

## Canon, creeds, and confessions: an exercise in Lutheran hermeneutics

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### **Introduction\***

I thank you for the invitation to speak at this symposium. It is an honor to be invited. It was also something of a surprise, since the LCA has followed a rather different path from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), of which I am a member. When I asked President Semmler what he thought I might have to contribute, he said that he had read something about the paper that I presented in 2010 in Columbus, Ohio, at the time of the formation of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) (of which I am not a member)—I shall say more about that in a moment—and that a paper from the perspective of one who has been involved in that scene would be appealing. As I prepared my paper, I asked myself what specifically I might have to offer you. Let me begin by telling you what I will *not* do. I do not come to this symposium to take a position or to tell you what path I think you should take on any issue, for example, the ordination of women. I am not so presumptuous as to tell you what to do, nor, I might add, so foolish. Nor do I bring new exegetical insights to biblical texts.

What I do intend to offer you is a way of thinking about the interpretation and authority of Scripture and then to give an example of what that way might look like, using the biblical texts on the role of women in the church as a test case. However, we must be clear from the beginning: I approach our questions from a different perspective from you. Therefore I do not and cannot presume that the perspective from which I approach the questions is one that you could adopt for yourselves. If you become uncomfortable when, in the course of this paper, I speak of possible 'contradictions' in Scripture, then I ask for your patience, but not for your forgiveness, since unlike the LCA, I am not committed, either personally or ecclesially, to a position of the verbal inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> I simply ask that you take my paper for what it is: thoughts from one who is concerned about the future of Lutheranism, who remains committed to the Confessions as a hermeneutical guide in the church, and who, within that framework, wants to help Lutherans think about Scripture in a way that remains faithful to (what I regard as) the best of the Lutheran confessional tradition. Before I come to the particular questions that I have been asked to address, I wish to give some background.

In 2009 the Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA approved a social statement on human sexuality with accompanying resolutions that opened the possibility of churchly recognition of same-sex

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\* For the sake of historical record, I am publishing this paper in exactly the form in which it was presented at the hermeneutics symposium in Tanunda on October 14, 2011, except for three appendices that I have added, to clarify and expand on some points made in the paper. To readers who were not present at the symposium in Tanunda, I wish to emphasise that the topics discussed in this paper were dictated by the questions posed for my consideration by the LCA. They are listed at the start of the section titled 'Canon, Holy Spirit, and the articles of faith in the conflict of ideologies' (below).

<sup>1</sup> I am aware that the meaning of 'inerrancy' is carefully nuanced in LCA documents, for example in 'The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy' (1972) and 'A Consensus Statement on Holy Scripture' (1987).

unions and the ordination of persons in publically accountable, committed homosexual relationships.<sup>2</sup> Many in the ELCA are convinced that these actions violate the Lutheran Church's confessional commitment to the authority of Holy Scripture in all matters of faith and life. A voice representing this position is a movement called Lutheran CORE (Lutheran Coalition for Renewal).<sup>3</sup> In August 2010, at the formation of the NALC, Lutheran CORE sponsored an open theological conference in Columbus, Ohio, entitled, 'Seeking New Directions for Lutheranism'. I spoke at the conference on the topic of 'The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible in the Church'.<sup>4</sup> Therefore my remarks here are strongly colored by the American situation.

In that paper I sought to propose a way of thinking about the interpretation and authority of Scripture that avoids two extremes in American Lutheranism. One extreme (better: one end of the spectrum),<sup>5</sup> represented by the Missouri Synod, is biblical inerrancy on the model of Lutheran Orthodoxy. The other extreme, represented by significant voices in the ELCA, argues that the authority of (over?) Scripture lies in the interpreting human community. According to this position, Scripture continues to have authority for the church to the extent (and only to the extent) that the church, in its communal experience, continues to *hear* it as the Word of God today. Many in the ELCA like to appeal here to Luther's idea, revived in the 20th century 'Luther Renaissance', that, since the preached Word of God has priority over the written Word of God, the church might not consider all of Holy Scripture to be the Word of God. That is to say, there may be 'slippage' between the concepts of the 'Word of God' and the 'Bible', and there may be disagreement within the church as to where Holy Scripture continues to speak as the Word of God to the church and where it does not.

While the prioritizing of the preached Word over the written Word is certainly found in Luther, I am concerned that a facile appeal to this principle—leading to the 'slippage' between Holy Scripture and Word of God—together with a growing tendency to locate the authority of (or over) Scripture in the communal experience of the church are conspiring to deprive the ELCA of its authoritative foundation in canonical Scripture. If we cannot identify all of canonical Scripture as the Word of God for the church; if, that is to say, the 'slippage' between Holy Scripture and Word of God allows us to pick and choose which parts of Scripture remain authoritative and which do not, and if the communal experience of the church is decisive in that question, then *who* exactly makes such decisions and on *what basis*? And where does it all end? One can hardly make a strong case on the basis of the Confessions that the Lutheran Church is free to disregard any part of canonical Scripture as Word of God.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the ELCA constitution itself states quite plainly that 'the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God'. I find no indication that any part of canonical Scripture is to be excluded as Word of God.

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<sup>2</sup> The social statement, 'Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust', is available at [www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements.aspx](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements.aspx). See particularly p. 20. The accompanying resolutions are summarized at [www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/cwafaqs.aspx#policy](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/cwafaqs.aspx#policy)

<sup>3</sup> Lutheran CORE gave birth to the NALC, but CORE is broader than the NALC. CORE intends to be a pan-Lutheran renewal movement connecting confessional Lutherans in North America.

<sup>4</sup> The papers presented at this conference have been published in *Seeking new directions for Lutheranism: biblical, theological, and churchly perspectives*, edited by Carl E Braaten, ALPB Books, Delhi (New York), 2010. My paper was published as 'Holy Scripture and Word of God: biblical authority in the Church' and appears on pages 53–108.

<sup>5</sup> I do not intend to use the word 'extreme' in a pejorative sense (as in 'extremism'), but rather as descriptive. The two extremes are two ends of a spectrum.

<sup>6</sup> The Lutheran Confessions do not define the exact extent of the canon of scripture, but they use the canonical Old and New Testaments, as well as some of the apocryphal books.

But what does it mean to identify *all* of Holy Scripture as the Word of God? The Orthodox Lutheran answer is to appeal to theories of divine inspiration and inerrancy. Every word in Scripture is a direct utterance of the Holy Spirit (verbal inspiration), and all of Scripture is therefore inerrant. That means that there cannot be any real contradictions or errors in Scripture. Many in the ELCA, Lutheran CORE, and the NALC would happily affirm the infallibility of Scripture with respect to all matters of faith and morals. We would argue, however, that to demand a subscription to biblical inerrancy in every respect, including matters of history, astronomy, and nature, or a subscription to the claim that there are no real contradictions within Scripture is untenable. Moreover, it can be argued that such a subscription to biblical inerrancy goes beyond what Scripture clearly claims for itself and beyond our own confessional standards.<sup>7</sup> The problem, then, is this: If we do not begin *a priori* with the assumption that all of Scripture is the Word of God, we run the danger of falling to the one extreme of ‘picking and choosing’. On the other hand, how can we think of all of Holy Scripture as Word of God for the church, as the Confessions require, without adopting the most untenable aspects of Orthodoxy?

### **A hermeneutical proposal**

In my 2010 paper I proposed that, following the best of the Lutheran tradition, but particularly the Confessions—which are, after all, the real standard bearers for Lutherans—we need (1) to recover a sense for the canonical unity of Scripture, while at the same time (2) we recognize that there is diversity within Scripture, and that the Confessions themselves teach us how to distinguish between primary and secondary matters. The first guards against a deconstruction of the church’s canon, as a result of uncritical use of critical methods; the second gives us the freedom to acknowledge that Scripture contains a variety of views on some matters—and some of these views may in fact be contradictory to each other—so that on some matters there may *not* be a single biblical teaching, nor must there be one. (3) Even in controverted matters, however, where Scripture may not be wholly clear or internally consistent, the unity of the canon will guide the church’s judgment, so that the church is not left rudderless. Let us look at each of these points.

