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Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology

DR. PAUL G. BRETSCHER'S "THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT": AN EVALUATION BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY OF CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, FORT WAYNE, INDIANA — JUNE, 1979.

In the nature of the case this Opinion must focus directly on the doctrinal content of the essay. The latter contains also fine and worthy thoughts as well as a great deal of confused and rhetorical argumentation, to the point of pathos. Such and similar matters cannot be pursued here, but are best taken up in the course of collegial dealings especially on the part of those who official duty that is. Since Dr. Bretscher himself admits, and even insists, that his position is contrary to the official doctrinal stand of the Missouri Synod, that question too need not detain us. The essay poses two main issues: (1) the doctrine of Holy Scripture, as developed in the bulk of the essay (Part II) and (2) the doctrine of the church, developed in Part III. The question is whether the essay's position on these matters is in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions and with Holy Scripture itself.

Ad (1)

The essentials of Dr. Bretscher's argument may quite objectively be summed up like this: In the Bible the term "Word of God" means not the Bible itself, but first of all Christ, and secondly the message about Him. To call the Bible as such ("as a book"), the Word of God, therefore, is not only wrong but is Satanic "pseudology" and "a falsified meaning of 'the Word of God'" (pp. 13, 18). The Bible may still, however, be called "Word of God" provided this is meant to refer to the Bible's Gospel — content, not to its divine authorship or inspiration. The Synodical controversy has come about because the Bible has been called the "Word of God" in both the true and the false senses, without adequate definition and distinction. The result was that "we in the Missouri Synod have been trying to carry two incompatible 'theologies' at the same time. Our behaviour, in consequence, has been what psychologists would call schizophrenic, and self-destructive" (p. 9).

But if the Bible is "Word of God" not by virtue of divine authorship but only because of its Gospel-content, *it necessarily follows that the Bible is no more and in no other sense the Word of God than any other good book or sermon which conveys the Gospel-*

message! Dr. Bretscher himself explains that when Scripture says that "The Word of the Lord came" to the prophets, this was really nothing different from what happens to us today, when God enlightens "us with 'dots of light' as his gift, forming us into theologians, or, in the Bible's words, 'prophets'" (pp. 6-7). There is then no essential difference between biblical and non-biblical books, provided they all proclaim the Gospel.

This radical reduction of Holy Scripture to the level of all other books which contain the Gospel is totally incompatible with the very bedrock axioms of the Lutheran Confessions. To cite only the Formula of Concord, the whole point of the introductory section on "Rule and Norm" is that the church's creeds and confessions of the Gospel, though salutary and necessary, are altogether subject to Holy Scripture as sole judge, rule, and norm of all teachers and teachings (Ep. 1, 7; SD 1, 3, 9). Nor is the absolute supremacy of the Bible an arbitrary hermeneutical decision on the part of the Formula. Scripture must be accepted as sole final judge simply because it is God's Word, "to which no man's writings may be regarded as equal, but to which everything must be subjected" (SD 9). And the distinction between "God's Word" and "man's writing" is not a distinction between Gospel and non-Gospel; for the human writings in view here are the creeds, the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Catechisms, and the like. The difference is simply that Holy Scripture is divinely inspired, whereas these other writings, though full of Gospel, are not. The Latin of SD par. 9 defines the difference quite clearly, as one "between divine and human writings" (*inter divina et humana scripta*).

It is noteworthy in this connection that elsewhere Dr. Bretscher frankly admits that what he regards as the disastrous confusion of the two meanings of "Word of God" can be "traced back into our Confessions, where the 'inspiration meaning' is quite evident as a heritage of medieval piety."¹

The question remains whether perhaps, despite the Lutheran Confessions, Dr. Bretscher's claims could be sustained from the Bible itself. He insists that he has "found no Biblical text . . . which defines the term 'Word of God' to mean the holy, inspired, divinely authored Bible" (p. 9).

It is true of course, as the Lutheran Reformation in particular never tired of insisting, that the whole Bible has as its basic theme, scope, and centre God's full and free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ (Lk 24:44-47; Jn. 5:39). It is also self-evident that no references to our complete Bible can be expected in texts written before the various parts of the Bible were collected and combined

into one unified whole. But that “no Biblical text” calls the Scriptures “the Word of God”, is patently false. Psalm 119, for instance, repeatedly speaks of “Thy word” or “Thy words” in the sense of the concrete biblical text (note synonyms like “judgments,” “testimonies,” “law,” “precepts”). It is interesting that Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT) cites many verses from just this Psalm as making it “clear that the author is thinking esp. of the Pentateuch as the written Word of God” (IV, 100). And Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary* certainly carries no brief for any traditional orthodoxy.

