

The Authority of Scripture from Canon to Confession: An Evangelical Catholic Approach

Every Sunday morning we confess. I do not mean the confession of our sins, for which we receive God's absolution, spoken from the mouth of God's designated instrument, a minister of His¹ Church. Rather, I mean we confess as would a criminal in a court of law that we are guilty—guilty of believing what Christians have always believed. We confess before God, before each other, and before the whole world. We convict ourselves by the words of our own mouth, confessing that we are guilty of aiding and abetting the message of the cross that "is foolishness to those who are perishing," (1 Cor 1:18) a foolishness that many ages and cultures have determined is reasonably punishable by persecution and even death. Let us stand together now and so confess our faith as countless generations of Christians have from the second century of the Church, in the words of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit

¹ Throughout my essay I employ the practice of capitalizing masculine pronouns referring to the Deity. Although this has not been common practice in church scholarship in recent decades, following the lead of Lutheran theologian Marva Dawn, I believe there are several reasons this practice should be reinstated. Recognizing the limitations of all human speech to adequately convey the Divine Reality and the serious objections raised by liberation theologians of various stripes to the practice of capitalizing God-language (particularly male pronouns), I also recognize that no adequate substitute for the traditional language of "He" and "His" has yet gained broad acceptance or come into common usage. It must also be acknowledged that from a pastoral perspective the traditional language is deeply connected with the piety of many people. In the face of these competing claims upon our use of God-language, I believe that capitalizing language referring to God not only treats seriously the pastoral needs of much of the church's membership (for whom the sexual politics of prayer language has been largely a non-issue), it also distinguishes common usage masculine pronouns (which refer to sexually male objects) from their Divine counterparts that refer to a God without sexual attributes. Although not ideal, this distinction may help meet the pastoral needs of those who find the traditional masculine language of God offensive, alienating, or inadequate.

and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen

By these words we confess our utter and willful complicity in the offense of the gospel, the faith of the whole Christian church throughout time and space. Though we may and indeed must eschew many of the sinful actions of Christians throughout time and around the world, we do so precisely because they were out of step with the faith they professed, the faith we now profess in accord with them and give thanks to them for passing on faithfully to us, whatever their personal sins or failings.

However, as our recitation of the Apostles' Creed a moment ago indicated, for more and more people, such a confession of faith is problematic not only for people outside the Church—as indeed one would expect—but to people inside Her as well. Is Jesus Christ “*His* only Son, our Lord,” or “*God’s* only Son our Lord?” Did He, following His crucifixion, descend “into hell” or “to the dead?” The variations being mumbled by people under their breath or even spoken in more strident, defiant tones would have been even more cacophonous had we spoken together the Nicene Creed, the Creed whose explicit purpose was to

articulate the Apostolic faith, the faith of the Church, over and against the various heresies in competition with it.

My purpose here is not to open up a discussion about the validity of inclusive language concerns or the legitimacy of feminist philology; that is a matter for another forum. Rather, it is to point out that within the Church today there are a wide variety of actual faith commitments among people who consider themselves equally “faithful” to the Lutheran and broader Christian tradition. Our situation is the converse of the Babel story: We share a language, but mean by the same words very different things.

The situation borders on chaos. Contrary to the “growing ecumenical consensus” claimed by our new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal as justification for some of the textual changes from the green *Lutheran Book of Worship*, there is in the pews of historically mainline Protestant denominations (including the ELCA) a growing lack of consensus about what faithful discipleship looks like. Our Presiding Bishop’s assessment of the situation was much closer to the truth when, following the lead of theologian Marcus Borg, he called these differing approaches to Christian discipleship “irreconcilable” in a 2005 ELCA press release. Whether they are equally “valid” as the Bishop also claimed is the question before the Church today, a question that the actions of the August 2009 Churchwide Assembly have made more pressing in that corner of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Actually, in the aforementioned remarks, our Presiding Bishop was referring to differing approaches to the interpretation of Scripture that exist within the modern Church, or *hermeneutics*. This brings us to the topic at hand, for the differing faith commitments within our pews spring from, reinforce, and give birth to different approaches to Scriptural interpretation. In what was within living memory a standard textbook on most ELCA seminary campuses, Dr. Carl Braaten summarizes the modern predicament:

