

# The Proper Doctrinal Use of the Bible

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[California Pastoral Conference, Pomona, California, April 15, 1969]

Introduction: Defining the issue. Do we (WELS) always avoid the possibility of reading and using the Scriptures *deductively*? Do we always use the Scriptures as the *source* of our doctrines? Or as a hunting ground to prove our ore-conceived ideas?

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  - b. Twisting and distorting a clear meaning to conform to our own. Application to us?
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## Introduction

St. Paul wrote to Timothy that the Scriptures are, among other things, "profitable for doctrine." This, of course, can only be true if the Scriptures are *used* properly. And as we well know from Church History, this has not always been the case. For centuries the Bible was known as the "book of heretics." Already in the Third Century Tertullian complained that there was no use in trying to use the Bible to disprove heretics because the assurance of victory was so slight. He felt that the Scriptures could be interpreted and understood in so many ways that heretics could prove their views from the Bible as well as the orthodox (Robert Grant: p. 102). And it was this feeling about the Bible that eventually led the Catholic Church to make this book a member of the list of Prohibited Books, It was s dangerous book! Men got all sorts of wrong and heretical ideas from it! Every heretic of every age has always pointed to the Bible to back up his teachings.

So it is that today, too, there are teachers of every variety and description laying claim to the teachings of the Bible. Everyone quotes the Bible in his own defense. This leads us to the obvious conclusion that someone is not using the Scriptures properly. This essay, then, will deal with the Proper and Improper Doctrinal Use of the Bible, And the main issue will be this: Do we ever employ methods in our use of the Bible that result in our own voice being heard above God's? Do we ever use the Bible as though it were a hunting ground for proof texts to back up ideas that we already have? Does every proof text that we quote really say what we say that it says? Put another way, we are going to discuss the difference between an Inductive and a Deductive Use of the Scriptures, To refresh your memory Inductive reasoning takes a body of facts and extracts certain truths from them. These are the good guys. This is exegesis. Deductive reasoning on the other handy start with an idea or a theory and then looks around for facts and evidence to back it up. These are the bad guys. This is eisegesis.

Very simply, then, our question is: Are we exegetical and inductive in our use of the Scriptures; or do we sometimes lapse into eisegesis and deductive reasoning? Do we make proper doctrinal use of the Bible?

One more introductory point. I have been asking “Do *we* do this or do *we* do that?” Who is *we*? Our subject could be discussed on various levels. The *we* could be orthodox Christianity in general in its endless battles against the Arians, Anti-Trinitarians, Pelagians, and all the rest. Such a study would examine what the Bible says-concerning the person of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, the way to salvation and other basic Christian teachings. We would then be asking whether *we*, as orthodox Christians have properly used the Scriptures in arriving at the doctrinal formulations that are the basis of our faith. Or we could discuss this subject on the level of Protestants vs. Catholics. Are *we* as Protestants correct in our judgments about Roman Catholic doctrine? Do *we* as Protestants correctly use the Bible in all points of difference with Catholics? Or we could discuss the subject on the level of Lutherans vs. Protestants. Are *we* as Lutherans correctly teaching what the Bible says concerning, for example, the means of Grace—the Real Presence, Baptismal Regeneration? All of these approaches would be instructive and beneficial. But we are going to approach the problem of this essay within the bounds of Lutheranism itself, specifically conservative Lutheranism, more specifically Wisconsin Synod Lutheranism? This will be our primary application. Do *we*, as pastors of the Wisconsin Synod, use the Bible properly in all matters of doctrine and practice? Or are we ever guilty, intentionally or unintentionally, of reading our own ideas into the Scriptures and passing them off as the Word of God? It is hoped that a discussion of this kind will make us more acutely aware of the necessity of exercising extreme care in our use of the Scriptures so that we do not make the Bible say what we want it to say but that we will allow it to instruct us. When we say “Says the Lord,” we want to make sure that it really is the Lord who is saying it.

