

Australian Theses on Scripture and Inspiration

By John P. Meyer

In our April number we published the theses which the Joint Intersynodical Committees of the two Lutheran synods in Australia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, have adopted. These theses have been submitted to the pastors and congregations of the respective synods.

It warms one's heart to read in them confessions like the following: "Holy Scripture is, without limitation, God's Word. Everything which Scripture says is God's Word. On the other hand nothing can be proclaimed as Word of God which is not taught in Scripture" (Th. 2). Thus all of Scripture without reservation is declared to be the Word of God, our mighty and majestic God; and the Word of God which we possess is limited to the Scriptures, with nothing to be added, nothing omitted, and nothing that deviates from the Scriptures to be granted recognition.

To this we add another declaration: "We believe and confess that Holy Scripture does not only contain the Word of God, but that it is God's Word as a whole and in all its parts. We reject as unjustified the attempts made to distinguish between that which is Word of God in the Scripture and that which is not" (Th. 3).

These words breathe the spirit of Samuel: "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." Of the words of the Bible some may stand in more direct relation to Christ than others, some may affect our faith more immediately, others more remotely, but as far as divine authority and divine infallibility is concerned, there is no difference; they are all exactly on the same plane. We should be violating the majesty of our God if we declared any of His words to be less binding on our conscience than others. True, some may seem less important for our spiritual life than others, but every one, be it about an ever so trifling matter, is, because spoken by God, of such overwhelming weight and authority that it will make the world too narrow for us.

These words of the Australian Theses have a different ring from the Sandusky Resolutions, which brazenly declare "that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines." An altogether different ring from the Friendly Invitation, which assumes "areas where there exists an allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God" and which brands the demand for a "unified statement" as a "threat to evangelical liberty of conscience." Any document that now emanates from the spirit of the (unretracted) Sandusky Resolutions and the (unretracted) Friendly Invitation cannot but be tinged with that same spirit; but a document which wholeheartedly proclaims the Scriptures as a whole and in all its parts as the express Word of God may not always be worded quite satisfactorily and may even contain actual slips of expression, yet such naevi will be corrected by the unmistakable statements quoted above.

It is our intention to point to some naevi and to plead for correction. We are now not thinking of mere externals, as, a loosely used connective, a misplaced comma, and the like, but of things which affect the sense of the document.

It makes one stop and hesitate, when one reads in Th. 6 with reference to inspiration that "God ... gave to men ... His Word *of revelation*." Nothing more is said, but one can hardly avoid the impression as though inspiration and revelation were co-extensive, that the boundaries of both coincide, that for all practical purposes revelation is inspiration and inspiration is revelation. However, there are many things contained in the Scriptures which the writers knew in a natural way without a special revelation of God. The expression quoted above, although it does not say it in just so many words, may, by implication, easily lead to the idea as though such things which the writers knew from human sources are to be excluded from the act of inspiration because they are not strictly God's "Word of revelation." Inspiration is not limited to special revelations, but it pertains to the trustworthy transmission of God's message in all its parts which the men of God delivered in His name. Also such things are covered by inspiration which the writers knew from personal observation, from the reports of eye and ear witnesses, from a study of secular source material.

The last sentence of Th. 4 expresses a great truth: "Our belief in the Bible is faith in the Triune God, who speaks to us in the Scripture," but is the division voiced in the first sentence: "God the Father, through God

the Holy Ghost, proclaims the Son,” fully warranted? It is true, as the cited passages indicate, that Jesus is the chief theme, the very heart of the Bible message. But is it proper to solemnly mention Jesus as only the topic of the Bible, and not as its author? and the Father as the author in contradistinction from the Son and the Spirit? (To the list of passages 1 Pet. 1, 11 should perhaps be added.)

The fact that Jesus is the key to a proper understanding of the Bible is easily forgotten. When we rejoice that Luther gave us Christians of German descent the “open” Bible, we often think only of the fact that he translated it into the German vernacular, so that people can read it even without any knowledge of the ancient languages. But Luther opened the Bible for us by teaching us to find Christ in it. Yet, is it not an overstatement when Th. 5 declares “that Holy Scriptures can be rightly understood only by those *who believe* in Jesus Christ”? The quotation from the Apology points to the importance of the article of justification for a proper understanding of the Scriptures, but it does not say that only a believer can have such understanding. Do unbelievers reject, e.g., the article of justification by grace alone because they cannot grasp the meaning of the words? Rather, just because they understand the words they reject the doctrine. The real Christ crucified is to them foolishness and a stumbling block—What about the *theologia irrogenitorum*? Here compare A. C. VIII, and especially the word of Jesus which is cited there.

