

A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles (1972)

Adopted by 1973 synodical convention as a “statement of belief” which “expresses the Synod’s position on current doctrinal issues.”

IV. Holy Scripture

The Inspiration of Scripture

We believe, teach and confess that all Scripture is given by the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit and that God is therefore the true Author of every word of Scripture. We acknowledge that there is a qualitative difference between the inspired witness of Holy Scripture in all its parts and words and the witness of every other form of human expression, making the Bible a unique book.

We therefore reject the following views:

1. That the Holy Scriptures are inspired only in the sense that all Christians are “inspired” to confess the lordship of Jesus Christ.
2. That the Holy Spirit did not inspire the actual words of the Biblical authors but merely provided these men with special guidance.
3. That only those matters in Holy Scripture were inspired by the Holy Spirit which directly pertain to Jesus Christ and man’s salvation.
4. That noncanonical writings in the Christian tradition can be regarded as “inspired” in the same sense as Holy Scripture.
5. That portions of the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ contain imaginative additions, which had their origin in the early Christian community and do not present actual facts.

The Purpose of Scripture

We believe that all Scripture bears witness to Jesus Christ and that its primary purpose is to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. We therefore affirm that the Scriptures are rightly used only when they are read from the perspective of justification by faith and the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

Since the saving work of Jesus Christ was accomplished through His personal entrance into our history and His genuinely historical life, death and resurrection, we acknowledge that the recognition of the soteriological purpose of Scripture in no sense permits us to call into question or deny the historicity or factuality of matters recorded in the Bible.

We therefore reject the following views:

1. That knowing the facts and data presented in the Scripture, without relating them to Jesus Christ and His work of salvation, represents an adequate approach to Holy Scripture.

2. That the Old Testament, read on its own terms, does not bear witness to Jesus Christ.
3. That it is permissible to reject the historicity of events or the occurrence of miracles recorded in the Scriptures so long as there is no confusion of Law and Gospel.
4. That recognition of the primary purpose of Scripture makes it irrelevant whether such questions of fact as the following are answered in the affirmative: Were Adam and Eve real historical individuals? Did Israel cross the Red Sea on dry land? Did the brazen serpent miracle actually take place? Was Jesus really born of a virgin? Did Jesus perform all the miracles attributed to Him? Did Jesus' resurrection actually involve the return to life of His dead body?

The Gospel and Holy Scripture (Material and Formal Principles)

We believe, teach and confess that the Gospel of the gracious justification of the sinner through faith in Jesus Christ is not only the chief doctrine of Holy Scripture and a basic presupposition for the interpretation of Scripture, but is the heart and center of our Christian faith and theology (material principle). We also believe, teach, and confess that only "the Word of God shall establish articles of faith" (SA, II, ii, 15), and that "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (FC, Ep, Rule and Norm, .) (formal principle). The Gospel, which is the center of our theology, is the Gospel to which the Scriptures bear witness, while the Scriptures from which we derive our theology direct us steadfastly to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We reject the following distortions of the relationship between the Gospel and the Bible (the material and formal principles):

1. That acceptance of the Bible as such, rather than the Gospel, is the heart and center of Christian faith and theology, and the way to eternal salvation.
2. That the Gospel, rather than Scripture, is the norm for appraising and judging all doctrines and teachers (as, for example, when a decision on the permissibility of ordaining women into the pastoral office is made on the basis of the "Gospel" rather than on the teaching of Scripture as such).
3. That the historicity or facticity of certain Biblical accounts (such as the Flood or the Fall) may be questioned, provided this does not distort the gospel.
4. That Christians need not accept matters taught in the Scriptures that are not a part of the "Gospel."

