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Saving Faith and the Inerrancy of Scripture

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IN OUR DAY, as never before perhaps, Christian theology is in tension between two tasks: to be loyal to the Word as given in Holy Scripture and to be sensitive in a responsible sort of way to all truth, wherever and however it is found. It is the posture of Christian faith to draw all knowledge obediently under the God of the Bible, to place it under the light that God's Word affords.

It is hardly a secret that Holy Scripture has come under severe scrutiny, if not to say attack, in the last couple of centuries—not only on the part of its avowed foes, but also at the hands of its erstwhile friends, some of whom still claim considerable respect for it. This latter ambivalence has occasioned considerable stir and unrest in the churches and among Christians generally. Specifically it involves Scripture's identity as the Word of God. Seldom is Scripture's inspiration denied outright. Rather it is a question of the exact meaning and nature of this inspiration. Is it absolute in scope and extent, thus covering the very words of Scripture; or is it relative, limited to the content, especially the saving message, of Scripture? The neuralgic point, to be more precise still, is this: Is the Scripture absolutely infallible, or inerrant? The battle for the Bible lies here, after all is said and done.

Christian faith feels itself under attack whenever the Scripture comes under fire in any way. It is not a case of stripping away its Lord. No assault can bring that off against a faith which is beyond reach in the believer's heart and stands firm on God's foundation. God not only has given His Word of promise on this point, but has also placed His seal on the believers, so that they are His (2 Tim. 2: 19).

God's Word is self-attesting, self-vindicating. The believer knows and believes this; and yet he rises and reacts whenever the Scriptural Word is maligned, mutilated, emasculated at the hands of men. He refuses to kowtow before the attackers, no matter how intense the vilification, which now is turned upon him. "Legalist," "obscurantist," "biblicist," "intellectualist," "antedeluvian," "bibliolatrist," "anti-intellectual"—the pejoratives go on almost without end. But name-calling—while unpleasant to the victim—fails really to score. The only danger ultimately comes when the Church itself, and those in it, have given up the battle-cry emblazoned on its banner, the gegraptai, "It is written." Christ sounded this cry against Satan; and the Christian church and all Christians need to sound it against all their foes, beginning with Satan, chief artificer of all attacks on God's Holy Word.

The implication, therefore, is that saving faith has a care for the treatment given Holy Scripture, its inspiration, its inerrancy. Whether a sinner can come to faith, live, and die without explicitly treating this whole matter, is not the issue. Saving faith, as we shall note, has a

very narrow focus. Certain things are very fundamental, if a man is to be saved; and mutatis mutandis other things may be quite peripheral for salvation itself. Here the principle, which is applicable in law, lex non curat de minimis, may be seen as spinning over into theology as well. Paul's answer to the troubled jailer at Philippi is very brief and right on target, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16: 31). But even as in law, so also in theology, the time may come when the very details, the minimal matters of evidence, or testimony, may be very vital to the whole case. There is such connection between saving faith and Scripture's nature, specifically its infallible, inerrant quality.

It will be well, first of all, to note carefully what belongs to saving faith; and, then, secondly to treat the inerrancy of Scripture in proper perspective to such faith.

I. SAVING FAITH AND THE FAITH

Saving faith is the reliance of the heart on Christ, on the redemption that is in Him, by the grace of God, freely, without any merits on our part; for God set forth Christ to be the propitiation for all men's sin, that in Him all men might be justified. For this reason the Apostle Paul attests that God is the justifier of each sinner who believes in Christ, whom He gave for our righteousness, the righteousness which is ours, not by works, but by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3: 21-28).

So, by imputation, our sins are upon Christ, His righteousness is upon us; there is now reconciliation before God (2 Cor. 5: 19ff.). This the sinner believes; and by his faith he is justified, even as Abraham, and all believers before or after (Rom. 4:3). Whether described as knowledge (Jn. 17:3; Lk. 1; 77; Gal. 4:9), or as assent (Jn. 3: 36; 5: 46), or as trust (Jn. 3: 16,36; Gal. 2: 16; Mk. 1: 15), faith in each case denotes reliance on Christ, who alone is the proper object of faith which saves.

