

Distinctive Doctrines of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

Interpretation Of The Scriptures

Our Lutheran Church acknowledges the Scriptures alone as the one and only infallible source of divine and saving Knowledge. A test by which it becomes manifest, whether a church is in full earnest when declaring the Scriptures the only source of saving truth, will be found in the rules and principles which she lays down for the interpretation of the Scriptures. Of that church alone can it be said in the true and full sense of the term that it builds alone on 'the foundation of the apostles and prophets' and on nothing more, which in its practical explanation and application of the Scriptures allows no room whatever to any kind of human authority. If a church in her written confession does, indeed, lay down the Scriptures as the sole source of doctrine, but in her explanation of the Scripture allows a judgment to man or the wisdom of man as to what the meaning of the words written is or ought to be, then her practice contradicts her profession and she in fact sets up another guide beside the Scripture.

Here is a second point in which our Lutheran Church distinguishes herself from all other religious societies, of whatever name they may be. The Lutheran Church alone lays down and consistently carries into practice such principles of interpretation, by which the written word in deed and in truth remains our only light and guide in matters of religion. All others, in one way or other, admit another judge of doctrine beside, or above, the Scriptures.

The Scriptures Must Interpret Themselves

Scripture must be explained by Scripture, or it is to be left unexplained. This is the fundamental principle of all Lutheran hermeneutics. In the article 'of the Lord's Supper' the Formula of Concord says: '*There is no interpreter of the words of Jesus Christ, so faithful and able as Christ, the Lord, Himself, who best understands His own words, and His own sentiment and meaning, and is most wise and intelligent in explaining them.*' N. M. 2d ed. p. 670. And the preface to the Formula of Concord the confessors begin by saying: '*We believe, teach, and confess, that the only rule and standard, according to which all doctrines and teachers alike ought to be tried and judged, are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments alone, and it is written, Ps. 119:105: 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.'*' p. 551. The Scriptures being the standard by which all are to be judged, they themselves can be judged by no one. The divine Word must have a divine interpreter, and all interpretation based on the authority or wisdom of man must be rejected. The way of salvation is laid before us in the Scriptures in such clear, plain, simple terms that a child of ordinary capacity can easily find it, and though it must be conceded that not all passages are alike clear, yet our church holds that the more difficult are to be explained in no other way, than by the more lucid. Logical deductions from any particular passage are only then to be acknowledged divine truth, * when they are either contained in the words of that same passage or are established elsewhere in the Scriptures. The Bible is the spiritual light which God has placed in this world to enlighten our darkened understanding. Aside from the Bible all is spiritual darkness Hence it necessarily follows that the true hermeneutical rule can be none other than that which is laid down by David, when he says: 'With Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we see light.' Ps. 36: 9. The Scriptures give light, but

they can not receive light. No man, be he ever so learned and ever so wise, can bring light to the Scriptures. They must enlighten themselves.

* For a treatise on this subject see Lutheran Witness Vol I; p. 122.

By this principle of interpretation our church distinguishes herself in the first place from the Romish sect. The Council of Trent says: *'To restrain petulant spirits, it has been decreed, that, in matters of faith and morals which belong to the frame-work of Christian doctrine, no one leaning on his own prudence shall construe the Scriptures according to his own understanding of them, against the sense which the holy mother church has held and yet holds, because it is for the church to judge over the true sense and interpretation of the sacred Scriptures. Neither shall any dare interpret the Holy Scripture against the unanimous consent of the fathers.'* (Session IV, Decree 2, Canon 2.) Upon the whole this canon reads rather innocently, but examining closely we soon find that practically it does away with the Scriptures entirely. It declares that the Scriptures shall be explained agreeably to the consensus of the fathers. Now we Lutherans do by no means despise the writings of the ancients; Our Confessions rather commend their study. They say:

'These remarks (on the public Confessions of the church) are not to be understood as if we wished to reject or banish other useful and sound writings, - such as commentaries on the Holy Scriptures, refutations of errors, or explanations of important articles. For these writings, in so far as they are conformed to the above mentioned compend or outline of sound doctrine, can be retained and read with advantage, as useful explanations and statements.' N. M. 2d ed. p. 595.

But while the Lutheran Church has always commended the study of the fathers, she at the same time emphatically repels as false and pernicious the principle, that the Scriptures must be explained agreeably to the writings of the fathers, because thereby those writings would be placed above the Scriptures. The standard by which a book is to be judged and explained is greater than that book itself. If the principle be acknowledged that the Constitution of the United States must be understood and explained in agreement with the comments of Lawyer Black, then are Black's comments made a higher authority than the Constitution itself. In the Preface to the Epitome our Confessions say:

'Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their reputation may be, shall not be held to be of equal authority with the Holy Scripture, but to be subordinate to it, and shall not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses respecting the manner in which such doctrine of the Prophets and Apostles was held in certain places, after the age of the Apostles. p. 551.

