

A Study of
WELS Doctrinal Statements:
Statement On Scripture

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When WELS pastors meet together for conferences, it is only natural that we study God's Word through exegetical, isagogical and doctrinal papers. God's Word is vital to our lives and to our ministries. It is also only natural that we study the Lutheran Confessions. When we were ordained and installed, we subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions not in so far as they teach the word of God but because they correctly teach the word of God. The WELS doctrinal Statements are not part of the Lutheran Confessions. They are not adopted by very many churches in Christendom or even in Lutheranism, so they are not universal confessions, but they have been adopted by the congregations of the synod to which we belong. Our Synod adopted them because they correctly teach the word of God. We can say that the Synod takes its doctrinal stand also on these doctrinal statements.

The Steering Committee of our conference has decided that we will study these WELS doctrinal statements. We will look at the first of these documents today: Statement on Scripture. It may seem that it isn't necessary to study a document on the Scripture, after all, we have known this teaching for a long time. We teach it in confirmation classes and in adult instruction courses. We know it. There isn't any controversy now among us about the Scripture that I am aware of, so why study it? Although there is currently no disagreement about the Scripture among us, things can quickly change. R.C.H Lenski served at Capital Seminary (now called Trinity Seminary) in Columbus, Ohio from 1921 until he died in 1936. He served as Professor of Dogmatics and New Testament Exegesis and also Dean at that seminary. Among other things he wrote a set of commentaries in which he wrote commenting on John 17:17, "'Thine own word is truth' certifies the inerrancy and infallibility of the Word excepting no portion of it."¹ And commenting on 1 Corinthians 2:13, he wrote, "The very words which the apostles speak are taught them by the Spirit. He is their teacher even as to the 'words.' This is proof positive for verbal inspiration which is both taught throughout the Scriptures and is actually and factually apparent in the Scriptures."² Professor Lenski believed and taught that the Bible is God's word without error. About 50 years later, the President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the church body that includes the church body to which Lenski belonged, said, "People who believe in the inerrancy of Scripture should be welcome to remain within the new Lutheran Church ... I would not support the employment of theologians who hold this view."³ By the time Professor Lenski's seminary students in 1936 retired, the church body they belonged to had stopped teaching the inspiration of Scripture. False teaching can easily infiltrate a church. How did that change happen? What tricks did the devil use to lead sound Lutheran pastors away from this vital teaching? By the grace of God we still teach the Biblical doctrine of Scripture. We are not any smarter or better than those Lutherans in past Lutheran synods. What happened to them can also happen to us. So, it is good for us to thank God for his grace and review the Biblical teaching of the Word of God in the Statement on Scripture.

¹ Lenski, R.C.H, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1936), 1149.

² Lenski, R.C.H, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1936), 112

³ Chilstrom, Dr, Herbert, in a letter to Robert Jenson cited in *What's Going on Among the Lutherans?* (Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 57.

The history behind the WELS adopting this Statement on Scripture is important. The Statement on Scripture has an introduction that was not part of the original statement that was adopted, but it is included in the booklet "Doctrinal Statement of the WELS" published in 1997 and it is also included on the version found on the WELS website. It reviews some of the history leading up to the need for this Statement on Scripture. It follows:

Introduction to the Statement

Differences in doctrine and practice among the members of the Synodical Conference were beginning to surface already in the 1930s and 1940s. These differences threatened the fellowship our Wisconsin Synod had enjoyed with the other church bodies of the Synodical Conference since 1872. Meeting in Saginaw, Michigan, the 1955 WELS convention, by unanimous vote, adopted the Preamble to the Report of Floor Committee No. 2. This Preamble identified the specific doctrinal issues in controversy.

Now the following needed to be determined: Was the Missouri Synod a weak brother in need of our admonition? Would the synod respond to our patient, brotherly admonition? If this were the case, we had a responsibility to bring loud and clear admonition to our weak brother. Or was Missouri set in its unscriptural doctrines and practices? Were we compelled reluctantly to regard Missouri as those "who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Ro 16:17)? In such a case the God-pleasing course was clear: "keep away from them"; we must terminate fellowship with Missouri.

The 1955 convention was not sure which of the above two possibilities was the case. It voted, therefore, to recess the convention for one year. The recessed session in 1956 still did not feel it was able to make a judgment. It voted to "hold in abeyance the judgment of our Saginaw resolutions until the next convention." The Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union was instructed to "continue to evaluate any further developments in these matters."

The Synodical Conference convention at Chicago, Illinois, on December 4-7, 1956, adopted resolutions calling for the Union Committees of the member synods to meet for future discussions in the hope of reaching agreement in the controversial issues. The 1957 Wisconsin Synod convention concurred that such doctrinal discussions should continue "in an effort to restore full unity on the basis of the Word of God."

The Wisconsin Synod's Standing Committee on Church Union at this time included the synod's president and vice presidents, all district presidents as well as all members of the seminary faculty. A subcommittee of eight was chosen to attend the meetings of the Joint Union Committees on behalf of the Wisconsin Synod. President Oscar Naumann led the delegation. In all, six meetings were held in 1957, 1958, and 1959. Each meeting was scheduled for three days.

The second meeting, in Chicago on April 22–24, 1957, took up the first subject agreed upon for discussion. All four synods (Missouri, Slovak, Wisconsin, and Evangelical Lutheran Synod) made presentations on Scripture—Revelation, Inspiration, Principles of Interpretation, and Open Questions.

These discussions did not take place in a vacuum. In 1957 another committee was busily working in the United States to draft a statement on Scripture. The Joint Commission on Lutheran Unity, representing the United Lutheran Church in America, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church (= Suomi Synod), and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, was at work. Its statement was to be used as the doctrinal basis for the proposed merger into the Lutheran Church in America. On December 16, 1957, the Joint Commission's draft was released. Words such as inspired and inerrant were missing from that document. Rather, it stated that these church bodies "treasure the Holy Scriptures . . . as the primary witness to God's redemptive act in Christ." It spoke of "the Gospel transmitted by the Holy Scriptures" as the true treasure of the Church and said: "The Holy Spirit uses the Church's witness to the Gospel to create Christian faith and fellowship." In other words, the statement of the future LCA deemed it sufficient to confess that the Scriptures contain the Word of God. It limited the authority of Scripture to the Gospel message rather than say that everything in the Bible is true.

In contrast to this, the result of the second meeting of the Joint Union Committees of the Synodical Conference was positive. After thorough discussion of the subject of Scripture by representatives of the four synods, there was full agreement in substance. The "Statement on Scripture" was prepared. It was approved by the convention of the Synodical Conference in 1958. And in turn it was adopted by the Wisconsin Synod, without a dissenting voice, in its 1959 convention. The other three church bodies of the Synodical Conference also adopted it in their conventions.

The discussions within the Synodical Conference had begun on a hopeful note. Now there was a basis to address other issues in controversy because all agreed that the Scripture would serve as the inerrant guide and absolute authority for the discussions.

No true unity and no doctrinal clarity can come without acceptance of the Scripture as the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Thus the "Statement on Scripture" remains an important and timeless document for our church.

Let's review more thoroughly what was going on in Lutheranism that led up to the WELS adopting the Statement on Scripture. But as we do, we do not want to get the wrong impression. Since we are looking only at the doctrine of Scripture in this paper, we might get the impression that this was the only doctrine debated at the time. It was not. The doctrine of Scripture was not even the main topic of doctrinal discussions. But it did become apparent as time went on that if there was no agreement on Scripture, there could be no agreement on other doctrines under discussion.

Some theologians in Europe in the 1800's believed that the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible had been shown to be false by scientific and Biblical scholarship. They felt the need to come up with a new way of looking at the Bible without believing that the words of the Bible are the words of God. They wanted to retain the Bible without saying that it was inerrant. So they began to look for and teach about Scripture in different ways than had been done before. This would have an effect in Lutheran churches in the United States.

There were many different meetings and conferences during the 1800's and 1900's in which Lutherans were looking to unify. Our own synod was a merger of the Nebraska, Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin synods in 1917. Unlike other mergers going on at the time, the synods that formed what is now the Wisconsin Synod had no disagreements in doctrine. There were, however, disagreements among some synods even about the doctrine of Scripture. Dr. Arndt of the Missouri Synod wrote in 1932, "The assertion is made with startling frequency these days that whoever at this stage of intellectual development in the world still defends the inerrancy of the Bible must sacrifice either his integrity or his intelligence; the thesis that the Scriptures contain erroneous and indefensible statements is glibly put forward as a commonplace with which no one excepting knaves and fools will disagree."⁴

In 1926, Dr. Reu of the Iowa Synod had written in the *Kirchliche Zeitschrift* in its August Issue pointing out the difference between Lutherans who "assert that the Inerrancy of the Scriptures refers only to those things which pertain to the saving truth and who therefore from the start admit a possibility or even a probability that the Scriptures might err in other things" and those who "profess the absolute Inerrancy of the Scriptures in all things."⁵ By 1930 a majority of the Iowa Synod favored the first understanding. But we find in the Ohio synod this desire, "that whatever may or may not come of the cherished plans to unite our forces in organic union with those of other bodies, the confession of faith of the resulting body must clearly state our position on the Inerrancy of God's Holy Word."⁶

In 1928, the Chicago Theses, also known as the Intersynodical Theses, was drawn up by representatives of the Buffalo, Iowa, Ohio, Wisconsin and Missouri synods. They had the noble purpose to establish "full agreement based upon the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions." The first paragraph on the Scripture said, "We pledge adherence to the Holy Scriptures as the only source and norm of doctrine and faith. (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21) Over against modern theology we maintain, now as formerly, the doctrine of the verbal inspiration. (1 Cor 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16.) We believe and confess that Scripture not only contains God's Word, but is God's Word, and hence no errors or contradictions of any sort are found therein."⁷

It was presented to the various synods for action. There were reactions both for and against the Chicago Theses. As we are going to see throughout the history of the Lutheran churches in America in the twentieth century, many of the theses about Scripture may sound good at first. But they need to be looked at carefully, understanding past differences and making sure that those differences are addressed, making sure words and phrases are understood the same way be everyone and examining them on the basis of the words of Scripture.

⁴ William Arndt, *Bible Difficulties*, (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1932), Preface III-IV.

⁵ *The Confessional Lutheran*, April 1950, 41.

⁶ *Pastor's Monthly*, Jan 1928, 1.

