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The Doctrine of Biblical Authority in the Theology of Henry Eyster Jacobs

C. George Fry and John M. Drickamer

As Lutheranism enters the 1980's some theologians are already suggesting that the denominational "battle for the Bible" waged with such fervor in the 1970's was really a "departure from mainstream classical Protestantism." These scholars contend that "the Scripture ruckus" was caused either by "the importation of Fundamentalism into Lutheranism" or else it was "a peculiar distortion wrought by modern Missouri." Such opinions could hardly be further from the truth. Lest this view gain undue credence, we believe it is helpful to indicate that Lutheranism, when it has been true to its tradition, has always had a high regard for the Scriptures as the Word of God. Such a conviction, furthermore, was, in former times, not limited primarily to the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. It was nearly universal among America's Lutheran bodies. An illustration of this thesis can be found by looking at the doctrine of Biblical authority in the theology of Henry Eyster Jacobs, a major Lutheran theologian of the start of this century, who had no organic connection with either of the Midwest Lutheran Synods that today uphold a "high view" of the Bible.

Henry Eyster Jacobs (1844-1932) was one of the most eminent theologians of the English-speaking Lutheran Church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ Born in 1844, into a pastor's home (Michael Jacobs, his father, was a professor at Pennsylvania College), Henry Eyster Jacobs graduated from Gettysburg Seminary, served congregations in Pennsylvania, and then, from 1883 until his death in 1932 served as a Professor, and then Dean, at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mt. Airy, Philadelphia. Editor of the *Lutheran Church Review* (1882-1896), *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, the *Works of Martin Luther*, and *The Lutheran Commentary*, Jacobs also wrote prolifically on a variety of topics — historical (as *Martin Luther, the Hero of the Reformation*), systematic (as *A Summary of the Christian Faith*), and exegetical (as his commentaries on Romans, I and II Corinthians, and Galatians). While Jacobs can be read for profit (and pleasure) on a variety of topics, it is especially instructive, during the current "Battle for the Bible,"² to review what he said

concerning the Sacred Scriptures. Since Jacobs was not by any means a child of Missouri or Wisconsin, but stemmed from the General Synod (later General Council, and, later still, the early United Lutheran Church in America), it is helpful to compare his understanding of Biblical authority with that of Missouri and Wisconsin today. Since it is similar, then we must conclude a high view of Scripture was part of historic Lutheran Confessionalism.

Early in his systematics, *A Summary of the Christian Faith*, Henry Eyster Jacobs takes up "The Word as the Means of Grace." Quoting Dr. Martin Luther, he states:

The soul can do without everything except the Word of God . . . But you will ask: 'What is this Word, and by what means is it to be used, since there are so many words of God?' I answer that the Apostle Paul explains what it is, namely, the Gospel of God concerning His Son, incarnate, suffering, risen, glorified.³

In this fashion, Jacobs takes up the problem of the definition of the term "the Word of God."

In the Sacred Scriptures the expression, "the Word of God," can have at least four different but related meanings:⁴

1. The phrase, "the Word of God," can refer to the means of God's power in creation. For instance, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes the creation of the universe as follows (11:3):

By faith we understand that the world was created by the Word of God, so that which is seen was made out of things which do no appear.

The same usage appears in the Second Letter of Peter where we read (3:5-7):

They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the Word of God heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same Word the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment . . .

In both these passages the term "the Word of God" refers to the means of the Almighty's creative and providential power.

2. The phrase, "the Word of God," is used at least twice in the Scriptures to designate a Person, Jesus Christ. St. John, in both his First Letter and his Gospel, calls Jesus the Word. We read almost identical language in the introductory verses of each work (I John 1:1,2; John 1:1,2,14):

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life — the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us . . .

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through Him . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

In both these passages the term “the Word of God” refers to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ.

3. The phrase, “the Word of God,” can refer to the means of the application of salvation to the individual. Thus, St. Peter, speaking before the Jerusalem Council of the Church, could declare (Acts 15:7):

Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the Word of the Gospel and believe.

