

Luther's Doctrine of the Word —The Incarnate Word in the Written Word

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In a paper on “Luther’s Concept of the Word of God” first presented more than 50 years ago¹ Siegbert Becker began:

A generation ago the Lutheran Church in America was engaged in a controversy over whether it was sufficient to say that the Bible *contains* the Word of God or whether it was necessary for an orthodox Lutheran to confess that the Bible *is* the Word of God.² That controversy ended in what seemed to be a total victory for the forces of conservative and orthodox Lutheranism, for there is scarcely a Lutheran in our country today who would be unwilling to say that the Bible *is* the Word of God.³

The triumph to which Becker referred, however, was more apparent than real. From the 1960s until today, even some of those who defended the proposition that the Bible is the Word of God ask, “*In what sense* is the Bible the Word of God?” To say that “the Bible is the Word of God” when one is not sure at all about what is meant by that statement can hardly be called a confession of faith. The faux triumph of a conservative view of Scripture that occurred in American Lutheranism when the ALC retained the word “inerrancy” and the LCA and later the

¹ The essence of Becker’s paper was presented in different formats for various audiences. An early version known as *The Word of God in the Theology of Martin Luther* was presented at the Saginaw Valley Teachers Conference, Millington, Michigan, on April 19, 1963. The version titled “Luther’s Concept of the Word of God,” which appears to be addressed to a pastors conference and which cites all Luther references from the *Weimar Ausgabe* or *Weimarer Ausgabe*, is undated. It is this version which provided one of the foundations for this paper.

Because the first version of this paper was presented at a free conference that included individuals from the WELS, LCMS, and ELCA, I chose to base this study on the research of three Luther scholars: Siegbert Becker (WELS), Robert Preus (LCMS) and Kenneth Hagan (ELCA). Their works are listed in the bibliography.

² In referring to the roots of the controversy “a generation ago” Becker is referring to neo-orthodox writers like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner beginning in the 1930s. The reasons for the flare-up of this controversy about the Word during Becker’s time during the 1960s were the beginnings of what later became the Seminex controversy in the LCMS and the maneuvers concerning the nature of Scripture that were involved in the formation of the LCA (1962) and ALC (1960).

³ This statement is to some degree no longer true, though most theologians would still be willing to say that the Bible is *in some sense* the Word of God and they would still love to use the word “inspired” (but not “inerrant”). But for them the statement, “The Bible is the Word of God,” is a figurative statement. The neo-orthodox language, “the Bible *contains*, or the Bible *becomes* the Word of God,” has gone out of style, but the denial of the God-breathed character of the content of the Bible remains the same. The statement that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God means to say that the “Word of God” is an experience that we have when we read the Bible rather than the written or preached revelation that produces that experience. That the Bible is “inspired” for them means that it is “inspiring.” It does not mean that its content is “God-breathed.”

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ELCA continued to speak of “inspiration” was a Pyrrhic victory. So during the 1960s and 70s, Becker could continue to say that “the doctrine of the Word of God, its inspiration, authority, and inerrancy, is still one of the great theological battlegrounds of our time.”⁴ On all sides there remained a lack of clarity (or honesty) about what was meant when men in high places and honored positions in the visible church spoke of the Word of God. The unclarity remains today.

The controversy concerning the Word in the Lutheran Church today still centers on the definition of the term, “the Word of God.” There is no one who wants to say, “The Bible is not the Word of God.

The issue that Becker outlined for its relevance during the 1960s took on new relevance with the events leading to the formation of the ELCA in 1988 and the recent discussion surrounding departures from the ELCA to found new groups that want to be more biblical and more confessional. The new emphases in this discussion are the smokescreen of calling Christ “the Word of God” in order to evade dealing with the Bible as the Word of God and, even more importantly, the increased tendency to move beyond the written Word to open Enthusiasm.

All of the issues from all of stages of this controversy were already dealt with very thoroughly in Luther’s writings on this topic, so it is timely that we review how Luther understood this term “Word of God” both in relationship to Christ and to Scripture. This is doubly necessary because many enemies of Luther’s view claim the support of Luther for their aberrations.

Christ as the “Word of God”

It is true, as we might expect from any biblical theologian, that Luther occasionally speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Word of God,⁵ but it would be a gross misstatement to say that for Luther the term “Word of God” primarily denotes the Son of God. It is false to say, as one modern Lutheran scholar puts it, that “The ‘Word of God’ in the New Testament was essentially the historical Christ.”⁶ It is difficult to see how it is possible for any honest scholar to say this when Luther himself says that when John calls Jesus the Word of God, this is an obscure, rare, and peculiar way of speaking, which is uncommon and lacking in clarity in any language.⁷ That Luther was not at all accustomed to thinking of Christ when he used the term “Word of God” is evident, for example, from his comments on John 8:28, where he says, “Christ derives comfort from the fact that it is not he who is doing this, but another, namely, the Word of God.”⁸ Such a remark could hardly come from the lips of a man for whom the Word of God was primarily and

⁴ This battle over the Bible is largely over on the public, denominational level in the Lutheran church and many Evangelical churches. The churches that formed the ELCA have moved on to other questions, as we will see later. Perhaps within the LCMS there may still some internal dissent, but in Lutheranism this is really no longer an intersynodical debate. The camps have been formed.

⁵ WA 42, 13f; 46, 543-546, 635. LW 1, 17; 22:9-12. 115. *Caveat usor*: the Luther citations have been imported from the underlying documents and have not been checked in WA.

⁶ J. Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, Companion Volume to the American Edition of *Luther’s Works*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959, p. 60. Becker reacts strongly to Pelikan’s views because he was personally involved in opposing this influence in the LCMS. Pelikan ultimately left the Lutheran church and became Orthodox. Those who lose Scripture must seek shelter in tradition.

⁷ WA 46, 635. LW 23, 391. That Luther is correct to call this usage “rare” is demonstrated by the fact that the only occurrence of Christ being called the Word of God is in Revelation 19:13.

⁸ WA 33, 636. 17. LW 40, 221

“essentially the historical Christ.” That Luther was not inclined to think in this way is clear also from his work *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, where he writes, “We do not call the gospel Christ or the kingdom of Christ, but we speak of it as an oral, bodily preaching, regarding it as a part of Christ or his kingdom.”⁹

At times Luther also says that the Word of God is God himself.¹⁰ But we must learn to interpret Luther here as Luther taught us to interpret the Bible: The obscure passages in Luther must be understood in the light of the clear passages. The context makes it clear that what Luther meant when he said that the Word of God is God himself is that any offense against the Word is an offense against God. The statement usually occurs in a context where the honor and reliability of the Scriptures is discussed. In his comments on Psalm 111, for example, he says that the Word of God has been preserved for us in a book, and shortly thereafter he writes, “Since it is God’s Word, it must be regarded as no less high and venerable than God himself.”¹¹

The Bible as the Word of God

Usually, however, when Luther uses the term “Word of God,” he means by that term what we would expect it to mean in human language, without any allegories or figures of speech. The Word of God is, very simply and very clearly, what God says. To Luther, God was above all else a speaking God.

When we meet God on the very first pages of the Bible, he is immediately introduced to us as the God who speaks. He is the God who speaks the creative word in his majestic “Let there be.” He is the God who speaks in loving concern for Adam when he says, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” He is the God who speaks in the law and says, “You shall not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for on the day that you eat from it, you will certainly die.” He is the God who seeks fallen man with his voice and says, “Where are you?” He is the God who speaks in the gospel and tells man that the woman’s Seed shall come to crush the serpent’s head. In the first three chapters of Genesis we are told no less than twenty times that God spoke, and the creative Word and the revelatory Word are not in any way distinguished from each other. And if we take the first verse of Genesis as a sort of title for the whole chapter, then we can even say that the first specific act of God of which we have any knowledge is that God spoke.