⁷ *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol 26 (Oct. 1929), 267

The Buffalo Synod accepted the Chicago Theses in 1929. In 1929, the Missouri Synod rejected the Chicago Theses as inadequate because it allowed for contradictory teachings. Their main concern was with what the Chicago Theses said about the doctrine of election. But the committee report and the Missouri Synod's action also pointed out a more general problem that would continue to be seen over and over again. They said, "Your Committee finds itself compelled to advise Synod to reject these theses as a possible basis for union with the synods of Ohio, Iowa and Buffalo, ... At times they do not touch upon the point of controversy; at times they are so phrased that both parties can find in them their own opinion ... They do not remove but keep silent about the old differences."⁸ It is important that written words be precise, especially doctrinal statements. Doctrinal statements needed to be looked at carefully about what they say and what they don't say. The Wisconsin Synod convention took place after Missouri had already rejected the Chicago Theses. Our Synod passed a resolution expressing a willingness to continue discussing the document. Prof. E. Fredrich notes that the Chicago Theses marks a new approach by some Lutherans. "Union was becoming more important than unity."⁹ The Missouri Synod began to draw up what became known as the Brief Statement, adopted in 1932. This statement was to deal with the points at issue about, including among other things, the doctrine of the Scriptures. It said, the Scriptures: "are the Word of God because the holy men of God who wrote the Scriptures wrote only that which the Holy Ghost communicated to them by inspiration, 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21. We teach also that the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is not a so-called 'theological deduction,' but that it is taught by direct statements of the Scriptures, 2 Tim 3:16; John 10:35; Rom. 3:2; 1 Cor 2:13. Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10:35 ... The rule of faith according to which the Holy Scriptures are to be understood are the clear passages of Scriptures themselves which set forth the individual doctrines. The rule of faith is not the man-made so called 'totality of Scripture.'" The Brief Statement is a sound Scriptural statement about the inspiration of Scripture.

Meanwhile, in 1930, the Iowa, Ohio and Buffalo Synods united to form the American Lutheran Church (ALC). There was concern on the part of some in the Ohio Synod about the proposed constitution. A writer for the Ohio Synod's church paper, the Lutheran Standard, wrote about the proposed constitution, "The proposed constitution of the new body in the paragraph on its confession, has this section: 'The Synod accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired and inerrant word of God and the only source, norm and guide of faith and life.' Iowa insisted that 'inerrant' be removed from 'Word of God' and placed before 'source,' thus making the whole to read, 'the inspired Word of God and the inerrant and only source, norm and guide of faith and life.'¹⁰ The proposed constitution had no clear declaration about verbal inspiration. Prof. John Meyer of our Synod commented "Can it be possible that the Iowa Synod, by demanding the change, is trying to give shelter to an opinion in which, though accepting in a general way the canonical books of both Testaments as the Word of God and as the infallible source, norm and guide in all matters pertaining to Christian faith and conduct ... dares to doubt the absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures in all of its statements?"¹¹ There were several problems with the section about Scripture in the proposed constitution. But when the

⁸ Lutheran Church Missouri Synod Proceedings 1929, p. 110ff.

⁹ Edward Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 179.

¹⁰ John Brenner, *The Election Controversy*, (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 229.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

constitution finally was adopted, the Ohio Synod essentially gave in. The constitution stated in 1929 "The Synod accepts the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament as the inspired word of God and the only infallible authority on all matters of faith and life."¹² One of the main problems was that they confessed only the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures in matters pertaining to Christian faith and life and left open the possibility or probability of errors in the Scriptures in other things. This same false teaching would be seen again through the years.

The other main group of Lutherans in the United States at that time was the United Lutheran Church (ULC), which had been influenced even more by the modern theology popular in Europe. It called for a distinction between Scripture and Word. The ULC issued an invitation to discuss closer relations. Their position was that since we all subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions there is already a "firm basis to unite in one Lutheran Church in America and that there is no doctrinal reason why such a union should not come to pass."¹³ Our Wisconsin Synod in convention replied that there were reasons that preclude any ULC-WELS fellowship.

The ULC invited other Lutheran church bodies to establish closer relations. According to Dr. Reu of the former Iowa Synod, they chose not to invite the Wisconsin Synod. Representatives of the Missouri Synod, the ALC and the ULC met. Discussions between the representatives of the Missouri Synod and the ULC showed that there was a serious difference on the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. The ULC refused to confess plenary verbal inspiration. The representatives of the ALC who had previously consented to the Brief Statement of the Missouri Synod, including the section on Inspiration, now seemed to agree with the ULC.¹⁴

The ALC said that they agreed with the Brief Statement of the Missouri Synod, but didn't simply adopt the Brief Statement. The ALC in its dealings with the Missouri Synod now wanted to "supplement" the Brief Statement with their own statement addressing various points that they thought were essential, including the doctrine of Scripture and inspiration. It produced the Declaration (also called the Doctrinal Declaration) in 1938. The paragraph on the inerrancy of the Scriptures said, "By virtue of a unique operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He supplied to the holy writers content and fitting word, the separate books of the Bible are related to one another and, taken together, constitute a complete, errorless, unbreakable whole, of which Christ is the Center." To the ALC, the phrase "supplied to the holy writers content and fitting word" did not mean that all the words of the Scriptures are inspired but that those men wrote like any other writer would write and when necessary God supplied them with content and fitting word. They used the singular "word" instead of the plural "words" because the plural might suggest the Verbal Inspiration that they rejected. Another part of the Declaration said, "the separate books of the Bible constitute an organic whole without contradiction and error, John 10:35, and are rightly called the Word of God." This can be understood correctly, but they understood it to mean that "without contradiction and error" refers only to the "organic whole." Many of the doctrinal statements made during those years did not honestly settle differences in doctrine but hid them by using words that each side could understand in their own sense. The ALC claimed that they agreed with the Brief Statement as supplemented by the Declaration. The Missouri Synod in 1938 said that the Brief Statement and the ALC's Declaration taken together was a settlement of past issues and a basis for future fellowship. They said that the differences that remained needed no longer to be regarded as divisive. It was

¹² Ibid., 230

¹³ Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 180.

¹⁴ M. Lehninger, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, March 9, 1941, 68.

clear that the Missouri Synod was now not interested in agreement on all doctrines. Our Synod objected to the ALC's Declaration and considered it as "not stating the truth clearly or excluding error."¹⁵ Our synod also understood and wisely said that agreement between Missouri and the ALC should be based on one document, not two. If two documents are used, each side could hold to what one document said and ignore the other. "Not two statements should be issued as a basis for agreement; [but] a single joint statement, covering the contested doctrines thetically and antithetically and accepted by both parties to the controversy is imperative."¹⁶

While trying to reach agreement with the more conservative Missouri Synod, the ALC was also trying to reach agreement with the more liberal ULC. In 1939 the ALC reached an agreement with the ULC appearing to concede to the ULC on the doctrine of inspiration. In their "Pittsburgh Agreement" they said about the Bible, "... the separate books of the Bible are related to one another and taken together, constitute a complete errorless, unbreakable whole of which Christ is the center. They are rightly called the Word of God. This unique operation of the Holy Spirit upon the writers is named inspiration." And the Bible, "is the history of God's revelation for the salvation of mankind, and of man's reaction to it." Modern liberal theology claimed falsely that God reveals himself in his mighty acts to the exclusion of the word. The ALC and the ULC each understood the statement about Scripture in different ways. Our synod regretted that the ALC considered this a sufficient expression of its conviction about the Inspiration of the Scriptures.¹⁷ The Missouri Synod also correctly saw the weakness of the Pittsburgh Agreement. The January 1941 issue of the Concordia Theological monthly said, "A person cannot help asking, is this American Lutheran Conference not at all interested in doctrine? Apparently there was no discussion of doctrinal issues, no mention of the denial of Verbal Inspiration ..."¹⁸ The Missouri Synod saw that the statement was ambiguous because it may "be understood in a limiting sense and did not have an unequivocal declaration of the verbal inspiration and of the inerrancy of Holy Scripture in all its parts which the situation demands."¹⁹

In 1940, the Board of Publication of the American Lutheran Church sent to all pastors of the Missouri Synod and to most other Lutheran pastors in the United States and Canada, a pamphlet titled *In the Interest of Lutheran Unity*. This pamphlet contained an essay on Holy Scripture by Dr. Reu. He said that "God breathed" in 2 Tim 3:16, can be applied to Scripture only as a "whole" but not "to every Scripture passage." In discussing the meaning of the words "all Scripture" he said that this can hardly mean every scripture passage "because not every Scripture passage, although written down under the influence of the Holy Spirit is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, etc. for instance the passage Gen. 12:6 'And the Canaanite was then in the land'"²⁰ Dr. Reu also talked about the writers being "under the influence" of the Holy Spirit. He does not mean that in the sense of how we would understand verbal inspiration.

¹⁵ 1938-1953, COP tract 2, Conference of Presidents of the Wisconsin Synod. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3

¹⁷ Leniger, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, March 9, 1941, 69.

¹⁸ *Concordia Theological Monthly*, January 1941, 62.

¹⁹ *Concordia Theological Monthly*, May 1939, 382f.

²⁰ *The Confessional Lutheran*, May, 1953, 59.

Our Synod had asked the Missouri Synod to work on one document that could be agreed on with the ALC. The Missouri Synod agreed and at its 1941 convention said, "Since the Synodical Conference has asked us 'earnestly to consider the advisability of bringing about the framing of one document of agreement' and since it has become quite evident that it is not only desirable but necessary to have one document, our committee be instructed to make every possible effort that one such document be prepared."²¹ This passed unanimously. The Committee on Doctrinal Unity of the Missouri Synod and the Committee on Intersynodical Fellowship of the ALC began work on a single document. This document was to replace the Missouri Synod's Brief Statement of 1932 and the ALC's Declaration of 1938. In 1944 they published The Doctrinal Affirmation. It was around this time that the Missouri Synod abandoned its former position on Scouting. And in 1944 it abandoned its former position on Prayer Fellowship, making a distinction between "joint prayer" and "prayer fellowship." They also began joint work with the ALC in relief work. One danger was to be overcritical and negative in evaluating the Doctrinal Affirmation. Another danger was to disregard the historical background. Context is always important in making a proper judgment. Merely using statements broad enough to include both views in a controversy does not change any views or remove any errors. A union which is not true unity is of no real good and is prompted by worldly rather than by spiritual considerations. Our Synod said that the Doctrinal Affirmation did make some progress but did not adequately exclude old errors. It didn't remove the different views on formerly disputed doctrines. The Doctrinal Affirmation wasn't received well by everyone in the Missouri Synod on the basis that the Doctrinal Affirmation was vague and as had happened so often before, it left open the possibility for false understanding of doctrine. The Missouri Synod tried to meet the objection and proposed some changes to the ALC. The Missouri Synod did not immediately adopt The Doctrinal Affirmation but told its members that the final vote will be taken in 1947. But then in 1946 the ALC convention rejected the Doctrinal Affirmation as not acceptable and withdrew it from consideration.

