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A Response to David Lotz

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THE REVEREND DAVID LOTZ has taken an interest in the present theological problems of the Missouri Synod and has contributed several essays on its problems. He was given the role of "theologian in residence" for the Atlantic District. It was for the delegates of that district's conventions that he originally prepared three essays, which were later mimeographed for wider distribution. Mr. Lotz offered his three papers in response to the synodical leadership's call for general discussion on "A Statement" and related matters at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. I am offering this contribution in response to Mr. Lotz' request in a letter of July 12, 1974, asking for "any critical comments."

Mr. Lotz' papers were offered as a critique. To offer a critique on the critique can become very complex. I propose simply to respond to Mr. Lotz without getting into the question of whether he has accurately repeated the theological positions of the principal persons involved in the controversy. I assume he has. Thus I have not seen the charges in regard to the suspended president of Concordia Seminary, except where quoted. I have read "A Statement" issued by the synodical president and "Faithful To Our Calling" issued by the former faculty majority of Concordia Seminary, but I have not consulted these documents in any way in making this response.

The essays distributed by Mr. Lotz are: "An Appraisal of the Theological Crisis in the Missouri Synod"; "A Brief Synopsis of the Major Theological-Doctrinal Issues"; and "A Critical Appraisal of A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles." I shall attempt to examine certain theological principles from these essays and avoid an expository verse by verse commentary. As they were distributed together, I shall treat them as a unit.

In the essay dealing with "A Statement" Mr. Lotz remarks that the reading of his essay "presuppose(s) a fairly high degree of theological sophistication" ("Critical Appraisal," pp. 60a-b). This kind of statement puts any respondent in a very embarrassing situation. Any one might be proud to fall into Mr. Lotz' category of "a fairly high degree of theological sophistication." Etymologically the word "sophistication" must be related to the word "sophist." For the sake of self-esteem and self-preservation, I shall respond with a *nolo contendere* defense to any charge of "theological sophistication." Really the principles brought up by Mr. Lotz are very simple and not at all complicated. He might well be guilty at some points of some poor logic and cumbersome writing, but these are forgivable sins where the suppliant is repentant. Mr. Lotz agrees with me in isolating the real issues: Scriptures versus Gospel as norm, historicity, and the Law in the life of the Christian. Several years ago I isolated these same issues in several articles. Indeed it is refreshingly welcome to have someone else, and a person with whom one does not agree, confirm one's hypotheses.

Mr. Lotz sharpens up the position that regards the Gospel as

the basic norm for doctrine and the Scriptures as a secondary norm. Superficially it can be said that both groups arguing the question of authority in the church recognize Scriptures as possessing authority. But the question remains as to *why* the Bible possesses authority. In other words, how would each group answer the question: "Where does the Bible get its authority?" Or, "Why should I make the Bible the authority for my Christian life?" Answering this kind of question will provide us with the clue to the authority problem in the church.

Mr. Lotz' position—which he claims is that also of the former St. Louis faculty majority—is that the Scriptures are the authority because of the Gospel they contain. "The *Scriptures alone* are normative *because* they bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Gospel is accordingly the norm *within* the Scriptures." ("Appraisal," p. 6). Mr. Lotz' objection is that President Preus and the framers of Resolution 3-09 have incorrectly deduced that the former faculty majority says: "The Gospel *alone* is normative . . ." We shall let pass the question of whether Mr. Lotz properly reflects the conclusions of President Preus and others, but he has helped to narrow our vision on the intricacies of the position. This is the position: *The Scriptures are authoritative but they get their authority from the Gospel*. Let this position be appreciated for its positive value. It asserts that the Gospel is an essential part of the Scriptures and the Scriptures do play a vital role in Christian theology. But whatever positive value the position has is more than counter-balanced by its glaring inadequacies and unacceptable inversions. This position, as enunciated by Mr. Lotz, lowers the Scriptures in the authority scale to the same level as the Lutherans now place their confessions. Lutherans hold that the Bible alone is *norma normans*, the governing regulation, and the Confessions are the *norma normata*, the regulations governed by the Scriptures. In Mr. Lotz' scheme, the Gospel becomes *norma normans* and the Scriptures become *norma normata*. For Lutherans, Scriptures do not have an authority derived from a higher principle of the Gospel. Their authority is God's own.