### **Part I: Some Improper Uses of the Bible**

Dr. Ralph Bohlmann, assistant professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in an article untitled “Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions” isolates three criticisms that our confessions level against Roman Catholic use of the Scriptures. We are going to use these three misuses of the Bible which he describes as our own starting point for our discussion of the Improper Use of the Bible. In the first place, according to Dr. Bohlmann, our confessions complain that the Romanists are *selective* in their use of Scripture. The Apology says: “They select passages about law and works but omit passages about the promises” (Ap. IV,183); or again, “It is surely amazing that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith and specially deny it to works. Do they suppose that this is repeated so often for no reason? Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares? But they have thought up a piece of sophistry to evade thorn” (IV,107-109); or once again, “Moreover, why do they (Romanists) not present the *whole* sermon? The admonition has many parts, some of which command faith, others works. An honest reader would not pick out the commands about works and skip the passages about faith” (IV, 284). The issue in 1530, of course, was justification by faith without the deeds of the Law. The Romanists incorrectly used Scriptures when they repeatedly quoted the passages that seemingly supported their work-righteous point of view and ignored all the rest.

Another example of this same misuse of Scriptures, that is, the *selective* use, would be the Seventh Day Adventists and their insistence on keeping the law of the Old Testament. How many Adventist sermons do you suppose are preached on the text Col. 2:16-17? (“Therefore let no man judge you in meat or in drink or in respect to a holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath.”) Or how often do the Adventists study the Epistle to the Galatians with its polemic against the Judaizing tendency? They avoid these writings like a plague because in these places Scripture condemns their law-infested doctrines. They select only those passages which talk about the law and the necessity of keeping the law,

Luther has this to say about the selective use of the Scriptures:

“(Heretics) are not so pious as to *compare* passages; but they tear a bit here and a bit there out of the context; and when they have a word or two, they fall to babbling before the peoples so that

the people do not see what else and what more Scriptures says on the matter. Indeed, if one were allowed to tear one or two words out of a text and ignore what has preceded or what follows or what is said at *other places* of Scripture, then I, too, could certainly give all Scripture and language any explanation and direction I please” (*What Luther Says*. #296).

But now as stated earlier, our primary application of this question of the Proper Doctrinal Use of the Bible is to be directed toward ourselves. And here the going becomes quite sticky because any suggested application may immediately be understood as a denial of that which is being examined. However, such application must be made if we are honestly going to face the issue involved in our topic. There is no sense in discussing a subject if we automatically assume from the beginning that it doesn’t apply to us; that we are above question and examination. We must also honestly ask ourselves: in our doctrinal stands are *we* ever selective in our use of Scripture? Do we loudly quote the passages which agree with our positions and ignore those which raise difficulties and need to be explained quite at length in order to fit our conclusions? One place that I believe such a possibility could exist is in our published statements concerning the doctrine of the Anti-Christ. When we identify the Anti-Christ, we do so on the basis of II Thess 2, which of course is the most complete discussion of Anti-Christ at any one place the Bible. However *everything* that the Scriptures say concerning the Anti-Christ, all of the characteristics that are mentioned must be fairly and honestly considered when making an identification. Yet it appears that this has not always been done very well in several published statements which represent the conservative Lutheran stand on this issue. I am referring to the passages in I and II John which speak of the Anti-Christ. These passages too contain some important thoughts. Let me read them to you. I John 2:18: “Little children, it is the last hour: and as you have heard that Anti-Christ is coming, so now many anti-christs have come.” v.22: “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is anti-Christ, who denies the Father and the Son.” I John 4:2-3: “By this you know-the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard it was coming, and now it is in the world already.” II John 7: “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the Anti-Christ.” These passages very definitely state that one of the characteristics of Anti-Christ, whether this refers to one of many antichrists or to the one Anti-Christ, is this that he does not confess that: “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is of God,” and that: “he will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.” Even though these characteristics are plainly stated in I and II Johns yet these passages are totally ignored in the Dogmatics notes used at our Seminary under the point of the identity of the Anti-Christ. The notes are very careful to show exactly and literally how the description of II Thess 2 fits the Papacy; but not a word is mentioned about the I and II John passages and how these characteristics fit the Papacy. Another place that these same passages are ignored is in the Synodical Conference statement on the Anti-Christ which was adopted by our 1959 Synodical Convention. The same passages are ignored by Frans Pieper in his discussion of the characteristics of the anti-Christ; they are ignored in Graebner’s *Doctrinal Theology* which was taught at St. Louis in the 1930’s; they are ignored by J. T. Mueller in his *Christian Dogmatics*. This is not to say that our doctrinal conclusions would be changed if the John passages would be given their fair and objective consideration. Yet it must be admitted that on the surface at least they do appear to present some problems that would have to be resolved if our identification of the Anti-Christ as the Roman Papacy is to stand. And when we fail to discuss these passages and when we ignore the questions that they raises it appears that we are being selective in our use of the Scriptures. When we claim that a doctrine we teach is drawn from Holy Scriptures, it should go without saying that all the passages of Scripture which deal with the point should be considered. Anything short of this would be selective and improper.