In Is. 8:20, the “Word” is clearly God’s and is identical with the concrete, written “law” and “testimony.” Indeed, Kittel’s TDNT describes as follows the significance of the introductory formula, “The Word of the Lord (YHWH) which came to . . .,” often used by the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Hos. 1:1, Mi. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1):

It certainly *implies* that the whole book is regarded as DBR-YHWH [Word of the LORD]. In the written form no distinction is made between the divine voice in the prophet and its expression in poetry, saying, and address. We have here a transition to the final view that not merely the prophetic book, but in the last resort the whole of the OT, is the Word of God. The element of revelation is plainly present in the concept of word. For it is as revelation that the books are collected (IV, 96).

Under the heading “The Old Testament Word in the New Testament,” Kittel’s TDNT states:

The NT quotes the OT either as Scripture or as Word In many cases mention of the divine subject is facilitated by the fact that the OT passage quoted is itself an I-saying (Mt. 22:31 f. and par.: “I am the God of Abraham . . .”) or a statement which the OT narrative sets on the lips of God, e.g. the promise to Abraham (Ac. 3:25). But the examples go further by quoting sayings from the prophets and Psalms as spoken by God (Mt. 1:22; Ac. 4:25; Hb. 1:5 ff. etc.). They show that God Himself is firmly regarded as the One who speaks in Scripture (IV, 109, 111).

Certainly St. Paul’s expression, “the oracles of God” (*ta logia tou theou*) in Rom. 3:2 must refer to concrete, ascertainable texts, hence to God’s Word or revelation in written form. And how could the identity of Scripture and God’s Word be put more strongly than by calling “all Scripture . . . God-breathed (*theopneustos*)” (2 Tim. 3:16)? Again, the Lord’s own dispute with the Pharisees in Mt. 15:1 ff. implies that there is an authoritative divine revelation in documentary form, by which mere

human tradition can and must be judged. “Most interesting, finally, is St. Paul’s expression in I Cor. 15:54: “the word which is written” (*ho logos ho gegrammenos*). Here “the Word” is precisely the written biblical text. Indeed the *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament* by Coenen, Beyreuther, and Bietenhard cites this text as an instance in which *logos* (the word) means “*das Schriftwort*” (the word of Scripture) (II/2/425).

Dr. Bretscher attempts to weaken the force of John 10:35, “Scripture cannot be broken”, by suggesting that the real appeal is to the specific and direct pronouncement of God quoted from Ps. 82:6, rather than to Scripture as such, “as a book” (p. 10, footnote). This is quite false. Not only direct quotations from God, but even the “connecting writing” of Genesis 2:24 is attributed by Our Lord directly to God Himself (Matt. 19:4.5). St. Paul moreover identifies God and Scripture so completely that he can say that “the Scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up” (Rom. 9:17), and that “the Scripture, foreseeing (!) that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed” (Gal. 3:8)! “Scripture says” means quite the same thing as “God says”.

And what applies to the Old Testament, applies if anything even more to the writings issuing from the very fulness of Pentecost itself (John 14:26; 15:20; 16:12-15; 17:20; 20:31). The Apostles therefore claimed divine authority for their writings (I Cor. 2:12.13.16; 14:37; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14, etc.). Indeed for the later books of the New Testament the earlier ones were already “Scripture” (I Tim. 5:18 and Lk. 10:7; 2 Peter 3:15.16).

For a good overview of the massive biblical evidence in this matter the reader is referred to P. E. Kretzmann, *The Foundations Must Stand*.

As for Dr. Bretscher’s repeated suggestion that Christ and the Bible somehow exclude each other as foundation of faith (pp. 13, 16), this is refuted by Eph. 2:20, where Christ is the Foundation precisely *through* His chosen Apostles and Prophets, and not in some abstract way apart from them! This text also teaches, in the clearest possible terms, the vast difference in principle between the inspired Apostles and Prophets and everybody else: the former are “foundation,” the latter “building”.

A final word needs to be said about Dr. Bretscher’s view of historical criticism in this context. Briefly, he welcomes “the invasion of historical-critical study” because it “has forced [the Missouri Synod’s] ambivalence into the open, so that it is tearing

us apart" (p. 8). He emphatically rejects the Synod's understanding that historical criticism is the "enemy" of faith (pp. 4, 14). Not surprisingly, Dr. Bretscher rejects "the inerrancy of the Bible as book" (p. 13).