The writing of the most famous theologians of all ages are to be judged *by the Scriptures, and not the Scriptures by them.*

Further the canon quoted demands, that whosoever undertakes to explain the Scriptures must explain them in agreement with the teaching of 'the holy mother church'. This 'holy mother church' is composed of the prelates and the priesthood with the pope at their head. The laymen do here not come into consideration, because they are prohibited even from reading the Bible. The pope, as the *pretended* head of the church, is counted the supreme interpreter of the Holy Scriptures. As the pope explains them so everyone must receive them under penalty of eternal damnation. The Romish doctrine is that the Scriptures are dark and must have an infallible interpreter. This infallible interpreter is the pope, who is the vicar of Christ on earth and has the Holy Ghost in the shrine of his heart, so that he cannot err in expounding the Scriptures. By this blasphemous arrogance the

pope manifests himself as *'that man of sin, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped.'* 2 Thess 2: 2,4 (KJV). In vain do the Jesuits appeal to 2 Peter 1: 20, where the apostle says: 'No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.' They argue, that Peter would allow no one to explain the Scriptures after his own private understanding of them, and consequently Peter demanded that they must be explained by the public teaching of the church. But this argument is false because Peter does here not contrast 'private' with 'public,' but 'private' I with 'divine;' for he continues: 'For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.' The Scriptures did not proceed from man's own will and hence are not subject to man's own interpretation, but the Holy Ghost, the author of the Scriptures, must also be their supreme and authentic interpreter. A *private* interpretation is that which is taken from man's wisdom and intellect, and a *divine* interpretation is that which the Holy Ghost's own words give. Explaining Scripture by Scripture is the divine interpretation. Hence it is a private interpretation, as the term is here used, *when the pope explains the Bible after his own liking, although this be done in ever so public a manner.*

If we are not willing to have that 'man of sin' on the Tiber to interpret the Scriptures for us, we must also not allow our own reason to explain them after its own dictates or principle. That according to Lutheran theology man's reason is in no way to be granted a voice in the interpretation of the Scriptures, is clearly expressed at many places in the Confessions. In the words of the Lord's testament they say: *'We are under obligation not to interpret these words of this eternal, true and almighty Son of God, our Lord, our Creator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, as figurative, tropical, or strange expressions, and explain them so that they may appear Conformable to our reason; but rather to receive these words as they read, in their proper and clear sense, with simple faith and due obedient and we should not permit ourselves to be turned aside from them by any objections or human contradictions, derived from the reason of man, however agreeable they may appear to our reason'* p. 669

The text itself, the connection, the wording, the grammar must decide or determine the meaning, and we must never allow our reason to argue: This cannot be so, therefore the words must be understood different from what they say. So the Calvinistic theologians argued with regard to the Lord's Supper and other articles of doctrine: A true human body could not be present at many different places at the same time, neither could it be received with the mouth; therefore the words of institution must be understood figuratively. In unmistakable language does John Calvin write: 'The bread is called the body in a sacramental sense. Whence it follows, that the words of Christ are not subject to any common rule, and ought not to be examined on the principles of grammar.' (See Institutes Book IV, Chap. XVII, § 20.)

Because the Swiss theologians, in the controversy on the Lord's Supper, allowed their reason to meddle with the interpretation of the words of institution, therefore we can now so frequently hear Calvinistic sectarians say: Common sense would teach you better, than to understand the Scripture in that way. If reason is allowed to interpret the Scripture according to its own principles even in one article of doctrine only, then it has its entering wedge, and it will finally lead to the grossest rationalism or even outright infidelity. And when, to justify sectarianism, it is argued, that of two perfectly honest men the one would understand the same Scripture passage in one, the other in another way, we reply: We are

not to go by our understanding, neither are we to construe the Scripture as we think it right, but we must abide in that meaning which the words in their own natural and grammatical construction exhibit, as the Lord says: 'If ye continue in My word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.' John 8: 31, 32, Finally the true Lutheran Church can never consent to fanatics and enthusiasts, who would explain the Scriptures according to immediate revelations which they pretend to have received, or an inner light which they claim to possess. Virtually all such fanatics stand on the same ground with the pope, when he claims the right to interpret the Scriptures, because he has the Holy Ghost in the shrine of his heart. But St. John warns us writing: 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. 1 John 4:1.

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