

The View of Scripture in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America: A Covert Denial of the Orthodox Christian View of Scripture

Martin Luther broke ties with the Roman Catholic Church because the Holy Spirit through Scripture proved to him that its doctrine was not in accord with the Gospel of Christ. Luther's tenacious struggle for reform centered on three basic truths: *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura*. We are justified by God's grace alone, through faith in Christ Jesus alone, which we know by Scripture alone. To Luther, all teachings and traditions of the church had to be put next to the standard and rule which God established, namely His inspired Word, the Bible. Luther found true comfort for his sins only from these words given to the prophets and apostles by God himself.

These are Luther's tenets of faith, which by God's grace have been passed on to Lutheran Christians here in America. Yet, today, among the largest body of "Lutherans" in this country, namely the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), theologians and pastors have denied that Scripture is the very Word of God. They no longer find truth only in Scripture, nor do they consider Scripture to be the only authoritative truth. Though they use words that sound orthodox in their confessions and writings, they have changed the meanings and have cloaked their unbelief, while promoting themselves to be faithful followers of and witnesses to the Lutheran Christian heritage. The purpose of this paper is to draw from works, confession and publications of these ELCA voices to show how they have profaned and covertly denied the very Word of God, the Scriptures.

Recently, two articles in *The Lutheran*, the ELCA's periodical for parishioners, have shown that the ELCA'S view of Scripture is not in accord with what Scripture itself proclaims. In its monthly column "*Since You Asked*" of the September 1998 edition, the Reverend Burton L. Everest and Norma Cook Everest denied that the book of Jonah was historical, "The message of Jonah is in the story of Jonah. Jonah is not history but is like the story Nathan told David... an allegorical parable".¹ In the following month, religion professor Darrel Jodock wrote an article against social injustices. In this article, he made the Bible to be no more than a code book which believers can make into an authority for their lives. Inferring that Scripture is not the authoritative Word of God that stands by itself, Jodock wrote,

"All authority is communal. As long as we are responsible only for ourselves, nothing has a claim on us and there can be no authority over us... the closer our community of faith, the greater its need for guidelines to keep its interactions on track... The more the group turns to the Bible for guidance, the greater its authority grows... The more help the community finds, the more the Bible becomes an authority within it."²

Such abuse of God's Word causes one to wonder what exactly the ELCA truly believes the Bible to be. This paper will examine their confessions and teachings on Scripture in three aspects: the doctrine of the canon of Scripture, the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture and the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture.

I. ELCA's deviant theology with regard to the canon of Scripture

At first glance their definition of the canon of Scripture seems very true to the view of the Lutheran Christian heritage. The *Confession of Faith* of the ELCA, as found in *the Constitution* of the ELCA, proclaims about the canon of Scripture:

“The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.”³

On the surface, this statement on the canon seems laudable. Yet, one must understand the smoke and mirrors used to present an illusion of the truth. One must understand that their definition of the term “canon” is not that which traditionally has been attributed to it. For instance, when their *Confession of Faith* says they accept the “canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments”, they do not mean the entirety of the sixty-six books of the Bible as we now have them. In the ELCA book, labeled *Christian Dogmatics*, in the introduction to the section on Holy Scriptures, this distinction is clearly established as follows,

“The Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of the knowledge of God’s revelation which concerns the Christian faith. The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness—the `canon within the canon.’”⁴

According to them, the “canonical Scriptures” of which their confessions speak do not mean the entire collection of sixty-six books of the Bible. The ELCA theologians differentiate between that which proclaims Christ in Scripture as canonical and that which does not proclaim Christ as non-canonical. Therefore, the canon becomes very subjective. If one person sees Christ in an Old Testament passage, then that verse becomes canonical to him, regardless of whether or not a fellow ELCA member sees it, or calls it canon. Only where a person sees the Scriptures talking about Christ and salvation can one be sure that it is true, canonical Scripture. In their view, wherever the canon is not, there you do not truly have God’s Word. Eventually, the historical truths of Scripture can then be tossed aside. Their canon is therefore an intangible, ethereal concept subject only to personal conviction.

