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About This Issue

In our ongoing series of lot on central doctrinal themes in Lutheran theology, Stephen Hultgren presents Scripture's dual nature as "The Word of God in Human Words" according to a Chalcedonian mean between extremes. The divine Word and the human words are neither confused, as in fundamentalism, nor separated, as in liberalism. Author of separate books on the synoptic Gospels, Paul, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as essays on the historical and doctrinal understanding of the Bible, Hultgren is Lecturer in New Testament at Australian Lutheran College, 104 Jeffcott Street, North Adelaide, Australia 5006; Stephen.Hultgren@alc.edu.au.

Wading into recent intra-Lutheran arguments over the law, Nicholas Hopman presents Luther's teaching on the "eternal law" as different from Lutheran "orthodoxy" but consistent with Gerhard Forde's interpretation. Of course, understandings of the law always bear on the relationship of law and gospel, so a large doctrinal field needs to be covered here in some detail. Hopman, recently in Lutheran Quarterly as co-author with Steven Paulson of "Christ, the Hated God," is a graduate of Luther Seminary and a parish pastor at 15518 Deerwood Loop, Park Rapids, MN 56470; nhopman001@luthersem.edu.

Martin Luther's famous "theology of the cross" is an elusive topic when it comes to specific texts. Hans Wiersma explores an unexpected source for seeing how this theme played out in Luther's circle of influence, namely, a particular chapter in Bremen's 1534 Church Order. Wiersma, author of a reflection on his teacher James Kittelson (LQ 18), teaches at Augsburg College, 2221 Riverside Ave, Minneapolis, MN; wiersma@augsburg.edu.

First in a pair of Comments, Robert Kolb summarizes how Martin Luther's proclamation of the Word aimed at changing lives in Wittenberg, with others following suit then and there as well as elsewhere and even now. Kolb, with LQ from the beginning of the new series, has more to say on this theme in his forthcoming book Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God (Baker, 2016). kolbr@csu.edu; Concordia Seminary, 811 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105-3190. Second in this pair is another installment in our series on the translation of Martin Luther into other languages, following on Japanese and Spanish in recent issues. Antti Raunio here narrates the complex story of Luther in Finnish, from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. Raunio teaches at the School of Theology, the University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu. Raatie 17 E; FI-80700 Helsinki, Finland; Antti.raunio@uef.fi.

The Word of God in Human Words
by Stephen Hultgren

In memoriam Hermann Sasse
(† August 8, 1976), forty years on

In the middle of the twentieth century Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse stated that developing an adequate doctrine of Scripture was the most urgent task for Lutheran theology. Sasse considered the more conservative Lutheran churches to be susceptible to a fundamentalistic view of Scripture, while he charged more liberal Lutherans with a modernistic denial of the inspiration of Scripture.¹ A half century and more later we may say that, whether or not the doctrine of Scripture remains the burning theological issue for Lutherans, its importance is certainly not less than it was in Sasse's time, as one can argue that the tendencies within Lutheranism that Sasse identified remain with us today. In this essay I will draw on some of my own previous work,² as well as engage with some of Sasse's insights, in the hope of contributing to a scripturally and confessionally adequate approach to the doctrine of Scripture.

Historical Overview

The Lutheran Confessions contain no article on Scripture.¹ The absence of an article on Scripture is both a bane and a blessing. It is a blessing in that the Lutheran church was never confessionally bound by doctrinal formulations that might have later proved to be problematic. It is a bane in that, once the orthodox Lutheran approach to Scripture collapsed, there was nothing standing ready to take its place. The absence of a doctrine of Scripture eventually exposed Lutheranism to the twin dangers of fundamentalism and liberalism, the spirits of which continue to contend for the soul of the church. These err respectively in treating Scripture as a purely "divine book," ignoring the human side of Scripture; or, on the other hand, in treating Scripture as a collection of documents
testifying to human religious ideas or experience that may or may not possess divine authority. As Sasse recognized, a resolution to the problem can only come by acknowledging both the fully divine and the fully human natures of Scripture. In order to get a handle on this point, it is helpful first to put the matter in historical perspective.

It has been said that old Lutheran orthodoxy tended towards a “divinization” or “deification” of Scripture. By this is meant that the old Lutheran theologians tended to attribute to Scripture (as Word of God) qualities of divine speech, or even of God himself, that at times threatened to eclipse the human character of Scripture. It is typical in orthodox Lutheran dogmatics to treat Scripture as the source and norm of theology in dogmatic prolegomena and then to treat the “attributes” of Scripture in a locus on Scripture. The primacy thus given to Scripture is what we would call the “Scripture principle” in the strict sense. A principle (principium) is a primary source of knowledge that is better known and prior to all conclusions that might be drawn from it. If Scripture is the principle or source for all doctrine, then Scripture can be a principle also for a doctrine about itself.

Thus the orthodox theologians confidently cite verses from Scripture to formulate their doctrine of Scripture. The chief feature of Scripture is its divine inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). The theologians had no difficulty in identifying Scripture directly as the Word of God. Scripture is not simply a witness to God’s speaking, nor a medium through which he speaks, but Scripture comes from God himself and is the very voice of God—God himself speaking (Deus loquentis). Consequently, whatever is said of the Word of God in Scripture can be predicated of Scripture itself. From this premise follow the attributes of Scripture, such as its authority, sufficiency, clarity, truthfulness (inerrancy), and efficacy.

The old Lutheran theologians, of course, do not deny that Scripture had human authors. When the human authors wrote Scripture, they did not lose their individual personalities, will, consciousness, natural capacities, writing style, or thought forms. But the orthodox theologians did tend to downplay the human role in the production of Scripture. That was rooted in the fear of exposing Scripture to the possibility of something less than full, divine inspiration, to the possibility of error, and thus to uncertainty about the authority of Scripture. The truthfulness of Scripture must extend to all matters dealt with in Scripture, including geography, history, and science. The humanness of the biblical authors could not be allowed to impinge on the divine authority of Scripture, except (perhaps) to the extent that human authorship might have a bearing on the canonical authority of a biblical text.

