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A Reaction to The Essay: "The Lutheran Confessions and 'Sola Scriptura'"

FRED KRAMER

I. *Observations on the essay itself*

THE ESSAY very properly recognizes the fact that the Lutheran Confessions are Trinitarian, i.e., they point the church which is pledged to these confessions to the Triune God as her God. The Trinitarian faith, moreover, confesses "Sola gratia" as the chief article of faith, and views all theology, also the Scripture itself, from the vantage point of this article. The Lutheran Church insists on "sola Scriptura", because she has first come to confess "sola gratia". The Scripture is source and authority for the teaching of "sola gratia."

"What happens," the essay asks, "when we view the Scriptures from the perspective of "sola gratia?" It answers that then, according to the Lutheran Confessions, we are led to make the following affirmations:

1. The Scriptures are God's address to man, revealing His grace in Jesus Christ, His Son.
2. The Scriptures are the authoritative source of the church's proclamation and the norm by which that proclamation is tested.
3. The Scriptures are the means by which the church lives and fulfils her mission. The church is the redemptive community in which the Holy Spirit is at work through the Word to bring men to faith, to build up the body of Christ, and to carry the Word to the ends of the earth.
4. The same principle which governs the Scriptures themselves governs all interpretations of Scripture.

Under point 1, the essay makes the significant statement that "in the Bible man is confronted by none other than God Himself in His judging and pardoning activity." This serves to draw attention away from the tendency, always present in the church, to make the Bible a collection of many doctrines (a welter in which the poor Christian reader may easily get lost) and to direct the Christian's gaze on God Himself, who in the Bible speaks to him, addresses him, in both Law and Gospel.

The essay then proceeds, still under point one, to show the task of the Law, which "reveals, denounces, and condemns sin." At length, and very explicitly, in the very words of the Confessions, it then sets forth the content of the Gospel from the individual Lutheran Confessions, showing that the Gospel deals with the work and

suffering of the Son of God for sinful man's redemption; that this Gospel calls sinful man to faith in Christ; that through this faith man comes into a new relationship with God, which in turn leads to a life of sanctification.

Under point 2, the essay strongly states the Reformation emphasis on Scripture which, because it is God's Word and address to man, is also the sole authority in the church, both as the source of the church's message and as the norm of the content of the church's message." Here it is particularly the Preface to the whole Book of Concord, and the Formula of Concord in its statement on *Rule and Norm*, to which the essay appeals. The essay, however, rightly points out that all Lutheran Confessions appeal to the Scripture as the sole authority in matters of the doctrine and life of the church.

Point 2 deals with one of the strongest emphases of the Reformation, the emphasis on the authority of the Scripture. It was not, at that time, a question of the inspiration of the Scripture. That was accepted also by the Roman Catholics. But Roman Catholics at the time of the Reformation were insisting, as they later declared officially at the Council of Trent, that not only the Holy Scripture, but also the "unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand" were to be received "with equal affection of piety and reverence," as the sacred Scripture.¹ It is against this teaching of the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation, and against her insistence on making articles of faith on the basis of supposedly apostolic traditions, that the emphasis of the Lutheran Confessions on the authority of Scripture is directed.

Standing on the authority of the Scripture the Confessions seek to vindicate to the Scripture two prerogatives: 1. The Scripture is to be the source of the church's message; her teachings are to be drawn from this source and from no other. 2. All teachings which demand to be heard in the church, or which are heard in the church, must be judged by Scripture. This is the meaning of the statement that the Scripture is the norm of the content of the church's message.

Under point 3, the essay states that "the church committed to the Lutheran Symbols believes, teaches, and confesses that the Scriptures as the Word of God provide the church with the adequate, reliable, and efficacious means for her work among her members and for her mission to the world."

This also is primarily a Reformation emphasis. At the time of the Reformation men argued about the "perfectio Scripturae." By this they did not mean, as our age might read it, an affirmation or a denial of the inerrancy of Scripture. They were speaking, rather, of the adequacy or sufficiency of Scripture. The term "perfection" was understood as completeness, sufficiency. The Roman Catholic Church did not argue that Scripture was bad, or erroneous. It believed and taught the inspiration of the Scripture, and unashamedly used the terminology, "Spiritu Sancto dictante." But

Roman Catholic theologians argued at great length that the Scripture was not perfect in the sense of "not complete, not sufficient." The church, therefore, was bound to the unwritten traditions, through which the incompleteness of the Scripture was complemented. Thus, Christians could have in Scripture plus tradition an adequate rule for faith and life.