At its 1944 convention the ALC said that one approach to intersynodical fellowship was through doctrinal discussion, "But we must be equally concerned about continuing to follow the other approach to Lutheran Fellowship, namely, Lutheran cooperation. We are pursuing that course under divine guidance ..."²² They believed that there was enough agreement on doctrines. One of the things that drove some Lutherans to change their view on Scripture was the desire for unity with other Lutherans. Some of them weren't so much interested in joining together to form a new Lutheran church body, but they were interested in working with each other more closely.

In 1947 the ALC issued a "Friendly Invitation" to the Missouri Synod and the United Lutheran Church (ULC) to renew negotiations, contending for an "allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God." The ALC went back to its former position and once again said that the Brief Statement and the Declaration were together enough basis for church fellowship. They said that to demand one document on which everyone agreed would be "a threat to evangelical liberty of conscience."²³ The Missouri Synod said at its 1947 convention that it was not ready to enter into fellowship with the ALC. But it

²¹Missouri Synod Proceedings 1941, 401f.

²²American Lutheran Church Proceedings, 1944, 82.

²³Conference of Presidents, Tract #2, 5.

also said that the Brief Statement of 1932 “shall no longer be considered as a basis for the purpose of establishing fellowship with the American Lutheran Church.”²⁴

A few years before this there had been another major development in the Missouri Synod. On September 6-7, 1945, a group of 44 Missouri Synod pastors and professors, including 4 district presidents, 5 members of the St. Louis seminary faculty and the editors of the Concordia Theological Monthly and the Lutheran Witness²⁵ who were dissatisfied with the Missouri Synod, met in Chicago. They drew up a statement of 12 propositions with comments. It became known as “The Statement of the 44.”

There was both good and bad in the statement. There was error mixed in with the truth. What we are interested in here is what the Statement of the 44 said about the Scripture: It said:

“II. We affirm our faith in the great Lutheran principle of the inerrancy, certainty and all-sufficiency of Holy Writ.”

“We therefore deplore a tendency in our Synod to substitute human judgments, synodical resolution, or other sources of authority for the supreme authority of Scripture.”

The “inerrancy, certainty and all-sufficiency” of the Scriptures was confessed by the Synods of the Synodical Conference. And we would agree that no synodical resolution or anything else is a substitute for Scripture. But to say that there is a tendency to substitute human judgments and synodical resolutions is vague. Exactly what were they referring to? What doctrines did they think were being taught based on human judgments and synodical resolutions? They didn’t say. They did object to the Synod’s teaching on fellowship. What some of them meant about Scripture, would be found out in the future. The text of the statement was published in the Lutheran Witness. The Missouri Synod President, John Behnken, met with the 44. Pres. Behnken sent a letter to the clergy of the Missouri Synod in which he announced that “... agreement has not been reached on some of the specific questions raised. ... Nothing has developed however, which is divisive of church fellowship.” He appointed a committee to deal with the Statement. The committee “called for firm doctrinal discipline because ‘A Statement’ espoused exegesis and practice that would disrupt the unity that had always characterized the Missouri Synod. Nevertheless, Behnken ignored the recommendation of his committee, met with the signers on his own, and allowed the document to be withdrawn from consideration rather than retracted as containing error,” and Prof. Brenner noted, “Behnken’s actions were a foretaste of Missouri’s future handling of discipline ... This unwillingness or inability to exercise doctrinal discipline was a major factor leading to the break in fellowship.”²⁶

A committee from the ALC and a committee from the LCMS began work on what would become the Common Confession in February of 1949 and the original draft was completed in August of 1949. Both Committees adopted it unanimously. It is amazing that they came to an agreement so quickly on many controversial issues. The Common Confession was distributed to the LCMS clergy in March/April of 1950. Objections to adopting the Common Confession were raised, but the Missouri Synod and the ALC both adopted the Common Confession. Did the Common Confession settle the doctrinal differences that had separated the Missouri Synod

²⁴ The Northwestern Lutheran, Aug 31, 1947, 285.

²⁵ Brenner, The Election Controversy, 265.

²⁶ Brenner, The Election Controversy, 267.

and the ALC, or were those doctrines stated in vague enough terms for everyone to agree? We are here interested in what it said about the Holy Scriptures. The editor of *The Lutheran*, the ULC magazine, wrote that Missouri had compromised. And that the Common Confession "Didn't try so solve the old problems - it buried them."²⁷

In the Common Confession we again find the phrase that "the Holy Spirit by divine Inspiration supplied to the holy writers content and fitting word." This is something that the ALC would endorse. The Common Confession did not say or mean all the words of the Bible are God's words. The ALC would also agree with other parts of the Common Confession that "Acknowledge the Holy Scriptures in their entirety as the inspired Word of God." The Wisconsin Synod understood the statement "the entirety of the inspired word of God" to mean all the words of the Bible. But to the ALC it meant that God was the chief author of all the books of the Bible which are meant to be taken as a unit. Those who believed in verbal inspiration were supposed to understand the words of the Common Confession according to their point of view. But the ALC didn't agree with what conservative Lutherans meant by verbal inspiration. They did not believe that every word of the Bible is inspired in the sense that we mean the word is inspired. They believed that the prophets and apostles wrote the history of God's revelation to mankind and that the 66 books of the Bible are a perfect whole. Since no human could produce such a fine history, they believed that the Holy Spirit must have had a hand in it. The Holy Spirit working with the writers they call inspiration. The Holy Spirit at times gave them the fitting word or expression that they would not have come up with on their own. The Common Confession did say that "We therefore recognize the Holy Scriptures as God's inerrant Word, and this word of God alone shall establish articles of faith." They said that not because that is what the Bible says but because "His Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts." In a letter from Prof. Dr. Mattes, a dogmatician of the ALC, to Prof Victor Bartelt of Milwaukee, Dr. Mattes wrote, "Yes, I believe there are what you might call historical and scientific inaccuracies in the Bible, but that nevertheless it is absolutely inerrant in the revelation of God and His holy will and his truth. These errors have nothing to do with the faith and in no wise disturb my regard for the absolute authority of Scripture."²⁸

Some in the ALC had been holding to the belief that all of the Bible is not the word of God but only those parts of the Bible that deal with our Christian faith and life. The Missouri Synod said that the ALC had changed and now accepted the entire Bible as the word of God. But those who hold to a more modern view of the Bible used the old terminology in a new way. As we have seen, a change in doctrine is followed by some altered way of the expression of that doctrine. The same terms may be used to mean different things by different people. The question then became: Is the whole Bible the inspired Word of God or is it the word of God only when it speaks about our salvation through Christ? The Common Confession didn't clearly answer the question.

In our Synod's convention in New Ulm, MN August 8-15, 1951, we said that the Common Confession was unacceptable in various statements about different doctrines including Scripture and Inspiration. Our synod adopted this at its 1951 convention "That we inform the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod that we not only find the Common Confession to be inadequate ... but that we also hold that the adoption of the Common Confession by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful

²⁷ *The Lutheran*, April 1950, 7.

²⁸ *The Confessional Lutheran*, June 1953, 70.

situation since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in the fact not settled.”²⁹

We were not the only ones who realized that the Common Confession was a forsaking of its old position by the Missouri Synod. It is interesting that in the “Lutheran” (ULC church paper), the editor Dr. Ruff, spoke about the Common Confession referring to it as the Missouri Compromise and said it “is almost identical in wording with the ‘Pittsburgh Agreement’ adopted by the United Lutheran Church.” And then adds that the wording “was officially interpreted as not an acceptance of the ‘verbal inspiration’ doctrine.”³⁰ In the Lutheran Standard (ALC), editor Schramm wrote, “the teaching of the Missouri Synod on the teaching of the Bible has encouraged some to be ‘Bible believers’ instead of Christ believers.”³¹

The reason that the term “verbal inspiration” was not used in the Common Confession was explained by Dr. W. Arndt of the Missouri Synod this way, “It was pointed out that the term ‘verbal inspiration’ is not employed because it is frequently interpreted to signify a mechanical view of inspiration, a mere dictation process, which would violate definite statements of the Scriptures.”³² He goes on, unfortunately, to call the Common Confession a triumph of conservative Lutheranism.

Prof. Siegbert Becker, who eventually taught at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, was at that time still in the Missouri Synod teaching at River Forest. He sent a questionnaire to about 50 professors and pastors in the ALC requesting them to state their position on certain questions pertaining to the Common Confession. In 13 replies, he found the following about their belief concerning the inspiration of every word and part of Scripture: Question one asked “Assuming that we are speaking of the original manuscript, do you personally believe that “all the words of the Bible are the words of God”? 8 out of the 13 answered yes. To the question “Do you believe that the Bible is infallible also in matters of geography, history, chronology etc.”? 6 of the 13 answered yes.³³ This showed that those in the ALC were divided over the fact that every word and part of the Bible is inspired.

The doctrinal committees of the ALC and the Missouri Synod submitted a Part II of the Common Confession to try to satisfy some of the criticisms. The Common Confession Part II, which was never adopted by the Missouri Synod, said about inspiration, “The Holy Scriptures are God’s verbally inspired Word, that is, God moved men to write what He wanted recorded in the words which He wanted employed. They alone constitute God’s inerrant Word to men.” The wording “The Holy Scriptures are God’s verbally inspired Word” sounds like it is saying that the whole Bible is verbally inspired. But when it adds the phrases “God moved men to write what He wanted recorded in words which He wanted employed,” the question came up: What did God want recorded – everything written in the Bible or only those things that pertain to Christian faith and life? Those who don’t hold to verbal inspiration will admit that the Bible has in it “what God wanted” and that it has “the words which he wanted employed.” A better definition would say that God moved the writers to write all the words so that the words of the Bible are the words of God. Part II avoided the real issue. Part II also did not deal with another

²⁹ Conference of Presidents, tract #2, 6.

³⁰ The Lutheran, April 5, 1950, 7.

³¹ The Lutheran Standard, April 29, 1950, 6.

³² The Lutheran Witness, July 25, 1950, 229.

³³ The Confessional Lutheran, July 1953, p. 74-75

point of controversy - that the Bible is accurate in all of its details. And it did not say that the teaching of verbal inspiration is expressly taught in Scripture.

