

LECTURES ON THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH THE TRUE VISIBLE CHURCH OF GOD ON EARTH by Dr. F. Pieper.⁴²

SIXTH LECTURE: NO HUMAN INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE IS TO BE ACCEPTED UNLESS IT AGREES WITH SCRIPTURE.



How are we to understand this? Didn't God give a special gift of explaining Scripture to particular people in the church and therefore does He not also desire that Christians make use this of gift which has been bestowed upon individuals in order to understand Scripture? Certainly! And yet He at the same time wants us to continue to stand firm on this truth that Scripture does not in the least depend upon man's interpretation.

What kind of people are these selfsame expositors of Scripture? When human

⁴⁰ Luke 9:23.

⁴¹ This is a literal translation of this verse. It is similar to our Hymn 398 v4 (ALHB). Another translation of it reads:

*“Jesus, all Thy children cherish
And keep them that they never perish
Whom Thou hast purchased with Thy blood.
Let new life to us be given
That we may look to Thee in heaven
Whenever fearful is our mood.
Thy spirit on us pour
That we may love Thee more--
Hearts o'erflowing;
And then will we
Be true to Thee
In death and life eternally. Amen.”*

⁴² **Dr. F. Pieper** (1852- 1931) delivered these lectures to the entire student body of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in the so-called “Lutherstunden” or **Luther Hours**. He followed a tradition started by Dr. Walther. On September 4, 1885 **Dr. Walther** stated: “We call these Friday evening lectures, which form, as it were, the conclusion of the week’s instruction, ‘Luther Hours,’ chiefly because in these lectures I let our beloved father Luther, the God-appointed Reformer and the common teacher of our church, speak to you.” (Walther, “Law and Gospel,” p. 344). In these lectures Dr. Pieper deals with significant points found in Walther’s outstanding book, “The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth,” and further explains them to his audience. This particular series

expositors truly expound Scripture, they are never to bring their *own* interpretations, but always only the exposition of *the Scriptures*. True expositors always show that the exposition which has been made by them is not their own, but is that from *the Holy Scripture itself*. For example, when we therefore speak of Luther's or Chemnitz's or Gerhard's exposition of Scripture, then we do so in the sense that Luther, Chemnitz and Gerhard have shown us *from the Scripture itself* how a text of Holy Scripture is to be understood.

You must absolutely adhere to that. If you do not adhere to that, then instead of the faith of Christians standing on God's Word, it will nevertheless again stand on men's word and men's cleverness. If we would depend on a human interpretation of Scripture, we would be bound to the interpretation of certain people for the sake of their learnedness or their Office, then our faith would not rest only on God's Word, but on men's authority. Therefore we must absolutely adhere to this: No person, no number of people, as highly regarded or learned they might also be, no synod, no entire church body can lay down a decree how a text of Holy Scripture is to be understood. But everyone has to prove to each other, when they interpret Scripture that the interpretation which they offer, is not *their* interpretation, but the exposition of Holy Scripture *itself*.

Therefore, **“the Evangelical Lutheran Church recognises no human interpreter of Holy Scripture whose ex officio⁴³ interpretation must be regarded as infallible and binding;**

- a. not any individual person;**
- b. not any special estate;**
- c. not any special or universal church council;**
- d. not the whole church.”** (Walther TVC., p.61).

Because the Lutheran Church confesses this, *therefore it is an orthodox church*. The papal church says against this that the Scriptures must only be understood according to the interpretation of the church or the pope. Therefore the papal church is a false church. She places human authority between God's Word and the faith of the Christian. In regard to the question, “What must I do to be *saved*?” the papal church introduces human merit between the sinner and the grace of God. So in regard to the question, “What is *truth*?” it also inserts men's word and authority between God's Word and the faith of the Christian. And the modern theologians are essentially walking in the paths of the papacy in this point, when and in so far as they assert that the articles of faith are not to be obtained directly from Scripture itself, but from the so-called faith consciousness [of the person]. In this way also everything finally comes to stand on the human interpretation of Scripture. Let us continue in the way of the Church of the Reformation.