“The authority of the Bible was the basic presupposition which the Reformation held in common with the Middle Ages and with its Roman Catholic contemporaries. But already in the sixteenth century impulses of humanist criticism were beginning to be felt. These impulses increased until there was a flood tide of critical thought in the Enlightenment that applied the categories of "nature" and "reason" to wash away the foundations of biblical authority. The English deists, the French encyclopedists, and the German thinkers of the Enlightenment released such an avalanche of critical methods and insights that not only the orthodox theory of verbal inspiration was swept away, but the unique status of Scripture in theology and the church was also severely threatened. The result is that in modern theology *the authority of the Bible no longer functions as an unquestioned presupposition*, as it did in the theology of the reformers, *but is treated precisely as that which has to be established.*" The question of biblical authority stands or falls with the approach one takes; it has become a matter of interpretation. In the contemporary idiom it is an "hermeneutical" question.” (emphasis mine)²

What do you believe the Bible is? Are the precise words, phrases, syntax of it what God intended humanity to have as His definitive revelation? Are those words a cradle that carries to us the general shape of God’s love, but its specifics are bound to another culture and time? Is the Bible “God-breathed” and uniquely so among the religious texts of the world? Is it the way God speaks to us who call ourselves Christians, but God is speaking equally to other religions through

² Carl Braaten, ed. (1984) *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1. Augsburg Fortress Publishers

their sacred texts? Is the Bible God's definitive and timeless word, eternally relevant until the coming again of Christ in glory? Is it—as has been said by some who wear the pastor's stole in our denomination—"a book full of poetry and stories written by dead, male heterosexuals," "an old book full of things that a lot of modern Christians disagree with," a book so irrelevant to modern life that "it will need to be rewritten in the next thirty years?"³

"In modern theology the authority of the Bible no longer functions as an unquestioned presupposition," Dr. Braaten tells us, "but is treated precisely as that which has to be established." It is my purpose today to demonstrate that authority as one *necessarily* constitutive (rather than to be established) for all Christians who propose to honestly think of themselves as part of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, especially the sons and daughters of the Lutheran Reformation. I will trace—in necessarily brief overview—the continuity of the New Testament's own treatment of Scriptural authority, the development of this doctrine during the period of the great Ecumenical Councils, and the approach of the Lutheran reformers as a return to a faithful, apostolic treatment of Scriptural authority from the speculative rabbit trails of the Church of the High Middle Ages.

The New Testament Approach

We begin with a look at the New Testament and its treatment of the authority of Scripture. It must be noted from the outset that the New Testament

³ These quotes were taken from a former ELCA bishop, the floor of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, and an ELCA pastor from New Mexico, respectively. Because two of them were in the context of private conversations, I have chosen to leave their attribution anonymous.

understands Christ—and by extension, its witness to Christ—as completing God’s work testified to by the Scriptures Christians know as the Old Testament. This is true of every New Testament author, for whom those canonical texts we know as the Old Testament are quite simply “the Holy Scriptures”—the only Scriptures of which they were aware.

Throughout the New Testament, the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures is everywhere assumed, though each author cites this authority with different formulae. Matthew’s Gospel, with its emphasis on the continuity between Christ and the Law, has the narrator editorialize, “this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet _____,” whereas Mark recalls Jesus saying, “let the scriptures be fulfilled” to proclaim the accomplishment of Old Testament prophecy. Luke too recalls Jesus announcing the fulfillment of God’s prophetic work in the Hebrew Scriptures, saying on the road to Emmaus, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” John, like Matthew, mostly retains the proclamation of Christ as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy for the voice of the narrator, preferring the formula, _____ happened “so that the scripture might be fulfilled.”

It is not the Gospels alone that view Christ as the completion or the “making full” of God’s covenantal-saving activity in the Old Testament. Paul will quote not only prophecy fulfilled by Jesus, but interpret whole episodes of salvation history as illumining the mystery of Christ (Rom 5:14⁴) or of our relationship to God in

⁴ “Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, *who is a type of the one who was to come.*” (Rom 5:14; NRSV)

light of Christ. (Gal 4:24-26⁵; 1 Cor 9:9-10⁶, etc.) The author of that apostolic sermon we call the Book of Hebrews makes extensive use of Psalms and Jeremiah as Christological proof texts, and the so-called “catholic” epistles of Peter, John, and Jude closely follow the patterns established by those books with a more prominent place in the canon.