This was the key doctrine of the Reformation, "that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins," for it is the Scripture's central and great teaching that "this faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight" (Augsburg Confession, IV).

The believer's conversion has its source only in God and His power through His saving Word, the Gospel. By nature all men are dead in sin and under God's wrath (Eph. 2: 1ff.), thus incapable of any spiritual awakening by themselves (1 Cor. 2: 14; Rom. 8: 7). But where man is incapable, God is capable and powerful. With the thundering of the Law, God smashes all pretension of righteousness on man's part (Acts 16: 29,30; Ps. 38: 5; Ezra 9: 6; Gal. 3: 10,19; Rom. 3: 20; 4: 15; 7: 7; 2 Cor. 3: 6); and with His sweet Gospel He comforts, consoles, quickens, regenerates, converts (Eph. 2: 5; Acts 11: 21; Col. 2: 12; 1 Jn. 5: 1). "Faith is kindled in us in conversion by the Holy Ghost from the hearing of the Gospel" (FC III, 41). It is in the nature of such faith that it trusts the Gospel, God's forgiveness

alone through Christ, and this alone (Mk. 1: 15; Rom. 1: 15,16; Acts 16: 31; 15: 11; Rom. 4: 24; 10: 9; 2 Cor. 5: 19ff.). Therefore, other things, like the Law, or indeed also the entire Scriptures, are not saving faith's object, but the Gospel only. God teaches this plainly in His Holy Word. The faith in the sinner's heart which lays hold of God's grace in Christ is saving faith, fides qua creditur, the faith by which a person believes and is saved. "Preaching the Word," therefore, says Luther, is "preaching faith." It is Holy Scripture which cradles this saving message, and "Holy Scripture, especially the New Testament, always inculcates faith in Christ and magnificently proclaims Him," avers Luther.

Saving faith, however, also relies fully upon God in all His other promises, too. That God will keep him faithfully and securely, the believer does not doubt (John 10); nor that God will finally take him to Himself in heaven (Jn. 14: 2); and that Christ will come again in glory (Jn. 14: 3; Acts 1: 11; 17: 31).

The blessings of saving faith are very real; by it the believer comes into possession of all the blessings Christ has procured for him: to come into the state of grace and peace coram Deo (Rom. 5: 1ff.; 8: 38,39; 1 Cor. 1: 8,9); to be joined with His God in the mystical union, whereby God dwells in him, and he in God (Eph. 3: 17; Jn. 14: 23; 1 Cor. 3: 16; 16: 19); to be fruitful in many good works and holiness of life (Rom. 7: 5,6; 2 Cor. 3: 6; Gal. 2: 20); to walk in the liberty with which Christ has made him free from the Law's curse, penalty, dominion, coercion (Rom. 8: 1; Gal. 5: 1; Col. 2: 16f.; 1 Cor. 7: 23; Rom. 6: 14); and to be numbered with all saints in the Christian Church, Christ's holy body (Eph. 1: 23; 5: 25f.; Acts 4: 4; Rom. 12: 5; 8: 15-17).

It is also in the nature of saving faith that it trusts God's Word in every way, in every part, and yearns to be taught of God (Jn. 6: 45). It does not quibble concerning the content of the faith as given by God in His Word but hears him gladly and obediently, in a servant-like posture (Acts 6: 7; Jude 3; 2 Tim. 2: 13; Ps. 33: 4). What a Christian believes turns on Scripture's complete teaching, that is, on all that is offered there for faith's acceptance. These articles and matters of belief, fides quae creditur (the faith which is believed), are not an uncertain thing. God's Word is clear in laying all these matters before the Christian's heart. They do not stand independently but are joined intimately with saving faith that trusts in Christ and His forgiveness (fides qua creditur), and faith readily gives its assent to all that God teaches in Holy Scripture, simply because it is His Word. Scripture, says Luther, is the Holy Spirit's lyre, and with it He melts icy hearts, turning them to faith, and with it gently draws assent to all of His sacred teaching.4 Jesus urged no other view when He reminded His opponents of their need to "search the Scriptures" (Jn. 5: 39).

