

The Confessions for Today's Student Of Theology: A Session with Schneeweiss on Scripture

ROBERT BERTRAM

Immediately prior to the beginning of the fall quarter each year the members of the Springfield faculty meet for a one day orientation meeting. At the 1961 meeting Mr. Arthur Ahlschwede, Acting Executive Secretary of the Board for Higher Education, spoke on the *Critical Importance of a Faculty Self Improvement Program*. Pastor Holland Jones delivered a paper on *To What Extent Should a Theological Faculty Exercise Leadership in the Church?* Professor Robert Bertram, head of the Religion Department at Valparaiso University, was asked to lead a discussion under the general heading *The Importance of Confessional Study in a Lutheran Theological Seminary*. As a device for stimulating discussion on this vitally important subject, Professor Bertram presented the paper printed below. It may be well for pastoral conferences to follow the procedure pursued by the faculty at its orientation meeting. We can predict that the ensuing discussion will be fruitful and blessed.

G. J. B.

HIS NAME alone was enough to lure me into conversation with him, "Simon Schneeweiss, pastor at Crailsheim." I had passed him often, on page 335 of my *Book of Concord*. There he stood with the other confessors of Smalcald, only two lines up from Melancton, though he had signed with none of Melancton's reservations. What the old confessor now said to me, about our theology today, probably reflected his own limitations. After all, he was four centuries removed from us. Yet what he had seen of our theology was a worthy enough sample. His *Book of Concord* stands cover to cover on my bookshelf with *The Brief Statement*, one of our favorites.

Our discussion of *The Brief Statement*, moreover, conformed to the rules: Schneeweiss is an ordained clergyman. (Count Bodo of Regenstein, on the other hand, would have been ineligible.) "Naturally," Schneeweiss winked, quoting *The Brief Statement* itself, "all Christians have the right and the duty to judge and decide matters of doctrine." "Naturally," I gulped. —So our con-

versation proceeded, whether in the mind or out of the mind I cannot say.

"I notice you assign first place," said Schneeweiss, "to the inerrancy of Scripture. And it is at this point that you vent your strongest language against your opponents. So it is here, I take it, that they are most in error?" "Error is right," I replied, "a 'horrible and blasphemous' error." "Nowhere else," continued Schneeweiss, "do you reproach your opponents quite so vehemently. Legalism, you say merely, is 'unchristian and foolish.' Self-justification and Unitarianism are 'postary from the Christian religion.' Denying God's grace is 'vicious.' Neglecting the means of grace is 'unchurchly.' But impugning the Bible's inerrancy, I gather, is worse than all these by far. You say of this error, not only that it is 'horrible and blasphemous,' but more: 'It flatly contradicts Christ and His holy apostles, sets up men as judges over the Word of God, and thus overthrows the foundation of the Christian Church and its faith.' " I acknowledged the quotation as being accurate. He waited for my explanation.

"Are you suggesting," I demanded of Schneeweiss, "that any heresy could be worse than the questioning of Scripture?" "No," he sighed, "all heresy is the worst. Every heresy, if it is that, is but a form of the worst heresy." "Then what, may I ask, is the worst heresy?" "My boy, you shouldn't have to ask that—unless, of course, you have a serious blind-spot." "Please answer the question," I snapped. Schneeweiss, without flinching, complied with a definition from Luther: "Heresy is anything which minimizes the benefits of Jesus Christ." I was silent.

"Surely now," Schneeweiss continued, "you do not find this definition strange? Not if you share our Confessions. Surely you have not forgotten why we labored so hard, for example, against merit-monging?" "Why, because it defies Scripture," I explained. "To be sure," he replied, "but we confessors at least found it necessary to say more than that: Merit-monging 'despises the merit and grace of Christ.' It 'robs pious consciences of the consolation offered them in Christ.' And surely you recall why we emphasized original sin?" "Because not to do so," I replied, "was unbiblical." "And", he added, "because not to do so was not to 'know the magnitude of the grace of Christ.' And surely you remember our charge

against the saint worshipers?" This I did remember, and so I quoted verbatim: "They do not even have proof from Scripture . . ." "But remember," said Schneeweiss, "how the passage continues: '. . . To put it mildly, even this obscures the work of Christ.'" Schneeweiss would have illustrated his theme even further—with infant baptism, Pelagianism, Manichaeism, the doctrine of the church, the Lord's Supper. But suddenly my memory came to my rescue. "Come to think of it," I said triumphantly, "this same theme of yours appears in our *Brief Statement* too, more than once." "Then may it be the theme," he said, "of the whole document, also of its article on Scripture."

