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The Other Understanding of the Inspiration Texts

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IN THIS ARTICLE THE AUTHOR EVALUATES THE NOTES OF FRANZ PIEPER ON THE inspiration of Scripture, presents a summary of Herman Sasse's view on inspiration, and then offers certain counsel concerning the proper understanding of the inspiration of the Scriptures.

Over the years I have found an observation of John Philip Koehler helpful when I heard something new about the Scriptures, something which some considered to be an attack on them. He said, "[Theology as a historical discipline] should arrange that material which has come about as a consequence of Scriptural exegesis and confessional study to be taught in such a way as to clean the study tracks from the refuse of false views, which will always again be heaped on them.

"This principle has been important in my entire life. That cocksure attitude that has figured everything out for itself and therefore is through with questioning and study, it seems to me, is not the conviction of faith either with respect to the way it expresses itself or even as far as reliability is concerned. This cocksureness is, on the one hand, egotistical and uncharitable in its subjective certainty, and on the other hand, lacks inner moral support and under unexpected attack breaks down. In contrast, certainty of faith is steadfast confidence that grounds itself on God's alien message, in-

deed on the message of alien grace. The person who is certain in faith confesses humbly his own inadequacy with respect to understanding and grasping all truths and therefore, while holding firmly to his own confession, remains open to discussion with other believing Christians. To a systematic mind this conception may seem paradoxical. In a certain way I suppose it is, but so is all human life, including our Christian life in its most intimate respects." (*Kirchengeschichte*, Vorwort, xii)

In the interest of openness for discussion and deepening confidence in each other's loyalty to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and in deepening trust of each other's integrity we propose to do three things: (1) To review briefly our traditional understanding of the inspiration texts; (2) to present in some detail Hermann Sasse's views; and (3) to express some common concerns.

I

What we have to say about our traditional understanding of the inspiration texts

is based on the classroom lectures that Dr. Franz Pieper dictated in the academic school year 1922—23.

1. All the Scripture of the Old Testament is called the oracle of God (Rom. 3:2), *ta logia tou theou*. Pieper continued by arguing that since Scripture and God's Word are convertible terms, Christ's word in John 10:35 that Scripture cannot be broken (*ou dunatai luthēnai hē graphē*) can and should be applied directly to every word of Scripture. Luther said, "You must always deal with Scripture as God Himself speaking." John Gerhard observed in his *Loci*, "Between the Word of God and the sacred Scripture there is no real difference" (*Inter verbum Dei et scripturam sacram non est reale discrimen*). Pieper continued in his lecture saying that Holy Scripture is God's Word because it is infused (*eingegeben*) or inspired by God. Scripture not only reports to us the fact that it is God's Word, but also teaches how it came to be God's Word, namely, because it was breathed or infused into the men by whom it was written. 2 Tim. 3:16 — *pāsa graphē theopneustos*; 2 Peter 1:21 — *hupo pneumatōs hagiou pheromenoi elalēsan apo theou anthrōpoi*. Pieper pointed out that the Scripture passages on inspiration make the following points: (1) Inspiration is verbal inspiration, not merely so-called inspiration of things or of persons, because the inspired Scripture consists of words, not of things or persons. (2) Inspiration does not consist merely of divine guidance and preservation against error, but also of the divine presentation or the divine giving of the very words of which Scripture consists. (3) Inspiration extends not merely to parts of Scripture, not merely to the chief parts or doctrines of faith, but to

all Scripture, to the whole Scripture. (4) This term inspiration, taken from Scripture itself, also means that Scripture in every word is inerrant (*erroris expers*). Pieper quoted John 10:35 as our Lord's own teaching on this point. Then he quoted Luther: "Scripture has never erred (*Die Schrift hat noch nie geirrt*)" and he added a quotation from Johann Quenstedt, "The original, canonical sacred Scripture is infallible, true and free of all error (*Sacra scriptura canonica originalis est infallibilis, veritalis, omnisque erroris expers*)."

The term inspiration also includes the mandate or impulse to write. Pieper thus adopted the stance of the Lutheran orthodox fathers with their triple principle of the suggestion of the matter, the suggestion of the words, and the impulse to write (*suggestio rerum, suggestio verborum et impulsus ad scribendum*). He urged his students to cling firmly to these three words: *pasa*, *graphē*, and *theopneustos*. The inspiration texts are primarily three, 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21; and John 10:35.