Luther's defense of Holy Scripture's clarity was one of the hall-marks of the Reformation. On the basis of passages like Deut. 17: 8; Ps. 19: 8; Ps. 119: 130; Is. 8: 20; Rom. 1 and 2 Cor. 3-4; 2 Pet. 1: 19; Jn. 8: 12; 9: 5; Phil. 2: 15-16, Luther asked: "Does not all this prove that the apostles, like Christ Himself, appealed to Scripture

as the clearest witness to the truth of what they were saying?" "If Scripture is obscure or equivocal," Luther went on, "why need it have been brought down to us by act of God?" He cites the key verse 2 Tim. 3: 16 and asks: "How then shall the apostle's word stand, 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction'?"

Scripture, specifically its clarity, is the reason why contention over Scripture's meaning is so wrong and so ungodly, for God did not increase the darkness and obscurity in men's minds by His precious Word. "All the articles which Christians hold should be both fully certain to themselves, and also supported against opponents by such plain and clear Scriptures as to stop all their mouths, so that they can say nothing in reply. This was the burden of Christ's promise to us, 'I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries shall not be able to resist."

"Carping obstructionism" was Luther's word for Erasmus' clever dodge in emphasizing that "Christ crucified should rather be preached," while at the same time he was ready to let other doctrines go and let Scripture be labeled as obscure in many places and on many things. Indeed, I preach Christ crucified first and foremost, was Luther's rejoinder. "But"—and it was a big but—"Christ crucified brings all these doctrines with Him."

Luther had a strong, persistent concern for all that Holy Scripture taught, for the *fides quae creditur*, simply because it was God's Holy Word. Never a Bible literalist who ignored Scripture's own hermeneutical rules for interpretation, Luther nevertheless can be said to have truly lived out of the content of Scripture. Never was it for him a collection merely of words for reading, but always words for living, as God intended. It was, indeed, the Holy Spirit's lyre which "makes us Christians," and the God-given source by which all articles of faith "must be given and revealed from heaven . . . otherwise they are not articles of faith." 10

It is in the same context that Luther comes down hard and clear on the divine purity of doctrine, because it is given of God and can, therefore, suffer no intrusion of error and no twisting by men.¹¹ Because Holy Writ is the touchstone given by God for all teaching, therefore agreement on all articles of faith is an absolute sine qua non; for, whatever the article or doctrine—the Holy Trinity, Christ's deity, the two natures in Christ, Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament, infant baptism, the creation of the world, justification by faith, the distinction between Law and Gospel, Scripture's own unique authority, inspiration, and absolutely infallible, inerrant nature, etc.—God has spoken clearly through the prophetic and apostolic Word, so that there dare be no quibble as to His meaning.¹²

Not the clever interpreter, therefore, but the faithful, attentive, obedient listener is what Scripture asks for in everyone who handles it, especially the preacher. To Luther, as it should be to every heir of the Reformation, it was simply inconceivable that a preacher use his pulpit for anything else than to say firmly, *Haec dixit Dominus*. Because God gave the Word, and all the teachings it contains, all of which are absolutely pure and beyond reproach, Luther rightly in-

sisted that "a preacher should neither pray the Lord's Prayer nor ask for forgiveness of sins when he has preached." This assertion was absolutely in tune with the apostolic injunction so beautifully and fully laid out in Paul's second epistle to Timothy from first word to last.