It may not be unimportant to note in this connection that Adam and Eve were the only creatures in the garden that could speak. Speech, particularly speech with God and speech about God, was a gift that distinguished the man and woman from the other animals.¹² The battle over the Word God began when Satan came and spoke to Eve, and she accepted what he said about God’s Word.¹³

God’s Word Is Everything that God Says

Anyone who has read only a little of Luther knows that it is not rare or unusual for him to speak of the spoken and written words of Scripture as the Word of God. It is evident that when Luther spoke of the Word of God, most often he thought of it as a concrete message consisting of

⁹ WA 18, 212. LW 32, 146

¹⁰ WA 8, 49. LW 13, 362

¹¹ WA 31 i, 403. LW 34, 316f.

¹² An *animal* in its etymological meaning is a creature that has *anima*, a creature that breathes.

¹³ This section is much more detailed in the original Becker paper. That paper provides many more citations from Luther.

individual sentences, phrases, and words, which were meant to be understood according to the common rules of human speech. Yet modern Lutheran (and Evangelical) theology often denies that the Word of God consists of words. For them the Word is more of an internal experience.

Of the command concerning the Tree of Knowledge given to Adam in the Garden of Eden, Luther writes, “Here the Lord is preaching to Adam and setting the Word before him. Although the Word is short, it is nevertheless worth our spending a little time on it.”¹⁴ The “Word of God” thus is the Word that God spoke to Adam and on which we still are able to spend time because we have it before us in the Holy Bible. In fact, Luther specifically asserts that this command given to Adam was a “spoken Word.”¹⁵ And in connection with the temptation that came to Eve to disregard this Word of God, Luther says that we are not to sit in judgment on God’s Word, but “When we hear God saying something, we are to believe it and not debate about it, but rather take our intellect captive in the obedience of Christ.”¹⁶ If these passages are not enough to convince us that in Luther’s thinking the Word of God is everything God says, it should certainly become clear when we hear him say, “It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God’s Word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken.”¹⁷ God says everything in the Bible, but he does not say everything in the Bible to everyone.

The Word of God Is Made Up of Words

It is evident therefore that when Luther spoke of the Word of God, he thought of it as an entity consisting of individual words, sentences, and phrases, which were meant to be understood according to the common usage of human speech. Now that may seem to be self-evident to us who from childhood have breathed a theological atmosphere in which the winds still blow from Wittenberg. One can hardly memorize the *Small Catechism* and many of the passages contained in our catechism without being conditioned to that way of thinking. And yet we ought to be aware that modern theology often denies that the Word of God consists of words.¹⁸

Repeatedly Luther speaks of the Word of God as consisting of actual spoken words. In 1522, in his treatise *On Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament*, he advised priests to marry, but at the same time he cautioned them against doing so if they could not do it with a good conscience that was thoroughly equipped with the Word of God. He then calls their attention to the saying of Paul in 1 Timothy 4, where the apostle says that the prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils. Luther advises them confidently to believe that “these are the words of God, who cannot lie.”¹⁹ This is only one of many examples that could be cited, but when one reads Luther at length and sees the ease with which he uses the phrases “the Word of God” and “the words of God” interchangeably as equivalents, it seems clear that it never occurred to him that anyone could deny that the Word of God comes to us in the words of human language.

¹⁴ WA 42, 79f. LW 1, 105

¹⁵ WA 42, 110f. LW 1, 147

¹⁶ WA 42, 118. LW 1, 157

¹⁷ WA 16, 384f. LW 35, 170

¹⁸ In the LCMS this occurred, for example, in the Martin Scharlemann paper, “The Bible as Record.” “Our everyday language is much too shallow to contain the Biblical revelation without major and even fatal adjustments” (p 7). This is the same error that says the infinite divine majesty cannot dwell in Christ.

¹⁹ WA 10 ii, 36. LW 36, 261

One of the clearest examples of this phase of Luther's thought we find in his writings which deal with the controversy with the sacramentarians. Repeatedly he cites the words of institution and says that we should believe these words, as we ought to believe all the words of Christ. This is what the Spirit says and it is the Word of God, and when we have God's Word, we should hold fast to it and let our own opinion go.²⁰ When we see the clear and distinct and powerful words of God, we should confess the real presence, for the Word of God says that the body and blood of Christ are in the sacrament.²¹ This alternation between the words of God and the Word of God is so natural that it is difficult to imagine how it is possible to hold that Luther taught that the Word of God is anything else than just these words we hear and read.

The Word of God Remains God's Word When Spoken by His Messengers

If something is God's Word when he says it, it does not stop being his Word when it is reproduced in ink. If something is God's Word when it is recorded in ink, it does not stop being his Word when it is converted back to sound again.

Since the Word of God comes to us couched in human words, it is not surprising to hear Luther say over and over that the Word of God is spoken by men and that it is no less the Word of God because of that fact, just as he was fond of asserting that the deity of the eternal Son of God is in no sense impaired by being joined to humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Luther says that the preaching of the gospel, when it is viewed superficially, looks like "a trifling thing, like any ordinary man's speech and word."²² Luther often admonishes us not to be offended at this fact that the Word of God comes to us through the mouth of men. When we hear the words of God in Baptism, in Holy Communion, and in the absolution, we should remember that it is still God's Word in spite of its utter simplicity, and we should not say, as the smart alecks do, "God should really offer us something more imposing."²³ God deals with us in this way so that we will be able to bear it when he speaks. If he wanted to, he could utter a Word so powerful that one could hear it all the way from heaven to earth, but such a word would bring no one to faith. Therefore God puts his words into the mouth of a human being.²⁴ We might well be reminded here of the fact that when God spoke with his own voice from Mount Sinai, the people of Israel fled in terror and said to Moses, "Speak with us yourself, and we will listen, but do not let God speak with us, or we will die" (Exodus 20:19). In the gospel God speaks to us with "a still small voice" or "a quiet whisper" as he did to Elijah (1 Kings 19:12).

The word of the preacher is the Word of God whenever it conveys the divinely intended meaning of the words that God spoke. The relationship between the Word of God and the inspired writers who received the Scriptures was unique. They spoke and wrote the Word of God as they were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" so that they spoke words "breathed out by God."²⁵ Only the inspired writers received the exact words and sounds that God wanted to be

²⁰ WA 19, 496. LW 36, 345

²¹ WA 18, 166. LW 40, 176

²² WA 41, 150. LW 13, 291

²³ WA 47, 37f. LW 22, 308

²⁴ WA 47, 37f. LW 22, 308

²⁵We may speak of both the writers and the writings as being inspired. When we say that writers were inspired, we mean they were "carried along by the Spirit": 2 Peter 1:21—ὕπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου

recorded to express the divinely intended meaning. Faithful preachers speak the divinely intended meaning of Scripture but not with the same sounds and with the same letters and words which God gave. Preachers convey the same divinely intended meaning but with different sounds and with different letters and words. If this were not so, a translation could not be the Word of God.

The relationship of God to the men who spoke and wrote his inspired Word was of a very special kind. So Luther says, for example, that we should believe Moses when he teaches, no less than we should believe God himself, for Moses “teaches us as a man of God whom we are to believe as if God himself were speaking.”²⁶ Luther does not demand that we give this same kind of credence to those who do not speak under the same influence of the Holy Spirit, and yet he says that we should adhere to the Word of God whether a disciple, apostle, saint or ordinary man speaks it.²⁷ At another time he said that we should believe it even when it is spoken by an ass, whether male or female.²⁸

In the last sermon that Luther preached to the congregation in Wittenberg during the absence of Bugenhagen from the pulpit in 1537 to 1538, Luther told the people:

God is speaking through the voice of the preacher who brings God’s Word.... Now you have the Word of God in church, in books, in your home.... We and our hearers are just beginning to recognize that it is not a man that we are listening to, but that it is God who is telling us things that contain an everlasting treasure. My dear friend, regard it as a real treasure that God speaks into your physical ear.... You do not hear the pastor. Of course, the voice is his, but the words which he employs are really spoken by God. A poor speaker may speak the Word of God just as well as he who is endowed with eloquence. A father speaks the Word of God as well as God does, and your neighbor speaks as well as the angel Gabriel. There is no difference between the Word when uttered by a schoolboy and when uttered by the angel Gabriel; they vary only in rhetorical ability.²⁹

Luther does not intend to say here that schoolboys, fathers, and preachers speak the Word of God in the same manner in which the Word recorded by the prophets and apostles was spoken.

