

“Scriptural Theology and the ELCA: Challenges and Resources”

Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible Consultation

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I. Introduction.

We come together, today, to begin a process that will result in resources that will help ELCA Lutherans hear the Word of God as it comes to us mediated by biblical texts. In this work we are privileged to join the company of witnesses to the Gospel who have come before us, commissioned with the same task.

We are, then, entering a stream of theological inquiry and confession that has been flowing for a long time. If one takes the “long view” of this matter of scriptural interpretation, as I tend to do, some of the tensions we are now experiencing in the ELCA seem not so new. For example, even a quick glance at the Hebrew Scriptures reveals two on-going concerns that can appear to be in some tension with one another. On the one hand, one sees everywhere a commitment to transmit with great care, the traditions of the ancestors. At the same time, it is clear that these same sacred traditions are expected to speak in new ways for new times. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the old traditions and the new interpretations inhabit the same space, side-by-side. And, they are in continual dialogue with one another.¹

So too, today, there is a rich conversation going on in the ELCA; a conversation that is attempting to discern answers to a very basic question: “How are the ancient texts that make up the biblical canon to speak to us in our present context?” Or, “How *do* these texts mediate the Word of God to us today?”

II. Theology of the Cross.

Let me say -- up front -- what I think is the most critical theological insight that needs to be kept in mind as we begin to articulate our responses to this question. That insight is what Lutheran tradition calls “The Theology of the Cross.”² What I think must be done by the ELCA -- among other things -- is to extend the Theology of the Cross into the area of biblical

¹See Diane Jacobson, “Reading Strategies in the Light of Biblical Diversity,” in *Witnessing to God’s Faithful: Issues of Biblical Authority*, ed. Reinhard Boettcher (Geneva: LWF, 2006), 49-62. This volume is hereafter referred to as LWF (2006).

²The most recent contributions of ELCA members to this tradition of which I am aware are, Anna M. Madsen, *Theology of the Cross in Historical Perspective* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2007); Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); Roy A. Harrisville, *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). Definitions of The Theology of the Cross are illusive. A.E. McGrath, in “Cross, Theology of” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. Hawthorne et. al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), suggests this contextual gloss: “A theology of the cross treats the cross as the exclusive ground of salvation. All other events within the history of salvation (such as the resurrection of Christ or his coming again in glory) are seen as being set in their proper context by the cross. Thus, in the case of the Corinthian theology so powerfully criticized by Paul, the resurrection appears to be detached from the cross and treated as relativizing the crucifixion. The theology of the cross negates this relativizing development.” McGrath also suggests that “a theology of the cross declares that the cross is the “starting point of authentically Christian theology,” and that “a theology of the cross treats the cross as the center of all Christian thought in that from its center radiate Christian statements on ethics, anthropology, the Christian life and so on. *The doctrines of revelation and salvation, so easily detached from one another, converge on the cross.*” Italics mine.

interpretation. That is, we must teach one another anew, as a church, how to read the Bible as theologians of the cross.

I do not have time this morning to make a programmatic statement of what this would look like in any kind of detail. To a large degree I leave this charge -- to extend the Theology of the Cross into the area of biblical interpretation -- to your theological imaginations.

But, succinctly expressed, the following is my thinking about this. As an exegete, I couch it within my understanding of the New Testament. I move here historically.

Jesus

The “Bible” of the earliest Christians -- Hebrew Scriptures, or the Septuagint (LXX), their Greek translations -- constitute a marvelously rich witness to the revelation of God in word and deed. Yet, wonderful as the Hebrew Scriptures are, something quite new enters the picture with Jesus. With Jesus, scriptural interpretation takes on new dimensions that fundamentally change the way those who are swept up into the kingdom of God relate to biblical text. While Jesus -- like other Jewish sages -- both knew well and venerated God’s Torah, Jesus also read himself into Israel’s story in a way that was thought blasphemous by many of his most pious and learned contemporaries -- including scribes, those experts in the care and management of the textual traditions of Israel. This reading of Jesus into Israel’s story eventuated in the gospel of *Christ Jesus* as well as the New Testament.

Paul

And, there is the cross. Where Jesus’ historical ministry ends -- on the cross -- there also dies, once and for all, any facile understanding of what the Word of God is. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians, a theology that understands that God is most fully revealed in Jesus’ death on a Roman cross is very different from a theology that does not. A theologian of the cross will discern in the death of God on the cross the revealed wisdom of God. And the alternative? Well, the alternative is what Luther called a “theologian of glory (who) calls evil good and good evil.”³ To a theologian of glory, the claim of a crucified Christ simply offends the deepest religious instincts (1 Cor 1:18-23, 3:19).

