



Lutheran CORE - Coalition for Reform

"Working Together for Positive Reform in the ELCA"

www.lutherancore.org

A Lutheran Statement on the Authority and Interpretation of Scripture In the Church

Presented by the Lutheran-CORE Steering Committee

April 15, 2007

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has begun a major five-year initiative on Scripture and the Word of God: "Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible." As members of the ELCA, we are deeply concerned about the role and interpretation of the Bible within our church, and we welcome the opportunity to participate in this important work. We offer the following statement as part of our contribution to this initiative.

1. The canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has revealed himself most fully and completely in Jesus Christ. The Bible bears witness to and receives its ultimate authority from the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as definitively revealed in, by, and through Jesus the Messiah, the incarnate Word of God, from and through whom the written Word came to be.
2. God gives his written Word to the church—the community of believers across time and space who confess and worship Jesus as Lord and Messiah and God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church is only able to recognize the authority of Scripture as the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit given to the community of Jesus Christ. Further, the church is only able to submit to and obey Scripture by this same Spirit. The misuse of the written Word by the church or individuals does not divest Scripture of its authority but rather reveals sinful disobedience and rebellion on the part of human beings.
3. The proper relationship of the church to the Bible then is that of appointed steward responsible for its correct care and use. Therefore the interpretation of Scripture is the prerogative and responsibility of the church; the church cannot and must not surrender its stewardship of Scripture to either the secular academy or others who would usurp the Scriptures for contemporary ideological agendas. At the same time, neither the church nor the individual believer is judge or master over the written Word. The church's interpretation of Scripture is bound by Scripture's own witness. For the ELCA and the Lutheran community, the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church provide a faithful and sufficient summary and witness to the content and boundaries of Biblical proclamation, faith, and life. This witness includes the biblical diagnosis of sin as the catastrophic infection affecting every human being. All human beings are sinners, turned inward upon themselves, under the judgment of God. This condition is so pervasive and dire that it can be overcome by nothing less than the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom the Old Testament's history of Israel is fulfilled and consummated. The Scripture's own distinction between law and Gospel informs and guides the church in faithful proclamation; the spoken Word is used by the Holy Spirit so that sinners are convicted of the truth that they are indeed dead in their sins, and redeemed and forgiven for the sake of Christ Jesus who transforms them for lives of new and fruitful obedience.
4. The present generation has no new authority or special revelation to authorize new or additional meanings that contradict or undermine the plain sense reading of the Bible. Responsible scholarship often deepens the church's understanding of the Word of God. One of the distinctive marks of such scholarship is concern for continuity with the church before us, and care to build upon the foundation of faith bequeathed to us. Any revision of the church's interpretation and application of the written Word can only be legitimately undertaken on the basis of the Scripture itself. Those who advocate for changes in interpretation and application are called to demonstrate how such changes are congruent with the comprehensive witness of the Scriptures and the confessions of the church.
5. Some claim that the ELCA is divided between two approaches to interpreting Scripture: one "traditional" and the other "contextual," "both of which are valid and irreconcilable." "Traditional" presumably describes the position represented by this present statement. By contrast, the "contextual" approach emphasizes the contemporary context at the expense of Scripture's intrinsic meaning and authority. Human reason, personal experience, and contemporary culture are regarded as final arbiters of the Bible. The "contextual" approach puts aside two millennia of the church's reading and interpretation of Scripture and threatens the church's confession of the Bible as God's written Word.

6. When the primacy and immediacy of the interpreter's experience and contemporary context predominate over the written Word, interpretation becomes a means of importing contemporary social political agendas into Scripture. Under the guise of contextual principles, these contemporary agendas increasingly control the church's interpretation of Scripture and threaten to displace the Bible's message of redemption and transformation. Antinomian ideologies of inclusivity and acceptance become determinative for the church's proclamation. The result is a sweeping revision of Christian faith and life, contradictory to and discontinuous with that of classical, orthodox Christianity.
7. Increasingly the "traditional" approach to Biblical interpretation is dismissed as a Lutheran version of fundamentalism. In contrast to fundamentalism, the "traditional" approach to the Bible is neither literalism nor bibliolatry. The "traditional" approach recognizes the divine and human character of the Bible; gives priority to the living Word, Jesus, from whom the Scripture receives its authority; and makes responsible use of the tools of historical criticism. The "contextual" approach, on the other hand, endangers the authority of the Bible within the church as "the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of (the church's) proclamation, faith, and life" (ELCA Constitution 2.03). The "contextual" approach so emphasizes the human nature of Scripture as to virtually exclude divine revelation from the Biblical message.
8. The claim is now quite commonplace within the church that both the "traditional" and the "contextual" approaches reflect a legitimate diversity in Biblical interpretation. Not only is the claim that both "are valid and irreconcilable," a logical absurdity but it is disingenuous as well. The two approaches begin and end with radically opposed understandings of the church and the Christian faith. More to the point are the words of Jesus: "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Mark 3:25) and "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). In reality the "contextual" approach vitiates the authority of the Bible within the church and ignores the Lutheran teaching that "Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which all doctrines should and must be understood and judged" (Formula of Concord, Epitome I, 3).

We are grateful that the ELCA has undertaken this study on the nature of Biblical interpretation. It is long overdue and is desperately needed now in our church. We desire to participate more fully in this initiative.

At the same time, we have serious concerns about this initiative. If the study merely reaffirms the current situation in the ELCA regarding Biblical interpretation, then the study will have failed, and our church will be the worse for it. Some people in the ELCA are calling for a plurality of interpretations of the Bible. We are, however, seeking for something more definitive than that.

We believe that a Lutheran understanding of the Bible is readily available to us in our Confessions and through our heritage within the church catholic. Major themes for a Lutheran understanding of Scripture should include, among others: the centrality of Christ in Scripture, the plain sense of Scripture, the distinction between law and Gospel, the relationship between Scripture and church and between Scripture and Confession, the unity of the Bible as the inspired and written Word of God, Scripture as its own interpreter, and the authority of the Bible as sola Scriptura.

May God's Spirit give us his blessing as we "search the Scriptures" anew.

Signed by Lutheran CORE (Coalition For Reform) Steering Committee:

Rev. Paull Spring, State College, PA, chair

Rev. W. Stevens Shipman, Lock Haven, PA, secretary

Rev. Mark Graham, Roanoke, VA

Rev. Ken Kimball, Waterville, IA

Rev. Victor Langford III, Seattle, WA

Rev. Erma Wolf, Brandon, SD, vice chair

Rev. Mark Chavez, Landisville, PA, director

Rev. Scott Grorud, Hutchinson, MN

Mr. Ryan Schwarz, Washington, DC

Rev. Paul Ulring, Columbus, OH

Others are welcome to add their signature to this statement by sending their name and address by email to l-core@charter.net
For more information, go to the Lutheran CORE / LC3 website at www.commonconfession.net