The orthodox “divinization” of Scripture is understandable in its historical context. The orthodox theologians were defending the Scripture principle (sola Scriptura) on more than one front. They were defending the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture against Roman Catholic theologians, who taught that Scripture was not clear enough to be a sole, sufficient authority; interpretation of Scripture required the authority of the church’s teaching tradition. They were confronting early rationalists, like the Socinians, who argued for submitting Scripture to critical judgment on the basis of human reason and who spoke freely of errors and contradictions in Scripture. And they were confronting enthusiasts, who claimed spiritual authority apart from the external Word.

That said, orthodoxy’s conception of inspiration was unsustainable. When orthodoxy treated Scripture as Word of God in the sense of a direct utterance, such that, for example, the possibility of error, limited knowledge, or contradiction in Scripture qua human writing was inadmissible, orthodoxy did not do justice to the human nature of Scripture. It was not sufficiently concerned about what the Scriptures are in their totality, including the human dimension. Indispensable to interpreting any text is knowing its origin, its genre or form, its function, and its internal structure and dynamics.

The breakdown of the orthodox view of Scripture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had many causes. Historical-critical approaches to the Bible challenged the concept of a theologically unified canon. The rise of modern science made it increasingly necessary to appeal to Scripture’s “accommodation” to human ways of viewing reality, to the point that it was no longer possible to hold that all biblical statements on nature must be binding, while the new historiography called into doubt the possibility of deriving reliable world history from Scripture. But among the causes
of the breakdown one must include the excesses of the orthodox approach to Scripture itself, which stretched the limits of plausibility and finally proved to be untenable.

All of these forces (and others) prepared the way for a very different approach to Scripture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one that regarded Scripture not so much as a document of divine revelation as a witness to human religious ideas, consciousness, or experience. The classic expression of this approach to Scripture is found in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his *Glaubenslehre*, first published in 1821/22, Schleiermacher rejected the view that the authority of Scripture was the basis for Christian faith. The apostles experienced faith under the direct influence of Christ, which is therefore the religious “original,” while later generations experience it through Scripture, specifically the New Testament. Scripture is normative for all later experiences of faith, but it contains a mixture of the canonical and the apocryphal. The apostolic age itself is not normative, because it was still under Jewish and pagan influences, of which it needed to be “purified.” Scripture is canonical to the extent that it testifies to the authentic experience (“God-consciousness,” the feeling of absolute dependence) of the faith community, which should remain unchanged from the apostles to later generations; that is what is normative.

That means that, although there is a normative standard of religious experience, the church is always open to the “development,” based on ever better understanding of Scripture—even the removal of error in Scripture—and appropriate to the time and place, of a more authentic interpretation of Christ, in which the canonical is distinguished from the apocryphal, and the latter expelled: the Spirit leading the church into all truth. As Schleiermacher put it famously elsewhere, Scripture, when it becomes the object of “servile reverence,” becomes a dead letter, a “mausoleum, a monument that a great spirit once was there, but is now no more.” The “dead letter” of Scripture endures as a witness to a spirit that seeks to be active even now, apart from Scripture if necessary. The implications of Schleiermacher’s approach are clear: the authority of Scripture is permanently subject to redefinition as the church “discovers” through the course of history what in Scripture is canonical and what is not.

This “Liberal” approach to Scripture (treating it as an expression of human religious ideas, experience, or consciousness) was severely challenged in the early twentieth century. The main problem was that nineteenth-century theology too often used Scripture to justify religious conceptions derived from other sources. After World War One, dialectical theology brought a renewed respect for the Word of God as a sovereign, transcendent authority that stands over against attempts to accommodate Scripture to human reason and culture. We can take Karl Barth’s discussion of Scripture in his doctrine of the Word of God in the *Church Dogmatics* as our reference point.

For Barth there is no simple identification of Scripture with the Word of God. The Word of God is an *event*, when God in his sovereign freedom graciously chooses and acts to reveal himself to humans. Scripture is not revelation in and of itself, and its authority does not lie in its being revelation; rather it is a written recollection of the event of revelation, a witness to the event of the Word of God. Scripture can be said to be the Word of God when it becomes the Word of God, when God uses it once again to reveal himself through it.

The incarnation of the Word of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the surest guarantee that God has revealed himself to humans. The Word of God in Christ must therefore be the basis of all knowledge of God. The prophetic and apostolic writings testify to the one Word of God in Jesus Christ. This witness to Jesus Christ is what gives Scripture its authority and its unity. The unified authority of Scripture cannot be founded on the notions of inspiration and inerrancy of old orthodoxy. The writers of Scripture were not inspired in the sense that they were amanuenses of the Holy Spirit. Rather precisely as humans, with all their limitations and the possibility of error and contradiction, they bore faithful witness to the event of revelation.

Yet the humanness of Scripture does not justify accommodating Scripture to human ideologies (contra Schleiermacher and
liberalism). The church's faith must begin and end with Christ and the biblical witness to him, not with ideas about faith derived from other sources. Precisely because the church acknowledges canonical Scripture as faithful human witness to the event of revelation, all human concepts and ideas will be submitted to Scripture. Faith approaches Scripture prepared to be confronted by a transcendent Word, open to possibilities beyond human reason and imagining.

In the wake of dialectical theology, the attempts to revive the classical dogmatic commitment to the primacy of Scripture, with the necessary modifications in the light of historical criticism, called forth much interesting and creative work. Barth's powerful doctrine of the Word of God found wide resonances in post-War, Protestant dogmatics, and well into the second half of the twentieth century. One might mention the work of Emil Brunner, Otto Weber, Regin Prener, and Wilfried Joest, to name a few. The Word of God, or the revelation of God, is to be understood in terms of event (or act), and Scripture is to be seen as (human) witness to the event of the Word, or to the event of revelation. Frank recognition of the human aspect of Scripture leads to a fundamental openness to, even a demand for, historical criticism (within proper limits), even as one wishes to respect Scripture as a transcendent Word that stands over against human ideologies.