#### **1. The canonical unity of Scripture**

The idea that there is a unity to Scripture has always been important in Lutheran hermeneutics. In the first instance, the unity of Scripture lies in Jesus Christ. Gerhard Ebeling (172–230) showed that Luther’s belief that Christ is the center of Scripture and his view that Law and Gospel run throughout Scripture have roots in the very earliest of Luther’s hermeneutical reflections.<sup>8</sup> Following developments in medieval hermeneutics, Luther understood Christ crucified to be the perfect union of letter and spirit (2 Cor 3:6), so that Christ unifies spiritually every word (‘letter’) of Scripture. Moreover, as the unity of letter and spirit, Christ transforms the letter that kills (Law) into the spirit that gives life (Gospel), so that Law and Gospel are two distinct parts of the Word of God but within an overall unity. The Confessions follow Luther in regarding Law and Gospel as running throughout the entire Scriptures, so that, in turn, the Christ of the apostolic preaching—the Christ who offers the free forgiveness of sins to faith

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<sup>7</sup> The *Book of Concord* does, indeed, speak of the infallible Word of God and the infallible truth of the divine Word (Kolb and Wengert: 10,13), but it is not clear that these affirmations extend beyond the articles of faith. Luther had a sense for the formal authority of Scripture, although he was aware of contradictions and inconsistencies in Scripture. He was not bothered by them as long as the articles of faith were secure. See Hultgren, 100 n 27, and 105 n 98.

<sup>8</sup> I summarize some of the most important insights of Ebeling’s article in Hultgren, 60–63.

(justification)—is also found throughout Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly the Lutheran Confessions regard Law and Gospel as key to a correct understanding of Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

For Lutherans who wish to be faithful to their Confessions, however, the unity of Scripture cannot be limited to Christ alone. Lutheran *clichés* like ‘Law and Gospel’ or ‘*was Christum treibt*’ can easily be misused in a reductionist way to obscure the fact that for the Confessions it is more than Christ or Law and Gospel or justification by faith that gives Scripture its unity. Certainly justification is *the* ‘chief article’;<sup>11</sup> but the Confessions, following Luther (Althaus: 7, 333; Öberg: 446–50), regard *all* the articles of faith as summarized in the ecumenical Creeds to be true summaries of Scripture and to cohere with each other (and the Ten Commandments summarize the moral teaching of Scripture). The Formula of Concord even regards the articles found in the earlier confessional writings to be true summaries of Scripture.<sup>12</sup> If we follow the lead of the Confessions, we can argue that the articles of faith summarized in the Creeds and even in the Confessions establish a basic *framework* for understanding Scripture as a unity. The idea that the unity of Scripture lies in Christ and the idea that the unity of Scripture lies in the articles of faith do not have to exclude each other, if we understand the articles of faith themselves to find their unity and coherence in Christ (Hultgren: 88).

I suggest that when the church, following the Confessions, orients its interpretation of Scripture primarily towards the articles of faith (and Christ), then the church is free to conceive of the unity of Scripture in a way that does not require theories of verbal inspiration or inerrancy. If the only way that one can conceive of the unity of Scripture is by way of theories of verbal inspiration (guaranteeing the single authorship of Scripture), then one is left with the presupposition that every *word* in Scripture is (must be) the direct, inerrant utterance of the Holy Spirit, and that none of the words in Scripture can truly contradict each other.<sup>13</sup> Then one is also left with all of the exegetical problems that the theory entails. If, however, one understands the unity of Scripture to be summarized in the articles of faith, then the articles give one a basic orientation for interpreting and applying biblical texts in a way that will be consistent with the intention of the Holy Spirit,<sup>14</sup> even while one has the freedom to acknowledge that there may be a diversity of views, even contradictory views, on some matters in Scripture. That brings us to the second point.

<sup>9</sup> See Ap 12.53–58. Cf also 4.5; FC SD 5.23.

<sup>10</sup> FC SD 5.1.

<sup>11</sup> AC 28.52.

<sup>12</sup> References in Hultgren, 70–72, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, for example, the LCMS’s ‘A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles’ discusses the ‘unity of Scripture’ after the ‘infallibility of Scripture’ and states: ‘We believe, teach, and confess that since the same God speaks throughout Holy Scripture, there is an organic unity both within and between the Old and New Testaments...[we] affirm that the same doctrine of the Gospel, in all its articles, is presented throughout the entire Scripture. We reject the view that Holy Scripture, both within and between its various books and authors, presents us with conflicting and contradictory teachings and theologies.’ It seems true to the hermeneutic of the Confessions to hold that there is an organic unity within and between the Testaments and that the articles are presented throughout Scripture. But does that assessment apply to every biblical text, even those that do not apply to articles of faith? The Statement holds that, without this view of the unity of Scripture, ‘it is impossible for the church to have and confess a unified theological position that is truly Biblical and evangelical.’

<sup>14</sup> Here a hermeneutical insight of Johann Gerhard may be useful. Following Luther, for ‘Gerhard the proper and literal sense of Scripture is the sense intended by the Holy Spirit. Since (1) the Holy Spirit is the author of all of Scripture and since (2) the articles of faith summarize Scripture in its unity, the literal sense of every text is to be interpreted with reference to the articles of faith, which is thus the sense intended by the Holy Spirit’. The quotation is from Hultgren, 87. I refer there to Bengt Hägglund, 1951. *Die Heilige Schrift und ihre Deutung in der Theologie Johann Gerhards: eine Untersuchung über das atlutherische Schriftverständnis*, C W K Gleerup, Lund, 220–23.

## 2. Diversity within Scripture

The Confessions do not generally speak of contradictions in Scripture. Where there are apparent contradictions, the Confessions tend to harmonize.<sup>15</sup> It is clear, however, that the Confessions recognize diversity in Scripture, and in such a way that the articles of faith are a guide in distinguishing between primary and secondary matters. For example, the Augsburg Confession and the Apology state that New Testament ordinances regarding food, days, and clothing cannot be treated as divine decrees; they are human traditions,<sup>16</sup> and to enforce them as though they were divine decrees would be to violate the chief article (justification).<sup>17</sup> Thus, although the biblical texts containing these decrees are Word of God (and served a good purpose in their time), they are not lasting divine decrees, to omit the observance of which would constitute sin. They are Scripture and Word of God, but they are not authoritative for the church today. The Confession regards New Testament ordinances regulating church order in the same way,<sup>18</sup> a point not irrelevant to discussions of 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 in regard to the ordination of women.<sup>19</sup> Besides such *explicit* appeals to articles of faith (here: justification) to distinguish between primary and secondary matters, the Confessions also seem to operate *implicitly* with such a hermeneutic. For example, on the matter of the return of Christ, the Augsburg Confession (17) affirms that at the return of Christ there will be a final judgment, resurrection of the dead, and eternal life for the righteous and eternal punishment for the ungodly. The Confession (in agreement with the Catholic tradition) rejects the ‘Jewish’ teaching of a millennial kingdom, whereby there is an implicit rejection of the eschatology of Revelation 20:4–6, at least in an earthly-political sense. Thus the article affirms New Testament eschatology (and the eschatology of the ecumenical creeds) on the whole while it rejects the eschatology of Revelation in particular.

## 3. The articles of faith as guide in controverted matters

If, however, one allows for a diversity of views in Scripture on some matters, and even contradiction, how can one meet the legitimate concern that the church will then not have a ‘unified theological position’, at least on some matters (and very important ones at that)?<sup>20</sup> I suggest that the pattern that we find in the Confessions, whereby the chief articles of faith serve to distinguish between primary and secondary matters, can be helpful in guiding the church in controverted matters, where Scripture may not be wholly clear or internally consistent. We have just seen an example of this in eschatology. The general teaching on eschatology, established by the (New Testament) canon as a whole, is affirmed, even while a particular text (Revelation 20) is tacitly rejected. In this case it seems better to acknowledge that the New Testament does *not* have a single eschatology—Revelation 20:4–15 is, if not in outright contradiction to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:23–28, in tension with them—than to insist that ‘the same doctrine of the Gospel, in all its articles, is presented throughout the entire Scripture’ without *any* conflict or contradiction between books or authors.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Thus, for example, James is harmonized with Paul: Ap. 4.244–52.

<sup>16</sup> AC 28.42–60; Ap 27.26.

<sup>17</sup> AC 28.52, 66.

<sup>18</sup> AC 28.53,54.

<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the moral commandments that fall under the Decalogue remain binding. See Hultgren, 73,74.

<sup>20</sup> See the LCMS statement quoted in n. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from the LCMS ‘A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles’ (see n 13 above). The LCMS’s ‘A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod’ (1932) states that Scripture clearly teaches that there will be no millennium, and there will be only one resurrection of the dead. That is hardly clear from Revelation 20! Such a position is only clear from *Scripture as a whole*, even though particular texts within Scripture differ.