And Paul, who was present on that occasion, could write to the church at Colossae as follows (Col. 1:5,6):

Of this you have heard before in the Word of the Truth, the Gospel, which has come to you, and indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing . . .

In both contexts the expression “the Word” implies both God’s promises in the Gospel and God’s power to make them real for us in conversion and regeneration.

4. The phrase, “the Word of God,” however, most frequently is used to refer to the Bible. In his characterization of the traits of a pastor, St. Paul specified that (Titus 1:9):

. . . he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it.

Again, in his “High Priestly Prayer,” Jesus asked of the Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; thy Word is truth” (John 17:17). And in his history of the Church, St. Luke observed that “the Word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Beroea” and that “they received the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:13,11). For this reason, a twentieth century American Lutheran theologian, Dr. John R. Lavik, could write:

The Church is simply following the example of the prophet, and of Jesus and His apostles, when it designates the Bible as the Word of God.⁵

Or, as Dr. Jacobs noted, "There is deep significance in the fact that the title of 'the Word' is given both to Christ . . . and to the Bible . . ."⁶

That significance becomes obvious once we see that the four definitions of "the Word of God" really describe four dimensions of one dynamic process. Jesus Christ is the *Personal* Word of God, the second member of the Holy Trinity, the Eternal Son of the Living God. The Scriptures, which are the biography of Jesus Christ (by anticipation, by proclamation, and by retrospection), are the *Written* Word of God. Christ is present in and with the Scriptures as He is present in and with the word and water of Holy Baptism. Christ is in the canon, and it is God's Word for us. When the Scriptures are read, taught, or preached, we do meet Christ. The power of the Master is active in our lives (symbolized in Lutheran Churches by the act of standing when the Holy Gospel is read during the Service). Then the Bible is *the Word of God at work*. When this Word is received, the promises of the Gospel are "internalized" for an individual, and Christ "lives in him." A power is let loose in his life that alters him for both time and eternity and makes him resemble the Master in his mind, manners, and morals. In this way the Bible is *the Saving Word of God*.

By the term, "the Word of God," we mean, therefore, a Person and His promises and power which result in salvation. For us this Person, Jesus Christ, comes through the means of grace, the Written Word. Apart from the Scriptures we have no saving knowledge of God. It is His purpose to come to us in this "interim age" not immediately, or directly, but mediately, or through "means." Together with Baptism and the Supper, the Book is a means of this coming. So there is the Incarnate Word, Jesus; the Written or Inscripturated Word, the Bible; the Inculcated Word in the preaching-teaching-study of the Bible; and the Incorporated Word, "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3) sustaining our faith.

Dr. Henry Eyster Jacobs believed that the Holy Scriptures were "inspired" through "the activity of the Holy Spirit in and through the writers when they were written." Then, quoting his predecessor, the venerable Dr. Charles Porterfield Krauth, he continued:

[Scripture] is inspired or it comes from God; it is human for it comes through man. But remember we do not say that the human is without the divine. The Spirit is incarnate in the Word, as the Son was incarnate in Christ. There is deep significance in the fact that the title of 'the Word' is given both to the Christ, the Revealer, and to the Bible, the revelation of God, so that in some passages great critics differ as to which is meant. As Christ without confusion of natures, is truly human as well as divine, so is this Word. As the human in Christ though distinct from the divine was never separate from it, and His human acts were never those of a merely human being, His merits and His blood were those of God, so is the written Word, though most human of books, as Christ, the Son of Man, was most human of men, truly divine. Its humanities are no accidents; they are divinely planned. It is essential to God's conception of this Book that it shall be written by these men and in this way. He created, reared, made and chose these men and inspired them to do this thing, in their way, because their way was His way.⁷

And so we have moved beyond a definition of the term, "the Word of God," and our identification of the Bible as God's Word, to the problems of inspiration and revelation.