Mr. Lotz sets this new position up against the one previously held, but he is less than fair. "The Scriptures, in sum, are the 'only rule and norm of faith and practice' because of their central *content*—the doctrine of the Gospel, not because of their particular *form* as the inspired and infallible Word of God. This is not to say that such inspiration and infallibility are unimportant or unnecessary." By his reference to the "particular form" Mr. Lotz confuses deliberately, I dare say, the mode of inspiration with the fact. "A Statement" holds that the Bible has its authority from God and does not speak to the mode of inspiration as Mr. Lotz suggests.

The Scriptures are authoritative for Mr. Lotz and for those he represents not because of their *theological* origin but because of their *teleological* purpose. The older positions said what the Bible "does," it does because of what it "is." The new position says what the Bible "is," it is because of what it "does." For Mr. Lotz, the Scriptures are the Word of God because they serve the Gospel, not because they are given by God through inspiration. This is basically a confusion between Scripture's origin and function. Lotz' position is consistent

in defining Biblical inerrancy as “utter reliability . . . achieving its God-ordained purpose” (“Synopsis,” p. 5). Inerrancy is no longer defined as being “a not contrary to fact report” but it is defined as God’s carrying out his purposes now. Theology becomes teleology again. He claims that the controversy “should be made to focus on the faculty’s proposed definition of ‘inerrancy,’ not its supposed denial of ‘inerrancy.’” (“Synopsis,” p. 6). This attitude demands a long pause for thought. The former faculty majority, in the opinion of Mr. Lotz, still makes use of the term “inerrancy,” but has given it a new meaning. The technical term for this kind of reasoning is equivocation, to “use expressions of double meaning in order to mislead.” Does a person have two cows, if he calls a cow “a cow” and a horse “a cow”? The Arians of the fourth century and the Jehovah’s Witnesses of the twentieth call Jesus “God” as do confessing Lutherans. But what each group means by “God” is entirely different. This is exactly what Mr. Lotz does with the word “inerrancy.” Here is a case of using the traditional terminology but giving it a new meaning.

Furthermore Mr. Lotz states that the term “inerrancy” “is not found as such in either the Bible or the Confessions” (“Synopsis,” p. 5). Consider this line of reasoning. Mr. Lotz says the term “inerrancy” is neither of Biblical or confessional origin; the term is used by the faculty majority (but with reluctance, I imagine); and the term has been redefined by the faculty. If this is how the former faculty really feels, then why use the term at all? One could easily get the impression that the word “inerrancy” is used to indicate that the faculty espouses a position that it really does not hold and does not want to hold.

Mr. Lotz’ remarks about the necessity of redefinition of the word “inerrancy” to save us from a prescientific world view of a flat earth are not helpful. His statement that “the biblical authors clearly operate with a world view which simply takes for granted a flat earth” is begging the question (“Synopsis,” p. 6). If it is so clear, let him produce the evidence.

The matters of Biblical authority, interpretation, historicity, and facticity may be all treated together for the sake of convenience. Mr. Lotz makes a distinction between “historicity” and “factuality.” “A Statement” intends that one word explains the other and in the document they may be considered as synonymns. Mr. Lotz sees that facticity can take other forms besides the historical one. Thus he sees Genesis 3 as factual in the sense of describing the fallen condition of mankind, but not necessarily historical, in the sense of being one particular episode in time and space. Mr. Lotz’ point of contention must be made clear. He is not denying that certain events previously considered historical *must* now be treated as metaphorical or symbolical, only that they may be so treated (“Synopsis,” pp. 6ff. and “Critical Appraisal,” p. 60k). He objects that “A Statement” does not allow metaphorical or symbolical interpretations to the exclusion of historical ones. Genesis 1-3, Jonah, the Synoptic Gospels, and John are mentioned as cases where other than historical interpretations should be allowed.