All the words of Scripture are the Word of God because God spoke all of them through the Spirit, but the words recorded in Scripture are the Word of God in several different ways.

They are most often words that convey divine truth about doctrine or history even when they were spoken by someone who did not speak them willingly or understand them correctly, such as the prophecies of Balaam and Caiphas, which expressed divine truths even though they were spoken unwillingly and unwittingly (Numbers 24:15-19, John 11:50-51).

φερόμενοι. When we say the writing was inspired, we mean it was “breathed out by God”: 2 Timothy 3:16—θεόπνευστος. The word “inspired” was not the best name for this, but it does reflect that the writers were in the Spirit and the Spirit was in the writers: 1 Peter 1:11—τὸ ἐν αὐτοῖς πνεῦμα Χριστοῦ; Matthew 22:43—Δαβὶδ ἐν πνεύματι.

²⁶ WA 40 iii, 492. LW 13, 80f

²⁷ WA 33, 303.

²⁸ WA 1, 595. LW 31, 194. By the way Balaam’s donkey was female.

²⁹ LW 22, 527-529. It is important to note that according to Luther the Word is not more effective when proclaimed by a called pastor, as some Romanizing Lutherans claim.

Sometimes words recorded in the Bible are false statements made by sinners that God wanted to be recorded to teach us something about specific events of history, as when Satan said “You will not surely die.”

A correctly translated passage does not convey the divinely intended meaning when it is ripped out of the context and used to support a false idea³⁰ (though an innocent listener might hear the correct meaning in spite of the distorted intent of the speaker).

A falsely translated passage does not convey the Word of God (that is, the divinely intended meaning) even if it is printed in an official Bible, as when the Vulgate said that “she [Mary] will crush the serpent’s head” or the New World Translation says, “In the beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.”

The power of the Word does not depend on the faith or intent of the speaker, only on the presence of the divinely intended meaning. A critic may be quoting the words of the Bible to ridicule them, but his citing of the words may have the opposite effect on his audience from that which he intended. A disputed issue is whether a preacher can take away the divinely intended meaning when he reads the right words but publicly repudiates the meaning. When a Methodist pastor reads the words of institution in a Lutheran church and says “I do not literally believe the words ‘this is my body’ but I am reading them for you” do the words lose their power? Despite such cases of casuistry, we can say that the essence and power of the Word are present whenever the divinely intended meaning is present regardless of whether the word is read, heard, spoken, or remembered.

We who have been given the privilege of sharing in the office of the holy ministry would do well to give serious and earnest consideration to this aspect of Luther’s thought. On the one hand, it ought to fill us with holy pride and joy in our office. It is truly the Word of God we proclaim in our teaching and preaching, the Word of which God himself has said that it shall not return to him empty, but that it shall accomplish that which he pleases. On the other hand, however, it should arouse us to a deep sense of the responsibility that rests upon our heart and conscience, and when we preach and teach, we should be sure that what we say is what God wants spoken, and that we are conveying the divinely intended meaning; We can be certain of this only so long as we constantly hold up our ideas and words to the touchstone of Holy Scriptures and evaluate our teaching in the light of God’s written Word.

The Scriptures Are the Word of God

If a statement is the Word of God when he speaks it with his living voice, it does not lose that character when it is transposed to paper with ink or to a computer screen with pixels. In the final analysis, unless God chooses to speak from heaven again, the only means that we have to give us direct access to the Word of God is the message which we have recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

The only Word of God that we have as a primary source of his message is that which we have in the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures are the Word of God *par excellence*. A translation may express the internal essence of the Word, which is the divinely intended meaning. Only the

³⁰ An example would be using Colossians 2:21: “Do not touch!” “Do not taste!” “Do not handle!” as a proof passage for the Temperance Movement to forbid use of alcoholic beverages. In context it is not an endorsement of the Temperance Movement but a rejection of its false teaching.

original texts can express what has been called the external essence. The *external essence* is the words, style, and idiom of the original text—in the Old Testament the idiom of the Hebrew language and in part, the Aramaic, in the New Testament of the Greek language.

At the root of Luther’s concept of the Word of God you will always find the Holy Bible. He generally uses the terms “Scripture” and “Word of God” as synonymous and interchangeable terms, and while, as we have seen, he knew as well as any student of Scripture that this term “the Word of God” is used for the creative Word by which the universe is brought into being and kept in existence, and the personal Word, which is the eternal Son of God, yet when he uses the term without explanation, he almost invariably identifies the Word of God with the Scriptures. It is not at all difficult to find passages in Luther wherein he does this in so many words and says, “The Holy Scripture is the Word of God,”³¹ or in which he appeals to the Word of God and then cites a passage from the Bible.³²

We find Scripture and the Word of God identified also when he says that we Christians believe that Christ is both God and man because God’s Word says so, since the Holy Scriptures assign the title of Creator to Christ, and from this it follows beyond question that he is truly and essentially God.³³ In the funeral sermon which he preached for Duke John in 1532, Luther spoke of “the Word of God in the Scriptures.”³⁴ In 1521 he said that the papists would not allow the simple meaning of Scripture to stand, and thus they distorted the Word of God.³⁵ In 1525 he said that the radical reformers were twisting the words of Scripture to mean what they wanted them to mean and in this way put the Word of God to torture.³⁶ In 1537, in a sermon on the three ecumenical creeds, preached at Smalcald, he said of the Jews and Muslims:

When they want to interpret our Scriptures, we will not permit this. They have neither the ability nor the right to do this, for it is God’s Scripture, and God’s Word, which no man can or should interpret.³⁷

In all this Luther was simply echoing the position that he took already at the Diet of Worms, where he said that his conscience was captive to the Word of God, and a few moments later asserted that his conscience was captive and bound by the Holy Scripture.³⁸ Already then the two terms stood for the same concept.

And when he thus equates the Word of God and the Holy Scriptures, he means again, very simply, as he himself says, that God speaks to us in the Bible.³⁹ He says that if we want to know what is to be taught in the church, we should ask God, and we will find his answer in the Scriptures.⁴⁰ “Holy Scripture presents the Word to us everywhere,” he asserts,⁴¹ and we are

³¹ WA 46, 542. SL 9, 1853; LW 22, 6.14; WML 3, 391; 5, 163; SL 9, 1800

³² WA 12, 235. WML, 3, 145

³³ WA 46, 600f. LW 22, 74f

³⁴ WA 36, 238. LW 51, 232

³⁵ WA 7, 341. LW 32, 26

³⁶ WA 18, 145-147. LW 40, 154-157

³⁷ WA 50, 282. SL 10, 1018

³⁸ WA 7, 838; cp. *Ibid.* 839. LW 22, 112f

³⁹ WA 14, 684. LW 9, 187

⁴⁰ WA 8, 536. LW 36, 197

⁴¹ WA 47, 33. LW 22, 304

required to believe only “what God has commanded us in Scripture to believe.”⁴² “The truths of God were committed to writing by divine authority,” he told his class in his lectures on Genesis,⁴³ and in his commentary on Psalm 111 he wrote that God’s Word is preserved for us in a book.⁴⁴ We may see only the poor letters of the alphabet in the book, but “this Word has such a secret power that it will flush throngs of devils out of the heart,”⁴⁵ for “Holy Scripture’s inseparable companion is the Holy Spirit,”⁴⁶ who “comforts us through the Holy Scriptures.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, Scripture is also full of threats, and we should not imagine that God is either joking or lying when He speaks these words.⁴⁸ With such expressions as these scattered throughout the writings of Luther, it is not surprising to hear him say in a sermon on 1 Peter 3:15–18 (1523):

