

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Hermeneutical Dilemma:
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Editorial ✠

This issue is the second in the Biblical Studies series, a series first suggested by the Commission on Church Literature and subsequently endorsed by the general leadership of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This issue is a contribution toward a fuller understanding of *the nature of the Word of God*. All the articles contribute to this thematic study. One's appreciation of God's written Word can be so controlled by specific problems, like the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, that the full grandeur of this book can disappear behind a carefully built fence of minor concerns. The contributors to this issue share a solidly Lutheran determination to let God's Word be God's Word.

A great deal of confusion concerning the interpretation of God's written Word prevails in church bodies today. In some measure this is due to the fact that the issues have been broadcast widely to the laity without proper preparation or information being supplied. Many a pastor's heart has been troubled as he sees Christians deeply disturbed by this unwise dissemination of complicated theological problems. We would feel, for example, that the contents of this issue are designed for professional study. Each pastor can decide what, if any, use he wishes to make of its contents in his ministry.

The articles brought together here emphasize several hermeneutical principles, and the discussion of these principles underscores the Lutheran way of understanding Christianity's Bible. *Sola Scriptura* is accepted as a basic principle of interpretation by each contributor. But each article, in turn, cautions against a purely mechanical application of this principle. *Sola Scriptura*, we are reminded by Curtis Huber and others, comes rather close to meaning *solus Christus*. This calls for a far fresher and more vigorous approach to Scripture than the mere matching of parallel passages and cross references.

A second principle which receives emphasis here is that of the *usus loquendi*. This used to mean, we thought, chiefly philological study by which we could determine more precisely the meaning of some Koine Greek words on the basis of papyri inscriptions. It means more than that. It calls the Bible student to determine as fully as he can the situation of the original hearers or readers. He must come to know—and this knowledge is readily available in many modern commentaries—what problems and needs of people prompted God to speak as He did in the first instance before the preacher can say to his present-day audience, "Thus says the Lord!" The neglect of this principle can easily result in wild and undisciplined allegorical interpretation.

On one principle several of the contributors to this issue part company with the majority of exegetes today, and that principle is the insistence that the exegete is finally bound by the text.

Another principle which is stated in this issue is that the authority of the Word of God is affirmed by Jesus Christ and does not depend on any rational arguments about the inerrancy of Scripture, as Arthur Carl Piepkorn points out, or any of the isagogical issues which have been engaging the attention of some writers today. The man who

does not understand what this Christocentric principle means cannot interpret Scripture correctly. This principle runs like a minor motif through the Lutheran Confessional Writings and like a major motif through the writings of Luther. The truthfulness of Scripture and its inspired character are defended by Lutheran exegetes because both terms represent ways of confessing the Christocentric character of the book. Discussions about who wrote the Pentateuch or Isaiah 40—66 often do not contribute to the honor of Christ, for, as the recent convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod pointed out, a dogmatic stand on either issue goes beyond the clear evidence of the Scriptures themselves.

It seems to us that much of the present discussion about hermeneutics does not really center in hermeneutics in and of itself. We suspect that if it did, the issues could be much more quickly defined and resolved. At least one other concern, which in itself is a perfectly valid and proper one, has been raised in the name of hermeneutics. This is the ancient debate about the relationship between faith and reason. Since 1700 the role of reason has been rising steadily to the point where for many it has destroyed the place of faith in the lives of Christians. Tertullian, fiery father of the third century African church, fought against this trend in his day by denying any proper role to reason in matters of Christian thought. Although he did not really say, "I believe a thing because it is incredible," as he is alleged to have done, he came very close to saying it. There are Tertullianists in the church today who would solve this problem of balance in the same sledgehammer way. One of their approaches is to rule out the propriety of any scientific or historical study of Scriptures on the argument that Scripture interprets itself. Ralph Gehrke wrestles with that problem in his article. He maintains that there is a proper place for historical investigation and reconstruction in Biblical studies. In other words, the authority of the Scriptures is not destroyed when rational principles and techniques are applied within clear bounds and limits such as Gehrke also spells out.

Martin Franzmann cautions against too full an employment of reason in the study of Scriptures. He rightly rejects the extreme positions of some exegetes today who make their reason a final judge of the reliability and truth of Scripture. His article shows clearly the wide gulf which separates the followers of "the new hermeneutic"—a term which is unfortunately applied indiscriminately and unclearly in our own denomination—from those who adopt a truly confessional and Lutheran exegetical stance.

This issue will thus make clear the understanding of the nature of God's Word which controls the work of exegetes in this denomination. It will also make clear what misunderstandings of its nature do not contribute to the exegetical task. The spirit in which all these essays are written is unmistakable. It is a spirit of dedication and humility. There is no brilliant saber-dancing designed to overawe the reader.

Many of the positions espoused in this issue represent the personal convictions of the writers and are not intended to be final and authoritative answers. In view of the fact that the church has worked with some of these problems for 2,000 years, any claim to final solution would be presumptuous—and legalistic. The contributors have

submitted their studies in the hope that the readers will read the entire article carefully, perhaps several times, to make sure that they have caught the real point of the writer.

Contributors and staff alike believe that each of these articles makes a valuable contribution to the work of the church, to the privilege of bringing the Gospel of Christ to people in need. In the spirit of the 1965 Detroit convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, this issue says to all its readers: "Let us make sure that our Biblical studies center in the message of forgiveness and new life through the blood of Jesus Christ. Let us make sure that our Biblical studies help others to preach this message with greater power as they come to understand it in its glorious radiance more fully. Let God's Word be God's Word for you — for the world!"

HERBERT T. MAYER

**The sermon outlines
for the church year
1965—1966
will be based on the
*Eisenach Gospel Pericopes***