The Authority of Scripture

We believe, teach and confess that because the Scriptures have God as their author, they possess both the divine power to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (causative authority), as well as the divine authority to serve as the church's sole standard of doctrine and life (normative authority). We recognize that the authority of Scripture can be accepted only through faith and not merely by rational demonstration. As men of faith, we affirm not only that Holy Scripture is powerful and efficacious, but also that it is "the only judge, rule, and norm according to

which, as the only touchstone, all doctrines should and must be understood, and judged as good or evil, right or wrong.” (FC, Ep, Rule and Norm, 7)

We therefore reject the following views:

1. That the authority of Scripture is limited to its efficacy in bringing men to salvation in Jesus Christ.
2. That the authority of Scripture has reference only to what the Scriptures do (as means of grace) rather than to what they are (as the inspired Word of God).
3. That the Scriptures are authoritative for the doctrine and life of the church, not because of their character as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, but because they are the oldest available written sources for the history of ancient Israel and for the life and message of Jesus Christ, or because they were written by the chosen and appointed leaders of Israel and of the early church, or because the church declared them to be canonical.
4. That the Christian community in every age is directly inspired by the Holy Spirit and is therefore free to go beyond the doctrine of the prophets and apostles in determining the content of certain aspects of its faith and witness.

The Canonical Text of Scripture

We believe, teach and confess that the authoritative Word for the church today is the canonical Word, not precanonical sources, forms or traditions, however useful the investigation of these possibilities may on occasion be for a clearer understanding of what the canonical text intends to say.

We therefore reject the following views:

1. That there are various “meanings” of a Biblical text or pericope to be discovered at various stages of its precanonical history, or that the meaning a canonical text has now may differ from the meaning it had when it was first written.
2. That Biblical materials that are judged to be “authentic” (for example, “authentic” words of Jesus, “authentic” books of Paul, or “authentic” ideas of Moses) have greater authority than “non-authentic” Biblical statements.
3. That certain pericopes or passages in the canonical text of Scripture may be regarded as imaginative additions of the Biblical authors or of the early Christian community and therefore need not be accepted as fully authoritative.
4. That extracanonical sources may be used in such a way as to call into question the clear meaning of the canonical text.
5. That the essential theological data of Biblical theology is to be found in the precanonical history of the Biblical text.

6. That certain canonical materials have greater authority than other canonical materials because of their greater antiquity or because they are allegedly more “genuine” or “authentic.”
7. That various statements of Jesus recorded in the Gospels may not actually be from Jesus and therefore lack historical factuality or the full measure of His authority.

The Infallibility of Scripture

With Luther, we confess that “God’s Word cannot err” (LC, IV, 57). We therefore believe, teach and confess that since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, they contain no errors or contradictions but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth.

We hold that the opinion that Scripture contains errors is a violation of the sola scriptura, for it rests upon the acceptance of some norm or criterion of truth above the Scriptures. We recognize that there are apparent contradictions or discrepancies and problems which arise because of uncertainty over the original text.

We reject the following views:

1. That the Scriptures contain theological as well as factual contradictions and errors.
2. That the Scriptures are inerrant only in matters pertaining directly to the Gospel message of salvation.
3. That the Scriptures are only functionally inerrant that is, that the Scriptures are “inerrant” only in the sense that they accomplish their aim of bringing the Gospel of salvation to men.
4. That the Biblical authors accommodated themselves to using and repeating as true the erroneous notions of their day (for example, the claim that Paul’s statements on the role of women in the church are not binding today because they are the culturally conditioned result of the apostle’s sharing the views of contemporary Judaism as a child of his time).
5. That statements of Jesus and the New Testament writers concerning the human authorship of portions of the Old Testament or the historicity of certain Old Testament persons and events need not be regarded as true (for example, the Davidic authorship of Psalm 110, the historicity of Jonah, or the fall of Adam and Eve).
6. That only those aspects of a Biblical statement need to be regarded as true that are in keeping with the alleged intent of the passage (for example, that Paul’s statements about Adam and Eve in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 11 do not prove the historicity of Adam and Eve because this was not the specific intent of the apostle; or that the virgin birth of our Lord may be denied because the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke did not have the specific intent to discuss a biological miracle).

