

The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,
Lutheran Council in the USA,
During 1972-77

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Quotations from **The Book of Concord**, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., **The Book of Concord** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

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Part 6

Theological Diversity in a Confessional Church

The Nature of Biblical Unity and Its Implications for the Unity of the Church

By Duane A. Priebe

HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Any passage or book in the Bible has an original, historical sense: the meaning intended by the author in the situation addressed by him. The historical-critical method is a set of tools to aid us in understanding the literal historical sense of the passage.

In being remembered and preserved, whether in the form of oral tradition or in the form of written texts, the passage acquires a life of its own although its language remains rooted in its historical context. The preservation and transmission of the "author's" words does not merely perpetuate the original history and meaning of the words but preserves that

history and those words in their significance for new times and situations.

Both the methods of the history of traditions and redaction criticism, as well as some aspects of form criticism, have made clear that this process of transmission, with its interpretation and reinterpretation in a constant dialogue between the language of the text and changing historical circumstances, has shaped the biblical text as we have it in a way that leaves easily discernible traces. At times this process affects the language of the passage itself so that it is stated in a different way. At other times it involves the context

within which the passage is placed or read.

This means that a passage of Scripture does not have a single historical meaning, but that different layers of meaning are discernible within the Bible itself. For example, a saying of Jesus or incident in his life may have had one meaning during his life on earth, it may have been remembered in a different sense in the tradition of the church after Easter, and it may be preserved in the Gospels with still other meanings. At times Jesus' original meaning may no longer be recoverable. Similarly, a prophecy of Isaiah may mean one thing during Isaiah's lifetime, another as it was remembered by his followers, and yet another thing

when it was incorporated into our present book of Isaiah, when it was read by Jews shortly before the coming of Jesus, and when it is read by Christians in the context of the coming of Jesus.

While oral tradition tends to dissolve the historical distance between past and present, remembering the past primarily in terms of its present significance, the "writtenness" of Scripture preserves an essentially unchanged fragment of the past, even though some of the same processes continued to have some effect on the transmission of the text.

Having a written canon of Scripture is related to the conviction that a particular history is the decisive encounter of humanity by God which is definitive for all people at all times and places. Related to both the sense of "writtenness" and Scripture is the conviction that the history and its language have the power to take up and to interpret new times and situations effectively in the context of God's redemptive action: "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10.11).

The emergence of new dimensions of meaning in the interaction between the text of Scripture and new situations can be characterized by the concept of emanation, a flow of meaning from the text in its intersection with the situation.

Hans Georg Gadamer in "Truth and Method"¹ uses the concept of emanation for the relation between a work of art and what is represented by it. The work of art represents its subject in a certain way so that it proceeds from the being of what is represented, and at the same time what is represented is present in that particular way only through the work of art. Scripture could similarly be understood as an emanation of the history of Israel, in which Israel's history is represented in its universal significance as the history of God's approach to humanity. This meaning, in turn, is only accessible to us in the representation of that history provided in Scripture. The emanation of meaning from Scripture in its dialogue with changing historical situations also involves an increase of meaning as the text of Scripture itself acquires new dimensions and richness in the history of its interpretation, which is never finished.

The role of Scripture for theology and the life of the church is related to the conviction that there can be no genuine Christian theology that is not involved in a dialogue with the past history of Israel culminating in Jesus Christ in the way it is represented in Scripture as God's decisive history with all humanity. The Scripture principle means that there is no theological tradition which can function as the final interpretation of Scripture. Theology is bound to a constantly

new dialogue with Scripture in openness to the emergence of new dimensions of meaning. The Bible is a living word, not a dead letter.

No interpretive tradition can acquire the power of a hermeneutical norm for reading Scripture. Scripture must always be given its own say in relation to our interpretive traditions. Theology always takes place in a trilogue involving Scripture, tradition, and our present situation. The criterion for the adequacy of the emergence of new meaning in the history of the interpretation of Scripture, together with the multiplicity that involves, is that the meaning be warranted by the text itself; i.e., that the meaning be given by the text or emanate from it rather than be imposed onto it. Some interpretations possible at certain times in the history of theology may no longer appear possible at other times.