The second complaint our confessions have about their Roman Catholic opponents is this, that they twist and distort the Scriptures to fit their own non-Scriptural opinions. “Our opponents twist many texts because they read their own opinions into them instead of deriving the meaning from the texts themselves.” (IV,224); or again: “Those words, spoken so simply, contain no errors but our opponents twist them by reading into them

their own wicked opinions.” (IV, 253); again: “These passages do not conflict with our position. Our opponents maliciously twist the Scriptures to fit their own opinions. They quote many passages in garbled form” (IV, 286) and finally in exasperation Melancthon writes:

May God destroy these wicked sophists who so sinfully twist the Word of God to suit their vain dreams! What good man would not be moved by such dishonesty? Christ says “Be penitent”; the apostles preach penitence. Therefore (sarcastically) the punishments of purgatory compensate for eternal punishment; therefore the keys have the command to remit part of the punishments of purgatory; therefore satisfactions buy off the punishments of purgatory. Who ever taught these asses such logic? This is not logic or even sophistry but sheer dishonesty. (Ap. XII, 123).

Again and again our confessions, especially the Apology, come back to this complaint that the Romanists do not approach a passage of the Scriptures inductively, looking for the real meaning, but deductively, twisting it to fit in with their own theological system.

A very crass example of this procedure in our own day occurs when a Jehovah’s Witness is forced to explain away the words of Thomas when Thomas confessed Jesus to be his Lord and his God. In an obviously malicious attempt to twist the Scriptures to fit their own ideas, the Witnesses will tell you that Thomas was saying “My Lord” to Jesus and “My God” as a sort of a prayer of thanksgiving to Jehovah for the miracle of the Resurrection. In connection with such a ridiculous use of Scripture, Luther has this to say:

This is the nature of all sectarians: they conceive an opinion of their own, without and apart from the Word. This opinion is forever dangling before their eyes, like a blue glass; then all they see looks blue to them and appears to be in harmony with their opinion. But they are sharpers, as Paul calls them in Ephesians 4...For just as sharpers control the dice, and the cube must turn up what they want, so the sectarians and enthusiasts handle the Scriptures. Everyone lays claim to al Scripture and uses sharpers’ tricks in an effort to make good his claim. (WLS #1970)

However, as we said before, the question that we want to wrestle with is: Do *we* ever do this, to a greater or lesser degree, intentionally or unintentionally? Do we ever try to make a passage say more than it says; or less than it says? Do we try to draw conclusions from passages that cannot bear such conclusions? Again, a possible example (though probably not a popular one) should lead us to examine our own doctrinal use of the Scriptures. Probably every church constitution of our synod has a paragraph somewhere which states: “Voting members of this congregation shall be those male members etc; then in parentheses: I Cor 14:34 and I Tim 2:12. These two passages where St. Paul speaks about the place of women in the church are always adduced as Scriptural proof passages to support the exclusive male suffrage that we practice in our congregations. The question that we are going to ask here is this: Do these passages say as much as we make them say? Do they really speak in terms of our congregational situations and can we automatically apply what Paul says in these verses to exclusive male suffrage in all matters of congregational business? That Paul is speaking in these two verses of the congregational worship situation and of the woman’s teaching role in spiritual matters cannot be denied or disputed. Prof. Gawrisch of our Seminary, writing in the January issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, makes that point very clear as he discusses these two passages in detail. A few quotes from this article will reveal Prof. Gawrisch’s opinion of the original situations to which Paul was writing.

Paul had indicated in v. 8 (I Tim 2) that the men were to lead in public prayer. Now he adds that the women are to be learners not teachers. They are to be in silence, not preaching or teaching, functions which would place them in a position of superiority to men...They are not to put themselves forward. They are not to assert themselves over against men, as they would be doing if they would preach to men or teach men” (*Quarterly*, Jan. 1969 p. 35).