2. The infallibility of Scripture is based on the authority of Christ, who affirmed that Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35). Pieper says that when this is denied, our *whole faith collapses* (*Leugne ich dies, dann fällt der ganze Glaube hin.*) To deny this further is to make John 3:16 uncertain. He dictated the following sentence to the class in this context: "It follows consequently that no one can believe the Christ of John 3:16 who denies faith in the Christ of John 10:35." In this respect, however, it seems that Pieper goes beyond the teaching of the orthodox dogmaticians. In his study of the theology of the 17th-century Lutheran dogmaticians Robert Preus says: "They [orthodox theologians]

will not even speak of inspiration or the authority of Scripture as a fundamental article of faith. People have been saved who never heard that there is such a thing as a Bible. The dogmaticians regarded Scripture as the source of Christian theology, as the infallible norm of faith and life, but never as the source of Christianity itself. Like Luther they believed that justification was the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.¹

3. Pieper pointed to two places in the Lutheran Confessions where he found this understanding of verbal inspiration taught. In the first instance, he pointed to the expression "the open, bright Scripture and clear Word of the Holy Ghost."² The other reference reads, "the Holy Ghost and His Word."³ However, these references do not confirm Pieper's view, which is clearly that of the late Lutheran Orthodox teachers. Let me quote three contemporary books on the theology of the Lutheran Confessions in support of this position. Friedrich Brunstad writes, "No one can appeal to the Confessions for the later doctrine of verbal inspiration."⁴ Edmund Schlink writes, "The inspiration of Scripture is indeed presupposed, but there is no detailed doctrine of inspiration."⁵ Quite recently Holsten Fagerberg writes, "It is an

old observation that the Confessions contain no doctrine of inspiration."⁶

4. As we sat in the old seminary classroom, we did not study the inspiration passages in their context. We were not told that *theopneustos*, that word on which so much depends, is a *hapax legomenon* and that it could also be taken in the active sense—which also makes good meaning. This position is adopted already in the Lutheran Commentary of 1897, where the author writes, "'inspired' of God, God-breathed (2 Peter 1:21) [is] a term found only here and [offers] no support for any theory teaching the mode of inspiration. The rendering of Cremer—no mean authority—'God-breathing,' 'filled and overflowing with the divine Spirit,' is suitable to what follows and is supported by the observation of Bengel: 'God breathed not only through the writers while it was written, but also whilst it is being read, God breathing through the Scripture and the Scripture breathing Him.'"⁷

We were really shocked a few years ago when, going over the lecture notes of our revered teacher, we discovered that he had not once referred to 1 Cor. 2:13: "Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth." In this passage verbal inspiration is clearly Christ-centered, as it always ought to be. This omission aroused our curiosity and we examined the three large volumes of his *Christian Dogmatics* only to discover that he referred to

¹ Robert D. Preus, *Inspiration of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1957), p. 210.

² *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 100, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 152, 108.

⁴ Friedrich Brunstad, *Theologie der Lutherschen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1951), p. 21.

⁵ Edmund Schlink, *Theology of Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 5.

⁶ Holsten Fagerberg, *Die Theologie der lutherschen Bekenntnisschriften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), p. 30.

⁷ *Lutheran Commentary*, s. v. 2 Tim. 3:16 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897).

the text but once, using it to prove that the Holy Spirit employs the Scriptures. In our judgment, this text is the key to the right understanding of divine inspiration.

II

The Christocentric approach to the question of inspiration has in recent years been identified with the name and the writings of Herman Sasse. Again and again he contends that inspiration can be understood only when it is used from the content of Scripture, which is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Scriptures. We find his position particularly helpful and so we offer a brief summary of his position.⁸

To this day the Lutheran Church does not have a formulated doctrine of Holy Scripture. The introduction to the Formula of Concord contains no exposition on this subject and therefore ought not be described as the Lutheran position on the doctrine of the Word. This doctrine simply does not exist in our confessional writings. However, though the Lutheran Confessions do not offer an extended doctrine on Holy Scripture, it must definitely be asserted that they teach the inspiration and the consequent absolute trustworthiness of the Bible as God's Word.

