

The Authority of Scripture, 2017

John Henderson

On 13 December 1951 the Joint Intersynodical Committees of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (ELCA) and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (UELCA) adopted ten theses on Scripture and Inspiration. These theses, which the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) now knows as the Theses of Agreement part VIII, begin:

We solemnly reaffirm the Scriptural principle of Luther and the Lutheran Church that 'the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel' and declare with the Formula of Concord: 'We believe, teach and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament alone'. We therefore accept the Scriptures, i.e., the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the only source and ultimate judge, rule and standard of all doctrine of the Church, also in the doctrines on the Holy Scriptures and on Inspiration.¹

In making this statement, and in the text of the theses, the two Synods declare that they are continuing the evangelical teaching of Luther and the Reformation.

In summary, the Theses go on to say:

1. The Bible is the written Word of God and nothing can be proclaimed as Word of God which is not taught in Scripture.
2. Holy Scripture is God's Word in all its parts.
3. In Holy Scripture the Father through the Holy Spirit proclaims Christ, even where it might not be immediately apparent.
4. Only those who believe in Christ as Saviour can rightly understand Holy Scripture.
5. The Holy Spirit inspires Scripture.
6. Inspiration applies to all of Scripture.
7. Inspiration is a divine miracle and mystery.
8. Holy Scripture is divine and human, as in the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ.

Holy Scripture is perfect, authoritative, sufficient and essentially clear. It is the inerrant Word of God. Human eyes cannot see this and human reason cannot prove it. It is an article of faith 'that is hidden and not obvious.'

1 DSTO 1A VIII Thesis 1 <http://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr>.

In 1966 the then brand new LCA drew on the agreement expressed in these 10 theses to form its key Constitutional article on Confession:

The Church accepts without reservation the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as a whole and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, written and inerrant Word of God, and as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life.²

In 1972 the LCA, through its Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) and the General Synod, sought to clarify what the LCA means by the ‘inerrancy’ of Scripture. Referring to the limitations of the human mind in trying to understand a divine mystery, the document makes an appeal to ‘*deal in love and forbearance with those who struggle to understand and express themselves adequately. Such an attitude will contribute to the building up of the body of Christ among us in love and peace, through the truth.*’³ The Synod also put limitations on the ways of speaking and teaching about Scripture:

- *Not to speak of ‘errors’ in the Holy Scriptures*
- *Not to hold that what the Bible clearly says actually is or actually happened may be regarded as what actually is not or actually did not happen*
- *Not to adopt uncritically and propagate the claims of historical criticism. These claims often rest on or lead to an unbiblical scepticism regarding the historical bases of the Christian faith*
- *Not to use modern knowledge to judge any biblical statement and to attack the authority of Scripture*
- *Not to make faith in the inerrancy of Scripture in any way dependent on human certainty achieved by rational argument and demonstration*
- *Not to regard all statements of the Scripture as being of equal value and importance*
- *Not to treat the Bible in a way which gives the impression that the Bible’s divine authority makes historical investigation unimportant or irrelevant.*

These documents, and others like them, form the content of the online dossier that accompanies this issue of the journal,⁴ so I don’t intend to work my way through any more. I have mentioned these samples only to set the scene, and to help us understand that the matter of the authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture is not new to us, but it has been with us as long as the LCA has been in existence, and indeed throughout the history of the church.

2 Constitution of the Lutheran Church of Australia Incorporated Article 2.1. Article 13.1 declares that Article 2 is unalterable. To access the Constitution go to <http://www.lca.org.au/about-us/our-structure>.

3 The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy <http://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr>.

4 Inspiration and Inerrancy: The LCA Debate on Scripture, 1951-1984 <https://e-resources.alc.edu.au/>.

It was about the time that the Intersynodical Committees were reaching their agreement on Holy Scripture and Inspiration that my father first encountered the Lutheran Church. Previously, like most Australians, he had scarcely given it a passing thought, if he had even heard of it. Family legend has it that when he, as a young army bandsman, became interested in my mother, a nurse at the Mackay Base Hospital, he made a point of asking her what she believed in and what religion she belonged to. At the time he was disenchanted with all religions and regarded himself as a humanist. He wanted no part in any religion, particularly anything a little bit weird. When his wife-to-be said, 'I'm a Lutheran', he reportedly replied, 'What's that?' 'Go and ask the pastor', she said. So he did.