The Joint Commission on Lutheran Unity, representing the United Lutheran Church in America, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church (= Suomi Synod), and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, produced a statement in 1957 in which it stated its view of Scripture among other things. It said, "The word of God is essentially the Gospel" and that the "title 'word of God' applies primarily to Christ himself," and that in Jesus "God reveals and imparts himself to men." Professor Carl Lawrenz commented, "In confessing that the Holy Scriptures are God's own Word, through which He speaks to us, we, too, will never want to lose sight of the fact that it is the purpose of Scripture to proclaim the Gospel of Christ as the Savior of sinners. Nevertheless, we will upon Scripture's own witness also want to acknowledge and confess that all of Scripture somehow stands in relation to this Gospel message and that Scripture is in its entirety, in all its parts, and in its very words the inspired Word of God."³⁴

You can see that there were many different ways that the teaching of the verbal inspiration of the Bible was being attacked: some said that the Bible is only inspired when talking about saving truths; some used vague words and phrases that could be understood in different ways; some did not discuss old differences about the Bible; some changed the meaning of inspiration, inerrant or God's Word; some said that the Bible as a whole is inspired but not the individual passages and words; some said that the men were inspired but not the words; some would try to make the Biblical teaching of verbal inspiration sound ridiculous by saying verbal inspiration means the writers only took dictation and that only the unintelligent would believe every word of the Bible is true; some said that God inspired the thoughts but not the words; some said that as people read the Bible, God reveals himself to them and that is why we can call the Bible inspired; some said that "all Scripture" in 2 Timothy 3:16 doesn't mean every passage; some said that agreement about the teaching of verbal inspiration isn't necessary for unity; some said that we need to allow for freedom of thought, and some made other claims against verbal inspiration. But all of these ways that deny verbal inspiration are all ways that try to take people away from the written words. They are just different hairs growing out of the same mole of unbelief.

As a result of all these false teachings about the Scriptures, the synods of the Synodical Conference had a committee produce the Statement on Scripture. It was adopted by the Synodical Conference in convention in 1958 and unanimously by our synod in convention in 1959. It was also adopted by the Missouri Synod at their convention in 1959. It is interesting that at the convention of the Missouri Synod, little time was spent on the Statement on Scripture because so much of the convention time had been taken up by a memorial also about the Scripture that was submitted by future professor at our seminary, Siegbert Becker. "The undersigned in dealing with brethren who deny the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, has at times been met the argument that this doctrine is not part of the position of Synod in which all pastors, professors and teachers are expected to subscribe. Therefore he respectfully requests Synod in convention assembled to give an answer to this question: Does Synod expect the professors at its colleges and seminaries to teach the doctrine of the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture as this doctrine is set forth in the Brief Statement?"³⁵ The committee

³⁴ Theologische Quartalschrift Vol 55, #1, January 1958, 74.

³⁵ Missouri Synod Reports and Memorials, 1959, 512.

assigned to deal with this memorial resolved that the members of the synod are expected to teach what the Brief Statement says. There was much discussion about this including by two members of the seminary faculty in St. Louis who opposed the resolution. The discussion went on for the time allotted to the committee for three days. The motion finally passed.³⁶ After that, other motions were discussed including the adoption of the Statement on Scripture. Since little time was left and much of the same subject had already been debated, it passed quickly.

Before we look at the Statement on Scripture itself, let's briefly wrap up some of the history we discussed so far. Although the Missouri Synod adopted the statement on Scripture in 1959, the next year the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, adopted "A Statement on the Form and Function of the Holy Scriptures." The document said in part that "The Scriptures express what God wants them to say and accomplish what God wants them to do. In this sense and in the fulfillment of this function they are inerrant, infallible, and wholly reliable. Their truthfulness, their infallibility as the only rule of faith and practice, and their reliability are incontrovertible."³⁷ The seminary statement did not agree with the statement on Scripture adopted the year before and it did not agree with their Brief Statement of 1932. And it went against the resolution adopted in 1959 that said all pastors, professors and teachers must teach the inspiration of Scripture according to the Brief Statement. However, at the 1962 convention of the Missouri Synod, it was declared that adopting that motion in 1959 regarding all pastors and professors and teachers being required to teach what the Brief Statement said about the Scriptures, was unconstitutional because it added to the doctrinal basis of the Synod and so would constitute a change in an unalterable article of the constitution. The Missouri Synod did not adopt the St. Louis seminary faculty statement at its 1962 convention but returned it to the faculty for further study. One of the faculty members at that time was Martin Scharlemann. He had received post-graduate education at the University of St. Louis and Union Theological seminary and the modern hermeneutics influenced his view of Biblical interpretation. He had been raising questions about the inerrancy of the Bible in the Missouri Synod beginning in the 1950's. He gave a series of papers that contained neo-orthodox concepts about inspiration and inerrancy. He said that he would prefer not to use the word inerrancy because it was a reformed concept. The seminary faculty was teaching students something that the synod as a whole did not believe. Eventually the majority of the faculty left the Missouri Synod and formed Seminary in Exile (SemineX) in 1974. Prof. Martin Scharlemann remained with the Missouri Synod.

Even though both the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod adopted the Statement on Scripture in 1959, it was soon clear that there were disagreements about this doctrine between us and the Missouri Synod. Prof E. Fredrich wrote, "The recessed 1961 Synodical Conference convention, meeting in Milwaukee May 17-19, was not able to accomplish anything in the way of bringing about some solution to the fellowship disagreement. In fact, doubts about Missouri's stand on Scripture had to be read into the record."³⁸ As you know, the Wisconsin Synod declared that they were no longer in fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961.

The Iowa, Ohio and Buffalo synods had formed the American Lutheran Church in 1932. The church body was joined by others in 1960 and was also called the American Lutheran Church. In its constitution in 1960 it included this statement about the Scriptures: "The American

³⁶ The Confessional Lutheran, July-August, 1959, 73-75.

³⁷ The Confessional Lutheran, November 1960, 130-131

³⁸ Edward C. Fredrich, "The Great Debate with Missouri" *Essays on church Fellowship*, editor Curtis Jahn, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, 1996, 237.

Lutheran Church accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testament as a whole and in all their parts as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God, and submits to this as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life." They included the word inerrant, but it was not taught in their schools. They did not understand these words as we would understand them. They joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American (ELCA) in 1988.

The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) had been a merger in 1962 of the United Lutheran Church (ULC) and other smaller like-minded Lutheran synods. They joined with the ALC in 1988 to form the ELCA. In the ELCA constitution it says, "The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ." Does this mean that they believe that the Bible is the verbally inspired Word of God as we believe? Reading their other writings shows that they mean something different than we mean. In their Christian Dogmatics textbook by Braaten and Jenson it says, "(We) ... still affirm the Bible as the Word of God. This is not meant in the fundamentalistic sense that everything in the Bible stands directly as the Word of God."³⁹

What the Lutherans were doing who wanted to merge together without doctrinal unity was not something new to Lutheranism, "Melanchthon fell into a hallucination That peace could be restored by ambiguous formulas, accepted indeed by both parties but understood in different senses. It is a plan which has often been tried and which never succeeds where men are in earnest. It not only does not bind men more closely, but leaves them more widely alienated, more full of bitter distrust. Men must be honest in their difference, if they are ever to be honest in their agreement."⁴⁰

As we look back at this history, we thank God that he gave our forefathers the discernment to see subtle errors in the beginning that later on would blossom into full unbelief. These men were no smarter than those who were going astray, but by God's grace they remained faithful and are an example for us to love and hold on to the words of God.

Now let's look at the Statement on Scripture itself.

I. Introduction

God reveals Himself to men primarily through His incarnate Son, whom He attests and presents to His Church through Scripture. The purpose of Scripture is to proclaim Christ as the Savior of sinners (Jn 5:39,46; Ac 10:43). All Scripture is written because of Christ and has a connection with the revelation of God in Christ, some passages directly, some more remotely. Every word of Scripture is therefore an organic part of the Scripture's witness to Christ. And Scripture is the complete message of God to sinners. By it man is freed from carnal security and self-righteousness, is delivered from despair, and regains by faith the lost image of God. Gal 3:26; cf. 4:31; Jas 1:18; 1 Pe 1:23; Jn 8:31,32.

³⁹ Patsy Leppien and J Smith, *What's Going on Among the Lutherans?* (Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, 1992, 55.

⁴⁰ Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology*, 290.

The Statement on Scripture begins by talking about the purpose of Scripture. The purpose of the Bible is to convey to sinners the truth, to convert the unbelieving, to preserve and strengthen faith, to lead believers to live a godly life, to give believers comfort in their troubles, to supply weapons with which they can defend against error that conflicts with God's truth, all to the glory of God and our eternal salvation. One of the passages that the Statement on Scripture cites is John 5:39, "You search the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them. They testify about me!" These wonderful words are an endorsement of the Old Testament as the revelation of God. They tell us that the Bible brings us eternal life. At the heart and center of God's truth is the fact that he is gracious for Christ's sake. We can search these Scriptures.

1 Peter 1:23 says that we are born again from imperishable seed. We are born through the "living and enduring word of God." The word shows us our desperate need to be saved. Then it shows us pardon for our sins, and contentment knowing that our sins are forgiven. That is a great promise, and it is a great miracle. Life that comes from the Word of God is forever.

The Scripture is the truth. That is why Jesus said, "If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. You will also know the truth." (John 8:31,32). The Statement on Scripture says, "Every word of Scripture is therefore an organic part of the Scripture's witness to Christ." We can rely on the words of the Bible because they have been given to us by God. And when we do that, our search for the truth has ended because we have the truth. We don't need to depend on the opinions or research of others.

If we are going to believe without a doubt that Jesus is our Savior, it is necessary that we believe that the words of the Bible are the words of God. If the words of the Bible cannot be trusted as being true, then we can't be sure what it says about Jesus.

We reject the idea that the natural knowledge of God is sufficient to salvation or useful beyond the use made of it in Scripture (Ro 1:20; 2:1,14-16; Ac 17:22,23). The revelation of God in nature and conscience is insufficient for salvation because man by reason of his fall is so constituted that he persistently perverts and distorts the revelation given to him by God and refuses to acknowledge or to submit to the God who thus reveals Himself. And man pursuing this perverted course is either led to feel secure in his self-righteousness or is driven to despair.

This paragraph of this section contains the first *negativa*, what we condemn and reject. Many of the documents produced by different Lutheran synods in previous years did not include a section about what they reject. That made it easier for those with differing views to agree to the document.

The Statement on Scripture rejects the idea "that the natural knowledge of God is sufficient to salvation or useful beyond the use made of it in Scripture." God has revealed himself to us in nature. The statement cites a couple of passages on this subject including Romans 1:20, "In fact, his invisible characteristics—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, because they are understood from the things he made. As a result, people are without excuse." People have a natural knowledge about God. But they suppress those thoughts and turn their back on God in favor of their own ways. Even though the world can have a certain knowledge of God, that knowledge does not make them believers. That is

why Paul, who said that people have this natural knowledge of God, knew something else was needed. He didn't leave people to the natural knowledge of God. He preached the Gospel.