Paul and John will also—significantly—reinterpret Old Testament events of salvation history in light of what God has done in Christ, understanding Christ not only as an interpretive guide to the events in question, but as a primary actor in them. (1 Cor 10:1-13⁷; John 8:58⁸) This is important, and a key for us to understanding the ongoing significance of the Old Testament Scriptural witness to the authors of the New Testament. For the authors of the New Testament, Christ is both the subject and the object of the entire revelation of God in Scripture. This Christ is no mere cosmic principle, the embodiment of abstract qualities of God like justice or mercy. He is a real man, a Galilean peasant of identifiable origin and verifiable biography with whom either they or an acquaintance have had direct contact. He is the One whom God raised from the dead, a true person about whom correct *or incorrect* information could be passed

⁵ “Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother.” (Gal 4:24-26; NRSV)

⁶ “For it is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. (1 Cor 9:9-10; NRSV)

⁷ “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. *For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.* ... ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.” (1 Cor 10:1-4, 9; NRSV)

⁸ “Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’” (John 8:58; NRSV)

on. Such biographical information served to reveal the true character of the God He called Father to them, for to see Christ is to see an icon of the Father. (John 14:7⁹) The Jesus they knew, the interpretive guide and measure of Scripture without equal, is not the archetype and avatar of their faith; He is “the pioneer and perfecter” of their faith.

That is why the interpretive key for the entire Scripture of which the New Testament authors are aware is the Christ whom the Church knew and proclaimed. In a manner foreshadowing one of the great *solas*¹⁰ of the Reformation, Christ alone is the measure of Scripture. This hermeneutic forms the backdrop of 2 Timothy 3:16-17; “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Scripture is “useful” because, interpreted by the Christ whom the Church proclaimed, it points to the Christ in whom alone salvation can be found.

This makes intelligible for Protestants such famous New Testament passages as 1 Timothy 3:15, which proclaims the “the church of the living God” to be “the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” The Church alone knew Christ, so the Church alone had the interpretive grid—the hermeneutic—through which to fully understand the Scriptures. Later, as the canon of the New Testament came to be effectively closed, those books whose place within the canon was contested¹¹

⁹ “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:7; NRSV)

¹⁰ The five *solas* of classical reformed Christianity are “*sola Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura, soli Deo Gloria*.” Christian faith is in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, from Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone.

¹¹ The final two books to be accepted into the New Testament canon were Hebrews and the Apocalypse of St. John.

were ultimately judged by this same criteria: Did they accord with the Christ whom the Church already knew and proclaimed?

Sub-Apostolic Development

Of course, as the generation died out who had had direct experience of Jesus both pre- and post-resurrection—or at least acquaintance with somebody who did—things quickly became more complicated. “The mind of fallen man is an idol factory,” Calvin would opine centuries later, and the Christians of the newly evangelized Roman Empire proved no exception. In typically human fashion, they frequently blended the apostolic preaching with the teachings of their native religious traditions, especially the “mystery religions” of the Empire and Hellenistic philosophies. As this situation swiftly progressed, the Christ the Church proclaimed could no longer be used reliably as a rule of faith, and consequently we quickly observe a shift in the manner in which the authority of Scripture is understood and employed.

During the first century, writers like Clement of Rome typically employed as scriptural quotation only citations we would recognize as coming from the Old Testament. However, in the sub-apostolic period, beginning with the Pauline letters, we quickly see fragments of what would come to be recognized as the New Testament employed in a virtually identical manner. The formula “as it is written,” used to cite Scripture in an authoritative manner in a period before the modern system of chapter and verse were instituted, quickly came to be supplemented by the parallel formula “as the Apostle wrote,” indicating that

Paul's writings possessed the same (or similar) authority for the Christian community as the Old Testament Scriptures.