Scripture itself says in 2 Pet. 1:20 (**“Knowing this first that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation”**) that no-one may explain Scripture with his own interpretations. In his Commentary on this passage **Luther** writes: "Here (2 Peter 1:20, 21) Peter attacks the false teachers. He says: Because you know that we have God's Word, continue in it, and do not let yourselves be deceived by other false teachers, though they may come and pretend to have the Holy Spirit. **'Know this first** (for the other he will say later), **that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.**' Be guided by that and do not think that you will interpret Scripture by your own reason and sagacity. These words crush and quash the fathers' own interpretations of Scripture and forbid (us) to build upon such expositions. If Jerome or Augustine or any other of the fathers offers his own interpretation, we do not accept it. Peter has forbidden you to interpret (Scripture) of yourself; the Holy Spirit must interpret, or it shall remain uninterpreted. If, then, any of the holy fathers can prove that his interpretation is noted in Scripture, which verifies that it should so be interpreted, it is all right; if not, I should not believe him. Thus Peter attacks even the boldest and best teachers; hence we should be sure not to believe anyone even though he presents Scripture, in case he explains and interprets it of himself; for he cannot set forth its true meaning of his own interpretation. Here, then, all teachers and fathers, no matter how many there are have failed in interpreting Scripture. When, for example, they refer the words of Christ, Matt. 16:18: **'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church,'** to the pope, that is a man-made interpretation, spun out of their own mind, and

such authority. He has explained its meaning unmistakably in clear and lucid passages, from which we derive the analogy of faith, according to which the interpretation of the more obscure passages is to be determined." (Harmon. ev., ad Luc. 24:27, fol. 398. Translation from Walther TVC., 62).

The **Council of Trent** has the following canon for the interpretation of Scripture: "In order to check arrogant spirits, the council has decreed that no one relying upon his sagacity, in matters of faith and morals which serve for the edification of the Christian doctrine, should distort Holy Scripture according to his own sense, or dare interpret Holy Scripture contrary to the meaning which the **holy Mother Church** has held and still holds, whose office it is to judge concerning the true meaning and interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures, or even against the unanimous consensus of the church fathers."

Here the papal church **condemns** a false principle of interpretation, namely, interpretation according to one's own opinion (wisdom) and according to one's own meaning but in order to **substitute another equally false principle of interpretation instead**, namely, the interpretation according to the understanding of the so-called church and according to the unanimous consent of the church fathers. There is no unanimous consent of the church fathers; it is **non-existent** and according to this which is non-existent the Scriptures should now be interpreted. Now, what the "holy mother church" refers to, is in the final instance there understood as the papacy *itself*.

Chemnitz⁴⁹ demonstrates in his "Examination of the Council of Trent" how absurd (preposterous) the papistical canons on interpretation are as follows: "The gift of interpretation is not outside the church in the unregenerate, for it is a **light of the Holy Spirit kindled in the hearts of the regenerate**. Of the unregenerate Paul writes 1 Cor. 2:14, 15: '**The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him. . . . But he that is spiritual judgeth all things**.' . . . It is also clear that no one when interpreting Scripture dare rely on his own sagacity⁵⁰, not even in the case of clear passages; for it is expressly stated (2 Peter 1:20) that Scripture is not of any private interpretation....

"We indeed **gratefully and reverently use the works of the church fathers**, who in their commentaries have expounded many passages of Scripture very profitably. We confess likewise that through the **witness** of the ancient church we have been **greatly strengthened** in the true and sound understanding of Scripture. We certainly do not approve it when anyone invents of himself a meaning which is at variance with all of antiquity and for which there are no testimonies of the church.

