

# The Lutheran Confessions and the Bible

[From the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord]

## Scripture Is Divinely Authoritative

The average Lutheran layman today may not know any Latin, but he probably knows what the phrase *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) means. It means that we Lutherans base our theology solely on the Scriptures of God and nothing else, not tradition, not human speculation, not modern scholarship, not our experiences or feelings or anything else. *Sola Scriptura* is a watchword, a guide for action, for every true Lutheran, pastor or layman.

This was the position and practice of Luther and our Lutheran Confessions. "The Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 9). "We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3). This is the spirit in which our great Lutheran Confessions speak. Everything we need to believe and do as Christians is told us in the Scriptures. Just as our Lord Jesus was a man of one Book and drew all His teaching from that one divine source and submitted Himself to it utterly in all He said and did, so we too who are His disciples today place ourselves joyfully under that prophetic and apostolic Word. And with our Lutheran Confessions we say: "No human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but ... everything must be subjected to it" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 9).

What persuades us as Christians to render such an exalted place to the Scriptures in our lives and teachings? It is the marvelous content of Scripture, which is the Gospel-as Luther said, "Christ is involved in Scripture through and through, like the body in its clothes" (WA, 12, 418). And it is 20 the Spirit of Christ who witnesses in our hearts that as Scripture speaks judgment and grace it proclaims God's judgment and grace to all men. We believe in the absolute authority of Scripture because Christ accepted the absolute authority of the prophetic Word of the Old Testament and because He guaranteed the absolute authority of the apostolic Word of the New Testament by His promise of the Holy Spirit to His apostles.

Why is Scripture authoritative? Edmund Schlink of Heidelberg answers: "Because God saves through the Word proclaimed by it." But this is no answer to the question and confuses the issue. God saves also through the Word proclaimed in hymns and sermons and Christian literature. No, Scripture is authoritative because it is God's Word. How often do our Confessions contrast God's Word in Scripture to any human being's writings and insist that all our doctrine be drawn "out of God's Word" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3,4,5,9, 10, 16; Ep, 1, 7, 8)! And Luther says: "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel" (SA, II, ii, 15). In contrast to all other writings and human authorities, God's Word carries with it God's authority.

And this authority is absolute and final. What Scripture asserts God asserts, what it commands He commands, what it promises God promises! Because our Lutheran Confessions believe in such infallible authority, they cite the Scriptures hundreds of times and regard Scripture's answers to the great problems and issues of their day as God's answers.

Today such a conviction regarding Biblical authority is rejected by many theologians. The Bible cannot carry divine authority with it, because it is not the very Word of God, they say. Although it may somehow "convey" or "contain" or "become" the Word of God, it must be read like any other human book. This is exactly the posture taken by many who use the "historical-critical method" (also called "higher criticism"), employed within the church by some scholars for about 200 years, since the time of Rationalism and the Enlightenment in Europe.

It is quite clear that such modern views-which were shared by unbelievers in the early centuries of church history-are not compatible with the position of Luther and our Confessions. The approach of higher criticism is likely to result in questioning, again and again, the 21 evangelical doctrine which is drawn from the right reading of the Sacred Scriptures. Today, after 400 years, we need have no doubt concerning the

divine authority of Scripture and therefore of our Gospel message drawn from it. And today Scripture still authenticates itself as the only source of our knowledge of God and of His grace.