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Statement on Scripture

In December 1956 the convention of the Synodical Conference created a joint committee composed of the standing committees on doctrinal unity in the several synods. This joint committee was instructed to deal with the controversies and difficulties that have been agitating the Synodical Conference for many years. It was resolved "that as the Union Committees of member synods reach agreement in the controversial issues, they draw up a common doctrinal statement to serve the Synodical Conference." (*Proceedings*, 1956, p. 145)

The joint committee adopted the following premises for drawing up a common doctrinal statement:

1. that in drawing up a joint confession we proceed from the conviction, born of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, that Scripture is the absolute and final authority on all matters on which it speaks and that through Scripture God speaks clearly to us on all matters of faith and life;
2. that we declare our willingness without equivocation and evasion to come to grips with all the issues that have arisen between us;
3. that we declare our firm intention to expose and condemn all matters contrary to the Word of God in doctrine and life with the purpose of removing what is not in keeping with the Word of God;
4. That in this connection, and for the foregoing reasons, we declare our conviction that a joint doctrinal statement needs to aim at nothing less than full agreement in all matters of doctrine and in practice which is based on such doctrine.

The joint committee hopes eventually to develop a precise statement on the doctrinal position of the Synodical Conference. To make a beginning, the doctrine of Scripture was examined, and a statement reflecting the consensus achieved was produced. This statement was officially adopted at the convention of the Synodical Conference, assembled in Lakewood, Ohio, August 5—8, 1958, and is now to be submitted to the member synods for final action.

Some news reports on this document did not reflect its full meaning and intent. The complete text is therefore made available here.

HERBERT J. A. BOUMAN, *Secretary*

STATEMENT ON SCRIPTURE ADOPTED BY THE JOINT COMMITTEE
OF THE SYNODICAL CONFERENCE

(Final Revision October 15, 1958)

I. *Introduction*

God reveals Himself to men primarily through His incarnate Son, whom He attests and presents to His church through Scripture. The purpose of Scripture is to proclaim Christ as the Savior of sinners (John 5:39, 46; Acts 10:43). All Scripture is written because of Christ and has a connection with the revelation of God in Christ, some passages directly, some more remotely. Every word of Scripture is therefore an organic part of the Scripture's witness to Christ. And Scripture is the complete message of God to sinners. By it man is freed from carnal security and self-righteousness, is delivered from despair, and regains by faith the lost image of God. (Gal. 3:26; cf. 4:31; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23; John 8:31-32)

We reject the idea that the natural knowledge of God is sufficient to salvation or useful beyond the use made of it in Scripture (Rom. 1:20; 2:1; 2:14-16; Acts 17:22-23). The revelation of God in nature and conscience is insufficient for salvation because man by reason of his fall is so constituted that he persistently perverts and distorts the revelation given to him by God and refuses to acknowledge or to submit to the God who thus reveals Himself. And man pursuing this perverted course is either led to feel secure in his self-righteousness or is driven to despair.

We reject the idea that tradition is a source of revelation. (Cf. Matt. 15:3-6; Col. 2:8)

We reject the idea that other new sources or norms of divine revelation besides Scripture are to be expected. (Heb. 1:1-2; Matt. 28:19-20; Gal. 1:8-9)

II. *The Inspiration of Scripture*

We believe and teach that all Scripture (that is, all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments) is given by inspiration of God and is in its entirety, in its parts, and in its very words inspired by the Holy Spirit. God revealed Himself personally and directly to such men as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Some of these He called to transmit His message to men orally or in writing. Their message was thus not their own, but God's Word. They were moved by the Holy Spirit, so that He is the true Author of their every word. Inspiration means, then, that mighty act of God whereby He spoke His Word in the words of men and made them the effective and final

vehicle of His revelation. Hence these words do not merely inform us concerning God's past action; they also convey God's action now. (1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Peter 1:19-21; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 1 Cor. 2:13; Jer. 23:29; Rom. 1:16-17)

In giving men His message by inspiration God had men express His Word in their own language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) and in their own style (personal, historical, poetic, oratorical). (Cf. the superscription on the cross, Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19-20.) Thus the holy writers felt personally responsible for every word they wrote (cf. 2 Cor. 7:8), while they at the same time knew that their words were given by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 2:12-13)

We reject as a distortion of the true conception of verbal inspiration any idea which makes the act of inspiration a mere mechanical dictation.

We condemn and reject any and all teachings and statements that would limit the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture or that deny the divine authorship of certain portions of Scripture. Inspiration applies not only to such statements as speak directly of Christ but also to such as may seem very remote (e. g., in the field of history, geography, and nature). For since God is the Lord of history and has revealed Himself by acts in history and has in the Person of His Son actually entered into man's history, the historical framework in which the Gospel message is set becomes an essential part of the inspired Word just as much as the spiritual truths revealed in it.