"Since that is the case, what is it, then, that exposes the canon of the Council of Trent concerning interpretation to criticism? I reply: The canon certainly is phrased in general expressions for the **purpose of deception**. But there are especially **four main points** in it concerning which there is a controversy between them and us, and these are here **veiled in deceitful generalities**, though elsewhere they are explained most lucidly.

"**In the first place**, they say, the gift of interpretation is so bound to the orderly notation of the episcopal office that the interpretations of anyone who is elevated to the episcopate, no matter of what kind they may be, are at once to be received and honoured as legitimate, true, and sound, since they are valid because of a prerogative which the office possesses that is occupied by them. **Thus they say that the pope has all rights in the shrine of his heart, even though he were an ignoramus (idiota) and so forgetful that of himself he knew nothing**. . . . And such is also the opinion of the council, namely, when all bishops are there assembled, as pure and impure animals are gathered together in the ark of Noah, every interpretation put forth by them must be accepted **without any proof**, and that because, as they fabricate, the gift of interpretation is inseparably

⁴⁹ 1522-1586.

connected with the episcopate. But **this is wrong**, for Paul, speaking of the gift of interpretation, states expressly (1 Cor. 12:11): '**But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit dividing to every man severally⁵¹ as He will.**' In addition, the whole history of the Old Testament shows that God often raised up prophets and interpreters of His will elsewhere and from other tribes, while passing by the regular high priests and priests. And what kind of interpreters our bishops are, is known today by the whole world.

"**In the second place**, they give to their gift of interpretation **dictatorial authority** so that it is not necessary to prove their interpretations by firm and convincing reasons and principles of interpretation. But they demand of us that without delay and without any examination, investigation, and criticism we swear by the sense which those force upon us who arrogate to themselves the prerogative of interpretation without the proof of the Spirit. Paul, however, in 1 Thess. 5:19-21, immediately adds to his admonitions: '**Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings,**' the words: '**Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.**' Just so, according to Acts 17:11, the Bereans, when Paul explained to them the Scriptures, first searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so, and when they perceived that his interpretation was Scriptural, they approved and accepted it. So also the eunuch describes interpretation by the words '**should guide me**' (οδηγεῖν [hodeegein]: to lead, to show the way). He asks and Philip answers. In this way the foundation of true interpretation was laid so that the eunuch himself knew and perceived from the instruction of Philip what was the meaning of the passage which he read (Acts 8:30-39). In the same way Paul in 1 Cor.14:29, 30 describes **how pious teachers should search out the true meaning of obscure passages** by mutual exchange. He says: 'Let the prophets speak two or three,' and then adds: '**And let the other judge. If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace.**'

"When **Augustine** in his book on Christian doctrine and elsewhere teaches others, he never uses any dictatorial authority for his interpretation, but shows how the obscure passages must be explained by those that are clear, and how the simple, sound, and **true interpretation must be obtained from the Scriptural mode of expression, the accompanying circumstances, comparison of the passage with others, and from the analogy or similarity of faith.** And since the natural man receives none of the things of the Spirit of God, but they are foolishness unto him, while the spiritual man judges all things (1 Cor. 2:14, 15), therefore the illumination of the Holy Ghost is necessary for finding and judging the true sense of Scripture. But our heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11:13). Therefore also Paul wishes to his congregations the Spirit of illumination (Eph. 1:17-19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 1:8-10)... Hence **in the church there is no dictatorial or papal authority for interpretation, but there are definite criteria according to which interpretation should be conducted and examined; for it is the church that has the right and liberty to judge.** But the papists arrogate to themselves the prerogative of interpretation so that at one blow they rid themselves of the burden of proof and rob the church of its privilege to judge. . .