Thus Prof. Gawrisch shows very plainly the context and situation into which Paul places these statements about women; and he shows how these statements should be applied in our own days namely, that women are not to be teachers or preachers, usurp authority over men, in matters relating to *public worship* or *public teaching* of the Word of God. However, later in the articles Prof. Gawrisch takes this application one step further, and without discussing it, without showing how or why his reasoning is valid he suddenly forbids women, as do our congregations, from taking part in any of the business life of the congregation. He asks:

May women take an active part in the business of the congregation, joining in the discussion, debating the issues perhaps even serving as chairman? May women serve on the church council or as delegates representing their congregations at conventions of the Synod?

Considering all of these situations to be equal, he answers:

On the basis of the Scripture passages which we have discussed our answer to these questions must be: No. Such activity would clearly violate the subordination of the woman to the man which God has established and which He does not want to have overthrown. If women were to participate actively in the business meetings of the congregations men and women would be functioning as authorities of equal ranks a situation in clear contradiction to the will of God” (p. 42).

In all. this, however, Prof. Gawrisch has not shown how functioning in a *business meeting* of a congregation is in clear contradiction to the will of God. He himself made the point that Paul, in these passages, is talking about the worship life and teaching ministry of a congregation. And it is not perfectly self-evident that all the phases of a congregational business meeting are substantially the equivalent of this worship life and teaching ministry that Paul refers to. If Prof. Gawrisch, however, wants to say that all women at all times ought always and in all situations be in subordination to men, then he should be prepared to apply this not only to women in the church but also to every Christian woman in business or politics who certainly is in the position of authority over the men. Paul, however, only denies such authority in matters of preaching teaching, and public worship.

The point here is not that women ought to be given a vote in our congregations. The point is, Do the passages I Cor 14:34 and I Tim 2:12 truly forbid such a thing entirely? Or is it possible that our opinion is like the blue glass dangling before our eyes making everything we see blue? Is it possible that we draw the line where we do because it is convenient and traditional, and we justify such an action by using a Scripture passage to cover the whole situation which only covers part of it? We must make certain that we do not add anything to Scripture or bring out of a passage more than it actually contains. This becomes an issue ever time we apply the words spoken in the Bible in one situation to a different situation in our own time. It ought to be one of our main concerns to show that the new situation is substantially the same as the original one, and that therefore the words spoken in the original situation can actually apply where we say they apply.

The third complaint of our confessions about their Roman Catholic opponents, closely akin to the second, is that their actual exegesis is *careless, slovenly, illogical*, and often *dishonest*. Dr. Bohlmann lists and illustrates a number of specific complaints on this score from the Confessions, but these need not detain us as they are not the point of our essay. One complete example of this poor and slovenly and dishonest exegesis on the part of the Romanists will illustrate what our confessions are complaining about at this point. The subject under discussion in Apology XII is whether or not private confession is necessary. We quote from this article:

It is silly to transfer here the saying of Solomon (Prov 27:23), “Know well the condition of your flocks” (this is the passage that the Catholics said “Proved” the necessity of private confession: “Know well the condition of your flocks.”) Solomon is not *talking* about *confession*. He is merely giving a bit of domestic advice to the head of a household telling him to pay diligent attention to his own property and leave other peoples alone, but warning him not to be so

preoccupied with the increase of his holdings that he neglects the fear of God or faith or his concern for God's Word. By a marvelous transformation, our opponents make passages of Scripture mean whatever they want them to mean. According to their interpretations, "know" here means to hear confessions "conditions" means the secrets of conscience and not outward conduct, and "flocks" mean men. The interpretation surely is a neat one, worthy of those men who despise grammar. But if anybody wants by analogy to apply the commandment given a father to the pastor of a church, he should at least interpret "condition" as meaning outward conduct. That at least would be more consistent. (Ap, XII, 106)

And so the complaint of the Confessions is that the context was ignored, the analogy was unwarranted, and the logic was poor; and therefore the whole result was "Making passages of Scripture mean whatever they want them to mean."

But of course our concern here is with our own use of the Scriptures. Are we guilty of the same poor and slovenly exegesis? The examples here are not hard to find among us, One minor one is the use that has been made in our own circle of Prov 6:27. This text has been quoted as a proof that God considers dancing sinful cause it involves a sinful embrace. The verse reads: "Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?" This passage has been explained by some as being God's prohibition of the *embrace* connected with some forms of dancing. When such a verse is quoted to our young people, they are powerless to argue back because their pastor is the authority on the Word. Yet, such a use of this verse is poor and slovenly exegesis and ought never be used in a discussion of dancing, The assumption is made without showing how or why that the "carrying of fire in the bosom" mentioned in this passage is applicable to the embrace of dancing. But this is nothing less than a convenient meaning poured into this text in order to produce a proof text against dancing. As the Apology just quoted put it: "The interpretation surely is a neat one, worthy of these men who despise grammar." For the context in Prov 6 has been ignored. Listen to the context:

Do not desire her (the evil woman's) beauty in your heart and do not let her capture you, with her eyelashes; for a harlot may be hired for a loaf of bread, but an adulteress stalks a man's very life. Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk upon hot coals and his feet not be scorched? So, is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife; none who touches her will go unpunished.