Regretfully, Mr. Lotz does not set down his principles whereby a given account may be classified as exclusively metaphorical or symbolical and not historical. His reference to "literary form" without any specifics makes a response rather difficult. This sentence sums up his position: "Their (faculty majority) position, rather, is that Genesis 2-3, the book of Jonah, and the gospels *do not necessarily have to be interpreted, in every detail and in every part, as historical documents*, as if the category of historical narrative were the only possible literary form which could be applied to them" ("Synopsis," p. 8; emphases are Mr. Lotz').

There is general agreement on all sides that the Scriptures use symbolical or metaphorical language. What literature does not? What is disturbing is the illogical jumps of thought. If some language detail is symbolical, this can hardly be interpreted to mean that all or any given part of the whole can or may be symbolical or non-historical. For example, Jesus called Herod a fox. This is a metaphor. Does this mean that Jesus Himself possibly becomes a metaphor, or that the events in the life of Jesus may possibly be considered as metaphors rather than parts of history? Jesus spoke parables, but does this mean that Jesus is parabolic? Mr. Lotz seems to believe that the use of a metaphor or a poem or whatever literary device excludes the historical (cf. "Critical Appraisal," p. 60k). History can be explained in poems, diaries, autobiographies, etc. Does this mean that what is no longer poetically explained is then historical? Let us grant that Genesis I contains poetic language. Does this mean that it cannot be history? Jonah sings a hymn from the belly of the fish about his punishment and deliverance. Does this mean Jonah's sojourn in the fish is not history? There is a poem about the embattled farmers at Concord's bridge. Does the Battle of Concord suddenly become a non-historical event, a metaphor or symbol or whatever because a poet described it? More serious, from the viewpoints of both faith and literature, is Mr. Lotz' remarks that the Gospels "do not purport to be *biographical documents* in our modern sense of the term, that is, strictly chronological and completely factual accounts of the life of Jesus" ("Synopsis," pp. 8f.). What is Mr. Lotz trying to say? That if something is not written in a chronological outline, it is not factual? History books are written topically and crisscross chronologically, as do newspaper and magazine articles. And what is the official biographical procedure in our modern world? Granted that a first century document will not look like a twentieth century document. Obviously! If it did—like the Book of Mormon a nineteenth century work—it would be regarded as a forgery. Let it also be granted the Gospels seem to have a literary character of their own, *sui generis*. They are written to present the life and preaching of Jesus to bring people to faith. But how does Mr. Lotz come to the conclusion that they therefore do not purport to be "completely factual accounts of the life of Jesus"? But they do! Mr. Lotz is saying, however, that they are not completely factual accounts. Now let him show where. To use an old dogmatism, let him cite chapter and verse. Why should we value "the complete factuality" of modern "*biographical documents*"? Which ones? How about the anticipated memoirs of Nixon or Kissinger? How about the

trade of the court biographers employed by the heroes themselves to tell "the whole truth"? How about the Rockefeller-financed biography of Arther Goldberg? Who will come forth with the pure historical document, free from all prejudices, deliberate and undeliberate lapses in memory, and with no propagandist purposes at all? If Mr. Lotz is totally unfair in his appraisal of the Gospels, this is only to be balanced by an unhealthy and uncritical appreciation of modern documents, including those produced by modern historians who seem to be charismatized with a near infallibility which he denies to the Biblical writers.

The approach set forth here would also permit the history recorded in the Scriptures to be interpreted as symbols. Something which is only "symbolic" can be classified as "historical" or "factual." "Facticity" does not exhaust the meaning of "historical." Mr. Lotz would permit the statement that the story of Adam and Eve has a certain "factuality" about it, but it could be "symbolic" ("Critical Appraisal," pp. 60j-k). One could say that the story of Adam and Eve did not happen, but it is still "historical." For "A Statement" the term "historical" refers to what happens. For Mr. Lotz it can refer to what happened or to what could possibly be just part of a "symbolic" story.