"**In the third place**, when the papists in the interest of their errors have **distorted a passage of Scripture**, they carefully search the writings of the church fathers to glean a few statements which in some way favour their purpose. Then they demand that such interpretations of the ancients, handed down in some way and on some occasion, **should be absolutely accepted without any discrimination or criticism, no matter whether they agree with the words of Scripture or deviate from them.** The fathers, however, did not wish to bind their readers in such a way to themselves that they were to think that something must be believed just because it was so stated by them, but only that of which they could convince them by passages of the canonical Scriptures or by other acceptable proofs not contradicting the truth; for these are the very words of Augustine in his 112th letter to Paulina. . . . And Jerome writes to Augustine: 'This liberty as to interpretation must he

preserved in the church by all means, namely, that the interpretations of all, whoever they might be, should deliberately be read and be freely examined according to their sources and reasons.'...

"In the fourth place, the papists arrogate to themselves also this prerogative that **even in the clearest passages of Scripture they freely depart from the true meaning of the words** and by their dictatorial authority patch on another so that people must believe not what Scripture says simply, properly, and manifestly, but what they themselves expound by virtue of their supreme power and authority. **By this artifice they undo the most lucid articles**, as those concerning justifying faith, the remaining sin in the regenerate, the imperfection of good works in this life, free will, the intercession of Christ, and others. Christ says: **'Drink ye all of it'** (Matt. 26:27), but they add to it their fictitious interpretation: **'Oh, no, not all, but only the priests.'** . . . The **'forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving'** (1 Tim. 4:1-3), Paul calls **'doctrines of devils.'** But this very clear light is useless, for they declare that these words are to be understood not as they read, but as they are interpreted by them. And the canon has been so worded that also in future they may play this game regarding the interpretation of Scripture with impunity and indeed by virtue of their authority....

"Another such interpretation of the Roman Church is the following: **'Here are two swords'** (Luke 22:38), which means, the Roman pope has the administration of two swords, the **spiritual and the political**... Andradius is surprised that those who themselves do not possess the gift of interpretation could and would judge the (Roman) interpretations. Now, we indeed know that in the church there are degrees of insight and that not all have it; we know also that no one should be wiser than it behooves him to be. But it is well known how much judgment the fathers in their sermons, in which they interpreted Holy Scripture, ascribed to the people. **It is certainly the duty and business of an interpreter to demonstrate the reasons and grounds of his interpretation so clearly and definitely that others can understand and grasp them, even if they themselves do not possess the gift of interpretation.** In this way the eunuch recognised the truth of Philip's interpretation, according to Acts 8:34-38." (Examen Concil. Trid., De interpr. S.S., sess. 4, decret. 2, fol. 57 ff. Translation taken from Walther TVC, 62-66. By Dr. J. T. Mueller).

Chemnitz thus acknowledges three things: **1. That the Scriptures are to be explained [expounded] by the Church.** In what way? Now the people who constitute the Church, the regenerate, who have the Holy Spirit, **only those are able to understand and to expound the Scriptures.** Outside the Church there is no understanding of the Scriptures and thus no exposition of the Scriptures. Naturally that is not the sense which the papists want to connect with their canon; **2. Certainly no-one may interpret Scripture according to his own ideas.** Every Christian indeed has the privilege of expounding Scripture, but no-one may interpret it according to his own ideas, but according to the sense which the Scriptures contain in their very own words; **3. Also we ourselves make use of the works of the church fathers in expounding the Scriptures; we read their Commentaries. We let them show us the sense of Scripture through their Commentaries,** or by them we let ourselves become still more certain of the already established correct sense.