The Apostle Paul understands the difference between a Theology of Glory and that of the Cross well, from the inside out. Remember, Paul’s first response to the proclamation of Christ crucified was to reject it. Not only that, Paul actively persecuted the church because of its claim that the crucified Jesus was Israel’s messiah. Paul’s zealotry in this task was driven, in part, by biblical proof-texts that convinced him that the church’s claim that God’s messiah could be hung on a tree and left to die was simply impossible (Deut 21:22-23; cf. Gal 3:13).

In the midst of his persecution of the church, however, Paul discovered that rather than doing the righteous work of God (by stamping out the heresy of the church), Paul had become the enemy of God’s messiah. Paul learned that it was precisely his zeal to protect God’s righteousness (and God’s Scripture) that was the cover Sin used to slip in unawares, with the result that Paul opposed God’s Christ. It was a lesson Paul never forgot. It is the engine that drives his theology.⁴

What Paul also learned was that on the cross, the humanly constructed, self-authenticating categories of what is sacred and what is profane were emptied of their content. What could be less holy than a Roman killing field? Yet it was there that God was most fully disclosed. In other words, after the cross, it simply will not do to rely on our religious instincts to determine what is “holy,” what is “pure,” what is “righteous” -- and what is not -- before God.

³“The Heidelberg Disputation (1518),” thesis number 21. *LW* 31:40.

⁴Paul’s citation of Deut 21:22-23 in Gal 3:13, from this perspective, might be the archetypal example of urging “Christ against Scripture.” On this provocative “slogan” used in a *Promotionsdisputation* of von Heironymus Weller and Nikolaus Medler in September 11, 1535, see Márta Cserhádi, “Finding the Keys: Unity and Diversity in the Bible,” LWF (2006), 67.

This is especially the case when those religious instincts are buttressed by snippets of Holy Writ, that serve as proof-texts for whatever it is that one might wish to justify by means of the Word of God.⁵

If one thinks that a Theology of the Cross has something to say to the practical tasks of biblical interpretation, then, I think, the project ahead seems both very important and very interesting. For I think the world hungers for this Word of the Cross that can liberate one from human hubris and denial. But there are challenges here also. The major one, I think, is that such a theology goes against the grain of the way most people in North America are socialized into Bible-reading. A Theology of the Cross is not a “self-evident” theology, hence the need for “revelation.”⁶ By contrast, alternatives to a Scriptural Theology of the Cross, are very entrenched in the religious imagination of our culture, supported as they are by a non-reflective commitment to “common-sense”: “The Bible says what it means, and means what it says.” What makes the alternatives to a Scriptural Theology of the Cross so attractive, of course, is that in addition to being “self-evident” they seem so pious. After all, they are “Bible-believing.” As Peter Gomes once noted, Sin that masquerades as a “surplus of virtue” -- that is, self-righteousness -- is a very difficult thing for the conscience to get a hold of.⁷ It is Sin at its insidious best. It is, by the way, something that affects us all. There is no purity here.

III. Abundance of Resources.

I for one, think that the Theology of the Cross lies not only at the heart of Paul’s theology, but undergirds the entire New Testament. It is there, so to speak, at the biblical source. It is also recovered in a variety of readings in the long history of churchly biblical interpretation; a history that also takes a variety of twists and turns through the patristic era, the middle ages, the Reformation, the period of Protestant Orthodoxy, and on through the modern era, into what some are calling post-modernity. Also, by the way, in the world of academic biblical study, the theological interpretation of Scripture is presently enjoying quite a wonderful renaissance. You can even feel it at the Society of Biblical Literature’s annual meetings.

The Bible is not being ignored today. In churches across the world, on a daily basis, the Bible is being read and interpreted, in many different situations -- in contexts of material abundance and incredible want -- from the bedside visit in the African AIDs ward, to the pulpit in Orange County on Sunday morning. So, although the ELCA may be beginning a process of deliberation and study, it does so in continuity with an ancient *and* presently very lively tradition of scriptural theology. In fact, one of the challenges that we face, is the abundant richness of the church’s long, complex, and lively relationship with Holy Scripture. How does one manage such a surplus of resources? Again, I would argue, one way to negotiate this abundance is to use the Theology of the Cross as a compass.