Even though the Bible is God's Word in the strictest sense of the term, it is an earthly and not a heavenly book. It was "inspired," we say. Sasse goes on to point out that the expression "inspired" comes from the Vulgate translation of *pāsa graphē*

theopneustos. Whether *theopneustos* is correctly translated in the Vulgate rendering of 2 Tim. 3:16 cannot be definitely decided. Sasse underscores the point that we made previously in this essay. *Theopneustos*, says Sasse, clearly means that God's *pneuma* is present in the writings of Scripture, so that we must say that Scripture is filled with the Spirit of God. But the term does not enable us to determine with certainty anything concerning the manner in which Scripture came to be. Furthermore, it is impossible to determine whether *pāsa graphē* means "the entire writing" or "every writing." Both meanings are possible. Since the passage is not a direct explanation of *theopneustia* — whatever that might mean — but rather a descriptive statement concerning the *graphē theopneustos*, the early Lutheran theologians do not adduce it to bolster the doctrine of inspiration. Here they follow their great teacher Luther who, whenever he cites this passage, never expresses himself concerning the meaning of *theopneustos*. Rather he and his earlier followers used 2 Peter 1:20-21 to prove that the Scripture is "not produced by men but by the Holy Ghost." In this passage we are told that the prophetic word of the prophets is not the product of their own will but that rather they spoke as they were "moved (*pheromenoi*) by the Holy Ghost." Although 2 Tim. 3:16 is cited in four passages of the Formula of Concord, the word *theopneustos* is not used to prove the divine inspiration of the Scripture but simply to establish its effective power (*Wirkung*).

Then Sasse asks the next question: What is the mistake of the later Lutheran orthodox teachers? There can be no question concerning the correctness of their position

⁸ This review is based on a letter, "On the Doctrine *De Scriptura Sacra*," that Sasse addressed to Lutheran pastors, Nov. 14, 1950. It is interesting to note that the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism has labeled Sasse "an authentic Lutheran," although he does take a different stand on Scripture and its inspiration.

that 2 Tim. 3:16 teaches that the Holy Scriptures arose through the working of the Holy Spirit and is filled with the Holy Spirit. But then it must also be borne in mind that there is no difference between the Christian church and the Jewish synagogue about the *fact* of inspiration. But why did the orthodox fathers as well as the fathers of the ancient church take over theories that were based not only on Jewish ideas but even on pagan views of inspiration? There is no explanation anywhere of what *theopneustia* is or how it worked. It was a widely held Greek theory that when the gods inspired a person they treated him as an artist treats his musical instrument and in effect dictated the divine words without in any way involving the mind and the personality of the writer. This view, when applied to the Scriptures, could be carried so far as to maintain that Moses, the alleged author of the Pentateuch, wept bitter tears when God dictated to him the last chapter of Deuteronomy with its report of his death. Perhaps, observes Sasse, we could at least have expected of these dogmaticians that they would have examined these statements of church fathers in the light of Scripture. If the "veil of Moses" hangs over Israel's face when it reads the Old Testament, should it no longer hang there when Israel speaks of the inspiration of Scripture? Is inspiration really something that can be understood without knowing what the Holy Spirit conveys through Scripture? That is the mistake in the theory of inspiration which the ancient church fathers and the later orthodox fathers adopted so uncritically. They saw inspiration as a formal process and an actual fact (*Tabbestand*) which had nothing to do whatever with

the content. But the Holy Scriptures are inspired because in them we find that which only the Holy Spirit can say (1 Cor. 12:3), and because in them the truth is established to which the Holy Spirit alone can testify, namely, that Jesus is the Christ and Lord. (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13 f.)

