

The Bible among Lutherans in America: The ELCA as a Test Case

By Erik M. Heen

Abstract: This article describes the biblical hermeneutics that inform the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by comparing the ELCA's tradition of biblical interpretation with that of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. It sets both against the great social and intellectual challenges of the early twentieth century, including the modernist/fundamentalist controversy. One commonality that surfaces is that both church bodies appropriated pre-modern hermeneutical impulses for "counter modern" biblical apologetics. In this process the LC-MS privileged the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy (17th century) while the ELCA constructed its hermeneutical paradigm through a recovery of the early Reformation (Luther). This observation suggests that both interpretive trajectories need further historical as well as theological review and revision.

Key Terms: Biblical Hermeneutics, ELCA, Missouri Synod, Modernism, Fundamentalism.

*A theology that claims with any right to rest on Luther's Reformation can never claim to be finished with the theological task of hermeneutics.*¹

The bitter controversy over biblical interpretation in the early twentieth century between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists has left its marks on the North American Protestant religious landscape.² One legacy is that the American popular Christian imagination has been left with the notion that there are really only two ways to read the Bible. One reads it either as a "conservative" or as a "liberal." One is either a fundamentalist and dogmatically committed to notions of inerrancy, infallibility, and verbal inspiration, or one is a liberal and rejects the literalist stance (and many traditional doctrines of the church) in order to seek an understanding of the Christian faith in the context of the modern world. Since "conservative" is often defined in terms of the literalism encouraged by the Scottish Common Sense realist tradition (and much evangelical Christianity),³ "liberal" Christianity by default becomes everything else which is not "Bible believing." Or so runs the taxonomy. But, one might ask, "Was Luther who had a 'high' understanding of the

inspiration and authority of Scripture yet, (a) thought the 'literal' sense of Scripture was 'Christ,'⁴ and was willing (b) to relegate Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation to deuterocanonical status, a 'conservative' or a 'liberal?'"

The example of Luther suggests that there might be a different way of thinking theologically about the Bible; one that is neither conservative nor liberal, but a different kettle of fish altogether. This insight is not new. In the 1930s, for instance, Henry Offermann (1889–1953), a United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) theologian who taught New Testament at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia maintained:

... we realize today that there is upon us the very important task to set forth before the world the Lutheran attitude toward the Scriptures. Though on the surface conservative Protestants seem in agreement as to the Scriptures, there is a distinctive Lutheran attitude. We agree neither with the liberal attitude nor with the fundamentalist. . . . Our attitude toward the Scriptures is Christocentric. This puts upon us the important task: (1) To emphasize the fact that for

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all of us with our whole heart there is no other authority and rule in faith and life than the Holy Scriptures. (2) We must state anew our Lutheran attitude toward the Scriptures from the Christocentric point of view. The Scriptures are more than the historical record of God's revelation in Christ. The Word of God has a center, Christ Himself.⁵

As a teacher of Bible at the same seminary at which Offermann once worked, I have often wished that I could recommend to my students a work that describes how the tradition of biblical interpretation that informs The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) represents something quite different than either of the reductionist caricatures of the "conservative" or "liberal" approaches that are maintained in the American culture at large. Joseph Sittler's *The Doctrine of the Word in the Structure of Lutheran Theology* (1948) is the last attempt along these lines of which I am aware. Sittler's work is in many ways a masterful treatment of the subject; yet much has changed in the hermeneutical landscape in the last sixty years. Sittler's historical review, for instance, is not well informed about the Lutheran Orthodoxy of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Five Challenges

The present article begins to address this lack of an in-depth description and analysis of the theological traditions that inform the ELCA's current understanding of Scripture. To do so, it is necessary to place the traditions of the ELCA within wider American Lutheranism, as well as the even larger and more complex phenomenon of American Protestantism. A project of this scope presents many challenges. I list five:

1. The ELCA, which came into being in 1988, is the result of a complex history of prior mergers. The church bodies that came together represented significantly different local cultures as well as distinctive hermeneutical traditions.⁶ This merger history explains, in part, the findings of a recent faith practices survey made in the ELCA, which notes, "For better or worse, ELCA Lutheranism is made up of several distinct faith practice groups, each with its own way of believing and relating to the church."⁷
2. A second challenge cuts in the opposite direction from adequately mapping the hermeneutical plurality that exists in the ELCA. When one looks out across the contemporary North American landscape, the ELCA represents only one of two large Lutheran church bodies. The other is the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS). In contrast to the complicated merger history of the ELCA, the LC-MS has maintained its institutional identity since its founding in 1847. Even though there is a great diversity within the ELCA (and a corresponding diversity in the LC-MS) when you look at the churches as a whole, especially with regard to their official statements, it is clear that the Bible is approached very differently in the two church bodies. For instance, on the basis of their styles of reading the Bible, the predecessor bodies of the ELCA began to ordain women in 1970. Missouri still does not.⁸ Some account must be given of the difference between the ELCA and LC-MS. To the extent that this becomes the focus of study, the internal plurality of faith practices in both churches will become less evident.
3. A third challenge has to do with getting at exactly how ordinary Lutherans have used the Bible through the twentieth century. It is relatively easy to chart out what the official statements of the various Lutheran church bodies have been.⁹ It is something else to get at how the Bible has functioned in the life of individual Christians. How did real flesh and blood Lutherans read the Bible 100 years ago? How did they 50 years ago? How are Lutherans reading the Bible today?
4. Although many current theological curricula distinguish between the areas of "biblical studies" and "systematics," such a clear division of academic specialties is lacking until relatively recently.¹⁰ When one chooses to study the way in which the Bible was interpreted among Lutherans in all periods but the recent past, one is inevitably drawn into doctrinal issues.¹¹ This is

because Lutheran confessional literature is itself construed as the church's authoritative exposition of Scripture. The Lutheran theological tradition posits that the confessional material compiled in the *Book of Concord* (1580), in particular the Augsburg Confession (1530),¹² are normative expressions of the faith of the church catholic *because (quia)* they correctly interpret scripture.¹³