IV. ELCA Constitution

Having made my plea that the Theology of the Cross be central to our on-going deliberations, allow me to move to a very brief discussion of other resources.

Even if we are to limit our field of vision to Lutheran trajectories of biblical interpretation -- and simply assume the larger resources of the church catholic -- we have our

⁵In this regard, as Luther once noted, Scripture has a wax nose. It can be formed into any shape that one might wish.

⁶The biblical hermeneutic of common-sense “literalism” has its analog in the common-sense realism that undergirds the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident...”

⁷Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Avon, 1996), 51. Gomes expresses the notion in the form of an aphorism:

“A surplus of virtue,” it says, “is more dangerous than a surplus of vice.”

“Why?” we ask naturally.

“Because a surplus of virtue is not subject to the constraints of conscience.”

hands quite full. There is remarkable depth in the Lutheran confessional tradition that, in many different historical, social, and economic contexts, articulate a variety of Lutheran encounters with the Bible understood as a Means of Grace.

There are also, obviously, numerous ways into this material. What I’ll do this morning is to engage one particular resource that lies close to home -- the Constitution of the ELCA, the wording of which is carefully parsed and very helpful.

I have appended “Chapter Two” of the Constitution of the ELCA -- where the language about the Word of God and its relationship to the Bible is found -- to text of my presentation.

2.01.

Chapter Two of the Constitution begins (2.01.) with a confession of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This confession can function as a reminder to us that the Bible itself is taken up in the Triune God’s economy of salvation.⁸ Or said somewhat differently, the Bible is the Means of Grace of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Father

You will note, for instance, that the ELCA Constitution speaks of the use of Scripture by God for God’s ongoing *creative* activity -- specifically to create “faith” (2.02.a.) and “the church” (2.07.) *for* fellowship, service, and mission. That is, the Bible is taken up here into first-article theological reflection.

Spirit

Also, the constitution addresses the role of the Holy Spirit (2.02.c.) in the inspiration of the text of Scripture. This reflects the church’s classic understanding of the role of the Third Person of the Trinity in the production of the written Word of God.

I would suggest that this modeling of how Scripture is taken up in the on-going designs of God-Father, and God-Spirit, needs to be affirmed and taken further into new dimensions.⁹

Son: Word of God

The christological focus of the Lutheran understanding of Scripture is well known. It is no surprise, then, that the ELCA Constitution devotes the most space to it. I draw your attention to the theological flow of this section (I am now at section 2.02).

This section *ends* with its statement on Scripture (sentence 2.02.c.), but does not begin there, or not explicitly. It begins with a confession of Jesus Christ as “Lord and Savior” -- itself an allusion to New Testament confessional forms,¹⁰ and “the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe” -- a paraphrase of Rom 1:16, the thematic statement of Paul’s most ambitious epistle, where the discussion of justification is central.¹¹ Justification, of course, the notion that we are deemed righteous by the grace of God through faith, was construed by Luther

⁸See, e.g., Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁹On the role of the Father, see, e.g., Günther Thomas’ notion of God’s “election” of the Bible in “The Bible and the Word(s) of God,” LWF (2006), 32. On the role of the Spirit, see *ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁰See, e.g., 2 Pet 2:20, 3:2, 18.

¹¹**Romans 1:16-17** (NRSV) For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

and Melancthon as expressing the “scopus” -- that is, the salvific intent -- of the activity of Word of God.¹²

This paraphrase of Scripture in the Constitution’s introduction to this section can serve to remind us of the woolly edges between these two categories. Scripture itself includes a variety of “creeds,” most simply κυριος Ιησους Χριστος, “Jesus Christ is Lord!”¹³ And the formal confessions -- beginning with the Nicene and Apostles’ creeds -- through the history of the church are in turn understood as paraphrases of Scripture. Indeed, the creeds -- or more generally the “Rule of Faith” -- has actively guided scriptural interpretation in all periods but the most recent. Section 2.04. of the ELCA Constitution indicates that the ELCA is committed to maintain the church catholic’s tradition of the Rule of Faith as hermeneutical guide.¹⁴

2.02.a.