Mr. Lotz upholds the position that the Gospel is the determining factor or criterion for what is and is not to be believed in the Bible. "There can be no doubt either that Scripture teaches such matters or that Christians need not accept them because they are not part of the Gospel. Indeed Christians properly repudiate them because they are a part of that Law which came to an end in Jesus Christ" ("Critical Appraisal," p. 60e). Mr. Lotz might not be aware of his agreement with the position of President Preus in that the Scriptures tell us what the Gospel is. Of course Mr. Lotz' real intent is that the Gospel tells us what parts of Scriptures are applicable. It follows automatically that there can be no third use of the law, the positive, wholesome guide in the Christian's life. The Gospel as the determining principle of what is to be believed and not believed is a natural conclusion from the concept that the Bible gets its authority from the Gospel. If the Gospel has become in effect the *norma normans*, then it follows that the Scriptures, the *norma normata*, have a truth derived from the Gospel and the Scriptures must be constantly judged by the Gospel.

Let us summarize the position of Mr. Lotz up to this point. The Gospel is the principle that gives the Scriptures their authority and they are the critical principle of interpretation in determining what is applicable and what is not applicable. History can be reduced to symbolic truth, as long as the Gospel predominates. "Gospel," regardless of its definition, may operate with or without a specific history. The entire system is quite consistent. The Gospel is the controlling principle.

The only thing remaining is to determine the definition of the Gospel. According to the old definition, the Gospel is the news or report that God redeemed all mankind for the sake of Jesus Christ. It is based on the fact that something specific happened. But it is right here on this very important question that Lotz leaves a yawning gap. Mr. Lotz is not willing to say that the Gospel can be set down in

any kind of permanent way. Before we cite a specific statement from Mr. Lotz, consider that a "Gospel" which is identified as the controlling factor in the entire scheme, the *norma normans*, has no fixed meaning. Mr. Lotz quotes the faculty as saying, "it (i.e. the Gospel) cannot be formulated in terms enduringly valid for every age and condition" ("Synopsis," p. 11). Mr. Lotz specifically denies that the theological task "amounts simply to the meticulous repetition of past theological formulations which presumably retain their power and persuasiveness for all times" ("Synopsis," p. 13). The Gospel for Dr. Tietjen and for the faculty majority, so claims Mr. Lotz, is "confessing the faith of our fathers anew in our words and our own ways to our own world" ("Synopsis," p. 13).

This amounts to nothing more than the most raw form of subjectivism. The controlling principle in theology then becomes the faculty's own words to its own world. This, masquerading as Gospel, then becomes the principle of Scriptural interpretation. It is the very nature of a norm or rule that it remain, at least somewhat, stable or stationary. But where the norm fluctuates, it can no longer be a norm. Nothing can be regulated. When this kind of Gospel norm is applied to the Scriptures, the results must necessarily be diversified and changing. We have already noted that this whole position confuses theology with teleology. We now recognize more fully the correctness of this conclusion. All would agree that preaching the Gospel must be done in contemporary terms. But, according to Mr. Lotz, it is the Gospel that is preached that decides for us what is of binding value in the Scriptures. With this approach Christianity is released from its history like a helium balloon and is left to every whim and wind that comes along. Whatever good is left in this kind of Christianity only comes out of some type of respect for the memory of the past.

At the root of the problem is false type of bibliolatry. The Bible appears on the scene as a book testifying to the Gospel. This Gospel is its authority, according to this position ("Appraisal," pp. 6f.). The book sits there suspended in mid-air with a message. Listen to its message of the Gospel because of its message, i.e., the Gospel. This is pure bibliolatry, logolatry, or even evangelolatry. The position of "A Statement" sees God's authority in the Scriptures. That at least is "theolotry" and not "bibliolatry."

These words are addressed to the pastors of the Missouri Synod as response to Mr. Lotz' essays, but I do wish that they would be shared with the lay delegates of the Atlantic District to whom Mr. Lotz first addressed his words and who will not receive a copy of this essay. For such a wish to be fulfilled, I can only rely on the leaders of the Atlantic District.