It can be seen from this context that that phrase "Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?" is nothing more than a picturesque way of saying that the person who sins in any way is going to suffer evil consequences for it, The statement has nothing at all to do with an actual literal embrace. This is clear from the parallel statement which follows it: "Can one walk upon hot coals and his feet not be scorched?" In what way could this possibly fit the dance situation? Both of these statements are merely establishing the cause and effect relationship which then is applied to Solomon's point in the following verses "So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife; none who touches her will go unpunished." Punishment will follow in such a situation just as surely as scorching feet follow when one walks on hot coals or just as surely as burning follows when one carries fire in his bosom. Picturesque speech; but nothing to do with dancing or with an embrace of any kind.

This, of course, is a very minor issue, a very minor misuse of the Scriptures. But it has been used to bind consciences as though God, in these words, forbids the embrace in dancing. And it does illustrate that such an improper use of the Scriptures is possible and present among us. We must beware that it does not spread to more important points.

Another example. J.P. Koehler is of the opinion that a well-meaning but poor exegesis occurs in our use of II Tim 3:16, the familiar passage about the inspiration of the Bible that we never fail to quote to establish that the entire Old Testament canon is God-inspired. This, of course, is a more important passage doctrinally than the former example. Writing in the essay which was read to our synodical convention in 1959 Koehler has this

to say: “(This passage) has often been explained from the Greek text to mean: ‘The whole scripture is given by inspiration of God *and* is profitable.’” But, Koehler goes on to contend:

Whoever understands Greek will readily see with the help of dictionary, grammar, and context, that the correct and unmistakable translation must read: “If Scripture is God-inspired then it is also profitable,” or “Every God-inspired Scripture is also profitable.” (1959 Proceedings, p.131)

Koehler continues by accusing exegetes of thinking that they *needed* a passage to prove the divine origin of Scripture in order to make their doctrinal formulations certain and unassailable; and that this *need* that they felt influenced their translation and treatment of Paul’s words. He describes this kind of exegesis as: “a bit of untruthfulness that occurs more frequently than many think. This untruthfulness has nothing malicious about it, because it really intends to defend a divine truth in which one believes with his whole heart” (Proceedings, 1959 p. 131-132). It might seem to some that such a loose use of the Scriptures is harmless when the truths of the Scriptures are being bolstered by our methods; but Koehler says that it is *untruthfulness*. Now whether you agree with Koehler’s thoughts on II Tim 3:16 or not is up to you. But the point is, when we use this passage to “prove” that all of the Old Testament at least is inspired by God, we should be aware that some scholars hold the opinion that this passage should be translated “every Scripture which is inspired by God” and not “All Scripture is inspired by God.” And having become aware of this opinion, we ought to be prepared to defend our use of this passage in our instruction classes and sermons before we categorically announce that the Bible “proves” by its own witness that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,”

One more example of poor and slovenly exegesis which is nothing more than an Improper Doctrinal Use of the Bible, is the use that has been made of Amos 3:3 in connection with the fellowship controversy. The passage reads in the KJV: “Can two walk together except they be agreed.” Application? Can two people have fellowship, pray together, commune together, worship together, unless they are agreed in doctrine? That is the way that this passage has been used on occasion. And yet a closer look at the passage will reveal that this is another poor and slovenly exegesis. Amos is building a case in chapter three for the conclusion: “The Lord has spoken; who can but prophesy?” He arrives at this conclusion by giving nine successive cause and effect examples: If one thing happens, it is only because something else which caused it has preceded it. For example, Amos says: “Does a bird fall in a snare on the earthy when there is no trap for it?” You can’t have the effect, the snared birds unless you have the preceding cause, the trap which has been set. Or again: “Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey?” First the lion must be on the scent of some prey and then he will roar in the forest. The preys soon to be devoured (cause) explains the roaring (effect). These examples can help us in understanding v. 3. Where the KJV has translated: “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” the RSV makes it more clear when it says: “Do two walk together, unless they have made an appointment” The “agreeing” of the KJV is the agreeing to meet, or an appointment. In line with his other examples Amos is saying here that you don’t find two people walking along together (effect) unless they have previously agreed to meet and travel together (cause). Don’t try to isolate what you see from what has caused it. This is his point. All these examples, then, lead to Amos’ conclusion that “The Lord has spoken (cause); who can but prophesy (effect)?” The people of Israel should not look at Amos’ prophecies without understanding the cause that stands behind them: namely, the Word of the Lord. The prophecies will most surely come to pass. When the whole context is thus considered it becomes obvious that the passage “Do two walk together, unless they have made an appointment?” cannot be applied in any way to the necessity of agreement in doctrine before there is fellowship. To make such an application is poor and slovenly exegesis. It is like looking through a blue glass hanging in front of our eyes which makes everything that we see blue-whether it is blue or not.

