

The Word of God in the Theology of Martin Luther

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Introduction

The doctrine of the Word of God, its inspiration, authority, and inerrancy, has become one of the great theological battlegrounds of our time. In fact, the student of contemporary theology finds on all sides even a lack of clarity about what is meant when men in high places and honored positions in the visible church speak of the Word of God.

We ought not to imagine, however, that our situation is unique. The authority, inspiration, and inerrancy of the Word of God has been denied implicitly by every unbeliever from the beginning of time. In the modern denials of this doctrine and in the hidden and hypocritical attacks on it in our generation, we only hear the echoes of the hissing of the old serpent who led the mother of us all astray, by leading her, first, to doubt whether the words by which she was to guide her actions were really and truly the words of God, and then, to reject in unbelief the words of the Lord by which He clearly threatened her with death if she disobeyed His command. It was, above all else, her failure to take the words of God seriously and to believe what He had said that brought sin into the world and death to us all. "Yea, hath God said?" is still the question which the old evil foe seeks to insinuate into our hearts in one form or another. The sheep's clothing of professed reverence for the Word of God in which our modern deniers creep in unawares and unnoticed does not entirely succeed in covering up the cloven hoofs and the forked tail of the old dragon, and those who have eyes to see will still discern the diabolical deception which is practiced on Christendom today by its theological spokesmen, and those who have noses to smell will still know, as Luther would have put it, *wie dem Teufel die Hosen stinken*.

Your program committee has asked me to speak to you on the doctrine of the Word as that doctrine is set forth in the writings of Martin Luther. We are all aware, of course, that though we are called by his name, yet the question of Luther's views concerning the Word of God is by no means the most important of the questions that call for an answer, even in the Lutheran Church. Followers of Luther know that, as Luther says it, the Word of God must establish articles of faith and no man and no angel has a right to impose his views on the church of God which knows no master save Jesus Christ and listens only to the voice of the Good Shepherd. If the Lutheran doctrine of the Word of God has any validity at all, and if God has indeed, as true Lutheranism always insists, spoken to us in the Holy Bible, then the very first question must always be, "What does the Bible say about itself?" No human judgment and no rational argument, no matter how cogent, fitting, and persuasive it may be, dare ever be permitted to have the weight and the force of Scripture's own testimony about itself.

Still we remember that three of the Lutheran confessions, the two Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles, which every unperjured Lutheran accepts as a correct restatement of Biblical doctrine, came directly from the pen of Martin Luther. His word does count for something among us, even though it is not on the same level as that of the apostles, and as members of the Lutheran Church, who are proud to bear the name of the man who stood before princes and bishops and confessed, "Councils have erred and popes have erred; prove to me out of the Scriptures that I am wrong and I will submit," we would be happy to have Luther on our side in the present battle for the inspiration and truth and authority of the Bible.

Unfortunately, most Protestants have this same desire, at least to some degree, and so we have men of such divergent views as Theodore Engelder and Emil Brunner, both claiming Luther as their champion. It is noteworthy, however, that of these two, Brunner has had to admit that he was wrong in imagining that the chief reformer of the church held views of inspiration and revelation which were similar to those promulgated by the neo-orthodox theologians of the modern visible church. In 1951, Paul King Jewett wrote his doctoral dissertation at Harvard on "Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation." Bernard Ramm, who takes notice of this unpublished work in his *Types of Apologetic Systems*, writes, "Jewett traces in Brunner's works—Brunner has

written over three hundred periodical articles—the first affirmations of Brunner that he and Luther saw practically eye to eye till in his latest works in which Brunner has come to admit that Luther was more of a traditional orthodox and fundamentalist (sic) than he imagined him to be at first.”¹

At least we must give Brunner credit because he has had the honesty and the decency to admit that he was wrong when further study convinced him that Luther held the view of inspiration which has been the traditional and ancient view of all Christendom, Lutheran, Reformed, and Romanist. However, sad to say, people still read Brunner’s early works and gullibly conclude from them that Luther was liberal and neo-orthodox in his view of the Holy Bible. It is my conviction that if men would only read Luther they would very quickly come to the conclusion to which Brunner has come. Much of the confusion in the church over Luther’s position on the inspiration of the Bible stems from this that men do not read Luther, but instead they read the works of those who write about Luther, who in turn often simply repeat the erring conclusions of respected scholars whose books about Luther they themselves have read. And so the same old arguments are repeated, the same old words quoted out of context are cited again and again, often, I am sure, by men who did not even take the trouble to verify the correctness and the fairness of the quotation. It is my considered opinion that anyone who holds that Luther had a liberal view of Scripture either has not read Luther, or else he has used his sources dishonestly, or else he has come to the study of Luther, as Luther himself might have said, with a pair of colored glasses before his eyes, so that he could not see what was there.

I. The Meaning Of The Term “The Word Of God” In The Theology Of Luther.

1. The “Word Of God” In Modern Theology.

If we are to have a clear conception and understanding of Luther’s doctrine of the Word as it compares with the views of modern theology, we shall first of all need to know how he defined this term “Word of God” in his own thinking. If ever a term used in theological literature and in the Bible has suffered martyrdom, it is this phrase, “the Word of God.” Just as in a former generation, when Modernism was in style for the theologians of the church, the term “Son of God” was so emasculated and watered down that its application to our Savior became almost meaningless, because it was asserted that any good man could be called a “son of God,” so the theologians of neo-orthodoxy have murdered the term “Word of God.” What it really means to them is almost impossible to discover, but on one thing they seem to be in agreement. They hold that this term “Word of God” is applied to the Bible only by a sort of figure of speech. This view is eating like a cancer also at the heart of Lutheranism. Not so long ago, one of the best-known Lutheran theologians of our day published a book in which he wrote, “The Scriptures were the ‘Word of God’, in a derivative sense for Luther—derivative from the historical sense of the Word as deed and from the basic sense of Word as proclamation. As the record of deeds of God, which were the Word of God, the Scriptures participated in the nature of that which they recorded.”^{1a} And not so long ago, I heard of a Lutheran professor who stood before his class and asked, “What is the Word of God? Is it a book?” Holding up a Bible and saying, “Why this is just paper and ink,” he threw the book on the floor and stepped on it. The next day one of his students took a volume of Kierkegaard’s writings to class, stepped on it, and said, “I assume that your opinion of the author of the book you stepped on yesterday is the same as my opinion of the author of the book on which I am stepping today.” As a result of such disparaging attitudes toward Scripture, articles on “The Bible *and* the Word of God,”² implying by their very form that these two terms stand for a pair of related but entirely different concepts, any resemblance between which is purely coincidental, have become a dime a dozen.

2. The “Word of God” As Event.

¹ Op. cit, Wheaton, Van Kampen Press, 1953, p.70

^{1a} J. Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, St. Louis, CPH, 1959, p.67

² Ibid, p.48

Neo-orthodox scholars are inclined to stress that the Word of God is the deed of God, that the greatest deed or Word of God in the Old Testament is the Exodus, and the greatest deed or Word of God in the New Testament is Jesus Christ, and they claim to find this peculiar and confusing view also in the writings of Martin Luther. We shall not pause here to ask what such views will eventually do to the Messianic character of the Old Testament, but even a casual reader of Luther will know that the greatest Word of God for him was the Word of forgiveness spoken by the mouth of men. It is true that occasionally Luther speaks of God's speaking, as being equivalent to God's acting. This is by no means common in Luther and it might be noted that in the same place where he says, "In the case of God to speak is to do, and the word is the deed,"³ he gives an example of what he means by saying that the invasion of the Turks is a word of wrath and good crops are a word of grace. It seems evident that when Luther says that God speaks to us in His deeds, he means about the same thing that we have in mind when we say that through calamities such as war and pestilence and famine God calls us to repentance.

Much more common in Luther is the concept of the creative Word of God as a cause of events that happen in this world. He speaks of the Word by which all things are created, governed, and preserved.⁴ He says that when a hen hatches an egg, this takes place because of the Word "Be fruitful and multiply" which is present still in the very body of the hen.⁵ "When God speaks a word," he says, "the thing expressed by the word immediately leaps into existence. God says to my mother: 'Conceive!' and she conceives. He says to me: 'Be born!' and I am born."⁶

But to say that events happen as a result of God's Word is still not the same as saying that the event is the Word. Commenting on the statement of Moses that God gave the children of Israel manna to eat so that they might learn that man shall not live by bread alone but by the Word of God, Luther says that we are by no means to say that the manna was the Word of God.⁷ It would therefore certainly seem that Luther sharply distinguished between the Word and the events which transpire because of the Word. He says, for example, that God acts also in the deeds of the Gentiles, in fact, he says that God acts in all the deeds of the Gentiles but that the deeds of the Gentiles do not have the testimony of the Word.⁸ Significantly he adds, "Therefore when the history of the whole world is taken together, it is incomparably less significant than even the most insignificant story of this (Israelite) nation. This is why the proud and carnal are deceived by the simplicity of things in the Scriptures, for they take no notice of the Word of God and value only the things."⁹

In this connection, it might also be noted that in his comments on the story of creation in Genesis 1, Luther stresses the fact that the Hebrew verb used in the statement, "And God said," denotes an uttered word,¹⁰ though no one heard it spoken except God Himself.¹¹ Yet of all this he says, "These are difficult matters, and it is unsafe to go beyond the limit to which the Holy Spirit leads us."¹²

Luther therefore recognizes that when we speak of the Word of God in these matters, we are dealing with something that goes beyond the experience of man and therefore is in large measure incomprehensible to us. Yet this aspect of the question is exalted by modern theology to the primary place in its discussion, and it is no wonder that much of modern theology is beyond all comprehension, confusing, and productive of little that makes a real contribution to the welfare of the souls of men. It would be far better if we would follow the advice of Luther and say that it is unsafe to go beyond the words of Holy Scripture here, as we ought to go beyond those words nowhere in theology.

³ LW 12, 33.

⁴ LW 22, 26(ON John 1:3); 1, 128.

⁵ LW 1, 53.

⁶ LW 13, 99; cp 14:12-14.

⁷ LW 9, 92.

⁸ LW 9, 33.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ LW 1, 16.

¹¹ LW 1, 19.

¹² LW 1, 17.

3. Christ As The “Word of God.”

It is also true, as we might expect from any Biblical theologian, that Luther occasionally speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Word of God,¹³ but it would be a gross misstatement of the case to say that for Luther the term “Word of God” primarily denotes the Son of God, or as one modern Lutheran scholar puts it, “The ‘Word of God’ in the New Testament was essentially the historical Christ.”¹⁴ It is difficult to see how it is possible for any honest scholar to say this when Luther himself says that when John calls Jesus the Word of God, this is an obscure, rare, and peculiar way of speaking which is uncommon and lacking in clarity in any language.¹⁵ That Luther was not at all accustomed to thinking of Christ when he used the term “Word of God” is evident, for example, from his comments on John 8: 28, where he says, “Christ derives comfort from the fact that it is not He who is doing this, but another, namely the Word of God.”¹⁶ Such a remark could hardly come from the lips of a man for whom the Word of God was primarily and “essentially the historical Christ.” That Luther was not inclined to think in this way is clear also from his work against the Heavenly Prophets, where he writes, “We do not call the gospel Christ, or the kingdom Christ, but speak of it as an oral, bodily preaching, regarding it as a part of Christ of his kingdom.”¹⁷

At times Luther also says that the Word of God is God Himself.¹⁸ But we must learn to interpret Luther here as Luther taught us to interpret the Bible,—the obscure passages in Luther must be understood in the light of the clear passages. What Luther evidently meant when he said that the Word of God is God Himself is that any offense against the Word is an offense against God. The statement usually occurs in a context where the honor and reliability of the Scriptures is discussed. In his comments on Psalm 111, for example, he says that the Word of God has been preserved for us in a book and shortly thereafter he writes, “Since it is God’s Word, it must be regarded as no less high and venerable than God Himself.”¹⁹

4. A Speaking God.

Usually, however, when Luther uses the term “Word of God”, he means by that what we would expect it to mean in human language without any allegories or figures of speech. The Word of God is very simply and very clearly what God says. To Luther God was above all else a speaking God. At the oral examination of Heinrich Schmedenstode at Wittenberg on July 7, 1542, Luther is reported to have remarked, “All the patriarchs believed in God, not as in a creator, but in God who spoke with them. They did not have a speechless God, or one who was only fabricated, but one who spoke...Adam, Eve, and Abraham heard God speaking. Therefore they were believers. We, too, have such a communicative God. He speaks to us daily through the ministers of his Word and his sacraments.”²⁰

When Luther says that our God is not a speechless God, he calls our attention to something that we are apt to overlook at times. When we meet God on the very first pages of the Bible, He is immediately introduced to us as the God who speaks. He is the God who speaks the creative Word in his majestic “Let there be.” He is the God who speaks in loving concern for man when He says, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” He is the God who speaks in the Law and says, “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” He is the God who seeks fallen man with His voice and says, “Where art thou?” He is the God who speaks in the Gospel and tells man that the woman’s Seed

¹³ LW 1, 17; 22:9-12. 115

¹⁴ Pelikan, *op. cit.*, p.60

¹⁵ LW 22, 115

¹⁶ LW 23, 391

¹⁷ LW 40, 221

¹⁸ LW 32, 146, e.g.

¹⁹ LW 13, 362

²⁰ LW 34, 316f.

shall come to crush the serpent's head. In the first three chapters of Genesis we are told no less than twenty times that God spoke, and the creative Word and the revelatory Word are not in any way distinguished from each other. And if we take the first verse of Genesis as a sort of title for the whole chapter, than we can even say that the first specific act of God of which we have any knowledge is that God spoke.

And we might well ask here whether it is of any special significance that the very first act of Adam, who was created in the image of God, is this same act of speaking. He gave names to the animals and when Eve was brought to him, he said, "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." And the very first thing that we are told of Eve after her creation is that she spoke to the serpent. When we speak of man's creation in the image of God should we include also this that they have speech in common and thus are able to communicate with each other? It is evident that the gift of speech sets man apart from the rest of God's creatures. In his *Preface to the Psalms* (1545) Luther writes, "There is no mightier or nobler work of man than speech. For it is by speech more than by his shape or any other work, that man is most distinguished from other animals."²¹

It may not be unimportant either, in this connection, that Eve was led astray by words spoken by the serpent. Luther says that the devil imitates God in speaking to Eve.²² Whatever all these facts may mean in their full import, one thing should be clear to anyone who begins to read the Bible from the beginning—in this book we will meet a God who speaks to men in words which they can understand and to whom men in turn can respond in words to which He will listen. It is this fact that at least helps to make man a responsible creature.