By the mid-second century, the New Testament books that theologian Johann Gerhard referred to as “canonical books of the first rank”—books that have for Lutherans always been central for the work of theology—were well established in the life of the Church and their authority uncontested. The Muratorian Canon (c. 170 A.D.) mentions Luke, John, The Acts of the Apostles, and thirteen of the Pauline Epistles. By the late second century, the Church Fathers Irenaeus of Lyons and Tertullian would quote these Pauline letters and all four of the Gospels we know as canonical in their defense of the orthodox faith against heresies like Marcionism and various forms of Gnosticism.

Because he was facing the Gnostics rather than Marcion (who recognized as incompatible with his religious system most of both the Old and New Testaments and so had the intellectual honesty to dismiss them as Scripture, whatever his other failings), Irenaeus recognized clearly the problem facing the Church during his ministry. It is one that is facing us again: The people who most stridently disagree with one another are all quoting the same Scriptures. In *Against Heresies*, referring to the non-Apostolic preaching of the Valentinians, he writes:

Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad

effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king's form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king.¹²

That it was a fundamental task of the Church to preserve the original image of the king and draw people's attention to it as the true revelation of God was assumed by Irenaeus. That theological knowledge was substantial rather than metaphorical and that salvation itself was at stake in the proper transmission of it was a perspective shared not only by Irenaeus but by his opponents as well.

The Lutheran Return

This was a perspective shared too by the Lutheran Reformers and their Roman Catholic contemporaries, which is what in part made the theological battles of the sixteenth century so acrimonious. To them we now turn our attention.

From the Patristic period, understanding the unaltered image of the king to which Irenaeus referred as the interpretive key to all of Scripture, there were at least four ways in which any given passage of Holy Scripture could be interpreted, so long as the interpretations so produced accorded with the overall image of the king—of Christ. Each passage of Scripture could be interpreted literally, tropologically (morally), allegorically, and anagogically (spiritually—relating directly to our salvation).

¹² Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., & Coxe, A. C. (1997). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (326). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

During the Patristic period, two of these approaches were more typical of particular schools of theological thought. The school of Antioch went in for a more literal approach to Biblical exegesis, while the Catechetical School of Alexandria emphasized an allegorical reading of Scripture, typified by the interpretive work of Origen. Though by the time of the Lutheran Reformation these two centers of learning had long since ceased to be geographic epicenters of theology, the interpretive approaches they typified continued in the life of the Church.

In the Scholasticism of the High Middle Ages, which formed the intellectual backdrop against which Luther would do his work, the allegorical method of Scriptural interpretation whose roots were in Alexandria was waxing strong. Though allegory can as a genre be both creative and edifying, the inherent imprecision of primarily allusive communication can lead one step by unsuspecting step into error: Rather than the wholesale rearranging of the mosaic practiced by heretics like Valentinus and the other Gnostics, the gems could be misplaced unintentionally one piece at a time until the picture no longer resembles the king it is intended to iconize.

This, it was contended by Luther and the other reformers, was precisely the situation into which the Church of the High Middle Ages had devolved. To reassemble the picture of the true king from the fox portrayed by Scholastic theology, Luther and the reformers set out the principle of *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone—as the normative guide for Biblical interpretation and by extension, Christian theology.

Of course, Luther and company faced a situation similar to that of Irenaeus more than a thousand years before: their Roman Catholic opponents were quoting *the same Scriptures that they were* to support different and sometimes opposite theological conclusions. With no living Apostles or their contemporaries to call upon to settle the dispute, what could serve as an interpretive guide for Scripture, for separating error from truth?

It should be no surprise to us that in this regard the Lutheran reformers reclaimed another source of Patristic insight, for their express purpose was not to break with the past, but rather to re-form the Church and Her practice to make it accord with Apostolic proclamation (hence, the extensive quotation of Patristic sources in the Confessions). The insight they reclaimed was the principle “Scripture interprets Scripture.” That is to say, Scripture itself sets its own agenda for its interpretation and determines the boundaries of any interpretive grids that may be applied to it. It is therefore improper to ask of the Scriptures questions they do not ask themselves or force the Scriptures to speak where they are silent.

But if Scripture interprets Scripture, which texts are central, serving as the key which unlocks the meaning of the others? What, to use Kasemann’s words, is “the canon within the canon?” The reformers gave two answers to this.