"Our article on Scripture," I assured him, "does refer to Christ. In fact, that is why we oppose the impugners of Scripture: They 'flatly contradict Christ and His holy apostles.'" "Do you mean," the old pastor asked sadly, "That they contradict Christ's promises?" "That I don't know," I had to admit. "They must at least contradict the Law," he said. "I don't know that either." "Then what is it about Christ that you fear they contradict?" "They contradict His statement to the Pharisees, 'Scripture cannot be broken.'" "Ja, ja," said Schneeweiss, "our Lord did say that to the Pharisees. But why: Because He knew they would not want to deny it. They too agreed that Scripture cannot be broken." "Yet what our Lord proved to them," I countered, "was that they did indeed contradict Scripture." "Precisely," replied Schneeweiss, "and what was it in the Scripture that the Pharisees contradicted? They denied that according to the Scriptures He could be the Son of God, the Good Shepherd." "Nevertheless," I insisted, "they did contradict Scripture." "Sure, that was where their contradiction showed up, so that even they must see it. But where did their contradiction begin? It began when they denied their Messiah." "So?" I asked. "So with your biblioclasts today," Schneeweiss replied. "You claim they 'flatly contradict Christ and His apostles.' If so, they must be contradicting, first of all, Christ's benefits. And if that is their problem, then so far you've been treating merely their symptoms—the symptoms of a problem which may be troubling you as well."

"My dear Pastor Schneeweiss," I said, perhaps a bit too patronizingly. "You seem to have put the cart before the horse, at least as you describe our biblical troubles today." "Explain, please," he asked. "Well, the trouble with our biblioclasts," I explained,

"is not that they deny the Gospel of Christ. At least not yet they don't . . ." "But if they don't deny that," Schneeweiss broke in, "why do you say they 'overthrow the *foundation* of the Christian of the Christian Church and its faith?" "I was coming to that, before I was interrupted. What I was about to say was that our biblioclasts do overthrow the foundation of faith: They overthrow Scripture. Next thing you know, the whole building will collapse, including the Gospel of Christ. If they tamper with Genesis today, what is to keep them from Romans tomorrow?" "Oh no, my boy, what is to keep them *in* Romans and *in* Genesis is He who is there first: The Alpha and Omega. As he Himself said, 'They are they which testify of Me.'" "But," I replied, "we are 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.'" "Please finish the verse," said Schneeweiss. I did, sheepishly: "' . . . Christ Jesus Himself being the chief cornerstone.'" "Other foundation can no man lay . . .," Schneeweiss began, until I cut him off with "Yes, yes, I know." Whereupon he mumbled, "Cart before horse, indeed."

I must have appeared crestfallen, for immediately Schneeweiss reverted to his kindest tone. "My boy, your *Brief Statement's* article on Scripture does intimate that Scripture's cornerstone is Christ." "Merely intimates?" I asked sadly. "Well," he smiled, "the intimation requires a little research by the reader." Then he quoted me the sentence from *The Brief Statement*:

With the Confessions of our Church
we teach that the rule of faith
according to which the Scriptures are
to be understood are the clear passages
of the Scriptures themselves . . .

"I appreciate your encouragement," I said to Schneeweiss, "still I fail to see how this passage even intimates Christ." "Perhaps the passage could be a little more explicit," he conceded. "But what it does say, at least, is that our biblical understanding is ruled by the clear passages." "Clear passages, yes, but what about Christ," I asked. "Well now," he said, "if you check the *Apology*, where that hermeneutical rule is laid down, you will make an exciting discovery. You will find that 'the certain and clear passages,' there referred to, are passages about the benefits of Christ—justification by grace alone. Those are the passages which rule our understand-

ing of Scripture." "I would have thought," said I, cheering up, "that the 'clear passages' were just those passages which are logically lucid and vivid." "I used to think so, too. But see, my boy, how tenaciously Christ-centered and grace-centered the Confessions are, even in their hermeneutics. Scriptures are clear when they are clear about Christ, the gracious Justifier. Anything else is not only contrary to Christ, but, as the *Apology* says, contrary to the Scriptures—*contra Scripturas!*"

When I looked at my watch and mentioned I had to be leaving, Schneeweiss said he had hoped to raise some additional points, not only about Scripture, but even about justification, law and gospel—yes, especially about law and gospel. But when he heard I was leaving for Springfield, he was consoled. "My fellow-confessors down there," he assured me, "will pick you up where I've left off."