If the people do not want to believe, you should be silent, for it is not your duty to force them to look upon Scripture as God’s book or God’s Word. You have done enough if you have shown that what you say is based on Scripture. When you hear people who are of this opinion and say, “You preach that a man should not accept the teachings of men, but Peter and Paul, yes, even Christ, were also men”—when you hear people who are so blinded and hardened, that they deny that this is God’s Word or doubt it, then just be quiet. Do not speak one word to them. Let them go.⁴⁹

In these expressions we also find Luther’s answer to the question so often asked in our time, “In what sense is the Scripture the Word of God?” The moment a theologian feels compelled to ask that question, he is already drifting away from the simplicity of a childlike faith. The question arises from the fact that the identification of the Scripture with the Word of God is so patently taught by Scripture itself and so ingrained in the whole doctrinal tradition of the whole Christian church, that it is well-nigh impossible to find any theologian, even among the most liberal, who would openly deny that the Scripture is the Word of God, just as you will not find any who will deny that Jesus is the Son of God, no matter under how many rocks you look. The denial of the truth that the Scripture is the Word of God usually comes in the form of this question, “In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?”⁵⁰ This question is essentially the same

⁴² WA 7, 673. WML 3, 380

⁴³ WA 42, 258. LW 1, 351

⁴⁴ WA 31, 402, 421. LW 13, 360 381

⁴⁵ WA 33, 436. LW 23, 274

⁴⁶ WA 40 iii, 543. LW 13, 111

⁴⁷ WA 19, 592f. LW 14, 254

⁴⁸ WA 14, 658f. LW 9, 149

⁴⁹ SL 9, 1071f

⁵⁰ A Lutheran” answer to that question was provided by answers in the *Lutheran*:

“What is the ELCA’s specific view of the authority of Scripture? The confession simply affirms that the Bible is “the inspired Word of God.” Some Lutherans are disappointed that there is no claim that the Bible is infallible, inerrant, or non-contradictory. But it serves us well not to rush by ‘inspired’ without considering its strong claim. The ELCA affirms that God has spoken and still speaks through the Bible to bring us to faith. Adjectives are not piled up to emphasize the meaning of ‘inspired.’ Instead, the confession makes a sweeping claim about the Bible’s *function*” (*The Lutheran*, Nov. 23, 1988, p 17). Here the meaning of “inspired” has been changed into “inspiring.”

as the first question ever asked about God’s Word, “Has God really said. . . .” In other words, “When you say that the Bible is the Word of God, you don’t really mean to say that God said these things that are said here, do you?”

Luther would have been not a little impatient with a question like this, for to him the answer was self-evident. He would have said about the Word what the *Smalcald Articles* say about the church, “Among us a seven-year-old child knows in what sense the Bible is the Word of God.” Luther was not a speculative theologian, and he hated speculation as he hated the devil himself. To him, very simply, the Scriptures were the Word of God because God speaks the words of this book, and what this book says, God says. We have previously heard him say that God speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures. In his lectures on Galatians, he equates the Scriptures with the sayings of the Holy Spirit.⁵¹ In another lecture, on Isaiah, he admonished his students to persevere in the constant use of God’s Word and not to grow tired of reading it (and who can doubt that he has in mind the Word of God as we have it in written form in the Scriptures), because, as he said, “Pious hearts believe that it is the Word of God, that it is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit.”⁵²

This conviction that Scripture is the Word of God because God speaks to us in the words of this book characterizes his thinking during the whole course of his career as the reformer of the church. Anyone who has carefully read the accounts of his appearance before the Diet of Worms must come away with the conviction that this poor emaciated monk could never have stood against the combined might of church and empire as he did if he had not the conviction deeply ingrained in his heart that the voice of Scripture is the voice of God. Ten years later he stood before the congregation in Wittenberg and sought to win them to that same conviction by saying:

If a thought comes to you, no matter if it seems so beautiful and holy that you imagine it to be downright angelic, then take a good look at it, compare it with God’s Word and see if it is grounded in Scripture, and whether God has commanded or said or ordered it or not.⁵³

God’s Word is therefore what God commands or says or orders, and in the final analysis this is found only in Scripture. And twenty-four years after Worms, the year before he died, in his *Against the Papacy at Rome Instituted by the Devil*, he still held the same position and wrote, “Whoever wants to hear God should read the Holy Scripture.”⁵⁴

“The Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of the knowledge of God’s revelation which concerns the Christian faith. The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness—the ‘canon within the canon.’ Jesus Christ himself is the Lord of the Scriptures, the source and scope of its authority” (Braaten and Jenson, I, 61). Here the emphasis is no longer on Scripture as written revelation from God but as the source of knowledge of revelation about faith. This means that Scripture does not so much reveal facts about God and facts from God, which are the basis for our faith, but it tells us about the faith experiences of the apostles so that we can have the same experience.

⁵¹ WA 40 I, 286. SL 9, 1852

⁵² WA 25, 344. SL 6, 742

⁵³ WA 33, 275. SL 7, 2389

⁵⁴ WA 54, 263. SL 17, 1089

The Oral/Aural Word of God

Though nobody really reads much of the major neo-orthodox theologians anymore, or maybe never did read them in their entirety,⁵⁵ we cannot simply ignore them, since they are the roots of the false views of the Word in Lutheranism and in Evangelicalism for the last fifty years. Neo-orthodox—the very word sounds quaint today—neo-orthodox theologians, in an effort somehow to reduce the significance and meaning of the statement that the Bible is the Word of God, are fond of asserting that for Luther the Word was primarily a spoken, proclaimed, preached Word and not a written Word.

A nationally known Lutheran scholar acknowledged his debt to Karl Barth by introducing him to a University of Chicago audience with the words, “To Karl Barth, as probably to no other living theologian, we may without blasphemy or exaggeration apply the words of the Fourth Evangelist, ‘And of his fullness have all we received and grace for grace.’”⁵⁶ That same scholar has written that for Luther the Scriptures were the Word of God only “in a derivative sense,” derivative, that is, “from the basic sense of the Word as proclamation.”⁵⁷ This is an inexcusable, unwarranted, and misleading caricature of Luther’s thought on this matter, and that exactly the reverse is true, that the proclaimed or preached Word can claim to be the Word of God only as it partakes of the nature of the Word as written and recorded for us in the Holy Bible, or to put it another way, only as it communicates the divinely intended meaning.

It must be admitted that there are a few passages in Luther that seem at first glance to exalt the spoken Word above the written Word. For the most part they come from early in his career, and it seems rather strange that most scholars in discussing these few, rather unique passages seem to forget that they come from a time when Luther’s own translation of the Bible in a language that the people could read and understand had not yet appeared. Moreover, it should be remembered that these words were written at a time when the Lutheran school system had not yet been established and the ideal of universal education, which owes so much to some of Luther’s later writings, had not yet gripped the imagination of the people. For a brief time it was possible to call the catechism “the Bible of the people.” In such a cultural context, the spoken Word heard at church was more significant for the masses in the church than the written Word, for the latter was not yet available to them. Now we can say that the Bible of the people is the Bible. (Unfortunately, it is still true that for too many of our members their chief experience of the Word is the word read and spoken in church.)