The approach outlined here has several benefits. First, orienting the interpretation of Scripture towards the articles of faith gives the church a way of understanding Scripture as a unity without requiring theories of verbal inspiration or inerrancy. Second, the church can acknowledge a diversity of views, even contradiction, in Scripture on some matters. At the same time, orienting the interpretation of Scripture towards the articles of faith gives the church a basic framework for dealing with controverted matters and difficult texts, and the confidence that its interpretation of Scripture is in harmony with the intention of the Holy Spirit.<sup>22</sup> I shall follow this approach in discussing texts relating to the role of women in the church. Third, this approach allows for a responsible use of historical criticism in the church.<sup>23</sup> Since one allows from the beginning the possibility of diversity and even contradiction within Scripture, one can allow for historical development and historical contingency behind and within biblical texts, even while one leaves articles of faith intact.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, this approach does not solve every problem.<sup>25</sup> I do think, however, that this approach may provide a way forward, a ‘third way’ as it were, beyond the ‘extremes’. In an age when we have become sensitized to the need to recognize the historical conditioning of biblical texts, we can acknowledge the real diversity and even contradictions in Scripture, even as we avoid the complete deconstruction of the canon.<sup>26</sup> With this proposal as background, we turn to our main questions.

### **Canon, Holy Spirit, and the articles of faith in the conflict of ideologies**

The questions given for our consideration read as follows:

The revelation contained in the Scriptures has been given in specific historical, geographical, cultural and social settings. This raises the following possible topics for discussion:

How are we to determine when a specific setting limits the meaning and application of a passage of Scripture and when application is not limited to the original context, a test case being St Paul’s words on the behavior of women in worship in 1 Corinthians?

Since all scriptural interpretation is contextual and cannot be undertaken without presuppositions, how do we avoid the danger of reading into the Scriptures the agendas and assumptions of our own context?

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<sup>22</sup> See n 14 above.

<sup>23</sup> So one can understand Revelation 20:4–15 as containing, in part, remnants of the worldview of ancient Jewish apocalypticism, even while one upholds articles of faith regarding the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and eternal life and eternal punishment.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, one can argue that historical-critical investigation of Scripture and allowance of contradictions within Scripture ultimately undermine the articles of faith themselves, such as belief in creation, the Virgin Birth, or the resurrection of the body and the final judgment. But can the historical critic really ‘prove’ that any of these articles of faith are not true?

<sup>25</sup> For example, if we follow Paul on the article of justification, must we not finally harmonize in order to preserve James, as the Confessions do? Here is an example, however, where historical criticism can help. Historical criticism teaches us to read James as a response to a misinterpretation of Paul, rather than as contradicting Paul. See Reumann, 151–58.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, this approach also raises a new problem. If there can be contradictions within Scripture on some matters, the *sola Scriptura* principle is endangered: Scripture may not be able to solve every problem that arises in the church. Here, however, Lutherans may have something to learn from Roman Catholics and the need for an authoritative teaching magisterium (though always subject to the authority of Scripture!). Sometimes a choice has to be made, such as Paul over James on justification (though see n. 25), or Romans 9–11 over John 8:44 on Christian attitudes towards Jews. I would still argue that a basic sense for the unity of the canon and for the articles of faith as guide can go a long way to solving problems.

I shall discuss the two questions in connection with each other. As suggested, I shall use the commands to silence of women in the church in 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 (as well as 1 Timothy 2:11–14) as a test case. These texts offer a fine opportunity to illustrate and to test a ‘third way’ between the two extremes. One extreme would claim that the commands to silence are the inspired, inerrant Word of God and cannot be compromised. Thus, for example, the LCMS’s ‘A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles’ rejects the view that ‘Paul’s statements on the role of women in the church are not binding today because they are...culturally conditioned’ on the grounds of the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures ‘in all their parts and words’, and on the grounds that there are no errors or contradictions in Scripture. The result is that these texts must be harmonized with texts that appear to contradict them, such as Acts 18:26, where Priscilla teaches (corrects) Apollos, and there is no indication that she erred in doing so.<sup>27</sup> The other extreme would be to dismiss 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 *a priori* as the residue of Greco-Roman patriarchal ideology. Since ‘we’ (the church) no longer believe in patriarchy, ‘we’, in our communal experience, simply do not ‘hear’ these texts as the Word of God any more. Therefore ‘we’ are free to disregard them without further consideration.<sup>28</sup> But this approach may be problematic as well. If we are tempted to dismiss biblical texts summarily on ideological grounds, we must beware lest we import into our treatment of Scripture another ideology just as questionable as the one we have rejected. And it is a bold individual indeed who would presume to decide summarily which parts of canonical Scripture should or should not be excluded from the canon of the church.<sup>29</sup>

What I am calling a ‘third way’ involves the following questions before we decide whether the texts commanding the silence of women are binding or not: How do the commands to silence, and especially the idea of the subordination of woman with which they are linked, fit into the canon of Scripture as a whole (the unity of the canon)? What, if any, is the relationship between the texts in question to the Christ of the apostolic gospel and to the articles of faith? Do the commands to silence fall under the Confessions’ category of human traditions, so that they can be regarded as non-binding, or are articles of faith at stake, so that to dismiss them would damage the framework of biblical faith? Historical-critical questions are allowed here: Are the texts historically and culturally conditioned? If so, does that conditioning explain the apparent contradiction with Acts 18:26? Yet historical questions, as useful as they are for explaining contradictions or the historical conditioning of texts, cannot be *ultimately decisive*. We must finally listen to and ask about the theological claims of the texts. What are the theological claims, and are they persuasive? Do they stand up to the witness of the canon as a whole? To summarize in the words of my 2010 paper: We ‘will not seek to dismiss any part of canonical

<sup>27</sup> For example, Priscilla’s teaching is private (not public) teaching (eg, Scaer, 232); or Priscilla does, indeed, teach as a woman, but not independently of a man (eg, Hamann, 15). Even if we accept these explanations, does not Priscilla exercise authority over a man (contra 1 Tim 2:12), and does she not correct Apollos in a way that qualifies the judgment on women implied in 1 Tim 2:14? Perhaps the need to harmonize Acts 18:26 and 1 Timothy 2:14 lies behind the statement in the LCMS document *The creator’s tapestry: scriptural perspectives on man-woman relationships in marriage and the Church* (St Louis, 2010), 37, that 1 Timothy 2:14 does not imply that women are more easily deceived than men; rather Eve is an example of ‘[l]istening to Satan rather than the Word of God’. But if that is the point of 1 Timothy 2:14, why does that exclude *women* particularly from teaching? Adam also disobeyed the Word of God. For what I regard as the more likely interpretation of the verse, see n 47 below.

<sup>28</sup> I place the word ‘we’ in quotation marks to highlight the problem that arises when the church allows communal experience to determine where Scripture continues to function as the Word of God for the church and where it does not. To whom exactly does ‘we’ refer?

<sup>29</sup> Like Luther (!) in his christological canon criticism of certain books (such as James and Hebrews). Yet even Luther did not want to force his views on the church. Moreover, Luther himself sought ways to preserve these disputed books as Scripture. And the Confessions, which are the real standard bearers for Lutherans, are more conservative in this respect than Luther. See Hultgren, 57–58, 64–65, 69–70.

Holy Scripture *a priori* but will rather listen to each and every text for what the Holy Spirit intends to teach through it, in harmony with the canon as a whole' (Hultgren: 97).

With respect to the first question, how we determine 'when a specific setting limits the meaning and application of a passage of Scripture and when application is not limited to the original context', we have two helpful resources: (1) the Confessions; and (2) historical-critical considerations. We shall take the Confessions first. Following them, we might make a distinction between apostolic decrees regarding church order, which the Confessions regard as human traditions and not binding on the church, and divine mandates that cannot be changed or ignored.<sup>30</sup> If we can regard the prohibition of women speaking in the church as a matter of church order (and human tradition), then we can comfortably limit the application of the prohibition to the time and place in which it was made and regard it as non-binding today. Not all are convinced, however, that the prohibition of women speaking in the church falls under that category. Some have argued, for example, that when Paul states in 1 Corinthians 14:37 that what he writes is 'a command of the Lord', the command of woman's silence in the church (14:33–36) is included in the divine command. Thus the silence of women remains a binding 'apostolic rule' on all of Christendom.<sup>31</sup> If this were clearly the case, one could argue that the issue is confessionally settled, since the Confessions are clear that divine commands in Scripture remain binding on the church.<sup>32</sup> One can plausibly argue, however, that it is *not* clear, either on biblical or confessional grounds, that 1 Corinthians 14:37 must be understood to include the instructions of 14:33–36.<sup>33</sup> Notwithstanding that argument, others have argued that more is at stake in the question of the ordination of women than the matter of church order, such as a proper understanding of the orders of creation and redemption (Kleinig, 2009b: 222). Is that concern justified? Following our 'third way', that is, reading the texts in light of the canon as a whole and particularly with reference to the articles of faith, can help to answer that question. More on that later.