Luther insists that even when God Himself speaks directly from heaven, the language in which He speaks is intelligible human speech. In his essay on "How Christians Should Regard Moses," (1525) he discusses the appearance of God on Mt. Sinai. He says there that God did not actually speak in the sense that He formed words with His mouth, tongue, tooth, and lips, as we do. Nevertheless, he continues, He who formed the mouth and put speech into it, can also speak without a mouth. The children of Israel actually heard a voice like the voice of a man. The syllables and letters made sounds which the physical ear was able to perceive.²³ Luther says exactly the same thing about the voice that came from heaven at the baptism of Jesus. He says that the Father's voice was no illusion when He pronounced these words from heaven. They were real, natural, human words.²⁴

5. God's Word Is What God Says.

God's Word therefore is what God says. In the *Large Catechism* Luther says of the close of the commandments that believers should recognize it as God's Word and be careful not to regard it as if it were spoken by men.²⁵ In these words God Himself declares how important the commandments are to Him.²⁶ We shall have more to say of this when we speak of God as the author of Scripture, but there are hundreds upon hundreds of passages in Luther in which statements of the Bible as cited with the assertion that this is what God says or declares or commands. Speaking of the deity of Christ in his comments on Psalm 45, he admits that this doctrine is difficult for human reason to accept but he tells his students that they should simply take their stand on the Word of God and not let it trouble us when He says incredible things.²⁷ When Satan and his instruments, the heretics, seek to draw us away from such articles of faith with their clever arguments, we should simply hold the clear texts of Scripture before them and tell them that we do not want to hear their sophistic speculations, for this is "What the Spirit says."²⁸

²¹ LW 35, 254

²² LW 1, 147

²³ LW 35, 163

²⁴ LW 22, 173

²⁵ LC, I, 41.42

²⁶ LC, I, 322

²⁷ LW 12, 283

²⁸ LW 12, 287

And this concept of the Word is no rare or unusual manner of speaking in Luther as Luther says that it is rare and unusual when Christ is spoken of as the Word of God. Of the command concerning the tree of knowledge given to Adam in the Garden of Eden, he writes, “Here the Lord is preaching to Adam and setting the Word before him. Although the Word is short, it is nevertheless worth our spending a little time on it.”²⁹ The Word of God thus is the Word which God spoke to Adam and which we still are able to spend time on because we have it before us in the Holy Bible. In fact, Luther specifically asserts that this command given to Adam was a “spoken Word.”³⁰ And in connection with the temptation that came to Eve to disregard this Word of God, Luther says that we are not to sit in judgment on God’s Word, but “When we hear God saying something, we are to believe it and not debate about it but rather take our intellect captive in the obedience of Christ.”³¹ If those countless similar passages are not enough to convince us that in Luther’s thinking the Word of God is what God says, it should certainly become clear when we hear him say, “It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God’s Word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken.”³²

And when Luther speaks in this way there is no hidden esoteric meaning involved in what he says. Unlike the unclear terminology of modern neo-orthodoxy which often empties the good old Biblical terms of all concrete meaning, Luther’s language is not of such a nature as to require initiation into the mysteries before it can be understood. When he speaks of the words spoken by God, he means the plain ordinary words of human speech, words such as you and I use every day. In a sermon on John 3:15, which speaks of the brazen serpent, he says that it is surprising that the human heart could believe the words of Moses that promised them healing if they would look at the serpent, that human reason would have been inclined to ask what good mere looking and mere words can do, and that undoubtedly many were offended by the simplicity of this cure.³³ A few days later, he preached on John 3:16, and in the introduction to this sermon he referred to the story of the brazen serpent again and said “It was the Word that healed the Israelites, the Word spoken by God: ‘Whoever looks at this bronze serpent shall suffer no harm from the bite or sting of any fiery serpent.’ ...There God was speaking and promising aid, not the serpent. Whoever believed in this Word and promise of God and looked at the serpent was obedient to God.”³⁴

6. The Word Of God Is Made Up Of Words.

It is evident therefore that when Luther spoke of the Word of God he thought of it as an entity consisting of individual words, sentences, and phrases, which were meant to be understood according to the common usage of human speech. Now that may all seem to be self-evident to us who from childhood have breathed a theological atmosphere in which the winds still blow from Wittenberg. One can hardly memorize the *Small Catechism* without being conditioned to that mode of thought. And yet we ought to be aware that modern theology often denies that the Word of God consists of words. According to this view, “The comprehension of man is unequal to the task of putting into words what God has done to break the silence of eternity,”³⁵ and “Our everyday language is much too shallow to contain the Biblical revelation without major and even fatal adjustments.”³⁶ If this means anything at all it means that the Word of God, the message of God to mankind, is really too great and too exalted and too holy ever to be expressed in the common, ordinary words of human speech. It is the same old rationalistic argument which said that all the infinite majesty of God could not possibly dwell in the body of Jesus of Nazareth, for the finite is not capable of the infinite. But we might well

²⁹ LW 1, 105

³⁰ LW 1, 147

³¹ LW 1, 157

³² LW 35, 170

³³ LW 22, 338f.

³⁴ LW 22, 348

³⁵ M. Scharlemann, “The Bible As Record”, an unpublished ms, p.5

³⁶ Ibid, p.7

say that just as the personal Word of God, the eternal Son of the Father, made Himself known to men in the lowly, humble carpenter of Nazareth, so the spoken Word of God in all its fullness and majesty comes to men in the unpretentious and simple words which God chooses to utter, and it be well also to remember that the Savior says that He will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of His words.³⁷

Repeatedly Luther speaks of the Word of God as consisting of actual spoken words. He says that the words of Christ are the Father's Word.³⁸ In the *Large Catechism* he writes that it is the Word of God which makes bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ, and if the words remain, then by virtue of these words, the bread and wine will be truly the body and blood of the Savior.³⁹ In the same confession, he says that we must continually keep the Word of God in our heart, that we should ponder it, hear it and put it to use and then continues, "These words are not idle or dead, but effective and living."⁴⁰ In 1522, in his treatise *On Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament*, he advised priests to marry, but at the same time he cautioned them against doing so if they could not do it with a good conscience, thoroughly equipped with the Word of God. He then calls their attention to the saying of Paul in 1 Tim 4, where the apostle says that the prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils. Luther advises them confidently to believe that "these are the words of God, who cannot lie."⁴¹ These are only a few of many examples that could be cited, but when one reads Luther at length and sees the ease with which he uses the phrases "The Word of God" and "the words of God" interchangeably as perfect equivalents, it seems clear that it never occurred to him that anyone could be so foolish as to deny that the Word of God comes to us in the words of human language.

One of the clearest examples of this phase of Luther's thought we find in his writings which deal with the controversy with the sacramentarians who denied the power of baptism and the real presence of the body and blood of the Lord in the Holy Supper. Repeatedly he cites the words of institution and says that we should believe these words as we ought to believe all the words of Christ. This is what the Spirit says and it is the Word of God, and when we have God's Word we should hold fast to it and let our own opinion go.⁴² When we hear that God speaks in this way, he says, we should give Him honor and "let His Word remain right and true."⁴³ When we see the clear and distinct and powerful words of God, we should confess the real presence, for the Word of God says that the body and blood of Christ are in the sacrament.⁴⁴ This alternation between the words of God and the Word of God is so natural that it is difficult to imagine how it is possible to hold that Luther taught that the Word of God is anything else than just these words we hear and read.

In one of his sermons on the Lord's Supper, preached in 1528, he spoke of the word "is" in the words of institution, and he told the congregation,

It is not the word of our prince or the emperor but of God. Therefore, when you hear this word "is" then do not doubt. Thus the sacrament is bread and body, wine and blood, as the words say and to which they are connected. If, therefore, God speaks these words, then don't search any higher, but take off your hat; and if a hundred thousand devils, learned men, and spirits were to come and say, How can this be? you answer that one single word of God is worth more than all of these. A hundred thousand learned men are not as wise as one little hair of our God. In the first place, therefore, learn that the sacrament is not simply bread and wine, but the body and blood of Christ, as the words say.⁴⁵

³⁷ Mark 8:38

³⁸ LW 23, 96

³⁹ LC, V, 10-14

⁴⁰ LC, I, 101

⁴¹ LW 36, 261

⁴² LW 36, 345

⁴³ LW 40, 196

⁴⁴ LW 40, 176

⁴⁵ LW 51, 189

7. The Word Of God Is Spoken By Men.

Since the Word of God comes to us couched in human words, it is not surprising to hear Luther say over and over that the Word of God is spoken by men and that it is no less the Word of God on that account, just as he was fond of asserting that the deity of the eternal Son of God is in no sense impaired by being joined to humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Luther says that the preaching of the Gospel, when it is viewed superficially, looks like “a trifling thing, like any ordinary man’s speech and word.”⁴⁶ Luther often admonishes us not to be offended at this fact that the Word of God comes to us through the mouth of man. When we hear the words of God in Baptism, in Holy Communion, and in the absolution, we should remember that it is still God’s Word in spite of its utter simplicity, and we should not say, as the smart alecks do, “God should really offer us something more imposing.”⁴⁷ God deals with us in this way so that we might be able to bear it when He speaks. If He wanted to, He could utter a Word so powerful that one could hear it all the way from heaven to earth, but such a word would bring no one to faith. Therefore God puts His words into the mouth of a prophet.⁴⁸ We might well be reminded here of the fact that when God spoke with His own voice from Mt. Sinai, the children of Israel fled in terror and said to Moses, “Speak thou with us and we will live, but let not God speak with us lest we die.”

What is involved here in Luther’s thinking is not only the doctrine of verbal inspiration. This we shall discuss in a later chapter. It is true, as we shall see, that the relationship of God to the men who spoke His inspired Word was of a very special kind. So Luther says, for example, that we should believe Moses when he teaches, no less than we should believe God Himself, for Moses “teaches us as a man of God whom we are to believe as if God Himself were speaking.”⁴⁹ Luther does not demand that we give this same kind of credence to those who do not speak under the same direct influence of the Holy Ghost, and yet he says that we should adhere to the Word of God whether it is spoken by a disciple or an apostle, a saint or an ordinary man.⁵⁰ At another time he said that we should believe it even when it is spoken by an ass, whether male or female.⁵¹

Since the beginning of time, Luther holds, God has spoken to men through the patriarchs and the prophets,⁵² and to this day God still speaks to us through our parents and our pastors and we should believe that the preacher’s words are God’s Word. Yes, we are justified even in saying that the “voice and words of father or pastor are not his own words and doctrine but those of our Lord and God.”⁵³ We are not to look for the Spirit elsewhere than in His words, which proceed from and are preached by the lips of men.⁵⁴ In the last sermon that Luther preached to the congregation in Wittenberg during the absence of Bugenhagen from the pulpit in 1537 to 1538, Luther told the people,

God is speaking through the voice of the preacher who brings God’s Word...Now you have the Word of God in church, in books, in your home...We and our hearers are just beginning to recognize that it is not a man that we are listening to, but that it is God who is telling us things that contain an everlasting treasure. My dear friend, regard it as a real treasure that God speaks into your physical ear...You do not hear the pastor. Of course, the voice is his, but the words which he employs are really spoken by God. A poor speaker may speak the Word of God just as well as he who is endowed with eloquence. A father speaks the Word of God as well as God does, and your neighbor speaks as well as the angel Gabriel. There is no difference between the

⁴⁶ LW 13, 291

⁴⁷ LW 22, 308

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ LW 13, 80f

⁵⁰ LW

⁵¹ LW 31, 194

⁵² LW 22, 37

⁵³ LW 22, 526

⁵⁴ LW 23, 176

Word when uttered by a schoolboy and when uttered by the angel Gabriel; they vary only in rhetorical ability.⁵⁵

Luther does not in any way intend to say here that schoolboys, fathers, and preachers speak the Word of God in the same manner or degree in which the Word is spoken by the prophets and apostles. He is not here speaking of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, as we said. Quite the contrary. He says that we are not to rely on men but that we must always test their sermons and decide whether they agree with the Word of God.⁵⁶ He said in one sermon, “I, too, am a pastor and doctor; the ministry and the mysteries of God have been entrusted to me. But if I were to preach at variance with Christ’s command, one would justly say to me: ‘You are the devil or Judas with the red beard.’”⁵⁷

On the other hand, if godless and wicked men speak what God wants spoken, then they also truly speak the Word of God. St. John has recorded the Word of God spoken by Caiaphas. Moses and the children of Israel did not reject the preaching of Balaam because he was a godless man. They looked upon his prophecy as a Word from God. The wise men heard the Word of God from the mouth of Herod, who in turn had heard it from the godless high priests and scribes.⁵⁸

In 1530, Luther wrote a rather lengthy essay on the office of the keys. In the course of this work, he discusses the Romanist notion of an “erring key” according to which it was supposed that sometimes when the pastor spoke the words of absolution to an individual he made a mistake and the man’s sins were not really forgiven. Of this perverted teaching Luther says that such ideas “originate in the mistaken notion that God’s Word is not God’s Word. Because it is spoken through men it is regarded as the word of men. And God is thought of as way up there in heaven, very, very far removed from His Word here below.”⁵⁹

We who have been given the privilege of sharing in the office of the holy ministry, would do well to give some serious and earnest consideration to this aspect of Luther’s thought. On the one hand, it ought to fill us with holy pride and joy in our office. It is truly the Word of God which we proclaim in our teaching and preaching, the Word of which God Himself has said that it shall not return to Him empty, but that it shall accomplish that which He pleases. On the other hand, however, it should arouse us to a deep sense of the responsibility that rests upon our heart and conscience, and when we preach and teach we should be sure that what we say is what God wants spoken, and of this we can be certain only so long as we constantly hold up our ideas to the touchstone of Holy Scriptures and evaluate our teaching in the light of God’s written Word.

8. The Scriptures Are The Word Of God.

For in the final analysis, the only Word of God that we have is that which we have in the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures are the Word of God *par excellence*. At the root and base of Luther’s concept of the Word of God you will always find the Holy Bible. He generally uses the terms “Scripture” and “Word of God” as synonymous and interchangeable terms, and while, as we have seen, he knew as well as any student of Scripture that this term “the Word of God” is used for the creative Word by which the universe is brought into being and kept in existence, and the personal Word, which is the eternal Son of God, yet when he uses the term without explanation he almost invariably identifies the Word of God with the Scriptures. It is not at all difficult to find passages in Luther in which he does this in so many words and says, “The Holy Scripture is the Word of God,”⁶⁰ or in which he appeals to the Word of God and then cites a passage from the Bible.⁶¹ How completely he equates the two with a casualness that assumes that this identification is self-evident becomes clear when we

⁵⁵ LW 22, 527-529

⁵⁶ LW 23, 191

⁵⁷ LW 23, 193

⁵⁸ LW 40, 251

⁵⁹ LW 40, 365

⁶⁰ SL 9, 1853; LW 22, 6.14; WML 3, 391; 5, 163; SL 9, 1800

⁶¹ WML, 3, 145

hear him say of Emser, “He has the effrontery to say that the Holy Spirit and Christ did not teach us enough, the Scriptures are not sufficient, God’s Word must have additions, and he who has not more than God’s Word, God’s Scripture, and God’s teaching is venomous, a heretic, an apostate, the worst man on earth.”⁶²

We find Scripture and the Word of God identified also when he says that we Christians believe that Christ is both God and man because God’s Word says so since the Holy Scriptures assign the title of Creator to Christ, and from this it follows beyond question that He is truly and essentially God.⁶³ In the funeral sermon which he preached for Duke John in 1532, Luther spoke of “the Word of God in the Scriptures.”⁶⁴ In 1521 he said that the papists would not allow the simple meaning of Scripture to stand and thus they distorted the Word of God.⁶⁵ In 1525 he said that the radical reformers were twisting the words of Scripture to mean what they wanted them to mean and in this way they put the Word of God to torture.⁶⁶ In 1537, in a sermon on the three ecumenical creeds, preached at Smalcald, he said of the Jews and Mohammedans, “When they want to interpret our Scripture, we will not permit this. They have neither the ability nor the right to do this, for it is God’s Scripture, and God’s Word, which no man can or should interpret.”⁶⁷

In 1538 he denounced Thomas Muenzer for doing what he pleased with God’s Word. He did not treat the Scriptures with the “veneration and profound awe” with which they deserve to be treated.⁶⁸ In all this Luther was simply echoing the position which he took already at the Diet of Worms where he said that his conscience was captive to the Word of God and a few moments later asserted that his conscience was captive and bound by the Holy Scripture.⁶⁹ Already then the two terms stood for the same concept.