Complicating the interrelationship between confessional theology and biblical interpretation is the fact that the Lutheran confessional literature has no distinct article on scripture as, for example, the Reformed tradition does.¹⁴ Distinct Lutheran formulations that spell out precisely the nature of inspiration, the limitation of the canon, how the Word of God (Christ pre-existent, incarnate, crucified and risen) and the Bible are to be distinguished but not separated from one another are, therefore, built upon arguments from the silence of the confessions on these points.¹⁵

More than one argument has been constructed to fill in the lack of a precise doctrine of scripture. This multiplicity of response is, in turn, due to the fact that there is a range of interpretations among scholars with regard to how best to understand the Reformation tradition itself. This is the case in many basic and critical issues. For instance, the discussion continues as to how best to describe Luther's own understanding of biblical inspiration and the authority of Scripture.¹⁶ A consensus also is lacking with regard to how best to describe the changes in biblical interpretation that were introduced by those that followed Luther, e.g., Melancthon and, particularly, the seventeenth-century orthodox dogmatists. Such historical foci of study beg the more fundamental questions: "In what manner is a recovery either of Luther's understanding of the Bible or that of the seventeenth-century theologians, both of which reflect pre-modern ways of construing experience, to be appropriated in the contemporary Lutheran church in order to interpret the Bible?" Similarly, "How is the contemporary church to approach its sixteenth-century confessional documents?" Although one's primary interest might be the recent past (e.g., the twentieth century), the subject of biblical

interpretation in the Lutheran church leads one back to the period of the early Reformation as well as through the intervening centuries. Just below the surface of any attempt to track recent Lutheran usages of the Bible, then, lies profoundly important but exceedingly complex historiographical and hermeneutical issues.

5. Finally, one must analyze how the notions about the Bible that have been at play in the larger American culture—that are not specifically Lutheran—affect the way Lutherans think about the Bible. Of primary importance here is the distinction between "conservative" and "liberal" expressions of the faith, a distinction that is continually being reconstructed in many different forums that range from the popular media to scholarly discussions. I am persuaded that this conservative/liberal distinction that comes so instinctually to many of us in North America is an unhelpful way of thinking about these things.¹⁷ It confuses and obscures more than it clarifies. I am also among those who share the belief that, when it comes to the Bible, there are no true conservatives left in America. There have not been any for some time. The old way of reading the Bible, where its truths were both self-evident and resonated harmoniously with the larger cultural worldview was, even by the 1930s, rarely to be found.¹⁸

The Scriptural Principle of "Old Lutheranism"

Given such challenges, what can be said about how the Bible was interpreted among Lutherans in America in the twentieth century and will be in the twenty-first? The first and lasting impression that strikes the historian is the amazing development that took place, within the theological tradition that became the ELCA, in a very short period of time. The generation that spanned the period from 1930 to 1970 saw the most change. In 1930, no American Lutheran church had yet committed itself publicly to an understanding of Scripture that clearly

distanced itself from the traditional approach that had been in place for three hundred years. By 1970 the divisions were public and clear. To understand the nature of this change, one must ask the question, “What was the ‘traditional’ view of Scripture that became increasingly problematic for many Lutherans in America?”

It was in the seventeenth century—or about a hundred years after Luther—that “Lutheran Orthodoxy” developed. This style of theology is also called “Lutheran Scholasticism” because of the deep influence of the philosophical categories of Aristotle upon its thought. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive study of the largely untranslated Latin works from this period of Lutheran hermeneutics to rival Richard Muller’s magisterial revisionist appraisal of Reformed Orthodoxy.¹⁹ For many in North America, Henrich Schmid’s compendium of seventeenth-century Lutheran orthodox theology has provided what little acquaintance of primary texts one might have from this era.²⁰

I will reduce the elegance of Lutheran Orthodoxy by focusing on the one aspect of its scriptural principle that has most often come under criticism, i.e., the claim that the Scriptures are inerrant, in all matters, scientific as well as soteriological. The Lutheran theologian Quenstadt, who died in 1688, is often quoted as articulating clearly this doctrine:

The canonical Holy Scriptures in the original text are the infallible truth and free from every error, or in other words, in the canonical Holy Scriptures there is found no lie, no falsity, no error, whether in the things or in the words; but all things, and each single one, that are handed down in them are the most true, whether they pertain to doctrine or morals or history, chronology, topography, or nomenclature; no ignorance, no thoughtlessness or forgetfulness, no lapse of memory, can or dare be ascribed to the amanuenses of the Holy Ghost in their penning of the sacred writing. [*Systema* I, 551].²¹