A second resource for answering our question is historical criticism. Are the texts commanding the silence of women historically and culturally conditioned in such a way as to make them of

<sup>30</sup> See at n. 18 above.

<sup>31</sup> For example, ¶7 in the document entitled, 'Why does the LCA ordain men only? A summary', issued on May 26, 2006, by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia (accessed on June 23, 2011, at [www.lca.org.au/resources/cticr/CTICRCaseMenPastors.pdf](http://www.lca.org.au/resources/cticr/CTICRCaseMenPastors.pdf)). This document cites the Theses of Agreement VI,11, which reads: 'Though women prophets were used by the Spirit of God in the Old as well as in the New Testament, 1 Cor 14:34,35 and 1 Tim 2:11-14 prohibit a woman from being called into the office of the public ministry for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. This apostolic rule is binding on all Christendom; hereby her rights as a member of the spiritual priesthood are in no wise impaired.'

<sup>32</sup> For references, see Hultgren, 69–73.

<sup>33</sup> For two reasons: (1) It is not clear to what kind of 'command of the Lord' Paul refers. Does Paul refer to a specific saying of Jesus (before or after his resurrection) in the gospel tradition, to a command that Paul believes the risen Jesus to have spoken to him directly, or (as is most likely) simply to Paul's sense that he speaks with the Lord's authority? In any case, 1 Corinthians 14:37a shows that Paul directs the admonitions of 14:37b and 14:38 to one who regards himself as a 'prophet' (*prophētēs*) or a 'spiritual person' (*pneumatikos*), which would suggest that the 'command of the Lord' has to do somehow with prophetic speech (14:24, 29–33). Since Paul clearly did not reject the speaking of female prophetesses (11:5), it is difficult to apply 14:37b to 14:33–36 understood as a prohibition of the speaking of *female prophetesses*. If one interprets 14:33–36 as referring to the speaking of women in the official worship service of the church, rather than to prophetic speech—assuming that such a distinction is even possible in the decade of the 50s of the first century—then 14:37, dealing with prophets, would once again hardly seem to apply to 14:33–36. (2) If the divine command of 14:37 includes 14:33–36 in its scope, then it would seem that it must include all of chapter 14 in its scope. Yet the Augsburg Confession regards 14:30–33 (the instruction that preachers are to speak in order) as a matter of human tradition, the non-observance of which is not a sin. Good order is the point (AC 28.53,54). If we follow the Confessional standard, why should 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 not also fall under this category, unless something more is at stake than good order?

secondary importance and hence inapplicable today? A typical historical-critical approach might look like this: 1 Timothy 2:11–14 is Deutero-Pauline and reflects the historical situation of the first or second post-apostolic generation. In the generation of Paul himself, women were allowed to speak authoritatively (prophesy) in the churches (1 Corinthians 11:5) under the power of the Holy Spirit and even to instruct men (Acts 18:26). As the initial spiritual enthusiasm of the church began to wane in the post-apostolic era, as church offices became formalized, and as the growing church settled into the established structures of Greco-Roman society, the church accommodated itself to the culture and practices of society. Such accommodation entailed that Christian women should behave according to the ideals for women in Greco-Roman society, and that meant to behave with modesty and in submission to men.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the commands to subordination and silence for women in 1 Timothy 2:11,12 are influenced by Greco-Roman patriarchal ideology. Given the similarity in language between 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14, many (though by no means all) would propose that 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 is a Deutero-Pauline interpolation and reflects the same historical situation as 1 Timothy 2:11–12.<sup>35</sup> One can argue that 1 Corinthians 11:5 and Acts 18:26 represent the ‘real’ apostolic view, and both 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 are secondary. The potentially secondary historical status of these texts, joined to the Confessions’ categorization of matters regarding church order under non-binding human traditions, might suggest that the prohibition of women teaching in the church should no longer be binding today.

This is a compelling argument. I would suggest, however, that historical considerations alone cannot decide the question. For one thing, our historical reconstruction might be wrong. In any case, it is dangerous for the church to base its biblically derived theology and practice on the results of historical-critical research alone.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the Lutheran church’s commitment to Scripture in its canonical form should make us reticent to throw out any part of the canon as authoritative without considering deeply the consequences of doing so. To be sure, we have the precedent of Luther’s Christological criticism of the canon.<sup>37</sup> Yet if the proposal being made here has any merit, the Christological criterion is not enough. Any proposal to disregard a part of canonical Scripture should be made only if such disregard can be justified before the canon as a whole and especially with reference to articles of faith.

In this case, what we must consider above all is the concept of the subordination of women; for both 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 ground the silence of the woman in her subordination to man, and such subordination is in turn based on Scripture (the Law): ‘For they [women] are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate (*hypotassesthōsan*), as the law also says’ (1 Cor 14:34). And ‘let a woman learn in silence with full submission (*hypotagē*). I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor’ (1 Tim 2:11–14). In other words, subordination and appeal to Scripture are the two *theological bases* for the silence of women and so should be the focus of attention. The question is whether the commands to silence and especially to subordination for the woman make sense today in light of the canon as a whole and especially with reference to the articles of faith.

<sup>34</sup> See references in, eg, Collins, 69,70; Schrage, 3.485.

<sup>35</sup> Eg, Schrage, 3.486.

<sup>36</sup> An analogy: Could the Lutheran church base its Christology on the results of modern historical Jesus research alone?

<sup>37</sup> That is, following Luther we might regard ourselves as free to criticize particular biblical texts as to whether they promote or hinder the preaching of the Christ who offers the free forgiveness of sins to faith.

The very idea of 'subordination' is offensive to modern sensibilities and modern ideas of sexual equality. For many people that alone is sufficient ground to disregard the biblical texts. That view is understandable. Before we make a rash decision, however, we must listen to and honor the concerns of both 'sides'—both those who would uphold these texts as authoritative, and those who would disregard them. The one side is legitimately concerned that the church will let the 'spirit of the age' (in the form of secular ideologies) control the interpretation and application of biblical texts in the church. By excluding *a priori* certain biblical texts as authoritative in the name of a modern ideology, does the church not run the risk of doing violence to the Word of God? Yet the other side is legitimately concerned that an uncritical acceptance of every biblical text as Word of God for the church entails an untenable view of divine inspiration, and that an uncritical acceptance of texts that are saturated by ancient presuppositions and ideologies can (and in fact does) do great harm (i.e., it is used to justify oppression of and violence against women). It seems to me that, if we are to follow our 'third way', so as to avoid both assuming that every word of Scripture is the inerrant utterance of the Holy Spirit and simply dismissing those texts that 'we',<sup>38</sup> in our communal experience, no longer 'hear' as the Word of God, then the church must constantly *test* ideological presuppositions, both its own and others', in the treatment of Scripture, to ask whether it is listening to the Holy Spirit or to some other spirit. How do we do that?

If we conceive of the spiritual unity of Scripture not in the sense that every word of Scripture is the inerrant utterance of the Holy Spirit, but in the sense that Scripture finds its unity in the articles of faith, with the Christ who offers the free forgiveness of sins to faith at their center, then it seems that we have a biblically and confessionally responsible way of testing ideological presuppositions. I understand an 'ideology' to be a worldview, a particular, conceptual construal of reality. An ideology offers a framework for understanding the world in its various dimensions, guidance for making decisions and acting within the world, and a basis for the critique of competing ideologies and worldviews.<sup>39</sup> Canonical Scripture, as summarized in the articles of faith in the creeds and Confessions, renders such an 'ideological' framework.<sup>40</sup> I suggest that when the church is confronted by challenges to its authoritative Scriptures, the first response must be neither to accept those challenges prejudicially and uncritically, nor to reject them prejudicially and uncritically.<sup>41</sup> The church will neither withdraw into the unassailable fortress of biblical inerrancy, nor will it simply capitulate to every challenge coming from outside. Rather the church's task is to investigate the ideological presuppositions of those challenges and to test them against the framework of biblical faith. The church must also continually test its *own* ideological presuppositions, its own position, against the framework of biblical faith. If the church is to engage the world with Scripture, then it needs to be open and willing to have its conceptual framework ideologically challenged. At the same time, the church needs resources to respond

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<sup>38</sup> See n 28.