This brings us to the end of Part I, the *major* portion of our topic: The Proper Doctrinal Use of the Bible. We have seen that it is improper to make *selective* use of Scripture; it is improper to *twist and distort* the Scriptures to fit our own opinions; and it is improper to establish any truths by means of *poor and slovenly exegesis*. The examples mentioned do not pretend to exhaust the possibilities. Nor are they intended to challenge any doctrinal conclusions. They are suggested as possible or evident examples, as the case may be, of

improper methods in arriving at a doctrinal formulation. Hopefully the point has been established that we too must be aware that we do not make improper use of the Scriptures. The danger is never far off, no matter who is doing the talking.

Before closing the door on Part I, let us hear some warning words from J.P. Koehler, again in the 1959 synodical essay:

Still another way of promoting legalistic tendencies is to make law out of the wording of Scripture (especially of the Gospel), for which one then demands intellectual acceptance. characteristic of this way of thinking for example, is the way in which the discussion of the divine origin of Scripture is made the first item of theological business in a dogmatic system (by the way, an application of this thought would be the practice of beginning an adult instruction course with the doctrine of the Bible; for when you have established that, or “proved” that then you have an authority to “prove” all your other teachings). When a person has established the divine character of Scripture on the basis of all kinds of attributes, or has determined its characteristics from its own expressions., then he has established the so-called formal principle of theology. Henceforth the naked word, severed from its context, is to have the same status which a statement of law has for a lawyer. In other words, this way of dealing with Scripture which treats it and its contents as a code of so-and-so-many established propositions which people must believe because it is the Word of God is legalism...I do not want to be understood as detracting from the trustworthiness of Scriptures. I am reacting to what I term the legalistic way of dealing with Scriptures. (CTM,XL no.3, p. 140)

Later in the same essay Koehler says:

Then (when legalism is involved) it is only natural too that the Scriptures have been demoted to second place. Even though it is established that the Scriptures are the *norma normans*, the ruling standard, we actually make the confessional writings, or even the writings of the fathers (or: the doctrinal stand of the Synod) the effective norm; the Scriptures dressed in its *dicta probantia*, the individual proof texts must serve in the role of curtain boys shifting the scenes and dimming the lights for the *norma normata*, the standard that is ruled, corrected, established...Scripture passages torn from their contexts, or, like a worn dime, having lost their distinctive impress now must serve as citations from a codex of decrees. The purely intellectual understanding steps to the fore. Still more is this the case when the interpretation of the text has not been won directly from Scripture by the author himself, through personal experiences but rather has been copied for generations from one book to another. That generates legalism (Proceedings, 1959, p. 137-138)

## **II. The Unfortunate Results of Such Improper Uses of the Bible**

In the second part of our essay, we want to discuss some of the unfortunate results of an improper doctrinal use of the Bible. Many of the implications of these results will immediately be clear to you and we will do little more than mention them. The first unfortunate result of an improper doctrinal use of the Bible is that by such use we will lose the respect of our members. Although our intentions might be the best, although we might be motivated by love for the truth and a clearer expression of the truth of God’s Word, yet, if our methods are improper we will have done more harm than good. The young person who discovers that his pastor has misused the Scriptures in forbidding dancing on the basis of the before mentioned Prov 6:27 passage will lose respect for his pastor. And the situation becomes worse as we try to defend an indefensible opinion and statement. The days of the Credibility Gap may be over in Washington, but this Gap can become very real for us when we use the Scriptures loosely.