So wrote Quenstadt in the 1600s. In 1915, Jacob Stub of the Norwegian Synod could write of the doctrine of verbal inspiration, “Today almost the entire Lutheran church of America holds to this belief.”²² Even in 1930, Quenstadt’s formulation of

the doctrine of the inspiration and the infallibility of Scripture remained deeply entrenched, not only at the popular level, but also among theologians of various Lutheran church bodies that made up at least two of the three major strains of American Lutheranism at the time.²³ Yet, within a single generation, a quite different way of approaching the Bible would become commonplace in the church bodies that were, in time, to become the ELCA. One enduring icon of this change is the ordination of women to the pastoral office in 1970. In the Old Lutheran approach it was impossible to entertain a doctrine of ministry that included women clergy. It seemed self-evident that Scripture taught with clarity that women could not hold such an office in the church. The proof texts (*dicta probantia*) were found in such passages as 1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11.²⁴

The decisions of the ELCA predecessor churches in 1970, in national votes of their memberships, to ordain women, indicates the sea change that had occurred with respect to the way the Bible was interpreted by a significant number of Lutherans in North America. This change is confirmed by the fact that the term “inerrant,” which had long been used to describe the essence of the Bible, in many prior church bodies, disappeared in the new ELCA church constitution written in 1988. Yet, the question must be asked, how well integrated are the changes? To what extent does the hermeneutical shift symbolized by the ordination of women extend throughout the church membership of the ELCA?

Recent Poll Data

A poll conducted among ELCA Lutherans in 2001 revealed statistics that may strike some as surprising.²⁵ When asked to choose from various statements the one that came closest to describing their feelings about the Bible, 22 percent of respondents picked, “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.” 51 percent chose, “The Bible is the inspired word of God. It contains no errors, but some verses are to be taken symbolically rather than literally.” Only 23 percent

picked, “The Bible is the inspired word of God, but it may contain historical and scientific errors.” In other words, in 2001, 73 percent of the ELCA respondents indicated they held a biblical position that is similar to that articulated by Old Lutheran theology. In the ELCA, at the turn of the twenty-first century, there was both evidence of a radical shift in the way the Bible was engaged during the twentieth century (witnessed by the ordination of women) and evidence of the persistence of a more traditional Bible piety.

The contradictory information about how the Bible is actually interpreted by ordinary church members does not stop here. There is a general sense, among many, that the Bible is being increasingly marginalized in the Lutheran church. A 1996 Gallup poll that took the pulse of America’s religion in general similarly noted that there was a “glaring lack of knowledge about the Bible, basic doctrines, and the traditions of one’s church.”²⁶ Yet, oddly, the 2001 ELCA survey referred to above notes that almost 50 percent of the respondents read their Bible at least once a week.²⁷ This data receives confirmation in the 1996 Gallup poll that indicates that there had been a significant *increase* in Bible reading over the previous 20 years in the United States.²⁸

How is one to reconcile the discontinuity between poll data that indicate: (a) a “glaring lack of knowledge” concerning the Bible; and (b) a robust engagement with the Bible among the ELCA membership as well as other faith communities? One way into understanding such conflicting data begins by noting that throughout the twentieth century it has been consistently voiced that the authority of the Bible, as well as a basic knowledge of its contents, was in rapid decline in the Lutheran church.²⁹ The decidedly non-Lutheran Henry David Thoreau, who died in 1861, perhaps best epitomizes this line of rhetoric when he quipped, “. . . notwithstanding the universal favor with which the New Testament is outwardly received . . . I know of no book that has so few readers.”³⁰ The problem of the perceived marginalization of the Bible in the life of the church, then, can be traced back to the beginnings of the twentieth century, and beyond. From this perspective, Lutherans as well as other

Protestants, it seems, have long revered the Bible more than they have read it.³¹

Yet if 50 percent of the ELCA membership read their Bibles on a weekly basis in 2001, why does the perception that the Bible is “no longer” central to the life of the Lutheran church endure? Why is there this sense that the Bible is not being engaged when—even in 2001—polls tell us, people continued to have a high understanding of the inspiration of the Bible, its authority, and engage it regularly?

The Demise of Biblical Civilization

The answer to this question, I believe, lies in the deep changes that American society underwent in the 1920s and 1930s. While the frequency of Bible reading may have stayed steady through the twentieth century and even increased toward its end, the surrounding social context of this reading shifted radically during that century, to the extent that the world of the Bible and the world of dominant North American culture became realities of a different order. The Bible became a book from a different time and different place; a book that was increasingly difficult to apply in one’s own life. So, although the Bible was read, and with great interest, increasingly few were able to discern, with clarity, exactly how these Scriptures were to be the rule, the norm, the guide to contemporary Christian faith and life. This gap between the Bible and its readers had not always been there. There was a time in the United States when people read the Bible and the truth content of it was self-evident, and its application seemed more straightforward.³² Up through much of the 1800s, historians of the nineteenth century tell us, a broadly evangelical Protestant consensus powerfully gripped mainstream American culture, a consensus that was “very much a product of common assumptions about what the Bible is and teaches.”³³

In trying to get at when and why this Bible-based cultural consensus unraveled, Grant Wacker notes the following:

For ordinary people the 1920s and 1930s seem to have been the decisive years of transition. In 1924, when [the sociologists] Robert and Helen Lynd were doing their initial field-work in "Middletown,"... most people claimed to believe in the exclusiveness of Christianity, the certainty of heaven and hell, the sacredness of the Bible, and the divinity of Jesus. When the Lynds returned a decade later, however, they found that the old belief had deteriorated to what they called an "unalert acceptance" of traditional verities.... [Other historians] who have made it their business to see American religion in the long perspective—have similarly concluded that the 1920s and 1930s were a watershed. The average person did not disavow the Bible so much as simply abandon it. By the end of the 1930s, to borrow a phrase from Conrad Wright, Americans had grown accustomed to using "a secular rather than a theological vocabulary when issues really seem[ed] worth arguing about."³⁴

I would modify these observations slightly. It was not so much that church people abandoned their Bibles. They kept reading them. Yet the reading was not as before. Replacing the comfort that the Bible had given, the reassurance that one's life fell under the well-ordered providence of God, was a new anxiety, perhaps not easily articulated, that the old truths were no longer as secure as they had once been.

The orthodox notion that the Scriptures were inerrant in all matters became increasingly problematic as scientific discoveries of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries continued to widen the gap between the biblical world and ours. As long as no real discrepancies were perceived between the world of the Bible and the contemporary world, the scriptural position of Lutheran orthodoxy was reasonable. However, the insistence of the inerrancy of Scripture in all matters becomes increasingly an irrational belief when confronted with the discoveries that the earth was not the center of the solar system, that its life span was of the order of billions and not a mere 6,000 years; that Adam and Eve had to be squared somehow with Darwin; that the apparent cultural suppositions of the New Testament were perhaps not valid for all time (in,

for instance, the ranking of man over woman; of free over slave; of Christian over all others); that the moral code (articulated in the OT and refined in the New) was problematic in some details in the modern world.³⁵ Once such problems surfaced, it was difficult to read the Bible in the same old way. The increasingly complex accommodations that were needed to bring biblical texts into harmony with the discoveries of modernity became too daunting for many to master with confidence.

The Watershed of the 1930s

The observations of American church historians that the 1930s were a watershed decade in the way people related to the Bible is confirmed by a reading of the Lutheran material from the early twentieth century. There are few indications in the first two decades of the twentieth century that the Old Lutheran scriptural stance was perceived as problematic by the majority of church folk. This was the case for a variety of reasons. Let me list two:

1. The training of clergy in most of the seminaries of the various Lutheran church bodies was still deeply traditional and informed by the great dogmatic treatments of the seventeenth century. The style of preaching and pastoring was deeply permeated by this theology. The historical-critical approach to the scriptures was not to be found at any Lutheran seminary in the United States.³⁶ The first very cautious introductions of historical-critical exegetical method, in the twentieth century,³⁷ occurred among ULCA professors at the very end of the 1920s.³⁸
2. The energy of the various Lutheran churches in the first decades of the twentieth century was directed at the practical needs of the still rapidly growing immigrant communities. The demands upon the church had more to do with meeting the challenges of organizing new churches, colleges, seminaries, and responding to the need for clergy. The big decline in immigration did not occur until the 1930s; the construction of a new theology was not a high priority up to this point.³⁹

Many Lutherans in America in the early twentieth century did not feel the need to depart from the old ways of thinking because they were living in small local cultures that were relatively isolated from the larger world.⁴⁰ Soon, however, such cultural isolation would end. World War I, among other disruptive forces, made it impossible to live in the same way as before. Increasingly, English became the language of the church in those areas of the country where German or Norwegian or Swedish or Finnish or Danish had recently sufficed.⁴¹ The succeeding generations of immigrants—born in America—experienced, often, a different kind and level of education than had their parents.⁴² Communication and transportation technology evolved rapidly, changing the nature of the flow of information. Urbanization was a constant and increasing trend.⁴³ Upward mobility was a clearly expressed value, and this entailed the prestige of higher education. In colleges, the larger world was experienced.⁴⁴ The old way of reading the Bible, that had been a part of the seamless experience of a worldview where the age of the earth was fixed, where this planet was the center of God's infinite concern, and that assumed that human nature had not much changed since the days when Jesus and Paul proclaimed the gospel, was no longer so effortless. Gradually and quietly, the old way of reading the Bible would become more of a cultural rarity.⁴⁵

Although for many American Lutherans the perception of what constituted the wider world changed radically in the years after World War I, it is important to note that the scriptural principle as articulated by the Old Lutherans did not disappear with the epistemology that had given it life. The old doctrine of scripture has been maintained—although with hardship—by a significant minority in the ELCA up to the present day. It is still the official position of the Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, as well as other smaller Lutheran church bodies. Yet, even though the old doctrine has been retained, the larger social context—American culture—no longer supports it or is informed by it as was the case in the decades before 1930.

To maintain a belief in the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible after 1930 necessarily meant that the Bible must be read in ways the seventeenth-century orthodox could never have imagined. The Old Lutheran scriptural principle had been formulated, in part, to give voice to the belief that there could be no fundamental contradiction between God's revelation through nature, and through the Bible.⁴⁶ God's Word was the creative agent behind both. Yet, the retention of the Old Lutheran scriptural principle in the modern church actually led to the irony that the revelation of God in these two spheres—nature and the Bible—are constantly at odds with one another. To maintain a belief in the scriptural principle of Old Lutheranism increasingly demanded a *sacrificium intellectus*—a sacrifice of the intelligence—as the twentieth century wore on.⁴⁷

The Old Lutheran approach to Scripture evolved into something quite different, then, *both* among those that held on to it, *and* among those who found it no longer to be a helpful way of interpreting the Bible. What came to replace the Old Lutheran way, among those who found its doctrine no longer tenable? How was it managed?