<sup>39</sup> So, for example, Marxism as an ideology has a particular view of reality, provides guidance for making decisions in the world, and criticizes competing worldviews.

<sup>40</sup> To take just some examples, the doctrines of the Trinity, of original sin, of justification, and of the Last Things render a certain worldview, commend certain actions and decisions within the world, and provide a basis for the critique of competing worldviews.

<sup>41</sup> Cf points B.3 and B.4 under 'Hermeneutical issues' in the document entitled, 'Controverted matters in the LCA debate on the ordination of women', issued on June 22, 2004, by the CTICR of the LCA: 'We need to explore how to determine whether our presuppositions are consonant with the Scriptures and the teaching of the church'. And 'the writers of Scripture...at times affirmed what was good in their culture, [but] they also critiqued it and transcended it]. We need to explore how a teaching that was seemingly "conditioned" by the cultural context in the NT is to be understood by us in a changed cultural context.'

to challenges in a coherent and consistent way, and that requires that the church work out carefully and explain clearly its own ‘ideological’ presuppositions based on a biblical framework. If the ideological presuppositions on which a challenge to a *particular* biblical text (such as the prohibition of women speaking in the church) are found to cohere with, or at least not to be in conflict with, Scripture *in its canonical unity* (especially as summarized in the articles of faith), then the church will be open to accepting that challenge as compatible with what the Holy Spirit intends to say through Scripture as a whole, and will be open to a change of mind. If, however, the ideological presuppositions on which a challenge to a particular text is based tear apart the canon or dislodge articles of faith, then the church will resist that challenge as contrary to the intention of the Holy Spirit. In this way the church has some way of discerning whether it is reading into biblical texts its own ‘agendas and assumptions’, as our second question puts it, or not. In other words, it becomes a matter of ‘testing the spirits’ (1 John 4:1), that is, ‘testing’ the ‘spirits’ in which ideological claims are made on behalf of or against particular biblical texts. It is a matter of ‘testing everything’ so as to ‘hold fast to what is good’ (1 Thess 5:21; cf 1 Cor 14:29).<sup>42</sup>

### 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 as a test case

What might such an approach look like concretely? In this section we return to 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 as a test case. I do not pretend to give an exhaustive treatment of the matter. I simply give a sketch of how this approach might proceed.

1 Timothy 2:11–14 grounds the silence of the woman and her subordination to man in creation and fall, citing biblical evidence (texts from Genesis) for the claim.<sup>43</sup> First Timothy is an excellent test case for our approach; for, by grounding the silence and subordination of women in creation and fall, the text itself already points us to major articles of faith (creation and sin) for our reflection. Our question must be: Does the *theological* grounding of woman’s silence and subordination in creation and fall make sense in light of the biblical canon as a whole? Only after the theological (ideological) rationale for the subordination of women *in general* has been examined should we consider the question in connection with the role of women in the church. Our first task, then, is to search the canon and to ask how the idea of subordination fits into the canon as a whole.

We note first that the subordination of women to their husbands appears frequently in the so-called ‘household codes’ (*Haustafeln*), rules for the ordering of the household in the New Testament epistles. In some places the subordination has an explicitly theological grounding (Eph 5:22–24; 1 Pet 3:6), while in others it does not (Col 3:18; Tit 2:5). As with 1 Timothy 2:11,12, it is clear that the ‘household code’ reflects the ideology of Greco-Roman (patriarchal) society.<sup>44</sup> When some of these texts give a theological grounding for the subordination of

<sup>42</sup> So, which spirit says, ‘we may disregard those biblical texts that prohibit women from speaking in church’? Is that the voice of the Holy Spirit (known from Scripture in its canonical unity) or is that the voice of an alien spirit? Likewise, which spirit says, ‘we must accept those biblical texts that prohibit women from speaking in church as authoritative’?

<sup>43</sup> The texts to which 1 Timothy 2:13,14 alludes are Genesis 2:7, 22,23; 3:6. If 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 is a Deutero-Pauline interpolation, it is possible that the author’s reference to the ‘law’ in 14:34 alludes to the same texts from Genesis as in 1 Timothy, but that is not certain. See Schrage, 3.490,91, 499, for proposals. Other proposals: Gen 3:16; 18:12 (cf 1 Pet 3:6); the Torah in general.

<sup>44</sup> See, eg, Elliott, 505–11, who argues, based on recent research, that the so-called ‘household code’ in the New Testament is actually based on a Greco-Roman *oikonomia* (household management) tradition. One should note, however, that the biblical texts do not represent a wholesale takeover from Greco-Roman ideology. See especially Kleinig (2009a), who points out that, unlike the Greco-Roman codes, in the New Testament the call to subordinate oneself presupposes a state of equality in Christ (405). The example of Christ arrests the ‘abuse of power’ (406), or at least it should do so!

women, we must ask, as with 1 Timothy 2:11–14, whether the theological grounding makes sense in light of the canon as a whole, or whether the theological grounding is simply cover for an ulterior ideology (ie, a Christian consecration of Greco-Roman patriarchal ideology).

An appeal to the ‘order of creation’ to explain the relationship of woman and man, as in 1 Timothy 2:13, appears elsewhere in the canon (1 Cor 11:3,8,9).<sup>45</sup> Man is the head of the woman, because woman was made from man (Gen 2:22,23). Here, however, Paul is concerned primarily about maintaining the proper distinction between man and woman (in worship) rather than the subordination of woman to man *per se*. Moreover, Paul says that ‘in the Lord’ man and woman are mutually dependent (1 Cor 11:11). This mutual dependence in Christ lets man’s superordination to woman in the order of creation be seen in a new light (we might even say: in its original intention). Man is not ‘from’ (*ek*) woman in the way that woman is from man (11:8); on the other hand, as woman is from (*ek*) man, man now comes ‘through’ (*dia*) woman (11:12). Thus in Christ, the ‘order of creation’, while not undone, is christologically qualified in the direction of mutuality (cf 7:4). Galatians 3:28 suggests the same.<sup>46</sup> Thus we may say that in 1 Corinthians and Galatians we have a dialectical view of the relationship between man and woman: in Christ the biblical order of creation is maintained, the distinction of male and female remains, but the superordination of man and the subordination of woman are qualified in the direction of mutuality.

The Pauline dialectic of subordination-with-mutuality finds its most profound expression in (the Deutero-Pauline) Ephesians 5:22–33. The subordination of woman to man is maintained (5:22, 24) and is grounded in the man’s headship of the woman (cf 1 Cor 11:3). The subordination is qualified, however, through the husband’s love for the wife, modeled on the self-giving love (*agapē*) of Christ for the church (Eph 5:25). The one-flesh union of man and woman in marriage, which has an analogue in the union of Christ with his body the church (5:29–33), entails that the husband loves his wife as himself, that is, as his own body (5:28). Thus the love of the man for his wife within the marriage relationship produces a kind of mutuality, even equality, between man and woman within the continuing relationship of superordination/subordination. Just as the members of the church *are* Christ’s body, even while Christ continues to be distinguished as their head, so, in a sense, the wife becomes *identified with* the man’s body (flesh), even while the man continues to be her head. One can say that it is marriage, modeled on the relationship of Christ to the church, that lets the biblical (Pauline) concept of subordination-with-mutuality come forth most clearly and profoundly.

In addition to the ‘order of creation’, 1 Timothy grounds the subordination of woman in the fall: Eve rather than Adam was deceived (Gen 3:13). The point presumably is that woman should not have authority to teach in the church because she is more prone to error than man is (cf 1

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<sup>45</sup> I use the term ‘order of creation’ here in the sense of the sequence of creation of Adam and Eve in the biblical narrative.

