His theory concerning *The Origin of Species* brought his facts together into a radically new but all-encompassing coherence and unity, which carried considerable persuasive power. The search for new evidences and with it the struggle for fuller and better sense continues to this day. It will not be denied. The mind of man must work at the challenge of achieving greater understanding, and it must work by its own inherent processes. That is its calling, even from the God who created it.

For Christians who held to the inspiration principle, however, everything seemed to be crumbling. Believing in the Bible in one certain way had been inevitably linked with believing in Christ. Christ and the Gospel

had been made to depend on the role which orthodoxy had assigned to the Bible out of respect for its inspiration. It followed that to "believe" in the Biblical account of creation, and at the same time to "believe" in the theory of evolution, was an impossible contradiction. Every Christian faced the choice as to which he would "believe," with his soul's salvation deeply affected by that decision.

But nobody seemed to realize what had happened here to the meaning of the word "believe." What does it mean to "believe" in evolution? It means simply to have seen the evidences, and to be *rationaly persuaded* that this way of integrating the evidences makes sense, indeed, the simplest and most coherent sense available. Such "believing" is entirely a matter of the thinking mind, not of the heart.

What does it mean then to "believe" in the Bible's creation account, according to the presuppositions of orthodoxy? It means that, on pain of undermining the authority of the Word of God and thus of the whole Christian faith, the story must be read and accepted "flat," according to its first-impression meaning, as the revelation of God's Holy Spirit. Discrepancies are not to be noticed, for man must not criticize or make himself judge over the Word of God. We are not dealing with human thoughts, after all, but with God's revelation. Therefore attention is not to be diverted to the time, occasion, background, resources, and purpose of the human writer whose thoughts are recorded in that document, so as to think his thoughts after him and thus understand what he is saying. "Faith" in the Word of God decrees that the first-impression sense must be the "literal" and "divine" meaning. After all, the

Spirit has not intended God's Word for scholars, but for simple believers. The process of critical thinking is born of unbelief and only obscures what God has made simple and clear.

Such is the "faith" to which Christians are summoned. Notice, however, that this "faith" has nothing to do with the response of the anxious heart to the Word of divine promise. It is entirely an intellectual thing, a series of rational inferences built on the first premise of orthodoxy, on the foundational significance which orthodoxy assigned to the inspiration of the Bible as its formal principle of truth and authority. Such "faith" invokes the halo of the Holy Spirit on a flat two-dimensional (Aristotelian) philosophy of history in Bible study, and abhors a three-dimensional (Kantian) reading of the Bible as demonic and "destructive."

Such "faith" now asserts its tyranny. It demands that the biologist bow. It demands that the critical Bible student bow. It demands that each be willing to offer the "sacrifice of his intellect" on its rationalistic altar, and so please God. If any brother refuses to offer that sacrifice, then he must be exposed and disciplined, and not allowed to teach in the church. But this is a "Baal" altar. It generates feverish anxiety among its adherents, but draws no fire from heaven—no matter how long and loud its prophets rave.

That alien altar traps us into committing the very offense (*skandalon*) which invites millstones around our necks (Matt. 18:6). "Little ones" who "believe" in Jesus, whose consciences find peace and comfort in the Word that declares their sins forgiven, pronounces them sons of God, and sets them free—such "little ones" are now com-

manded to offer God yet another kind of faith, a rational faith, a faith that demands the "sacrifice of intellect." In the name of such faith the Bible is closed to any who would search for the meaning of every word, sentence, paragraph, chapter, and book. The log decrees in advance what kind of thinking they must not do, what kind of understanding or reconstruction is not allowed. God Himself sends the foreigner to speak to the people He loves in order to free them of their log, but they refuse to surrender. They resist the work of God as demonic. Thus they fall under Jesus' judgment, "Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering." (Luke 11:52)

What is that "key of knowledge," that "faith" which Scripture and the Confessions proclaim so beautifully, and which opens the way to life and freedom? It is the anxious heart's involuntary and joyful response to the "voice from heaven" Word of God. Our gracious heavenly Father declares our sins forgiven. He delivers us from fear and judgment, pronounces us worthy, fills life with meaning, makes us His sons and servants and eternal heirs. All this He does out of the cross and resurrection of His Son, our Brother, whose death swallowed up the wrath that stood against us, and whose resurrection raises us up to life and freedom and everlasting hope. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). That is the key which opens everything else, including the Bible.

Holy Jesus, do it quickly! Heal our eye!