The classical attributes of Scripture inherited from orthodoxy were not totally dismissed but were creatively received and reinterpreted. There was a widespread conviction that one must speak of the inspiration of Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16) not in terms of the inspiration of every word, but rather in terms of the inspiration of the whole of Scripture—it is not in the letter but in the overall message that Scripture is inspired. The authority of Scripture was seen to lie in its witness to the work of God in history, above all in Christ. Lutherans tended to locate the authority of Scripture in its speaking as law and gospel, where it is particularly the gospel or the New Testament that establishes the authority of Scripture. Inerrancy, if the concept is preserved at all, tends to be thought of not in terms of the absence of error in all matters or of non-contradiction between the various statements of Scripture, but in terms of Scripture's infallible witness to the God who acts in Jesus Christ, in agreement with the prophets and apostles.

At this point we may return to the work of Hermann Sasse. Sasse's goal was, if not to produce a new dogmatic statement on Scripture, at least to establish the basis for a new consensus among confessionally minded Lutherans on the nature and authority of Scripture. Sasse argued that our doctrine of Scripture should be based on how Scripture presents itself, what it witnesses to us about itself. In a certain sense, of course, Lutheran orthodoxy taught the same. As we noted, however, the problem with orthodoxy was that it tended to apply to Scripture attributes of the Word of God in a way that threatened to deny the full humanity of Scripture. Modern fundamentalism suffers from the same shortcoming. On the other hand, liberalism tends to overemphasize the human nature of Scripture to the detriment of its divine authority. Sasse argued that we must take with full seriousness both the divine and human natures of Scripture.

To that end Sasse applied analogously to Scripture the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures of Christ—fully divine and fully human. As orthodox Christology must avoid both Monophysitism and Nestorianism, so in our view of Scripture we must avoid both a supernaturalistic-docetic view, which fails to take seriously the full humanity of the biblical writings, as in fundamentalism, and a rationalistic-religionsgeschichtliche view, which separates their divine and human natures, allowing one to deny the divine authority of texts arbitrarily. Scripture as divine is of one being with all that is rightly called Word of God, and as human it is of one being with the speech and books of humans. Sasse's approach is similar to other mid-twentieth-century theologians in arguing for recognition of both the divine and human aspects of Scripture, but he departs from them—and here Sasse is in agreement with classical Lutheran theology over against Barth and the Reformed tradition—in arguing that Scripture is not only a human witness to or written record of revelation, nor is it only "potentially" the Word of God waiting to be actualized, but it is the Word of God as such. Scripture is not a dead letter but is already as letter imbued with the living Spirit that inspired its writing, and it always needs to be treated as such.

If our doctrine of Scripture is to be based on how Scripture presents itself, then we cannot base the doctrine on our own
The Return to Luther’s View of Scripture

Crucial in Sasse’s project was the recovery of Luther’s view of Scripture. Sasse effectively refutes the claim, found with more conservative theologians, that Lutheran orthodoxy’s view of Scripture was the same as Luther’s. According to Sasse, the crucial difference lies in the understanding of inspiration. For Luther the inspiration of Scripture has to do with its content, rather than a process of writing, as in Orthodoxy. Jesus Christ is the real content of all of Scripture, the center of the circle, as it were. Scripture is witness to Jesus Christ.

On this basis Sasse states that Scripture is inspired because in it is said what one can say only in the Holy Spirit, namely, that Jesus is Christ and Lord.

Luther fully recognizes the human processes involved in the composition of Scripture. The oral Word has a certain priority over the written Word, because Scripture is written for the sake of preserving the oral Word. The prophetic books and the gospels are later collections of the oral proclamation of the prophets and apostles. That means that they are not perfect, for example, in the order in which they present their material. Luther can occasionally dispute the attributed authorship of certain books in the Bible, for example, Ecclesiastes. He recognizes the biblical authors’ use of sources, including in the Pentateuch. Scripture does not enjoy the same level of historical quality throughout.

That Scripture does not enjoy the same level of quality throughout and that it shares in the weaknesses of its human authors comes through most clearly in Luther’s theological critique of certain books of the canon. Luther is confident that the proto-canonical books contain no errors in doctrine, but he does not hold the same for the deuterocanonical books (Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation). The author of Hebrews, for example, does not belong to the circle of the apostles, and so his letter possesses less authority than the apostolic writings. Luther even attributes to its author theological error, although most of the epistle contains correct teaching. All of Scripture serves Christ, but because Christ is the Lord of Scripture, Scripture must also be judged by him, that is, it must be judged according to whether it clearly teaches Christ as the Savior of sinners. As Luther famously put it: “If the opponents will use Scripture against Christ, then we emphasize Christ against the Scripture.”

In conclusion to his discussion of Luther, Sasse states, quite correctly, that Luther did not hold to a doctrine of absolute inerrancy in the sense that Scripture could not be Word of God if it contained errors in matters not touching on doctrine. For example, Luther was able to entertain the possibility that Matthew committed a “minor error” (levis error) in attributing a citation of Zechariah to Jeremiah (Matt. 27:9). And Luther was not afraid to speculate that at times historical accounts in Scripture may exaggerate in the way that other ancient historians do.

If the recovery of Luther’s view of Scripture, including its human aspect, can help resolve some of the problems that Lutherans have inherited from orthodoxy, at the same time it must be said that a simplistic appeal to Luther can introduce new problems. I have
diagnosed some of those problems and offered possible solutions elsewhere.\textsuperscript{52} I refer the reader to my earlier work for full discussion. Here I will simply summarize some of the main points. The danger is that one will use Luther’s insights and specific, reasoned judgments about Scripture as (unwarranted) grounds for a more general, even arbitrary assault on the authority of Scripture as the Word of God.\textsuperscript{53} One might appeal facilely to Luther’s ranking the incarnate Word or the preached Word above the written Word as justification for an arbitrary rejection of parts of Scripture as the Word of God. One might be tempted to extend Luther’s critical judgments on deuterocanonical books to a theological critique of proto-canonical books in a way that Luther himself did not do.\textsuperscript{54} One might appeal to his famous statement about setting “Christ against Scripture” as warrant to dismiss anything in Scripture that does not appear to \textit{us} to “preach Christ.” One might appeal to Luther’s negative statements about the Law of Moses as grounds for rejecting anything in the law that we do not like. The problem with all of these approaches, however, should be evident: Where does the assault on the authority of Scripture as Word of God and the deconstruction of the canon end? Does it ever end? Moreover, in such an approach some important points have been missed.