Another passage mentioned in the Statement on Scripture is Acts 17:22-23, "Then Paul stood up in front of the council of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. For as I was walking around and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar on which had been inscribed, 'To an unknown god.' Now what you worship as unknown—this is what I am going to proclaim to you.'" Heaven and earth are full of the majesty and glory of God. Whether we look at the stars in the sky or the grass on the earth, or we think of ourselves who are wonderfully made, all things tell us there is a God. But who is that God? The natural knowledge of God does not tell us. We don't know the true God until we know Jesus Christ. Without the Bible revealing God to us, we cannot know God.

We reject the idea that tradition is a source of revelation. Cf. Mt 15:3-6; Col 2:8.

One of the claims for revelation from God apart from the Bible is that the Bible says that there are traditions that have been handed down to us. Those who believe that, point to 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and say that there are teachings we are to hold to apart from the written word, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold on to the teachings that were passed along to you, either by word of mouth or by a letter from us." But all this says is that the apostles taught orally. This passage is not saying that some teachings were passed on orally but were not written down. Those who hold to traditions doubt that the Bible is enough. At one point in the ministry of Jesus, some came to him complaining that the disciples didn't follow the traditions that had been handed down. This is found in the Matthew reference cited in the Statement on Scripture. What did Jesus do? He quoted the Bible as truth. The Bible is all we need.

How do we know what to believe and how to live? We answer that question with the Lutheran motto, "Sola Scriptura," Scripture alone. The Scripture alone is the absolute authority. That sounds easy enough. But it is not very easy at all. There is hardly anything dearer to us than our own opinion. But when it comes to what to believe, it doesn't matter what my opinion is. It doesn't matter what I think. It doesn't matter what makes sense to me. Sometimes we hear or even say ourselves, "What does the Synod teach?" There is nothing wrong with that question as long as we don't begin to think that if the Synod teaches something it must be right. We cannot accept something just because someone teaches it. The only authority is the Word of God.

We reject the idea that other new sources or norms of divine revelation besides Scripture are to be expected. Heb 1:1,2; Mt 28:19,20; Gal 1:8,9.

People are always coming up with things that get Christians to look to something other than to the words of the Bible. The Roman Catholics look at tradition, church councils and the Pope. The reformed look at reason. Some look for God talking to them directly or wait for some future divine message.

The Hebrews passage says that God in the past spoke to us by the prophets, that is, by the writers of the Old Testament, so we must accept it as God's inspired word. He also spoke to us by his Son. And this Son sent us out to teach everything he has commanded us (Mt 28:19-20).

We are told that the Church is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles. The prophets and apostles are no longer here, but the church is still being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets because we have their words. So Paul says that even if an angel comes later on and preaches something different than what he taught, we are not to believe that angel (Gal 1:8-9). Everything is to be judged by the Scriptures that we now have. We are not saying that God could not speak to someone and give them his words, but if someone claims that God has spoken to him, it has to be in agreement with what God has already told us. That is the test God himself has given us to use. God's revelation in Scripture will never be replaced.

II. The Inspiration of Scripture

We believe and teach that all Scripture (that is, all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments) is given by inspiration of God and is in its entirety, in its parts, and in its very words inspired by the Holy Spirit. God revealed Himself personally and directly to such men as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Some of these He called to transmit His message to men orally or in writing. Their message was thus not their own, but God's Word. They were moved by the Holy Spirit, so that He is the true Author of their every word. Inspiration means, then, that mighty act of God whereby He spoke His Word in the words of men and made them the effective and final vehicle of His revelation. Hence these words do not merely inform us concerning God's past action; they also convey God's action now. 1 Th 2:13; 2 Pe 1:19-21; 2 Ti 3:15-17; 1 Co 2:13; Jer 23:29; Ro 1:16,17.

Here the statement takes up the doctrine of Inspiration. The important questions to be asked and answered are: Are all the words of the Bible inspired by God? Are there any inaccuracies in the Bible in regard to history, geography or anything else? Is the doctrine of verbal inspiration drawn from 2 Tim 3:16 or not? What is the proper definition of inspiration? The word "inspiration" is not found in the NIV or the EHV. It is found only once in the KJV (2 Tim 3:16). Those who deny verbal inspiration are quick to point that out. But the Bible does teach verbal inspiration in many ways, just as it teaches the Trinity without using the word "Trinity." The Bible begins by telling us about a God who speaks to people. 10 times in the first chapter of Genesis it says, "God said." God himself even names things using language. Sometimes the claim is made that the thoughts of God could never be expressed in human language. But language didn't come about as a human invention after many years of grunting sounds. Adam and Eve had been given the gift of language by God. God once told Moses who was hesitant to be his spokesman to Pharaoh, "Who made a mouth for people? Or who makes someone mute or deaf, able to see or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11). If God made man out of dirt and gave him the power of language, it shouldn't seem strange to us that the almighty God can give to men the very words they wrote, the exact words he wanted them to use to express his will. God was able to express his will in human language to Adam and Eve about their sin and the coming Savior. Later, God spoke to Noah, Abraham, and others in words they understood and that expressed God's will. God can use human language to express his thoughts. The phrase "This is what the Lord says" or its equivalent is used about 2,000 times in the Bible. In the New Testament we are told that Jesus said to the apostles, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I told you." (John 14:26). So the Statement on Scripture defines inspiration this way: "Inspiration means, then, that mighty act of God whereby He spoke His Word in the words of men." God gave his Word in Scripture by divine inspiration. The inspired writers did their work as the

instruments of God who not only prompted them to write what they wrote, but also evoked in them both the thoughts and the words they used as they wrote.

Those who do not believe in the inspiration of the Bible say that verbal inspiration is not taught in the Bible but is a teaching that was invented by people. They sometimes say the teaching of inspiration was developed by 17th century dogmatists. The Statement of Scripture quotes some passages from the Bible showing that this claim is not true. Verbal inspiration is clearly taught by the Bible. The Statement on Scripture cites 1 Thes. 2:13 "When you received God's word, which you heard from us, you did not receive it as the word of men but as the word of God (as it really is), which is now at work in you who believe." What they heard preached by the apostles or those who bring the teachings of the apostles is "God's word."

2 Peter 1:19-21 states the reliability of the words of Scripture. Those words did not come from man but from God. "In fact, no prophecy ever came by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were being carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21). The emphasis in the Greek in the second half of this sentence is on the words, "by the Holy Spirit." What the apostle is saying is that the words of Scripture are not human but the word of God. The men were moved to write what they wrote. And when Peter says, "spoke," he shows it was not only the thoughts but the words they pronounced and made sounds. The Holy Spirit used them as his instruments.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 is also cited, "That from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, well equipped for every good work." The term here for "Holy Scriptures" in verse 15 is "ἱερά γραμματα" and not the usual "ἡ γραφή." The term used here emphasizes things that are written down in letters. He says that these Scriptures are "Holy." They are not secular writings. They are God-breathed. What does "all Scripture" in verse 16 refer to? When you read that Paul's letters were already called "Scripture" (2 Peter 3:16 "He [Paul] spoke about these things the same way in all of his letters. There are some matters that are hard to understand in his letters, which the ignorant and unstable distort, as they also do with the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."), we have to say that "all Scripture is God-breathed" doesn't just refer to the Old Testament. Paul's letters were "Scripture." Paul also placed his words which he had taught Timothy on the same level as what Timothy had learned from childhood in the Old Testament. "Hold fast to the pattern of sound words that you heard from me, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, who lives in us, guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you." (2 Timothy 1:13-14). "All" Scripture" is given by inspiration, not just part of Scripture.

The Statement on Scripture says, "They were moved by the Holy Spirit, so that He is the true Author of their every word." Scripture being God-breathed means that the men who wrote down the words were moved to take their pens and were moved by God to write down the words God wanted them to write. God used their minds, hands and memories but it was God who caused them to write what they wrote. "All Scripture is God-breathed," means that the Bible, even though many different men wrote it, is one book. It really has one author, and that author is God. The men who wrote the Bible did not write their own thoughts and words, but they wrote the words God moved them to write. If the words of the Scripture are breathed out from God, then they must be without error. So they can be used, as it says in 2 Timothy, for

teaching. And since God breathed all of these Scriptures, it is proper that when they were all finished, we would bind them together in one book, the Bible, the Book of God.

Paul said in another passage referenced above in the Statement on Scripture, “We also speak about these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 2:13). This passage talks about words taught by the Spirit. The apostles spoke about the things of the Spirit in the words of the Holy Spirit. The writers we can say were inspired men because they were impelled by the Spirit to write inspired words. They were not searching their own brains for some wise sayings. They were speaking not only ideas given to them by God, but they were speaking the very words of God. That is why we call this “Verbal inspiration,” the inspiration of the words. Sometimes our writers use the term “Plenary inspiration,” that is, full inspiration. Any teaching of inspiration which does not teach that the words were inspired, is not teaching Biblical inspiration at all.

My dogmatics notes from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary began the section on “The Word” by saying that “The Word of God essentially is the divine truths conveyed to us in the form of human speech.”⁴¹ The teaching of inspiration is not something new as the liberals claimed. It was taught in the Scriptures. It was taught by Luther, for example “I beg and really caution every Christian not to be offended by the simplicity of the language and stories frequently encountered there, but fully realize that, however simple they may seem, these are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the majesty, power and wisdom of the most high God.”⁴² This has been the teaching of conservative Lutheranism. Adolf Hoenecke wrote under the Thesis, “Even the words of the Holy writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit: “We teach not only factual inspiration but also verbal inspiration, since Holy Scripture teaches verbal inspiration. ... Verbal inspiration is not to be thought of as if the Holy Spirit had only led the holy writers to choose the correct word, for inspiration is not merely leading and assistance but giving and offering both the correct content and the correct word.”⁴³ And under Thesis 4 “All those subvert Holy Scripture who deny that the holy writers wrote at the prompting of the Holy Spirit and that all the content of Scripture, even every word in it, is inspired.”⁴⁴ Francis Pieper said, “Inspiration does not consist in the so-called subject inspiration, inspiration of the matter merely, nor in the so-called inspiration of persons, but it is verbal inspiration, since the Scriptures, which are said to be inspired, do not consist of things or persons, but of written words. As surely as 2 Tim 3:16 predicates.”⁴⁵

The Statement on Scripture does not talk about inspired writers but inspired words. When inspiration of persons is accepted instead of inspiration of words, then there is still the possibility of the human writers writing their own human thoughts. They then speak of the “Human element in Scripture.” We need to be careful when talking about the human authorship of the Bible so that we are not misunderstood. Talking about the human element in the Bible can lead to the conclusion that what was written was written by fallible men, so the Bible is just their opinion and the Bible is fallible. No human is the author of the Bible. The author of anything is the one who originated it. The Bible originated from God, not only the

⁴¹ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Dogmatics Notes, 18.

⁴² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol 35, 236.

⁴³ Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol 1, 417-418.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 420.