And when he thus equates the Word of God and the Holy Scriptures, he means again, very simply, as he himself says, that God speaks to us in the Bible.⁷⁰ He says that if we want to know what is to be taught in the church we should ask God and we will find His answer in the Scriptures.⁷¹ “Holy Scripture presents the Word to us everywhere,” he asserts,⁷² and we are required to believe only “what God has commanded us in Scripture to believe.”⁷³ “The truths of God were committed to writing by divine authority,” he told his class in his lectures on Genesis,⁷⁴ and in his commentary on Psalm 111 he wrote that God’s Word is preserved for us in a book.⁷⁵ We may see only the poor letters of the alphabet in the book, but “this Word has such a secret power that it will flush throngs of devils out of the heart,”⁷⁶ for “Holy Scripture’s inseparable companion is the Holy Spirit,”⁷⁷ who “comforts us through the Holy Scriptures.”⁷⁸ On the other hand, Scripture is also full of threats, and we should not imagine that God is either joking or lying when He speaks these words.⁷⁹ With such expressions as these scattered throughout the writings of Luther, it is not surprising to hear him say in a sermon on 1 Pet. 3:15-18 (1523),

If the people do not want to believe, you should be silent, for it is not your duty to force them to look upon Scripture as God’s book or God’s Word. You have done enough if you have shown

⁶² WML, 3, 373

⁶³ LW 22, 74f

⁶⁴ LW 51, 232

⁶⁵ LW 32, 26

⁶⁶ LW 40, 154-157

⁶⁷ SL 10, 1018

⁶⁸ LW 22, 283

⁶⁹ LW 22, 112f

⁷⁰ LW 9, 187

⁷¹ LW 36, 197

⁷² LW 22, 304

⁷³ WML 3, 380

⁷⁴ LW 1, 351

⁷⁵ LW 13, 360.381

⁷⁶ LW 23, 274

⁷⁷ LW 13, 111

⁷⁸ LW 14, 254

⁷⁹ LW 9, 149

that what you say is based on Scripture. When you hear people who are of this opinion and say, “You preach that a man should not accept the teachings of men, but Peter and Paul, yes, even Christ, were also men”—when you hear people who are so blinded and hardened, that they deny that this is God’s Word or doubt it, then just be quiet. Do not speak one word to them. Let them go.⁸⁰

In these expressions we also find Luther’s answer to the question which is so often asked in our time, “In what sense is the Scripture the Word of God?” The moment a theologian feels compelled to ask that question, he is already drifting away from the simplicity of a childlike faith. The question arises from the fact that the identification of the Scripture with the Word of God is so patently taught by Scripture itself and so ingrained in the whole doctrinal tradition of the whole Christian Church that it is well-nigh impossible to find any theologian, even among the most liberal, who would openly deny that the Scripture is the Word of God, just as you will not find any who will deny that Jesus is the Son of God, no matter under how many rocks you look. After all, false prophets must still come in sheep’s clothing if they expect to be heard by the people of God. The denial of the truth that the Scripture is the Word of God usually comes in the form of this question, “In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?” In essence this question is very much like the very first question asked about God’s Word, “Yea, hath God said?” In other words, “When you say that the Bible is the Word of God, you don’t really mean to say that God said these things that are said here, do you?” Luther would have been not a little impatient with a question like this, for to him the answer was self-evident. He would have said about the Word what the Apology says about the church, “Among us a seven-year-old child knows in what sense the Bible is the Word of God.” He was not a speculative theologian, and speculation he hated as he hated the devil himself. Philosophy he considered one of the greatest enemies of the Christian faith. To him, very simply, the Scriptures were the Word of God because God speaks the words of this book, and what this book says, God says. We have previously heard him say that God speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures. In his lectures on Galatians, he told his class at the University of Wittenberg, “If we could believe that God Himself speaks to us in Scripture we would read it with all diligence.”⁸¹ In another lecture, on Isaiah, he admonished his students to persevere in the constant use of God’s Word and not to grow tired of reading it (and who can doubt that he has in mind the Word of God as we have it in written form in the Scriptures), because, as he said, “Pious hearts believe that it is the Word of God, that it is inspired by God through the Holy Ghost.”⁸²

This conviction that Scripture is the Word of God because God speaks to us in the words of this book characterizes his thinking during the whole course of his career as the reformer of the church. Anyone who has carefully read the accounts of his appearance before the Diet of Worms must come away with the conviction that this poor emaciated monk could never have stood against the combined might of church and empire as he did if he had not had the conviction deeply engrained in his heart, that the voice of Scripture is the voice of God. Ten years later he stood before the congregation in Wittenberg and sought to win them to that same conviction by saying, “If a thought comes to you, no matter if it seems too beautiful and holy that you imagine it to be downright angelic, then take a good look at it, compare it with God’s Word and see if it is grounded in Scripture, and whether God has commanded or said or ordered it or not.”⁸³ God’s Word is therefore what God commands or says or orders, and in the final analysis this is found only in Scripture. And twenty-four years after Worms, the year before he died, in his *Wider das Pabsttum zu Rom vom Teufel gestifted*, he still held the same position and wrote, “Whoever wants to hear God should read the Holy Scripture.”⁸⁴

We could go on for a long time multiplying such samples of Luther’s thought to show that in his mind the Bible is the Word of God just in this sense that what is said in this book is said by God. In this sense, much

⁸⁰ SL 9, 1071f

⁸¹ SL 9, 1852

⁸² SL 6, 742

⁸³ SL 7, 2389

⁸⁴ SL 17, 1089

of modern theology would not be willing to call Scripture the Word of God, and it is no wonder that Brunner was finally forced to admit that Luther did not see eye to eye with him on the doctrine of Scripture.

9. The Oral Word Of God.

Neo-orthodox theologians, in an effort somehow to reduce the significance and meaning of the statement that the Bible is the Word of God, are fond of asserting that for Luther the Word was primarily a spoken, proclaimed, preached Word and not a written Word. A nationally known Lutheran scholar, who acknowledged his debt to Karl Barth by introducing him to a University of Chicago audience with the words, "To Karl Barth, as probably to no other living theologian, we may without blasphemy or exaggeration apply the words of the Fourth Evangelist, 'And of his fullness have all we received and grace for grace,'"⁸⁵ has written of Luther that for him the Scriptures were the Word of God only "in a derivative sense," derivative, that is, "from the basic sense of the Word as proclamation,"⁸⁶ In this section of our paper we shall attempt to show that this is an inexcusable, unwarranted, and misleading caricature of Luther's thought on this matter, and that exactly the reverse is true, that the proclaimed or preached Word can claim to be the Word of God only as it partakes of the nature of the Word as written and recorded for us in the Holy Bible.

It must be admitted at the very outset that there are a few passages in Luther which seem at first glance, at least to the superficial reader, to exalt the spoken Word above the written Word. For the most part they come from early in his career, and it seems rather strange that most scholars in discussing these few, rather unique passages, seem to forget that they come from a time when Luther's own translation of the Bible in a language that the people could read and understand had not yet appeared. Moreover, it should be remembered that these words were written before the time when the Lutheran school system had not yet been established and the ideal of universal education, which owes so much to some of Luther's later writings, had not yet gripped the imagination of the people. In such a cultural context, the spoken Word would always be more significant for the masses in the church than the written Word, for the latter was not available to them. If these facts were kept in mind even these early remarks would not be interpreted as they are by neo-orthodoxy.

In 1521, for example, in the preface to the *Church Postil*, which was a book of sermons intended for reading by the preachers of Saxony to their congregation, he wrote, "The Gospel should really not be something written, but an oral Word which bring the Scripture before us, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ Himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called His teaching not Scripture but Gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth."⁸⁷ And in a sermon in this *Postil* he said, "Christ did not command the apostles to write but only to preach."⁸⁸

Even if it is granted that this passage was written in a book in which he was seeking to encourage the preaching of the Gospel in Saxony and to remind the priests of their duty to proclaim the Word, it must still be admitted that it does seem to exalt the oral Word above the written Word. Yet it should not be forgotten that the passage occurs in a context in which Luther is seeking also to encourage the study of the Old Testament, of which he says that it deserves to be called Scripture more than the New Testament. On the other hand, one could adduce passage after passage from the writings of Luther in which he gives the name Scripture also to the New Testament. It bears repeating also to call attention once more that this was said in the preface to a book of sermons, and that Luther was attempting to point out to those who used the book the importance of the office of preaching. Whatever may have been in Luther's mind, however, when he wrote this, it should be remembered, first, that this was spoken early in his career, secondly, that it is a note which is rarely sounded by Luther, and thirdly, that to balance this one of few passages of this nature there are many passages in Luther in which he places the preached Word and the written Word on the same level or where he actually places the preached

⁸⁵ Pelikan, J. in *Criterion*, a publication of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, IL, 1 (Winter, 1963), p.3

⁸⁶ Pelikan, Op. cit, p.67

⁸⁷ LW 35, 123; SL, 11, xlv (my translation)

⁸⁸ WA X, I, I, 626

Word under the judgment of the written Word. We shall have more to say of this later, but we might here call attention only to the fact that in the same year in which he wrote the words quoted above, he also wrote, “The Gospel was not meant only to be written, but rather to be proclaimed with the physical voice.”⁸⁹ Here he no longer says that the Gospel was not meant to be something written, although he still expresses a preference for the preached Gospel.

A second passage which is often cited to show that Luther exalted the preached Word above the Scripture is found in the reply of Luther to the attacks of Catharinus, which also dates from the same year, 1521. Catharinus had argued that if the pope is not recognized as the head of the church, no one will ever know where the church is. In his answer Luther develops the line of thought which comes to full expression later in the seventh and eighth articles of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, namely that the church is known by its marks, that is, the Gospel and the Sacraments, the Gospel being the chief of the church rather than the sacraments. He then proceeds, “I am now speaking not of the written Gospel, but of that which is proclaimed with the physical voice.”⁹⁰ He makes a similar statement in his book *Of the Councils and the Churches*, in which he writes, “This Christian holy people (he is speaking of the Christian Church) is to be known by this that it has God’s Word...We speak, however, of the external Word orally preached by men like you and me.”⁹¹

At first glance, here again it appears that we have the same thought expressed as the previously cited passages, but a closer study of the context will show that this is correct. Unlike the previous passage this one is clear and Luther’s intent is easily discernible. The question is “What is the true church?” If the answer is given, “Where you find the Word of God, there you find the true church of God,” then, as Luther well knew the papists could argue that they also had the Word of God, for they had the Scripture. Luther himself says in one place, “To be sure, a bit of light remained in the papacy such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, and the Bible.”⁹² Therefore he says here that the true church of God is found where the Word of God is preached. He goes on to say, however, that he is not speaking of all preaching, but of that preaching which sets forth the doctrine of Christ. The papists, he said, were preaching the words of Thomas Aquinas rather than the words of Christ. Luther expresses his whole argument in succinct form in one of his sermons, where he says, to the pope and the bishops, “You bear the name of the Christian Church, you have Baptism, the Sacrament, and the Bible. And yet you do not teach and preach the truth.”⁹³

Thus it is evident that in this passage at least, Luther is not exalting the oral Word above the written Word at all. He is simply giving expression to the idea which was later summarized in the words of the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession, “The Church is the communion of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are administered in the right way,” and which is repeated in our time in the words of the *Brief Statement*: “The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications.” Luther puts it this way in his book on the *Misuse of the Mass*, also published in 1521, “A sure sign by which we may know where the church is, is the Word of God...how can we ourselves know where the church is, if we do not hear her prophesying...It is certain that the church and those in whom God truly dwells do prophesy; but it is uncertain where the church is which is capable of prophesying unless it actually does prophesy.”⁹⁴

However, when the proponents of neo-orthodox views seek to show that Luther somehow considered the spoken Word to be superior to the written Word by citing the repeated references that one finds throughout the writings of Luther to the oral Word, the preached Word, or the shouted Word, they are not dealing intelligently or fairly with the evidence. The most common synonyms in Luther for the “oral Word” are not the “preached Word, or the “shouted Word,” but rather the “external Word” or the “physical Word.” The German

⁸⁹ LW 13, 35; SL 5, 692 (my translation)

⁹⁰ SL 18, 1467

⁹¹ WML 5, 270-271

⁹² LW 23, 280

⁹³ LW 12, 369

⁹⁴ LW 36, 145

terms he uses are *das muendliche Wort*, *das aueszerliche Wort*, and *das leibliche Wort*. The antithesis to the oral Word might seem, at first glance, to be the written Word, but as we shall see in a moment, this is not the case. The contrast becomes clear when we see that he called it also the external Word, the antithesis to which is certainly not the written Word, but rather the inner Word, and when he calls it the physical Word we all recognize that the antithesis must be the spiritual Word. But all this becomes still clearer when we look at the context in which he uses these terms.

He uses these expressions especially in his controversies with the so-called “*Schwaermer*” the fanatics, the Anabaptists, the radical left. He describes them as people who “hate or neglect the external Word and are captivated by their own vain and inane speculations.”⁹⁵ These *Schwaermer* are the spiritual ancestors of those people whom we still find in the church today who are not satisfied with the plain, bare promise of forgiveness in the Gospel, but insist that God must speak directly to the human heart and that only he is a true Christian who has had a “spiritual experience” of the operation of the Holy Spirit in his own heart. Those are the people who still go around asking people, “Are you saved?” instead of proclaiming the Gospel and saying, “You are saved.” Luther says of them that they disparage the external Word and want to hear a spirit from heaven apart from the external Word.⁹⁶ Luther knew how dangerous such a teaching is to true Christian faith and in no uncertain terms he rejected what he called the “self-made spirituality” of the sects “who seek a special enlightenment and a secret revelation from heaven, and lay claim to something apart from the commonly preached Word of the Gospel.”⁹⁷

This is the sort of thing which is condemned also in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, in which all of us agree that “God does not want to deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.”⁹⁸ The Smalcald Articles describe those people in detail. After the brief discussion of the Gospel, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Keys, and Confession, we read in that document,

In these points, which have reference to the oral, external Word, we must hold fast to this that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the preceding external Word so that we may be on our guard against the Enthusiasts, that is, the spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without or before the Word and afterwards judge, interpret, or twist the Scripture or oral Word as they please, as Muenzer did and many still do today, who want to be sharp judges between the Spirit and the letters, and do not know what they say or teach; for the papacy is also pure Enthusiasm, in which the pope boasts that “all laws are in the shrine of his heart” and what he together with his church says and decides, that is supposed to be Spirit and law even though it goes beyond and against the Scripture and oral Word. That is nothing but the old devil and the old serpent, who also made Enthusiasts out of Adam and Eve, led them away from the external Word of God to spirituality and private opinions, and yet did it with another external Word just as our Enthusiasts condemn the external Word and yet they themselves do not remain silent but fill the world with their blabbering and their writing just as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the oral Word of the apostles, but had to come through their writing and word. Why do they not put an end to their own preaching and writing until the Spirit comes into the people without and before their writings, as they boast that he came into them without the preaching of Scripture.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ LW 12, 369

⁹⁶ LW 23, 92

⁹⁷ LW 13, 271

⁹⁸ S.A, III, viii, 10 (Cp, LW 22, 48)

⁹⁹ S.M, III, viii, 1-6

This citation from the confessions, which, by the way, was also written by Luther, places everything into proper perspective, is crystal clear that the antithesis to oral Word in all these passages is not the written Word but rather the “spiritual Word” of the Enthusiasts, which is for all practical purpose identical with what neo-orthodoxy means by the “Word of God.” The oral Word and the Scripture are in this passage from the confessions identified with each other, and the contrast is between the oral and written Word on the one side and the spiritual Word on the other. Luther himself states the contrast in this way when he writes in his comments on the preaching of Christ predicted in Psalm 2, “This passage must be understood entirely with respect to oral rather than spiritual preaching...He is true, visible, and tangible man, who also teaches with a human voice.”¹⁰⁰

For a correct understanding of the theology of Luther, it should be noted in this place that when Luther criticizes the Enthusiasts for their emphasis on the spiritual experiences of men, he does not mean that God does not speak to our heart or that Christians are forbidden to have such spiritual experiences, but he merely meant to emphasize that if such experiences do come they ought to be based on the oral, external Word, heard first in the ear and then in the heart. He specifically states in his work *On Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament* (1522), “The Master does his teaching in the hearts of men through the external Word of his preachers, however. The preachers impress the Word upon the ears, but Christ impresses it in the heart.”¹⁰¹ And of the blessings of the children of God of which David speaks in the 23rd Psalm, he writes, “Though the oral preaching of the Word, which enters the ears and touches the heart by faith and through the holy sacraments our Lord God accomplishes all these things in Christendom.”¹⁰²

Luther discusses this whole matter in great detail in his attack *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525).¹⁰³ He says there that God deals with us in a twofold manner, outwardly through the oral Word of the Gospel and the material signs of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and inwardly through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But the outward means must always come first and the inward experience always follows as an effect of the outward Word and sign. “God has determined,” he writes, “to give the inward to no one except through the outward.” He then quotes Karlstadt and his followers as saying, “Will a handful of water make me clean from sin? The Spirit, the Spirit, the Spirit must do this inwardly. The Wittenbergers are ignorant of this and make faith depend on the letter.” Luther then continues,

But should you ask how one gains access to this same lofty spirit they do not refer you to the outward Gospel but to some imaginary realm, saying: Remain in self-abstraction where I am now and you will have the same experience. A heavenly voice will come, and God Himself will speak to you...With all his mouthing of the words, ‘Spirit, Spirit, Spirit,’ he tears down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and the oral proclamation of the Word of God he wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit.¹⁰⁴

And just as Luther by no means wishes to disparage the true Christian feelings and experiences of the heart by his emphasis on the external Word that we hear with our ears, so he does not in any way downgrade the written Word by his many references to the oral Word. In fact, even a rather cursory reading of Luther will reveal that in Luther’s thinking the oral and written Word are the two forms in which the external or physical Word comes to us. There is a passage in Luther in which he says that the oral Word is stronger than the written Word, which for some reason or other is seldom quoted by neo-orthodox theologians, although it might appear

¹⁰⁰ LW 12, 43

¹⁰¹ LW 36, 248

¹⁰² LW 12, 170

¹⁰³ See e.g. LW 40, 146 ff.