The second unfortunate result of an improper use of the Bible is that our witness to critics of the Bible will be weakened when we misuse Scripture. If we read our own opinions into the Bible, practice poor exegesis and poor logic and ignore parts of Scripture that don't fit so well with our pre-conceived ideas, then we are supporting the claim of those who say that the Bible contains relative truth; and that each man can find in it what he wants to find. Thus Scripture loses its authority, and the fault would be partially our own. We who take the Bible seriously must be especially careful that we do not misuse it lest we make of it that "waxen nose" that Luther warned against.

The third unfortunate result of an improper use of the Bible is that such a misuse in *some* matters makes all our teachings suspect. If a person isn't above reading a few thoughts into some obscure passage to support one doctrine, how can we be sure that he isn't doing it in other cases as well? The question could arise whether any of our teaching can be trusted. Are we really giving the whole truth and nothing but the truth in respect to the way to salvation; the person of Jesus Christ; the Trinity, etc? Such questions would naturally follow. We tend to generalize when dealing with the teachings of heretics so that when we have proved them false on one point, we conclude that "this is how these heretics deal with Scripture. You can't trust anything they say." The same argument can be turned against us. If it can be shown that we have misused the Bible on one point, we become guilty of all (to misapply a text).

The fourth unfortunate result of an improper use of the Bibles, the most serious of them all, is that we become guilty of replacing God's Word with our own words. When we speak, we make it our claim that we are coming in the name of the Lord and with the Word of the Lord. And we may be very sincerer in our efforts to do just that, But if through negligence or careless ignorance or stubbornness or close mindedness we bring our of thoughts forward instead of God's Word, all our sincerity will not vindicate us. There are many sincere heretics too. And Jesus said about a group of very sincere and dedicated Pharisees: "In vain they do worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt 15:9). This has been a problem in all ages. God complained through Jeremiah:

I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name saying, "I have dreamed I have dreamed!"...How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies? Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my Word speak my Word faithfully. Therefore, behold! I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who steal my words from one another... Behold, I am against the prophets says the Lord, who use their tongues and say, "Says the Lord." Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, says the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them; so they do not profit this people at all, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:25-26,28, 30-32)

An improper doctrinal use of the Bible is nothing less than saying "Says the Lord" when the Lord is not talking.

### **III. Guidelines for Proper Doctrinal Use of the Bible**

But now the *solution*? Or at least some *guidelines* to prevent such improper methods from infesting our use of the Bible. You *could* say that the Proper Doctrinal Use of the Bible is just the opposite of the Improper Uses mentioned before and let it go at that. But some specific principles will probably be appreciated. And say we list five of them. They most certainly do not exhaust the subject because here we are dealing with the entire fields of Hermeneutics and Exegesis combined. But an effort is made to isolate a few that are considered especially important. Principle number one: For a proper doctrinal use of the Bible, all the "evidence" must be considered. There should be no intentional or unintentional suppression of any part of Scripture that deals with the issue. And our critics can usually be counted on to let us know if they think some of the evidence has been suppressed. They ought to be listened to and their criticisms examined. Every reference to a subject should be treated with correct exegetical procedures; and then these individual references should be used to forge the

correct Biblical doctrine, The entire process is to be an inductive one. Just like a careful scientist, the theologian must as objectively as possible search the Scriptures for the doctrinal “facts.” And from these facts the doctrine is formulated. (Ramm, p. 153-154)

Secondly, for a proper doctrinal use of the Bible, correct principles of logic must be employed. We have no need for logic, of course, when the Scriptures a simple statement of fact. In such cases logic only serves to relate one doctrine to another. But logic is used a great deal when references from all over the Bible are drawn together into one place and then summarized into a short and simple doctrinal statement, Such logic, however is subject to human limitations, and this should be recognized. The Honorary President of our District, E.A, Sitz, in his opening address to our District convention last summer, warned about the dangers of relying on logic-produced doctrinal statements and the formulated doctrinal position of our synod instead of the statements of the Scriptures themselves. Even though we as theologians conscientiously strive to eliminate any gap between our doctrinal statements and the Word of God, yet, as Pres. Sitz pointed out, our doctrinal statements are the products of human logic, and this is not infallible. This should encourage us to be all the more careful in our use of logic when using the Bible doctrinally. Bernard Ramm has this to say about the use of logic in theology:

Training in logic and sciences forms an excellent background for exegesis. It will give the interpreter the requisite background in the general rules of logic, the principles of induction and evidence, and the practical uses of the name in laboratory work. So much of exegesis depends on the logic of implication and the principle of induction and evidence, that it is unwise not to have a working knowledge of the same. Laboratory work which is properly supervised can inculcate into the student a reliable sense of what is evidence and what is not. Ministers, Bible students, and interpreters who have not had the sharpening experiences of logic and science may have improper notions of implication and evidence...In summary there is no simple rule which tells us that we have gone beyond our Scriptural data. The dangers of so doing ought always be in the mind of the interpreter and the theologian so that they may be ever so careful to keep their exegetical and theological work within the limitations of the Biblical Data. (Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, p. 153-154)

Thirdly, for proper doctrinal use of the Bible, proof texts will be carefully used. Both liberals and neo-orthodox, of course, have criticized the orthodox use of proof texts, especially because the Scriptures, closely quoted do not yield the teachings of such people. Liberals quote the texts that please them and discard the rest because they do not fit, and they do this seemingly at random. They claim that it is proper to cite the Bible in general—the general sense of Scripture—but not in particular as proof texts. But how is a general truth to be known apart from a series of particulars? On the other hand, the use of proof texts can and has been abused. Merely listing a text as a proof passage does not necessarily mean that this proof is there. Ramm makes the comment: “It is disconcerting to discover how many verses set down in a book of theology to prove a point melt away when each is examined rather vigorously from the standpoint of exegesis” (Ramm, p. 158). Later he adds: “Sometimes the array of texts to prove a point is rather imposing. But there must be a sound exegetical examination of every text cited or else we are guilty of superficial treatment of Scripture. The use of proof texts is only as good as the exegesis undergirding their citation” (p. 159).

Fourthly, for a proper doctrinal use of the Bible, the transmission of the Biblical texts must be above suspicion. Put differently, no doctrine should be constructed from an uncertain textual reading of the original language. Some of the ancient copyists, of course, were not above slipping in a few “helpful” explanatory words which would make a doctrine more certain. This is what happened in I John 5:7, yesterday’s Epistle, where someone found a reference to the Trinity in some difficult words of John and simply added the names of the Trinity to the text. Modern scholarship has thrown out the verse (hopefully no one preached on it yesterday!), but Jehovah’s Witnesses are still trying to harm the faith of Christians by putting the whole doctrine of the Trinity in the same category as this passage. Another example of using uncertain texts is the disputed ending of

Mark's Gospel, including Mark 16:16, "Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved." Perhaps we should examine our use of this passage, beautiful and doctrinally correct as it is, because it is virtually certain that it did not come from the hand of St. Mark. And if it is not actually part of the inspired record of Mark, it should not be used as Biblical material in our catechism, Sunday morning liturgy, and Baptismal liturgy. We're only too eager to throw out v. 17-18, about believers being able to cast out demons, speak in tongues, pick up serpents, swallow poison without harm, and heal the sick. These items do not fit into our system. But we'd like to hold onto v. 16 about Baptism. Such textually uncertain passages, however, have no doctrinal authority greater than a statement from one of the church fathers, and we ought, to acknowledge that.

The final point is a rather surprising, though minor one. No passage from the antilegomena should be allowed to stand against one from the homologoumena. This point comes from J.P. Koehler's notes on Biblical Hermeneutics (p.6) distributed at our Seminary. If this point is granted validity in our hermeneutics then statements of St. James about good works for examples would automatically be eliminated from the discussion if they were used against Paul's salvation by grace through faith. One wonders how many defenders Koehler's statement would find among Roman Catholic theologians! It is merely added here to show what a wide range of ideas must be taken into consideration when attempting to use the Bible properly. It is no simple task.

### **Conclusion**

The primary task of a theologian should not be to "prove" as correct his own doctrinal stand or the doctrinal stand of his church. The primary task should not be to defend what has always been believed and what a church body has already said on a subject. The primary task should be to re-examine as objectively as is humanly possible the statements which speak on a subject. It is no great tragedy to grow in our understanding of God's truth. It may be personally humiliating to admit that one has been wrong. But as we use the Bible doctrinally, we must remain open to the possibility that our human doctrinal statements could err. If this possibility is not granted then Scripture becomes the "curtain boys shifting the scenes and dimming the lights" for the main character: human dogma. This is to give up the Scripture, no matter how much lip-service we pay to it. "From this preserve use, heavenly Father!"