⁴⁵ Francis Pieper *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol 1, 217.

ideas, but also the very words. God is the author. Finally, it is not what Moses, Paul or any of the writers said. It is what God said. The writers were only his instruments.

The doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Bible has mostly been thrown out. People may say that there is some truth to the Bible, but very few say that the words of the Bible are the words of God from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation. They say that you have to read the Bible critically, that you can't believe everything it says, that you have to understand it according to what science says, or according to what our society accepts today, or according to something else outside of the words. The Scripture is clear. The meaning of Scripture is found in the words of Scripture, not behind the words of Scripture. The words mean what they say and say what they mean. To Peter the Bible was the final authority, the only reliable test of religious truth. He says, in the passage referenced in the Statement: "In fact, no prophecy ever came by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were being carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21). What the Scripture said was the same thing to Peter as God saying it. If we no longer believe that, then the Christian religion has lost its value and authority.

So Peter taught that the Scriptures did not come from man but from God. Was Jesus really transfigured on the mount? Yes. God's Word says so. Did Jesus really pay for all of your sins? Yes. God's Word says so. God knew that people would think that the Bible is just a bunch of made-up stories, so he inspired Peter to come right out and say that they are not made-up stories no matter how hard they are to believe. "To be sure, we were not following cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the powerful appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty." 2 Peter 1:16. The Bible is not the word of man but the word of God. There are times when Jesus based his point on the exact wording of a Scripture passage (John 10:35). Every word of the Bible is true and infallible.

In giving men His message by inspiration, God had men express His Word in their own language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek), and in their own style (personal, historical, poetic, oratorical). (Cf. the superscription on the cross, Mt 27:37; Mk 15:26; Lk 23:38; Jn 19:19,20.) Thus the holy writers felt personally responsible for every word they wrote (cf. 2 Co 7:8), while they at the same time knew that their words were given by the Holy Spirit (1 Co 2:12,13).

God used humans to speak and write his words. Usually, the prophets and apostles knew that they were being inspired by God. But they didn't always know that they were being inspired by God. For example, Caiaphas didn't know he was prophesying when he said that it was good for one man to die for the people.

Some have claimed that since the writers used their own language and style, it shows the words were not given by God himself, because if he had, the style would always be the same. But that is not even true of human writing. The same author can and does use different styles depending on what he is writing and to whom he is writing. Professor Becker used to tell us in class that the same man who wrote *Alice in Wonderland* also wrote *Elementary Treatise on Determinants*. Those books had different styles and different vocabularies.

We reject as a distortion of the true conception of verbal inspiration any idea which makes the act of inspiration a mere mechanical dictation.

Some who did not believe in the teaching of verbal inspiration claimed that verbal inspiration made the writers just like secretaries taking dictation which went against what the writers themselves claimed. For example, Luke saying at the beginning of his Gospel that he investigated everything to write an orderly account, (Luke 1:3). In this paragraph of the Statement on Scripture it is saying that we reject the idea that verbal inspiration means that they were just taking dictation from God. Verbal inspiration isn't just taking dictation. God made use of their mental abilities and styles. God didn't always give dictation, but sometimes he did. There are times that the writers were taking dictation something like a secretary. In Revelation 1:10, John is told, "Write what you see on a scroll and send it to the seven churches." Then John is told before writing each letter to those churches, "To the messenger of the church in _____, write ...". Verbal inspiration doesn't mean the writers took dictation, but it doesn't exclude it either.

The relation of the Holy Spirit to the writers of the Scripture is described as those men being his instruments in communicating his word in written form. Psalm 45:1 "My tongue is the pen of a rapid writer." Here David doesn't think it is a bad thing to take dictation from God. In 2 Samuel 23:2, David says, "The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me. His word is on my tongue." Matthew 1:22 "All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet." The words the prophet spoke were the words of God. Many other passages could be cited. If by saying "dictation" they mean, putting words into the minds of the writers, then we could say that it was given by dictation. Nothing mechanical is implied by dictation. Verbal inspiration is a miracle of God.

Even though we may not want to use the illustration of dictation, we don't want to back away from the phrase "verbal inspiration." If someone wants to omit this term, we would not agree. We don't want to abandon the term just because others misinterpret it.

God alone is the author of the Bible. We do not call Moses or the prophets the authors. The writers did not write any part of the Scriptures as helpless, unthinking, robots. They really believed and felt in their hearts the messages which the Holy Spirit gave them to write.

We condemn and reject any and all teachings and statements that would limit the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture, or that deny the divine authorship of certain portions of Scripture. Inspiration applies not only to such statements as speak directly of Christ, but also to such as may seem very remote (e.g., in the field of history, geography, and nature). For since God is the Lord of history and has revealed Himself by acts in history and has in the person of His Son actually entered into man's history, the historical framework in which the Gospel message is set in Scripture is an essential part of the inspired Word just as much as the spiritual truths revealed in it.

Those who wanted to adopt a new view of Scripture were trying to have a view of Scripture that would agree with the modern opinion which says there are mistakes in the Bible. Later on, Dr. Scharlemann of the Missouri Synod suggested that it would be best to drop the term inerrancy. Some who held neo-orthodox views still claimed to believe in an inerrant Scripture.

But in order to do that they changed the definition of inerrancy. They defined inerrancy as errors and mistakes that were written to deceive people. They believed that there were mistakes in the Bible but not intentionally to deceive people so in their minds the Bible is still inerrant. They also saw the Bible is inspired in the sense that the Bible shows how God revealed himself in his mighty acts. So what the Bible leads us to believe is inspired, but not the words themselves. The Statement on Scripture said, "We condemn and reject any and all teachings and statements that would limit the inerrancy." And it goes on to say that the history, geography and nature mentioned in the Bible are inspired.

This paragraph mentions the sufficiency of Scripture. The Scripture is sufficient. That means the Scripture contains all that is necessary for the achievement of the end and aim of the Holy Scriptures. The Scripture is all we need to be saved. The Scripture doesn't tell us everything but everything it says is true. All the words of the Bible are words given by the Holy Spirit even when speaking about what seems to be unimportant things. When Paul wrote to Timothy, "When you come, bring the cloak I left in Troas with Carpus" (2 Tim 4:13) it may at first not sound worthy of inspiration, but it does show us that the Holy Spirit is interested in our everyday life.

When the Statement on Scripture says that the "historical framework in which the Gospel message is set in Scripture is an essential part of the inspired Word," it means that in the Bible we have a true history of what was said and done. The men who claim to have written the Bible really wrote it at the time they claim to have written it. The people the Bible reveals to us really did live and do the things described unless there is something in the context itself that compels us to think otherwise. This is what we mean when we talk about the Historical-Grammatical method. When those who deny the inspiration of the Bible use the Historical-Critical method of understanding the Bible, they use the word "Historical" in a different way than we do. They may not always deny the existence of the people or events described in the Bible, but they believe that because the writers were human beings who lived at a certain time in history, they reflect the views and opinions of their own society at that time.⁴⁶

We reject the idea that verbal inspiration is called into question by accidents in the transmission of the text and the resultant variants in the manuscripts. Inspiration pertains in the first instance to the original autographs of Scripture. But by His gracious providence God has given us such a fullness and variety of witnesses to the original text that Christian scholarship reproduces it with great fidelity. God has so watched over the transmission of the text that the variant readings nowhere affect the doctrines of Scripture. We gratefully acknowledge also that translations of Scripture, though not under particular inspiration, are by God's providential care adequate vehicles of His revelation in the inspired Word. Heb 2:3; 1 Pe 1:25; Mk 13:31; Jn 17:20; Mt 28:19,20.

When we talk about the inspiration of Scripture we are talking about the original documents. But today we do not have any of the original documents. What we have are copies. We have close to 2,000 old Hebrew manuscripts. There are over 4,000 ancient Greek manuscripts. There are some variant readings because of spelling errors, copying mistakes and some intentional

⁴⁶ Siegbert Becker, *The Historical-Critical Method of Bible Interpretation, Our Great Heritage*, Vol. 1, (Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, 1991). 276.

changing trying to improve the text. But by a comparison of the manuscripts, it is possible to recognize most of the changes to the original documents and have a text that is very close to the original. The text that has been handed down to us has amazing accuracy. No variant reading will change a single doctrine in the Bible. Most variants are so insignificant or so obviously wrong when compared to others.

Francis Pieper wrote, "Variant readings in the copies do exist. But first of all, let us bear in mind that it is not fair to argue from the variant readings in the copies against the inspiration of the originals. We have never held that the copyists were inspired. Spelling mistakes or slips or attempted corrections in the copies have absolutely nothing to do with the inspiration of the originals. ... If it is discovered that in copying or printing an act of the legislature, say of the State of Missouri, mistakes crept in, no sensible person would conclude that the act was never adopted with a definite wording. That is generally admitted. Accordingly, men ought not to argue from the mistakes which are found in the copies of the Bible against the inspiration of the originals."⁴⁷

Is the idea of an inspired Scripture useless because of variant readings? No. We know that the inspired words have been preserved for us. Pieper continues "We know we have this word *a priori*, that is, prior to any human investigation, on the basis of the divine promise. When our Savior says in His high-priestly prayer (John 17:20) that all those who will come to faith in the end of time will come to faith through the Word of the Apostles, herewith promise us that the Word of the Apostles will be present in the Church to the Last Day. Again, when Christ admonishes all believers to continue in his Word (John 8:31-32: If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed, and ye shall know the truth"), He guarantees that His Word will be present for us to continue in it. ... Again, when Christ instructs not only the Apostles, but his Church (Matt. 28:20) to teach all nations all things (παντα) whatsoever He has commanded them, He gives the Church the guarantee that His doctrine in all its parts will be clearly and surely known to it to the end of time. Christ also came to the defense of the text of the Old Testament ... Likewise in His temptation (Matthew 4) Christ operates with the γεγραπται as with an immovable certain text. We do not read that the devil brought up the matter of 'variant readings.'"⁴⁸

In Mark 13:31 which the Statement cites, it says "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Note the plural "words." God's words will not pass away. The words of the Bible are the inspired words of God and the only source and standard of Christian doctrine. The Scripture is clear and so Christian doctrine can be established without question. We are admonished to "Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3) To do that, one and the same doctrine is to be taught, the doctrine the Holy Spirit teaches in the inspired words of the Bible. And we are to "watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching that you learned, and keep away from them." (Romans 16:17). We are to maintain outward fellowship only with those who together with us profess the true doctrine and whose practice is according to it. These passages show that we will have the words of God to the end. Francis Pieper also says, "What the church needs in our day is not a reliable text of the Bible, but the faith in the sufficiently reliable text."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1. 237-238.

⁴⁸ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol 1, 238-239.

⁴⁹ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol 1, 340.