<sup>46</sup> It is too strong to say (as does Stendahl, 32), that according to Galatians 3:28 ‘the primary division of God’s creation is overcome, that between *male and female*’ (earlier on the same page: in Christ the Law has been ‘transcended’). It is more accurate to say that the created order has been christologically qualified, since Paul does not deny that humans continue to exist as men and women any less than that they continue to exist as Jews and Greeks (as Stendahl notes on page 34), or as slaves and free, even though such identities no longer count for anything in church fellowship. That Paul was concerned about a possible misinterpretation of a slogan such as Galatians 3:28 in the sense that the distinction between male and female is *overcome* in Christ is clear from 1 Corinthians 12:13, where, following upon the discussion of the problem of confusion of men and women in 11:2–16, Paul leaves out ‘male and female’ from the triad found in Galatians 3:28.

Tim 5:13).<sup>47</sup> When we consider the canon as a whole, we must compare such a view of women against Acts 18:26 where Priscilla (with Aquila) teaches and *corrects* Apollos. In Acts we have an example from the apostolic church that challenges the judgment of 1 Timothy.

That brings us to the topic of the fall (sin) more broadly. According to Genesis 3:16, after the first transgression of Adam and Eve, God tells Eve that ‘your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’. It is possible that 1 Corinthians 14:34 alludes to this verse when it says that women ‘should be subordinate, as the law also says,’ although that is hardly certain.<sup>48</sup> On this reading, 1 Corinthians 14:34 could be understood to mean that woman’s subordination to man is God’s will for the relationship between the sexes. That is, Genesis 3:16 expresses God’s will for the relationship between man and woman in the ‘order of preservation’, after the fall.<sup>49</sup> But there is another way to read the text, within the canon as a whole, and that is to say that the man’s ‘ruling’ over the woman is not an expression of God’s will but is rather a manifestation of sin, a post-lapsarian reality that God explicitly names, for the man’s ‘ruling over’ the woman is consequent upon the transgression of the first couple. That is an insight that feminist biblical scholars in particular have brought to the text,<sup>50</sup> but even Luther read the text that way (and his reading was followed by at least some in the Lutheran tradition).<sup>51</sup> At the very least, one can read Genesis 3:16 as pointing to the way in which sin has transformed the *subordination* of woman to man, grounded in creation, into the sinful *oppression* of woman by man.<sup>52</sup>

In sum, when we consider our texts in light of the canon as a whole, it seems that we can say the following. The grounding of the subordination of woman to man in the order of creation in 1 Timothy 2:11–14 finds support elsewhere in the canon, but the subordination is christologically qualified. In Christ there is mutuality between man and woman, even while subordination and the difference between the sexes are not abolished. The grounding of the subordination of woman to man in woman’s alleged propensity to deception (exemplified by Eve’s being deceived) is countered by Acts 18:26, where Priscilla corrects Apollos. Genesis 3:16 permits us to see woman’s subordination to man not (only) as grounded in God’s will as creator but (also) as a consequence of sin. Christ redeems everything from sin, even the relationship between man and woman. The one-flesh marriage union of man and woman, analogous to the marriage between Christ and the church, reveals most clearly what a relationship of subordination-with-mutuality, redeemed from sin, looks like (Eph 5:22–33).

These considerations give us a basic biblical framework against which ideological challenges to particular texts can be tested. For example, when feminist scholarship finds in texts such as 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14 examples of patriarchal ideology implicated in all

<sup>47</sup> Though some have rejected this interpretation (see n 27), it still seems the most likely one in light of the close parallel in Philo’s comment on Genesis 3:1 (*Questions on Genesis* 1.33: ‘woman is more accustomed to being deceived than man...because of softness she easily gives way and is taken in by plausible falsehood that resembles the truth’) and in light of the parallel between 1 Timothy 2:15 and 1 Timothy 5:14–15: marriage and bearing children will ‘save’ a woman, because, by keeping her occupied in household affairs, the woman is prevented from falling prey to heresy (‘turning away to follow Satan’).

<sup>48</sup> See n 43.

<sup>49</sup> Eg, in the LCMS document, ‘Woman suffrage in the Church,’ 18 (accessed June 23, 2011, at [www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=685](http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=685)).

<sup>50</sup> Eg, Trible, 128.

<sup>51</sup> For Luther, see WA 42,151 (=LW 1.202); see further, on the Lutheran tradition, Appold, 264 n 48.

<sup>52</sup> Cf Brunner: ‘Instead of the man being the “head” of the woman, he now, according to Gen. 3:16, becomes a ruler who possesses her. The original association of the woman to the man is now transformed into a subjugation to his desire that has an almost oppressive power’ (206).

kinds of injustices against women, so that the authority of these texts can be questioned,<sup>53</sup> we must ask: Does such a challenge stand up to the canon as whole? The answer, I think, would have to be 'Yes, in some sense'. It is biblically legitimate to see the subordination of women, at least in some (I would say many) instances, as a consequence of the fall (Gen 3:16), where subordination is true oppression. In this way, from a canonical perspective, one could use Genesis 3:16 as a critical lever against 1 Corinthians 14:33–36 and 1 Timothy 2:11–14.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, the claim that the concept of gender is merely a social construct,<sup>55</sup> so that in Christ created difference between man and woman has been overcome, goes beyond the canonical framework. In the New Testament mutuality between man and woman is achieved through a Christological qualification, not an abolition, of the 'order of creation'.<sup>56</sup>

Once we have undertaken a canonical investigation of the topic of subordination, we can return to the question of the role of women in the church. The question is whether it makes any *theological* sense to link woman's silence in the church, specifically in the role of preacher or teacher, to the subordination of woman to man. We have seen that the canon as a whole qualifies subordination in various and significant ways, although it does not altogether abolish it. Is there something theologically *essential* to the preaching and teaching office that requires the subordination and silence of the woman? Or do the commands to subordination and silence in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 reflect concerns of a specific time and place that no longer apply?

It seems to me that the basic theological issue here is one of *symbolism*. What does the official, public speaking (preaching, teaching) of the woman in the church symbolize theologically? If woman's speaking in the church is understood to symbolize that redemption in Christ entails the overcoming of created sexual difference between man and woman, then that would go against Scripture in its canonical unity.<sup>57</sup> If woman's speaking in the church is understood to symbolize that Christ's redemption of the whole world includes the redemption of sinful social structures that *unjustly* subordinate (oppress) women, or to symbolize mutuality between man and woman in Christ, without abolishing the created difference between them, then that would agree with Scripture in its canonical unity.

It may not be impertinent to illustrate the point with recent policy statements of the LWF. It is the stated policy of the LWF to encourage member churches to ordain women.<sup>58</sup> The policy is part

<sup>53</sup> Eg, Schüssler Fiorenza, 60,61.

<sup>54</sup> Eg, in the LWF document, *Churches say "no" to violence against women*, 12 (accessed June 23, 2011; at [www.lutheranworld.org/LWF\\_Documents/EN/Lwfviolence-EN.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/EN/Lwfviolence-EN.pdf)).

<sup>55</sup> See at n 62 below.

<sup>56</sup> Cf Brunner (206–207): In Christ the *kephale*-structure (man's headship to woman) is seen in its original sense, redeemed from the fall. But the relationship between man and woman 'must still bear the fundamental elements of the *kephale*-structure that were given in the creation' until the resurrection of the dead. Creation, fall, and redemption form a unity. As correct as it is for Brunner to say that the redemption of the relationship between man and woman must await the resurrection of the dead to reach fullness, I would ask Brunner, who argues that 'the consequences of the judgment on sin are not eliminated from the experience of the Christian', whether Christ's redemption of the relationship between man and woman from sin must be allowed to *become visible* in this age.

<sup>57</sup> For this reason, caution is warranted in using Galatians 3:28 in the question of the ordination of women. As others have pointed out, ancient heretical groups used the text to justify the ministry of women (see, eg, Stendahl, 36).

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the document, 'Ordination of women in the LWF member churches': 'Ordination of women is a policy and a commitment reemphasized in all the LWF Assemblies. However, this is not a binding policy on the LWF member churches, rather a commitment that the member churches are encouraged to address at their own pace' (accessed on June 23, 2011, at [www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/DMD/DMD-Documents/EN/DMD-Ordination\\_of\\_Women.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DMD/DMD-Documents/EN/DMD-Ordination_of_Women.pdf)).

of the LWF's overall program of female empowerment, efforts to alleviate the inequitable suffering of women and to confront the violence committed against women around the world.<sup>59</sup> One must applaud those efforts. They take seriously that Christ's redemption of our fallen world includes (and must be seen to include) the redemption of sinful social structures that harm women. To the extent that the ordination of women symbolizes such empowerment, one can regard it as in conformity with Scripture as a whole.