First, on the basis of neither Luther himself nor the Confessions can one drive a wedge between Scripture and Word of God, or between oral and written Word. Scripture exists for the sake of the orally proclaimed gospel, but that does not impair the authority of canonical Scripture as Word of God.\textsuperscript{55} Second, while it is true that Luther engaged in canon criticism, his criticism was on the basis of and for the sake of the gospel, and not for the sake of an ideology foreign to Scripture.\textsuperscript{56} Luther sincerely believed that in this kind of criticism he was allowing Scripture itself, or rather Christ who is the “Lord of Scripture,” to do the criticism.\textsuperscript{57} That sets Luther far apart from his modern, would-be followers who believe that Luther provides a model for a general critique of Scripture on the grounds of criteria drawn from outside of Scripture.\textsuperscript{58}

Third, Luther’s statement about setting “Christ against Scripture” may not be taken out of context and be made into a slogan. When Luther spoke about setting Christ against Scripture, he was protesting what he regarded as the misuse of Scripture by the Roman Catholic Church to teach justification by works.\textsuperscript{59} He was not establishing a general principle for setting Christ and Scripture against each other.

A fourth and final point is that Luther’s view of the unity of letter and Spirit should prevent us from prematurely dismissing anything in Scripture as Word of God (as it should also prohibit us from prematurely dogmatizing anything in Scripture).\textsuperscript{60} Luther, like all interpreters of Scripture in his day, inherited the medieval hermeneutical tradition of distinguishing between the letter and spirit (Spirit) on the basis of 2 Corinthians 3:6. But in Luther’s hands the relationship between letter and Spirit undergoes a profound transformation.\textsuperscript{61} There was a tendency among some medieval theologians to dismiss the clear, literal meaning of Scripture in preference for hidden spiritual meanings on the grounds that “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.” In addition, since much of the Old Testament seemed unedifying, theologians resorted to allegorical methods of interpretation. There was a tendency to set letter and spirit against each other, or to separate them.\textsuperscript{62} In some cases, the spiritual sense of a text might have to be found outside of Scripture itself.\textsuperscript{63}

Luther came to a very different view of letter and Spirit. On the one hand, Luther sees that when Paul speaks of the letter and Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:6, he has in mind the Scriptural law that condemns sinners and the Spirit that gives new life to those who have been condemned to death.\textsuperscript{61} That opens the way to a Christocentric hermeneutic, because the killing law and the life-giving Spirit meet in Christ crucified. When one understands in light of Christ crucified that the law condemns us as sinners and that the Spirit gives us new life, then one understands Scripture correctly as both letter and Spirit. Here is the basis of Luther’s law-gospel distinction.\textsuperscript{64}

On the other hand, Luther came to see that the literal (or what he preferred to call the historical-grammatical) sense of Scripture had to remain primary; otherwise Scripture becomes unintelligible, and readers are tempted to invent new meanings for Scripture. Luther was influenced by a strand of medieval hermeneutics that could speak of the “literal sense” of an Old Testament text in two ways, in terms of its historical (literal) sense and its prophetic (literal)
That approach enabled Luther to grasp that the Old Testament authors were not speaking to the later church of hidden truths, only to be revealed by the New Testament, but that they were speaking to the people of their own day about the promise of Christ, to be received by faith. That meant that the Old Testament text, already in its literal, historical sense, was full of clear, theological meaning. This approach opened the way to a reunion of letter and Spirit, a reunion of the literal, historical sense and the literal, spiritual (theological) sense of a text.

These insights lead to a consistent Christological hermeneutic. The Christ of the apostolic gospel becomes the unifying center of the entire Scriptures. Moreover, the literal, historical sense of a text already carries theological weight. With the Christ of the New Testament preaching at the center of Scripture, one does not need to look beyond Scripture for the theological meaning (spiritual sense) of any text. Scripture interprets Scripture.

The insistence on the unity of the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture has important consequences for our question. On the one hand, it can prevent us from dogmatizing every statement in the Bible, which is the fundamentalist error. In every statement in the Bible, we must not only ascertain what the “literal” sense of a text is, but also ask what the Holy Spirit intends to teach through it. We can honor the literal (historical-grammatical) sense of every text even while we recognize that its spiritual sense, from which it cannot be separated, is what the Holy Spirit intends to teach through Scripture as a whole.

On the other hand, maintaining the unity of letter and Spirit can prevent us from dismissing a priori any particular text’s authority on the grounds that, in its literal sense, it is a “dead letter”: Either the text seems to have no meaning for us today, so we ignore it. Or we feel a need to fill the words of Scripture with spiritual meanings that are derived from outside Scripture itself. These are the errors of theological liberalism. Rather, we should read every text in light of the whole of Scripture to which it (through the Spirit) is organically connected. That does not mean that we can dispense with careful exegesis on the way to discerning the literal sense of any text in its own historical and literary context. But it does mean that with respect to the authority of Scripture we will not dismiss any text a priori as a “dead letter” but will seek first to assess its authoritative claim in light of Scripture as a whole. The vast distance between this approach and that of Schleiermacher should be clear.

The Shape of the Canon

If Sasse’s great challenge (and achievement) was to develop for Lutherans a doctrine of Scripture that recognizes both the divine and human natures of Scripture, the question today may be: How does recognizing both natures actually work in practice, when it comes to questions of biblical authority? How do we know if we are binding consciences with biblical statements that God does not intend to be binding? How do we know if we are dismissing biblical statements that God does intend to be binding? Our review suggests that a genuinely Lutheran approach to Scripture will recognize that the canon has a certain “shape.” If we follow Luther, we might think of that shape as a circle, with Christ at the center. In any case, the shape of Scripture is not a flat, two-dimensional plane, as in fundamentalism, where every text in its literal sense is (allegedly) of equal status. To use a different image, Scripture is three-dimensional, with high and low points. The degree of authority that resides in any given text is determined to some extent by its relationship to other texts.