¹⁰⁴ LW 40, 147

at first to favor their point of view. In this passage, found in his sermons on the Gospel of John, we find these words, “The Holy Ghost speaks to those who read the Word of God. Here then speaking and writing is one thing, except that the oral speaking is more powerful than the written, because through writing you can also speak with those who are more than a hundred miles away from you.”¹⁰⁵

This passage is interesting for several reasons. In the first place when he says that the Holy Ghost speaks to those who read the Word of God, it becomes clear why he so often simply speaks of the oral or spoken Word even though it seems evident that he includes also the written Word in that term. Secondly, the statement that speaking and writing are one thing shows clearly that his assertion that oral speaking is more powerful than written speaking is not intended in any way to give the written Word a secondary or subordinate position to the spoken Word. In the third place, I would question whether Luther really said that oral speaking is more powerful than written, for it would be much more intelligible if the passage read, “Written speaking is more powerful than oral, because through writing you can also speak with those who are more than a hundred miles away from you.” Finally, even if Luther did say that the spoken Word is more powerful than the written Word, this should not be hard for us who are teachers to understand. Luther was primarily a teacher and what he meant by such a statement should not be difficult for teachers to see. A statement in writing may be identical in every respect with a statement made orally, and yet all of us know that a spoken statement, which can make use of the inflections of the human voice, is pedagogically more effective than the same statement made in writing. St Paul already indicates this in the Scriptures when he writes to the Galatians that he wishes that he could be present with them and change his voice to emphasize the words which he was writing to them.

There can therefore be no question whatever that Luther included the Scriptures when he spoke of the oral Word. In the selection from the confessions quoted previously, Luther three times uses the expression, “The Scripture and oral Word,” not “The Scripture and the Word of God,” mind you, but “the Scripture and Word of God?” Ordinarily, when one article precedes two nouns in English as well as in German, or Greek for that matter, the two nouns are to be understood as referring to the same person or thing, But beside this the context makes it clear that this expression, “the Scripture and oral Word,” is for all practical purposes equivalent to “the written and spoken Word.” But this becomes still more apparent, when we hear him say in his letter *Concerning the Rebellious Spirit*(1524),

They want to teach the people orally and in writing, though they still boast that each one must hear the voice of God for himself; yet they ridicule us who teach the Word of God orally and in written form, which they claim is of no value. They have a much higher and more precious office than the Apostles and Prophets and Christ Himself. Those all taught the Word of God orally or in writing and said nothing about the heavenly voice of God which we are supposed to hear ... we recognize and judge this spirit as having as his purpose the invalidating of the Scriptures and the oral Word of God, and doing away with the sacrament of the altar and of baptism.¹⁰⁶

In the same work he describes Muenzer and his followers in these words, They come from heaven, and hear God Himself speaking to them as to angels. What is taught at Wittenberg concerning love and faith and the cross of Christ is an unimportant thing. “You yourself must hear the voice of God.” they say, “and experience the work of God in you and feel how much your talents weigh. The Bible means nothing. It is Bible, Booble, Babel,” etc.¹⁰⁷ In another place he speaks of the Anabaptists as people who ridicule the external Word and say that it is “after all, a mere word written with pen and ink. As soon as it is spoken it passes into thin air and vanishes.”¹⁰⁸ When we read such things in Luther, we must come to realize once more that also in theology there is nothing new under the sun. These are the kind of people who would stop on a Bible and say, “How can

¹⁰⁵ WA 47, 184

¹⁰⁶ LW 40, 55

¹⁰⁷ LW 40, 50

¹⁰⁸ LW 22, 54

an object of paper and ink be the Word of God?" These people, too, put on a false show of spirituality as though they were above finding God in such material things as paper and ink and water and bread and wine. These words of Luther make it as clear as anything can be that when he emphasized the oral Word in his controversies with the Anabaptists and Karlstadt and Muenzer, he was defending the Holy Scriptures and their place in the church, and there is no hint in them anywhere that the Bible is to be considered the Word of God only in a derivative sense. If this is what you mean by fundamentalism, then Luther is a fundamentalist.

10. The Spoken Word Derives Its Authority From The Written Word.

In fact, for Luther the written Word, the Scripture, the Holy Bible, is the basis in which the spoken Word must find its foundation and the criterion by which it must be judged. Just because a man is a preacher and occupies the pulpit and the office of the ministry gives no one a guarantee that people must believe him, for there can be scoundrels in the holy ministry.¹⁰⁹ If any preacher comes and proclaims anything which is at variance with the voice of Christ¹¹⁰ or inconsistent with Moses,¹¹¹ we are not to follow him. We are to listen only to those pastors who bring us the words and the thoughts of Christ.¹¹² True Christian preachers must proclaim the Gospel of Christ which the apostles transmitted to us; and of those who preach this message, and only of them, we can say that they are sent by God and speak the Word of God. Those who do not preach this are false prophets.¹¹³ What we invent or what we got from the opinions of Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose is not the Word of God.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the church itself has no power and no right to change one single word of God, for if she had this right, the whole foundation of our faith would become uncertain, for if the church has the authority to change one word, then she has the right to change any word and all the words, "even the one by which she is founded and confirmed as a Christian Church."¹¹⁵ We must always remember that not only individual preachers but also a whole church body may fall into error.¹¹⁶ When we hear Luther speak in this way, we must realize again how much he can still teach us. And in these days, when we are urged by ecumaniacs all over the world to listen to all the voices in the church, we need to pay a little more attention to Dr. Luther; and when we are told by neo-orthodox scholars that Scripture grew out of the faith of the church, or that the Scripture is the gift of the church to the world, we might keep in mind that Luther said, "It is not God's Word just because the church speaks it; rather, the church comes into being because the Word is spoken."¹¹⁷

According to Dr. Luther, a preacher, and this would certainly also apply with equal force to those in the teaching ministry of the church, who wants to be faithful must suppress his own words and speak nothing but the Word of God; he dare not say anything else but what God says and orders him to say; and if he does say something else, it will not be God's Word even though he yells like mad.¹¹⁸ It is evident that when Luther spoke of the oral Word and the shouted Word, the emphasis was always on the noun and not on the adjective. Luther says that Christ did not tell His disciples, "Teach them to observe what you invent," but rather, "What I have commanded you."¹¹⁹ The written Word therefore remains the touchstone by which the spoken Word must be evaluated and judged.¹²⁰ Luther says that all the books of the fathers and the councils together cannot improve on what we find in the Holy Scriptures.¹²¹

¹⁰⁹ LW 21, 251

¹¹⁰ LW 22, 443

¹¹¹ LW 22, 483

¹¹² LW 23, 352

¹¹³ LW 22, 478.483

¹¹⁴ LW 22, 484

¹¹⁵ LW 34, 74

¹¹⁶ LW 34, 75

¹¹⁷ LW 36, 144f

¹¹⁸ LW 51, 305

¹¹⁹ LW 35, 148

¹²⁰ LW 23, 174

¹²¹ LW 34, 383

One ought to conclude from all this evidence that no man is justified in saying that in the theology of Martin Luther the Scriptures derive their character as Word of God from the basic character of the Word as proclamation. Rather the very opposite is true and the spoken Word is the Word of God only when it is based on and derived from the written Word in Scripture. To Luther, the Word of God was first and foremost the Holy Bible. He gives voice to the deep awe and reverence which lie hold for this book when he says, “Only the Sacred Scriptures have such a majestic and powerful tone, even without our effort, that they can meet and dispose of all the debating tricks and compel one to say: ‘No man ever spoke like this man.’”¹²² And it might be well for us to pray to the Lord for a double measure of the Spirit which Luther displayed when he wrote in the dedicatory letter to his commentary on Psalm 1, “I do not know why; but I cannot help loving those about whom I hear that they love the Holy Scriptures and hating those who distort and despise them.”¹²³ Perhaps out of that would come a new reformation of the church. God grant it. Amen.

II. The Inspiration Of The Holy Scriptures.

Just as the term “Word of God” has been emptied of much of its traditional meaning in our time and filled instead with insubstantial, neo-orthodox fluff which is the theological equivalent of the kind of whipped cream that comes out of an aerosol can, which is tolerable only after you have forgotten what the real thing tastes like, so the term “inspiration” no longer is permitted in many circles to mean what it meant in the theology of our fathers. When men today speak of the “inspiration of the Holy Bible” they often mean only that it is an inspiring book, that historically it has demonstrated its ability to rouse men out of their spiritual lethargy, but basically the holy men of God who wrote this book were inspired in the same way that Homer and Shakespeare and even Tennessee Williams are inspired. To many scholars in the church, the inspiration of the Bible is no longer a doctrine to be taught or a truth to be confessed but a problem to be discussed.¹

For Luther the inspiration of the Bible is no problem. He never discusses it at any great length or in any detail. He just takes it for granted as a self-evident truth which is accepted by all of Christendom,² just as the Lutheran Confessions take it for granted and assume it as the basis of all their pronouncements in matters of doctrine. Modern theologians, if they would really take Luther seriously on this point, would be inclined to dismiss his view of the inspiration of Scripture as incredibly naïve, though they would be prone to excuse him because he lived in an age when men still believed in miracles and the direct intervention of God in the affairs of men.

1. God Is the Author Of Scripture.

It is unquestionably true that Martin Luther held firmly and unreservedly to the divine authorship of the Scriptures. The Holy Scripture, he says, “is the Holy Spirit’s book.”² In the letter which he sent to the followers of John Hus in Bohemia in 1523, he admonished them not to neglect the study of Hebrew and Greek, for “it was in these two languages that the Holy Spirit wrote the Old and New Testaments.”³ In his comments on Psalm 119, he says of the Bible, “No other book, doctrine, nor word, except this book alone which teaches us God’s Word, can comfort us in need, anxiety, misery, death, yes, in the midst Of devils and in hell. Therein God Himself speaks to us, as a man speaks to his friend.”⁴

He speaks of God as the author not only of the Scriptures as a whole, but of various parts of the Bible also. Of the Psalter he says in his Preface to the Psalms in his German Bible (1545), “I have a notion that the

¹²² LW 14, 283

¹²³ LW 14, 284

¹ See, e.g., “On Second Thought”, *The Cresset*, Valparaiso U, Feb. 1961

² SL 9, 1775

³LW 36, 304

⁴ SL 9, 1787f.

Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.”⁶ He considers the Holy Spirit, however, to be not only the compiler of the Psalter, but looks upon Him as the author of the individual psalms. He writes that the Holy Spirit, the greatest and best poet of all, composed the psalms.⁷ He says that Psalm 111 is the “Holy Spirit’s hymn,”⁸ that the allegories of Psalm 45 were all “written by the Holy Spirit.”⁹ And that we must believe that the Holy Spirit Himself composed Psalm 90.¹⁰

Also those parts of the Bible which we would classify as history Luther assigns to the authorship of the Holy Ghost. Thus we find him holding that the historical accounts found in the Bible are recorded by the Holy Ghost,¹¹ and that it was the wish of the Holy Spirit that even details from the lives of the patriarchs should be committed to writing.¹¹ One could hardly say that the history of the family of Cain in Genesis 4 is a part of the history of salvation, and yet Luther says that also the history of Cain after the murder of Abel is related by the Holy Spirit.¹²

But of all the ways in which Luther speaks of God as the author of the Bible, the most common passages are those passages in which he, with a very childlike faith, ascribes individual words and passages to the Holy Ghost, no matter who the human author of the passage may happen to be. At this point we shall say nothing of the inspiration of the words, since we intend to cover this in greater detail under the heading of verbal inspiration, but for the present we shall take note only of the fact that in Luther’s various commentaries it happens literally hundreds of times (it is possible to count 56 times in which he does this in his commentary on Psalm 2 alone) in which he speaks of the passage under discussion as a saying of the Holy Spirit. We find such phrases as “The Holy Spirit says,”¹³ “God says,”¹⁴ “the Holy Spirit makes mention of,”¹⁵ “the Holy Spirit gives us a description of,”¹⁶ “the Holy Spirit exercises his function as teacher in this passage,”¹⁷ “the Holy Spirit wanted to give special praise,”¹⁸ “the Holy Spirit wanted all posterity to become aware of it,”¹⁹ “the Holy Spirit inserted this description,”²⁰ “the Holy Spirit carefully describes,”²¹ “the Holy Spirit differentiates,”²² “the Holy Spirit speaks,”²³ “the Holy Spirit instructs,”²⁴ “the Holy Spirit makes a special point of,”²⁵ “the Spirit teaches,”²⁶ “the Holy Spirit forbids,”²⁷ “adds,”²⁸ “warns,”²⁹ “comforts,”³⁰ “foretells,”³¹ “the Holy Spirit writes,”³² “prophesies,”³³ “gives us consolation,”³⁴ “wishes to show,”³⁵ etc.³⁶

⁶ LW 13, 351

⁷ LW 13, 351

⁸ LW 12, 255

⁹ LW 13, 81

¹⁰ See, e.g. LW 22, 415; 2, 364

¹¹ LW 2, 296

¹² LW 1, 311

¹³ LW 14, 8; 12, 23

¹⁴ LW 2, 143

¹⁵ LW 2, 166

¹⁶ LW 2, 349

¹⁷ LW 2, 364

¹⁸ LW 2, 372

¹⁹ LW 2, 374

²⁰ LW 2, 344

²¹ LW 2, 235

²² LW 2, 241

²³ LW 2, 245; 12, 340

²⁴ LW 12, 310

²⁵ LW 12, 390

²⁶ LW 12, 28; 12, 405

²⁷ LW 12, 90

²⁸ LW 12, 91

²⁹ LW 12, 23.92

³⁰ LW 12, 32.92

It is evident that Luther never would have agreed with this point of view, expressed not so long ago by a Lutheran writer, in a Lutheran magazine, that the Psalter is the word of God in a way that other Biblical books are not. “While other Biblical literature”, writes this Lutheran theologian, “is God’s word to men, the Psalter constitutes men’s words back to God...The Psalter becomes the Word of God in that God accepts these prayers and takes them to Himself, takes them to heart and thereby, they become God’s property. But then God turns around and gives them back to us.”³⁷ When we remember that Luther said that the Psalter was compiled by the Holy Ghost as a summary of the whole of Scripture, that the Holy Ghost composed individual psalms, that in the words of the Psalms the Holy Spirit speaks, teaches, warns, threatens, and comforts, we must see how incompatible these two points of view are. In fact, in his commentary on Psalm 51, Luther marvels at the insight into repentance and forgiveness that is displayed here, and he asks, “What man could speak of repentance and forgiveness as the Holy Ghost speaks in this psalm?”³⁸ And a little later in the same commentary he writes that we should believe “that it comes not from David but from the Holy Spirit Himself.”³⁹ Of Psalm 90 he said that only the Holy Ghost can teach in this way.⁴⁰

In the light of all this it is also clear what Luther means when says that the Holy Scriptures did not grow on earth.⁴¹ The divine wisdom which Moses teaches in Psalm 90 is knowledge which does not grow in our homes.⁴² The Word which we are to preach from the pulpit has not been invented by men, but it was sent down from heaven.⁴³ “The Word was not spun out of our heads,” he says, “nor did it grow out of any human heart. It fell down from heaven.”⁴⁴

This was Luther’s striking way of impressing upon the Christians of his time that the Bible had not come into existence as ordinary books do, but that it is truly a gift of God from heaven. It should make crystal clear to anyone that Luther would not be pleased with those who bear his name but who ridicule the doctrine of the divine origin of this book by saying that surely God did not let the Bible fall directly from heaven, or that it did not come floating down on a little pink cloud. While such statements are literally true, they usually come tripping along on cloven hoofs. Holy Scripture did not grow on earth, said Dr Luther, and those who are willing to listen with unprejudiced minds know what he meant. They know also why he called the Bible “divine Scripture,”⁴⁵ “divine writings,”⁴⁶ why he said that the sayings of the Bible were “divine sayings,”⁴⁵ and why he went so far as to speak of “Paul’s divine voice.”⁴⁷

When Luther read the Scriptures he was conscious, and he wanted others to be conscious of this also, that God spoke, not only through this book (this an unbelieving Modernist and a docetic neo-orthodox theologian would also be willing to admit), but *in* this book. He makes the remark in one place that he is accustomed to saying repeatedly that the Holy Ghost is the teacher of this book; and the context makes it very clear that he is not speaking of the guidance of the Holy Ghost given to those who read and study the Bible in

³¹ LW 12, 22.63

³² LW 12, 34

³³ LW 12, 41

³⁴ LW 12, 38

³⁵ LW 12, 50

³⁶ For other similar expressions see LW 12, 8. 10. 11. 12. 14. 18. 20. 50. 51. 52. 54. 59. 60. 61. 63. 65. 68. 69. 72. 74. 75. 76. 77. 81. 83. 89. 273. 274. 278. 279. 286. 288. 290. 297. 299. 303. 304. 252. 255. 265. 269; 36, 142; 32, 175

³⁷ E.H. Schroeder, “The Lord of our Life”, in *The Nexus*, November 1961

³⁸ SL 5, 474; LW 12, 303f.