If these facts were kept in mind, even these early remarks would not be interpreted as they are by neo-orthodoxy. In 1521, for example, in the preface to the *Church Postil*, which was a book of sermons intended for reading by the preachers of Saxony to their congregations, he wrote:

The Gospel should really not be something written, but an oral Word which brings the Scripture before us, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why

⁵⁵ Reading Barth’s dogmatics, which is aptly called the *White Elephant*, would be a Protestant version of purgatory.

⁵⁶ Pelikan, J. in *Criterion*, a publication of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, II, 1 (Winter, 1963), p. 3. A more accurate description of the contribution of Barth to theology would be a paraphrase of a song by the Highwaymen: “The devil’s right hand, the devil’s right hand—Mama said Barth’s theology is the devil’s right hand.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 67.

Christ Himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called His teaching not Scripture but Gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth.⁵⁸

Similarly, in a sermon in this *Postil*, he said, “Christ did not command the apostles to write but only to preach.”⁵⁹

Even if it is granted that this passage was written in a book in which he was seeking to encourage the preaching of the gospel in Saxony and to remind the priests of their duty to proclaim the Word, it must still be admitted that it does seem to exalt the oral Word above the written Word. Yet it should not be forgotten that the passage occurs in a context in which Luther is seeking also to encourage the study of the Old Testament, of which he says that it deserves to be called Scripture more than the New Testament. On the other hand, one could adduce passage after passage from the writings of Luther in which he gives the name Scripture also to the New Testament. It bears repeating also to call attention once more that this was said in the preface to a book of sermons, and that Luther was attempting to point out to those who used the book the importance of the office of preaching. Whatever may have been in Luther’s mind, however, when he wrote this, it should be remembered, first, that this was spoken early in his career; secondly, that it is a note which is rarely sounded by Luther; and thirdly, that to balance this one of only few passages of this nature there are many passages in Luther in which he places the preached Word and the written Word on the same level or where he actually places the preached Word under the judgment of the written Word. We might here also call attention to the fact that in the same year in which he wrote the words quoted above, he also wrote, “The Gospel was not meant only to be written, but rather to be proclaimed with the physical voice.”⁶⁰ Here he no longer says that the Gospel was not meant to be something written, although he still expresses a preference for the preached Gospel. Not only do many Christians receive the greatest part of their contact with the Word through what they hear in church, but most evangelization takes place not through someone picking up a Bible and reading it, but through someone coming to them and talking about Christ.

Thus it is evident that Luther is not exalting the oral Word above the written Word at all. He is simply giving expression to the idea which was later summarized in the words of the seventh article of the *Augsburg Confession*: “The Church is the communion of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are administered in the right way,” and which is repeated in recent time in the words of the *Brief Statement*:

The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name or by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine that is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications.

Luther puts it this way in his book on the *Misuse of the Mass*, also published in 1521:

A sure sign by which we may know where the church is, is the Word of God... How can we ourselves know where the church is, if we do not hear her prophesying? ... It is certain that the church and those in whom God truly dwells

⁵⁸ WA 10 II, 17. LW 35, 123; SL, 11, xlv (Becker’s translation)

⁵⁹ WA 10 II, 626.

⁶⁰ LW 13, 35. SL 5, 692 and SL 18, 1467

do prophesy; but it is uncertain where the church is which is capable of prophesying unless it actually does prophesy.⁶¹

However, in most of the passages in which Luther speaks of the importance of the spoken Word, the contrast is not with the written Word at all. So when the proponents of neo-orthodox views seek to show that Luther somehow considered the spoken Word to be superior to the written Word by citing the repeated references that one finds throughout the writings of Luther to the oral Word, the preached Word, or the shouted Word, they are not dealing intelligently or fairly with the evidence. The most common synonyms in Luther for the “oral Word” are not the “preached Word,” or the “shouted Word,” but rather the “external Word” or the “physical Word.” The German terms he uses are *das mündliche Wort*, *das äusserliche Wort*, and *das leibliche Wort*. The antithesis to the *oral Word* might seem, at first glance, to be the written Word, but as we shall see in a moment, this is not the case. The contrast becomes clear when we see that he called it also the *external Word*, the antithesis to which is certainly not the *written Word*, but rather the *inner Word*; and when he calls it the *physical Word*, we all recognize that the antithesis must be the *spiritual Word*. But all this becomes still clearer when we look at the context in which he uses these terms.

Luther uses these expressions especially in his controversies with the so-called *Schwaermer*, the fanatics, the Anabaptists, the radical left. He describes them as people who “hate or neglect the external Word and are captivated by their own vain and inane speculations.”⁶² These *Schwaermer* are the spiritual ancestors of those people whom we still find in the church today who are not satisfied with the plain, bare promise of forgiveness in the Gospel, but insist that God must speak directly to the human heart and that only he is a true Christian who has had a “spiritual experience” of the operation of the Holy Spirit in his own heart. Those are the people who still go around asking people, “Are you saved?” instead of proclaiming the gospel and saying, “You are saved.” Luther says of them that they disparage the external Word and want to hear a spirit from heaven apart from the external Word.⁶³ Luther knew how dangerous such a teaching is to true Christian faith and in no uncertain terms he rejected what he called the “self-made spirituality” of the sects “who seek a special enlightenment and a secret revelation from heaven, and lay claim to something apart from the commonly preached Word of the Gospel.”⁶⁴

This is the sort of thing that is condemned also in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, in which all of us agree that

God does not want to deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.⁶⁵

This citation from the Confessions, which, by the way, was also written by Luther, places everything into proper perspective. It is crystal clear that the antithesis to oral Word in all these passages is not the written Word but rather the “spiritual Word” of the Enthusiasts, which is for all practical purposes identical with what neo-orthodoxy means by the “Word of God.” The oral

⁶¹ WA 8, 491f. LW 36, 145

⁶² LW 12, 369

⁶³ LW 23, 92

⁶⁴ LW 13, 271

⁶⁵ S.A., III, viii, 10; cp. WA 46, 577.

Word and the Scripture are in this passage from the Confessions identified with each other, and the contrast is between the oral and written Word on the one side and the spiritual Word on the other. Luther himself states the contrast in this way when he writes in his comments on the preaching of Christ predicted in Psalm 2, “This passage must be understood entirely with respect to oral rather than spiritual preaching. He is true, visible, and tangible man, who also teaches with a human voice.”⁶⁶

For a correct understanding of the theology of Luther, it should be noted in this place that when Luther criticizes the Enthusiasts for their emphasis on the spiritual experiences of men, he does not mean that God does not speak to our heart or that Christians are forbidden to have such spiritual experiences, but he merely meant to emphasize that if such experiences do come, they ought to be based on the oral, external Word, heard first in the ear and then in the heart. He specifically states in his work *On Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament* (1522):

The Master does his teaching in the hearts of men—through the external Word of his preachers, however. The preachers impress the Word upon the ears, but Christ impresses it in the heart.⁶⁷

And of the blessings of the children of God of which David speaks in the 23rd Psalm, he writes:

Through the oral preaching of the Word, which enters the ears and touches the heart by faith, and through the holy sacraments, our Lord accomplishes all these things in Christendom.⁶⁸

And just as Luther by no means wishes to disparage the true Christian feeling and experiences of the heart by his emphasis on the external Word that we hear with our ears, so he does not in any way downgrade the written Word by his many references to the oral Word. In fact, even a rather cursory reading of Luther will reveal that in Luther’s thinking the oral and written Word are the two forms in which the external or physical Word comes to us. There is a passage in Luther in which he says that the oral Word is stronger than the written Word, which for some reason or other is seldom quoted by neo-orthodox theologians, although it might appear at first to favor their point of view. In this passage, found in his sermons on the Gospel of John, we find these words:

The Holy Spirit speaks to those who read the Word of God. Here then speaking and writing is one thing, except that the oral speaking is more powerful than the written, because through writing you can also speak with those who are more than a hundred miles away from you.⁶⁹

This passage is interesting for several reasons. In the first place, when he says that the Holy Spirit *speaks* to those who read the Word of God, it becomes clear why he so often simply speaks of the oral or spoken Word even though it seems evident that he includes also the written Word in that term. What is written in the Bible is a “spoken Word,” an “oral Word,” and not the spiritual word of the Enthusiasts that comes apart from means.