I would suggest that this image of the “shape” of the canon provides the most helpful way forward for thinking about how we honor Scripture as both fully Word of God and fully human words. When we acknowledge that not all of Scripture is of the same quality, we honor Scripture’s human nature. When we refuse a priori to dismiss the authority of any text, but rather let the shape of Scripture itself guide us in discerning the relative authority of each text, we honor the divine nature of Scripture: it is God, not we ourselves, who disposes of Scripture and its authority. It is then a matter of seeing every part of Scripture in right relationship to the rest of Scripture, according to the shape that Scripture itself has, and then letting each part of Scripture speak with its own accents and its proper authority.

To put the matter in classical theological terms, one could say that authoritative interpretation of Scripture should be according to
the “analogy of faith” (analogia fidei). If we follow Luther, in the first instance that means that Scripture should be interpreted in agreement with faith in the Christ who freely justifies sinners. In addition, however, and closely following upon this, interpretation according to the analogy of faith means that one is to interpret Scripture with reference to the whole of Scripture (tota Scriptura) and its overall shape, especially as Scripture is summarized in the articles of faith.  

To be clear: I am not arguing that the meaning of any biblical text should be dictated by the analogy of faith, as Luther can suggest; that would be a violation of good exegetical method. I am arguing that the analogy of faith can help us discern the relative authoritative weight of any biblical text vis-à-vis other texts. We might think of the analogy of faith—in the original sense of analogia as proportionality—in terms of the overall, unitary sense of Scripture, in which each part of Scripture takes its proper place and bears its proportionate weight in relationship to every other part of Scripture. The analogy of faith both restrains and frees us. It restrains us from interpreting Scripture against the Christ who justifies sinners freely and other articles of faith. But just as importantly it frees us by limiting what is required of us in terms of binding doctrinal content drawn from Scripture.

In the last section I give two examples of what respecting the “shape” of the biblical canon might look like, and how that might help us respect Scripture as both fully Word of God and fully human words. The first example will counter a fundamentalistic approach to Scripture, the second a theologically liberal approach to Scripture.

(1) Countering Tendencies in Fundamentalism

If the Word of God comes to us in the form of human speech, then we must pay careful attention to how biblical texts speak; for what a text intends to say is inextricably connected with how it speaks, that is, with its genre or form. This is where study of Scripture in terms of the categories of human literature can be most useful. It is also one of the places, however, where questions of biblical authority become most neuralgic; for there is sometimes disagreement on what the most adequate analogies are for thinking about how particular texts speak. Do chapters 1–3 of Genesis “speak” in a way that has its closest analogies in scientific or historical reports? Or do they “speak” in a way that has its closest analogies in ancient Near Eastern myths?

The question cannot be avoided. No thoughtful reader will deny that Scripture contains different genres, although people may disagree about the consequences that follow from the fact. Each kind of literature “speaks” in its own way. If we are to honor Scripture as fully divine and fully human, then, as Sasse argued, we must allow Scripture to present itself to us on its own terms, in both its divine and human natures, without allowing our preconceived notions of what Scripture can or cannot, must or must not be and say, to render premature judgment. That is not always easy to do, but it must be attempted. In the case of Genesis 1–3 one must ask: Does Scripture intend to present itself as a book of world or natural history?

The problem, of course, is that when one looks to Scripture as a whole, one will find different answers to the question. That historical facts are of importance to the message of Scripture one can hardly deny. The exodus from Egypt and the discovery of the empty tomb, for example, are cornerstones of biblical faith in the God who saves. On the other hand, it cannot be proved that it was God’s intention in every case to reveal historical or natural facts. Does God intend for us through Scripture to adopt a geocentric view of the universe (Jos. 10:12–13)? In which realm of fantasy would one today make such a claim?

If we regard the whole of Scripture as inspired, and Jesus Christ as the center of Scripture and the Lord of Scripture, then we need to look at the whole of Scripture, with Christ at the center, for answers to the question of what is doctrinally binding in Genesis 1–3. Some Lutherans have, to be sure, rejected appeal to “the whole of Scripture” (das Ganze der Schrift; das Schriftganze) as a basis for doctrine. The sedes doctrinae, it is said, must be the basis of doctrine, the sedes being the clearest and most direct statements in Scripture on a given matter, which provide the rule for less clear passages. With the latter I would basically not disagree. However, three things must be noted. First, we cannot play the sedes doctrinae and the “whole of Scripture” off one another. Already Luther considered appeal to the
whole of Scripture (tota Scriptura) as necessary in establishing articles of faith and as a basis for the sound interpretation of individual texts. Second, that one regards a text as a sedes doctrinarum does not yet necessarily tell us what in the text is doctrinally binding. Is every statement in Genesis 1–3, taken in a strictly historical sense, doctrinally binding? If so, why do we not apply the same standard to the rest of Scripture, for example, how many women witnessed the empty tomb of Jesus? Finally, I would suggest that the primary sedes doctrinarum may not always be where we expect to find them.

Let us take the doctrine of original sin as an example. If we ask what the primary sedes of the doctrine is, one might answer that it is Genesis 3, the narrative of the fall of Adam, as interpreted through Romans 5:12–14. But Genesis 3 by itself does not necessarily lead to a doctrine of original sin. Judaism considers Genesis 3 to be the Word of God, but rabbinic Judaism never developed a doctrine of original sin on its basis. Not even Romans 5:12–14 necessarily leads to a doctrine of original sin in the way that the Western church has understood it. That would suggest that Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12–14 are not sufficient and perhaps not even primary in a doctrine of original sin. Might one not say that it is insight into the human situation that Paul won through knowing Christ as his Savior, and which he expounded in Romans 7, that reveals to us the inescapable entrapment under sin in which all of humanity finds itself? Then one might ask whether the doctrine of original sin depends on a historical reading of Genesis 3. Genesis provides raw, narrative material upon which the doctrine is developed, but it is not the primary basis for it. Such an approach is Christocentric and honors the analogy of faith, where faith in Christ as the Savior of sinners and the articles of faith clarify what in Scripture is and is not doctrinally binding.