This is what Luther means when again and again he calls the Bible "the Holy Ghost's book," for Christ and the Holy Ghost always belong together. (*Ubi Christus, ibi Spiritus Sanctus, ubi Spiritus Sanctus, ibi Christus.*) This sentence expresses their relationship to one another in the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification. But they also belong together in their relation to the Holy Scripture. Luther calls Christ "the Lord of the Scripture" in his Galatians commentary, and just for that reason it is the Holy Spirit's book. How could it be otherwise? asks Sasse rhetorically. For it is the Holy Spirit's work and office to bear witness to Christ, to awaken faith in Him, and to effect the confession of allegiance to Him. In Matt. 10:20 Jesus points out that the *martyrion*, the witness to Christ that a martyr gives before a court, is inspired. How much more must this not be true concerning the human authors of the Scripture whose purpose also is to witness to Christ! "It shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not you that speak but the Spirit of your Father that speaks in you" (Matt. 10:20). This is what the New Testament teaches in 2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:19-20. That is what the churches of all ages should have taught, namely, that the authors of the Biblical books received what they should say. It was not they who spoke, but it was the Holy Spirit who spoke through them. That is the Christian understanding of the in-

piration of Holy Scripture as the Lutheran reformers learned to know it from the witness of Scripture concerning itself.

This means that the Holy Scriptures must be understood from the viewpoint of faith in Jesus Christ, the saving faith of the Gospel. Even as the Scripture is the tool that the Holy Spirit can use to call men to faith, so in turn this faith aids men to understand the entire Scripture. The Apology is in harmony with the thought of Luther when it speaks of the article of justification as "the chief topic of Christian doctrine," and then says concerning it that it is "of special service for the clear, correct understanding of the Holy Scriptures, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ."⁹ This principle leads Luther to insist that the ability to distinguish between Law and Gospel is the art which makes a theologian a Christian and an evangelical theologian and is also the prerequisite for the correct understanding of Holy Scripture.

Having established that the Bible is God's Word, the Holy Spirit's book, because Christ is its content, the question arises concerning the meaning of this assertion in relation to the evident human aspects of the Bible. After all, it is a collection of literary documents of differing kinds all written by men and clearly stamped with the imprints of authors' differences and peculiarities. While we must say of the Bible with all seriousness and without reservation that it is God's Word and that the Holy Spirit is its author, we must declare no less seriously that the books of the Bible are genuinely man's word,

⁹ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 121.

written by sinful, infallible, and imperfect human authors. To deny the divine character of Scripture is to run the risk that the Bible loses its character as Holy Scripture and becomes a haphazard collection of documents from man's history of religion. As a consequence it would be without any normative significance for the church. On the other hand, if we deny the human character of the Bible, then the humanness and the naturalness of the Biblical texts become mere appearance and the Bible becomes a docetic book. For example, if David was only the writing pen or the "musical instrument" for the Holy Ghost, then this mighty prayer of repentance (Ps. 51) loses its character as prayer; along with Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane it almost becomes play-acting for the Docetists and Monophysites. The divine-human parallels that exist in the incarnate word also exist in the written word. Just as one must say concerning the two natures in Christ that all is divine and all is human, so it must also be asserted of the one Holy Scripture that everything in it is divine and everything is human. The Bible's fundamental nature then is to be sought in its character as God's Word. The human word alone would never have constituted the Bible.

Then Sasse reminds his readers once again that nowhere do we find an explanation describing the nature of inspiration. Neither the New Testament nor the confessions of the church answer the question of how the Holy Spirit placed the human author into His service or how He used him for the purpose of speaking God's Word in the guise of man's word. Later theologians indeed tried to answer this question by saying that the Holy Spirit

gave the human authors the impulse to write and also revealed to them what was to be written both in content and form (*impulsus scribendi, suggestio rerum, suggestio verborum*). But is that not really an attempt to make the phenomenon that can never be understood psychologically, since it conforms to no other psychological experiences, understandable psychologically? Concerning all the working of the Holy Spirit the fundamental principle is that His work cannot be understood psychologically and therefore also cannot be made psychologically clear. We believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures, though it is impossible to understand it.