³⁹ LW 12, 403

⁴⁰ LW 13, 82

⁴¹ SL 7, 2095; LW 22, 484.

⁴² LW 13, 82

⁴³ LW 22, 478; cp. Also 22, 484

⁴⁴ LW 21, 205

⁴⁵ LW 36, 135

⁴⁶ LW 32, 167

⁴⁷ LW 32, 155

faith, but he means that the things that are taught here are taught by the Holy Ghost.⁴⁸ Anyone who reads much in Luther must very quickly come to the conclusion that Luther treats whatever the canonical books say with the greatest reverence and respect. He insists over and over that statements most contradictory to human reason must be allowed to stand and that no effort should be made to resolve paradoxical propositions by human interpretations. There is only one way in which this attitude of his could be understood. Luther himself was always conscious of something of which he urged all readers to be mindful when the Bible is read. “In dealing with Scripture”, he says in one of his early sermons on Genesis, “you must remember that it is God Himself who speaks.”⁴⁹ And he never changed his mind. In one of the last works to come from his pen, *The Last Words of King David*, issued in 1543, he wrote, “The Holy Scripture is spoken by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁰

And, this was always more than an academic question with him. If it is God who speaks here, men ought to listen to it devoutly and with respect. He complains in the commentary on the Sermon on the Mount,

Since it was so common that everyone has it written in a book and can read it every day, no one thinks of it as anything special or precious. Yes, we grow sated and neglect it, as if it had been spoken by some shoemaker rather than the High Majesty of heaven. Therefore it is in punishment for our ingratitude and neglect that we get so little out of it and never feel nor taste what a treasure, power, and might there is in the words of Christ. But whoever has the grace to recognize it as the Word of God rather than the word of man, will also think of it more highly and dearly, and will never grow sick and tired of it.⁵¹

2. The Word Of God Is Written By Men

When Luther emphasizes so often that the Word of God is not the word of men, when he says that the Scriptures did not grow on earth, that it fell from heaven, this does not in any way indicate that he was denying the historical, human process which God employed as His way of sending His Word from heaven. In fact, if it were not for the unreasonable objections of modern theologians who insist that to say that it came down from heaven means that it came floating down from the sky on “a little pink cloud,” it would hardly be necessary to note that Luther was certainly aware of the truth that the Scriptures were written by men.

But he saw absolutely no conflict between this so-called human side of the Scripture and his repeated assertion that it is God who speaks in the Bible. He consistently looks upon the prophets and apostles as the channels and the instruments whom God used to give His Word to men. There can be no question that Luther held to the view which is often called mechanical inspiration today and which is caricatured by the assertion that this view of inspiration of necessity destroys the freedom of man and makes nothing more than typewriters out of the writers of the canonical books. He says that the prophets and apostles were men “through whom the Holy Ghost has spoken.”⁵² In the Genesis commentary he writes “We hear God speak through the prophets.”⁵³ He repeatedly names individual apostles and prophets as spokesmen of the Lord and says the Christ spoke “through Paul,”⁵⁴ the Holy Spirit spoke “through David,”⁵⁵ “through Isaiah,”⁵⁶ and “through John.”⁵⁷ Sometimes he even speaks of the mouth of the holy writer as God’s instrument. Thus he writes that God spoke “through the mouth of Paul,”⁵⁸ “through the mouth of the prophet David,”⁵⁹ and he says that even the lowliest

⁴⁸ SL 2, 566

⁴⁹ SL 3, 21f.

⁵⁰ SL 3, 1895

⁵¹ LW 21, 10

⁵² SL 7, 1660f.; LW 22, 113

⁵³ LW 2, 353; cp. 12, 18

⁵⁴ LW 36, 150

⁵⁵ LW 12, 14

⁵⁶ LW 32, 164

⁵⁷ LW 22, 14

⁵⁸ LW 35, 139

⁵⁹ LW 12, 22

Jew in Palestine knew that God had “spoken through the mouth of Moses.”⁶⁰ Luther may be guilty of a mixed metaphor here since in every case he has reference to something that is *written* in the Bible, but it is no more strange than when we hear David say in Psalm 45, “My *tongue* is the *pen* of a ready writer.”

It never occurs to Luther that this might be something degrading and destructive of human personality, as modern theology seems to think. To Luther this divine use of human instruments is a marvellous manifestation of divine grace. He says that it is a wonderful thing that the Holy Ghost wanted to give all the books of Holy Scripture to the world out of the people of Abraham and through his seed.⁶¹ He speaks of Paul as “a chosen vessel” of God in the transmission of God’s Word to man.⁶² The four evangelists were not drunk or insane but they were filled with the Holy Ghost when they wrote the truth about the Lord’s Supper.⁶³ When St John recorded the words of the sermon Christ preached at Capernaum, he acted at the command of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ Instead of looking upon such inspiration as being destructive of human personality, Luther considered this a great honor which God has done to the office of the ministry when He chose to speak through the instrumentality of man. Even in places where the Bible simply says that the Lord spoke and mentions no human speaker, Luther suggests that we ought to understand this speaking as having been done by man. Thus he says that God spoke to Cain through Adam⁶⁵ and to Noah through Methuselah.⁶⁶ He does not insist on this but says,

I find it particularly pleasant to think that these words of God were not spoken from heaven but were said to Noah through a human agency. Although I do not deny that this could have been revealed by an angel or by the Holy Spirit Himself, nevertheless the ministry should be given the honor where it can rightly be maintained that God spoke through human beings... Thus, in my opinion, these words were spoken by Methuselah himself; but they are attributed to God because the Spirit of God spoke through him.⁶⁷

And yet, paradoxically, again and again he stresses the point that it is not men but God who speaks to us in the Bible. In his Galatians commentary he says that it is not an angel nor any creature that speaks to us in what is written in the Scriptures, but God Himself.⁶⁸ At another time he wrote, “The Scriptures, although they are written by men, are not of men nor from men, but from God.”⁶⁹ What Moses says is really said by God,⁷⁰ and what Moses presents to us are the commandments of God and not his own ideas.⁷¹ There are times when Luther ascribes the words of Scripture to men, and then quickly corrects himself in what seems to be a completely unnecessary way. In one place, for example, he writes “These are the sayings of St. John, or rather, of the Holy Ghost.”⁷² He does the very same thing in another place, where he says, “We see how Moses, yes, the Holy Ghost Himself, describes the most trivial works and sufferings of the patriarchs.”⁷³

The fact that the Word is spoken by human beings does not in any way detract from its character as the Word of God, “The Word of God is truly the Word of God even when it is uttered by a human being,” he says,⁷⁴

⁶⁰ LW 22, 14. Cp. Also 22, 78; 1, 86

⁶¹ WML V, 171

⁶² LW 32, 206

⁶³ LW 36, 163

⁶⁴ LW 23, 127

⁶⁵ LW 1, 262.276.283

⁶⁶ LW 2, 81f.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ SL 9, 182

⁶⁹ WML, II, 455

⁷⁰ LW 13, 80

⁷¹ LW 9, 55

⁷² SL 3, 1916

⁷³ SL 2, 772

⁷⁴ LW 2, 81

and “whatever men speak at the prompting of the Spirit of God, that God Himself speaks.”⁷⁵ This book and all that it says, although it was written by men in human language is to be treated with all the respect due to God Himself. Whoever believes that in Paul the Holy Spirit is speaking will recognize the commandments of Paul as divine ordinances.⁷⁶ A devout heart will be certain that God speaks through Paul, will reverence and not dishonor the words that Paul speaks.⁷⁷ We should therefore be on our guard against impairing the authority of Scripture in any way, for “those things which have been delivered to us by God in the sacred Scriptures must be sharply distinguished from those things that have been invented by man in the church.”⁷⁸

This whole question of the human authorship of God’s Word is dealt with in a work which Luther published in 1524, *On Avoiding the Doctrines of Men*. Ever since the Leipzig debate in 1519, Luther had no longer hesitated to denounce the bulls of the popes and the decrees of the councils, because, as he said, they were the doctrines of men. Some of his adversaries pointed out that Peter, Paul, and John were also men, and therefore their doctrines, too, were the doctrines of men. But Luther answered, “It is one thing when the man himself speaks. It is quite another thing when God speaks through men.”⁷⁹ Matthew and Paul and Peter were men, indeed, but “the speech of the apostles was commanded by God and confirmed and proved by great miracles.”⁸⁰ This last remark, by the way, is most interesting, because this point of view, which holds that the inspired Word is “confirmed and proved by great miracles,” is listed by E. A. Burtt, in his *Types of Religious Philosophy* as one of the “disputed assumptions of Protestant fundamentalism,”⁸¹ and Lutherans who use the argument today are often accused of being fundamentalists.

When, in the same controversy, the opponents of Luther, in defending the doctrines of men, quoted the passage, “He that heareth you, heareth me,” Luther answered this argument by calling their attention to the fact that they were forgetting that this was not all that Jesus said. The same Lord who had given this promise to the apostles had also told them what they should preach. He points out that Jesus “does not say, ‘Go, and preach what you want, or what seems good to you,’ but He puts His own Word into their mouth and commands them to preach the Gospel.”⁸² And what was true of the apostles was true also of Moses. “He never spoke a single human doctrine, but what God commanded him to speak, as almost all the chapters point out.”⁸³ And this principle still has its application today. Men can claim to speak God’s Word only when they speak as the oracles of God. “God speaks to us through the Scriptures,” Luther says in another place, “and through men who teach the Scriptures.”⁸⁴

In the very last chapter of this work, *On Avoiding the Doctrines of Men*, he sums up his position in these words,

Therefore we may say once more, we do not find fault with the doctrines of men because men have said it, but because they are lies and blasphemies against the Scriptures, which, although they were also written by men are nevertheless not from men but from God. Now, because Scripture and the doctrines of men are opposed to each other, the one must be false and the other true. Let us see which one they themselves will accuse of lying.⁸⁵

⁷⁵ LW 2, 250

⁷⁶ LW 36, 155

⁷⁷ LW 32, 222

⁷⁸ LW 36, 96

⁷⁹ SL 19, 620

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Op. cit. New York, Harpers, 1951, p. 166

⁸² SL 19, 615

⁸³ SL 19, 616

⁸⁴ SL 6, 80

⁸⁵ SL 19, 621

And therefore he could say in his commentary on Matthew that we should be sure that when we hear the Word of God from the apostles and ministers of Christ, it is just as if we were hearing Christ Himself, And note here that he does not distinguish here between hearing and reading it. He writes, "When we hear the Gospel in the church, or read it in the book, then this is equivalent to hearing God Himself in heaven in the midst of the angels. And even if there were no other profit in it, yet it would already be a great thing to hear God Himself and the voice of God with our own ears. What could be more exalted than to hear God speak."⁸⁶ Therefore he says also, in a famous comment on Matt. 24: 15,

Mark well what you read. For you are not reading the word of a man, but the Word of God the All-Highest. He wants scholars who diligently pay attention to it, and take note of what He says. And if it is properly said that one should read the letters of princes three times since they must write prudently lest they be considered fools, how much more should one read God's letters, that is, the Holy Scriptures, three, four, ten, a hundred, a thousand, yes, thousands of times.⁸⁷

It is "damned unbelief and the cursed flesh" he says, that "will not let us see or notice that God speaks with us in the Scripture, or that it is God's Word, but they think that it is Isaiah, Paul, or some ordinary man who has not created heaven and earth."⁸⁸ From all that has been said, it would appear that the modern emphasis on the human side of Scripture with all its implications was completely foreign to Luther. What he said of what might be called the human side of baptism, he would undoubtedly have been willing to say also of the so-called "human side" of Scripture. He wrote of baptism in the *Babylonian Captivity*,

Beware of making any distinction in baptism by ascribing the outward part to man and the inward part to God. Ascribe both to God alone, and look upon the person administering it as simply the vicarious instrument of God, by which the Lord sitting in heaven thrusts you under the water with his own hands, and promises you forgiveness of your sins, speaking to you upon earth with a human voice by the mouth of his minister.⁸⁹

3. The Verbal Inspiration Of The Bible.

Up to this time, someone may say, we have heard nothing from Luther which would indicate that he would go along with the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, which stresses that all the words of the Bible are the words of God. What did Luther have to say about verbal inspiration, about the doctrine which says that the very words in which the Word of God comes to us were given to the holy men who wrote the Bible? On this matter, too, Luther is no trumpet giving forth an uncertain sound. There can be no doubt about where he stands on this doctrine. Modern theologians are fond of saying, "When we say that the Bible is the Word of God, we do not mean that it consists of so many words of God." Against such people Luther would have drawn the sword of the Spirit, and he would have scourged them with the whiplash of his most vehement invective. And when we say this, we are not just imagining what he might have done if he had been faced with this question. He was faced with it, and he dealt with it in the same way that the *Brief Statement* deals with it. Luther would never, for example, have agreed with that was said not so long ago in a Lutheran magazine, "These are not God's words because God gives them to men. They are God's words because men give them to God, and He says: 'These are mine, I have accepted them, I am responsible for them, legally and morally they are mine. They were spoken by My children in whom My Spirit lives, and they are mine.'"⁹⁰

⁸⁶ SL 7, 113

⁸⁷ SL 9, 1808

⁸⁸ SL 9, 1800

⁸⁹ LW 36, 62f.

⁹⁰ Robert Hoyer, "On Second Thought," *The Cresset*, February, 1961

There are modern Lutheran theologians, who, in an effort to justify their own unbelief and apostasy, cite Dr. Luther as one who did not believe in the Missouri doctrine of verbal inspiration. This, they say, was an invention of Chemnitz and Gerhardt and Calov and the other theologians of the seventeenth century. It ought really to be a source of amazement to hear anyone who has read widely in Luther to speak in this way, especially in view of the fact that even in the Lutheran Confessions we hear phrases from Luther that ought to alert us to the falsehood of any claim that seeks to establish that Luther was not a believer in verbal inspiration.

a. Verbal Inspiration In The Confessions.