I am thankful that the young pastor of that parish, when confronted on his doorstep, did not begin to answer this disillusioned humanist by defending the authority of Scripture. What he did instead was tell him about his Saviour Jesus, forgiveness, salvation, and the promise of eternal life. For the rest of his life my father never looked back from the journey God called him to that day. To him Christianity was never a religion. It was faith in Jesus Christ, fed by the Word of God and nurtured by the Sacraments as taught and practised in the Lutheran Church.

My point in telling this story is to show that the Church's doctrine on Scripture and Inspiration cannot be an end in itself. Instead, it must support the church's preaching, teaching, and evangelism. In a speech in Augsburg, Germany, upon receiving the 2017 Augsburg Peace Prize, Lutheran World Federation General Dr Martin Junge remarked, 'The church is not self-serving.'⁵ While Dr Junge was referring in particular to World Service, we can also apply his remark to the preaching and teaching of 'Christ crucified' as food for a starving world.⁶ Like Cranach's depiction of Luther on the altar of St Mary's Church, Wittenberg, we hold Scripture in our hands, read it and preach it in order only to point to Christ and to no other.⁷ This is why the Lutheran Church believes Scripture is 'divinely inspired, written and inerrant', so that there be no doubt about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There are always those in the church, however, who do not believe in the teachings of the church. Therefore the church is obliged to produce more and more documents to clarify issues. That this is so in the LCA becomes clear in reading the historical accounts and documents printed in this edition of the Lutheran Theological Journal. During my time in ministry, and particularly in leadership, I have noticed that we have a tendency to pick selectively from various documents, or to forget entirely that some documents exist at all. In doing so we risk reliving the same old arguments generation after generation, as though we were the first ever to have thought about these things. This is why it's

5 'Kirche ist ja kein Selbstzweck'. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/5no8n8dokphb4kv/Rede-Martin-Junge.pdf?dl=0>.

6 In the 20th century many Lutheran congregations would write 'We preach Christ crucified' on their signboards.

7 Many sites reproduce this artwork. One place it can be located is https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lucas_Cranach_d.J._Reformationsaltar,_St._Marien_zu_Wittenberg,_Predella.jpg.

good to see such a comprehensive gathering of the LCA's documents on Scripture and Inspiration in the one place. Together they provide a narrative of our common journey, both what we agree on and what we contest. The narrative revealed in these pages helps us learn from earlier generations so that we remain on firm doctrinal ground, faithful to the gospel, passing it on to those who likewise follow us.

Doctrine performs many functions for the church, such as dialogical, apologetic and catechetical. One of those functions is to tell us what we can and can't speak or teach in the church, as does the 1951 statement I quoted earlier. Another is to show the relevance of the Word of God in our time. A third is to lead us into the praise of God (liturgy) which can be said to be the ultimate purpose of all theological endeavour. In an age of individualism, we must relearn the fact that doctrine is not about our individual views or opinions but the official credal position of the church. All pastors of the church operate under the permissions and restrictions provided by official doctrine, since at ordination, and again at successive installations, they declare that they will stand with the church in their preaching and teaching. Congregations do the same in their founding documents. This unerring commitment explains why the LCA is so careful to maintain each pastor's proper call,⁸ and each congregation's proper establishment, to ensure that the ministry of Word and Sacrament among us remains legitimate.⁹ Pastors are the chief expositors of Scripture – that is why they receive extensive training and it is what congregations expect. They must carry out their ministry with great care, study, thought and prayer, in the proper fear of God and in full awareness of their sacred responsibility. The church's ministry is not just about helping people feel good themselves and providing them with tips for self-care. It is about preaching and applying the Word, rightly dividing law and gospel, and pointing, always, to Christ. He is the difference between light and dark, despair and hope, life and death, heaven and hell. Without him we have nothing.

Of course, Scripture teaches us many things – proper relationships, respect for creation, holy living and so on. All of these, however, are a subset of knowing Christ who is our all, and growing in understanding what this exclusive claim means for us. In him we are a new creation – we live in new ways.¹⁰ Scripture contains the stories of so many characters using so many forms of literature that there is a message in it for every day and every stage of our lives, whether we are up or down, confident or bewildered, happy or sad, lonely, anxious and depressed, burnt out, or just cruising. Life itself cannot exhaust the wisdom of Scripture, because it is the wisdom of God, the Holy Spirit. Every time we engage with it, there is something new to learn, a new message to take hold of, a new hope in our heart, and new word to teach us.