By "inspire" is meant literally "to fill with the Spirit of God." The term means "to breathe in" the spirit of another, in this instance, that of the Deity. By "revelation" is meant "divine self-disclosure." Various expressions are used in English for "revelation," trying to convey the full meaning of the Greek and Latin originals. They imply such ideas as "to draw back a curtain," or "to unveil oneself," or "to disclose one's identity." Revelation is the process by which God appears openly to men. According to the Scriptures, this communication climaxed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and is now, therefore, completed and closed until the second coming of the Lord. The last book of the Bible, the Revelation of St. John the Divine concludes with words that apply specifically to that volume, but, as a principle about the exclusive right of God to speak for Himself, also to the whole Bible (Rev. 22:18,19):

I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book; if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

There is, for this reason, no continuing revelation (*revelatio continuata*). Since the end of the apostolic era, God works only indirectly, or mediately, through means, not directly, or immediately, in confrontation. For that reason, the church cannot regard any subsequent Christian as a legitimate prophet, any more than it can accept Muhammad as a prophet.

Dr. Jacobs quotes from various authorities at length in his treatment of the inspiration, revelation, and preservation of the Scriptures. For instance, he cites Christoph Ernst Luthardt, who in his *Glaubenslehre*, had said:

How marvelous is the harmony between the beginning and the end of Holy Scripture, from the creation of the heavens and the earth, to the new heaven and the new earth of the world to come! And the entire course from the beginning to that end is a great, progressive, and connected whole. Notwithstanding the different ages in which they were written, the diverse relations and circumstances, the varieties in station and culture of their writers, one thought pervades all, from beginning to end there is but one purpose.⁸

Again, Luthardt, writing in his *Saving Truths of Christianity*, said:

They who wrote the several parts often knew nothing of each other; they knew nothing of that whole for which they were laboring. Neither accident nor human intention brought this to pass, but a higher Spirit. Scripture is a wonderful structure — a structure for which there must have been an architect. It is the ruling mind that knows how to utilize and combine individual efforts.⁹

The Swabian exegete, Johann Albrecht Bengel, observed:

Not only are the various writings, when considered separately, worthy of God, but they together exhibit one complete and harmonious body, unimpaired by excess or defects.¹⁰

Again, the American theologian, Charles Porterfield Krauth, asked:

Why take many lutes and pipes, unless revelation were designed to be symphony as well as melody, whose unity should not be that of the simple string, but that by which the Great Composer pours His own divine spirit of music into many parts, whilst wind and touch on instruments faithful to their own nature unite in 'Creation' or 'Messiah' to form what is at once truly theirs, and, because such, truly His?¹¹

And lest this all seem exclusively Lutheran, Jacobs quotes St. Jerome: "Tota Scriptura sacra unus liber dicitur, quia uno

Spiritu scripta est" ("All of Holy Scripture is called one book because it was written by one Spirit").

Jacobs believed that the Holy Spirit, who was active in the incarnation of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible, also guided the preservation of the Bible. The indestructibility of the Word was assured by its authorship: "The Word of the Lord abideth forever" (I Peter 1:25). Since the true church is "the circle of humanity within which God inwardly dwells," and since that fellowship has the promise individually and collectively that Christ will ever be with it (Matthew 18:20), Jacobs taught that the Blessed Trinity presided over the preservation of Scripture in the church through the centuries. As Jacobs wrote:

Spirit and Word, or Word and Spirit are never separated. But the elementary stages in their joint work are the basis for their gifts in ampler measure. Through the impulse, therefore, of the Holy Spirit, working by the Word, first in the individual believer, and then uniting all in manifold testimonies conspiring to one end, there is a concurrence of numberless factors to results far above the intentional effort of any one when he wrote.¹²

Jacobs also taught that the same Triune God who had presided over the revelation, inspiration, and preservation of the Sacred Scriptures, also took care concerning their interpretation. In this connection, Jacobs asked: "What, then, is the supreme test of the claims of Scripture, or of any portion or book of Scriptures?" He answered:

Not literary-historical criticism, but the religious use of Scripture, i.e., its office and fruits as a Means of Grace. For if literary-historical criticism were the supreme test, then only the limited few who would have access to historical sources and would have the requisite literary training, could be judges. In view of constant progress in the collection of new sources of information and the adoption of improved scientific methods, each generation successively would discredit the results of those before it. The criticism of the beginning of the Twentieth Century will be an anachronism before the next century opens. But the test is to be made by the humblest of men. The Word of God and its inerrant record are not simply for the aristocracy of science but are intended for all. 'Erudition has never had the key to the Kingdom of Heaven' (Tischendorf). Scholar and peasant, the most cultivated and the most illiterate, meet here on an even footing. It is a radical error to elevate men who have no

higher than linguistic attainments to the chair of judges in regard to the real meaning and purpose of Scripture. As unquestioned attainments in the study of the English language and literature do not qualify one to be a critic and interpreter of Blackstone's Commentaries or of a treatise on physics or mathematics, or scientific music written in English; as even more than ability to read and write English with facility is necessary in order to interpret the masterpieces of English prose and poetry; so one may know Hebrew like the Rabbis of old, or Greek like the philosophers who heard Paul on the Areopagus, without being a competent judge concerning the Old or New Testament. Three qualifications are required of every competent translator, *viz* . . . knowledge of the languages from which he translates, knowledge of the language into which he translates, and familiarity with the subject that is treated. The most advanced authority in Semitic or Aryan philology can not assume to be a very successful interpreter of such treatises, deciphered from those languages, as are of a technical character. The jurist will have to aid him in regard to legal translations, and modern medical science in regard to the primitive beginnings of its branches found in the documents which he indeed must translate. As soon as he passes beyond the limits of his own calling as a philologist, he loses his standing as a scholar. Nowhere is the classical rule, *Ne sutor supra crepidam*, more pertinent than in Biblical Criticism.¹³

We see, then, that for Henry Eyster Jacobs the Sacred Scriptures were produced by the Holy Spirit, penned by men who received divine revelation in a number of ways, and preserved under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to make all people "wise unto salvation" through the proclamation of the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, for evangelical theologians such as Jacobs the Bible truly is the Word of God.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Gerhard E. Lenski, "Henry Eyster Jacobs," *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, edited by Julius Bodensieck (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), II, 1168; Anon., "H.E. Jacobs," *The Concordia Cyclopedia*, edited by L. Fuerbringer, Theodore Engelder, and P.E. Kretzmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1927), p. 371; Anon., "Henry Eyster Jacobs," *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, edited by Erwin L. Lueker (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 527; H. Offermann,

"Henry Eyster Jacobs, the Theologian and His Theology," *Lutheran Church Quarterly* VI, 1-27; 220-224; B. Lotz, "Henry Eyster Jacobs (1844-1932) in Retrospect," *Lutheran Church Quarterly* XVIII, 382-393. See also Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Memoirs: Notes on a Life of a Churchman*, edited by Henry E. Horn (Huntington, Pennsylvania: Church Management Service, Inc., 1974), 3 vols.; John A. W. Haas, et. al., *Theological Studies, Dedicated to Henry Eyster Jacobs on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1924), and Henry Eyster Horn, "A Jacobs Trilogy," *The Lutheran Historical Conference: Essays and Reports, 1974* (St. Louis: Lutheran Historical Conference, 1977) 46-59.

2. This term is from the book by Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).
3. Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: The Board of Publication of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America, 1905), p. 267.
4. See C. George Fry, *A Book About the Bible* (Columbus: Hathaway Printing Company, 1971), pp. 11ff.
5. John R. Lavik, *The Bible is the Word of God* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), p. 16.
6. Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith*, p. 267.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 268, 269. While this analogy with the Incarnation may be helpful, no human cooperation with inspiration is to be imagined. Synergism would be as much an error in the doctrine of inspiration as it is in the doctrine of conversion. See Franz Pieper, "Der Synergismus in der Lehre von der Inspiration," *Lehre und Wehre* 38 (July 1892), 193-198.
8. Jacobs, *A Summary of the Christian Faith*, pp. 268-269.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 274-275.