II. SCRIPTURE'S INERRANCY AND SAVING FAITH

Faith in Christ is the only way unto salvation, as both Old and New Testaments of Scripture attest. Only God's Gospel works such faith. Thus only where the Word is can there be faith. It is inseparably tied to the saving revelation which God has given concerning Himself and His saving purposes through Christ. Human knowledge and experience can in no way contribute to saving faith; here only the fundamental truths revealed by God Himself can avail, both in enlightening and in converting the sin-darkened hearts of men. Thus, it is a knowledge and conviction, or trust, which God alone can work. It is self-evident that such faith can exist even though some doctrines taught in Scripture are not known, or are even denied. Faith in Scripture's inerrancy, or in statements of Scripture that deal with historical, geographic, and other secondary matters, is not of the essence in the believer's status coram Deo. Christian theology has rightly distinguished among the articles of faith that there are secondary fundamental articles (Baptism, Lord's Supper, etc.) or nonfundamental (creation, angels, etc.) which must be seen as not essential to saving faith in and of themselves. However and at the same time, it is in the nature of saving faith that it trusts God in all His promises and relies on His Word in all that it teaches. Accordingly, what a Christian believes with regard to the whole counsel of God as taught in Holy Scriptures (fides quae creditur) does not stand independently but is intimately joined with the faith by which the sinner lays hold of the forgiveness of sins won for mankind by Christ's vicarious satisfaction (fides qua creditur). This is not to say that the one is complemented or completed by the other; but it is to say that saving faith inevitably results also in trust of all that God has spoken through his chosen apostles and prophets. The Christian believes these truths:

- 1) The Holy Scriptures, from which he has learned to know God's saving Word concerning the redemption which is in Christ, his Savior, are also the absolutely reliable source of all other doctrines or articles of faith. In framing articles of faith, Luther stated, "the rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel" (SA II, II, 15). The context indicates indubitably that the Reformer has the Scriptural Word in mind.
- 2) Worship in the church should at every point be guided by Holy Scripture. "Neither is it safe," avers Melanchthon, "without the authority of Scripture, to institute forms of worship in the church" (Apol. XXIV, 92). Luther concurs completely in this judgment (SA II, II, 8).
- 3) The church, particularly the called pastors, must have a care that "the Word of God [be] preached purely and truly, according to the command and will of God" (FC, SD, II, 55).

- 4) The Law and Gospel can only be rightly and properly distinguished—as indeed at all times they must be—when God's Word [is] rightly divided, and the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles [are] properly explained and understood" (FC, SD, V, 1).
- 5) Nothing else, not even the Symbols or Confessions, are judges, "as are the Holy Scriptures," in establishing teaching within the church and for judging all teaching and teachers (FC, Epit., Preface, 8), for they alone, the Holy Scriptures, are "the pure, clear fountain of Israel," which God has given to the church for this purpose (FC, SD, Comprehensive Summary, 1-13).
- 6) The Word of God is the sanctuary above all sanctuaries, yea, the only one which we Christians know and have . . . the treasure which sanctifies everything . . . at whatever hour [it] is taught, preached, heard, read, or meditated upon . . . [because] all our life and work must be ordered according to God's Word, if it is to be God-pleasing or holy" (LC I, 91f.).

The whole matter of Scripture's inerrancy impinges upon the Scripture's unique character and quality as the inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 3: 16; 2 Pet. 1: 19-21), and upon the fact that Scripture attests, and, so, also proves that it never errs, is deceitful, or wrong (2 Tim. 3: 16; John 10: 35). At times it is claimed that this is a deduction drawn from the fact of Scripture's inspiration. If so, then it is a necessary one, implicit in the very nature of God's Word. But the position expressed by Jesus in John 10: 35, concerning the fact that Scripture cannot be broken, even to the extent of one point or one word, is a sustained theme that runs through all of the Scriptural Word, and hence not mere implication, but clear avowal! Thus inerrancy, like inspiration, is Scripture's teaching concerning itself and no deduction.

For the Christian, the whole epistemological problem of knowing God and His divine purposes is a settled one. He does not proceed aimlessly or independently of God's revelation as given in Scripture. Nor does he expect or await a "marriage" between this revelation and the finer insights of independently working human philosophy. Aquinas sought such synthesis, as have countless other divines, and failed. In time, through the influence of Kant and Hegel, a dialectical synthesis in the search of truth was widely accepted as the true and only fountain of all knowledge. But it, too, failed to square with reality and mankind's existential needs, as did logical positivism with its vaunted reliance upon empirical, demonstrated fact and experience. The same can be said for existentialistic philosophy which discards the emphasis on rational process and urges the non-rational leap of faith in the quest for meaning in life as something that is to be lived rather than thought or communicated. Even more pathetic were the efforts of linguistic analysis which proposed that man find truth and meaning by searching for ethical values in life through a kind of linguistic fission or word-event.