The Constitution then sets out three statements that articulate its understanding of the Word of God. It begins (2.02.a) with the Word understood as the Second Person of the Trinity. It highlights the Word’s role in creation,¹⁵ its incarnation in Jesus,¹⁶ and the Word’s ability to create anew.¹⁷

Here I note that the christological doctrine expressed at Chalcedon (451 CE), that the incarnate Christ is “one person in two natures,” fully human, fully divine, has provided Lutherans with an analogy for thinking about *how* Scripture is the Word of God. Luther’s famous saying that the Bible is the “cradle of Christ” assumes this analogy.¹⁸ The Bible is very earthy, completely human. Nevertheless, it carries the very Word of God to the world. A 100 years ago, the North American Lutheran Henry Eyster Jacobs argued for understanding Scripture in terms of the two natures of Christ as a counter-argument to claims for a particular understanding of inerrancy.¹⁹ Chalcedon is also the basis of Fred Gaiser’s eloquent introduction

¹²In my remarks this morning I am not highlighting the role of justification or the Law/Gospel dynamic. This is not because I do not assume their centrality to Lutheran hermeneutics, but because I do. They are fundamental. See, e.g., M. Cserháti, “Finding the Keys,” LWF (2006), 68-70.

¹³Phil 2:11. On a fuller understanding of “confession” that includes prayer and doxology, see Reinhard Boettcher, “Confessing Faith in the Word of God: The Bible and the Confessions of the Church from a Lutheran perspective,” LWF (2006), 101.

¹⁴This commitment is expressed in the *Epitome of the Formula of Concord*, 3.

¹⁵John 1:1-4

¹⁶John 1:14

¹⁷e.g., Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17.

¹⁸See Diane Jacobson, “Reading Strategies,” LWF (2006), 55-6.

¹⁹Jacobs did not believe inspiration determined the inerrancy of all statements of the Bible. Here, as was common with confessional Lutherans who held a deeply incarnational theology, Jacobs thought the doctrine of the two-natures of Christ provided a helpful analogy for thinking correctly about the nature of biblical inspiration. I quote at some length from Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Elements of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Board of Publication of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America, 1898), 28-29, since the nuances in the presentation of the doctrine of inspiration among late nineteenth century Lutherans are difficult to paraphrase: “We claim for the Holy Scriptures absolute inerrancy with respect to all theological truth; we repel any suggestion or suspicion of deception, or error in the strict sense of the term, even on those subjects which only form the framework, but not the contents of the record of revelation... Writers were not inspired so as to speak with scientific precision when they employed their human knowledge of geographical or chronological details, in unfolding to unlettered men the revealed truth with which the entire range of human facts was connected. As in the person of Christ, the divine and the human were united, and, by this union, the limitation

to the *Word & World* volume entitled “The Heresy of Infallibility” sent out as part of your pre-session reading packet.²⁰

2.02.b.

In the second statement of this section of the ELCA Constitution (2.02.b), the Word of God is understood in terms of the distinctive Lutheran theological categories of Law and Gospel. Note the clear understanding that “judgment and mercy,” though centered in the person of Jesus Christ, was operative in the Word of God “beginning with creation”. It is not that the Old Testament is “Law” and the New Testament is “Gospel” -- a common misunderstanding within the church at large. The Word of God inevitably encounters humans as both Law and Gospel. There is, then, both Law and Gospel “in” the Old Testament as well as in the New. And note, the efficacy of God’s Word experienced as judgment and promise is not limited to the Bible in this statement. The language is, “The Word of God...(reveals) judgment and mercy through word *and* deed.”

From my perspective, educational materials that reflect over the complexities of the Law/Gospel dialectic are always needed. This goes for “Justification” as well. Both core Lutheran theological notions, I would suggest, are more easily misunderstood than understood. They are categories that need fresh re-statements, specifically with regard to biblical interpretation.

2.02.c

Only in the third statement of this section of the Constitution (2.02.c.) is the Bible explicitly mentioned. I read this to imply that the Bible is construed as a primary expression of the Means of Grace, but not the exclusive means. The Word of God -- as Law and Gospel -- is also encountered in the proclamation of the Word in worship and in the active ministry of the priesthood of all believers. Similarly, it is experienced in the “visible words” of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.²¹