D. *The Healing*

The log is ripe and ready for surgery. Not only has the Lord brought the cataract itself to a determined, aggressive, and sharply focused head, He has also been preparing the patient. In our church's long confusion and dismay over the seemingly irresolvable conflict concerning the Scriptures, God has been driving preachers and people away from the formal principle and into the material, that is, into the Gospel itself and the comfort it proclaims out of the cross and into the heart of sinners. "Let the Lord take care of His Bible," many have found themselves saying, "As for me, I am only going to use it and preach it."

The log has accused such brethren of equivocation, indecisiveness, indifference, lack of proper zeal for the true doctrine. Yet it has been the Lord's own doing, part of His remarkable preparation for surgery. Those who have entrusted the Bible to God and simply loved and proclaimed its Gospel will not be terrified. The loss of the log will be for them a great gain. For when the eye finally sees clearly, it discovers that the Bible is still there after all, still God's inspired and authoritative gift, the rule and norm of faith and life, richer than ever in its resources for the honoring of Christ and the comforting of anxious consciences.

The surgery will be most frightening and painful, of course, for brethren who have zealously and insistently committed themselves to the defense of the log. They have been blind guides, not by their own intention, of course, but by the ambush of Satan. Yet our Lord Jesus has rich mercy for them too. If they fall into the ditch, He will not bury them there. The demon may cry out and convulse its victim, even

casting him down like a corpse. But the demon must come out, and the hand of Jesus is quick to raise up what has been laid low (Mark 9:26-27). Indeed, in the strange wisdom of the Lord such brethren have performed a most necessary service. They have forced the log to make itself visible so that we cannot help but see it for what it is, and thus be rid of it. "We acted in ignorance" (Acts 3:17), but we have a gracious God who forgives, heals, and turns even our shame into good, if only we will love Him and let Him have His way with us. (Rom. 8:28)

There is no place for recrimination. We stand on the New Testament side of Easter. The only defeat that matters is the defeat Jesus suffered willingly for our salvation. The only victory that means anything is the victory the Father gave Him according to promise, and us through Him. And so the Lord Jesus pleads from heaven, "Don't be afraid! Let it happen! Follow Me! Don't try to salvage anything out of that old house! Don't look back! If you love your Bible the way the log has loved it, you will lose it. But if you lose it for My sake, you will find it!"

We have seen a great sight. The Spirit's fire from heaven has fallen on the one true altar, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and consumed and sanctified it utterly, including even its baptismal waters. We can do nothing now but cry, "The Lord, He is God," renounce our syncretistic confusions, and follow Him only (1 Kings 18:21, 39). To calculate consequences, to peer fearfully into the future as though to retain veto power over the direction our God is leading us, is nothing but unbelief.

Stand on the mountain, though, and look toward the sea. Are there not small clouds

of grace on the horizon, signs that the long drought is ending?

One little cloud suggests that we may be in for a great era of *Bible study*, in which the rational tools of the foreign invader become gifts of God to the church. The study will call for full use of the mind, without inhibition or fear of loss. And yet the mind will be controlled by the believing heart, and by an overwhelming hunger to understand in all of Scripture how the Holy Spirit reveals to us the difference between light and darkness, between the wisdom of the saints who know God in Christ, and the fallen wisdom of natural man who wants to be like God through the knowledge of good and evil. What showers of life-giving rain the Lord has in store for us, to enliven our hearts, brighten our eyes, cheer our faces, and strengthen our step!

The Bible will not disintegrate or lose its authority. It will look different, however, and the transition may indeed frighten and test us, even as the wilderness did Israel when they had followed the Lord out of Egypt. Critical thinking has a way of reconstructing things so that they look different indeed. We do not view the sky today in the same way our fathers did, for example, even though it is the very same sky. They made sense of that sky by seeing it as a domelike and hard "firmament" holding up the stars and providing pathways for sun, moon, and planets. To us the sky is three-dimensional, with infinite and varied distances, and with a solar system of orbiting planets governed by the forces of motion and gravitation. The revolution in thought and knowing is incredible, yet the sky is still there.

It took two and half centuries for men to interpret the solar system and become

accustomed to seeing the sky as we see it today. The history led from Copernicus (d.1543) through Tycho Brahe, Galileo, Descartes, and Kepler to Newton and La Place. If it should take that long for us to learn to see the Bible differently, what is lost? We stand meanwhile on a Gospel which no one can erase from the Bible—the voice from heaven Word of sonship, inheritance, and servanthood speaking to our anxious hearts out of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The sun did not cease to shine and warm the earth just because Copernicus and his successors came to understand it in a new way.