It was Luther's and the Reformation's accent that God must be taken and known there where He approaches and makes Himself

known to man, and, as Luther pointed out, God "does not manifest Himself except through His works and the Word." He dealt with the patriarchs more directly and yet always under a given "covering," or "veil" (larva Dei). Later He deigned to make Himself known through the Word which He gave and recorded in written form through His chosen prophets and apostles. "It is therefore insane," states Luther, "to argue about God and the divine nature without the Word or any covering (like Baptism, or the Lord's Supper), as all the heretics are accustomed to do"; and, accordingly, "those who want to reach God apart from these coverings exert themselves to ascend to heaven without ladders" (that is, without the Word), while God all the while is beckoning them to His Word, saying: "Look! Under this wrapper you will be sure to take hold of Me." "14"

Scripture's divine origin is a matter that is central in its own witness and absolutely essential in Christian theology's witness about it. "It is the Holy Spirit's Book," as Luther rightly put it; and without fear of being accused of a kind of mechanical view of inspiration, he bluntly stated that "Holy Scripture did not grow here on earth." It was God who gave it and, therefore, to speak of "dictation," or "amanuenses," or "mouthpieces," was quite in tune with Scripture itself in its accounting for the manner of the Word's origin (Matt. 1:22; Acts 1: 16; Is. 59: 21; 2 Sam. 23: 2; Jer. 1: 4,9). To fight against Scripture was to fight against God's Word, in Luther's book; for he stood by what Jesus said in John 10:35, and not with the denials of Christ's opponents.

Scriptural inerrancy is the key not only to Scripture's divine status but to the church's spiritual strength as well; for the church that denies that Scripture is God's inerrant Word is not only unworthy of Him but is a weak and feeble institution. Luther's critics are legion (e.g., Aulen, Althaus, Barth) because of his readiness to identify Holy Scripture with the Word of God itself and to be bound by its text. But that was Luther's stance. Even as he stood by the words, hoc est meum corpus, so he also pointed unequivocally to Holy Scripture to say, hoc est Verbum Dei. He would have little truck with Barth's evasive bibliology which places the Word beyond man's reach by stating that the Scriptures are a witness to the Word only, and that they become the Word only at the point where and when God wills that His word find me, for the Word is always above and beyond the written text itself and in no way identifiable with it.

The effect of such a view of Scripture in our day has been devastating. No longer can anyone claim that it is a mere petty strife over words. God's truth and His church are threatened as to their very life and existence, although we can rest on His promise that none of these forces of evil shall finally destroy either of them. But for the sake of blood-bought souls clinging to God's Word in Holy Scripture concerning their Savior, the church must recognize the gravity of the attack on Scripture. When Scripture is described as a medley or composite of divine and human elements, of truth and error, then the Good News itself, the Gospel, is no longer safe. No one then can say how far inspiration extends, since God has not given a special revelation about it. Each interpreter becomes a law unto himself. "The

criterion lies within ourselves," we are told, "in the response of our own spirit to the spirit that utters itself in the Scriptures," and that, in turn, is described as the devout spirit and temper that existed within the composers of Scripture itself (J. S. Semler).

When Christians piously gather for worship, therefore—"Blessed Jesus, at Thy Word We are gathered all to hear Thee . ."—they must know that it is "the broader context," "the whole of Scripture," for which they are to look, rather than for specific teachings based upon specific passages of Scripture, alleged to be inerrant and absolutely definitive, says the modern critic. From the days of Schleiermacher the quoting of individual Bible verses has been looked upon not only as bookish, but dangerous to the faith and the "spirit" of the so-called "Word."