These judgments rest on some very basic misperceptions. On the one hand historical criticism is vastly over-rated. As Dr. Bretscher wrote in another article: "For as a Lutheran preacher Bultmann submits altogether to the authority of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God."² Virtually the whole world knows better. On the other hand, the importance of biblical facts and history is vastly under-rated. Thus Dr. Bretscher sharply rejects as an error the Missouri Synod's confession that "the historical framework . . . in Scripture is an essential part of the Word of God."³ Elsewhere Dr. Bretscher distinguished sharply between "the historical reality of Scripture" and "the theological," and assigned issues like "the historicity and facticity of persons and events" to the former only: "it is not appropriate therefore, to approach such questions by appealing to the Bible's inspiration and authority."⁴

This radical severance of facts and history from faith and theology does violence not only to particular aspects and details, but to the very nature of the Gospel of the *Incarinate* Redeemer (Matt. 26:13; I John 4:3)!

Ad (2)

While Dr. Bretscher's rhetoric is particularly imprecise and emotive in the third part of his essay, it is clear at least that the Missouri Synod is meant to be seen as "a falsified church." The reason for this is said to be the Synod's false doctrine of the Word:

will not the falsified Word, through the misbelief it summons, create also a falsified Church? The clearest evidence of a falsified Church in our 1943 Catechism is its doctrine of "the true visible Church" (Q. 184).

A conflict is then alleged between the Synodical Catechism and the Confessions, particularly CA/Apol VII/VIII:

This Catechism does not catch the insight of the Confessions that the Church is *visible* by its "outward marks," and "believed" because the Word and Sacraments are believed. Therefore, the 1943 Catechism calls the Church "invisible" (p. 19).

The main object of the attack is the whole idea of doctrinal orthodoxy, and of church-fellowship bound and delimited by it. It is alleged that the pure preaching of the Gospel demanded by CA VII is one thing, and the Synodical insistence on the "entire doctrine" quite another.

What is meant here is not the preaching of the Gospel in its purity, but the set of "distinctive doctrines" (1943 Cat. Q. 183) which comprise the denomination's doctrinal system. Thus the denomination is boasting in the completeness and perfection of its man-made doctrinal formulations. It "has" this "entire doctrine" in its possession as no other Church "has" it. This doctrinal system is what it teaches and confesses. On this ground, then, the denomination declares itself before God and men to be "the true visible Church," and the measure of the falsity of other churches.

The essay appears to advocate a broad and all-inclusive church-fellowship which would embrace not only the L.C.A. and the LWF (p. 4), but all external Christendom: "If the unclean and the false do not enter, it is not the city's walls *but their own walls* that keep them out (Rev. 21:22-27)" (p. 25, emphases in original).

The decisive features and thrusts of Part III of the essay thus reflect the ecclesiology of the modern Ecumenical Movement, which is diametrically opposed to that of the Lutheran Confessions.

Specifically, the essay comes into conflict with the Confessions at two points. In the first place, the objection to the Catechism description of the church as "invisible" — if substantive, not merely terminological. — amounts to an attack on the Apology's distinction between the church in the proper sense (par. 28) and the church in the larger sense (par. 10). What Dr. Bretscher criticises about the 1943 Catechism, viz, the definition of the church as believers only, and therefore invisible, is precisely what the Apology teaches:

But when we come to define the church, we must define that which is the living body of Christ and is the church in fact as well as in name. We must understand what it is that chiefly makes us members, and living members of the church the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit we maintain that the church in the proper sense is the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit (par. 12. 13. 28).

This church, though "recognizable" (par 5) in its outward marks, "has not yet been revealed" but remains in this life "hidden under the cross" (par. 17. 18). Nor does the term "assembly" in Apol. VII/VIII 29 mean to suggest that the church is essentially visible; for this "assembly" is "made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world" (par. 20).

