

# THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY.

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VOL. V.

JANUARY, 1925.

No. 1.

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## “The Pure, Clear Fountain of Israel.”

(*Concordia Triglotta*, p. 851.)

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The Lutheran Confessions contain many a poetic turn. These were embodied in the formal statements of the truths to which the Lutheran Church stands pledged, not merely for ornamental purposes or to overcome the tedium which is apt to arise in the reader as he works through page after page of strictly logical and diplomatically exact depositions of *credenda* and *damnanda*. These beautiful flashes are rather integral parts of the Confessions, which they enliven: they have genuine confessional force. They reveal the deep inward joy that comes to the soul with a settled conviction, the profound satisfaction that fills the heart when a great difficulty is solved, and they breathe the fervor of ardent devotion to a cause that lifts its champions above this sordid life of paltry egotistic interests into a sublime sphere, where grateful wonder and admiration seem the most proper attitude. They are the heart-throbs of the same faith that expresses itself at the same time, and in another way, through the calm deliberations of the cool intellect. When the Lutheran confessors spoke, the entire man in them spoke, heart and soul and mind and every God-given faculty in them. It is not surprising at all that men who have studied the Lutheran Confessions have discovered that their perusal of these documents was turned into a series of devotional exercises for them. There is many a soul-feast prepared for the truly hungry in these old records.

The Lutheran Confessions, also in this respect, reflect the character of the Holy Scriptures. These, too, are not a dry recital of facts which the mind must grasp, but they set forth the verities of the creed which God proposes to fallen man with much beautiful imagery and a pure pathos that stirs every sensibility in man. Very often the poetic turns in the Lutheran Confessions are taken over directly from the Scriptures.

The caption at the head of this article may serve as an illustration. It occurs in that chapter of the Formula of Concord which precedes the articles that define the pure faith as regards particular doctrines—the chapter that declares the “foundation, rule, and standard whereby all dogmas should be judged . . . and the controversies that have occurred should be explained and decided in a Christian manner.” No human confession, the Lutheran not excepted, can do this, but only “the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.” Why? Because they are “the pure, clear fountain of Israel.” The thetical statement of the norm of doctrine without this picturesque addition would have been sufficient. But the addition carries us at once into that long list of Bible-texts which depict the Scriptures as the ever-flowing fountain which God has opened for the souls of sinful men in the arid desert of this earthly life, and out of whose inexhaustible bourne there wells up for them unceasingly, as from a freely flowing spring, unerring truth, unalloyed consolation, pure delight and refreshment, and bliss never ending.

When the devout Israelite declared concerning Jehovah: “With Thee is the fountain of life,” Ps. 36, 9, did he simply indulge for a moment in a metaphysical contemplation of the origin of Pure Being? When Jeremiah, speaking for Jehovah, charges the renegade nation of his time: “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the Fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water,” chap. 2, 13, does he not censure them for having constructed containers for what they supposed was giving them life other than what God had provided for them? For there is no evidence that God ever communicated spiritual life—and that is what is meant in all these “fountain texts” of Scripture—without channels, or means, for purveying them to the people. He is indeed the primary, original, and independent cause of that life, as of every other life, but what He puts into any medium of communication with man carries with it the power which He bestows and therefore becomes “the power of God unto salvation,” Rom. 1, 16, or “a fountain of life,” or of salvation, etc. As our dogmaticians put it: the *causa efficiens principalis* always works through the *causa efficiens instrumentalis*, or *organica*.