Noting that in the history of the canonization of the New Testament some books (like Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and Revelation) were accepted late, they interpreted that fact Christologically. In other words, they saw some books of the New Testament as closer to the center of the Scriptural witness because they

testified to the grace of God given in Christ more clearly. That is to say, for Luther and company the gospel content of a book determined its place within the canon rather than ecclesial usage, at least to an extent. We might call this the material principle (the gospel content) of Scripture superseding the formal principle (its place within the New Testament canon based on Church usage).

Additionally, over and against the allegorical interpretations that had given birth to what the Reformers viewed as accretions and impediments to the Church's gospel ministry, the Lutheran Reformation insisted on the preeminence of the plain meaning of Scripture. Luther would write:

“The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth, and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and the very simplest, sense, which we call the literal ordinary, natural sense.”¹³

In other words, for the Lutheran Reformers, as for the Patristic school of Antioch, those parts of Scripture whose meaning was plain interpreted those parts of Scripture whose meaning was obscure.

Together, these complimentary approaches to determining how Scripture interpreted Scripture issued forth in the historic Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel, which must always be distinguished, but never separated from *or pitted against one another*. The plain meaning of Scripture determined whether a given pericope was Gospel or Law, whether it addressed the people of God as a word of judgment teaching us our need for salvation or as a word of promise actually delivering it.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser*

The proper distinction of Law from Gospel is central to the project of Lutheran theology, and without it, the whole Lutheran system of theology collapses upon itself. The determination of the Law or Gospel content of a given Scriptural text determined its closeness to the Christological center of the Scriptures, but only in this limited sense: because this world is the world of God's left hand, the world of God's judgment, the world of actions and unavoidable consequences, according to what Lutherans call "the first use of the Law,"¹⁴ the determination of a given passage as Law defined its significance as belonging to this world. The Law is determinative for this world "that is passing away," and so we receive it as a judgment upon our relations to one another that are also ultimately passing away. The Gospel is determinative for the next, which is why in this world we can receive it *only* as a not yet fully realized promise.

This approach to Scriptural authority was used by the Lutheran Reformers to articulate their understanding of Scriptural authority against competing claims. On the one hand, they distinguished themselves from their Roman Catholic interlocutors, who claimed as the authority for their interpretations of Scripture Holy Tradition and the teaching Magisterium of the Church, exemplified in the papal office. On the other hand, they set themselves apart from the "enthusiasts" who claimed the special, unmediated enlightenment of the Holy Spirit as their authority, the ones whom Luther accused of "swallowing the Holy Spirit feathers and all," those who claimed that God was speaking apart from the Scriptures as the normative and authoritative means of grace.

¹⁴ The first use of the Law is its public or civic use: its use in ordering human affairs in the civic realm, even for non-Christians.

Taking as their stepping off point the plain meaning of Scripture and allowing Scripture to interpret itself on that basis allowed the Lutheran Reformers to avoid the twin pitfalls of veering into enthusiasms, hermeneutics foreign to Scripture itself, or an unreflective fundamentalism. It allowed them to freshly articulate the one holy catholic and apostolic Christian faith.

This is not to say there was a reduced role for interpretation in the Church's life. Rather, it is to say that an interpreter in no way stood over the plain meaning of Scripture as its authority, but did his or her work strictly by bringing to expression the Scripture's own witness to itself. A Scriptural interpreter could thus be understood in a way similar to that of the "nature interpreters" that work in our national parks: They explain to hikers the significance that *inheres* in the flora and fauna they encounter: they do not give that meaning to them.

Robust Orthodoxy

Of course, such a middle way has been hard to maintain throughout history. Like the drunk peasant Luther says fallen man is, we keep falling off one side of the horse or the other. Sometimes we fall toward a crass conservatism like that the unsustainable vision of the unfortunately-named Lutheran Orthodoxy, which attempted to replace the material inspiration of Scripture (its gospel content) with inerrant verbal inspiration. Conversely, we can fall into the equally unsustainable antinomianism (literally, "against the Law-ism") that has characterized the last two hundred years of Western theology, where—as Dr. Braaten reminds us—“the categories of ‘nature’ and ‘reason’ [have been used] to wash away the foundations of biblical authority.” Such modern interpretive methods purport to

separate “God’s Word” from God’s words, claiming as the Spirit’s new “means of grace” cultural developments or the social sciences, “enthusiastically” designating Biblical categories and specifics uncongenial to current theories in those fields as trash, deadwood washed up on the shore of God’s good news.

