

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Editorial ✠

“Which Birds?”

Some weeks ago a trusted friend advised us to stick to broad theological issues in the pages of this journal and to avoid all the pressing present problems in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. “Fill the church full of Gospel,” he said, “so that there will be no room left for non-Gospel problems.” That was tempting advice; it would relieve editorial tensions greatly. But at the same time, it might leave the theological field in the hands of irresponsible journalists, and it would seem to imply that the Gospel is not relevant to our current crises. Instead of following our friend’s good advice, we have decided to aim our evangelical guns at the birds that are flying around the synodical chimney. Let’s make the proclamation of the Gospel to specific problems the key to our program—that was the staff’s final editorial decision.

However, it seems that the contributors to this issue, with the exception of Horace Hummel, have followed our friend’s advice. In their articles, most of them concentrate on mining the Scripture for God’s proclamation of judgment and His promises of grace, as if nothing else bothered them. Maybe that’s good, because it does reveal their own supreme confidence in the Gospel’s power to overcome. It also demonstrates their unified determination to preach the Gospel in season and out of season. Incidentally, each of our contributors, by their careful attention to the minutest details and facts in the Biblical record show that they do not belong to that Gospel-reductionist school, badly caricatured in several District memorials, that is supposed to argue that you can ignore or twist anything in Scripture so long as the Gospel is not affected.

In our original design, worked up by a subcommittee of the exegetical department of our seminary, approved by that entire department and then ratified by the *CTM* staff, this issue was to explore various aspects of the relationship between Old and New Testament. Professors Klein, Lange, and Sauer carefully stuck to that assignment, while others went their own useful, helpful, pastoral, scholarly ways.

The topic of confessional subscription and exegetical responsibility requires further treatment than it receives in this issue. We did not expect Dr. Hummel to solve all the problems in one essay. Dr. Hummel has provided some of his own ideas on this topic, and some readers will undoubtedly find their own thinking stimulated by his article. Others will find his comments on evolution to be thought-provoking. Dr. Hummel’s article can be described as a defense of the *sola scriptura* principle, as are the other articles in this issue. But if Scripture was written for the purpose of making us wise unto salvation by proclaiming Law and Gospel, then we need to ask whether a Lutheran article on Scripture is complete and Lutheran if it does not broaden our understanding and appreciation of Law and Gospel. If we make this requirement, are we becoming too fussily Lutheran? too pedantic and mechanical?

We think not, in this day and age when the proper understanding of Law and

Gospel is challenged and obscured by many. The church still stands or falls as it succeeds or fails to maintain the Christological purpose and nature of the Scripture in everything the church says about Scripture, and as it succeeds or fails to find Law and Promise in all its chapters. Without this soteriological emphasis, articles about Scripture fall flat and have little appeal or value to the parish pastor.

We wondered what impact Dr. Hummel's article would have on its readers because of its personalistic, subjective tone. He has clearly thought through many of the problems to his own satisfaction, but not every reader will want to take his word for it. However, his article is a useful and stimulating contribution to dialogue, and dialogue is an essential ingredient in reconciliation, that blessed goal that so many seem to have given up as hopeless.

Planning a Biblical issue requires one fundamental decision concerning what kind of article will be of most service to the 2,500-plus parish pastors who make up the majority of our subscribers. Should contributors be asked to write articles that are specifically and obviously geared to the parish pastor? Most of our contributors to previous issues have rejected this approach. They argue that the best way to help pastors is by inviting them to come into their studies and classrooms and watch them do exegetical work. This year the contributors followed that approach, while the staff favored a more specific focus on today's parish pastor.

And so, with some embarrassment, we introduce a new and very occasional feature: introductions to selected articles putting them into perspective for the pastor. The embarrassment stems from the fact that the editor is not convinced our pastor subscribers need them or that he, or anyone else on the faculty for that matter, is really equipped to introduce these articles from the perspective of the parish pastor. Embarrassed, also, lest the rest of our readers, some one thousand professional scholars and theologians, turn up their noses at the articles because of the introduction. So with considerable hesitation we'll go this route and wait for the avalanche of mail to show whether it was a good or dumb decision.

Articles by Alfred von Rohr Sauer and Harvey Lange, prepared for this issue, will be delayed to the October issue for reasons of space. Good reading, and a blessed fall parish program!

HERBERT T. MAYER
for the staff

Searching the Scriptures

Ours is a day in which the people of the church are apt to be a bit uneasy about their exegetes, the men whose calling it is to interpret the Sacred Scriptures. Jesus Christ had a good word for the professional experts of the Bible in His day, and His Word is useful for experts and laymen alike, for opponents of His like those to whom He first spoke that Word, and for us all who propose to be His disciples:

You study the scriptures diligently, supposing that in having them you have eternal life; yet, although their testimony points to me, you refuse to come to me for that life. (John 5:39-40 NEB)

Those words trigger a number of useful reflections.

1. *The Scriptures are to be searched.* What was wrong with the opponents of Jesus was not that they searched, but that they searched without finding. The Bible does not carry all of its treasure on the surface. The people of the Old Testament read their Scriptures as though through a veil (2 Cor. 3:14). Prophets in the very act of writing their Scriptures had to search and ponder what it was that they were given to write (1 Peter 1:10-12). We are to search; and anything that stops that search, especially when it is for its right purpose, is damaging.