Terms like “fountain,” “well,” or “spring” suggest the ideas of refreshment, ease, restoration, reviving. The allegorical use of these terms as substitutes for the plain term “Word of God”

refers particularly to the grace-offering and grace-bestowing quality of the Word, or to the holy Gospel, which is the very heart of the written Word of God. It is the promise of the Redeemer and of forgiveness in His name and for His sake that quenches the thirst of those famished and exhausted and dying by their futile efforts to work out their own salvation. The "fountain texts" of both Testaments are therefore related to the Messianic prophecies in the Old and the preaching of Jesus in the New. Isaiah speaks of the happy days when men, now despairing of life, "shall with joy draw water from the wells of salvation," Is. 12, 3, and summons them, true "evangelist of the Old Testament" that he was: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!" Is. 55, 1. He promises them: "The parched ground shall become a pool and the thirsty land springs of water," Is. 35, 7; for Jehovah has said: "I will pour water on him that is thirsty and floods upon the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit upon thy seed and My blessing upon thine offspring," Is. 44, 3. The prophets of the Exile, and after, are particularly rich and emphatic in declarations that with the coming of the Messiah the spiritual drought that lies on all lands shall terminate. Ezekiel's "vision of the temple waters," in chap. 47, is the greatest and most dramatic of these prophecies. He beholds waters spreading from out of the temple of God and inundating the earth and healing all the bitter waters. (Who, when reading this, does not think of Habakkuk's prediction: "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea"? chap. 2, 14; comp. Ps. 36, 8, 9; 46, 4; Is. 11, 9.) He watches men sounding the depths of these temple waters, that is, searching into the meaning and mystery of the things that God by His revelation pours out upon the world: some are easy to understand, as the water that reached up to the ankle; others more difficult and requiring deeper study, as the water that rose up to the knees or loins; others altogether beyond the reach of men, where man's research is baffled by things past finding out, and the searcher, with Paul, can only bow the head and worship. Rom. 11, 33. Here is where the Church Father got his idea that Scripture is like a river, so shallow that a child can wade through it, and so deep that an elephant can drown in it. (Luther's *Works*, St. L. Ed., 4, 1223; 13, 1909; 22, 14.) — Zechariah has the same visions as his inspired colleagues: "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness," chap. 13, 1; again: "It

shall be in that day that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem: half of them toward the former [or eastern] sea and half of them toward the hinder sea. In summer and in winter shall it be," chap. 14, 8.

That the people of the Old Testament understood these picturesque descriptions as references to the Word of God: its power, its all-embracing catholicity, there can be no doubt. To cite but a few instances: There is the entire Psalm 119, which connects every phase of the spiritual life of the believer directly with the Word of God. Or take Ps. 84, 5, 6: the pilgrims that pass through the Valley of Baca — a type of this vale of misery — are bound for the Temple: the strength of Jehovah is in them, and His ways are in their hearts, because, of course, they have been taught them from His Word. As a result, they can turn sterility into fruitfulness; they can make out of the dreary valley through which their way leads a place of springs, covering the landscape with blessings, as if an early rain had descended on it. They carried the fountain of life with them, and from them issued fructifying streams to others. The goodly knowledge of one Christian man is as deep waters and a flowing brook to those perishing in their ignorance and hopelessness. Prov. 18, 4. Or, take apocryphal writers who, though writing uninspired, have retained the thought and language of the people of God. Sirach (chap. 1, 5) says: "The Word of God most high is the fountain of wisdom." Baruch (chap. 3, 12) reproves the backslider by saying: "Thou hast forsaken the Fountain of wisdom."

But when the Savior begins to walk on earth, the "fountain texts" are seen in their full significance; for He Himself is the Headwaters of the river of salvation. In the beautiful conversation at Jacob's Well with an erring child of Samaria He says: "Who-soever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." John 4, 14. Again, in the sermon at Capernaum: "He that believeth on Me shall never thirst." John 6, 35. Again, in his sermon at the Temple on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, when they were fetching water from the Pool of Siloam: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." John 7, 37, 38. Here the Lord appeals to such Old Testament texts as Joel 3, 1; Zech. 14, 8; Is. 58, 11; Prov. 16, 22. It is needless to

point out that all blessings to be derived from Him He attached to His Word and to faithful continuance in His Word. John 8, 31, 32.