We reject the idea that verbal inspiration is called into question by accidents in the transmission of the text and the resultant variants in the manuscripts. Inspiration pertains in the first instance to the original autographs of Scripture. But by His gracious providence God has given us such a fullness and variety of witnesses to the original text that Christian scholarship reproduces it with great fidelity. God has so watched over the transmission of the text that the variant readings nowhere affect the doctrines of Scripture. We gratefully acknowledge also that translations of Scripture, though not under particular inspiration, are by God's providential care adequate vehicles of His revelation in the inspired Word. (Heb. 2:3; 1 Peter 1:25; Mark 13:31; John 17:20; Matt. 28:19-20)

III. *The Authority of Scripture*

We believe and teach that God has given us His Holy Scripture to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:13-17). We therefore confess Scripture to be the only, but all-sufficient foundation of our faith, the source of all our teachings, the

norm of our conduct in life, and the infallible authority in all matters with which it deals. (Luke 16:29-31; Deut. 4:2; 13:1-5; Is. 8:20; Acts 26:22; John 10:35)

We believe and teach that where Scripture has not spoken decisively or is silent, differences of opinion may be held without violating Scripture or breaking the bonds of fellowship. Such matters fall into the area called open questions. Scripture itself must determine which questions are to be considered as open. The term "open questions" may legitimately be used where the Scripture language leaves open the precise scope of a passage or where linguistic, textual, or historical problems make the perception of the intended sense difficult. But where Scripture has spoken, there God has spoken, whether it be on a central dogma or on a peripheral point; where Scripture has not spoken, the matter must forever remain open. (1 Peter 4:11; Jer. 23:22-23)

Scripture being the Word of God, it carries its own authority in itself and does not receive it by the approbation of the church. The Canon, that is, that collection of books which is the authority for the church, is not the creation of the church. Rather, the Canon has, by a quiet historical process which took place in the worship life of the church, imposed itself upon the church by virtue of its own divine authority.

IV. *The Interpretation of Scripture*

Since Scripture is God's Word, the interpretation of Scripture should not be regarded as merely or primarily an intellectual task. The true meaning of Scripture becomes clear for man in a given situation, not merely by a scrupulous study of Scripture and a careful analysis of the facts at issue, but rather by approaching Scripture in a spirit of repentance and faith which makes men obedient sons of God, who hear Scripture when it speaks as Law in all the rigidity of the Law, and when it speaks as Gospel, in all the unconditional grace of the Gospel. (2 Cor. 4:3-4; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Gal. 2:5; 5:3, 6)

Scripture alone is to interpret Scripture. The hermeneutical rule that Scripture must be interpreted according to the rule, or the analogy, of faith means that the clear passages of Scripture, not any theological system or dogmatical summary of Bible doctrine, are to determine the interpretation. Seemingly obscure passages must not be interpreted so as to pervert or contradict clear passages. This means that every statement of Scripture must be understood in its native sense, according to grammar, context, and linguistic usage of the time. Where Scripture speaks historically, as for example in Gen. 1—3, it must be understood

as speaking of literal, historical facts. Where Scripture speaks symbolically, metaphorically, or metonymically, as for example in Rev. 20, it must be interpreted on these its own terms. Furthermore, since God spoke in the common language of men, expressions such as sunrise and sunset, the corners of the earth, etc., must not be viewed as intending to convey scientific information. (Ps. 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19; 2 Tim. 3:15)

Since the same God speaks by the same creative energy of the same Holy Spirit throughout Scripture, the Old Testament and the New Testament are to be viewed as constituting an organic unity. This unity is to be understood, not as a simple equation of the two Testaments with each other but in the sense of Heb. 1:1-2: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son." Since the New Testament is the culminating revelation of God, it is decisive in determining the relation between the two Testaments and the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies in particular; the meaning of a prophecy becomes known in full only from its fulfillment.

Since Scripture is in all its parts and in all its words the inspired Word of God, we reject and condemn any use of the phrase "totality of Scripture" which tends to abridge or annul the force of any clear passage of Scripture. Similarly we reject the use of any phrase which makes room for the idea that the *Scripture as a whole* may be regarded as the Word of God, though it in many details is regarded as only the words of men.

We reject and condemn "demythologizing" as a denial of the Word of God. Where Scripture records as historical facts those events and deeds which far surpass the ordinary experience of men, that record must be understood literally, as a record of facts; the miraculous and mysterious may not be dismissed as intended to have only a metaphorical or symbolical meaning.