⁶⁶ WA 40 ii, 245, 250. LW 12, 43

⁶⁷ WA 10 ii, 23. LW 36, 248

⁶⁸ WA 51, 287. LW 12, 170

⁶⁹ WA 47, 184

Secondly, the statement that speaking and writing are one thing shows clearly that his assertion that oral speaking is more powerful than written speaking is not intended in any way to give the written Word a secondary or subordinate position to the spoken Word.

In the third place, it is doubtful that Luther really said that oral speaking is more powerful than written, for it would be much more intelligible if the passage read, “Written speaking is more powerful than oral, because through writing you can also speak with those who are more than a hundred miles away from you.” (In other words, the widely quoted Luther statement “oral speaking is more powerful than written speaking” is actually a typo. It is not what Luther meant to say.)

Finally, even if Luther did say that the spoken Word is more powerful than the written Word, this should not be hard for those who are teachers to understand. Luther was primarily a teacher and what he meant by such a statement should not be difficult for teachers to see. A statement in writing may be identical in every respect with a statement made orally, and yet all of us know that a spoken statement, which can make use of the inflections of the human voice, is pedagogically more effective than the same statement made in writing. St. Paul already indicates this in the Scriptures when he writes to the Galatians that he wishes that he could be present with them and change his voice to emphasize the words he was writing to them.⁷⁰

There can therefore be no question whatever that Luther included the Scriptures when he spoke of the oral Word. In the selection from the Confessions quoted previously, Luther three times uses the expression, “the Scripture and oral Word,” not “the Scripture and the Word of God,” mind you, but “the Scripture and Word of God.” Ordinarily, when one article precedes two nouns in English as well as in German, or Greek for that matter, the two nouns are to be understood as referring to the same person or thing. But beside this the context makes it clear that this expression, “the Scripture and oral Word,” is for all practical purposes equivalent to “the written and spoken Word.”

What are some ways in which this Enthusiasm manifests itself today. We summarized the issue with these words: these people are not satisfied with the plain, bare promise of forgiveness in the gospel, but insist that God must speak directly to the human heart and that only he is a true Christian who has had a “spiritual experience” of the operation of the Holy Spirit in his own heart. These are the people who still go around asking people, “Are you saved?” instead of proclaiming the gospel and saying, “You are saved.” Luther says of them that they disparage the external Word and want to hear a spirit from heaven apart from the external Word.⁷¹ What are some specific examples of how this Enthusiasm is practiced today?

It is Enthusiasm to expect divine revelation outside of Scripture as Mormons, Islam, Jehovah’s Witnesses, charismatics, and other cults do.

It is Enthusiasm to make something other than the gospel a means of grace as when music or other emotional appeals are used to manipulate a decision.

It is Enthusiasm to set another source of teaching alongside the Bible, such as Catholic and Orthodox tradition or the Wesleyan Quadraliteral (the four sources of theology are scripture,

⁷⁰ In dogmatics class, how much of your understanding of the notes did you get from pre-reading the notes before class and how much from hearing them discussed in class?

⁷¹ LW 23, 92

tradition, reason, and Christian experience). This is also becoming the dominant source of theology in the ELCA.⁷²

It is Enthusiasm when rapid shifts of sexual morality (increased acceptance of divorce, living together without marriage, acceptance of gay marriage) are based on the feeling “it can’t be wrong if it feels so right” and the claim “don’t I have the right to be happy.”

It is Enthusiasm when people seek their assurance more from their sanctification than from God’s decree of justification.⁷³

It is Enthusiasm when Calvinists say that the Spirit works alongside the means of grace, not through the means of grace.

It is Enthusiasm to use any form of human knowledge (science, archaeology, history, etc.) to pass judgment on Scripture rather than as a tool to understand the meaning of Scripture.

It is Enthusiasm of a peculiar kind when Romanizing Lutherans claim that the use of the means of grace by an ordained pastor adds something to the effectiveness of the means that is not present if they are used by a non-ordained person. It is true that the pastor speaks Christ’s Word, not his own, and that he speaks Christ’s absolution, not his own. But there is no scriptural basis for the claim that the pastor serves as an incarnation or icon of Christ in a way that ordinary

⁷² This statement was made by the first bishop of the ELCA:

The prescriptive method [of using Scripture] is based on the assumption that Scripture is used to discover final answers to questions. Thus, when confronted with a particularly thorny issue, one could go to Scripture, study carefully every text that addresses the issue and come up with a conclusive response. Scripture as “norm” means Scripture as answer book. ...I suspect that most of us in the LCA come at these matters from the descriptive method. We see Scripture as no less important. ... But for us “norm” means “guide” rather than “rule.” Having informed ourselves of what Scripture has to say, we go on to ask questions about other ways in which God may be trying to enlighten us.

The author stated that this view of Scripture is “very conservative.”

In fall of 2011 I was a presenter at a free conference at MLC in New Ulm, MN which included quite a few current and former members of the ELCA. My presentation on the doctrine of the Word in 20th century Lutheranism was last on the docket. I felt it was going to be a downer of an ending to the conference since I necessarily had said some not nice things about the ELCA, and my reactor was going to be an ELCA dogmatics professor. The day before my presentation, my reactor and I met, and he said that my presentation of the history was accurate and that his major criticism was going to be that I was too nice to the ELCA. He said that for them the discussion of inerrancy is off the table. Their approach is to demythologize the history and leave a kernel of truth that confronts hearer with an existential moment of decision. They are pure enthusiasts who have swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all. On issues like homosexuality they believe they have a higher morality than we do because we are led by a book and they are led by the Spirit. In debates about morality, Scripture is turned into a weak partner in the cacophony at the table and displaced as the sole rule and norm in favor of “listening to the voices.”

⁷³ For examples see J. Brug, “The Lutheran Doctrine of Sanctification and it Rivals,” especially the section on liberal Lutheran sanctification. This paper is based on a review of the book *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*. This paper was first presented at the North Atlantic District Conference on June 15-16, 1993.

Christians do not or that the ordained ministry itself is a means of grace that adds power to the Word.⁷⁴

It might seem strange to claim that fundamentalist charismatics, Roman Catholics, decision theology Wesleyans, and Romanizing Lutherans are all proponents of the same error, but all theologies which replace or supplement the objective Word with some sort of human or subjective addition are simply varieties of the same basic theology.

The Spoken Word Derives Its Authority from the Written Word Which Derives Its Authority from the Incarnate Word

For Luther the written Word, the Scripture, the Holy Bible, is the basis in which the spoken Word must find its foundation and the criterion by which it must be judged. Just because a man is a preacher and occupies the pulpit and the office of the ministry gives no one a guarantee that people must believe him, for there can be scoundrels in the holy ministry.⁷⁵ If any preacher comes and proclaims anything which is at variance with the voice of Christ⁷⁶ or inconsistent with Moses,⁷⁷ we are not to follow him. We are to listen only to those pastors who bring us the words and the thoughts of Christ.⁷⁸

True Christian preachers must proclaim the gospel of Christ which the apostles transmitted to us; and of those who preach this message, and only of them, we can say that they are sent by God and speak the Word of God. Those who do not preach this are false prophets.⁷⁹ What we invent or what we got from the opinions of Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, [or Luther or Walther] is not the Word of God.⁸⁰ Moreover, the church itself has no power and no right to change one single word of God, for if she had this right, the whole foundation of our faith would become uncertain, for if the church has the authority to change one word, then she has the right to change any word and all the words, “even the one by which she is founded and confirmed as a Christian

⁷⁴ See J. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, NPH, 2009, p 316-331, for a summary of this view. Here are two brief examples:

Douglas Fusselman, “Only Playing Church?: The Lay Minister and the Lord’s Supper,” *Logia*, Epiphany 1994, p 43-51. Internet.