But in what sense can the selfsame inspired Scripture be man's word? Sasse asks next. If the Holy Ghost is to be considered the author of the Holy Scriptures, in what sense can we speak of the human authors of Holy Scriptures? Does it mean that the book has two authors and that they both collaborate as is the case with human books? Does the one contribute this and the other that? But we do not think of the Bible in that way. We do not say of a psalm: These are David's words, these are words spoken by the Holy Spirit. The human words are God's Word; that is the striking true statement concerning the Bible. God's Word is authentically man's word — *omnia divina, omnia humana*. Now we understand why we are warned against attempts to understand inspiration psychologically. Because it is impossible, according to psychological criteria, for the same book to have two authors in any real sense; the psychologizing of inspiration necessarily led to either the divine side of Scripture being absorbed by the human side or the reverse. As a result there has

arisen the "Nestorian-Arian" view, which has almost destroyed the Scripture principle of the Reformation, and the "Docetic-Monophysite" view developed by the teachers of late orthodoxy, which often has the net effect of destroying the human character of the Bible. This destruction of half of the Scripture begins the moment the human writer is conceived of as the will-less instrument of the Holy Spirit, who is the dictator of the Scripture and in that sense its author. To think of the holy writers as secretaries and to ascribe to them a larger role in the formation of the texts, although still essentially a passive role, does not change the picture. Abraham Calov illustrates this Docetic attack on Scripture when he draws the conclusion from the phrase in 2 Peter 1:21, "not by the will of man," that the Biblical writers had taken nothing from their memory or from the narrative of any other writer, but that everything was dictated by the Holy Spirit from scratch. In essence this is also the position of Johann Quenstedt, David Hollaz, and most of the reformed theologians of the later 17th century. It makes a person wonder, says Sasse, why the Holy Spirit didn't dictate *Romans* to Tertius, Paul's secretary, who after all wrote the epistle. Why would there be the process of double dictation? Why the detour via the apostle? When inspiration is viewed in this way, the human side of the Bible disappears and many questions of interpretation are laid at the doorstep of the Holy Spirit which can be more easily resolved if one takes seriously the fact that holy *men* of God wrote the Bible.

How does all this relate to the much discussed question of the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures? It is taken for granted that the Holy Spirit does not lie. But it

must also be remembered, according to Sasse, that in speaking to us in human language and script in the Bible, the Holy Spirit shares in the weakness of man's word. The Holy Spirit is all-knowing, but He does not tell us everything in the Bible. Rather He has chosen to speak through men who are not all-knowing and who therefore cannot speak the language of divine omniscience. Lest we be misunderstood, we hasten to state the following: What is not in question and never should be questioned by Christians is the absolute infallibility, the perspicuity, and the sufficiency of the Holy Scripture in all articles of faith and in all questions which touch on the relation of man to God and on our redemption. There are no theological errors in the Scripture, no false assertions, concerning God, Christ or the Holy Spirit, concerning creation, redemption, sanctification, concerning the last things. The question rather is this and it must be posed this narrowly: Does the infallibility of the Scripture, its freedom from all incorrect and inexact statements and from all contradictions, extend also to statements of non-theological nature, and thus especially to the historical references and to all questions concerning nature that fall into the field of our external world view? That the doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of the Scripture is an ideal view conceived by men who wish to honor the Scripture and then read back into the Bible is clear from the problem of the four gospels. The question of the relationship among these books makes a mockery of every rational view of inspiration. How much labor Christendom and its exegetes would have been spared if it had pleased God to give us one gospel instead of four! As a matter of fact, Tatian

came up with this solution in the early church and after a few decades of great popularity was thrown into oblivion. Surely if theologians had written the New Testament it would look quite different. But, continues Sasse, since we cannot change it, we try at least to improve it. Is not a quiet criticism of the Holy Spirit's work implied in the subtitle to Johannes Osiander's *Harmony of the Gospels*? It reads: "In which the Gospel-history is woven into a unity from the four evangelists in such a way that no word of an evangelist is left out, no alien word is intermixed, the order of none is disturbed, and all is left in its place." And thus Osiander brings order into the chaos created by the Holy Spirit. From the tradition of Jesus, which was scattered among the four evangelists, Osiander creates the picture of the real Jesus who cleansed the temple three times, healed Peter's mother-in-law three times, awakened Jairus' daughter three times—imagine for a moment how the people involved must have felt when these things transpired the second and third time—and the centurion of Capernaum had a "double" in Palestine. A person marvels at the fact that Osiander does not conclude that the Lord's Supper was instituted many times and that Jesus died several times.