7. That Jesus did not make some of the statements or perform some of the deeds attributed to him in the Gospels but that they were in fact invented or created by the early Christian community or the evangelists to meet their specific needs.
8. That the Biblical authors sometimes placed statements into the mouths of people who in fact did not make them (for example, the claim that the “Deuteronomist” places a speech in Solomon’s mouth which Solomon never actually made), or that they relate events as having actually taken place that did not in fact occur (for example, the fall of Adam and Eve, the crossing of the Red Sea on dry land, the episode of the brazen serpent, Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree, John the Baptist’s experiences in the wilderness, Jesus’ changing water into wine, Jesus’ walking on water, or even Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead or the fact of His empty tomb).
9. That the use of certain “literary forms” necessarily calls into question the historicity of that which is being described (for example, that the alleged midrashic form of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke suggests that no virgin birth actually occurred, or that the literary form of Genesis 3 argues against the historicity of the Fall).

The Unity of Scripture

We believe, teach and confess that since the same God speaks throughout Holy Scripture, there is an organic unity both within and between the Old and New Testaments. While acknowledging the rich variety of language and style in Scripture and recognizing differences of emphasis in various accounts of the same event or topic, we nevertheless affirm that the same doctrine of the Gospel, in all its articles, is presented throughout the entire Scripture.

We reject the view that Holy Scripture, both within and between its various books and authors, presents us with conflicting or contradictory teachings and theologies. We regard this view not only as violating the Scripture’s own understanding of itself, but also as making it impossible for the church to have and confess a unified theological position that is truly Biblical and evangelical.

Old Testament Prophecy

Since the New Testament is the culminating written revelation of God, we affirm that it is decisive in determining the relation between the two Testaments and the meaning of Old Testament prophecies in particular, for the meaning of a prophecy becomes known in full only from its fulfillment. With the Lutheran Confessions, we recognize the presence of Messianic prophecies about Jesus Christ throughout the Old Testament. Accordingly, we acknowledge that the Old Testament “promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for His sake” (Apology, IV, 5) and that the patriarchs and their descendants comforted themselves with such Messianic promises (cf. FC, SD, V, 23).

We therefore reject the following views:

1. That the New Testament statements about Old Testament texts and events do not establish their meaning (for example, the claim that Jesus’ reference to Psalm 110 in Matthew 23:43-44 does not establish either the psalm’s Davidic authorship or its predictive Messianic character).

2. That Old Testament prophecies are to be regarded as Messianic prophecies, not in the sense of being genuinely predictive, but only in the sense that the New Testament later applies them to New Testament events.
3. That the Old Testament prophets never recognized that their prophecies reached beyond their own time to the time of Christ.

Historical Methods of Biblical Interpretation

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, we acknowledge that the historical framework in which the Gospel message is set in Scripture is an essential part of the Word.

Furthermore, we recognize that the inspired Scriptures are historical documents written in various times, places and circumstances. We therefore believe that the Scriptures invite historical investigation and are to be taken seriously as historical documents. We affirm, however, that the Christian interpreter of Scripture cannot adopt uncritically the presuppositions and canons of the secular historian, but that he will be guided in his use of historical techniques by the presuppositions of his faith in the Lord of history, who reveals Himself in Holy Scripture as the one who creates, sustains, and even enters our history in order to lead it to His end.

We therefore reject the following views:

1. That the question of whether certain events described in the Scripture actually happened is unimportant in view of the purpose and function of Holy Scripture.
2. That methods based on secularistic and naturalistic notions of history, such as the following, may have a valid role in Biblical interpretation:
 - a. That the universe is closed to the intervention of God or any supernatural force.
 - b. That miracles are to be explained in naturalistic terms whenever possible.
 - c. That the principle of the economy of miracles may lead us to deny certain miracles reported in the Scriptures.
 - d. That the doctrines of Holy Scripture are the result of a natural development or evolution of ideas and experiences within Israel and the early church.
 - e. That the message of Scripture can be adequately measured by laws derived exclusively from empirical data and rational observation.
 - f. That man's inability to know the future makes genuine predictive prophecy an impossibility.

3. That our primary concern in Biblical interpretation is not with explaining the meaning of the primary sources, namely, the canonical Scriptures, on the basis of the sources themselves.
4. That if the use of historical methods leads to conclusions at variance with the evident meaning of the Biblical text, subconclusions may be accepted without violating the Lutheran view of Scripture or our commitment to the Lutheran Confessions (for example, the claim that it is permissible to deny the existence of angels or a personal devil because of literary, historical or theological considerations).