The poetic thought of the Word of God as a fountain is extended even into the future life. Its happiness and glory is the heritage of believers now by hope, which the Word of Christ has quickened in them. The voice that cheers them now when they listen to the great and precious promises which God gives them is calling to them from the Throne of Majesty, out of paradise: "Let him that is athirst come." Rev. 22, 17. "I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely." Rev. 21, 6. And John relates as part of his concluding vision: "He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." Rev. 22, 1. There, where expectation becomes realization and hope passes into fruition, all wishes are stilled, and no unrequited longing shall stir the hearts of the glorified. When we behold Jesus face to face, having been raised with the likeness of God restored to us completely, we shall be satisfied, Ps. 17, 15, and "the pure, clear fountain of Israel" will have done its full work for us.

It appears, then, that, when the Lutheran confessors at Kloster Bergen declared the apostolic and prophetic Scriptures the norm of doctrine and, in so doing, referred to them in the poetic manner stated, they had in mind two things: 1. There can be no Christian truth offered for the believer's acceptance except it be taken from the Scriptures. 2. There can be no Christian comfort, peace, and hope conveyed to men's hearts, except it be drawn from the Scriptures. A deviation from any word of God is denounced as untruth, and inasmuch as such a deviation involves a departure from the highest truth of Scripture, free and full righteousness to sinners by faith, for Christ's sake, it is a deadly, soul-destroying error. The formal and the material principle of the Reformation are both embraced in this declaration of the confessors.

It is no small matter whether men bow to the authority of the written Word of God or not. If they do not, the truth cannot be obtained from their lips, there is no light in them, and their ministry to men as teachers is under God's curse. While the great World War was still in progress, in 1917, there was gathered in the good old Luther-town of Eisenach an august assembly for the celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. This assembly defined its relation to the Scriptures and the Con-

fessions by giving out the slogan: "Gebunden und doch frei! Gebunden an das Ganze der Offenbarung in der Schrift, gebunden an den Christus Gottes, den die Schrift treibt, aber frei gegenueber den Einzelheiten, frei in der Beurteilung der menschlichen Huellen, in die die Gottesherrlichkeit der Schrift verkleidet ist." \* Uttered on an inspiring occasion, in a locality abounding in mementoes of a great Lutheran past, at a time when the stress of political complications was straining at the souls of serious-minded men, this pronouncement, made in the shadow of the Wartburg, was actually regarded as the presage of a better time for Lutheranism in Luther's land. Strip the utterance of its oratorical plethora and reduce its vagueness to concrete assertions, and what is it worth as a confession? The speakers do not purpose to be bound by "the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments," or the Bible, as our forefathers bound themselves, but only to "the revelation within the Scriptures." Scripture and revelation, in the view of the speakers, are not identical terms. Our orthodox teachers, too, have distinguished between revelation and Scripture, but in an entirely different sense, namely, not to depreciate the authority of any, even the least part, of the Scriptures, as was done by the Eisenach assembly, but to set off the wider term of revelation from the narrower, or specific, term of inspiration. The Eisenach declaration pledges itself only to such parts of Scripture as offer information about matters that are unknown and unknowable to men. All other matters are to be regarded and treated as purely human elements. Who decides which portions of Scripture are genuine revelation, which not? This task devolves upon the individual reader, and modern theology will aid him in making his decision. This ominous distinction between faith in the revelation within the Scriptures, which is to be obligatory, and faith in the Scriptures *per se*, which is not to be obligatory, is bad enough; but the mischief perpetrated here goes still further: the Eisenach assembly did not even pledge itself to the revelation within the Scriptures, — whatever that may be, — but only to a general view of the revelation within the Scriptures, "das Ganze der Offenbarung in der Schrift." This is a mere abstraction which the mind of man forms from reading the Scrip-

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\* "Restricted, yet free! Restricted to the revelation within the Scriptures viewed as a whole; restricted to the Christ of God whom the Scriptures urge. But free over against particular matters, free to form our opinion of the human garments in which the divine glory of the Scriptures is masked."