Trying to defend this new position, the ELCA theologians have had to do some very tricky historical flips. They have tried to paint the orthodox Lutherans as unfaithful to Luther and his view of Scripture while trying to make themselves look as the true heirs of Luther’s view of the canon of Scripture. Carl Braaten shows this distortion in the following excerpt from his book, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*:

“In the subsequent period of Lutheran orthodoxy, the beginnings of biblical criticism in Luther were virtually aborted. Whereas for Luther the canon was to be found in the Bible, for orthodoxy the canon became equated with the inspired text. Whereas for Luther the material principle of Scripture, namely, justification through faith alone, was primary, for orthodoxy the formal principle of Scripture, namely, that it is verbatim the inspired Word of God, took precedence.”⁵

The truth of the matter is not that orthodox Lutherans deviated from Luther, but that the ELCA has deviated from Luther and from the true beneficiaries of his view, orthodox Lutherans.

Soon after Luther died, many nominal Lutherans tried to spout their own doctrines. God used Luther's pupils to confirm that which was truly Christian and to condemn that which was not. Their confession of the truth and condemnation of falsehood, the Formula of Concord, found its source not only in a select canon within the canon, but in the whole of Scripture. Introducing the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, the successors of Luther made quite clear that the canon of Scriptures is more than merely something within the Bible, but is the Bible itself,

“We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119, 105: *Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.* And St. Paul: *Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,* Gal. 1, 8.

Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.”⁶

No other collection of books was considered equal to Holy Scriptures, namely all of the books of the established canon of Scripture. They did not distinguish between the Scriptures and a canon within the canon. In the ELCA's *Confession of Faith*, they profess,

“This church *accepts* the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and *the Formula of Concord*, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.”⁷ (italics added for emphasis)

Yet, they deny the very thing which they claim to accept when their theologians write about this new ethereal canon within the canon. It is apparent that their “accepting” does not necessarily oppose all contradiction.

Even if the ELCA were correct about the shift from Luther to the successors in orthodox Lutheranism, still they would have to find a way around the view espoused by the early Christian fathers. Their abstract view of the canon of Scripture deviates from the definition of the canon of Scripture according to the church fathers. Notably, Saint Augustine, explaining how he expounded the Scriptures, defined very clearly that the canon was not some ethereal entity within the Bible, but consisted of the books of the Bible themselves,

“The whole canon of Scriptures on which we say that this consideration of the steps of knowledge should depend is contained in the following books: the five books of Moses, that is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; one book of Joshua, one of Judges...Ruth... the four books of Kings and two of Paralipomenon [1&2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles]...Job, ...Esther, ... the Psalms of David, and the three books of Solomon: Proverbs, the Canticles of Canticles, and Ecclesiastes... twelve single books of Prophets... Osea, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacuc, Zephania, Aggeus, Zacharias, and

Malachias. Then there are four books of four major Prophets: Isaias, Jeremias, Daniel, Ezechiel... The New Testament contains the four evangelical books, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the fourteen epistles of Paul the Apostle, to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, two to the Thessalonians, to the Colossians, two to Timothy, to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two Epistles of Peter, three of John, one of Jude, and one of James; a book of the Acts of the Apostles, and a book of the Apocalypse of John.”⁸

Professor Wilbert Gawrisch, in an essay on the canon of Scripture, clearly distinguished that one might not know the history of the canon and yet believe because the decisive and vital proof concerning the Scriptures’ canonicity comes from the Scriptures themselves. The conviction of faith that the whole of Scripture is God’s Word comes only from the Spirit. Professor Gawrisch wrote,

“These books have what our fathers called the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. They are the voice of him who is the ultimate and absolute authority. There is none higher. There is, therefore, apart from God, no one who can authenticate or validate them. They are self-authenticating, self-validating...The teachers of our church have coined the term *autopisticity* to designate this quality of the Scriptures...It was the autopisticity of the Scriptures that caused the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be separated from the Apocrypha and other non-canonical writings. Just as in a blast furnace the heavier molten iron separates itself from the lighter slag, so the inspired Scriptures separated themselves from the non-inspired writings.”⁹

One must perceive the canon through the eyes of faith. The ELCA does not look to Scripture for this proof. Ultimately, the ELCA’s low view of the canon of Scripture can be attributed to their low view of Scripture itself. This becomes all the more apparent when they speak about Scripture’s clarity, or lack thereof from their viewpoint.