It is against this position of the Roman Catholic Church, that the Lutheran Confessions insist that the Scriptures, as the Word of God, provide the church with the adequate, reliable, and efficacious means for her work among her members and for her mission in the world.

The essay emphasizes that the Lutheran Confessions affirm the adequacy, and therefore also the reliability, of the Scripture as the Word of God; that the confessions look upon the Scripture, not as a dead report of God's speaking once upon a time, but rather as something dynamic, through which God still speaks and will continue to speak, working faith in men through His Spirit who is active in and through the Word, and leading men to a life of sanctification.

Under point 4, the essay speaks briefly on the proper way to understand and interpret the Scripture. It tells us that:

The church committed to the Lutheran Symbols believes, teaches, and confesses that the Scriptures as the Word of God must be interpreted in conformity with the purpose of God expressed in the Scriptures, that is, in careful distinction of Law and Gospel, and with a view to enabling men to proclaim the Word of God to save the sinner, edify the believer, and provoke and empower him to love God and his neighbor.

In this connection the essay makes the strong statement, worthy of careful attention and constant observance by every reader and interpreter of Scripture:

Just as all doctrines, including the doctrine concerning the Scriptures, are given their dimension and direction from the Gospel, so also the interpretation of the Scriptures is to be undertaken from this perspective. Any interpretation of Scripture that does not take this into account rests on false principles, is misleading, heretical, disruptive, irreverent, and irrelevant.

These are fighting words. Yet they express the understanding of Luther and of the Reformers. This is how they want the Scripture read and interpreted, with the purpose of the Scripture, "to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," always before the eyes of the reader.

II. *Observations for the church in the year 1969*

This writer found that the essay, *The Lutheran Confessions and "Sola Scriptura"* accurately and adequately reflects the position of the Lutheran Confessions on the authority of Scripture. The

question of the authority of the Scripture is still a question of life and death for the church, for the Scripture is her only authority. This authority is constantly being called into question. It was so during the Reformation. It was so during the age of Orthodoxy, (roughly from 1680-1720) when Roman Catholic theologians continued, in line with the decree of the Council of Trent, to seek to lessen the authority of Scripture by insisting that the oral traditions must share the authority in the church with Scripture. During the same period the anti-Trinitarian Socinians sought to undermine the authority of the Scripture by questioning the nature of inspiration, and accusing the Scripture of errors. It is so today also, when the assertions of the Socinians have been accepted by many people in the churches as a result of literary and historical criticism of the Bible, and an extreme type of form criticism undermines the text of the Scripture until one wonders how such a book can even faintly be thought to possess any authority at all.

The church has not been silent in the face of these attacks on the authority of the Scripture. Students of the history of doctrine and of theology insist that the dogmaticians of the seventeenth century, both Lutheran and Reformed, "developed" the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scripture to safeguard its authority and that, in their efforts to do this, they committed foolish blunders.

This is an area which deserved most serious and careful study on the part of competent men in the Missouri Synod. One can only view with wholehearted respect the zeal of the orthodox dogmaticians of the seventeenth century in behalf of the authority of the Scripture. But if they went too far, and either claimed what was unnecessary or even wrong, then the church should know and recognize it, and should correct it.

Over and above the study of the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scripture as it was set forth by the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth century, the church today must come firmly to grips with every aspect of the higher literary and historical criticism of the Bible. It is asserted, and often by responsible Christian men who are firmly committed to the Gospel, that the higher critical method, when responsibly used, helps greatly in understanding the Scripture. To the extent that this is true the Church should use this method, because it is her duty to understand the Scripture.

But it is also a fact which no responsible Christian should deny that the higher critical theory and method, when used irresponsibly, robs the church of a dependable text, and destroys the authority of the Scripture by destroying the Scripture itself.

For this reason it is the task of the church today, as surely as it asserts the "sola Scriptura", the authority of the Scripture, to study the higher historical and literary critical theory and method, accept and use what is good, but recognize and resolutely reject what attacks the authority of the Scripture.

This is not a small task. It will not be accomplished in a meet-

ing or two. It cannot be accomplished for the whole church, not even for all of Lutheranism, by any small segment of the church. It would seem that it could be best accomplished, and that the results would be most widely accepted, if the task could be performed by as wide a representation of competent, believing scholars as possible.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Fourth Session, Decree Concerning the canonical Scriptures, Waterworth, p. 16.