III. The Authority of Scripture

We believe and teach that God has given us His Holy Scripture to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Ti 3:13-17). We therefore confess Scripture to be the only, but all-sufficient foundation of our faith, the source of all our teachings, the norm of our conduct in life, and the infallible authority in all matters with which it deals. Lk 16:29-31; Dt 4:2; 13:1-5; Isa 8:20; Ac 26:22; Jn 10:35.

The Bible is the only book written under the personal direction, supervision and guidance of God. Because the words of the Bible are the inspired words of God, they have authority. The Bible must decide all questions of doctrine for us, because it alone is God's book. "All Scripture is God breathed." God breathed into the writers what they should write. They did not write down what they thought would be a good religion to follow, but they wrote down the words God put into their hearts. God guided their pens and by his Holy Spirit, guarded them from putting down any errors. Even though the Bible was written down by men, it is completely God's Words.

The Bible tells us what happened at the beginning of the world, how God made everything in 6 days by his word, out of nothing. The Bible tells us what will happen at the end of the world. This book has foretold events in minute detail. This book is true from cover to cover. There are no mistakes in it. It is God's authority. To doubt that the words of the Bible are the words of God is to call God a liar. "The authority of the Bible is that prerogative by which the Bible claims unrestricted acceptance of all its statements, full assent to all its teachings, unwavering confidence in all its promises, and willing observance of all its demands by those whom they concern, the prerogative by which it is the only infallible source and norm of doctrine and rule of life"⁵⁰

As seen earlier, some of the Lutheran Churches which denied the inspiration of Scripture wanted to say that the Bible was inspired or had authority in all matters of faith and life. This is a misleading expression. By using this expression, they were saying that when the Bible spoke about matters that didn't involve faith or life, the Bible wasn't inspired and had no authority. Here in this Statement on Scripture it says that "We therefore confess Scripture to be the only, but all-sufficient foundation of our faith, the source of all our teachings, the norm of our conduct in life." It is saying that the Bible is our only authority in matters of faith and life. It in no way is implying that there are things in the Bible like science or geography that are not inspired and authoritative. In fact, the Statement on Scripture makes that clear as it continues, "and the infallible authority in all matters with which it deals."

The Statement cites several passages. In Luke 16:29-31, the rich man in hell was told that his brothers should listen to Moses and the Prophets. They had God's messengers. They had the Bible. That is how God saves people. But people don't think that the word of God is enough. It is not forceful enough or impressive enough. They want something that is really going to impress unbelievers. Something that will move them to make the right choice. That is a delusion. That is not God's way. God's way is through hearing the Word. The Word alone has

⁵⁰ A.L. Graebner, Outlines of Doctrinal Theology, (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1910), 8-9.

the authority to bring someone to repentance and faith. When Isaiah says, "To the law and to the testimony!" (Isaiah 8:20), he is referring to the word of God. Isaiah is saying, Let's go back to the Word of God and his promises, back to the faith that trusts only what God says. It is the only authority.

Jesus said, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). To break Scripture is to destroy it, invalidate it by denying its authority. To be "broken" is to make something have no effect. That is what was being done by the liberal Lutherans. They denied the authority of the words. Scripture to them had lost its authority. They replaced the authority of Scripture with the authority of what they thought was right. What gives something authority? The Scripture gets its authority because it is the will of God. The authority of Scripture rests on the inspiration of Scripture. If the Bible is the fallible words of men, it has no authority. To disregard any part of the Bible, to say that the words aren't true in history or anything else, calls into question its authority.

Matthew 5:18 says the same thing. "Until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter, or even part of a letter, will in any way pass away from the Law until everything is fulfilled." And Matthew 22:43 "Then how can David in the Spirit call him Lord," The inspired words of the psalm, and the entire Scriptures, cannot be broken without consequences. Usually, false teachers first say that only minor things like geography or history are not inspired, but that is just to get a foot in the door for more important matters to be labeled as not inspired. The Scripture cannot be broken only because it is the inspired word of God. It has authority.

We believe and teach that where Scripture has not spoken decisively or is silent, differences of opinion may be held without violating Scripture or breaking the bonds of fellowship. Such matters fall into the area called "open questions." Scripture itself must determine which questions are to be considered as open. The term "open questions" may legitimately be used where the Scripture language leaves open the precise scope of a passage, or where linguistic, textual or historical problems make the perception of the intended sense difficult. But where Scripture has spoken, there God has spoken, whether it be on a central dogma or on a peripheral point; where Scripture has not spoken, the matter must forever remain open. 1 Pe 4:11; Jer 23:22,23.

Some liberal Lutherans sought to justify their departure from what the Scripture says by claiming the matter was an open question - since the Lutheran Confessions have not spoken about it. They held that Lutherans didn't need to agree on things that were not addressed in the Lutheran Confessions. The Iowa Synod claimed, for example, that Millennialism was an open question. The Lutheran Confessions were written between 1530 and 1580. Darwin's Origin of Species did not appear until 1859. We would not expect the Lutheran Confessions to treat the topic of evolution. But that does not mean that evolution is an open question and the Bible has nothing to say about it.

There have been those who would agree that the Bible is to be the source of all of our teaching but go on to say that since the inspiration of the Bible is not covered in the Lutheran Confessions, it is an open question. Although the Lutheran Confessions do not have a separate article dealing with the inspiration of the Scriptures, it is because that teaching was not questioned at the time they were written. But the Lutheran Confessions do teach the inspiration

of Scripture. The Nicene Creed says that the Holy Spirit “Has spoken through the Prophets.” In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, “Truly, it is amazing that the adversaries are in no way moved by so many passages of Scripture, which clearly ascribe justification to faith, and indeed, deny it to works. Do they think that the same is repeated so often for no purpose? Do they think that these words fell inconsiderately [thoughtlessly] from the Holy Ghost?”⁵¹ (Underlining mine). Later in the Apology, Melancthon points to what Paul says about the Lord’s Supper and then says, “These are the words of Him who has instituted the Sacrament.”⁵² Melancthon knew Paul wrote those words but ascribes them to the true author, God. The Apology also calls the words in 1 Corinthians 7:2, “each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband,” the command of the Holy Ghost.⁵³ God’s word cannot even be honestly mistaken. In the Large Catechism it says, “The Word of God cannot err.”⁵⁴ Many more examples could be cited that show that the teaching of the inspiration of Scripture is taught in the Lutheran Confessions.

Scripture being the Word of God, it carries its own authority in itself and does not receive it by the approbation of the Church. The Canon, that is, that collection of books which is the authority for the Church, is not the creation of the Church. Rather, the Canon has, by a quiet historical process which took place in the worship life of the Church, imposed itself upon the Church by virtue of its own divine authority.

The Bible is the only authority. The authority of the Bible depends on God alone, it does not depend on the authority of the church. The church does not confer authority on Scripture. The Canon is the stick, the yardstick by which something is measured. When we say the Bible is the Canon, we mean that if something measures up with the Bible it is right, if it doesn’t measure up with the Bible it is wrong. The canon is a standard by which we judge a book to see if it is the word of God and has this authority. Books are canonical from the time they are produced not after people decide that it is canonical.

The traditional use of the word “canon” is that it is the books that are commonly acknowledged as authoritative, or normative, for the Christian faith, that is, the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 of the New Testament. To say that a book is “canonical” means it is authoritative. To liberal scholars the word “canonical” means that a book has been accepted and defined as being in harmony with previous beliefs. So they will say that just because a book is canonical doesn’t mean it is authoritative. They see the books not as God’s Word but as human records and interpretations of God’s actions in history.

IV. The Interpretation of Scripture

Since Scripture is God’s Word, the interpretation of Scripture should not be regarded as merely or primarily an intellectual task. The true meaning of Scripture becomes clear for

⁵¹ The Apology of the Augsburg Confession Art IV, 107-108, Concordia Triglotta, (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1921), 153.

⁵² Ibid. 359

⁵³ Ibid 437

⁵⁴ The Large Catechism, 57, Concordia Triglotta, (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1921), 747.

man in a given situation, not merely by a scrupulous study of Scripture and a careful analysis of the facts at issue, but rather by approaching Scripture in a spirit of repentance and faith which makes men obedient sons of God, who hear Scripture when it speaks as Law in all the rigidity of the Law, and when it speaks as Gospel in all the unconditional grace of the Gospel. 2 Co 4:3,4; 2 Ti 3:16,17; Gal 2:5; 5:3,6.

The Jews understood what Jesus was saying. At the trial of Jesus before Pilate they reported that Jesus had said that "he himself is Christ" (Luke 23:2), and "claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7), and after the death of Jesus they told Pilate that Jesus had said, "After three days I will rise again" (Matthew 27:63). They knew and understood the words Jesus said, but they didn't have faith, so they really didn't understand the meaning of what Jesus said.

More people reject God's Word than believe it. 2 Corinthians 4:3,4 explains why many people reject the light. "But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled among those who are perishing. In the case of those people, the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from clearly seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is God's image." The world also has a god. Some people may never go to church, but they have a god. Everybody has a god who is the driving force in their lives. The god of this age is the devil. He does all he can to prevent people from seeing the light of God's Word. He blinded the mind of Eve, instilling doubts about what God had said. The light of God's Word is shining but the devil makes it his business to obscure the light. He convinces people that God's Word is not true, that it is not intelligent to believe what the Bible says, or he convinces them that they do not need God's words. He tries to keep people from seeing how sinful they are, so they don't think they need the light of salvation. He puts some people in a fog of earthly things, pleasures, recreation, business and family so that the light of God's Word doesn't penetrate that fog. He blinds some people with the pop philosophy of the world, things like "all that matters is that you live a good life," and "all religions are the same." He convinces them that they have something better. It is not because they have a lack of intelligence to realize what is being said. As a matter of fact, it is often the brilliant and highly educated who reject God's Word. They reject it because Satan has "blinded the minds of the unbelievers." They are stumbling around in darkness, and they don't even realize it. They may know what the Bible says, but they ignore it. They have no way of leading themselves out of the darkness. The only way is the Gospel that directs lost sinners to Jesus.