In the second place, the Lutheran Confessions do not share the

modern Ecumenical Movement's embarrassed distaste for a normative orthodoxy. Quite the contrary in fact. The Confessions do not understand the Gospel in some pietistic, undogmatic sense which could be played off against detailed doctrinal definitions as such. Rather, the Gospel is understood as something which must be preached "unanimously according to its pure understanding" (CA VII, 2), and which may be summed up in a number of "articles," such as the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession (CA, conclusion. Cf. LC, Creed). The doctrinal definitions of the Book of Concord are meant not as sectarian peculiarities but as correct statements of the revealed, divine truth itself, hence as confessions of the one evangelical faith of Christ's one holy and universal church (Preface to the Book of Concord: FC SD Rule and Norm). This "pure doctrine of the holy Gospel" (FC SD Intro. 3) divides the church of the Augsburg Confession "from the papacy and from other condemned sects and heresies" (FC SD Rule and Norm 5) hence also from the Reformed deniers of the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar (FC SD VII, 33). There must be agreement "in doctrine and in all its articles" as well as in "the right use of the holy sacraments" (FC SD X, 31). Contradictions of this doctrine "cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended" (FC SD Intro. 9). The confessors are "minded by the grace of the Holy Spirit to abide and remain unanimously in this confession of faith and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it," and to implement their doctrinal consensus "through diligent visitation of churches and schools, the supervision of printers, and other salutary means" (Preface to the Book of Concord, Tappert, p. 14).

The biblical basis of the Lutheran Confessions' doctrine of the church is clearly indicated in Apol. VII/VIII. Suffice it here to point out that the biblical Gospel is not a simplistic, minimalistic slogan compatible with every wind of doctrine; it is an organic whole by which God Himself creates and defines His church, Mt. 28:19, 20; Acts 2:42; 15:1ff.; Rom. 16:17; Gal. 1:8,9; Eph. 2:20; I Tim. 6:3-5; II Tim. 2:2; 3:14-17; Tit. 1:9-11.

The point of orthodoxy is not, as Dr. Bretscher thinks, to assert a "superior rightness" (p. 21) and to "exclude tax-collectors and sinners" (p. 24). An orthodox church is not a perfect church. The point rather is to prevent the loss or pollution of that divinely-given means, the holy Gospel, by which alone tax-collectors and sinners can and do receive life and salvation. And to imagine that the doctrinal issues at stake in world Lutheranism and Christendom today are peripheral and leave Christ's Gospel intact, is to

misread the situation tragically. Surrender of the sacramental Presence, for instance — as practised for generations in European Lutheran state churches through church-fellowship with Reformed and Union churches, culminating today in the Leuenberg Concord — is not a minor disagreement about interpretation but a radical violation of the Gospel itself, and an act of robbery against the people of God. And the historical-critical destruction of the authority of the Bible rampant also in the ALC and the LCA attacks the very central Christian mystery, that of the divine-human Person and Work of the Redeemer. To accommodate such things under the hospitable umbrella of a “reconciled diversity,” as the Lutheran World Federation does officially, is to renounce the central affirmations of the Lutheran confessions at their very roots.

Conclusion

The essay’s doctrines of Holy Scripture and of the Church cannot be squared with the Lutheran Confessions’ understanding of the Word of God.

It should be pointed out that Dr. Bretscher’s essay abounds in false antitheses. Complementary aspects of the truth are set in opposition to each other, with disastrous consequences. Typical examples are “oneness of our theology” vs. “the formulation of documents” (p. 7), Bible as Gospel vs. Bible “as a Book” (pp. 9 & passim); Word of God vs. “outward forms of religion and doctrine” (p. 11); “the Bible as Book” vs. “Christ alone” (p. 13); “living ‘Word of God’” vs. “formulations of doctrine . . . visible things . . . forms . . . wineskins” (p. 16); the purely taught Gospel of CA VII vs. “the *entire doctrine* of the Word of God” (p. 20). This mischievous tearing asunder of what God has joined together appears to be inspired by a tendency to denigrate concrete, outward particulars in favour of undefined and undefinable Spirit-absolutes. This spiritualizing tendency — most clearly evident in the fateful cleavage between historical fact and theological faith (*After the Purifying*, pp. 86-87) — runs directly counter to the central biblical reality of the Incarnation itself. It reveals a mode of thought which is typical not of Lutheran realism, but of Docetism, Nestorianism, Calvinism (*finitum non capax infiniti*), and Barthianism. It is a species of enthusiasm which should cause us all to take to heart again the sobering words of the Preface to the Book of Concord:

Such an explanation must be thoroughly grounded in God’s Word so that pure doctrine can be recognised and distinguished from adulterated doctrine and so that the way may not be left free and open to restless, contentious individuals, who do not want to be bound to any certain

formula of pure doctrine, to start scandalous controversies at will and to introduce and defend monstrous errors, the only possible consequence of which is that finally correct doctrine will be entirely obscured and lost and nothing beyond uncertain opinions and dubious, disputable imaginations and views will be transmitted to subsequent generations (Tappert, p. 13).