It is astounding to see the kind of rationalism that Osiander reflects over against Scripture, though he is representative of a consistent understanding of inspiration present in Lutheranism already before Calvin. It is doubly remarkable in view of the fact that Osiander reflects an almost mystical understanding of Christ and is otherwise everything but a rationalist. The Bible's nature is deduced from a given conception of what a book should be like if

it was written by God. Osiander is followed then by the later orthodox Lutheran dogmatists who in turn profoundly influenced some of the founding fathers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It is understandable that we would like to have a book from which God's glory shines and thus in our reverence for this book ascribe to it certain characteristics that it does not claim for itself. But God's ways are not our ways. Even as Christ's glory in the days of His flesh was hidden under the cross, even as His empire and His kingship in the church in this aeon, to borrow language from Luther and the Apology, remains *cruce tectum* (hidden by the cross), even so the Bible, which witnesses concerning Him, is God's Word hidden beneath the cross (*verbum dei cruce tectum*).

It is clear that the Holy Scriptures really are the manger in which Christ lies. It was men, human beings, who wrote and preserved these documents, who kept these stories alive in their memory and retold them. Men did this, and they were not mechanical writing instruments. They were men, not supermen, even though the Holy Spirit filled them. The memory by which these men preserved the events they had experienced was extraordinary memory, but it was human memory with all the limitations of human memory. They wrote history according to the principles of their age and not according to the techniques and criteria of modern historiography. Thus, like their pagan contemporaries, their numerical statements are often approximate designations, resting upon estimates and not statistics. They reproduced statements and speeches exactly as did their contemporaries in the field of ancient historiography. As He inspired them, God did not

give them any new astronomical, geological, physical, or biological knowledge. Now again, says Sasse, no one doubts that God could have done that. But then the centuries before our enlightened age would not have understood much of the Bible. The people of the 21st century would have become restless about the ancient Bible and its Einsteinian viewpoint. Thus we can do nothing but trust God, the Lord, that He has done right and that He has not lied to us when He left the Biblical authors in their so-called or alleged errors.¹⁰

Luther believed in the Bible because he believed in the Lord Jesus; he did not believe in the Lord Jesus because he believed in the Bible. But the theologians of the late orthodox period seemed to have believed in the Lord Jesus because they believed in the Bible. In Luther's case, the critical principle of *sola Scriptura* was the consequence of *sola fide* whereas in the later period the *sola fide* was the consequence of *sola Scriptura*.¹¹

The Reformed churches have always granted the formal principle (Scripture as inspired and inerrant) a higher rank than the material principle (justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ). It is still the theory of the Reformed church and in noticeable measure determines the life of some of the branches of the Reformed church to this day. What was in

¹⁰ Sasse says, "Christian theology can never admit, namely, the presence of 'errors' in the sense of false statements in the Holy Scripture." "Inspiration and Inerrancy, Some Preliminary Thoughts," *Reformed Theological Review*, 19, 2 (1960), 47.

¹¹ F. E. Mayer, *Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), pp. 142 f.

the final analysis only a theological theory for Lutherans and for Reformed theologians of the 17th century has here become an actual theological fact; a theologoumenon has become a dogma. The doctrine of the inspiration of the Holy Scripture has become the one great fundamental article of Christian faith from which all the rest must follow.¹²

To the question, "What must I do to be saved?" the church has answered through the ages: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." This is, of course, also the answer of all fundamentalists. But for many it becomes the second answer. The first answer is, "Believe in the Bible!" Thus Christian faith becomes for these people first of all belief in a sacred book.

It is striking to note the degree to which typical Reformed fundamentalistic questions have penetrated into Lutheranism. Given the belief in an inerrant Scripture

¹² Some might find this idea contained, for example, in *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, a religion textbook by E. W. Koehler that was widely used in the ministerial and teacher training colleges of the Synod: "Unless we accept 'all Scripture' as given by inspiration, we have no foundation whatever for our faith. . . . They who assail the plenary inspiration of the Bible are tearing up the very foundation, and leave nothing behind but rubbish and ruin, nothing on which to build our faith" (2d ed. [St. Louis: Concordia, 1952], p. 9). The point of view is expressed in John Theodore Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics* that was used as the textbook in systematic theology at Concordia Seminary for almost a generation. ". . . for everyone who repudiates the inspiration of the Bible subverts the foundation on which the Christian faith rests and falls under the condemnation of God, Matt. 11:25" (p. 108). See also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 305. Here Pieper enumerates eight fundamental Christian principles whose rejection results from "the denial of the inspiration of Scripture."