Suppose, for example, that in the earnest search to understand what God is really saying to us in the account of the Creation and Fall, a student recaptures the mind of the original writer and in the process is persuaded that the creation accounts in their original intent belong to a category called "wisdom literature" and were never designed to be a flat "history of origins." The log will suffer great pain, of course, and is bound to cry out in terror and anger. But the Bible has not been despised, or its authority compromised. God is still the Creator of heaven and earth, and of me and every man. His divine Word, in fact, pierces more deeply than ever, exposing the nature of sin, pronouncing the judgment of futility and death on human arrogance, and pointing the lost sinner to the far better wisdom of sons who hear the Word of the living God, and fear, love, and trust Him above anything else.

Again, suppose that the student, in wrestling with the book of Jonah so as to recover through the mind of its writer what God is really saying to human hearts, is persuaded that this book in reality re-

capitulates in a kind of "parable" form the history and attitudes of God's people (Jonah) before and through the miracle of the exile and return (flight, storm, fish, and casting on the shore), down to Judah's expectation of revenge against the Gentile conquerors (Nineveh) and the crushing disappointment at the untimely death of a messiahlike Zerubbabel (the worm smiting the gourd) — what has really been lost? The log can do nothing but fume and spit, but the sound eye rejoices in the riches of divine wisdom, the exposure of sin, and the high calling of the people of God that sustains them even in their wilderness and depression of spirit.

We have been reading the Bible flat. We shall learn to read it in stereoscope, by the kind of depth perception that comes with thinking the thoughts of human writers after them, so as to hear more fully what God really intends to tell us through them. It is a complex operation. There are bound to be mistaken reconstructions, as there were also in astronomy. But mistakes do reveal themselves, as critical students weigh and sift through the insights of their colleagues and predecessors. In the end there can only be enriched understanding, not merely of technical points but of those questions which most profoundly concern confessional Lutherans — the honor of Christ, the anxious conscience, the Word of God and what God is really saying to our hearts, and faith with its fruits of new life. For that is the genius of the Bible. That is what God's Book and Spirit is finally all about!

Other little clouds of impending grace also appear on the horizon. There is one called *systematic theology*. We have seen how our orthodox fathers were somehow

derailed. Two possible authority principles carried through in the Lutheran Reformation. The one was the strong stream of tradition, the authority of the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God. The other was new and refreshing, the authority of the Gospel which broke through into anxious hearts like a voice from heaven with the message of redemption in the cross of Christ, thus generating faith, freedom, and new life. The Reformation itself did not really sort out the new authority from the old. Somehow it was the old stream which in the end swept orthodoxy with it and supplied the foundation of its theological system.

But now the Lord has forced us to see the distinction clearly. With that vision comes His invitation to explore the other stream. What would it be like to build systematic theology on the "Gospel principle" of Biblical authority, starting with the four points on the combination dial as we have highlighted them on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions? It would be an altogether different style of systematic theology, aimed always for the heart and having only one goal — to open the lock, set sinners free, and restore them to sonship and all its fruits through Christ. For the *fides quae creditur* of which orthodoxy spoke ("the faith which is believed," in distinction from *fides qua creditur*, "the faith by which the believing is done") is not the substance of a doctrinal system, intellectually learned, "proved" by Biblical texts, and founded on the inspiration authority of the Bible. It is rather the Gospel Word from the cross, by which God pronounces us His forgiven people and promises to be our God.

That little cloud of a new systematic

theology promises to enrich all our *preaching* and *teaching*. We shall learn to be more direct and effective instruments of what the voice from heaven is saying. We shall "know what is in man" (John 2:25), what the "secrets," the hungers and anxieties of hearts are (1 Cor. 14:25). We shall discern "the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). We shall know how to love and to feed one another and our children, not with intellectualized straw but with the Bread of Life for which hearts truly hunger. We shall discover what Jesus means when He says of the Spirit, that the living water we drink becomes a well of water expanding within us and pouring out of us to others in inexhaustible supply (John 7:37-39). And so our *evangelism* will grow and not be able to contain itself. We shall be offering the world not institutions and forms, not doctrinal systems to be accepted by the mind and kept pure, but food and drink for crying consciences, and thus freedom from the curse and dominion of the sin that has trapped and enslaved a lost humanity.

At least one more cloud appears, this one named *unity*. It ought to be clear to us now, that the doctrine of inspiration, when it is made to be the foundation principle, is no defense against schism. But the Gospel binds us to Christ and thereby to one another in love. That Gospel is also the great medication for the specks which Satan continually plants in our eye and which so readily become occasions of tension and division.