tures, a syllabus, a quintessence, an *ensemble* effect. In other words, it is an experience of the individual that has come to him while hearing or reading the Scriptures. Modern German theology loves to call it *Erlebnis*. Notably it is the Scripture witness to "the Christ of God." To this subjective phenomenon the believer is to feel himself inwardly bound, and with regard to the Scriptures themselves he is to feel himself inwardly free. That this was the meaning appears from statements that were made in connection with the slogan afore-cited: "One service the Scriptures will, of course, no longer be able to render; they cannot by particular statements authenticate particular parts of the Confessions." This means that under the operation of the slogan, "Restricted, yet free!" such things as proof-texts cease to exist. It is henceforth useless to put your finger on any Bible-text and say: "Thus it is written!" "So says Jehovah." The normative authority of the Scriptures is completely destroyed. The restriction which the declaimers at Eisenach seemed to put upon themselves is nothing but a delusion; for the Scriptures to which they pledged themselves are not "the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, *limpidissimi purissimique Israelis fontes*," but a phantastic product of their own imagination. In 1580 the Lutheran Confessions anchored to a fact; in 1917 some who still sport the Lutheran name tied themselves to a fiction.

The question was raised by earnest men in Germany soon after the slogan was published: What would Luther have said to the illustrious gathering at Eisenach if he had descended from the Wartburg? The answer is not difficult. In his comment on 1 Pet. 3, 15 he says: "The sophists have perverted also this text, saying that we must overcome heretics by our reason and the natural light of Aristotle, because in the Latin version of this text the phrase *rationem reddere* is used — as though Peter had meant that we are to give our answer from our own reason. For they say the Scriptures are much too feeble to overthrow heretics; that must be done with reasons drawn from our brain; that's the way to prove that our faith is right. Think of it! our faith, which exceeds all reason and is solely by the power of God! Therefore, when people will not believe, keep silent; for you are under no obligation to compel them to regard the Scriptures as God's Book or Word. It is sufficient if you have taken your stand on the Scriptures. For instance, they might try this quibble on you: You are preaching that we are not to accept the teachings of men: well, were not Peter and

Paul, yea, Christ Himself, men? When you meet with people so utterly blind and reprobate as to deny that this is God's Word or question whether it is, just keep still; don't say a word to them and let them go. If you speak at all, say to them: I will offer you proof enough from Scripture; if you will believe it, well and good; if not, I am not going to offer you anything else. But you say: If I act that way, God's Word will make a poor showing. I say: Just leave that to God." (9, 1071 f.) Luther believed that the Holy Scriptures were "spoken by the Holy Spirit" (3, 1895), "written by the Holy Ghost" (9, 1770); that they are "the book of the Holy Ghost" (9, 1775); that the Holy Scriptures did "not grow on earth" (7, 2095). Accordingly, to Luther "one passage of Scripture has more authority than all the books in the world" (19, 1734). "For a foundation and evidence of our faith," he held, "we must have the Scriptures" (11, 1025); "the Scriptures are our guarantee; they embolden us to challenge even an angel from heaven, let alone a Pope and council" (15, 1549); "when you have a decision of Scripture, you need not look for any further decision either from the Fathers or from church councils" (3, 503). Anticipating the future declaration of the final confession of the Lutheran Church, he declared: "No other doctrine shall be presented in the Church than the pure Word of God, that is, Holy Scripture" (9, 87); for Holy Scripture is "the best and sublimest book of God, full of comfort in every affliction, because it teaches us faith, hope, and love" (22, 5). To Luther, too, the Scriptures were "the pure, clear fountain of Israel."

The ranks of those who hold the old faith that the Scriptures are, word for word, given by inspiration and do not allow the cavils of "scientific" investigators of the Bible to shake their confidence that God's Book will take care of every negation of its divine origin and character, are being fearfully thinned in these days. It is a mere Gideon's band that goes out to battle with Bible skepticism and Bible repudiation. But if it is a real Gideon's band, it is sufficient for the task, and the outcome is a foregone conclusion.

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