To be clear: I am not arguing that we should play Christ and Scripture off each other, that Genesis 3 is not a sedes doctrinarum, that the chapter is unimportant, or that it is not authoritative Word of God. Rather I am asking about the text’s relative place and proportionate weight within tota Scriptura. I am also asking how the text “speaks” as human word, and precisely so as Word of God. Does it speak in the mode of history or of representational narrative? I would argue the latter. Does its doctrinal authority—that is, what we will teach normatively about human nature and sin on the basis of the text—depend on it being of the genre of history? I cannot see how it does. Then can we not acknowledge the full humanity of the text while also affirming its full divine authority—can we not believe that, like Adam himself, the text arose out of the earth of ancient Near Eastern myth, but, at the same time, receiving the breath of God, was purified of its pagan, mythological features through the divine inspiration of its human authors and was ordered by divine providence towards the revelation of its deepest truth in the appearance of the Second Adam? We can and must distinguish within Genesis 3 between what is doctrinally binding and what is not. What we should not do is try to separate within the narrative the Word of God from human words. It is the narrative as a whole that is the bearer of the Word of God, and it is not for us to decide a priori where divine speech can or cannot occur; God decides that. But we can discern that by looking to the rest of Scripture.

(2) Countering Tendencies in Liberalism

A question that frequently confronts the church is the extent to which specific biblical commandments are to be taken as divine, universally binding commandments, and when they may be taken as merely passing provisions, possibly even of human invention. That applies especially to Old Testament law, although the question also arises in relationship to apostolic injunctions and even Jesus’ teaching. This question has become the occasion for painful divisions within Lutheranism in recent decades, especially on the topics of the ordination of women and the church’s teaching on homosexual behavior.

That some biblical commandments are of passing significance is, of course, not in question. Christians mostly ignore the Torah’s dietary laws, and they have clear biblical warrant for doing so (Mark 7:19; Acts 10–11; Rom. 14:14; Gal. 2:14; Titus 1:15). The Law of Moses contains commandments that belong to the civil or ceremonial law of Israel and are not universally binding. That has been recognized by the church from the earliest period. But that raises the questions: Which commandments are of passing significance, which
are of enduring significance, and how do we know the difference? Can we perhaps even regard some commandments in Scripture as of human invention?\(^2\)

The question is not a new one. The second-century gnostic Ptolemy, in his attempt to explain differences within the Torah as well as to reconcile the Law of Moses with Jesus' teaching, argued that some of the laws of Moses were of human and not divine origin. That approach presented a challenge to the early church, because it threatened to lead to the disintegration of the canon of (Old Testament) Scripture. It was the great achievement of early theologians such as Justin and Irenaeus to preserve the full, divine authority of the Law of Moses by placing it within a salvation-historical framework.\(^3\) Irenaeus taught that one must respect how Jesus treated the law and why. For Irenaeus commandments that appear in both the old covenant and the new covenant are not abolished for Christians.\(^4\) In this way Irenaeus allowed the shape of the biblical canon itself to be the controlling factor in determining how the Old Testament law continues to apply to Christians, rather than relying on some other authority. I would argue that we must still do the same today, following Jesus' and the apostles' patterns for relating the gospel and the Old Testament law. That is respecting the shape of the canon.\(^5\)

The New Testament relates the gospel to the law in different ways. Jesus and the apostles sometimes abolish Old Testament law. But at other times they affirm it, clarify it, or deepen or intensify it. When one studies the gospels one finds that Jesus shows profound respect for the Law of Moses. When he challenges some of its imperatives, he does so not out of an abstract criticism of law but on the basis of competing principles or imperatives; for example, that the Sabbath law is given for the sake of human life, and the latter outweighs the imperative not to work (heal) on the Sabbath; or that God's will for marriage is rooted in creation (Torah!), and that creational intent outweighs Moses' concession of divorce; or that the imperative to follow Jesus outweighs even the command to honor father and mother.\(^6\) Jesus rebuked those who placed human traditions above explicit divine commands—even if those human traditions were ultimately derived from Scripture (Mark 7:9–13). As

for Paul and the apostolic church, they did not abolish Mosaic laws arbitrarily. In some cases the distinction between laws of passing significance and laws of enduring significance was based on Scripture itself,\(^7\) in other cases on Jesus' teaching;\(^8\) in other words, it was based on divine authority.

We cannot make blanket statements about the law and the New Testament. Rather we must look at each case on its own terms, to learn how Jesus and the apostles relate the gospel to the law, and why. That means that no biblical commandment should be treated a priori as a "dead letter," but should always be related to the whole of Scripture to which it is organically related through the Spirit. We must look for Scripture's consistent witness, trajectories of development, Jesus' and the apostles' patterns of relating the gospel to the law, and the like—in other words, we must respect the shape of the canon. When we find a consistent witness in the Old and New Testaments, or clear patterns of relating the gospel to the law, the church will honor the apostolic witness on those matters, in the confidence that it hears the voice of the Holy Spirit in the unified witness of the Old and New Testaments. Critique of biblical law can never be a matter of humans criticizing laws of human invention on the basis of human authority. Rather it is a matter of observing how God (Jesus) himself has disposed of his own, divine law within the history of salvation and so has shown us what is of enduring and binding significance and what is not. Only so can we hope to have an objective measure in deciding controverted matters.

**Conclusion**

It seems to me a good thing that the Lutheran church, like the ancient church, has not dogmatized a detailed doctrine of Scripture as the Word of God. The church of the first five centuries showed great wisdom when it recognized limits in dogma, tending to make articles of faith only out of those matters that have the clear and consistent witness of canonical Scripture. The church affirmed that Christ came down from heaven and became incarnate "for us humans and for our salvation", and that he was crucified "for us," but it did not dogmatize a particular understanding of how salvation
happened. The wisdom lay in recognizing that Scripture offers more than one way of thinking about how salvation happened in Christ—the doctrine of atonement does not need to be reduced to a single teaching.

Likewise our creed affirms that the Holy Spirit “spoke through the prophets”—Scripture is inspired—but the church did not dogmatize a particular view of how inspiration happened. The Lutheran church has been wise not to try to explain or define inspiration in a dogmatic way. As we have seen, Scripture testifies of itself that it is inspired, but it does not tell us how it is inspired. Acknowledging limits in dogmatic definition in this matter has served the church well, and we can expect that it will continue to serve the church well.

