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# Paul Bretscher's AFTER THE PURIFYING: A Review Article

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THE LUTHERAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION has now entered into the battle which currently is raging within The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod by its publication of its thirty-second yearbook, entitled: *After the Purifying* (Lutheran Education Association, 7400 Augustana Street, River Forest, Illinois, 1975, 108 pp., Paper, \$2.95). The author of this yearbook is the Reverend Dr. Paul S. Bretscher, an outspoken opponent of the current synodical administration and a versatile writer on behalf of the cause of Seminec and ELIM.

Dr. Bretscher believes that since the New Orleans Convention God has entered the fray of our Synod and has started a purifying process, a process also involving judgment on the past history of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The administration of Synod and those upholding and supporting the position which is in harmony with the constitution of Synod are endeavoring to melt the dross from the gold. It is Bretscher's stance that the dross is not to be found with the Elimites and the Seminec faculty, but with the defenders of the traditional theological position of the Missouri Synod for the last 128 years.

*After the Purifying* has as its presupposition the thesis that the dross of Missouri will be removed. Bretscher holds that he and those in sympathy with him will be victorious. What kind of Lutheran education will be necessary to be in harmony with the new purified theological position, brought about by the Elimites whom God supposedly is employing to rid the Synod of the dross of false doctrine? According to Bretscher, Lutheran education's unique task is to "hallow God's name" by teaching the Word of God clearly and purely. The present controversy in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has to do with nothing less than "the Word of God," and thus the very nature of Lutheran education is at stake in the dispute (p. 14). The assertion is certainly correct that the major issue in the present controversy concerns the question: "What is meant by the Word of God?" What is the nature of the Word of God? How is the Word of God properly to be interpreted?

The author of the yearbook has developed a different idea as to what the Word of God is. Thus, he writes that it is clear from the Catechisms that in Luther's mind

"the Word of God" is not simply equivalent to the Bible. It stands rather for specific things that God is saying, which He expects us to believe in our hearts, concerning our relationship to Him. God's Word is that message by which the Spirit creates and gathers the Church, and which the Church in turn preaches and teaches, not only in pulpit and classroom, but also in absolution and the sacraments. The Word of God proclaims grace and

forgiveness in Christ to the sinner. Its content is the wisdom and promises of God for sanctification and eternal life (p. 14).

However, according to the Missouri Synod tradition and piety, the "Word of God" is simply equated with the Holy Scriptures.

Scripture is understood to be the Word of God, not by and for the sake of the Gospel, but in its formal totality as a Book. Indeed, when some brethren insist that Scripture is the Word of God according to the "means of grace" (Gospel) understanding of that term, without implying the totality of the Bible as Book, they are charged with "Gospel Reductionism." In the Synod's tradition and piety, Scripture is the Word of God according to a meaning derived from the doctrine of inspiration and certified by Missouri's understanding of the sentence fragment, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). Thus the term "the Word of God" stands for the inspired canon of the sixty-six books (pp. 14-15).

Bretscher goes on to reject point by point the historic Lutheran stance on the nature of Holy Scriptures. He repudiates the inerrancy of Scriptures. Because of its erroneous understanding, according to Bretscher, Missourian theologians have raised questions about those who have problems with the historical or literary nature of Bible study and have designated them as "Bible-doubters." This practice results from Missouri's having made the Scriptures as a Book synonymous with "the Word of God." Bretscher objects to the Synod's view that the Bible is to be believed in everything it says without wavering. As an employer of the higher critical method it is absolutely impossible for Bretscher to subscribe to an errorless Scripture.

It is Bretscher's contention that in Synod today there are two different positions on what is meant by "the Word of God." He acknowledges that Article II of the Synod's Constitution declares that every member "accepts without reservation" the Scriptures as "written Word of God." This phrase "the written Word of God," Bretscher claims, is being understood in Synod in two different ways. "To many, perhaps most, it means the inspired and inerrant Scriptures, with God as the true Author of every word. To a minority, however, 'the Word of God' means the Spirit's proclamation of grace in Christ to sinners, and the Scriptures as the fountain and norm of that Word" (pp. 15-16).

