

CC3) The Authority of Scripture

We believe and confess that the Bible is God's revealed Word to us, spoken in Law and Gospel. The Bible is the final authority for us in all matters of our faith and life.

A central conviction of the Lutheran Reformation was that the sole and final authority for all Christian teaching is the Bible, summed up in the catch phrase *sola scriptura*. The Epitome of the Formula of Concord states it more fully. "We believe, teach and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone."¹

This principle did not embrace a woodenly literal reading of the Bible, but rather expressed the Reformers' belief that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit...it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12) Through the words of Scripture, God speaks the justifying Word of salvation through faith in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Therefore, no other teaching, insight or knowledge can bear greater weight than the Bible, nor can any teaching that is contrary to it be accepted as Christian truth. As the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord declares, "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments...(are) the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated."²

The Lutheran reformers further maintained that God's Word addresses us in two distinct, but related voices, Law and Gospel. The Law is the accusation of God that exposes our sin, destroys all our pretensions of self-righteousness and drives us in despair to cling to the cross. The Gospel is the astounding declaration that, for Jesus' sake, God forgives us and rescues us from death and condemnation. The Word functions on all people in both these ways and must do so in order for God's work to be done in our life. To hear one voice without the other distorts God's Word.

Some people today claim that the Bible alone cannot serve as the source and norm of our faith, because interpretations of it diverge too widely. They appeal to reason, experience, tradition or other means to insure right interpretation. Others have asserted that new scientific or historical knowledge counterbalances or simply outweighs the Bible's witness in different areas, while still others claim that contradictory ways of reading the Bible are equally valid. Complex interpretations are said to overturn the accepted meaning of certain texts.

In the face of all such efforts, confessional Lutherans insist that the Bible, precisely because it is God's Word to us, interprets itself and needs no other authority to buttress it. Those passages which most clearly proclaim our sinful condition and God's salvation in Jesus Christ help to clarify more obscure ones, and the overall message of God's salvation, culminating in the cross and empty tomb, is the context in which every text must be read and understood. Through the words of the Bible, God addresses us, in Law and Gospel, putting us to death in our sin and raising us to new life in Christ. In that way, the Bible is not subject to any other claim of authority, but is the standard by which all other authorities and truth-claims are judged.

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¹ Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 486.

² *Ibid.*, p. 527.