On the other hand, when the LWF urges that the 'fullness of the gospel' is 'most accurately represented' when women are ordained to the ministry,<sup>60</sup> one may ask: What does the 'fullness of the gospel' mean? If the gospel, as Lutherans understand it, is the free justification of the sinner by grace through faith for Christ's sake, then why is the ordination of women necessary to represent *that*? Surely it is not illegitimate to include in the 'fullness of the gospel' reconciliation between man and woman and freedom in Christ.<sup>61</sup> If, however, the 'fullness of the gospel' is understood to include the overcoming of created, sexual difference between man and woman—and there are hints in that direction<sup>62</sup>—then one must ask whether the 'fullness of the gospel' has not become a perversion of the gospel.<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion

As I stated at the beginning, it has not been my intention to take sides, to tell you what path to take, or to bring new exegetical insights. Rather, I have tried to lay out a way of thinking about the interpretation and authority of Scripture that avoids two extremes: biblical inerrancy, on the one hand; and simply allowing 'communal experience' to determine where Holy Scripture speaks to the church as God's Word and where it does not, on the other. Following the Confessions, this way of thinking about Scripture *begins* with the assumption that canonical Scripture is *in its entirety* Word of God for the church. It does not, however, appeal to theories of verbal inspiration and inerrancy to uphold the unity of Scripture. It allows for the possibility of genuinely divergent views and even contradictions within Scripture and for a responsible use of historical-critical method, while leaving articles of faith intact. At the same time, it does not simply leave it to the human community to judge where Scripture does or does not speak as Word of God to the church. Rather, following the Confessions, it finds Scripture united in Christ and in the articles of faith. Following the Confessions, it recognizes a distinction between divine decrees and human traditions within Scripture. It allows the articles of faith to distinguish between primary and secondary matters and to serve as guides in matters where Scripture may not be wholly clear or internally consistent. Following the Confessions, it allows the articles of faith to serve as a framework against which the church may test ideological challenges to

<sup>59</sup> See the documents at [www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/DMD/DMD-WICAS.html](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DMD/DMD-WICAS.html) (accessed June 23, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> Eg, in the document 'Recommendations for Action' issued by the 'Conference of Women Bishops, Presidents and Leaders with the Ministry of Oversight', of 2005, accessed June 23, 2011, at [www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/DMD/DMD-Documents/EN/DMD-Women\\_Bishops-Geneva-2005.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DMD/DMD-Documents/EN/DMD-Women_Bishops-Geneva-2005.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> Eg, in 'The ongoing Reformation of the Church: the witness of ordained women today', of 2008, accessed June 23, 2011, at [www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/DTS/DTS-Documents/EN/DTS-Ongoing\\_Reformation-2008.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/DTS-Documents/EN/DTS-Ongoing_Reformation-2008.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> See, eg, the document, 'Concept of gender: a just analytical tool?', pages 1–3, on gender as a social construct; and page 5, where it is said that Galatians 3:28 means that there is 'no difference' (!) between men and women for Christians (accessed on June 23, 2011, at [www.lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/DMD/DMD-Documents/EN/DMD-Concept\\_of\\_Gender.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DMD/DMD-Documents/EN/DMD-Concept_of_Gender.pdf)).

<sup>63</sup> The basic problem might be put thus: How does the church instantiate a biblical pattern in which Christ qualifies but does not abolish the created order? If the church does not ordain women, some will object that the church overlooks the New Testament sense of mutuality between man and woman. If the church does ordain women, some will fear that that will lead to abolition of sexual difference. Whichever path the church chooses, it must make clear which false understandings of Scripture it rejects as well as which correct understandings it affirms.

particular biblical texts and with which it can defend, in a coherent way, its own interpretation and application of Scripture.<sup>64</sup>

I come to our questions with different hermeneutical presuppositions from the LCA. For that reason my proposals may be of limited or even of no value to you. So, once again, I simply ask you to take my thoughts for what they are—good or bad—within the hermeneutical framework in which they are given. Moreover, I have addressed our questions from the perspective of the situation in American Lutheranism. American Lutheranism, like American Christianity in general (and American culture), is polarized, and that polarization seems to be only intensifying. Whether this quite matches the situation in Australian Christianity, as an outsider I am not competent to say; but the American situation does perhaps leave you wondering what you are to make of the future of American Lutheranism.<sup>65</sup> In these difficult and changing times, I ask myself whether there is a way forward, a way out of the ‘no-man’s land’.<sup>66</sup> I hope that there is. I offer my thoughts in the hope that they might contribute to the well-being of world Lutheranism as a Confessional movement within the church catholic and as a Church established securely on the Word of God.

### **Appendix 1. Verbal inspiration and inerrancy**

During public conversation of this paper in Tanunda, and subsequently in private conversation, some questions were raised about my understanding of ‘verbal inspiration’ and ‘inerrancy’. Moreover, the question was asked whether my representations of other positions on these topics, particularly in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), were fair. Here I would like to clarify some statements made in the paper, as well as my position in general.

First, I reiterate a point made in paragraph 3 and in the last paragraph, namely, that I wrote this paper from the perspective of American Lutheranism, and, except where explicit reference is made to persons or documents of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA), nothing in the paper should be understood as a comment on or assessment of the positions of the LCA.

On the matter of verbal inspiration: My disavowal of ‘verbal inspiration’ in paragraph 2 needs to be understood in light of what I have written previously on the matter. That is to say, I have previously disavowed a theory of the divine inspiration of Scripture that treats its human authors as ‘scribes of the Holy Spirit’ who wrote every word of Scripture as ‘the direct utterance of the Holy Spirit’ in a kind of dictation, as in Lutheran Orthodoxy (Hultgren: 76,88). At the same time, I

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<sup>64</sup> Of course, the objection can be and has been made that canon, creeds, and confessions are themselves ideological constructs. For example, in *Churches say ‘no’*, it is said that ‘the patriarchal formation of the canon’ (39) is implicated in violence against women. Such objections must be taken seriously and answered. But the Lutheran Church can hardly dispense with canon, creeds, and confessions when it is publically, confessionally, and constitutionally committed to them. Nor is it unreasonable to expect of such a church that it give some account of what exactly commitment to a single canon of Scripture (and to the creeds and confessions as summaries of said Scripture) means, and to demonstrate that commitment in its practical life and decision-making. To do so is ultimately an expression of the church’s trust that in the canon of Holy Scripture, from beginning to end, the church truly has the Word of God, everything that the church needs for true teaching in faith and morals, and that in its Scriptures the church has resources for meeting every challenge that confronts it. So, for example, I have tried to argue that Scripture, when read as a canonical unity and with reference to the articles of faith, has the needed resources for addressing violence against women, without the need for the deconstruction of the canon itself.

<sup>65</sup> Cf Zwick, 37: ‘It is sometimes said that theologically, and in other ways too, the LCA sits somewhere between The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is hard to know where we “down under” Lutherans sit because, unfortunately, the ground between our two big sisters seems to be widening and in danger of becoming a no-man’s land or even a deep gulf.’

<sup>66</sup> See the previous note.

have insisted that the Church must approach ‘each and every text’ in Scripture as the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit speaks (Hultgren: *passim*, esp. 88,89,97). When I challenge ‘verbal inspiration’ in the present paper or question attempts to harmonize biblical texts that appear to contradict each other on the grounds of verbal inspiration, I mean verbal inspiration in the sense of a particular theory of divine authorship intended to guarantee the unity of Scripture.<sup>67</sup>

The Theses of Agreement of the Lutheran Church of Australia uphold the ‘verbal and plenary inspiration’ of Scripture while rejecting various theories of inspiration (TA VIII.8). The LCMS’s ‘A brief statement of the doctrinal position of the Missouri Synod’ (1932) speaks of the ‘verbal inspiration’ of Scripture, and ‘A statement of scriptural and confessional principles’ (1973) speaks of God as ‘the true author of every word of Scripture’. Neither LCMS statement commends a particular theory of inspiration; at the same time, neither statement explains exactly what the affirmation that every word of Scripture is divinely inspired means. It is not fair to attribute to the LCMS a particular theory of inspiration.<sup>68</sup> But given the historical baggage associated with the term ‘verbal inspiration’, especially in the American situation, the move from affirming the inspiration of (all of) Scripture to affirming the *verbal* inspiration of Scripture, without explaining what the word ‘verbal’ means, has the potential to mislead.<sup>69</sup> Precision in doctrinal statements is desirable. One may also wonder whether tendencies to harmonization *imply* a certain theory of inspiration.<sup>70</sup>