Our conviction that the Bible is the Word of God is not based on logical conclusions, but it is a matter of faith worked by the Holy Spirit. It convinces our hearts of the truth of what it says. It tells us that we are sinners who deserve eternal damnation in hell. In spite of our natural inclination to think we are good people, we believe we are sinners because the Holy Spirit leads us to believe it by the Word. It tells us Jesus lived and died to pay for our sins and we believe it because the Holy Spirit worked in the Word again. The Bible claims to be inspired and we believe it because the Holy Spirit did his work in us. This proof doesn't satisfy the unbeliever but it satisfies us. Professor Brug wrote, "We can make some reasonable arguments in favor of the inspiration of the Bible, but inspiration cannot be proved by human reason. We believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture because the Holy Spirit has worked faith in us. We have had God's Law and Gospel preached to us. The Holy Spirit has worked faith in Christ in our hearts through the words of Scripture. The Holy Spirit has given confidence in Scripture. Belief in the inerrancy of Scripture is ultimately a matter of faith, not proof. Belief in the

inerrancy of Scripture rests on the testimony which the Holy Spirit has given through Scripture.”⁵⁵

Scripture alone is to interpret Scripture. The hermeneutical rule that Scripture must be interpreted according to the rule, or the analogy, of faith means that the clear passages of Scripture, not any theological system or dogmatical summary of Bible doctrine, are to determine the interpretation. Seemingly obscure passages must not be interpreted so as to pervert or contradict clear passages. This means that every statement of Scripture must be understood in its native sense, according to grammar, context, and linguistic usage of the time. Where Scripture speaks historically, as for example in Genesis 1-3, it must be understood as speaking of literal, historical facts. Where Scripture speaks symbolically, metaphorically or metonymically, as for example in Revelation 20, it must be interpreted on these its own terms. Furthermore, since God spoke in the common language of men, expressions such as sunrise and sunset, the corners of the earth, etc., must not be viewed as intending to convey scientific information. Ps 119:105; 2 Pe 1:19; 2 Ti 3:15.

We don't really interpret the Bible. We just understand it as it reads. "Certainly, this commandment that I am giving you today is not too difficult for you, ... Instead, the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so you can obey it." Deuteronomy 30:11,14. The Bible is not secret code. We can understand it. "The absolute authority of Scripture includes this that Scripture is its own interpreter. And thus Scripture itself gives the interpretation of the more obscure passages by comparing them with the clearer ones, so that thus Scripture is explained by Scripture"⁵⁶

The Statement on Scripture says that Scripture must be interpreted according to the "rule, or the analogy, of faith." The term "analogy of faith" was much debated in the 1800's and again in the 1900's in connection with the election controversy. Some (Iowa and Ohio Synods) used the phrase to mean that you had to harmonize Scripture passages so that they are in harmony with the rest of Scripture, and you must rationalize the passages to fit them together according to human reason. Others (the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods) said that Scripture needed to be understood as it reads, and you cannot go beyond the simple words.

Prof Brenner quotes Francis Pieper "By the analogy of faith we mean the clear Word of Holy Writ. As regards any particular doctrine we find the clear Word in those passage of Scripture which treat expressly of the doctrine under consideration. The relationship between various doctrines is not to be determined by men, but again by the Scriptures alone, inasfar as it is there revealed. Passages that explain one doctrine must not be dragged in to explain other doctrines."⁵⁷ Here in the Statement on Scripture, the analogy of faith is likewise defined, "Scripture must be interpreted according to the rule, or the analogy, of faith means that the clear passages of Scripture, not any theological system or dogmatical summary of Bible doctrine, are to determine the interpretation." The Scriptural doctrine of election says that God elected some to be saved. The statement that God wants all to be saved also stands. It may not

⁵⁵ John Brug, The Battle to Preserve the Doctrines of the Inspiration and Inerrancy of Scripture in American Lutheranism, Essay File, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2.

⁵⁶ Seminary Dogmatics Notes p. 25,26.

⁵⁷ Brenner, The Election Controversy, 122.

make sense to us, but we don't try to interpret the doctrine of election using passages about justification by faith. We let both teachings stand and even if they seem contradictory.

Doctrine must be based only on passages of Scripture that teach that doctrine. "Nor can an agreement be reached if the controverted point is not placed in the light of Scripture. This happens when an 'interpretation' takes the place of Scripture or passages are quoted which treat of a different doctrine. The latter case is of frequent occurrence."⁵⁸ Another point needs to be made when talking about Scripture interpreting Scripture. The Bible is understood not through resources outside of the Bible. We use Scripture to understand Scripture, not things outside of Scripture. "We go astray in our exegesis of Scripture as soon as we think that the historical background given in Scripture needs to be supplemented by material from secular history and permit this supplementation to have any decisive influence on our exegesis. Such a procedure, too, would be an infraction of the truth that Scripture shines its own light and would introduce an element of uncertainty into the interpretation of Scripture."⁵⁹

The Bible is clear. That means that in the words and sentences of human language it clearly expresses all the truths which God revealed to us and which we need to know for our salvation. The Bible doesn't tell us everything, but anyone who carefully reads it, noticing figures of speech, will be able to know what it is saying. The Statement on Scripture cites Psalm 119:105 "Your words are a lamp for my feet and a light for my path." Only because the word of God is clear can it be and lamp for our feet and a light for our path. It also cites 2 Peter 1:19 "We also have the completely reliable prophetic word. You do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the Morning Star rises in your hearts." Until we are in heaven, the Bible is the only lamp we have, and we are to pay attention to it. The Statement on Scripture also cites 2 Timothy 3:15, "From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." This is an assertion of the clarity of Scripture. The Scripture had come to Timothy as a child through his mother and grandmother. Because the Scripture is clear, it made him wise for salvation. Each passage has one intended meaning. Each passage is to be taken in the natural way you would read it.

The Bible makes all the doctrines of God accessible to every reader or hearer of average human intelligence and sufficient knowledge of the language used.

Since the same God speaks by the same creative energy of the same Holy Spirit throughout Scripture, the Old Testament and the New Testament are to be viewed as constituting an organic unity. This unity is to be understood, not as a simple equation of the two testaments with each other, but in the sense of Hebrews 1:1,2: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." Since the New Testament is the culminating revelation of God, it is decisive in determining the relation between the two testaments and the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies in particular; the meaning of a prophecy becomes known in full only from its fulfillment.

⁵⁸ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1. 153.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 366.

There is no difference between the Old and New Testaments about doctrine. The New Testament only reveals more. The Holy Spirit is the author of the Old Testament, and he often gives the interpretation in the New Testament. This is Scripture interpreting Scripture. The Holy Spirit is the best interpreter of his own words. The writer to the Hebrews says, "In the past, God spoke to our forefathers by the prophets at many times and in many ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." (Hebrews 1:1-2). The words of the Bible are the words of God from beginning to end. God in the past spoke by the prophets, by the writers of the Old Testament. God himself spoke through the writers of the Old Testament so we are not free to take it or leave it but must accept it as his inspired Word. But even though the Old Testament is God's Word, its main message about the Savior was somewhat hidden since the Savior hadn't come yet. The words of the prophets are just as much God's Word as the words of the New Testament, but the New Testament has more to tell us. It has more information about God and the things of God.

Since Scripture is in all its parts and in all its words the inspired Word of God, we reject and condemn any use of the phrase "totality of Scripture" which tends to abridge or annul the force of any clear passage of Scripture. Similarly we reject the use of any phrase which makes room for the idea that the Scripture as a whole may be regarded as the Word of God, though it in many details is regarded as only the words of men.

We do not deduce Christian teaching from something called "the totality of Scripture." That phrase really makes no sense. The totality of Scripture is a human invention apart from the individual doctrines based on passages that teach them. "The 'whole of Scripture' as opposed to the sedes doctrinae was invented to block the authority of Scripture."⁶⁰ We take Christian teaching from the Scriptural passages concerning that specific doctrine. "Modern theology even goes so far as to demand that each doctrine be derived from 'the whole of Scripture.' This senseless and impossible method, recommended and adopted by the 'Reformer of the nineteenth century' (Schleiermacher), is declared to proceed from a 'deeper understanding of Scripture,' while the old theologians are said to have cut up Scripture by insisting that each doctrine be taken from the passages in which it is revealed."⁶¹

Professor Becker said, "People often say, 'You have to get rid of the proof passage method; we don't quote individual Bible passages to prove doctrines.' This cramps the style of your Neo-Orthodox theologians. They would rather operate with the whole Scripture, not individual statements of Scripture, but the whole Scripture. They talk about the ideas behind the words of Scripture, not the clear words of Scripture."⁶²

We reject and condemn "demythologizing" as a denial of the Word of God. Where Scripture records as historical facts those events and deeds which far surpass the ordinary experience of men, that record must be understood literally, as a record of facts; the miraculous and

⁶⁰ Ibid. 202.

⁶¹ Ibid. 353

⁶² Siegbert Becker, A Transcript of Dr. S. Becker's Lecture's on Romans, (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, Mequon, 1992,) 40.

mysterious may not be dismissed as intended to have only a metaphorical or symbolical meaning.

The Statement on Scripture mentions especially the “demythologizing” espoused by Lutheran Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann was a disciple of Karl Barth who came from a reformed background and taught Neo-orthodoxy. Bultmann viewed the Bible as being written in the form of myth and that we need to extract the truth out of what the Bible says. But Peter says that is not how they wrote. “To be sure, we were not following cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the powerful appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Peter 1:16.

Dr. Becker in a paper read to the Presidium of the Missouri Synod on May 24,25, 1962, said, “Neoorthodoxy seeks to divorce faith in God from faith in the words and promises of God. To a consistent Kierkegaardian, faith in God is a stepping out over the abyss into the darkness and resting on nothing but God, in a blind trust. This may sound very Christian, but it is not the way the Bible speaks. The Bible does not speak as though faith in God and faith in the words of the Bible were unrelated or even antithetical to each other. To believe in God, in Biblical terms, means to believe what God says and what God says in precisely what is said in the Scripture.”⁶³

Whatever is not Scriptural is not theological, and cannot be truly Lutheran. The true Lutheran church accepts, believes and confesses only doctrines that can be substantiated with clear words from Holy Scriptures. In our doctrinal statements we can neither go beyond nor stop short of the doctrinal statements of the Bible. Whatever the Bible teaches, we believe and confess. Whatever it does not teach we must reject. We do not base our religion on the conclusions of human reason but solely on the Word of God. The devil knows how important the Bible is for Christians, so he attacks it, tricking the minds of some who seemed to be leaders in the church. He put into their hands the knife of neo-orthodoxy which they used on the body of the Bible while still pretending to accept the Scriptures. So we must strengthen ourselves in our position against these attacks by reminding ourselves of what the Scriptures say about themselves.

The words we find in the Bible are not merely the best and highest wisdom in the world, but the inspired words of God, because “men spoke from God as they were being carried along by the Holy Spirit.” That equips the Gospel of Jesus Christ which we believe and which we teach with divine authority and divine infallibility. We as a church still believe in and teach the verbal inspiration of the Bible. Let’s never let go of that, or we are done for. If we lose that, then we have lost all divine authority on which to base our religion. It will be a special miracle of God’s grace if our synod is not contaminated by the same false ideas as other Lutheran churches. May God keep this passage always in our minds, “All Scripture is God breathed” and preserve in us the attitude “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

⁶³ The Confessional Lutheran, June-July-August 1964, 72.