This faith in the verbal inspiration of the Bible is already indicated in the first chief part, where he asks, “What does God say of all these commandments?” He does not for one moment doubt that when Moses tells us that this is what God says then Moses is right, and in his explanation of the close of the commandments, he says, “God threatens to punish all that transgress these commandments.” These words are so familiar to us that we scarcely notice that they assume that Moses quoted the very words of God.

We have all memorized the statement of Luther in which he says of the first words of the Lord's Prayer, “God would by these words invite us to believe that He is our true Father.” You remember how he appeals in the Fourth Chief Part to the words and promises of God. It is because of the modern attacks on verbal inspiration that I personally object when the new intersynodical catechism changes the words of Luther from “as the words and promises of God declare” to “what God has promised” and from “What are such words and promises of God?” to “What is God's promise?” But the stress which he lays on the *words* of God becomes most evident in the Sixth Chief Part. Listen to him as he says, “That is shown us by these *words*, Given and shed for you for the remission of sins...Forgiveness, life, and salvation are given us through these *words*...It is not the eating and drinking indeed that does them., but the *words* here written...which *words* are as the chief thing in the sacrament; and he that believes these *words* has what they say and express...he is truly worthy and well-prepared who has faith in these *words* ...But he that does not believe these *words*, or doubts, is unworthy and unprepared; for the *words* for you require all hearts to believe.”

It may be objected that Luther does not say that these are words of God and therefore these phrases are wrongly cited as indications of Luther's faith in the verbal inspiration of the Bible. But do you suppose for one moment that Luther, who refused to take the word of the popes and the councils for anything would have spoken in this way of the words of any man? Do you suppose that he would have been willing to say that the words of *men* could give us forgiveness, and life, and salvation? Do you suppose that he who said that the Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no man, not even an angel, would have said that those who believe mere human words would be well prepared for and worthy of the Sacrament of the Altar. Any Lutheran theologian therefore, who holds that he has a right to that name and then says that our faith must be in Christ and not in the words of a book (as though that were a valid antithesis) ought really to take another look at what he memorized in his confirmation instruction, and if he then does not see the inconsistency of his theological position with that which he is sworn to uphold, he must be blind indeed. To see the force of this argument it is necessary only to assume for a moment that Luther did not believe in verbal inspiration and then reread the *Small Catechism*.

In the *Large Catechism*, too, he speaks of the words of God even more emphatically than in the *Small Catechism*. One need read only his treatment of the two sacraments to be impressed by the reverence with which Luther approaches the words of God. He says, for example, that one learns what the benefit of baptism is from the words of Christ,⁹¹ and that this benefit is offered and promised in the words which are attached to the water.⁹² He writes that what the Lord's Supper is, what it profits, and who is to use it, must be established from the words.⁹³ One should really read the whole of the last two chief parts in the *Large Catechism* to see how the

⁹¹ LC IV, 23

⁹² LC IV, 33

⁹³ LC V, 1.2

doctrine of verbal inspiration is ingrained in Luther's thinking. This becomes evident also in other parts of the Large Catechism. At the end of his discussion of the Ten Commandments he says that we should receive the words of God as a matter of divine seriousness and set great store by them (LC V, 322—see the original German). In his treatment of the Third Commandment he says that the words of which the Word of God consists are not useless or dead, but effective and living words.⁹⁴ And in the Preface to the *Large Catechism* that a Christian can render no greater service to God than to occupy himself with God's commandments and words.⁹⁵ And while Luther did not write the Apology, he certainly approved of it when Melancthon said, "It is surely amazing that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith and specifically deny it to works. Do they suppose that this is repeated so often for no reason? Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares?"⁹⁶

b. Verbal Inspiration In The Sacramentarian Controversies.

But perhaps nothing demonstrates Luther's complete acceptance of the verbal inspiration of the Bible more clearly than his controversies with the Zwinglians over the real presence. There are two aspects of Luther's view of the Word of God which are particularly involved here. One is the question of the proper interpretation of the Holy Scripture and the other is the unqualified acceptance of the words of Holy Writ as the words of the all-wise and omnipotent God.

At Marburg, in 1529, Luther met with Zwingli, and the two sides discussed their doctrinal differences. They found themselves in agreement, as they stated in the Marburg Articles, on the doctrines of God, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, original sin, faith, justification, the external Word, baptism, and confession. What a grand day it would be if all the followers of Luther, not to speak of all the followers of Luther and Zwingli, could agree on those articles today! Justus Jonas could write that they had agreed in everything except the article of the Lord's Supper. Can you imagine how Luther, at this time, when the continued existence of the Church of the Reformation seemed to hang in the balance and Protestantism was fighting for its very life, could have refused to recognize the Zwinglians as brothers just because they would not admit that the little word "is" really means "is" and not "represents," if he had not been fully and firmly convinced of the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures? Luther may have been stubborn, and thank God that he was, but he was no fool. He knew full well what was involved, but here at Marburg he was willing, as some of the medieval scholars would have expressed it, to rend the seamless robe of Christ once more for the sake of one little word.

That he was a firm believer in the verbal inspiration of the Bible is demonstrated not only by his actions, but also by his express words. His action at Marburg was not a spur of the moment decision. He knew what he was doing, and he did it deliberately. Six years before, in a message to the Waldensians, he had written,

One must not deal sacrilegiously with God's words in this way that one gives to any word any other meaning than the natural one unless he does so on the basis of express, clear Scripture. This is done by those, who without justification in Scripture, sacrilegiously twist the word "is" and make it mean "signifies."...But we would and should simply abide by the words of Christ. He will not betray us...If we would permit such sacrilege in one place, that one without basis in Scripture may say that the little word "is" means as much as the little word "signifies," one could not forbid it at any other place, and the whole of Scripture would be nullified...Every word should be permitted to stand in its natural meaning and one should not depart from it unless the creed (der Glaube) demands it.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ LC I, 100-101

⁹⁵ LC, Preface, 10

⁹⁶ Apol. IV, 107.108

⁹⁷ SL 19, 1312-1314

Luther knew very well what was at stake at Marburg. Zwingli and Carlstadt had urged him often enough not to split Christendom over such a small matter, and two years before Marburg, in 1527, in his book on the words of institution, he took note of these pleas not to divide Christendom and offend against Christian love over such a little thing. Luther speaks a curse on this kind of love which is willing to compromise the truth of God's Word, and then he goes on to say, "It will not help them to say, that they have great respect for God's words and the whole Gospel except only in this one place. My dear friend, God's Word is God's Word...Whoever charges God with a lie in one word and blasphemes, or says that it is a small thing that He is blasphemed and charged with lying, he blasphemes the whole God, and considers all blasphemy of God to be a trifle."⁹⁸ A little later, in the same work, we find words that have been frequently quoted,

If they were not such light-hearted despisers of Scripture, a single clear Scripture passage would have as much effect on them as if the whole world were full of Scripture, as is also the case. As far as I am concerned, one single passage of Scripture makes the whole world too narrow for me. But if they flit over it superficially and imagine that it is the word of men, it is possible that no Scripture will convince them...D. Carlstadt makes a martyr out of the little word "this;" Zwingli makes a martyr out of the little word "is"; Ocolampadius makes a martyr out of the little word "body;" the others make a martyr out of the whole text.⁹⁹

Can you imagine anyone who does not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible speaking in this way? Only those who are deliberately blind could fail to see here what Luther's attitude was toward the individual, single words of the Holy Bible.

In the next year, just one year before Marburg, he returned to the same subject again in his *Confession Concerning the Supper of Christ*. If ever there was in any of the Lutheran theologians a clear confession of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, and a demonstration of holy awe before the simple words of Scripture, we certainly find it here, Zwingli had found fault with Luther because he insisted so stubbornly on what Zwingli called "five poor, miserable words." To this Luther replied,

With such remarks they testify against themselves and show what sort of spirit they have and how precious they regard the Word of God. These precious words they denounce as five poor, miserable words, that is, they do not believe that they are God's words. For if they believed that they are God's words, they would not have called them five poor, miserable words, but they would consider even a tittle, or a letter, to be greater than the whole world, and they would tremble before it as before God Himself. For he who despises a single word of God, will certainly not consider any one to be great...We must abide by them and cling to them as the clearest, surest, most certain words of God, which can not deceive us nor lead us astray.¹⁰⁰

Again, we might ask whether it would be possible to imagine a man speaking in this way who is not fully committed to the verbal inspiration of the whole Scripture. He clung so tenaciously not only to the words that dealt with the Lord's Supper, but to all the words of the Bible. We have already noted what he said about the words and promises of God in the sacrament of baptism. And this, too, is not isolated instance. In his *Kirchenpostille* he tells us that he once heard of a man who mocked the Biblical doctrine of baptism and said, "I would like to know whether a handful of water could save me." Luther charges that such a man treads the words of Scripture under foot, and he asks, "My dear sir, where do the words come from, from God, or from reason."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ SL 20, 775

⁹⁹ SL 20, 788f.

¹⁰⁰ SL 20, 1040f.

¹⁰¹ SL 12, 1606

Furthermore, in the light of the surrender to evolutionism on the part of modern ecclesiastical unbelief and theological timidity, and of the concessions made to Darwinism by the “trembling apologists” of the Christian faith, it is interesting indeed to hear what Luther had to say about the words of Genesis 1. More than ten years before he began his lectures on Genesis at the university, Luther preached a series of sermons on the book of Genesis, over a period of more than eighteen months. Notes were taken by others and the sermons were then published with Luther’s permission and approval. Commenting on the statement that the world was created in six days, Luther says in one of these sermons,

I have often said that anyone who wants to study the Holy Scripture should always be careful to stay with the simple words, wherever he can, and never depart from them unless he is compelled by an article of the creed to understand it otherwise than the words read. For we must be certain of this that there has been no simpler speech on earth than that which has been spoken by God. Therefore when Moses writes that God created heaven and earth and all that is therein in six days, then let it be six days. You may not follow the gloss which says that the six days were one day. But if you cannot comprehend how they could have been six days, then give the Holy Spirit credit for being more learned than you are. For in dealing with Scripture you must remember that it is God Himself who speaks. Because God said it, it does not become you wantonly to twist His Word as you please, unless you are compelled to understand a text differently than the words read, namely, if the creed will not permit the sense given by the words.¹⁰²

We have noted in an earlier chapter that Luther believed that the Word of God was spoken also by pastors and fathers who carry out their office faithfully. But he saw a great qualitative difference between the words spoken in God’s name by our present-day pastors and teachers and the words which were spoken by the inspired men of God. In his work on *The Last Words of David*, which he wrote just three years before his death, he comments on the words, “The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His Word was in my tongue,” and he says,

Whoever dares to boast that the Spirit of the Lord speaks through him, and that his tongue speaks the Word of the Holy Ghost, must by all means be sure of his ground. This will not be David, the son of Jesse, born in sin, but he who has been awakened to be a prophet through the promise of God. Should not he, who has such a teacher to teach him and to speak through him, compose such beautiful psalms? He that has ears to hear, let him hear. “My speech is not my speech, but whoever hears me, hears God. Whoever despises me, despises God. For I see, that many of my descendants will not listen to my words to their own great detriment.” Such a boast neither we, nor anyone who is not a prophet, have a right to make. We, insofar as we are saints and have the Holy Spirit, may indeed boast that we are the catechumens and pupils of the prophets, as men who repeat and preach what we have learned and heard from the apostles and Prophets, and who are sure that the prophets have taught these things.¹⁰³

c. The Words Of The Bible Are The Words Of God.

Luther regularly equates the words of Scripture with the “words of God” and repeatedly he calls them the “words of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁴ He complains in the *Das Pabsttum zu Rom vom Teufel Gestiftet*, that Alveld, the Franciscan of Leipzig, “esteems and treats God’s holy words no better than if they were the fabled pratings of some fool or jester at a carnival,”¹⁰⁵ because of the way in which he dealt with the passages of Holy Writ. In

¹⁰² SL 3, 20f.

¹⁰³ SL 3, 1890

¹⁰⁴ e. g. WML 3, 335; LW 22, 11; 14, 267; 156-157. 7.284f; LW 12, 263, 135, 83.279; 2, 261

¹⁰⁵ WML 1, 339

his book *Against Latomus* he wrote that we should be steadfast adherents of Holy Scripture and not swear allegiance to any word of man, for “the Holy Spirit is quite capable of expressing his meanings in suitable words, so that there is no need of human inventions.” At another time he wrote that the Holy Spirit “studiously arranged the wording of Scripture.”¹⁰⁶ Of the words of Paul in Tit. 1: 5-7 he says, “These are not the words of the church, nor of the councils, nor of the fathers, nor even of those Gomorrahs, Paris and Louvain, but words of the Holy Spirit and of Jesus Christ, indeed, of the divine majesty.”¹⁰⁷ In his comments on Gen. 1:5 he writes that these “are the words, not of a drunken person, but of God.”¹⁰⁸ In a wedding sermon which he preached in 1545, he alluded to Gen. 1:26, which tells us of the creation of man, and said, “These are not my words, nor those of any other man, but God’s Word.”¹⁰⁹ Of Isaiah 64:6 he wrote in his work *Against Latomus*, “We cannot deny that these are the words of the Spirit, for they are in the sacred canon.”¹¹⁰ He therefore wants us to consider all the words of the canonical books not as being “frivolous words”¹¹¹ but “divine words”¹¹² “great and incomparable words...heavenly and infinite words,”¹¹³ “words which are not born in our house, but are brought down from heaven by the Holy Spirit,”¹¹⁴ and as “the holy words of God,” to which no violence is to be done by any petty human argument.¹¹⁵

And Luther meant exactly what these words of his say, for there are many instances when he cited single words of the sacred text as being of divine authorship and imbued with divine authority. He spoke with scorn of those who dared to change a single word of God as though it were necessary to lead God to school and smooth the feathers of the Holy Ghost.¹¹⁶ We have an illustration of what he meant in his controversy with Latomus of the University of Louvain. The scholastics of Louvain had objected to Luther’s doctrine that sin remains in the Christian after baptism; and when Luther pointed out that St. Paul himself said that sin still dwelled in him, Latomus countered by saying that what Paul called sin was not really sin but that this was just a figure of speech. Luther answered that by such arguments they accuse the Holy Ghost either of being careless or else of not knowing the right words to use in speaking of His own affairs,¹¹⁷ and a few pages later he writes, “We do not believe...that Paul, who was a chosen vessel, lacked the words to speak with foresight in well-chosen and proper terms.”¹¹⁸ In arguing against the doctrine of transubstantiation in the *Babylonian Captivity*, he says that “bread” and “wine” are words of God.¹¹⁹ In discussing the pronoun “us” in Gen. 1:26, Luther rejects the notion that this is a plural of majesty, and he says, “The Holy Spirit is not imitating this court mannerism...; nor does Holy Scripture sanction this manner of speech.”¹²⁰ In a comment on Psalm 2: 7, he writes that “the Holy Spirit wished to use the past tense.”¹²¹ Of the word “Selah” which occurs so often in the Psalms and which no one really understands, Luther writes, “I believe that this word is a punctuation mark of the Holy Spirit. Whenever we find it in the Psalter, the Holy Spirit wants us to pause and ponder; there He wants to touch and enkindle our heart for particularly deep meditation.”¹²²

¹⁰⁶ LW 36, 165

¹⁰⁷ LW 36, 156

¹⁰⁸ LW 1, 21

¹⁰⁹ LW 51, 358

¹¹⁰ LW 32, 164

¹¹¹ LW 36, 143

¹¹² LW 32, 215

¹¹³ LW 12, 263

¹¹⁴ LW 12, 324

¹¹⁵ LW 36, 35

¹¹⁶ WML 3, 416f.