as the first article of faith, questions like the following become natural and even essential to the mission of the church: How many earthly hours were there in a creation day? Did the sun or the earth stand still at Gibeon? How does this situation look in the light of the theory of relativity? Is a rabbit a ruminant? How was the belly of the fish that swallowed Jonah ventilated? This kind of "Christian" apologetics has projected more souls into destruction than the writings of scoffing atheists that they were intended to refute, Sasse observes. In this kind of approach to Scripture the holy awe and respect for the boundless depth of God's Word is destroyed. Again we must emphasize that we do not deny the miracles or the miraculous. We accept them in simple faith. He who accepts and confesses the miracle of the person of the God-man can also accept Jesus' miraculous deeds as they are recorded in the Gospels and the rest of the Biblical miracles. We are not concerned about rational explanations of them or descriptions of them as, for example, the case of the sun before Gibeon. We can accept these, because we believe in Jesus Christ who, according to the testimony of the New Testament (1 Cor. 10:2 f.) is already present in the Old Testament miracles. He is present as the Lord of the realm of nature, of grace and of glory, albeit hidden to men. At the same time we believe that we must continue to ask questions in order to know what He says and what He does not say and to understand where He gives us an article of faith and where He does not intend His word to be an article of faith. It will not do to make every sentence that Jesus speaks in the gospels or which we might find elsewhere in the

Bible into a doctrinal statement and then, in the name of that oft-misused interpretation of John 10:35, proclaim it as a dogma. When Jesus, like His entire people, speaks of the Pentateuch as Moses (Luke 16:29) and traces the book back to him, he does not thereby teach as an article of faith that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, as if He were saying, "Verily, verily I say unto you, Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch, including the last chapter of Deuteronomy." That is the way of fundamentalism.

It should be the great task of Lutheran theology to call Christendom back from erroneous paths. But the beginning must be made first in the Lutheran churches that are threatened not only from the side of modernism but also from the side of fundamentalism. Returning to the correct understanding of the Holy Scripture can only consist in returning to the *Dominus Scripturae*. We must again take with utmost seriousness Christ's statement that He is the content of Scripture because Scripture witnesses to Him. We must remember and if necessary learn again that the mystery of inspiration is to be approached at this point, and at this point alone. As the writing which testifies of Him (John 5:39), the Scripture is His book, the book about Him, the book of Him who bears witness to Christ, the Holy Spirit's book. As Christ's book and the book of the Holy Spirit, the Bible is the book of truth. The debate about the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures was finally a debate about their truthfulness. However, theologians erred when they thought they could prove and demonstrate the truth of Scripture by developing a theory of inspiration which guaranteed that it was a

perfect book, a completely contradictionless system of absolutely pure truths and absolutely true statements. That is philosophy's conception of truth.¹³ The Biblical understanding of truth can be understood only by one who has understood the most peculiar and the greatest sentence ever spoken concerning the truth, namely, our Lord's sentence, "I am the Truth." Because we believe Him we believe the Scripture. Standing quietly before its puzzles and mysteries, we bow before Him, the Lord of the Scriptures and hear His promise to the humble hearer and reader: "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembles at My Word." (Is. 66:2)

III

Permit me now to share with you a few contemporary concerns involving the doctrine of the Word and suggest a few applications of the theses that we borrowed from Hermann Sasse in part II.

For example, while working on this paper, I saw the following quotation in a letter:

The Bible from A to Z is God's inerrant Word revealed to the human race. If you stretch a chain across a room and fasten the ends to the wall and then remove one link it will fall to the floor. The same is true if you remove one book or word from the whole Bible, the Bible loses its inerrancy. Sixty-one years I stepped into the pulpit and proclaimed what God says. . . . The liberal is sinning against the acts of the Holy Ghost who inspired the writer what to write. Matt. 12:32: Whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be

¹³ See Kent S. Knutson, "The Authority of Scripture," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XL, 3 (March 1969), 156—65.

forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come. That is what the Bible says. Again as plain as 2 and 2 are 4.¹⁴