It is here also, in the ELCA Constitution (2.03.c.), that the *purpose* of Scripture is announced. The Old and the New Testaments are described as the “written Word of God” whose intent is: “to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.” Scripture, in other words, *does* something. Unless Scripture does something, however clever the interpreter, it is misunderstood. An understanding of the dynamic efficacy of Scripture, in a

of the human element was not at once removed. The human element in Scripture reminds us of the human nature of Christ during the State of Humiliation. As Christ, in His humanity, refrained from the full use of the attributes communicated through its union with the divine nature, and thus shared in all the sinless weaknesses of humanity; so the Holy Spirit, in making the sacred writers infallible recorders of the hitherto unknown will of God towards men, in no way inspired them to be teachers of astronomy, or geology, or physics. These spheres do not belong to revelation. It is enough for us to know that, on these subjects, they had in the fullest extent the ordinary assistance granted believers even now, when, praying for the Spirit’s guidance, they use earthly things in the service of the truth as it is in Jesus. No number of contradictions that could be gathered within this sphere, would in the least degree shake our confidence in the absolute authority of Holy Scripture as the infallible test of theological truth, an inerrant guide in all matters of faith and practice. If it be fallible, then the very end of which a record of revelation has been provided, is defeated.”

²⁰Frederick J. Gaiser, “The Heresy of Infallibility,” *Word & World* 26:4 (2006), 355-56.

²¹See, e.g., *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*. Adopted for Guidance and Practice by the Fifth Biennial Churchwide Assembly of The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, August 19, 1997.

Lutheran key, is available in Kathryn Kleinhans' article, also in the *Word & Witness* volume you received.²²

2.03.

In a new section, 2.03., of the ELCA Constitution, comes finally the traditional language about the role of Scripture in the church:²³

The 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*. It is this articulation of the role of Scripture in the church that has, through the years, been at the center of much ecclesiastical discussion. It does, after all, beg the question of method. That is, how, exactly, does biblical text "norm" the church's "proclamation" -- say in its understanding of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper or at the "end times"? Or how does the Bible norm one's understanding of "faith" -- say with regard to the role of the human will in the event of salvation? In the past, many of the difficult theological conversations in the church had to do the proper use of the Bible in coming to terms with such issues of "proclamation" and "faith" as they arose.

Increasingly, however, in the last 40 years or so,²⁴ it is not the Bible's relationship to the church's "proclamation," or the proper understanding of its "faith," that has been at issue. It is the third category that has dominated the discussion of biblical interpretation. Again, this is tied up with the question of exactly *how* does the Bible "norm" the *life* of the church in such areas as the role of women; the office of ministry (what is the role of bishops?); or most recently, a cluster of issues related to human sexuality? It is precisely here that I think the "disconcerting differences" in the way ELCA members think of *how* the Bible is to norm the "life" of the church arise.²⁵ I note that in the specific area of human sexuality, the ELCA released in

²²Kathryn A. Kleinhans, "The Word Made Words: A Lutheran Perspective on the Authority and Use of Scripture," *Word & World* 26:4 (2006), 401-11.

²³This language stems from the Epitome of the Formula of Concord (1577). The introduction to the Epitome contains the material most often quoted in this regard, e.g., "...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." Note, however, that the epitome also contains a statement of commitment to the creeds of the church: "Immediately after the time of the apostles--in fact, while they were still alive--false teachers and heretics invaded the church. Against them the early church prepared *symbola*, that is, short, explicit confessions, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal, Christian creed and confession of the orthodox and true church of Christ, namely, the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. We pledge ourselves to these and thereby reject all heresies and teachings that have been introduced into the church of God contrary to them." Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 486-87.

²⁴The church, of course, has always been interested in this dimension of scriptural interpretation. E.g., the Bible was much taken up in the North American discussion over slavery in the 19th century.

²⁵This language stems from the North Carolina Synod's memorial to the national church in response to the use of the Bible in the floor debates in the ELCA's churchwide assembly in Orlando, Summer 2005. The memorial to the church reads, in part, "... within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America there is a disconcerting level of divergence as to how best to interpret the Scriptures and to what extent and in what ways biblical authority informs, shapes, and norms the life of the individual Christian and this church itself."

December 2006 the last in a series of study guides that deserve close readings.²⁶ I would also caution this group that this area -- the role of the Bible in norming the "life" of the church -- important as it is -- should not be *our* starting point in our discussions. Specifically, with regard to human sexuality, another ELCA task force has been commissioned. Our field of vision, I think, is larger.

Inerrancy

I would like to make one more extended observation about what the ELCA constitutional language -- in my opinion -- does or does not say.