II. ELCA’s deviating theology of Scripture’s clarity

The ELCA’s idea of Scripture’s clarity becomes apparent when they describe the use of Scripture. In a document labeled *A Proposed Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*, ELCA pastors and theologians unveiled another cryptic supposition about Scripture. Concerning the means of grace, they all agreed to answer the question, “What is the Word of God?” as follows:

“Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate. The proclamation of God’s message to us is both Law and Gospel. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Through this Word in these forms, as through the sacraments, God gives faith, forgiveness of sins, and new life.”¹⁰

Once again, they veil their false doctrine in seemingly acceptable terms. Scripture calls Jesus Christ the Word of God (John 1:1ff). Yet, by defining the Word of God in the way which they did, the theologians were really denying that the words of the Bible are also in and of themselves the clear Word of God. *Christian Dogmatics* asserts that Scripture is not clear by itself, yet needs

experiences outside of Scripture to make it clear:

“whatever theology asserts about God on the basis of Scripture must in some way be correlated with what can be learned about God’s world in nature and history from other disciplines... Modern theology is currently rediscovering and applying the universal perspective of the Bible...”¹¹

The ELCA’s confessions never plainly deny Scripture’s clarity. Yet, their denial of Scripture’s authority discloses this denial. How can one be sure that anything in the Bible truly is the canon within the canon? Where is the clarity of the gospel of Christ to be found for sure? Not in the words of the Bible, but by having an experience with the canon within the canon, which by the way, never is the same from person to person. Jodock’s view that Scripture can become clear and authoritative also points to this denial.

Keeping in mind the ELCA’s distinction between Scripture and the Word of God, the bulletin inserts intended to reach all the ELCA congregations in July and August of 1998 expose the presupposition that Scripture does not make itself clear but must be considered only alongside the extra-scriptural:

“As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are on a journey together, discovering anew the relevance of God’s Word for this world’s problems. In this journey, we are mindful of our solid roots in Scripture, the tradition of the whole Church, and the Lutheran Reformation.”¹²

In essence, their view of Scripture’s clarity denies that we can learn God’s will from it and it alone. Ultimately, their view of Scripture’s clarity leaves one groping about in darkness.

This is far from the orthodox view of Scripture’s clarity. Orthodox Lutheran Christians note that the Scriptures are the very Word of God and therefore are clear in themselves. They confess that after God chose to “transmit His Word in writing, the Church of every age was strictly bound to the written Word of God.”¹³ To set the traditions of the Church or the Lutheran Reformation on an equal plain with Scripture is to deny this fact. Professor Lawrenz made this evident when he wrote,

“In considering the message of the church we will constantly remember that none of these truths or any other point of Christian faith and life can be certain and remain certain for us unless we hold firmly to the outward clarity of the Scriptures, to this that the message of the Scripture lies in the message contained in the very words of Scripture...”¹⁴

Consequent to the ELCA view that Scripture has no clarity by itself, one must not be surprised when they no longer consider Scripture as the sole judge in matters of faith. In the ELCA theological writings and publications, it becomes more and more clear that they have deserted the Christian view of Scripture as *norma normans*, namely, the rule or standard by which all teachings and teachers of the church must be measured. Carl Braaten, trying to distance the ELCA from orthodoxy, revealed this error when he wrote,

“The authority which the Scriptures possess in orthodoxy is of an authoritarian kind, commanding blind faith and obedience... The Scriptures are endowed with

causative authority so that, in the language of orthodoxy, it is said that the Scriptures create faith and obedience; the Scriptures create assent to the truths to be believed. This type of language indicates that the distinction between the Holy Spirit... and the Holy Scriptures has virtually collapsed.”¹⁵

Again, the ELCA contradicts itself. The Lutheran Confessions, which they profess as a clear witness to the Word of God, clearly proclaim the opposite of their viewpoint about the Scriptures’ clarity as a tool and means of the Spirit,

“the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong. But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned [by what arguments the dogmas conflicting with the Holy Scripture were rejected and condemned].”¹⁶

Indeed, the Holy Spirit declares Scripture to be clear by itself when he inspired the Apostle Paul to write to Timothy,

“and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:15-17, NIV)

A Scripture that is not clear by itself cannot make an infant wise unto salvation nor thoroughly equip the man. When the ELCA theologians whisper their doubts concerning Scripture’s clarity, they also manifest their denial of Scripture as the inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of God.

III. The ELCA’s denial of Scripture as the inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of God

At the heart of ELCA’s aberrant view of Scripture is their denial that Scripture is the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. Although the *Confession of Faith*, professes the Scriptures to be, “inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors”¹⁷, one must understand that their definition of inspiration is not the classical definition of inspiration, namely verbal inspiration. To them, the prophets and apostles were inspired in much the same way an artist or poet becomes “inspired”. Carl Braaten shows this position when he wrote, “The Bible is the written Word of God in a derived way; it is a deposit of the early church.”¹⁸ He goes on to explain exactly what he means,

“It is finally for the sake of Christ alone that the church continues to regard the Bible as ... the Word of God. This is not meant in the fundamentalistic sense that everything in the Bible stands directly as the Word of God.”¹⁹