There are two aspects to this chapter of the story. One part of it has to do with an ongoing critique that was leveled at the Old Lutheran position, to indicate its weaknesses; the other effort was constructive and was directed to building meaningful connections across the gap between the Bible and modern American culture that had opened up in the twentieth century.

Criticism of the Scriptural Principle of Old Lutheranism

I mention three aspects of criticism leveled upon the Old Lutheran scriptural position that evolved from within wider Lutheranism:

First, the primary weakness of the Old Orthodox scriptural position, as already noted, was seen to lie in its inability to deal effectively with 300 years of truths established by scientific and historical research, including that research done on the Bible itself.

Second, in opposition to the Old Lutheran assumption that theology, once its truths were correctly articulated, need never change,⁴⁸ the New Lutherans were committed to the ideal that each generation should formulate the doctrines of the church in its own contemporary terms. Why, it was asked, should a seventeenth-century use of Aristotelian scholastic categories determine how one in the twentieth century understands the doctrines of the church? It is important to note that, in this advocacy for a new expression of the faith, there was initially never any thought that the articulation would be anything but orthodox, that is, guided by the ancient rule of faith. The fundamental doctrines of the church (i.e., the trinity, the two natures of Christ, the doctrine of original sin, the atonement effected by the death of Christ, the centrality of justification) were never at stake. What was under dispute was the way in which these doctrines were to be interpreted in the modern church and the manner in which they were thought to be derived from the Bible.

Third, the new theologians consistently claimed that the orthodox dogmatists had a tendency to reduce the nature of faith itself to a set of propositions or facts that must be believed. In the Old Lutheran systematics, once one accepted the assumption that the Scriptures were inerrant, various doctrines (in propositional form) were identified in the Bible for which intellectual assent was demanded. This theological ethos had long been critiqued by Lutheran pietists who thought the heart had been taken out of faith by the scholastic method orthodoxy employed. The New Theologians picked up this pietist critique and carried it forward. In the appropriation of this critique, however, there was little reflection concerning how adequate was the pietist characterization of Old Lutheranism as dry, mechanical, and unduly noetic.

The Approach to Scripture in New Lutheranism

In order to construct a new way reading the Bible for the twentieth century, the new theologians gathered tools from many quarters. I mention here five.

1. Of primary importance was the recovery of the biblical theology of the early Reformation, primarily that of Luther. At the beginning of the twentieth century, much American Lutheran theology accepted as a given that the seventeenth century had provided the church with an accurate interpretation of both Luther and the confessional writings that make up the Book of Concord. This was soon to change. Beginning in Germany in the nineteenth century, Luther's own writings again became the subject of intense study. This research, driven in part as a critique of orthodoxy, revealed that Luther's approach to Scripture differed significantly from that of the seventeenth century. Luther simply did not equate the Word of God with the Bible in the same way as did the orthodox fathers. For Luther, the Word of God was understood to be—first and foremost—*not* the Bible, but Christ, crucified and risen. *This* Word of God, *this* Christ, was to be found in the active proclamation of the Gospel, a proclamation that sought out people where they were, in the midst of their lives, and claimed them in body and spirit as well as mind.

The new Luther research also discovered that, in the early Reformation, the discussion about the extent of the canon was open in ways it was not in the seventeenth century. Luther's understanding of the Gospel—as that Word of God that “urges” Christ (*was Christum treibet*) upon the world—and his knowledge of the early church's questioning of the status of some of the contents of the canon (what the tradition calls the *antilegomena*), allowed Luther to relegate entire books of the Bible to a secondary status. Most famous is his negative opinion of the book of James, but he also doubted the apostolicity of other individual books.

With the rediscovery of Luther also came a new appreciation for his understanding of the Word of God encountered as both Law and Gospel. Orthodox Lutheranism, especially as carried forward by LC-MS in North America, had always stressed the distinction between Law and Gospel.⁴⁹ The dynamic, however, was employed in a new way among some

Lutherans in the twentieth century. As Law, the Word reveals to us who we are and the depth of our sin; as Gospel, it forgives us and grants us new life. The Word of God, then, both kills and makes alive, it is both cross and resurrection, judgment and redemption. If this Word is to be effective as Law and Gospel, the New Lutherans thought, it needs to confront Sin in similar terms as do ordinary people, in the real world of everyday experience. It is not enough to go to the Bible and simply search for what is Law and Gospel in that book.⁵⁰ Here too, in the recovery of Luther's understanding of Law and Gospel, a way was seen to break through the more rigid application of the seventeenth-century hermeneutic that equated the books of the Bible with the Word of God.