One of the words that was hotly contested among North American Lutherans in the 20th century, was the term "inerrant." It is missing in the ELCA Constitution.²⁷

The notion that Scripture is "infallible" or "inerrant" goes at least as far back as the 17th century period of Lutheran Orthodoxy. It had, on the whole a long ride -- about 300 years -- as a relatively uncontested doctrine.²⁸ This was, I think, because it stated what most construed to be obvious. There could be no significant contradiction between "general revelation" -- that is, the way God ordered creation -- and "specific revelation," understood as the text of the Bible. God was the author of both. The claim that the Bible was "inerrant" in all of its statements -- including those that have to do with cosmology, creation, science, and the social order -- was a way of simply stating the more-or-less obvious.

As the church moved into the modern period, however, the scriptural principle of Lutheran Orthodoxy became increasingly problematic and came under severe criticism both from within and from without the church. From a doctrine that started out simply stating the obvious -- the necessary harmony between the created order and the Word of God -- it evolved into a counter-modern strategy.²⁹ This reactionary role of inerrancy was made famous by the Fundamentalists in the early part of the 20th century, but has also been carried forward in a variety of more moderate guises in all of the American Lutheran communions as well. The claim of inerrancy of the Old Lutheran scriptural principle is still the *de facto* position of the

²⁶*Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality*. ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Journey Together Faithfully, Part Three. (ELCA: 2006). The previous publication, *The Church and Homosexuality*, Study Guide: Part Two (ELCA: 2003), contains a succinct statement of basic Lutheran modes of biblical interpretation. See under the rubric "Biblical Authority and Interpretation: Lutheran Perspectives," 8-11.

²⁷It was, by contrast, included in the Constitution of the American Lutheran Church (1962). In the *Handbook of the American Lutheran Church* (Edition of 1985), in chapter 3 (Confession of Faith), section 3.10 one reads, "The American Lutheran Church accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as a whole and in all their parts as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God, and submits to this as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life." This wording is very close to the *United Testimony on Faith and Life* (1952).

²⁸The Lutheran pietists were not necessarily enamored of the claim of Scripture's inerrancy. For a critical discussion and overview of the literature, see Alan J. Thompson, "The Pietist Critique of Inerrancy? J. A. Bengel's *Gnomon* as a Test Case," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47:1 (2004), 71-88.

²⁹See Erik M. Heen, "The Bible among Lutherans in America: The ELCA as a Test Case," *Dialog* 45:1 (2006).

Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod.³⁰ If the statistics from the ELCA Office of Research and Evaluation that were sent to you (in the pre-session reading materials) are to be believed, this notion of the inerrancy of biblical texts has received new life in the ELCA itself in the last few decades.³¹ So, here is one of the questions before us -- is the ELCA to take a stand on the validity of the Old Lutheran understanding of the inerrancy of the biblical text?

I, for one, think it should. For a variety of reasons. Let me list a couple:

1. First, as has long been pointed out, the Bible itself does not make a claim for inerrancy. In this matter, it is a bit presumptuous for us to make claims over and above the Bible.

2. Secondly, there is a deep theological problem with the assumption of the Bible's infallibility. Gerhard Forde, who grew up in Lutheran Orthodoxy, was a remarkably insightful analyst of its strengths and weaknesses. Over 40 years ago, in an article entitled "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," which was also sent to you in your pre-session packet, Forde critiques the basic assumptions of biblical inerrancy. In doing so, he sets as an alternative an understanding of the Word of God that encounters us as Law and Gospel. The two understandings of Scripture, Forde notes, are fundamentally incompatible.

Forde begins with what he sees to be the two major *advantages* of the doctrine of scripture based on inerrancy. First, Forde says, such a scriptural principle: [Here as is my practice inciting texts from another time, I have retained the non-inclusive language.]

...has the obvious advantage of being exceeding simple and readily understandable. It follows the lines of a simple logical syllogism: The Word of God is true, scripture is the Word of God, therefore scripture is true. It is the easiest and most convenient doctrine in the world with which to operate.

³⁰The "Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of Missouri" (1932) reads:

1. We teach that the Holy Scriptures differ from all other books in the world in that they are the Word of God. They are the Word of God because the holy men of God who wrote the Scriptures wrote only that which the Holy Ghost communicated to them by inspiration, 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21. We teach also that the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is not a so-called "theological deduction," but that it is taught by direct statements of the Scriptures, 2 Tim. 3:16, John 10:35, Rom. 3:2; 1 Cor. 2:13. Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10:35.