2. *The Scriptures are to be searched for Jesus Christ.* Jesus' opponents were the experts in the Biblical interpretation of their day. But they were on the wrong track. Something kept them from finding Him! They had constructed a religion of statute and ordinance; and instead of searching the Scriptures to arrive at their vitality and purpose in Christ, they only added ordinances to the Law. Anything that stops the searcher of the Bible, whether he be a sophisticated scholar or a simple reader of a translation in his own tongue, from finding Jesus Christ as his prime discovery, is damaging.

3. *Searching the Scriptures is a great service to Christians.* The man who is burrowing into the meaning of the Scriptures in order to produce their Word of Jesus Christ is doing his fellow Christians a great service. He is accepting the mandate to handle the Word of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-21). He is impelled by the charism of the Spirit and the gift of knowledge to help his brothers and to edify the church of God (1 Cor. 12:8, 25; 13:2). He is an agent of the Spirit of God who tells what Jesus said and did (John 15:26; 16:14). Anything that impedes the man who is so gifted and enabled in fulfilling his calling of the Spirit to unfold the Scriptures is damaging.

4. *To search the Scriptures does not mean to throw any of it away.* The average Bible reader develops a bias in favor of certain sections. Many a pastor has through the years of his ministry developed an "inner canon" of favorite preaching texts or of verses and sections for catechetical classes and Bible studies or bedside ministration or counseling. This is splendid, this is what the Bible is for. But in using these excerpts he is apt to halt his search through the rest. He is happy, and his people with him, that he is supplying the familiar treasures. But in the process vast areas of the Bible remain unused, in part because of neglect, in part because they seem too difficult. Thus a lack of

searching sets in, which may hamper the enlarging and growing understanding of the Scriptures. Anything that thwarts such growth is damaging.

5. *Gifted, experienced, trained interpreters of the Bible make varied discoveries.* I am not talking about the destructive criticism which speculates about portions of the Bible to the extent of discarding them as fraudulent or useless. But I am talking about the serious work of the interpreter who aims at recovering as completely as possible the intended meaning of the Bible. The Bible is a varied collection of documents—stories and histories, visions, poems, apologues with spiritual purposes, letters of teaching and counsel. Some of these seem to fit together with difficulty. The committed Christian interpreter seeks to plumb the basic meaning and purpose of all that he is examining. He makes new discoveries all the time. He is modest about his findings and he knows that they are subject to improvement and growth. He delights in sharing them with his fellow workmen with whom he is dividing the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). For ultimately it is Jesus Christ for whom he is searching; and anything that impedes that search and sharing is damaging.

6. *Christians are apt to resist the process of growth in understanding the Bible.* You wouldn't imagine that people would need the admonition, but Peter had to exhort: "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18 AV). Even good Christians are apt to fear that the foundations of their faith might prove to be an illusion. Or they may feel offended at the expertness of someone who puts their inexperience in the shade. They may want their church, or some fancied consensus of Biblical teachers, to freeze the meaning of the Scriptures at a certain point and term every variation from it an error or a heresy. But any such block across the path of growth is damaging.

Damaging for what?

7. *Halting the growth in insight into the Scriptures breeds contention.* The church is drawn into factions when it clusters around prestigious interpreters.

I appeal to you, my brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: agree among yourselves, and avoid divisions; be firmly joined in unity of mind and thought. . . . Each of you is saying, "I am Paul's man," or "I am for Apollos"; "I follow Cephas," or "I am Christ's." Surely Christ has not been divided among you! Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Was it in the name of Paul that you were baptized? (1 Cor. 1:10, 12-13 NEB)

Superficially it would appear that the position of one interpreter might become a rallying point which halts the proliferation of doctrine. Actually it works in the opposite direction. For the truth of Scripture takes hold of the human heart not at the command of a prestigious teacher, but through the power of its Law and Gospel. (Note Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I, 313, 315, 316)

8. *Halting the growth in insight into the Scriptures defaces the church.* The church is not the arbiter of doctrine, either in small or large sections of it. The moment that Christian men, no matter how well-intentioned, tell their fellow Christians that their own interpretation of a moot passage of Scripture is to be accepted and others discarded,

they have ceased to edify and build the church and have asked it to become a collection of automatons. They have stifled the gifts of the Spirit and have replaced Him with their own method of truth. They have declared that God no longer has great things to uncover from His Word. They have forgotten the rock from whence they have been hewn: Christ the chief cornerstone, apostles and prophets sometimes standing very much alone, heroes of the faith like Athanasius or Martin Luther or C. F. W. Walther, recovering treasures of truth like the two natures of Christ or the meaning of justification or the doctrine of the church. As Francis Pieper says about the peril of the *ecclesia repræsentativa*:

If the question at issue pertains to matters taught and decided in God's Word, the Christian position is that no man and no assembly of men, no matter how learned and renowned they may be, can decide for a Christian what is Scriptural doctrine. This matter every single Christian must decide for himself on the basis of the clear, infallible Word of God. . . . God has not invested the church, or individuals in the church, with legislative authority; on the contrary, here the rule is: "One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren." (Matt. 23:8. *Christian Dogmatics*, III, 428, 432)

It isn't just to keep peace at any price that synodical conventions of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod have refused to sanction the adoption of set interpretations of Scripture. But they have thrown back to Christians, their pastors and teachers, fathers and mothers, laity and clergy alike, wherever they are, the responsibility of unwearied search in the Scriptures, not just for the truth of God in general, but for the Christ of God in particular. Where that search goes on, the damage of stagnation, dead orthodoxy, and Law instead of Gospel is thwarted, and God stands by His church with His Spirit, answering its prayer (Ps. 119:18): "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."

RICHARD R. CAEMMERER SR.