But what Scripture is not is a textbook or a manual. Those types of books are the products of Western rationalism organising the world into things that can be known and

8 The LCA speaks of the internal call and the external call of a pastor. Both come together to legitimate the ministry. The internal, personal call to ministry is authenticated by the external call to a particular ministry through a body, such as a congregation, which the church has authorised to call a pastor.

9 Augsburg Confession XIV.

10 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15.

leaving out those that cannot. When I went to school, for instance, the school specified a textbook for each subject containing the relevant information I was expected to know – Scripture is not that. When I purchase a new appliance it comes with a manual to tell me in so many steps how to use it (or not, as the case may be) – Scripture is not that. These days, when I want to know something, I frequently Google it, and then I have to sort the wheat from the chaff, the real news from the fake news – Scripture is not Google.

Rather than these things Scripture is a lived relationship, God's journey with his people. The Bible is ancient, and it is Eastern, predating our Western culture and its mechanistic view of the world. Perhaps we have begun to overuse the term 'narrative', but that's what Scripture is – a story, a pilgrimage. God comes down from the mysterious heavens to spend time with us, to sit in the dirt, and to share our story, to know and be known. In that sense the whole of the Bible is the prolonged story of Jesus – promised, incarnate, lived, died and raised. This is why Lutherans hold to the whole Bible,¹¹ and not just parts of it.¹² When Aboriginal people speak about the land, they say they do not own the land, the land owns them. Lutherans could say the same about Scripture – we do not own it, it owns us.

My final point in this brief introductory article is to say that we should not engage Scripture as though it were meant as a divisive force in Christ's church, but instead engage with it as a power that brings us together in hope. If the church truly is God's people gathered around his Word and the Sacraments, then it must have the pulling power to turn us away from self-interest and differences of opinion towards our common identity and purpose. Our passionately held views should inspire us to turn towards one another in reconciliation and hope, and not turn our backs on each other in hostility and separation. As always, in all our encounters, Christ the mediator stands between each of us and between God and us.

The church has always lived with the tension of potential division. From the dispute between St Peter and St Paul, the schisms over many centuries through to the 16th-century Reformation, down to the splits of the 19th and 20th centuries among Australian Lutherans, differences over doctrine and Scripture have been fought vigorously and hard, sometimes, even, to the death. Some things, of course, are worth the fight. Luther certainly thought so, and we agree with him. So do many Catholics I speak with today. Their regret over the Catholic treatment of Luther as a Reformer, however, does not make them want to *join* the Lutheran church but it does make them

11 Perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, Luther omitted the Apocrypha, or disputed books, from his translation of the Bible. To this day most Lutherans aren't aware of these additional books which never quite made their way into the Biblical canon, but still have a place within Catholic spirituality. While not regarded as the Word of God proper, Lutheran pastors may preach from these books or refer to them as long as the clear word of the canonical Scriptures support what is being preached or taught and Christ is clearly proclaimed.

12 This can be one of the pitfalls in relying solely on the Bible passages of the lectionary cycle, as it cannot cover the whole of the Bible in its cycle. Pastors should make a conscious effort to engage people in the study and appreciation of those parts of the Bible which do not appear in the cycle of Sunday readings.

want the *gospel* Lutherans proclaim. You see, we don't have an exclusive on the gospel. All true Christians hold the gospel in common. All those who are saved are saved by the gospel. The gospel is one of those divine things that, like love, the more you give it away, the more of it you have.

If we, as a church, have a purpose in this world, it is to bring this gospel message, our hope in Christ, to the world. The Word of God which brings us this gospel is divinely inspired and inerrant. Sadly, we are not. Our understanding of the human condition, of the sinner/saints that we are, surely also confirms our faith that God loves sinners and it is God's business to turn them into saints. So our striving is not to become perfect, but to grow deeper into the Word, to let it permeate our whole beings, to live it and breathe it, to know ourselves as God knows us, and to humble ourselves before God in the light of his amazing grace to us in Jesus Christ. And then to go on, together, hoping, trusting, believing, that the God who saves us will remain constant, keeping the promises contained in Scripture until the end of our days.