¹¹⁷ SL 18, 1134; LW 32, 203

¹¹⁸ LW 32, 206

¹¹⁹ LW 36, 31

¹²⁰ LW 1, 58

¹²¹ LW 12, 52

¹²² LW 13, 37

And to emphasize this point that the individual words of Scripture are to be taken seriously, Luther many times goes so far that he asserts that the individual letters of Scripture should be treated with respect. In his work on the *Three Symbols* (1538) he writes, “There is not a superfluous letter in the Scriptures.”¹²³ When the imperial edict after the Diet of Augsburg demanded that the Lutherans celebrate communion only in one kind, Luther answered, “One should rather let the whole sacrament go than forsake a single letter or tittle of the Word;”¹²⁴ and in the *Babylonian Captivity* he wrote, “God forbid that there should be one jot or tittle in all of Paul which the whole church universal is not bound to follow and keep.”¹²⁵ He says that the Holy Ghost, who speaks to us in the Bible, is not a fool or a drunkard and that he does not speak one word, not even an iota, in vain.¹²⁶ “One tittle of the Scripture is greater than heaven and earth,” he told his class in Galatians.¹²⁷ “Not one letter of Scripture is useless,” he said in one of his sermons.¹²⁸

Luther also holds that the arrangement of the words, or what we might call literary style, is the product of the Spirit’s activity. In one of his lectures on the Psalms he said that God is the source not only of the words but also of the phraseology, or the manner of speaking, used by the Holy Ghost and the Holy Scriptures.¹²⁹ In one of his sermons of the first four chapters of John’s Gospel he told the congregation, “We Christians must learn to familiarize ourselves with the phraseology or diction of the Holy Spirit.”¹³⁰ It is often argued that if the Holy Ghost is really the author of all the books of the Bible, the style of all the books should be the same. But Luther says that the Holy Ghost is a fluent speaker, who is able to express the same thing in a variety of ways.¹³¹ In fact, the Holy Ghost studiously arranged it that the words of institution are not found recorded in exactly the same way in the Gospels.¹³² In his dedicatory letter which prefaces the commentary on the first 22 Psalms, he compares the Holy Ghost to a school teacher who composes little letters or speeches for the children to write to their parents. In this same way the Holy Ghost equips us in the Psalter both with the words and the mood in which we are to address our heavenly Father.¹³³

4. Even The “Trivialities” In Scripture Are Inspired.

The opponents of inspiration often point out that there are many things in Scripture that are trivial and unimportant and therefore unworthy of being regarded as inspired by the Holy Ghost. When you hear them speak, it sometimes seems that these men imagine that they have discovered something new in pointing out such trivial things, and their question, “Do you suppose that the Holy Spirit would have inspired something so mundane as this?” implies that those who believe in the plenary inspiration have never done much thinking about such things. Luther knew his Bible better than most modern scholars who spend their time reading books about the Bible, and he knew full well that the Bible contained much that appears trivial and unimportant, but he said, in the preface to the Old Testament, printed in his translation of the Bible, “I beg and caution every pious Christian not to be offended by the simplicity of the language and stories frequently encountered there, but fully realize that however simple (*schlecht*) they may seem, these are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the majesty, power, and wisdom of the most high God.”¹³⁴ They are the diapers and the cradle in which we will find Christ.¹³⁵

¹²³ LW 34, 227

¹²⁴ LW 34, 82

¹²⁵ LW 36, 25

¹²⁶ SL 3, 1895

¹²⁷ SL 9, 655

¹²⁸ SL 10, 1018

¹²⁹ SL 4, 1960

¹³⁰ LW 22, 119

¹³¹ LW 12, 197

¹³² LW 36, 165

¹³³ SL 4, 215; LW 14, 286

¹³⁴ LW 35, 236

¹³⁵ Ibid.

What amazed Luther more than the inspiration of these simple stories is the fact that human beings were able to express the loftiest and most majestic matters in human language. This is what modern, neo-orthodox theology says cannot be done. It is a strange paradox that meets us here in modern theology. When the Bible speaks of everyday things and human affairs, it is argued that divine words are not needed, and when it speaks of the mysteries of God, human words are not equal to the task. Luther saw the difficulty here for human reason, but in faith he overcame the temptation and was sure that with God nothing is impossible. In his comments on Psalm 110, he wrote: “To grasp such high, inconceivable, and inscrutable mysteries of the Divine Majesty with words, nor to mention the brevity and power of their phrasing...this is neither human nor within the power of a small spirit.”¹³⁶

And as for the “trifles” in Scripture, Luther believed firmly that they, too, were recorded by the will of the Spirit of God. He insists that we should look upon nothing in the Bible as unimportant and that we should pay close attention also to these trivial things. If we would do this, he says, we would find much comfort and instruction in them.¹³⁷ He writes, “God did not consider it beneath His dignity to have these seemingly unimportant and paltry works recorded in His book. Whatever the godly do, even if it is a work not commanded is pleasing to God and acceptable on account of faith.”¹³⁸ This, by the way, is also an illustration of how Luther was able to teach great spiritual truths on the basis of some of these simple stories. And even when he was unable to see any presently useful significance in some of the statements of the Bible, he did not immediately begin to ridicule it even by implication. He says, for example, that the account of the activity of John the Baptist at Aenon near Salim is an unimportant story and he admits that he is unable to say much about it, but then he continues, “However, since it was recorded by the Holy Spirit, we dare not pass it by.”¹³⁹ When Moses in Genesis 12 relates how Abraham told his wife, when they came to Egypt, that she should say that she was his sister, Luther comments, “How few there are who when they read these words that Abraham addresses to his wife as he reveals his plan to her, suppose that they can learn anything from them? But since the Holy Spirit wanted this committed to writing, the student of Holy Scripture will regard nothing as so insignificant that is not helpful, at least as a guide for our life and conduct.”¹⁴⁰

It should be apparent that this is not a note which is rarely sounded in Luther, but it may not be amiss to add a few more examples to demonstrate that this emphasis on the trifles in Scripture, especially since it will help us to see in proper perspective the claims of some of our modern Luther scholars that Luther considered the Scriptures important only where they spoke directly of Christ and those matters which concern our eternal salvation. Luther at times spoke of some of the details of the life of Christ in exactly the same way in which he spoke of these so-called trivialities in the lives of the patriarchs. In one of his Lenten sermons he says that the statement that Christ’s side was pierced and that no bone in His body was broken does not seem to have any special significance, and yet, he says, since both events were clearly prophesied we should consider them important no matter how insignificant they may appear, for “the Holy Spirit says nothing uselessly and for nothing.”¹⁴¹

This is exactly the same kind of language he employs in commenting on details from the lives of the patriarchs. In regard to the action of Jacob in dividing his flocks in preparation for the meeting with Esau, he writes, “We see how Moses, yes, the Holy Ghost Himself, describes the most trivial works and sufferings of the patriarch with such great diligence...Therefore the Holy Ghost does not consider it improper to spend so much time on domestic and agrarian (*Hirten*) pursuits and passions.”¹⁴² A little earlier in the Genesis lectures he had treated the story of the quarrel of Rachel and Leah over the mandrakes picked by Reuben, and had commented,

¹³⁶ LW 13, 228f.

¹³⁷ SL 1, 794; 2, 566-568.469.772

¹³⁸ LW 2, 350

¹³⁹ LW 22, 415

¹⁴⁰ LW 2, 296

¹⁴¹ SL 139, 485

¹⁴² SL 2, 772

This is an extremely ridiculous and childish thing. One could speak or write nothing more worthless or more trivial. Why, then, is it written nevertheless? Answer: One must always keep in mind, as I am accustomed repeatedly, that the Holy Spirit is the teacher (*Meister*) of this book. It pleases Him to play and jest in this way and to describe such trivial, childish things which are worthless. These things he sets before us that we should teach them in the church with great profit...One should not superficially pass over them, much less should we despise them, as though they were filthy or worthless, as the papists do...The Holy Ghost and God, the Creator, condescend to us in this way, and it pleases Him to have His fun with His saints and play games with them in such trivial affairs...So we will understand that the Holy Ghost has not uselessly set this before us that we might read, teach, and believe it.¹⁴³

The tremendous difference in attitude between Luther and modern theologians becomes evident when we read what he has to say about the fact that Jacob walked to Haran without escort, without camels, without silver and gold. Commenting on this fact, he writes,

You dare not imagine or wonder why it pleases the Holy Ghost to describe such simple and lowly deeds. Listen to what St. Paul says in Rom. 15, “Whatsoever was written before, was written to teach us, in order that we through patience and comfort of the Scripture might have hope.” If only we believed firmly, as I do, although my faith is weak, that the Holy Ghost Himself, and God, the Creator of all things, is the real teacher of this book (*der rechte Meister dieses Buchs*) and of these simple and lowly events, which seem so simple and trivial to the flesh, we would find the greatest comfort in them, as St. Paul says.¹⁴⁴

When the modern theologian reads these things in the Bible, he immediately dismisses them as a part of the human side of the Scripture that can be ignored, at best, or even criticized. When Luther failed to see any importance in these words of Scripture he ascribed it to his sinful flesh and to the weakness of his faith. In other words, when modern unbelievers who masquerade as Christian theologians find something in the Bible that does not quite suit them, they immediately assume that there must be something wrong with the Bible. Luther, in a similar situation, would without hesitation come to the conclusion that there was something wrong with him. Luther’s attitude is well summed up in the words, “Whoever reads and studies the Holy Scriptures with diligence will consider nothing in it to be of much unimportance that it cannot at least serve to improve our life and behavior, since the Holy Spirit has seen to it that it was described (*dieweil es der Heilige Geist hat beschreiben lassen.*)”¹⁴⁵

Another interesting contrast between Luther and modern unbelieving Bible scholars is seen in the manner in which he deals with repetitions in the sacred text. When the modern scholar finds such repetitious passages, he immediately assumes that here we have a case of two documents put together by an unskillful editor. It is in some measure on such passages that the modern source hypothesis of the origin of Scripture is built. The story of the flood is a case in point. Luther notes in his commentary on Genesis that Moses is rather wordy here and that he repeats the “same things to the point of being tiresome.”¹⁴⁶ He feels that only spiritually minded men are equipped to deal with such passages, since they alone will know that the Holy Spirit repeats nothing in vain. Luther himself sees in this constant repetition an indication of deep emotion in Moses and also in Noah, who were deeply distressed by God’s threat to destroy the world, as men repeat the same phrases over and over when they are deeply grieved. “Therefore,” he says, “This is not a purposeless tautology or repetition.

¹⁴³ SL 2, 566.560

¹⁴⁴ SL 2, 469

¹⁴⁵ SL 1, 794

¹⁴⁶ LW 2, 90

The Holy Spirit does not operate with useless and unnecessary words, as the ignorant and sated spirits think.” (my translation).¹⁴⁷

He sees an entirely different reason for the repetitions which he finds in the story of the covenant which God made with Noah after the flood. Here again he says that the Holy Spirit has a good reason for using such an abundance of words. When we consider how horrifying the experience was through which Noah and his family had just passed, we will understand why God needed to repeat his promise so often. He says that when a child has been spanked, it is difficult to make it stop sobbing, and the mother must make efforts to calm the child, caress and pet it, so that it might finally begin to forget its tears and smile again.¹⁴⁸ It is truly remarkable what insights into God’s dealing with us Luther is able to share with the church just because he read even the apparently most insignificant statements of Scripture with great seriousness.

Luther’s childlike approach to the Bible in these matters was not due to any lack of sophistication on his part. He comments again on the repetitiousness of parts of Deuteronomy and he says that a carnal reader who does not know what he is reading could not help being offended by the wordiness of the language. But if we remember that these are the words of God, we will have the proper attitude. We know that to hear God is bliss, even if God were to do nothing else but repeat the same syllable over and over again. But since He is so gracious that He speaks to us words with meaning we must pay attention to them with trembling.¹⁴⁹

The Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod makes a special point of this that also historical and geographical statements of the Bible are the teachings of the Holy Spirit. Luther would have agreed wholeheartedly. That he believed that the geographical teachings of Scripture were also given by the Holy Ghost is clear from his assertion that the Holy Ghost occasionally inserted descriptions of the land into the sacred text.¹⁵⁰ And the purely historical statements of the Bible he viewed in the same way. In dealing with the invasion of Palestine by the four kings from the east, which is recorded in Gen. 14, Luther comments, “This passage seems to be altogether barren, yet Moses is very prolix in his description of the time and the place...Let the Holy Spirit exercise His functions as teacher in this passage; He wanted these matters to be recorded in this way.”¹⁵¹

We have presented this evidence in such profusion at the risk of seeming repetitious in order to demonstrate beyond question that Luther’s doctrinal position on the verbal inspiration of the Bible is stated clearly and without equivocation. Occasionally isolated statements of Luther quoted out of the context of Luther’s writing are cited as evidence of a “freer” position over against Scripture than that which is usually denominated as “fundamentalism.” If anything, Luther’s position on Scripture is far to the right of modern fundamentalism, which is often all too ready to compromise on what it considers unimportant matters in the Scriptures. If here and there a statement appears in the writings of Luther which may seem at variance with this position, the scores of passages in which he expressed his conviction that the words of the Bible were given by the Holy Ghost from heaven ought certainly in all fairness not to be ignored. Honest scholarship can do nothing else. Honest common sense must admit that a thousand clear passages setting forth the same position time after time at every period of a man’s life ought to be a more reliable basis of establishing his views than a few isolated passages often quoted out of context. From that point of view, and I am convinced that it is the only honest point of view that a scholar can take, it is incomprehensible how anyone could possibly teach that Luther was not an ardent, convinced, and committed verbal inspirationist.

III. The Inerrancy Of Scripture.

¹⁴⁷ LW 2, 91

¹⁴⁸ LW 2, 143f.

¹⁴⁹ LW 9, 48

¹⁵⁰ LW 2, 344

¹⁵¹ LW 2, 364

On the basis of the verbal inspiration of the Bible Luther also emphatically asserted the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures. This has already been apparent in some of the things that have been said previously, but in this chapter we shall take special note of some of the more emphatic passages in Luther in which he defends the inerrancy of Scripture with a vehemence that would be difficult to find in a proponent of modern fundamentalism. On this subject, too, we hear Luther speak with his customary conviction and clarity. “God does not lie or deceive;” these are words that we find again and again in the writings of the great reformer.

But someone may say that this all men will grant, and no one will deny that God does not lie, but this does not yet assert the inerrancy of Scripture. Yet, invariably when Luther asserts that God does not lie or deceive he does so to convince his audience that some statement of the Holy Bible is true and reliable and worthy of belief. We might go so far as to say, at the risk of bringing all the wrath of neo-orthodoxy down upon our heads, that for Luther the inerrancy of Scripture is a logical deduction from the major promise that God does not lie or deceive, and therefore, since God speaks to us in all the words of the Bible, we will find no lies and no deceptions in the Bible either.

We find this argument in the Lutheran Confessions. In his treatment of the promise attached to the Fourth Commandment, Luther says in the *Large Catechism* that we ought not to doubt that God will grant the blessing offered here for since He has promised it and has never yet lied we should be sure that He is not lying here either.¹ In regard to the command and the promises of God that we have in baptism, he writes again in the *Large Catechism*, that we are to build all our confidence on the fact that God has commanded this sacrament and He will not lie or deceive. Luther then continues, “We know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I—in short—all men—may lie and deceive but God’s Word cannot err.”² Exactly the same argument is used in regard to the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Here Luther argues that it is the Word of God which makes bread and wine to be the body and blood of the Savior, and again he develops this thought in the following way: “If the words remain...then in virtue of them they are truly the body and blood of Christ. For as we have it from the lips of Christ, so it is; He cannot lie or deceive.”

While we are dealing with the Lutheran Confessions it may be well here to anticipate somewhat and cite here also a few statements of the confessions in which Luther not only says that God does not lie, but in which he ascribes inerrancy to the Scriptures as such in so many words. In the admonition to frequent communion which we find in the Fifth Chief Part of the *Large Catechism* he says that even if we do not feel the need for the Lord’s Supper in our heart, at least we should believe the Scriptures for they will not lie to us.³ In the First Chief Part of the *Large Catechism* he discusses the words of God in which He promises to reward those who keep the commandments and to punish those who transgress them. He says,

Let everyone be careful not to regard this as if it were spoken by man...The world does not believe this at all, and does not recognize it as God’s Word. For the world sees that those who trust in God and not mammon suffer grief and want and are opposed and attacked by the devil...We must grasp these words, even in the face of this apparent contradiction, and learn that they neither lie nor deceive but will yet prove to be true...These words must stand and prove to be true since God cannot lie or deceive.⁴

This is exactly the same argument that is used in the *Brief Statement* when it says, “Since the Scriptures are the word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors and contradictions,” and the Lutheran who objects to this argument of the *Brief Statement* because it is “fundamentalistic” ought also in all honesty refuse to take the confessional oath required by the Lutheran Church.