Then Chemnitz exposes the errors of the papists in regard to the following points: 1. That they bind the interpretation of Scripture to the Office of the Episcopate. Since 1870 it has bound the official interpretation of Scripture to the person of the pope, even when other 'Bishops' do not agree; 2. That the interpretation of the Episcopate is not to be proven according to Scripture as to its correctness; 3. That [in support of their errors] they use statements of the church fathers which are contrary to the meaning intended by the fathers; 4. That they do not consider themselves bound to the text and context of Scripture in their interpretation of Scripture. ----

Chemnitz gives an *example* of the papistical interpretation of Scripture as follows: In Luke 22:38 the disciples say: **"Here are two swords."** Bonifacius VIII himself appealed to this passage in the notorious

Bull **unam sanctum**⁵² in order to prove that the pope is the all supreme one, both in the church as well as in the state, that he has both the earthly [political] as well as the spiritual sword. Now Lutheran teachers have certainly referred to John 18:11 where the Lord said: **“Put your sword into your sheath.”** Against the statement of Andradius that Christians are not in a position to prove [examine, test] the interpretation of teachers who have the special gift of Scriptural exposition, Chemnitz explains: Every Christian can examine an interpretation of an interpreter of Scripture as long as these remain an expositor. **An expositor is a man who reveals the sense of Scripture to those who do not have the special gift of exposition.** Whoever cannot do that, is not an expositor of Scripture. Whoever merely interprets [Scripture] so that only he himself understands it, has failed his vocation [calling]. Also that is exactly one of the characteristics of a true expositor of Holy Scripture that he also shows to the simple [unlearned, plain] people who do not have the special gift of exposition that **his exposition is the exposition of Scripture.**

It is also a fact: although all Christians do not have the gift of exposition, **yet they can still check all interpretations whether they capture the sense of Scripture or not.** But the interpreters themselves are often to blame that interpretation is not recognised as the correct one. We are **not precise enough** in the expression or in the argumentation [we use], so that our hearers are not always able to understand clearly that our interpretation is the exposition of the *Scriptures*. But this defect then arises from this that we do not attend to [look after] our Office as expositors correctly and in every respect. **It is due to human weakness by which this creeps in.** Also Gerhard impresses this on us: Because the Christian Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, that is, on the Holy Scriptures, then we accept the interpretation of the *fathers only then when it is proven to be the exposition of Scripture itself.*

Gerhard says: "We do not reject the practice of the church, the opinions of the fathers, or the decrees of the councils, **if they are drawn solely from Scripture**; for **our faith** in the end must not rest upon the judgment of either the fathers or the councils, **but upon Holy Scripture.** We indeed are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), and we recognise only Christ as the supreme and authentic Master of our faith (Matt. 23:8), who speaks to us in Scripture." (Loc. de interpr. S. S., par. 97).

[Delivered by F. Pieper on 13 December, 1889] (To be Continued.)

(Headings and bolded emphasis added. Larger paragraphs have been broken down into shorter ones

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PRACTICAL

(The following is translated from the Real Lexikon, a series of 8 volumes summarising the sermons, **essays**, etc., of the old former Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference drawn up by Pastor Eckhardt, pages 43- 45)

The Lord’s Supper-Benefit.

44. Communion of the Sick. The pastor must remove all false ideas from the sick in regard to the Lord’s Supper⁵³:

(a) that the sick person does not regard the Lord Supper as bodily medicine⁵⁴.

⁵² On 18 November 1302, [Pope Boniface VIII](#) issued the [Papal bull Unam sanctam](#) which some historians consider one of the most extreme statements of [Papal spiritual supremacy](#) ever made. *Unam sanctam* means **“one holy”** referring to the false belief that the Roman Catholic Church is the one apostolic church outside of which there is no salvation. The main propositions of the Bull are the following: First, the unity of the Catholic Church and membership in is necessity for salvation. The pope then falsely affirmed that since he claimed to be Peter’s successors so he is the head of the church. All who wish to belong to the fold of Christ are placed under the dominion of the pope.

⁵³ Der Lutheraner Vol. 6, p.158.

⁵⁴ **Walther (Standard Epistles**, German, p. 179; English, p.185) states: **“He (Christ) speaks this way, ‘Take, eat: this is My body, which is broken for you; this is My blood which is shed for you.’** Christ says nary (not) a word that merely eating and drinking his body and blood works faith. **Christ’s body and blood is not like medicine which**