The ELCA’s denial of verbal inspiration becomes evident especially when their theologians

deny the inerrancy of Scripture. Carl Braaten wrote in *Christian Dogmatics* that ELCA theologians reject verbal inspiration “because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings.”²⁰ Quoted in the book *What’s Going On Among the Lutherans?*, ELCA bishop Dr. Herbert W. Chilstrom exposed ELCA’s denial of verbal inspiration as a presupposition common among ELCA theologians and taught to all their pastoral candidates, when he wrote:

“In my opinion, people who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture should be welcome to remain within the new Lutheran church... I do not argue with those who say that they hold that [verbal inspiration] as an opinion, so long as they do not make their opinion a standard position for the new church... I’m sure there are many who now come to our seminaries who hold the view that the original writings of Scripture were inerrant and infallible. Let them test those views in an arena where they will be challenged.”²¹

Orthodox Lutheran Christians on the other hand have always confessed that which Scripture proclaims, namely, that the Spirit of God inspired the very words which the prophets and apostles wrote down. Doctor Francis Pieper explains verbal inspiration as follows:

“Inspiration does not consist in the so-called subject inspiration, inspiration of the matter merely, nor in the so-called inspiration of persons, but it is verbal inspiration, *suggestio verborum*, since the Scriptures, which are said to be inspired, do not consist of things or persons, but of written words... The miraculous operation of the Holy Ghost [namely, the divine act of inspiration] had not the writers themselves for its object - these were only His instruments, and were soon to pass away - its objects were the holy books themselves. Whoever rejects Verbal Inspiration...thereby denies... the Scripture doctrine of inspiration.”²²

Professor David Kuske correctly and briefly establishes the truth of Scripture’s verbal inspiration, when he founds it upon God’s own claims,

“In a miraculous way, which goes beyond any human investigation, the Holy Spirit inspired chosen men to write God’s Word. Each of the following passages states that the Bible writers spoke only as God directed or guided them:

2 Peter 1:21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men *spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*.

Hebrews 1:1 In the past God *spoke* to our forefathers *through the prophets* at many times and in various ways.

Matthew 1:22 All this took place to fulfill what the *Lord had said through the prophet*.

John 14:26 But the Counselor, *the Holy Spirit*, whom the Father will send in my name, *will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to*

you.

John 16:13, 14 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he *will guide you* into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and *he will tell you* what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and *making it known to you.*"²³

The believer's confidence in Scripture as the very words of God can only come from Scripture. No system of proofs, no line of logic will ever convince a person. The Holy Spirit alone has the power through the gospel to change man's stubborn heart to believe that this Book is God's own Word.

Where does the ELCA's view of Scripture lead in the end? In reality, the ELCA theologians deny that the Scriptures are a means of grace by which the Holy Spirit works. By denying that Scripture is inspired, inerrant and infallible, they rip away the foundation by which we trust in Christ! Consider the horrible outcome which Carl Braaten suggests,

"The question we face as Lutherans today is whether we can still claim, in face of our current knowledge of Christian origins, that the message of justification is the true summary of the gospel we hear from Scripture."²⁴

By its view of Scripture, the ELCA has not only harmed true faith and stifled the truth of the gospel; in essence the ELCA has denied the very truth of Scripture by which we believe and trust in Christ for eternal life. Of such a faithless faith, Professor Gawrisch wrote, "What miserable creatures of uncertainty we would be if we did not have the assurance that God is actually speaking to us through the pages of the Book!"²⁵

May God in his grace continue to preserve Luther's view of *Sola Scriptura* among us, and use us to share it with others who are lost without the solid foundation of God's Word.

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¹ Rev. Burton L. Everest and Norma Cook Everest, "Since You Asked: Is Jonah historical?" The Lutheran. September, 1998: 21.

² Darrell Jadock, "Does the Bible Really Matter?" The Lutheran. October, 1998: 12-13.

³ Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. *Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. <http://www.elca.org/co/faith.html>. (10/14/99).

⁴ Carl E. Braaten, "The Holy Scriptures" Christian Dogmatics, vol. 1, Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson

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- ¹¹ Carl E. Braaten, "The Holy Scriptures" Christian Dogmatics, vol. 1, Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 76.
- ¹² "With Confidence in God's Future" Bulletin Insert #1 of 8.
- ¹³ Francis Pieper, D.D., "Holy Scripture" Christian Dogmatics. Trans. Dr. Theodore Engelder, vol. 1. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) 193.
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