The minister then functions as the means and instrument through which Christ Himself personally does His work in His Church. The Pastor does not function in the place of a Christ who is far removed from His people; on the contrary, Christ is personally present in the local congregation in, with, and under the person of the appointed minister.... It is precisely this mystical union of Christ’s Office and Christ’s Divine/human presence that is described in Apology VII & VIII (p 44).

It is not suggested here that the written Word is without effect. The point is that the Word proclaimed by the Pastor is MORE effective than that read by the laity. How could Luther (with Walther’s blessing) make such a contention? This statement is difficult—if not impossible—to explain unless reading words *about* Jesus is somehow different from hearing words *from* Jesus. In that case, the Office is once again the difference (p 46).

⁷⁵ WA 32, 507. LW 21, 251

⁷⁶ WA 47, 158. LW 22, 443

⁷⁷ WA 47, 192. LW 22, 483

⁷⁸ WA 33, 568f. LW 23, 352

⁷⁹ LW 22, 478 483

⁸⁰ LW 22, 484

Church.”⁸¹ We must always remember that not only individual preachers but also a whole church body may fall into error.⁸² When we hear Luther speak in this way, we must realize again how much he can still teach us. And in these days, when we are urged by ecumaniacs all over the world to listen to all the voices in the church, we need to pay a little more attention to Luther; and when we are told by scholars that Scripture grew out of the faith of the church, or that the Scripture is the gift of the church to the world, we might keep in mind that Luther said, “It is not God’s Word just because the church speaks it; rather, the church comes into being because the Word is spoken.”⁸³ According to Dr. Luther, a preacher (and this would certainly also apply with equal force to those in the teaching ministry of the church) who wants to be faithful must suppress his own words and speak nothing but the Word of God. He dare not say anything else but what God says and orders him to say; and if he does say something else, it will not be God’s Word even though he yells like mad.⁸⁴ It is evident that when Luther spoke of the oral Word and the shouted Word, the emphasis was always on the noun and not on the adjective. Luther says that Christ did not tell his disciples, “Teach them to observe what you invent,” but rather, “what I have commanded you.”⁸⁵ The written Word therefore remains the touchstone by which the spoken Word must be evaluated and judged.⁸⁶ Luther says that all the books of the fathers and the councils together cannot improve on what we find in the Holy Scriptures.

One ought to conclude from all this evidence that no man is justified in saying that in the theology of Martin Luther the Scriptures derive their character as Word of God from the basic

⁸¹ LW 34, 74

⁸² LW 34, 75

⁸³ LW 36, 144f Examples of this view would be

- 1) The Roman Catholic and Orthodox view that the church creates the Bible rather than that the Bible creates the church. It is true that the church existed before the Bible was finished, but the spoken Word that brought the church into existence was the same Word that was written in the Bible.
- 2) The *open canon* view that the church voted books into the canon the way the baseball hall of fame votes in candidates. The church cannot make books canonical. The Spirit makes them canonical by inspiring them. The church only recognizes the canon. It does not create it.
- 3) The view of *retrospective prophecy* which believes that certain biblical writings like Psalm 45 and Psalm 72 originally had no Messianic meaning but originated as exaggerated descriptions of the kings of Israel, which were later applied to a hoped-for Messiah by both Jews and Christians. This reinterpretation of the text may have taken place either before or after the prophecies were recorded in the canonical books. Even some liberal critics believe that although these predictions or hopes were not Messianic when first proclaimed, they were already being interpreted as Messianic prophecies by the time they became “canonical” by being incorporated into the book of Psalms or into the writings of the prophets. In this view, the passages become prophecy about Christ when the church makes them so. If this view is true, Adam and Eve had no gospel because Genesis 3:5 was originally about ladies and snakes.

E.g., James L. Mayes (*Interpretation: Psalms*, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994, p 236, 238) says of Psalm 72: “This prayer poem was probably composed for the inauguration of a Davidic king in Jerusalem. It was appropriate for such an occasion and has a general character that would allow it to be used repeatedly. It is not about any particular king.... By the time Psalm 72 became part of Scripture it was probably being understood by some as a prayer for the coming of the Messiah.”

⁸⁴ LW 51, 305

⁸⁵ LW 35, 148

⁸⁶ LW 23, 174

character of the Word as proclamation. Rather the very opposite is true and the spoken Word is the Word of God only when it is based on and derived from the written Word in Scripture. To Luther, the Word of God was first and foremost the Holy Bible. He gives voice to the deep awe and reverence which lie hold for this book when he says, “Only the Sacred Scriptures have such a majestic and powerful tone, even without our effort, that they can meet and dispose of all the debating tricks and compel one to say: ‘No man ever spoke like this man.’”⁸⁷ And it might be well for us to pray to the Lord for a double measure of the Spirit which Luther displayed when he wrote in the dedicatory letter to his commentary on Psalm 1, “I do not know why; but I cannot help loving those about whom I hear that they love the Holy Scriptures and hating those who distort and despise them.”⁸⁸ Perhaps out of that would come a new reformation of the church. God grant it. Amen.

Concluding Summary: Connecting the Written Word with the Incarnate Word

As we have seen, Luther asserts that God speaks in the words of Scripture. The Scriptures are *Deus loquens*. Luther identifies Scripture with the Word of God.⁸⁹ Both the Bible and Luther also call Christ the Word of God. How are these usages related?

The written Word and the incarnate Word are connected in three ways.

One way is by analogy. Just as the eternal Word does not diminish his deity by veiling it in a human nature, the written Word of God does not lose its divine nature by being joined to human words. If a thought was the Word of God when he thought it, and it was the Word of God when he said it, it remains the Word of God when it is written down and delivered by human messengers.

The second connection between the Word and the Word is that one is the source of the other. All of the Bible is the Word of God which is the Word of Christ which is delivered by the Spirit of Christ and which is delivered to human messengers. Occasionally, for good measure an angel is inserted into the chain—see the sequence in Revelation 1. The entire Bible is the Word of Christ. The Bible is not the Word of God because it tells us about Christ. It is the Word of God in all its parts because Christ speaks it to us. The Bible does not become the Word of God when we find Christ there. We find Christ there because the Bible is the Word of God through which the Spirit speaks to us with power. Some of the words of Scripture directly proclaim the gospel of Christ. Some of them support the preaching of the gospel. Some of them provide a closer or more distant background for the account of the giving of the gospel. All parts are all equally the words of Christ. I confess I feel a mild unease when told to stand for the gospel to honor the words of Christ. By this point of the service we have already had three installments of the Word of Christ.

⁸⁷ LW 14, 283

⁸⁸ LW 14, 284

⁸⁹ In this section I am reflecting Robert Preus, “Luther: Word, Doctrine and Confession,” p 1-2, 10-14. Preus seems to have used the St. Louis edition as his primary source.

The third way the two Words are related is as a means to an end. The end or goal is Christ—to be one with Christ and to be found in him. The written Word, in whatever form it comes to us, is the means to that end.

Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart, that is, the right knowledge of the heart about God. But reason cannot think correctly about God; only faith can do so. A man thinks correctly about God when he believes God's Word. But when he wants to measure and to believe God apart from the Word, with his own reason, he does not have the truth about God in his heart and therefore cannot think and judge correctly about Him. ... Truth is faith itself, which judges correctly about God. And that correct judgment is that God does not look upon our sins but believes that we are cleansed through Christ and justified through faith in him.⁹⁰

The true way to union with the eternal Word is nothing other than faith based upon the gospel in the written Word.