For Bretscher, therefore, it is wrong, illogical, misleading and Christ-belittling to apply the expression "the Word of God" to the entire Bible. Thus he writes: "The Word of God, meaning Christ and the Gospel which proclaims Him, is the true glory and authority of the Bible. For the sake of that message it is proper to call the Holy Scriptures 'the Word of God'" (p. 19). This sentence is followed by the assertion: "Biblical texts ascribe to this 'Law-Gospel 'Word of God' many precious qualities" (p. 19). In this last sentence Bretscher departs from his definition of the Gospel as the "Word of God" by introducing also the Law. Law and Gospel are quite different from each other in every conceivable respect. Concerning this Law-Gospel

Word of God Bretscher claims that God, in employing these two forms of His Word, speaks the truth and does not lie, that His Word (Law-Gospel) is clear, a light to our path, and also that God's Word (Law-Gospel) is powerful, unique, abiding, alive, and Spirit-ed (p. 19). If the latter "qualities are ascribed to the Scriptures simply as inspired Book, divinely authored, apart from and larger than the Word of God as Gospel," then Bretscher claims, they are misapplied. Indeed, a great robbery has occurred. For the glory which the Scripture assigns to Christ and the Gospel has been appropriated to the bare Bible. The consequences of such a misappropriation are simply deadly. The Gospel as the Word of God is robbed of its honor (p. 19).

The volume under review has many assertions criticizing the traditional stance of historic Lutheranism. Bretscher endeavors to depict Luther and the Confessions as holding his view that the Word of God is equivalent to the Law-Gospel principle and not synonymous with the canonical Holy Scriptures. According to Bretscher, when Paul in Acts 20:27 claims to have proclaimed to the Ephesians "the whole counsel of God," Paul meant that he preached the plan of salvation and has no reference to other Biblical teachings (p. 41). On pages 75 and 76 Bretscher cites Walther, Pieper, Bente, and *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* as holding the position that the canonical books of the Old and New Testament constitute the Word of God. It is interesting to note that Bretscher's own father, Paul M. Bretscher, a former St. Louis professor (now deceased), in his excellent essay "Take Heed Unto The Doctrine," delivered at the 1959 Convention of Synod at San Francisco, held to the historic position of the Synod that the Bible was synonymous with the Word of God.

Dr. Bretscher would have his readers believe that Luther and the Confessions did not equate the expression "the Word of God" with the Holy Scriptures. According to Luther, *sola Scriptura* meant that only the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were the source of a saving knowledge of Christ. Luther did not limit the Word of God merely to the Gospel or a Law-Gospel dichotomy. An examination of the references given by Dr. E. Plass in Volume III of *What Luther Says* (Concordia, 1959), pp. 1460-1493, will show that Luther thought, spoke, and wrote of the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. Luther wrote: "No other doctrine should be proclaimed in the Church than the pure Word of God, that is, the Holy Scriptures" (St. Louis, IX: p. 87). In another writing Luther said: "It is our unbelief and corrupt carnal mind which would not allow us to perceive and consider that God spoke to us in Scripture, or that Scripture is the Word of God" (St. Louis, IX:p. 1818). Many more passages could be cited to prove that Luther considered the Bible to be synonymous with "the Word of God" and as such errorless.

This was also the position of the Lutheran Confessions. In the Large Catechism (Tappert, p. 444) Luther wrote: "My neighbor and I, in short, all men, may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err." In the Formula of Concord (Ep. VII, 13, Tappert, p. 483) it is asserted: "God's Word is not false nor does it lie." The opening paragraph of the Epitome of the Formula of Concord begins with

the declaration: "We believe, teach and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged, as it is written in Ps. 119:105, 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.'"

The entire Bible is authoritative because it was given to men by the Holy Spirit. The authority of the Holy Scriptures cannot be limited to what the Scriptures assert about Law and Gospel or about the Means of Grace. While it is true that to interpret the Bible properly, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel must be maintained and that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is the central doctrine of the Christian religion, this does not warrant denigrating other portions of Holy Writ written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Bretscher has come up with a new formula for allowing the use of the historical-critical method. He proposes a distinction in the Bible between "the historical reality" (horizontal line) and "the theological reality" (vertical line). Thus he writes: "If the Bible is to be treasured for what it truly is, these two realities must be taken into account simultaneously" (p. 78). The "theological reality" comes from God (vertical), while the "historical reality" comes from men (horizontal). The theological reality will be found in God's word of judgment and mercy, while the historical reality will "not be ashamed of the Bible's full participation in human literature and history. It will not compromise the authentic historicity of the Scriptures by invoking an erroneous understanding of the Bible's inspiration and authority. On the contrary, Lutheran education will recognize that the revolution in Biblical studies is a gift from God to be accepted without fear and used to his glory" (p. 87). In this volume, however, Bretscher does not further explore the use of the historical-critical method, which he has defended and of which he has given a demonstration in his study, "The Baptism of Jesus, Critically Considered," Biblical Series #5, May 1973, distributed by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

Bretscher's views on the Holy Scriptures are not Lutheran and contradict the Biblical position on inspiration and inerrancy and militate against the view that *all* of the Bible is Word of God (the view of historic Christianity). Having read and considered the words of *After the Purifying*, we are forced to say to Bretscher what Luther said to Zwingli: "You have a different spirit."