2. Increasingly, there was a shift in the way the Bible itself was approached in the seminaries of the church. The historical-critical approach to the Bible, introduced very cautiously in the late 1920s in the UCLA, within a generation was widely used. This new method was seen as a way of opening up the Bible, to recover the great diversity of its witness and the dynamic, inventive quality of primitive Christian faith. Once historical-criticism became the accepted methodology, the Old Lutheran approach to scripture that was based on totally different assumptions (e.g., the unity of Scripture), was no longer possible in principle. In time, even the centrality of the doctrine of justification came under attack by certain Lutheran exegetes.⁵¹
3. The use of historical-critical methodology and the resultant recovery of a variety of biblical theologies made possible a new openness for ecumenical engagement by Lutherans.⁵² It allowed exegetes from different faith traditions to pursue a common study of Scripture. Here the church was also reflecting the ideal advocated by the academic study of the Bible. Krister Stendahl, a Lutheran New Testament exegete who taught at Harvard Divinity School, in an influential article on "Biblical Theology" written in 1962, strongly advocated that biblical exegesis was properly a "descriptive" enterprise. Exegesis

needed to restrict itself to a discovery of "What a text meant" in its original historical situation rather than "What it means" to the contemporary church. All historically trained scholars, of whatever faith perspective—or none at all—could participate in this task.⁵³

4. In addition to the recovery of Luther and the use of new historical methodologies, the New Lutheran approach to Scripture also relied upon the resources long associated with Pietism. Though Pietism never abandoned the classic doctrines of the church, the emphasis was placed on the actual experience of the believer of regeneration through Christ, i.e., on what might be called the "existential" dimension of the life of the believer. This existential interest—understood in terms of the new life in Christ—was taken forward by the new Lutheran theologians.⁵⁴ It dovetailed with the recovery of the work of Søren Kierkegaard as well as the philosophy of existentialism that was then fashionable.⁵⁵
5. The same period that saw the evolution of a new Lutheran way of looking at scripture in America, also saw the flowering of the wider theological movement of Neo-Orthodoxy. This movement is most often connected with such theologians as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Although the Neo-Lutheran theologians took issue with aspects of Neo-Orthodoxy, they shared its commitment that no return to the Old Orthodoxy's understanding of scripture, as inerrant and verbally inspired, was possible.

Conclusion

The basic story line of how the Bible functioned among twentieth century Lutherans is not complicated. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the differences among the extant Lutheran church bodies with respect to their approach to the Bible, while not insignificant, were not construed as particularly problematic. This is because all Lutheran bodies in America were shaped, to greater or lesser degree, by the grand systematic constructions of Lutheran Orthodoxy. There were issues that

separated individual theologians across the various church bodies with regard to the use and understanding of scripture (e.g., how one understood the issue of inspiration),⁵⁶ but most would argue that such differences did not diminish the strong continuity with the scriptural principle as articulated by the orthodox dogmatists. The one exception here, perhaps, is among Eastern Lutherans (i.e., the General Synod, the General Council).⁵⁷ By the end of the twentieth century, however, two distinctive traditions of interpretation had emerged, one represented by the ELCA and one represented by the LC-MS.

One common way to describe the differences between these two traditions is to note that, while the LC-MS continues to value highly the doctrinal developments of the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy and sees in them a proper articulation of the confessional tradition, the ELCA approaches the seventeenth-century doctrinal codifications with a hermeneutic of suspicion, allowing itself rather to be shaped by the recovery of the theological hermeneutic of Luther that occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This characterization of the difference between the ELCA and Missouri is, to a certain extent, justified. In many ways, the story of how Lutherans in America in the twentieth century came to regard the Bible is the story of how some remained committed to the "Old Lutheran" understanding of the Bible, and how some were led to develop theological resources discovered by a historical-critical study of the early Reformation as well as the Bible, resources that were found to speak in new ways to the increasingly ecumenically open Lutheran church of the post World War II era. Yet some questions need to be raised with regard to the adequacy of this received tradition.

A historical narrative that characterizes Missouri in terms of a repristation of seventeenth-century dogmatics and the ELCA in terms of a fresh and objective recovery of Luther's sixteenth-century hermeneutic, does not adequately describe how the Bible functioned among either American Lutheran group at the turn of the twenty-first century. Such a view not only distorts both theological traditions (i.e., both that of orthodoxy as well as the one based on the modern

recovery of "Luther"), but perhaps more importantly, does not adequately acknowledge the great changes that occurred in wider American culture in the twentieth century and the corresponding shifts that occurred in the biblical apologetics of both theological traditions.

Both Missouri's re-appropriation of Old Lutheranism and the ELCA's "New Lutheranism" represent responses to the encounter with modernity experienced first at the grassroots level by many Lutherans first only in the 1920s and 1930s. The biblical theologies that evolved in both Missouri and the ELCA in the twentieth century are, then, both "counter modern," though in different ways. The biblical hermeneutics of both Missouri and the ELCA, as different as they are, represent appropriations of pre-modern Lutheran traditions in an attempt to respond to the new way of construing experience that came suddenly upon many Lutherans in the early twentieth century. As such, they share more in common than might first strike the eye.

The project of constructing a Lutheran biblical hermeneutic that more self-consciously deals with the great sociological and intellectual changes that occurred in North American society lies largely ahead of us. The first step, it seems to me, to constructing an adequate Lutheran hermeneutic for the twenty-first century is an analysis of the various changes that occurred in the twentieth century, an analysis that is willing to criticize both "counter modern" interpretive streams (i.e., LC-MS and ELCA) that evolved. This article represents the beginning of such work.