There are specks associated with "liberalism," for example. Liberal theology was born out of the crisis at the end of the 18th century, when science had declared its independence and would no longer rev-

erence theology as queen. The foundation principle of orthodoxy was crumbling. The Bible was not the kind of authority orthodox theologians had claimed it was. It did not "authenticate itself" to any mind which had learned to become critical of sheer tradition and arbitrarily decreed authority. The Gospel principle of the Bible's authority was unknown. Therefore when the inspiration principle was exposed as an unreal and inadequate foundation, all Christianity appeared to collapse with it. Many gave up on the church altogether, totally disillusioned, even priding themselves on their new freedom from ancient superstitions and from a stifling intellectual prison.

Liberal Christians recognized the collapse of the old foundations, yet were determined to salvage what they could of the Christian faith. They looked for better foundations. Since the Gospel foundation was as unknown to them as it was by now to orthodoxy, they had to invent foundations out of their own desires and imaginations. It was a subjective business, much dependent on cultural values. They selected from the Biblical remains whatever they thought might have enduring worth and still speak to modern man. Thus liberalism created new theologies and pursued various culturally conditioned fads of moral wisdom and action. There was nothing else liberals could do. They had been fed with intellectual straw all along, and straw was the only tool they had. Their great hunger showed in their stubborn hope that there must be *something* of enduring value in Christianity, something that gives life worth and meaning! They were open, of course, to the historical approach to Bible study, but their real purpose was not that

of the critical historians, namely to find what the Bible and its history really meant. Rather they picked out from it those meanings which still seemed usable to man. It is a mistake, therefore, to associate critical Bible study, as a method of historical inquiry, with liberal theology.

Meanwhile a remnant of conservatives, still with the log in their eye, worked with great zeal and determination to shore up the crumbling foundations. They had no other choice. Their very salvation depended, they thought, on that kind of foundation. They attacked liberalism as a great enemy, its eye filled with specks. They repudiated historical study of the Bible on the ground that this method, above all else, was undermining the Bible's authority and thus the whole Christian faith. The log in the eye judged specks by its own false standard. It demanded that specks be removed, citing its Biblical texts as "proof." More often than not the conservative eye, even with the log in it, was right in seeing specks for what they were. But the conservative protest had absolutely no power to heal. Its tool was the log, the formal principle, the inspiration authority of the Bible. Conservatives did not know how to use the Gospel as the instrument of healing. They did not feed the hearts of "liberal" brethren by proclaiming the honor of Christ for the comfort of anxious consciences, becoming the voice from heaven singing the three-noted chord of the Gospel and thus inviting faith through the Spirit. The Spirit that inspired the Bible had displaced the Spirit of Pentecost. Intellect did battle with intellect, while Satan laughed. In the end the conservatives had no recourse but to pronounce judg-

ment on church and world and to retreat into a safe corner of sectarianism.

The cloud named unity appears on the horizon now, however, and is filled with hope. The word of the Gospel of Christ is not only a better and sure foundation. It is also a powerful leaven. When hearts are comforted by that Word and thus know God, the healthy and aggressive leaven of Matt. 13:33 prevails mightily over the spoiling leaven of 1 Cor. 5:6. The church has a medication for its specks. It does not have to stand in helpless terror of their pernicious consequences. The eye that "sees clearly" can love the liberal brother, listen to him and learn from what he has seen, wrestle with him as necessary without fear and with indefinite patience, and summon him to the true foundation. For the liberal too is afflicted with an anxious heart, hungry for the heaven-sent Word of life, needing to know above all a gracious God and Father in Christ.

Therefore we shall cling to one another, so that the Lord by His comfort may heal us individually and as a church. By our one baptism we are one body. The strength of any brother is a delight to all. The weakness of any is gladly borne and shared by all. We need not fear contamination with deadly germs of false doctrine. The Lord Jesus has clung to us in spite of and through all our confusions, and clings to us still. He has continually loved us and presented us to Himself a glorious church, like His bride on the day of the wedding, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:27)

So we can dare to trust and follow Him. Jesus did not want to lose a single one of those whom the Father had given Him. He did not go on weed-pulling expeditions.

He did not call down fire on people who rejected Him. He did not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking wick. To the blind guides of His day He looked like a "liberal," yet He was neither indifferent nor a compromiser. Rather, He had a leaven, the Word of His Father, to share with His brothers, and He trusted that leaven to do its work. And He had a love, like the Father's own love, a love that

would not give up or surrender disciples or Jerusalem or world to wrath and judgment — not even if it cost Him His life. That is how He redeemed the whole of lost humanity from judgment and sent His disciples to gather all nations into God's holy people. If we are infected with that leaven, can we love less?

Holy Spirit, we are ready! Let it rain!

Valparaiso, Ind.