¹ LC I, 165

² LC IV, 56-57

³ LC V, 76

⁴ LC I, 41-42

And what Luther says in the *Large Catechism* is only a reflection in miniature of the view which he espoused in his other works. It is not at all difficult to find passages in Luther where he says that God is not joking or lying when He threatens,⁵ that He cannot lie when He speaks His words of promise to us.⁶ In his work on the *Papacy at Rome*, he offered to forgive all his enemies who had slandered him, but proclaimed that he was willing to exercise patience with no man who would dare to make a liar out of Christ or the Holy Ghost because he had no intention of being lenient or conciliatory in his defense of the Holy Scripture.⁷ And in almost all of the places where he says that God does not lie or deceive He has reference to some specific statement of Scripture.

There are other places in which he ascribes inerrancy to the Scripture directly. “Scripture does not lie” and “God does not lie” are synonymous statements in Luther. When he stood before the Diet of Worms and asserted that the councils had erred and the popes had erred, but offered to be convinced by the testimony of Scripture,⁸ he sounded a keynote which was to be heard again and again throughout his activity as the reformer of the church. Repeatedly he asserts that the Scriptures did not err as had the popes and the councils. He appealed to the example of Augustine, whom he quoted as saying that he had learned that only those books which are called canonical should be given the honor of belief in their absolute truth.⁹ He had appealed to the example of Augustine a month before the diet in his *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles Condemned by the Papal Bull*, when he had quoted him as saying, “I have learned to do only those books that are called Holy Scripture the honor of believing firmly that none of their writers has ever erred. All others I so read as not to hold what they say to be the truth unless they prove it to me by Holy Scripture or clear reason.”¹⁰ He quoted the same words again eighteen years later in his work *On the Councils and the Churches*.¹¹

There can be no doubt that he was speaking of the teachings of Holy Scripture when he said in one of his sermons on the Gospel of John that the Word of God should be believed against all the arguments of reason, for “it is not a man’s word, which could lie and be wrong; it is the word of God who is the eternal truth.”¹² At another time he wrote that God’s Word is such perfect truth that it needs no patching or repair.¹³ He says in so many words, “The Scripture cannot lie.”¹⁴ False miracles might deceive us, but the Word of God will not deceive us.¹⁵ “Scripture has never erred,” he wrote in the *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles* in March of 1521, and he asks, “If we are not willing to grant this, then what is Scripture good for?”¹⁶

Luther continually drew this contrast between the writings of the fathers and the Scripture, that the former could be mistaken but the Scriptures alone are inerrant. He held that the saints could err in their writings and sin in their lives, but it is impossible for the Scriptures to be in error.¹⁷ In his third *Reply To Emser*, he made the same offer he had made at Worms. “If you convince me through Scripture, doubt it or not, I will submit. You know very well how all the fathers often erred...For this reason I want Scripture, Scripture...Scripture...”¹⁸ What help is it...to quote many fathers...They erred as men...For me the original word of Christ means more than all teachers and fathers, however holy and learned they may have been.”¹⁹

⁵ LW 9, 149

⁶ e. g. LW 9, 112

⁷ WML 1, 393

⁸ LW 32, 112

⁹ LW 32, 118

¹⁰ LW 32, 11

¹¹ WML 5, 148

¹² LW 23, 95

¹³ LW 13, 268

¹⁴ LW 13, 393

¹⁵ LW 21, 275

¹⁶ LW 32, 11

¹⁷ LW 36, 137

¹⁸ WML 3, 394

¹⁹ WML 3, 400

In his work on *The Adoration of the Sacrament*, he wrote, “Don’t let anyone pull you away from the Word through any statement of man, be it Augustine, Jerome, Bernard, or even an angel. ‘The elect will be led astray,’ says Christ. Therefore we cannot build on the mere word of one of the elect saints, without Scripture.”²⁰ Even the church as a whole cannot be trusted implicitly. The church knows that she can err and blunder at times, but she corrects these errors and blunders according to the Word of God which alone cannot err.²¹

And yet even though Luther regularly insists that the saints, the fathers, the popes, the councils, and even the whole church can err, yet he is not willing to admit this possibility about the writers of the canonical books. He says that the evangelist St. John was moved by the Holy Spirit and therefore we will not be deceived by what he writes.²² In the preface to the book of Daniel in his German Bible Luther deals at length with the prophecies concerning the future history of the world and says that these prophecies will surely come to pass “for Daniel does not lie.”²³ He makes the same assertion about all the prophets when he says, “The prophets did not lie.”²⁴ The same thing is true of all the apostles who were sent to the church as “infallible teachers.” They were not able to err, but since the time of the apostles no one should make this claim that he cannot err in the faith.²⁵ We should therefore never regard the writings of the fathers as equal to those of the apostles.²⁶

Not only does he make this claim for the Scriptures as a whole but he ascribes inerrancy also to the various parts of the Bible. He does not want the book of Psalms to be charged with falsehood.²⁷ He often says that the words of God are sure and that they do not lie, thus ascribing this quality of inerrancy not only to the Word *in toto* but also to its individual words. Of the words of Psalm 112 he says, “These words cannot lie.”²⁸ He holds that all the words of God are true,²⁹ and they will not mislead or deceive us.³⁰ He actually goes so far as to say that “if God were found to be unfaithful in so much as even one word, then would perish faith, truth, the Scripture, and God Himself.”³¹ This is certainly not the kind of remark one would expect to hear from one who has what is called a “freer attitude” toward Scripture. It is this high regard for the individual words of Scripture that leads Luther to say that men have no right to change even one single word of Scripture or to abrogate it,³² for all the words of God are “true and reliable, without deceit or falsehood.”³³

And he makes constant use of this argument that each word of God is inerrant in his controversies. A statement of Scripture, taken in its normal meaning, is always the last word in any argument for Luther, and this attitude of his can only be understood if one realizes that the words of Scripture are unshakeable and of divine authority in his thinking. He defends the real presence not with some philosophical demonstration of the possibility of such an event, but with the argument that the Scriptures say that it *is* the *body* and the *blood* of Christ,³⁴ and he says that the Word of God cannot lie.³⁵ When the theologians of Paris taught that evil desires and covetousness are not truly sin, Luther answered that if Paris was right then Moses and God lied, for they said, “Thou shalt not covet.”³⁶ When God calls something “sin,” then we should believe that it is sin, because God does not lie.³⁷ Those who refuse to admit that anger, hatred, and envy are sins are really guilty of “slapping

²⁰ LW 36, 289

²¹ LW 13, 383

²² LW 22, 88

²³ LW 35, 296

²⁴ LW 22, 485

²⁵ LW 34, 113

²⁶ LW 1, 121

²⁷ LW 14, 334; 36, 294

²⁸ LW 13, 399

²⁹ LW 22, 121

³⁰ LW 36, 178

³¹ WML 1, 382

³² WML 3, 416f.

³³ LW 22, 121

³⁴ LW 36, 172.280; 40, 196

³⁵ LW 40, 176

³⁶ LW 36, 204

³⁷ LW 32, 25f.

God across the mouth and calling Him a liar in His words.”³⁸ He urged the priests to marry because Paul said that the prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils, and if Paul calls it this, we should remember that “these are words of God, who cannot lie.”³⁹ Of the six days of creation he says that it is “necessary to understand these days as actual days, contrary to the opinion of the fathers”...for “human beings can err, but the Word of God is the very wisdom of God and the absolutely infallible truth.”⁴⁰

It is therefore to be expected that Luther will quote whole verses of Scripture and declare them to be the infallible truth. He has made this claim for the individual words and it is not surprising that he should do the same for the sentences. In his *Avoiding the Doctrines of Men* he wrote “Christ does not lie when He declares ‘Not what goes into mouth defiles, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles.’”⁴¹ Especially is Luther at pains to remind us that the words of God do not lie when he deals with the promises of God,⁴² and he firmly believes that the prophecies of Scripture cannot fail because they are God’s Word,⁴³ and the man who does not believe these promises makes a liar out of God⁴⁴ and a lie out of the Gospel.⁴⁵ It is therefore not at all surprising to hear him say, “The text cannot lie,”⁴⁶ and “This verse does not lie.”⁴⁷ Such remarks are common in Luther and we avoid adding to them here only because to cite them all would become extremely tedious. But it will surely not be taken amiss if we add the comment which Luther makes on Psalm 45:6, when he writes, “The Word is so far above criticism that not even the smallest letter is in error in the law and in the divine promises. Therefore we must yield to no sect, not even in one tittle of the Scriptures, no matter how much they shout the slander that we by our strict adherence to the words violate love.”⁴⁸

This inerrancy, however, applies not only to the Law and the Gospel. Luther is not willing to admit that there are errors also in other matters treated in Scripture. We have already heard him say that we must accept the six days of creation as actual days because the Bible does not lie. And in view of the fact that the *Brief Statement* of our Synod says that there are no errors in the chronology of the Holy Scriptures, it is interesting to note that Luther made a special study of the chronology of the Bible, and he published the results of his labors in his *Chronicon*. In explaining the method which he had pursued in these studies, he says that he made use of the secular historians, but that where they disagreed with the Bible, he had given preference to the Holy Scriptures. The historians, he says, were only men, but in the Scriptures the true God speaks. Therefore, he goes on, he used the historians in such a way that he is not compelled to contradict the Scripture.⁴⁹ The implications are obvious, It is very evident that he was not willing to let the Bible be corrected on the basis of any human evidence or testimony.

And this testimony to the inerrancy of the chronology of the Bible is repeated in the Genesis commentary. There Luther relates that Jerome, in seeking to solve what seemed to him to be a chronological difficulty in the story of the flood, had suggested that the time from the announcement of the coming of the flood to the event itself was not 120 years, as God had said. Luther, however, rejects this solution offered by Jerome and says, “We shall not make a liar out of the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁰

In the same work he comments on a difficulty in the chronology of the early years of Abraham’s life and what Luther says here might well be taken to heart by our modern scholars who are so quick to ascribe errancy to Holy Writ and to say that the book of God’s truth contains mistakes. Luther writes,

³⁸ LW 21, 80

³⁹ LW 36, 261

⁴⁰ LW 1, 122

⁴¹ LW 35, 136

⁴² e. g. 14, 240f.; 22, 308; 2, 295; 36, 59f.; 23, 178f.44

⁴³ LW 12, 121

⁴⁴ LW 40, 365-368

⁴⁵ LW 22, 469

⁴⁶ LW 13, 401

⁴⁷ LW 14, 67

⁴⁸ SL 5, 398; LW 12, 242

⁴⁹ SL 14, 491

⁵⁰ LW 2, 25

It is senseless to imitate the foolhardy geniuses who immediately shout that an obvious error has been committed whenever such a difficulty arises and who unabashedly dare emend books that are not their own. As yet I have no real answer for this question even though I have carefully computed the years of the world (He is here evidently referring to his *Chronicon*). Therefore with due and humble admission of my lack of knowledge (for it is the Holy Spirit alone who knows and understands all things) I offer the conjecture that in the case of Abraham God wanted these sixty years to be lost because of a definite plan, that no one might venture to foretell anything definite about the end of the world.⁵¹

It is evident that by asserting the inerrancy of Scripture Luther does not mean to imply that it gives us full information on every subject that it treats. There are difficulties in Scripture that we cannot solve, but instead of approaching the Scripture with imagined superior knowledge and wisdom, we are to assume that the difficulty lies not in the Bible but in our own ignorance. Luther demonstrates this spirit in a way that we might well emulate in his comments on Gen. 11:11, where he says that we are faced here with another difficulty because the text plainly says that Arphaxad was born when Shem was one hundred years old and yet he was born two years after the flood, although a previous passage had led Luther to believe that Shem was one hundred years old at the time of the flood. Luther comments,

Some give one answer, others another. In the first place, no great harm would result even if there were no information available about these matters (Note that he does not say, “If the Bible were not true to the facts of history here.”) In the second place, in order that we may give at least some answer, it is not at all inappropriate if one applies to the beginning of the Flood the expression “two years after the Flood,” which Moses uses here. Then the meaning would be that Arphaxad was born two years after the Flood had begun. The Flood, however, lasted one year and ten days.

But it is objected: “If this is true, how is it that Elam and Ashur were born before Arphaxad, for then three births occurred in one year?” I answer that even this does not cause any difficulty if we assume that there were twins at the first birth. As I stated above, our faith is not endangered if we should lack knowledge about these matters. This much is sure: Scripture does not lie. Therefore answers that are given in support of the trustworthiness of Scripture serve a purpose, even though they may not be altogether reliable.⁵²

When Luther therefore says of the apparent contradiction of the Mosaic account of the call of Abraham and the account of the same event given by Stephen in Acts 7, “If one is willing to be wise with humility and not to overindulge his reason, he will easily reconcile Moses and Stephen,”⁵³ there seems to be no reason why the editor of the American edition of Luther’s Works should suggest in a footnote that the text at this point was revised by an editorial hand. It was Melancthon who suggested that there might be a casual error here. Luther never admits, however, that there is more involved here than a difficulty for us. He says, “Moses and Stephen contradict each other. How shall we harmonize them? Each of the two is a trustworthy witness, and yet they do not agree with each other.”⁵⁴ He alludes then to the customary answer that Abraham was called twice, but he seems finally to lean to the explanation that Stephen was not inspired in the same way that Moses was inspired, saying, “It seems to me that the accurate account of what happened is given by Moses and not by Stephen who certainly derived his knowledge of this story from Moses alone. But when we relate something incidentally, it

⁵¹ LW 2, 239

⁵² LW 2, 232f.

⁵³ LW 2, 242

⁵⁴ LW 2, 277f.

often happens that we do not pay such close attention to all details.”⁵⁵ It might be pointed out to those who have difficulty with this same passage that if Stephen really did make a mistake in recounting the story of the call of Abraham, then the Bible would have been in error in saying that he gave a correct account of the event. The inspiration of Scripture does not mean that every speaker in Scripture is inerrant. And it might be pointed out again that Luther does not in any way even hint that the Scripture might here be guilty of giving us false information.

Over against these scores of passages, there is one passage that speaks of a mistake in Scripture which is cited again and again because it is the only one that can be found in all the writings of Luther. In a copy of what are apparently lecture notes from Luther’s classes on the prophet Zechariah, there is a reference to the fact that Matthew in chapter 27 cites a prophecy found in the book of Zechariah but ascribes it to Jeremiah. Commenting on this Luther says, that there were certainly holy and learned people with Matthew who would have told him that this passage is found in Zechariah, and then Matthew could very easily have corrected “this little error”⁵⁶ if it had pleased him. Luther then goes on to express his displeasure over those who look through the Scriptures to find such things that they can argue about. A careful reading of the text will indicate that Luther does not say that Zechariah made an error or that the Scriptures here have not told the truth. The writer of these lines often speaks in class about contradictions in the Bible, especially in regard to the doctrine of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, but this does not mean that he really believes that the Bible contradicts itself. It seems apparent that this is the same sort of remark that we find here in Luther. It might be mentioned also that in Luther’s own authorized version of the Zechariah commentary this phrase “this little error” does not occur.⁵⁷ For men to cite this passage from Luther therefore as an example of an admission on the part of Luther that there are errors in the Bible is either poor scholarship or dishonest reporting. If a man insists in dozens of places that there are no errors in the Bible and then in one place in a rather casual way speaks of “a little error,” it ought not to be difficult to come to a conclusion concerning his basic attitude toward the Holy Scripture. Luther believes in what we today call the inerrancy of Scripture. But he would have been a little scornful of those who spend their time with such matters as this. In his own commentary on Zechariah he says that he who loves idle disputes may ask all the questions he wants. He will find more questions than he finds answers.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ SL 14, 2124

⁵⁷ SL 14, 1949