Against these two extremes stands what might be called “small ‘o’” Christian orthodoxy. The very word “orthodoxy” will raise a specter for many, for as the late Avery Dulles noted:

In the past, Christians have held orthodoxy in high esteem, even while sometimes disagreeing about what doctrines are true and sound. But the case is quite different today. The *idea* of orthodoxy has become suspect, and many consider that it is bound up with an authoritarian and fundamentalist mentality unsuited to the modern age.¹⁵

Small ‘o’ orthodoxy in no way resembles this modern caricature. It is in no way fundamentalist, considering the Scriptures “easily understood” as a revelation separate from the Apostolic community that gave birth to them. It is not authoritarian, but rather acknowledges the role of authority in the creation and continuation of all human communities. Recognizing that nature abhors a vacuum, it therefore insists that in the community called the “one, holy catholic and Apostolic Church” the canonical Scriptures are the supreme authority in faith and life so that the Church might not become captive to the spirit of the age, but “be transformed by the renewing of Her mind.”¹⁶ Such an orthodoxy gratefully receives the gifts of various historical critical schools of Biblical interpretation, evaluating them according to “one holy, catholic, and Apostolic” criteria without

¹⁵ “The Orthodox Imperative”; *First Things*; August/September 2006, Number 165

¹⁶ Romans 12:2

necessarily adopting the value systems and interpretive approaches that may have given birth to them.

Regarding the inspiration of Holy Scripture, it attends closely to the words of Scripture, being bound by proper exegesis, for it holds to a view of verbal inspiration that lacks the myopia of fundamentalism and the subjectivism of postmodern liberalism. As Pr. David Jay Webber helpfully sums up, for small 'o' orthodox Christians, "'Verbal inspiration' means inspiration of the words - that is, of the text of Scripture - and not just of the ideas or feelings that may stand behind a fallible human text. Verbal inspiration cannot be sacrificed without sacrificing the very concept of an inspired Scripture. Obviously, it is the words in their context that are inspired, so that what we are really talking about is an inspired text and not inspired words in isolation from each other. But words in their context, forming a text, are still words. And when you are talking about the words that form the texts of Sacred Scripture, you are talking about inspired words - i.e. 'verbal inspiration.'"¹⁷

Small 'o' Christian orthodoxy hence employs modern exegetical tools judiciously, but always in the service of "the faith delivered once for all to the saints," being careful to ensure that the portrait of the King whom the Christian faith proclaims "was, and is, and is to come" remains unaltered. It recognizes that far more than being an agent of cultural or personal transformation, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the stuff of salvation, vouchsafed to the Church for all generations and recorded for us *authoritatively* in the canonical Scriptures.

¹⁷ Quoted from the blog www.cyberstones.com

Most importantly of all, it would its clarity of about Biblical authority and struggle for precise interpretation of them is properly conducted with a generosity of spirit that flows naturally from knowing that it is in no way worthy of the gift it has received in the Holy Scriptures and that if it is correct in its assertions, it is not because it is so holy or so pure, but because God is gracious and good even to the poorest of His servants.

My conclusion is as simple as my paper has been historical: If we are merely aware of or influenced by the Church's historical approach to Scriptural interpretation rather than in some way *bound* by it, we are in no meaningful way holy, catholic, Apostolic, or Lutheran. If we are serious about the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus, serious about the idea that God entered human history and through the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church has continued to participate in it, we must be *bound* by history. It is a commonplace for modern intellectuals to reflect critically on the past. What will future theologians say as they look at our period of Church history? Will we be the ones who explained again to our age "the faith delivered once for all to the saints," or the ones who sold our inheritance for a mess of cultural relevance and social pseudo-science? This is the question we *will* answer in our preaching, teaching, and common life.

It is a high calling and a dread responsibility, but by the grace of God it is ours. Thanks be to God.