The task in the history of interpretation is to come to understanding with the aid of the language of the text, by attending to the text. This presupposes that understanding is not already given but is to be sought. What is to be understood is not simply the text as such but our own lives and situations in their relation to God. One function of the historical-critical method is its power to release the text from the confines of our interpretive traditions by setting it in its historical distance from ourselves and hence to aid it in saying its own word to us.

The meaning of a passage is given or at least shaped by its context, which includes its historical context, the book which contains it, and the Bible as a whole. Each of these contexts shapes the meaning in different ways and may provide different dimensions of meaning. The meaning of a passage of Scripture is also closely related to the context of the interpreters and their situation in history.

The existence of a canon of Scripture is related to the conviction that the text of Scripture (though not necessarily all its texts) has the power to take up new situations or contexts into itself and to create new dimensions of meaning. The interpretation of Scripture is the representation of its meaning in the present, not an archaeological repetition of its meaning in the past.

One potential problem with the historical-critical method used as the exclusive approach to Scripture is that its focus on past meaning can give the interpretation of Scripture an archaeological flavor, with the restriction of meaning to the historical sense potentially leading to irrelevance and to an impoverishment of meaning. This potential is present particularly in the isolation of exegesis from the life of the church.

Excursus. The discussion of Article II of the Missouri Synod constitution by Albert Marcis (see paper on p. 83) was very informative. The actual language of the constitution is capable of a broad range of meaning that could include the positions of all the participants of this discussion.

The Missouri Synod participants, however, argued that the language of the constitution is equal to the conservative interpretation of it, on the basis of the historical-critical analysis that that interpretation is what the authors of the constitution had in mind. But in fact the language of the constitution says one thing and not the other. It includes possible meanings such as that of the moderates, which may not have been envisioned by the original authors but cannot automatically be excluded.

If this were a discussion of Scripture, one would invoke the principles of clarity and sufficiency to say that if God had intended the conservative interpretation, he would have said it plainly. But a meaning that is not given by the text itself cannot be imposed as **the** meaning of the text, since the text itself contains a wider variety of potential meanings.

I wonder if that is not also true of the LCMS constitution. The authors may have thought in terms of a conservative interpretation, but they did not spell it out. Is not the restriction that the language equals the conservative interpretation an alteration of the text? "It says one thing but it really should say another because that is what is meant." But the **text itself** read literally includes both conservative and moderate interpretations and perhaps other dimensions of meaning.

So "language equals interpretation" is an alteration of meaning that is simultaneously an impoverishment of meaning. And are not impoverishments of meaning always divisive? Look at the Roman Catholic Church's exclusion of a broad range of its own tradition in the rejection of Luther!

UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF SCRIPTURE

Alongside a more static understanding of unity of the sort that can be contained within the framework of a single, consistent theological system, a more dynamic understanding of unity can be conceived. It comprises polarities, tension, and even apparent, if natural, contradictions which are to be held together in all their differentiation.

If Ernst Käsemann is correct—which I believe him to be—in his description of the theological diversity of the New Testament, then the unity of Scripture is to be understood as a dynamic unity in the dialogue of the parts, not as the more static unity of uniformity and noncontradiction. Such a dynamic unity, with its polarities, tensions, and contradictions, has a positive function. Its tensions and polarities, which can never be completely comprised within a single theological system, are creative of meaning and help Scripture always to transcend the givenness of any of our already existing theologies. This unity is related to the life-giving, explosive power of Scripture to create new meaning and to lead us beyond ourselves and our ideas.

Using the analogy of mathematical matrices, perhaps one of the best ways to represent the unity of Scripture would be to arrange the books in a manner that would represent how they are read and related to one another. Such an array would indicate the center that provides the hermeneutical context in relation to which other books are read, the interrelations with other books, as well as the books that tend to be more normed than norming. The array would be related to the clarity of Scriptures: What forms the clear and most comprehensive center that provides the context for reading the rest in an appropriate way. Different centers, and different arrays of the interrelations between the books, would provide different contexts of meaning for the various parts and hence somewhat divergent theological frameworks.