2. We furthermore teach regarding the Holy Scriptures that they are given by God to the Christian Church for the foundation of faith, Eph. 2:20. Hence the Holy Scriptures are the sole source from which all doctrines proclaimed in the Christian Church must be taken and therefore, too, the sole rule and norm by which all teachers and doctrines must be examined and judged. -- With the Confessions of our Church we teach also that the "rule of faith" (*analogia fidei*) according to which the Holy Scriptures are to be understood are the clear passages of the Scriptures themselves which set forth the individual doctrines. The rule of faith is not the man-made so-called "totality of Scripture" ("*Ganzes der Schrift*").

3. We reject the doctrine which under the name of science has gained wide popularity in the Church of our day that Holy Scripture is not in all its parts the Word of God, but in part the Word of God and in part the word of man and hence does, or at least, might contain error. We reject this erroneous doctrine as horrible and blasphemous, since it flatly contradicts Christ and His holy apostles, set up men as judges over the Word of God, and thus overthrows the foundation of the Christian Church and its faith.

³¹Kenneth W. Innskeep, "Research Related to the Bible in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," Research and Evaluation, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. December 6, 2006.

Secondly, [Forde continues] the method has the advantage of intending to place men under the direct authority of scripture. There can be no doubt, certainly, that this was the aim of the method. It was believed that by submitting wholly and without question to scripture in this fashion one was placing oneself directly *under* the authority of the Word of God and that one was being obedient to it.

Then Forde goes on to the *disadvantages*. I quote him at length because I think Forde's criticism of Old Lutheranism's scriptural principle is important:

Here I would say to begin with that [the scriptural principle of Lutheran Orthodoxy's] very strength is its greatest weakness. The belief that by accepting scripture in this uncompromising fashion one is placing oneself *under* the authority of God's Word is in fact open to serious question. For when all is said and done, the *a priori* belief that this is the way it *must be* in order for scripture to be the Word of God is nowhere established in scripture itself, and it is a human construction; it is a human idea about what the term "Word of God" must mean. In other words, if I say that there can't be any errors in scripture if it is to the Word of God, I am in effect saying that I know to begin with what the Word of God must be, and unless scripture meets my idea it cannot be accepted. I am then trying to establish the truth of *God's Word* in the same way I would establish the truth of man's Word. A man's word is true only if it corresponds to the facts; God's Word can be true only in the same way. I am the judge of this. And the belief that by this method I am placing myself *under* the Word of God may in fact be only an illusion. For if I say, "If the Bible contains errors I cannot believe," I am in effect saying to God that unless he provides me with the kind of guarantee which I expect and want, I cannot believe. Then I am in a very dangerous position because I am dictating to God the conditions under which I will believe. It is dangerous because it might just be that God has not *in fact* provided us with that kind of guarantee.³² This, I realize [Forde concludes] is a subtle kind of argument, but since the position is based on a *a priori* consideration, it is this *a priori* which must be questioned. The fact is that *I do not know a priori* what the Word of God is. I don't know beforehand what God is going to say or how; **I can only listen** and then try to form some confession as to what it is after I have heard it.³³

The problem with "inerrancy," in short, is that it is a human creation.³⁴ The authority of Scripture that results, then, is also a human creation. *We* construct a notion of *divine* authority and then we place ourselves obediently under it. Such is a subtle form of idolatry, but idolatry nevertheless. From this perspective, claims for "inerrancy" of Scripture are very problematic. What is the alternative?

As Forde notes, the first obligation of the reader of Scripture is to listen to it. From my own vocation as a biblical exegete, I think we are in a quite wonderful position to do this in a new way. That is because biblical studies, since its turn from historical-critical to more literary methods, some twenty-five or so years ago, has provided us with wonderful, close readings of

³²For a similar notion, see G. Thomas, "The Bible and Its Authority," LWF (2006), 32.

³³Gerhard Forde, "Law and Gospel as the Methodological Principle of Theology," in *Theological Perspectives: A Discussion of Contemporary Issues in Lutheran Theology*, by members of the Department of Religion Luther College (Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 1964), 55-56.

³⁴The issue of inerrancy must be separated from the issue of inspiration. These are often lumped together as some sort of litmus text of one's biblical orthodoxy. That is one must "believe" in both "verbal inspiration" and "inerrancy." One can maintain a commitment to the inspiration of Scripture without making claims for its inerrancy. See, e.g., footnote 19 above.

Scripture;³⁵ readings that refuse to lift texts out of their literary or rhetorical contexts. In many ways “narrative criticism” is a simple method that can be understood by all. One begins at the beginning of a book, reads through to its middle, and on to its end. One encounters the theology of the narrative as it develops.