How then do we answer the question of the agonized conscience, "What must I do to be saved?" Do we reply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and the absolute inerrancy of Scripture." Not at all, for we remember that Christ, who is Himself the Gospel, is the sole object of faith, as also Pieper points out beautifully in his *Christian Dogmatics*.¹⁵ Whoever makes either the Law or the entire content of Scripture the object of faith introduces the monster of uncertainty into the life of the Christian and robs the guilty conscience of any possible comfort.¹⁶ It is surely unfortunate that in his comments on John 10:35 Pieper really goes beyond this principle and introduces a concept of absolute inerrancy which, as we have tried to indicate, goes beyond what Scripture says of itself. The doctrine of the absolute inerrancy of Scripture has a way of bringing with it legalism, for example, the demand that one believe in a 24-hour creation day.¹⁷

In a paper prepared by Dr. Fredrik A. Schiötz, former president of The American Lutheran Church, entitled "The Church's Confessional Stand Relative to the Scriptures," I found this paragraph:

In the city church of Wittenberg, there is a large altar painting showing Luther in

¹⁴ *Christian News*, Sept. 6, 1971, p. 11.

¹⁵ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 505.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 534.

¹⁷ In his writings Sasse refers to the damage to souls done by the theory of absolute inerrancy. See also Robert C. Schultz, "Revelation and Inspiration," mimeographed article in author's possession.

the pulpit, one hand on the open Bible, the index finger of the other hand pointing to Christ on the cross, and beyond Christ is the congregation. This becomes a dramatic way wherein the painter emphasizes that the Scriptures are a means. They point to Christ, even as John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world." How beautifully Cranach's painting gives expression to the purpose St. John declared in recording his Gospel. You will recall the last two verses in the 20th chapter: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

John the Baptist points to Christ. Luther points to Christ. The Bible points to Christ. Let it be our concern to see Jesus and Jesus only as the content of the Scriptures. It was so with Luther, and as a result inerrancy was no problem for him, even though he did on occasion find at least "a minor error" in the Bible. If we follow Luther and John the Baptist, inerrancy will not be a problem for us. Let us not for a moment fool ourselves by believing that if only all Lutherans could agree on the inerrancy of the Scripture, unity would be established overnight and all our problems would disappear. Strange as it may sound, it is true that Scripture itself has been the starting point of all heresies and splits in the church.¹⁸

Instead of continuing with the interne-cine struggle that is now polarizing our brotherhood, let Jesus be our peace, and let this peace be for the preaching of the

¹⁸ Werner Elert, *Der christliche Glaube* (Berlin: Im Furche-Verlag, 1940), pp. 190—91.

Gospel, the healing word of forgiveness, which we and the world need so much. Let us not be sidetracked by trying to save our church by legalistic or rationalistic means. Jesus Christ was not divided, and we have all been baptized into Him. When Helmut Thielicke was in this country, he met many "Bible-believing Christians" who were deeply troubled and worried about the church. To them he said:

"They remind me of the disciples on the ship crossing the Sea of Galilee with the Lord on board. There they are by themselves—for, of course, the Lord is sleeping—prowling about the ship, listening to the creaking in the ship's sides and peering from the railings into the water to see whether they can discover some Bult—or frogman down there boring a hole in the ship's side. When the Lord finally woke up, to his amazement he saw his men aimlessly and excitedly running about instead of being at their nautical stations, performing their regular duties, while the ship has obviously gotten off course. Then he asked them, "Why aren't you paying attention to the course instead of running about as you

are?" They answered, "We're looking out to see whether some Bult—or frogman is boring into our ship." And the Lord said, "Why should that interest you?" The disciples replied, "But, dear Lord, how can you ask such a thing? If the ship gets a hole in it, the water will come in!" And the Lord said, "Yes, and what then?" The disciples said, "Why, the ship will go down." Whereupon the Lord said, "So that's what you are afraid of. O men of little faith, don't you know that the ship can never go down as long as I am sleeping in it, as long as I am with you?"

As I said, this is often the way my fundamentalist friends strike me when they worry about the ship of Holy Scripture possibly going down, even though the Lord is in it. We should not worry about the ship at all, but rather perform our regular duties on it. This would be the kind of relativism that would befit the children of God.¹⁹

Afton, Minn.

¹⁹ Helmut Thielicke, *Between Heaven and Earth: Conversations with American Christians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 33—34.