Denominational and theological diversity within the church is at least in part related to such diversity of theological centers and the ways in which various parts of Scripture are interrelated with each other. Examples would be the function of Paul (especially Romans and Galatians) and John for Lutherans; the combination of Paul with the Old Testament covenant concept for Calvin; Matthew for Roman Catholics; Ephesians and Colossians for Eastern Orthodoxy; Acts for a variety of Baptists, Pentecostals, and other Evangelicals; and Revelation for various millenarian eschatological groups. Since Scripture does not prescribe its own single hermeneutical center, such diversity is contained

within Scripture itself and belongs to the nature of Scripture as the authority for faith and life for the Christian community.

Within the range of such diversity are effective evaluative criteria for the appropriateness of theological appropriations of Scripture. The adequacy of an interpretation is dependent on the accuracy of its understanding of the center that provides the context for reading the rest of Scripture. There is a historical criterion in the sense that certain books have always belonged more clearly to the canon of Scripture than others. Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation have a more ambiguous place in Scripture. The hermeneutical center must come from the centrally canonical books rather than from the more ambiguously present books if the center is not to lead to a distortion of Scripture. The power of the center to integrate Scripture without doing violence to other books and traditions—i.e., comprehensiveness—would be a further criterion.

The center is not given once and for all but must be sought in the process of continuing exegetical study. The diversity of Scripture holds up the question of the center.

Theological diversity in the history of the church is part of the effective history of Scripture itself in its hermeneutical power. Legitimate theological diversity is related to the diversity of Scripture, with the unity being a dynamic unity in the dialogue of the parts. Such diversity can be thought of as an emanation of meaning from Scripture with a corresponding in-

crease of meaning to the text as it acquires greater richness through its history. The criterion of such a diversity is the text itself. Any other criteria, especially when it leads to a restriction and impoverishment of meaning, is contrary to the function of Scripture for the church and subjects Scripture to the norm and authority of that criteria.

The historical sense of the text is not the sole dimension of meaning, but in its distance from the present it can help to open our eyes to the text itself, releasing it from the potential hermeneutical bondage of tradition; and it can point us to surprising dimensions of meaning. The meaning of the text is not bound to the historical intention of the author, however, who may well have said and did more than he ever dreamed of. The history of the text belongs to its meaning, although the historical sense can also serve as a control on a rampant, arbitrary proliferation of meaning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

If Scripture is authoritative for the church, then the unity of the church and its theology should correspond to the dynamic unity of Scripture with its polarities, tensions, and even possible contradictions.

If theological diversity is in part due to the hermeneutical functioning of Scripture itself in history, then that diversity belongs to the

meaning of Scripture and to the nature of the church. Such diversity belongs to the nature of the gospel as the message of God's approach to every person and to every human situation by grace alone without any merit or worthiness that we must attain. Such diversity also reflects an increase of meaning in the traditions of the church, which belongs to the meaning of Scripture—those meanings are contained in Scripture and emanate from it. The criterion of such increase of meaning in the unity of the church is Scripture itself: does the meaning emerge from the text itself, or is it imposed on to the text?

A theological tradition can function with a limited range of interpretive traditions, but the church cannot do so, and those traditions dare not become exclusive lest they lose their roots in the church and Scripture. Particular theological traditions function within the church in a way appropriate to Scripture, the gospel, and the nature of the church only when they are held together with alternative traditions in the unity of the gospel and of the church in a dialogue of the parts.

In the matter of such appropriate diversity the boundary between orthodoxy and heresy is never given once and for all but is always present as a question for which understanding is sought with the aid of Scripture. The rejection of such diversity as proper to the church is a rejection of the sole authority of Scripture and its replacement with the authority of one's own in-

terpretive tradition. It is also a betrayal of the gospel in its universal sweep and power.

1 Hans Georg Gadamer, **Truth and Method** (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).