This sort of careful reading that listens attentively to the biblical text as it unfolds its own narrative theology could be extended to the canon as a whole. Gerhard Forde, for example, suggests something similar when he thinks through issues of Law and Gospel in terms of close readings of the Bible’s meta-stories. Forde is here reflecting over Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6 that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” In Luther’s writing, the early opposition between “letter” and “spirit,” in time, gave way to the more familiar “law” and “gospel.”³⁶ Playing with these roughly equivalent terms “letter/spirit” and “law/gospel” in Luther’s theology, Forde says the following about Luther’s understanding of 2 Cor 3:6: ...the “law” as the letter that kills is not just a body of laws, but as Luther could say, the literal works of God in the world, *and most particularly the story, the entire history of God with his people which culminates in cross and resurrection and so ends the story of old beings*. The law, the letter, kills. It brings us to an end. And when the letter kills, the spirit does its life-giving work.³⁷

One of the assets we have today in the Lutheran Church is the coming together in a new way, of biblical studies -- guided by new methods of exegetical practice -- and theological reflection. It allows for new collaboration across academic fields in ways not always encouraged when historical-criticism was the reigning paradigm of study.

IV. Conclusion.

There is much more to say, of course, but I fear I have already laid out too much. Yet let me make some final comments that center around one of the practical consequences of a Theology of the Cross applied to scriptural interpretation.

I would like us to do our best in articulating ways to think about Scripture that is mandated to us by the great Lutheran theological tradition as mediated via the ELCA’s confession of faith. Yet there is more I would like to see. I would like us to do that work in a manner that is respectful of other ways of responding to God’s Word. I don’t think that stating our understanding of Scripture need come at any one else’s expense. We Lutherans have not always been very good at speaking for ourselves. Often caricatures of other theological positions become the foil against which a more proper Lutheran understanding is drawn. The victims that have most often been dragged into the room with us in the recent past have been Judaism (especially its understanding of “law”), Lutheran Orthodoxy, and Fundamentalism. I caution against such an approach -- though I know even I have succumbed to it in my remarks today. At the very least we must have our guard up against such a method. For a variety of reasons. In the first place, I fear, we often bear false witness against our neighbors. Our rhetorically driven caricatures are often distortions -- distortions that can take on a life of their own, with tragic consequences. Secondly, one needs a bit of humility here. I may, from my theological perspective, have a great reserve, for instance, towards a Scriptural Theology based in biblical inerrancy. I will enter into conversations with folks with regard to the dangers I perceive in this approach. Yet -- at the same time -- I cannot assume, that God will not work through individuals and faith communities that hold such beliefs. In fact, I know God can. After

³⁵In the field of New Testament, one of the break-through books was David Rhoads, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Fortress, 1982) now in its second edition (1999).

³⁶Gerhard Ebeling, “The Beginnings of Luther’s Hermeneutics,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993), 129-158; 315-338; 451-468.

³⁷Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 153.

all, Sin -- our “missing the mark” -- does not have the last word with God, even in the area of biblical interpretation.

What we -- as representatives of the ELCA -- can do, however, is articulate our understanding of how God is reaching out to the world today by means of the Bible. In doing so, I pray that we might be guided by a Theology of the Cross in our deliberations. I trust that our work will be grounded in our confession and worship of the Triune God. It will seek new ways to speak of God’s use of Scripture to sustain not only human life, but all creation. It will speak to how Scripture reveals our denial of our limitations while at the same time it gives us new life and sustains us in it; a new life, by the way, that includes new “minds.”³⁸ Issues related to Justification, and the Law/Gospel dynamic will be thought through yet again for catechetical purposes in the area of biblical interpretation. The persistent, post-reformation, pre-modern legacy of the claim for the inerrancy of the biblical text will, I hope, also be addressed. Finally, I trust our process will disclose how God has invested Scripture to facilitate our service not only to our “neighbor,” but also the “other,” those separated from us by any number of humanly constructed boundaries. A Theology of the Cross, I would argue, pushes us out of whatever comfortable sanctuaries we might inhabit to minister to the world without, which is -- as we all know -- greatly suffering (Heb 13:10-14).

In all of this, I trust, the excitement of the coming together again of the best of biblical studies and confessional theological reflection -- an excitement that I myself enjoy -- will edify the whole.

Thank you for your kind attention.

³⁸RSV **Romans 12:2**: Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.