Luther's slavish dependence upon the text has been severely scored, as might be expected (e.g., on verses like Ps. 119: 16; 1 Sam. 3: 10; 1 Tim. 6: 3; Jn. 6: 68; 1 Pet. 4: 11; Rom. 1: 1; 6: 22; 16: 18,19). The Christian knows, however, that if this is a bondage, then it is a blessed bondage, and, in fact, a true freedom; for there is no word more sure than God's Word. No doctrine of Scripture is safe, not faith itself, if God's Word is doubted. When faith has no sure, pure fountain from which to drink, the "Scripture" of the higher critic becomes a poisonous potion of uncertainty and terrible delusion.

Can a man base his hope of salvation upon fallible men and their judgment? Can "experts" decide Scripture's meaning and the extent of inspiration? Will that posture not eventually lead to the undermining of the people's faith, the deposing of Scripture's authority and the imposing of man's? How can that be squared with 2 Timothy 3:16?

Our sinful flesh is only too ready to listen to every challenge of God's Word, to interpose a "Yea hath God said?" with every "Haec dixit dominus." But should we not rather be affirming the apostolic word that "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning" (Rom. 15: 4) and should we not be learning a proper regard for and fear of stumbling at God's Word (1 Pet. 2: 6-8)?

It was not without good reason that Luther placed the whole matter concerning Scripture's divinely inspired nature in close parallel with the personal union of natures in Christ, stating:

The Holy Scripture is the Word of God, written and (as I might say) lettered and formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God cloaked in human flesh. And just as Christ was dealt with and handled by the world [in der Welt gehalten und gehandelt], so is the written Word of God too.¹⁷

For an equally good reason, and drawing on Luther's thoughts, Walther expressed the position on Scripture which is most attuned to its own witness and most in line with the faithful Christian's own confidence, when he wrote:

Dr. Luther writes in his Large Confession with reference to Zwingli's alloeosis: "Beware, beware, I say, of the alloeosis! For it is the devil's mask." . . . We must apply this to the so-called

Gottmenschlichkeit der Schrift (the divine-human nature of Scripture) as the term is used by modern-conservative theology: Beware, beware, I say, of this "divine-human" Scripture! It is a devil's mask; for at last it manufactures such a Bible after which I certainly would not care to be a Bible Christian, namely, that Bible should henceforth be no more than any other good book, a book which I would have to read with constant sharp discrimination in order not to be led into error. For if I believe this, that the Bible contains also errors, it is to me no longer a touchstone but itself stands in need of one. In a word, it is unspeakable what the devil seeks with this "divine-human" Scripture . . . O God, have mercy upon poor Christendom in these last troubled, dangerous times! 18

The Christian believer has no other doxology finally than this: "Blessed be our fathers, blessed be St. Paul, who taught us that every word of Scripture is the very word of God! That every word stands, now and forever, unbroken, unbreakable!" 19

FOOTNOTES

- 1. Cf. C.F.W. Walther as quoted by F. Bente, "Walthers Verdienst um das Sola Scriptura," Lehre und Wehre LVII, p. 158.
- 2. J. Pelikan and H. J. Lehmann, eds, *Luther's Works* [LW] (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-), LI, p. 64.
- 3. LW XXVI, p. 146.
- 4. LW V, p. 11; XIV, p. 130.
- 5. M. Luther, The Bondage of the Will, trans. by J. I. Packer and 1. O. Johnston (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1957), p. 127.
- 6. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 7. Ibid., p. 129.
- 8. Ibid., p. 107.
- 9. LW XXIV, p. 250.
- 10. LW XLI, p. 59.
- 11. LW XLI, pp. 210-220 passim.
- 12. E. F. Klug, From Luther to Chemnitz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 56-75, 105-114 passim.
- 13. LW XLI, p. 216.
- 14. LW I, pp. 11-15 passim.
- 15. J. G. Walch, ed., Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Scriften (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1881-1910), VII, p. 2095.
- 16. C. H. Dodd, The Authority of the Bible (London: Nisbet, 1952), p. 296.
- 17. Walch, IX, p. 1770.
- 18. C. F. W. Walther, "Vorwort," Lehre und Wehre XXXII, p. 76; translated and quoted by T. Engelder, Scripture Cannot Be Broken (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1944), p. 330.
- 19. Engelder, p. 330.