Unless new energy is given to this descriptive task and further constructive work is done to bring the world of the Bible and the social world(s) of the contemporary Lutheran churches in North America on better speaking terms, it may be irrelevant whether or not people continue to read their Bibles. In either case it may appear, to people both outside and within the Lutheran church, that the Bible has simply vanished from our midst. One will then be left with the reductionist liberal/conservative dichotomy, a hermeneutical paradigm that is inadequate to the task at hand. In the last analysis, H. Offermann's imperative is as urgent today as

it was when first articulated some two generations ago: “We must state *anew* our Lutheran attitude toward the Scriptures from a Christocentric point of view.”

Endnotes

1. Inge Lønning, “The Holy Scriptures,” *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 96.
2. As Edwin S. Gaustad, “The Bible and American Protestantism,” *Altered Landscapes: Christianity in America, 1935–1985*, ed. David W. Lotz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 210.
3. On the common sense philosophical tradition, see Mark Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37 (1985): 216–238.
4. On the background of the double “literal sense” of Scripture, understood as (a) the meaning intended by the human author, and (b) the meaning intended by the divine author, see the discussion in Karlfried Froehlich, “Problems of Lutheran Hermeneutics,” *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 128; also Scott Hendrix, “Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation,” *Interpretation* 28 (1983), 232–233; Richard A. Muller, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, vol. 2 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 56–57.
5. Quoted in E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America 1914–1970* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 99.
6. Todd Nichol, “The American Lutheran Church: An Historical Study of its Confession of Faith according to its Constituting Documents” (Th.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1988), charts the distinctive approach of the ALC (1960–1987) to the Bible. Nichol argues that the geographical “middle synods” (Joint Synod of Ohio, Buffalo and Texas Synods, Iowa Synod, Hauge’s Synod, Norwegian Synod, United Norwegian Lutheran Church, Lutheran Free Church, Augustana Synod, United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church) that were influential in the formation of the ALC also provided a “middle term” with respect to biblical usage in that it was positioned between the more traditional emphases of Old Lutheranism represented by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the New Lutheran approach of the Lutheran Church in America (1962–1987).
7. Kenneth W. Inskeep, “Religious Commitment in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: Findings from the *Faith Practices Survey*, 2001,” (Department for Research and Evaluation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, July 23, 2001), 2.
8. Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4, notes that the most visible difference for many between the ELCA and the LC-MS lies in fact that Missouri does not allow the ordination of women to the pastoral office. Missouri’s resistance to this practice is the focus of Todd’s investigation. For a defense of the position, see, “What About . . . the Ordination of Women to the Pastoral Office,” one of many “What About” pamphlets produced by the Office of the President, LC-MS, during the tenure of Dr. A. L. Barry. This is available at: http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/LCMS/wa_ordinationofwomen.pdf.
9. See, e.g., Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).
10. Krister Stendahl, in “Biblical Theology: A Program,” *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 14–15, argues that a clear distinction between systematic and exegetical tasks becomes possible with the rise of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (History of Religions School) at the turn of the twentieth century.
11. The “Epitome” of The Formula of Concord (1577) states that “Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge, rule, and guiding principle, according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are good or evil, correct or incorrect.” *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 487.
12. The Book of Concord (1580) contains the following documents: The three Ecumenical Creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, Athanasian); The Augsburg Confession (1530); the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (September 1531); The Smalcald Articles (1537); Treatise on the Primacy of the Pope (1537); The Small Catechism (1529); The Large Catechism (1529); The Formula of Concord (1577).
13. A distinction is sometimes made between those who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions “because” (*quia*) they are correct expositions of scripture, and those who subscribe “in so far as” (*quatenus*) the Confessions are correct interpretations of scripture. On the relationship between Scripture and the Confessions, see Edmund Schlink, “Scripture and Confessions,” in *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. P. Koehnke and H. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), xvi, 29; and Ralph Bouman, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, revised ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), 19–20.
14. On the differences between the Lutheran confessional tradition and that of the Reformed churches regarding scripture, see Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 116–127. Excerpts from these documents can be found in an appendix to this work, “Reformed Confessions on Scripture,” 462–471. See also Richard A. Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 74–86.
15. E. Schlink, *Theology*, 1 n. 1; Inge Lønning, “The Holy Scriptures,” 90.
16. Richard A. Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 63–67.
17. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, eds., *Reforming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), contains essays from the “Re-forming the Center: Beyond the Two Party System of American Protestantism” project which also questions the adequacy of the analysis of American Protestantism in terms of two opposed factions, the fundamentalist/evangelical and liberal/mainline.
18. Darrell Jodock, *The Church’s Bible: Its Contemporary Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 25.
19. Richard Muller, *Holy Scripture*. On the Lutheran side, in English, the most comprehensive treatments are found in Robert Preus’ work, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmatists* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957); and *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1970).
20. Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Verified from the Original Sources*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1889). This work was reprinted by Augsburg Press in 1961.
21. Quoted from Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 223.
22. Jacob Stub, *Verbal Inspiration* (Decorah: Lutheran Publishing House, 1915), 27.
23. The two strains were the Old Lutherans and the Lutheranism of the “middle synods”, those church bodies that came together to form the

American Lutheran Conference in 1930. The third strain is represented by the theological developments that began to emerge in the ULCA in the late 1920s. Though the ULCA's early statements on Scripture were informed by the traditional consensus, it was receptive also to the "mediating" theology of the nineteenth-century Lutheran confessional renewal of the Erlangen school. The three-fold typology which recognizes distinctive approaches to Scripture among Lutherans in North America is developed in Todd W. Nichols, "The American Lutheran Church."