By reason we cannot apprehend or affirm that we are accepted into grace for the sake of Christ. But this is announced through the gospel and we take hold of this by faith.⁹¹

Luther never separates the gospel from the Scripture Word, which is always centered in Christ. Nor does he separate faith from the gospel in the Scripture Word. Faith, worked through the written and proclaimed Word, is always directed toward Christ.⁹²

Luther concluded that the entire Scriptures were Christocentric in their content. They all connect to God's plan in Christ.

Christ is the sun and truth of Scripture.⁹³

The Scriptures from beginning to end do not reveal anyone besides the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come and through his sacrifice as an innocent Lamb of God carry and take away the sins of the world.⁹⁴

Outside the book of the Holy Spirit, namely the Holy Scriptures, one does not find Christ.⁹⁵

To Luther Scripture, properly interpreted, cannot teach anything against the vicarious atonement of Christ and the doctrine of justification.⁹⁶ All Christian doctrine must center in Christ, the Savior, who is the purpose of Scripture, and the purpose of all doctrine is to lead to salvation. Doctrine is for our comfort, our forgiveness, and our union with God. Luther never tires of making this point. Scripture makes us happy, confident Christians and puts us at peace with God.⁹⁷ Scripture is our defense against temptation and the devil, the world, and our flesh.⁹⁸ Scripture instructs us in true worship and service of God.⁹⁹ Scripture instructs us how to be good

⁹⁰WA 40, 376

⁹¹WA 40, 376

⁹²W² 8, 38; 9, 839; 3, 325; 13, 1559; 5, 933; 22, 1661

⁹³WA 3, 620. The English translation has the word "sun," but the Latin has *sol et veritas*.

⁹⁴W² 17, 1070

⁹⁵W² 9, 1775

⁹⁶cf. WA 24, 549; 42, 368; 42, 277

⁹⁷W² 4, 2098.

⁹⁸W² 6, 439.

⁹⁹W² 4, 1424; 13, 573; 13, 2215-2216

theologians who point to Christ.¹⁰⁰ All these and other blessings Christian doctrine affords us because of the great power of Scripture which underlies all teaching in the church. Scripture and Christian doctrine and preaching are powerful because they point us to Christ and his grace.

All the works which Christ performed are recorded in the Word, and in the Word and through the Word he will give us everything, and without the Word he will give us nothing.¹⁰¹

By “Word” in this connection Luther means not simply the Scriptures but all teaching and preaching based upon that Word. Christian doctrine, the *solus Christus*, not only points the way to Christ, but it also confers upon us faith in our Savior and adoption as God’s children. Christ is in me and I am in him through faith. Christ is the only way to God.

Luther at times makes statements that seem to oppose Christ to Scripture. What does he mean in these statements? He cannot be saying that Scripture contradicts itself, since he often asserts that it does not. This becomes clear in his comments on Galatians 3:14 in which Luther is criticizing his opponents who quote Scripture passages praising works to oppose Christ’s work of providing complete atonement and redemption. He states:

Therefore one should simply reply to them as follows: Here is Christ, and over there are the statements of Scripture about works. But Christ is Lord over Scripture and over all works. He is the Lord of heaven, earth, the sabbath, the temple, righteousness, life, sin, death, and absolutely everything. Paul, his apostle, proclaims that he became sin and a curse for me. Therefore I hear that I could not be liberated from my sin, death, and curse through any other means than through his death and his blood. Therefore I conclude with all certainty and assurance that not my works but Christ had to conquer my sin, death, and curse. Even on natural grounds reason is obliged to agree and to say that Christ is not my work, that his blood and his death are not a cowl or a tonsure or a fast or a vow, and that in granting me his victory, he is not a Carthusian. Therefore if he himself is the price of my redemption, if he himself became sin and a curse in order to justify and bless me, I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and if you were to scream the Scripture contradicts itself, I have the Author and the Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on his side rather than believe you. Nevertheless it is impossible for Scripture to contradict itself except at the hands of senseless and stubborn hypocrites. At the hands of those who are godly and understanding it gives testimony to its Lord. Therefore see to it how you can reconcile Scripture, which, as you say, contradicts itself. I for my part shall stay with the Author of Scripture.¹⁰²

The meaning of Luther’s outburst at this point is perfectly clear. He is not contradicting the unity of Scripture nor the unity of Christian doctrine but is expressing his absolute commitment to the principles: by Christ alone, by grace alone, by faith alone. Scripture must be interpreted according to Christ and his vicarious atonement. Nothing in Scripture can oppose that great truth. Nothing in our doctrine can be taught which opposes that great fact. Nothing in our worship or lives can oppose it. Nothing in the written Word can be quoted against the incarnate Word. Luther is not setting Scripture against Scripture but he is setting Scripture properly understood against twisted misinterpretations of Scripture.

¹⁰⁰ W² 14, 435.

¹⁰¹ W² 13, 1556.

¹⁰² WA 40, 458

For Luther Christ is the center of Scripture in both the Old and New Testament. Christ is the eternal Word of God who was present at creation. He is present in the Old Testament in the Promise and as the Angel of the LORD who led Israel. He is present in the New Testament as the Word Incarnate who came and lived and died for us and for our salvation. He is present in the church in Word and sacraments. He is present in the world with ruling power, unrolling the scroll of history for his church. All of Scripture leads to Christ, and Christ leads to salvation.

The purpose of Scripture is to promote Christ and Christ alone. Two testaments tell one story and point to one Savior. Law and gospel serve one purpose. The law shows us our sin. The gospel shows us the solution. Sin has been forgiven in full. In love we live for Christ, guided by his law. It is in this way that the Word and the Word are connected. We would not have the Word without Christ, and we would not have Christ without the Word.

Resources

This paper is built on three previous studies about the doctrine of the Word in the teaching of Luther, one from a WELS writer, one from an LCMS writer, and one from an ELCA writer.

Becker, Siegbert, "Luther's Concept of the Word of God," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File. Undated.

Becker, Siegbert, "The Word of God in the Theology of Martin Luther," A paper read at The Saginaw Valley Teachers Conference, Millington, Michigan, on April 19, 1963. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File. This paper provides many more examples from Luther than the first paper listed and provides a lengthy study of verbal inspiration.

Preus, Robert, "Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession," 1993,
<http://www.confessionallutherans.org/papers/drpreus.htm>

Hagen, Kenneth, "Biblical Interpretation in the Middle Ages and Reformation," The 33rd Annual Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota, October 26 and 27, 2000, Published in the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 41:1, 2001.

Four earlier studies by the author of the present study also deal with the topic at hand.

Brug, John F., "Luther's Doctrine of the Word—The Incarnate Word in the Written Word," 2011 Edition. Presented at a free conference at New Ulm, MN, November 10, 2011.

Brug, John F., "Biblical Interpretation in 20th Century Lutheranism," The 33rd Annual Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota, October 26 and 27, 2000. Published in *LSQ* 41:1 2001 and in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File.

Brug, John F., "Why the Historical-Critical Method of Interpreting Scripture is Incompatible with Confessional Lutheranism," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File. Paper presented at a free conference in Finland.

Brug, John F., "The Battle to Preserve the Doctrine of the Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture in American Lutheranism," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Online Essay File.

One other study merits special consideration for negative reasons:

Pelikan, Jaroslav, *Luther the Expositor*, Companion Volume to the American Edition of Luther's Works, St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959, esp. p 48-70. Though this contains much useful

material, it contains seeds of what grew into Seminex theology and perhaps the seeds of Pelikan's own personal journey from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy.

For a sampling of Luther's comments on the Word read:

Plass, Ewald, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959, Vol. III, WORD, p 1460-1493.