There are particularly two passages in the Theses which seem out of harmony with the splendid confession quoted at the beginning of this brief review, one in Th. 2, the other in Th. 10.

In Th. 2 we find the statement that “the Word of God is not identical ... with Scripture.” This statement is placed in contrast with the other, viz., that “Holy Scripture is, without limitation, God’s Word.” It is introduced by the concessive conjunction “although.” The entire sentence, being preceded by “therefore,” is based on assumptions stated in the preceding ones: “This content (the Eternal Son of God) it (the Bible) has in common with the oral Word either preceding or following the written Word.” What is the oral Word which preceded the written Word? When the apostles wrote their letters they placed them on the same level with the word which they had previously proclaimed orally to the respective churches. This made good sense in their case. The readers had received the Gospel message as it was spoken to them by the apostles, they had accepted it in faith because they recognized it as the Word of God. Now, so the apostles assured them, they may, yes, they must receive the written word in the same spirit. They cannot accept the one and reject the other. Both are on the same level, both are given by inspiration. They heard the spoken message, they read the written message. To them it made good sense when they were assured that both were equal as to inspiration.

But what do we today know about the spoken word of the apostles? The only information we have in the case, and all the information that we are able to get, is that contained in the Bible. For us, then, the distinction and coordination of the two forms in which the Word of God was proclaimed is of little practical consequence. We are dependent for our information about both on the same source, the Bible.

The second part of the above quotation harbors graver danger: the oral Word *following* the written Word. To what does this refer? Do the Theses mean the Word of God as the apostles preached it on subsequent visits? Then the same situation would confront us as concerning the Word which they preached before writing their letters. Or do they mean the Word of God as it is being proclaimed by the Church? All preaching of the Church that will meet the standards of God is drawn from the Scriptures and based on them. The Church has not been promised any new revelations, revelations that may go beyond the Scriptures. True, the Church has the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth, but He, who does not speak of His own, merely brings to our remembrance what Jesus Himself has already taught us. True, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the Church, when confronted with new difficulties, will be led into a deeper and fuller understanding of the Word; but again, there are no new revelations. Or has the Church the inspiration in the sense in which this is predicated of the writings of the apostles and prophets?

What does it mean to place the subsequent spoken Word, as spoken by the Church, on the same level with the written Word of the Bible? One is reminded of Brunner with his stress on the *viva vox ecclesiae*. He militates against a “nonhistorical emphasis on the Bible,” which he calls “an unspiritual traditionalism” and charges that it “deifies the ‘letter’ of the Bible, as if the Spirit of God were imprisoned within the covers of the written word,” maintaining that “even the Word of the Bible is only the *means* of the real Word of God, Jesus

Christ, and that therefore, . . . fundamentally *it stands upon the same level as the testimony of the Church*” (Italics mine. M.) For anyone holding Brunner’s views the words of Th. 2 would make good sense, but in view of the staunch confession of the Theses quoted at the beginning of this review they leave an unpleasant aftertaste.

In Th. 10 we read the correct statement that “none of the natural limitations which belong to the human mind even when under inspiration of the Holy Ghost can impair the authority of the Bible or the inerrancy of the Word of God.” But this sentence assumes a different aspect when read in the light of a statement preceding it by a few lines: “God made use of them (the distinctive features of the personalities of the writers) in such a manner that even that which human reason might *call a deficiency* in Holy Scripture must serve the divine purpose” (Italics mine. M.) What are deficiencies? Are they lack of formal education? lack of elegance in style? violation of the rules of strict grammar? Take the case of anacolutha—some masters of style use an occasional anacoluthon most effectively. Elegance of style and correctness of grammar are, after all, very relative terms, even humanly speaking. What then are deficiencies? The term itself is broad enough to include errors in the argumentation (violations of logic) or even in the presentation of facts, and the like. When theologians, who have not the gift of inspiration, commit errors of that type in their writings, or preachers in their sermons, while otherwise faithfully proclaiming the truth of the Gospel and correctly dividing Law and Gospel, the Holy Spirit will graciously prevent the human error from having evil effects. This is our consolation. But when the Holy Spirit gave the Word of God to His chosen instruments by inspiration, when He Himself, even according to the inadequate phrasing of the Pittsburgh Agreement, “*supplied* to the holy writers content and fitting word,” the case is different. In the case of preachers and theologians the Holy Spirit in His assistance can be satisfied with the warding off of any damage which their lapses might cause, while in inspiration He would Himself be suggesting the error of fact or of expression.—The word “deficiency” should be replaced with another, with one which would preclude the possibility of using it to cover actual error.

Let the beauty of the confession contained in Theses 2 and 3 shine forth in unmarred splendor.