That said, I see no reason not to pursue a doctrine of Scripture. In fact, since for Lutherans all articles of faith are to be established only on Scripture, the church needs to know how to derive authoritative teaching from Scripture; and for that, it needs to know what it believes and teaches about Scripture. Despite Sasse’s worthy labors, the hope for consensus in a Lutheran doctrine of Scripture remains unfulfilled. The pursuit of such consensus, in my view, remains worthwhile. As in other matters, for example, the doctrine of atonement, I would argue that there may not be only one way to approach a doctrine of Scripture, but there are better and worse ways. I agree with those who have argued that Scripture is best approached when we honor it both as fully Word of God and fully human words, which helps us avoid the errors of both fundamentalism and liberalism, the two chief dangers to a genuinely confessional Lutheran approach to Scripture.

There is much to learn from the insights and errors of the past. We encounter profound problems if we ignore either the divine or human nature of Scripture, or if we seek a priori to separate the two natures. The excesses of old orthodoxy and of modern fundamentalism prevent us from seriously grappling with the human aspects of Scripture, the varying quality and theological views of the different parts of Scripture, and their varying degrees of authority in relationship to each other. On the other hand, liberalism has too often reduced Scripture and accommodated its authority to human ideas and experiences, too quickly dismissing the claims of Scripture as merely human. Here dialectical theology, with its emphasis on Scripture as a transcendent Word of God that addresses us beyond our own reasoning and imaginations, has been an important corrective.

We honor Scripture as divine and human by taking seriously its “shape.” As conditioned by its human nature, we acknowledge that Scripture comes to us with varying qualities and theological emphases, along with limitations and deficiencies. But notwithstanding the foregoing, we also acknowledge that Scripture is in its entirety the Word of one Spirit. By letting the shape of the canon guide us, we allow Scripture to interpret itself in terms of its binding authority and thereby reveal its divine claims on us. That is not to say, of course, that we are not responsible for interpreting Scripture, using carefully all of the critical faculties and tools at our disposal to understand the nature of the biblical texts and what they aim to say. But it does mean that when it comes to hearing Scripture as a divine Word to us, that is, in discerning what is binding teaching for the church, we must in the end allow Scripture to interpret itself. Only so will the church have an objective standard of Scriptural authority.

Nor does that mean that there will never be disagreements in the church on what in Scripture is binding and what is not. Not even the clearest, agreed upon doctrine of Scripture will spare the church such disagreements. One thing, however, we should keep in mind: If we no longer believe that Scripture is basically self-interpreting in terms of its divine authority, or if we do not allow it to function as such, then there may be nothing left but to concede that human reason or tradition is the ultimate arbiter over Scripture. Then, I fear, the end of the Lutheran confession is in view.

NOTES


2. For my previous work relating to the doctrine of Scripture, see the three publications cited in notes 51, 57, and 71 below.
3. Even though there were early attempts within the Lutheran movement at formulating aspects of a doctrine of Scripture. For a summary of these early attempts, see Sasse, Saraa Scripta, 206–07, 212 (= Kloha/Feuhrerh., Scripture and the Church, 53–55, 62).


5. On the place of Scripture in dogmatic prolegomena and in the doctrinal loci of Lutheran orthodoxy, see Preus, Theology, 72–257, esp. 73–98, 107–09, 115–26, 235–57. According to Preus (p. 97), some, but not all, of the early theologians have a locus on Scripture, not necessarily first in order. The later orthodox theologians follow Johann Gerhard in discussing Scripture as source and norm of theology in the prolegomena, while the divine origin and attributes of Scripture are handled in the locus on Scripture (p. 116), usually first in order (p. 256).

6. Preus, Theology, 115–16. Preus notes that “at this point Gerhard breaks with Thomas, who taught that the articles of faith were the sources (principia) of theology. Gerhard states that articles of faith are principia, truths based on the one principium of theology, namely Scripture.” See further pp. 89, 237 n. 16.

7. Preus, Theology, 382.


14. I say “perhaps” because the earlier theologians were inclined to distinguish between proto-canonical and deuterocanonical books within Scripture, whereas the later theologians, fearful of allowing human, historical judgments as to the authenticity and authority of Scripture, tended to iron out the difference (Preus, Theology, 395). See also Heinrich Schmid, The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4th ed. tr. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1899), 80–91.


17. Preus, Theology, 271, 297–98.

18. Preus, Theology, 340–43.

19. See Scholder, Birth, 46–87. Orthodoxy already held a theory of accommodation with respect to the writing style, perception, and understanding of the secondary (human) authors of Scripture, but it denied that such accommodation implied the possibility of error in biblical statements on nature and history (Preus, Theology, 289, 348, 355; note also, however, pp. 358–59, where reference is made to Cort Atakass and his defense of the Copernican theory of the universe). Now, however, it became increasingly difficult to hold that Scriptural statements on matters of nature and history could be regarded as binding.


21. For the following, see Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, 586–611.


27. The para graph of 2 Tim 3:16 can be interpreted either way, and apparently was interpreted differently in different contexts already in Orthodoxy (Preus, Theology, 310–11).


30. See Paul Althaus, Die christliche Wahrheit: Lehrbuch der Dogmatik (2 vols.; 2nd ed.; Gütersloh: B. Bertelsmann, 1949), 198–200; Werner Ebert, Der christliche Glaube: Grundlinien der lutherischen Dogmatik (3rd ed.; Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1950), 183–89; Prenter (pp. 112–14) can even say that Scripture is to be read as gospel, whereas law is to be sought outside of Scripture.

31. E.g., Prenter, Creation and Redemption, 92, 128.

32. Sasse, Saraa Scripta, 208–09 (= Kloha/Feuhrerh., Scripture and the Church, 57–58); in the latter see also p. 314.

34. Sasse was not, of course, the first or only Lutheran theologian to formulate the matter in this way.

35. Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 222-25, 230 (= Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 75–78, 85); in the former see further pp. 276, 288–89, in the latter pp. 178, 311–12, 334, 336.

36. Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 224 (= Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 77), see also in the former pp. 276–77, and in the latter pp. 114, 116, 322, 325–26. Preus, *Theology*, 376–77, comments on the orthodox Lutheran doctrine of the unity of Word and Spirit and the efficacy of Scripture (even *extra iusum*) against Calvinism. For Barth, the union of the divine and human natures that occurs in the incarnation of Christ does not apply to the written word of Scripture (*Barth, Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 490–99). The Word of God does not inhere in the words of Scripture (p. 320), so that Scripture must be said to be a sign of the Word of God (pp. 507, 581). True, in Scripture we always meet both the human and the divine, and it is not for us to try to differentiate between letter and spirit, or between the divine and the human—only God can decide when Scripture will become Word of God for us (pp. 501, 531). Even so, Scripture can only attest—it cannot itself reveal—the revelation that occurred in the person of Christ (p. 500).

37. E.g., Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 336.

38. The fact that both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures (even though they often disagree with each other) are authoritative for New Testament authors shows that it is not always the exact wording but the overall content that is authoritative. See Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 235–36 (= Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 235–37). In the former see also pp. 260–67, in the latter p. 112.


42. See, for example, Sasse's work on the doctrine of creation, where he accepts historical-critical judgments on the texts of Genesis, and also exercises great care in drawing doctrinal content from them: Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 45–111, esp. 46, 47, 55–58, 86, 89, 94, 99–100, 103. Elsewhere Sasse states that there is no greater danger to the unity of the church than making a theological opinion into a dogma. He makes this comment specifically against those who use John 10:35 as biblical proof for absolute inerrancy (*Sata Scriptura*, 297).

43. See especially his Letter 16, "Was sagt uns Luther über die Irrtümlichkeit der Heiligen Schrift?" (pp. 201–320 in *Sata Scriptura*, English translation in Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 116–57).


46. Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 216 (= Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 67). In the former see also p. 284, in the latter pp. 114, 335.


51. See further Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 262 (= Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 245), and in the latter pp. 111, 165–66.


53. Indeed, one finds appeal to Luther to justify such an approach already at the beginnings of critical theology, in the work of Johann Salomo Semler. See Hultgren, "Holy Scripture and Word of God," 80–81, and references there.

54. According to Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 311 (= Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church*, 144), Luther did not extend his theological criticism of the deutero-canonical books to the books of unquestionable canonicity.


57. Hultgren, "Holy Scripture and Word of God," 64.

58. The one may also note that in the Lutheran Confessions, which are our normative documents, Luther's canon criticism recedes in importance. Attempts are made to integrate books whose canonicity was questioned, such as James, into the confessional framework. See Hultgren, "Holy Scripture and Word of God," 69–70. See further my comments in "On Being 'Lovers of Truth': The Canon of Scripture and the Church's Commitment to Truth," *Rightly Handling the Word of Truth: Scripture, Canon, and Creed* (ed. Carl E. Braaten; Delhi, New York: ALPB Books, 2015), 11–52, here 38–40.

59. Sasse, *Sata Scriptura*, 230–24 (= Kloha/Feuerhahn, *Scripture and the Church, 72–73*).

59a. The discussion here has been slightly modified from my earlier discussion in "Holy Scripture and Word of God," 59–62.


64. See Ebeling, *Anfanage* for full discussion. I summarize the main points in my "Holy Scripture and Word of God," 61–63. But I wish to correct myself here. On p. 61 of that essay I translated WA 4:40.2 in the sense that "[w]hen Christ was crucified, he
became the ‘spirit as rejected letter, the truth as figure or shadow of truth’ [p. 197 in the 1992 reprint]—‘Denn Christus ist die veritas, spiritus reiecta litera, quae facta umbra veritatis’—rather than directly from Luther’s text. However, Erwin Möhlau, ed., *D Martin Lutheri Psalmen Auslegung*, 3 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959–65), 2:314–15, translates better the whole Latin phrase, *et veritas non promissio nis impleto, vel certe spiritus reiecta litera, quae fuit umbra veritatis*, as “Aber meine Wahrheit d. h. die Erfüllung der Versprechen oder der Geist, nicht der Buchstabe, der nur ein Schatten der Wahrheit ist.” The English translation of Ebeling’s article (p. 150) also incorrectly translates the Latin: “For Christ is the truth; the spirit rejects literal things, which are only shadows of truth.”

68. In none of this do I mean to adopt 2 Cor 3:6 as a general, biblical hermeneutical key. “Letter and Spirit” Paul does not have textual meaning in mind. But quite apart from 2 Cor 3:6, an insistence on the unity of letter and Spirit makes sense within a doctrine that holds all of Scripture to be inspired by the Holy Spirit.
70. I say “allegedly” because no careful reading of Scripture can actually maintain this viewpoint consistently. Fundamentalism inevitably ends up twisting the meaning of words to make all of Scripture consistent with itself.

71. See Otto Hof, “Luther’s Exegetical Principle of the Analogy of Faith,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 38 (1967): 242–57, who notes that for Luther there is one article above all ( justification) that constitutes the analogy of faith (pp. 245, 255), but that Luther does not neglect the articles of faith of creed and confession (p. 246). The articles of faith, as a summary of *tota Scriptura*, serve as a valid touchstone for valid interpretation of Scripture. Elsewhere I have given examples of how referring to the articles of faith, as a summary of Scripture, can help in dealing with difficult texts. See my “Holy Scripture and Word of God,” 90–92; and my essay, “Canon, Creeds, and Confessions: An Exercise in Lutheran Hermeneutics,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 46/1 (2012): 26–50.
73. For more discussion and examples of this point, see my “On Being ‘Lovers of Truth’,” 38–40.
74. See, for example, Flacius’s understanding of the *analogia fidei* in the historical overview of the concept in Bernhard Gertz, *Glaubenswelt als Analogie: Die theologische Analogie-Lehre Eich Przewoda und ihr Ort in der Auseinandersetzung um die analogia fidei* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 63.
76. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatik*, 1:201–02, 333, 362–64. See also the 1932 “Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod,” which (paragraph 2) rejects a “man-made so-called ‘totality of Scripture’” as the basis for a rule of faith in interpreting Scripture.