On the inerrancy of Scripture: When I disavow the ‘inerrancy’ of Scripture in paragraph 2, my disavowal is once again to be understood in light of the American situation. The LCMS statement of 1973 recognizes ‘that there are apparent contradictions or discrepancies and problems which arise because of uncertainty over the original text’. It rejects the notion that ‘the Scriptures contain...factual contradictions and errors’. In other words, it limits ‘apparent contradictions’ or ‘discrepancies’ to the text-critical level. What, then, does one do with Matthew 27:9, where, according to the best textual witnesses, Matthew attributes to Jeremiah a verse from Zechariah? There can hardly be uncertainty over the original text. Matthew 27:9 is a *locus classicus* in the history of the discussion of the inerrancy of Scripture, and even Luther spoke of a ‘light error’ (*levis error*) (Sasse: 258,59, 314–17, 347). The LCMS statement also rejects the notion that ‘the Biblical authors accommodated themselves to using and repeating as true the erroneous notions of their day’. One may ask: Did not the author of Joshua accommodate

<sup>67</sup> As already stated, I think that it is appropriate to ‘listen to each and every text for what the Holy Spirit intends to teach through it, in harmony with the canon as a whole’. In particular, the rule of faith and the articles of faith that arise from the canon serve as primary guidelines for treating Scripture in a unified and harmonious way. So long as we do not try to explain inspiration rationally, but regard the divine inspiration of Scripture (as a whole and in its parts) as an article of faith in terms of the third article of the Nicene Creed, the language of verbal inspiration is unobjectionable. On this point, see especially Sasse, 212–32, 245–54, 278–89.

<sup>68</sup> The LCMS’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) in 1975 issued a document, ‘The Inspiration of Scripture’, which takes up this question in detail (accessed at [www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=681](http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=681) on January 17, 2012). The document explicitly rejects a dictation theory and other mechanical theories.

<sup>69</sup> The term ‘verbal inspiration’ has tended to be equated with or easily conflated with theories of inspiration (including dictation theories) in fundamentalism, as well as in some strands of Lutheran Orthodoxy. See Barton, 719–22.

<sup>70</sup> Note that the LCA’s ‘A consensus statement on Holy Scripture’ (1987) states, on the one hand, that ‘[a]ttempts to harmonise Scripture should not be rejected as necessarily showing an incorrect understanding of the nature of the Scriptures’ (B.5a); on the other hand, ‘[n]either should those be censured who contend that much of such harmonisation is unnecessary, and not demanded by the fact of the inspiration of Scripture’ (B.5b). In this connection I add a comment on my reference to Henry Hamann in n 27. Whether his treatment of Priscilla’s teaching is a matter of harmonization or not, he does not himself say in the article cited. See further Henry P Hamann, *The Bible between fundamentalism and philosophy*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1980, pages 28, 69, where he criticizes fundamentalism for an excess of harmonization but does not rule out harmonization altogether.

himself to a pre-Copernican worldview when he recorded that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and it did so (Josh 10:12,13)? The Synod's 1932 (doctrinal) 'Brief Statement' declares Scripture to be 'infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters', a statement that hearkens back to certain formulations of Lutheran Orthodoxy. The 1975 CTCR report on inspiration states more modestly: 'The Holy Scriptures do not purport to be a textbook of universal history offering an exhaustive account of the history of all nations and peoples from the beginning of time up to the various periods when the Biblical books were written' (II.B, Inspiration and historical records in the Bible).<sup>71</sup> Does the latter view of Scripture have any bearing on the Synod's doctrinal position?

It is not fair to equate the position of the LCMS with Lutheran Orthodoxy in an undifferentiated way, as discussed above in connection with inspiration. It is all too easy to slide from identifying the LCMS position on inerrancy with that of Lutheran Orthodoxy (as in paragraph 4 of the paper)—not, I think, inaccurate in itself—to linking that position to other views of Lutheran Orthodoxy (such as on inspiration), which are not representative of the LCMS. The question may be asked, however, whether LCMS doctrinal statements regarding inspiration and inerrancy do not invite some confusion. Lutheran Orthodoxy sometimes linked the inerrancy of Scripture *in all matters* (including history and geography) to the divine inspiration of Scripture by way of theories of inspiration (references in Hultgren: 76).<sup>72</sup> One may legitimately ask in any given case whether a *blanket* doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture in all matters derives from or at least implies an (even unconsciously held) theory of divine inspiration. We must all strive for precision of expression.

I do not deny that it is unhelpful for preachers and teachers of the Church, when speaking in an official capacity, to allege contradictions or errors in Scripture. Such talk does not edify, but it does cause offense (cf Sasse: 292). On the other hand, intellectual honesty requires that theologians acknowledge that Scripture, insofar as it was written by humans, is not a perfect book, but bears the marks of human limitations. Hermann Sasse made this point with particular clarity, in conjunction with the analogy between the divine and human character of Scripture and the two natures of Christ, the incarnate Word of God (Sasse: 222–25, 230–39, 288,89). In other words, one can agree that Scripture is God's 'perfect revelation',<sup>73</sup> completely reliable and sufficient for sound teaching in doctrine and morals, without requiring that the Bible be a 'perfect book'.<sup>74</sup> The inerrancy of Scripture cannot mean the absence of everything that must appear to human reason to be contradiction, imprecision, or error (Sasse: 259). In theological debate biblical scholars, theologians and pastors should be free to ponder and discuss what to human reason appear to be contradictions and errors, deficiencies and problems in Scripture.<sup>75</sup> As

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<sup>71</sup> See n 68.

<sup>72</sup> The same can be said of fundamentalism (Barr: 287).

<sup>73</sup> Theses of Agreement VIII.10.

<sup>74</sup> Cf the LCA's 'A consensus statement on Holy Scripture', where it is said: 'It should not be asserted that to accept the inerrancy of Scripture necessarily means to force upon Scripture preconceived notions of a perfect book. It should not be asserted that the acceptance of inerrancy involves first having to remove every problem in Scripture or that inerrancy needs to be proved to human reason'.

<sup>75</sup> The Theses of Agreement of the LCA speak of the holy writers having 'retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology, literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history) as apart from direct revelation and prophecy' (TA VIII.10). Consequently, there is 'that which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scripture'. The 1972 statement on 'The Theses of Agreement and inerrancy' calls such phenomena 'apparent errors'—a term not used in the Theses of Agreement themselves. The same 1972 statement urges that one should not 'speak of "errors" in the Holy Scriptures'. But the 'Consensus statement on Holy Scripture' (1984), with somewhat more latitude, urges that '[r]eference should not be made to contradictions, deficiencies, or mistakes in the Scriptures without the use of qualifying additions like "apparent"'.

preachers and teachers in the Church, however, speaking in an official capacity, we ought to listen for the truth that God speaks through each text, integrate that truth into the truth of biblical revelation as a whole, and communicate that truth to the people in our charge, rather than speak of errors, deficiencies, or contradictions in the biblical text.<sup>76</sup> Since the Lutheran Church stands on the Word of God as its highest authority, it requires a method for interpreting Scripture in a unified way. It also requires criteria for determining where differences in biblical interpretation can be tolerated, and where such differences begin to undermine the Church's doctrinal integrity.

## Appendix 2. Primary and secondary matters

Another point of discussion in Tanunda was whether the Confessions can be used—in my words—‘to distinguish between primary and secondary matters’ in Scripture (see paragraphs 7, 11, 12, and 35). If I were to rewrite my paper, I would not use the terms ‘primary matters’ and ‘secondary matters’. What I intended to say—as I think the paper makes clear—is that the Confessions, in their treatment of Scripture, distinguish between biblical statements and commands that are binding in terms of doctrine and morals and statements and commands that are not binding. But that is not quite the same as ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’.

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<sup>76</sup> For example, it is not helpful to claim that, of the four accounts of the words of institution in the New Testament, one is right and the others are wrong, or to reconstruct a hypothetical original that we declare to be correct, while declaring the four canonical accounts to be in error. Here is an instance where, for liturgical purposes, the Church has had to make choices. But the church should listen to each account on its own terms to discern the truth that God speaks through it. Sasse (238,239,285–89) makes an important point: The ‘errors’ and ‘contradictions’ in Scripture that arise from the limitations and pre-modern worldviews of its authors and from multiple retellings of the same event give insights into truth that would not be otherwise possible.

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