Finally, we append to this Opinion a set of theses written by Dr. Bretscher in 1959, which indicate a good grasp of what is at stake. In our estimation those 1959 theses reflect a clarity and sobriety which *The Sword of the Spirit* sadly lacks. We plead for a return to that earlier position.

Notes

1. Paul G. Bretscher, "An Inquiry Into Article II," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, October, 1974, p. 42.
2. Paul G. Bretscher, "The Baptism of Jesus, Critically Examined," *Biblical Studies Series* (LC-MS, CTCR, 1973), p. 5.
3. Paul G. Bretscher, "An Inquiry," p. 41.
4. Paul G. Bretscher, *After the Purifying* (River Forest: Lutheran Education Assn., 1975), pp. 86-87.

Propositions on Scripture

1. It is misleading to distinguish between faith in the Word about Christ, and faith in Christ; or to define historical faith as faith in the former, and true faith as faith in the latter. Faith in Christ is indistinguishable from faith in the Word that proclaims Him. Therefore the proposition that Jesus is the Word should not be construed to minimize, but to maximize the importance of the Word of Scripture.
2. The distinction between a formal and material principle in Lutheran theology is invalid, if it is used to subordinate either to the other.
3. The truth or relevance of any proposition contained in Scripture is not to be determined by our success at fitting it into our dogmatics, but by its significance in the text and context in which it occurs. This includes the testimony which Scripture gives concerning itself.
4. If it is his conviction of verbal inspiration of the Scripture as a Book, which makes a man unevangelical, then Christ, St. Paul, and Luther were unevangelical. Any unevangelical tendency in our Church is not to be traced to its insistence on verbal inspiration, or to its use thereof in defining Scripture's authority.

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5. Though we grant that the doctrine of verbal inspiration can lead and has led to a mechanical view of Scripture and to failure to appreciate its true humanness, to attack it on this ground is to attack essentially a straw man. When the straw man is slashed to ribbons, the simple truth remains untouched, that God has revealed Himself and the nature of His actions, not by astute theological deductions or stirrings in the inner Spirit, but by Words; and that He "has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning."
 6. Any method of resolving or dismissing the tension of the inerrancy of Scripture also in historical, geographical, scientific, etc. matters, which affords to the speculative theologian the implicit license to demonstrate the disunity of Scripture in the name of intellectual honesty, must be rejected.
 7. To explain prophecy in the OT and NT as a spiritualized post-event reconstruction and interpretation of an historical occurrence, is to destroy the true significance of revelation and to undermine the Covenant itself. God's self-revelation in history consists in this, that He attaches His express Word to His action, both before, in, and after the event. The divine quality of the event stands on the Word that completely circumscribes it; the Word is never a mere deduction from the act. It is this "before, in, and after" Word, which establishes even the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as being God's act. Luke 24.
 8. The issue of Scripture cannot be fought through merely in the locus of Soteriology. What a man does with Scripture is determined not only by what he thinks of Christ, but also by what he thinks of Scripture. The giving and the preserving of the record of His historic acts and of their significance is, within the scope of its own purpose, as essential an historical and soteriological act of God, as was the crucifixion and resurrection of His Son.

As a final point, may I acknowledge my indebtedness to my father by quoting from a recent letter:

9. "It is not easy to take Scripture for what it says of itself. There are, as Cullmann points out, many 'skandals' connected with interpreting Scripture. Here are some: the text itself, the canon, the cruxes of exegesis, interpretation itself, translations, the differing accounts of witnesses in the NT. Every interpreter is aware of these 'skandals' and would like to remove them in some fashion, whether by allegory, or by assuming interpolations (Bultmann), or by existential interpretations. In short, every interpreter would so much like to

fashion Scripture according to his own mental image. The Christian interpreter suffers under these 'skandals' more so than the non-Christian interpreter. But he lets them stand. He realizes that Scripture as we have it is nevertheless the Word of God. He is intent to glorify God for the fact that in spite of the 'skandals' God still speaks to His children in all the words of Scripture. Therefore he keeps on reading and meditating on the Word of Scripture, and feeds the hungry flock on that Word. For only that Word is able to cast down the proud and haughty but also to raise up the truly repentant to the glories of heaven."

10-29-59

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*This Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology
was originally prepared by Prof. Kurt Marquart.*