24. Proof texts taken from C.H. Little, *Disputed Doctrines: A Study in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology* (Burlington: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1933), 69–72. Counter passages cited on p. 71: Gal 3:28, 1 Cor 12:13, Gal 5:6, Col 3:11.

25. Kenneth W. Inskip, "Religious Commitment in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America."

26. George Gallup Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape: Trends in U.S. Beliefs* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1999), 4. This data receives confirmation even in Evangelical circles. See John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Evangelical Landscapes: Facing Critical Issues of the Day* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 64, 71.

27. 2001 Faith Practices survey interviewed 600 Lutherans over 18 selected randomly from complete membership lists from 40 ELCA congregations.

28. The Gallup poll indicates that in 1978 only 30% of those who owned Bibles said they read them once a week. In 1996, the figure had risen to 47%, a 50% increase.

29. The Lutheran Bible Institute was organized in Minneapolis in 1925. One of the motivating forces for the creation of the Lutheran Bible Institute in 1925 was the perceived lack of biblical knowledge among church folk. See F. Kibler, *Lutheran Bible Institute: The Original Vision* (California: LBI, 2000), 20, 23.

30. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906, 1961), 73–74, quoted in Marty E. Marty, "Scripturality: The Bible as Icon in the Republic," in *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 151.

31. E. Gaustad, "The Bible and American Protestantism," 225.

32. E. Gaustad, "The Bible and American Protestantism," 221.

33. Grant Wacker, "The Demise of Biblical Civilization," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford, 1982), 122. This description does not recognize the different uses of the Bible in the debates about slavery in North America.

34. Grant Wacker, "The Demise of Biblical Civilization," 122.

35. See C. A. Wendell, "What is Lutheranism?" in *What is Lutheranism? A Symposium in Interpretation*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 229–230 for a similar listing.

36. Eugene L. Fevold, "Coming of Age, 1875–1900," *The Lutherans in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 306.

37. There were earlier forms of "historical" or "rational" criticism applied to the Bible in the nineteenth century by American Lutherans theologians of the General Synod, e.g., Frederick Quitman (1760–1832) and Samuel Schmucker (1799–1873). These attempts were generally abandoned in the course of the nineteenth century in the face of an aggressive renewal of Lutheran confessionalism.

38. E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America 1914–1970*, 72, 98, 114 n. 101.

39. E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America 1914–1970*, 12. D. Olaf Moe, "A European Characterization of the Three Main Branches of the Lutheran Church," *The Lutheran Church Quarterly* 1:3 (1928), 310.

40. Leigh D. Jordahl, "American Lutheranism: Ethos, Style, and Polity," *The Lutheran Church in North American Life*, ed. John E. Groh and Robert H. Smith (St. Louis: Clayton, 1979), 42, 50.

41. T. Gullixson, "Our English Work, the Problem," *Teologisk Tidsskrift* 3 (1920), 301–314.

42. T. Gullixson, "Our English Work, the Problem," 308: "According to the very latest educational statistics, verified thru the information gathered in making up our mighty army, the average child in America quits school somewhere between the fifth and the sixth grades. North Dakota, according to competent authority, does not rise above, but rather falls below this average." On the impact of changing education expectations see Charles M. Jacobs, "Inaugural Address," *The Lutheran Church Review* 46 (1927), 214.

43. Theodore C. Bachmann, "The Church and the Rise of Modern Society, 1830–1914," *The Lutheran Heritage*, vol. 2, ed. Harold C. Letts. *Christian Social Responsibility: A Symposium in Three Volumes* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 115, notes that while in the mid-nineteenth century most North Americans were living in rural communities, by 1910 nearly half were in cities.

44. R. Kibler, *The Original Vision*, 23 quotes Adolf Hult, a founder of the Minneapolis Bible Institute, in 1919, indicating that church colleges had departed from "the church's ideals, the church's point of view." For a first-hand account of what one encountered in college, see Fredrik A. Schiotz, *One Man's Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 143. A general history of Lutheran colleges and seminaries can be found in Richard W. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

45. On the changes in world views, see C. A. Wendell, "What is Lutheranism?", 26–28.

46. See, e.g., Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 121.

47. See Robert D. Preus, *A Study of Theological Prolegomena*, 298.

48. This has been described as Old Lutheranism's "burden of infallibility." See Theodore Graebner, "Burden of Infallibility: A Study in the History of Dogma," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 38 (1965), 89.

49. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928).

50. See, e.g., Gerhard Forde, "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," *Theological Perspectives: A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Lutheran Theology by Members of the Department of Religion, Luther College* (Decorah: Luther College, 1964), 62–63.

51. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jesus and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 2.

52. Warren A. Quanbeck, *Search for Understanding: Lutheran Conversations with Reformed, Anglican, and Roman Catholic Churches* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 27.

53. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), quoted from Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology: A Program," in *Meanings*, 22.

54. G. Forde, "Law and Gospel," 60–61.

55. See, for example, Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 16–21.

56. Eugene L. Fevold, "Coming of Age, 1875–1900," 306.

57. See discussion in Erik M. Heen, "The Distinction 'Material/Formal Principles' and its Use in American Lutheran Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 17 (2003): 329–354.

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