

LECTURE 111

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

As is well-known by us all, I think, differences existing within the Lutheran Church of Australia concerning the Bible, especially the relation within it of the human and the divine, have come to a focus in recent years in the question of the authority of the Bible. Opposing views have been channelled into the ideas represented by the terms 'formal principle' and 'material principle'. With the term 'formal principle' we are thinking of the nature of the Bible as God's Word, God's Word in writing, and with 'material principle' we are thinking of its central content, which may be described in various ways; e.g., as the Gospel, as Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord, as justification by faith. With some simplification we are distinguishing between form and content. Normally, we don't bother to make a separation of this kind when dealing with what we read. Of course, it does happen often enough. Some people have already made up their minds as to the value of any writing, essay, book, pamphlet, and so on by reference to the author. If it is or Y, they don't even bother to read it, their judgement or prejudice concerning the writer having determined for them already whether they should read or not read. Other people, with more open minds, will read for the sake of what is written, maugre the writer. However, where prejudice or knowledge of the writer is absent, usually we read the material as one thing without even thinking of the formal division into author and content.

Now, this would be the proper way to read the Bible, too. But unfortunately this is not possible any longer because of developments down the centuries in the world and church at large and because of opinions, good or bad, of teachers and those who presume to be teachers within our own church. So, willy-nilly, the relations between form and matter have to be considered and the endeavour made to determine the source of authority, whether it lies in the formal, or in the material principle, or whether it is somehow distributed in a complicated manner between them, or even is to be found only in their unity.

1.

The first assertion to be made and to be defended is that insistence on one of the principles to the exclusion of the other, form being seen as completely secondary to matter or the other way around, can only result in loss of the Gospel and of the Word of God. We take up the material principle first to see what happens if it is stressed to the exclusion of the formal principle.

Stressing of the material principle in this way can take place in two ways (may be in more, but I can think only of two). The first way occurs when Jesus Christ as person is set over against the written word of the Bible. This is repeated in one way or the other by all sorts of writers, and it must be commonplace to all of you, so that documentation is not at all necessary. This opposition: Jesus, not Bible, is one of those many false oppositions we find in theological writing that is so destructive of all theology and of all reason as well. Now, I don't deny that Jesus is a person or that he is person is a final authority. But I can't do anything with that idea. Jesus is not with us as he was with the disciples. We can't talk to him, write to him, ask his opinion, consult him as professional counsellor. We just have no communication with him at all. No one has been able to do this since St. Paul, and even he had only a relatively very short conversation with him, on the road to Damascus. To set

Jesus against written Word would seem to make a distinction which seems godly and pious, but in effect it is one which is quite impracticable, unusable, and irrational.

But it is worse, for it leads to a position directly counter to a central concern of Lutheranism. We don't believe, according to the Christian faith, that Jesus Christ has quite removed himself from us. But we do believe that he is present among us (the Lord's Supper is excluded here) only according to his Spirit. In a number of passages in John's Gospel especially, Jesus declares quite categorically not only that it was imperative that he leave his disciples and go to the Father, but also that the presence of his Spirit is the substitute for the presence of himself. 'These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you....You heard me say to you, "I go away, and I will come to you. If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father..."' (John 14:25-28). The same idea in ch. 16:7 is even more direct and explicit 'Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.' St. Paul is in agreement with St. John that the Lord is present with his church in or by his Spirit: 'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:17,18).

To make the Lord the authority as person is to make the Spirit the authority, for that is how this person is with us and among us. And to separate the Spirit from the Word is pure enthusiasm. 'Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacraments is of the devil' (Smalcald Articles III, Art. VIII, 10). No one intends that by opposing the person Jesus Christ and the Bible, but that is what must happen. The charismatically minded will find any reference to Jesus as authority apart from the written Word very much to their liking indeed.

The second way in which exclusive stress on the material principle operates is by opposing part of the content of the Scripture to the rest of Scripture. This part is usually designated the Gospel, but I have found it rare indeed for this concept to be given any precision at all, and it can be taken to include as much or as little as one like to see there, usually as little. Now our LCA in its Theses of Agreement has given a pretty definite indication of what it understands by Gospel. It rejects the following error:

to understand Augustana VII ('For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments')

(a) as limiting the area of the Gospel to less than, or expanding it beyond, what has been stated in paragraph 22.

Paragraph 22, in turn, reads:

For Lutherans the consensus required should always be regarded as the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord.... ('The Church and Its Unity According to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession'), sections 22 and 24 (5) (a). See Doctrinal Statements....LCA, A10.

A rebel within the Missouri Synod, Paul G. Bretscher, may be used as an example of those who play Gospel off against the written Word. In his rather lengthy essay, The Sword of the Spirit, he defends the position that Word of God is not to be applied to the Scripture as such but only to the Gospel, and of course, to the personal Word, Jesus Christ. 'The "Word of God" means precisely the Gospel or "good news" of Christ the holy writers are proclaiming' (p.8). But in the whole essay I can't find a definition or clear determination of what Gospel means or embraces and what it does not. Now, for the development of the argument that is coming, I shall have to define 'the Gospel' as I imagine Bretscher would and those who speak like him. I am going to define

it as John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

Exclusive authority of this Gospel statement, apart from the written Word can lead to assertions like the following :-

- (1) The ordination of women into the public ministry is permissible, because it is not in conflict with the Gospel;
- (2) Since all is grace, itself no necessary deduction from the Gospel summary, there is no place for law, the exercise of authority, punishment in the Christian family;
- (3) Since all is grace, there is no eternal punishment;
- (4) Since the heart of the Christian Gospel is the love of God, love is all that counts in the lives of Christians, and such love may be compatible with some sexual freedom and with situational ethics generally;
- (5) Insistence on close communion and the refusal to commune, except in cases of emergency, members of churches not in fellowship with our own represent a position which the Gospel summary does not demand;
- (6) Neither does the Gospel summary demand the confessional attitude of the LCA in general.

My personal argument does not call for a specific refutation of the various positions just rehearsed. But, in passing, it may be stated, that the logic in these examples is not exactly impeccable. For instance, one could argue rather in Case No. 2 that the complete obedience of the Son to the Father involved in the Gospel summary calls for that sort of obedience in the family. And I can't imagine people arguing on cases 5 and 6 as they do, unless they are also willing to defend Peter's denial of his Lord at the same time. For the same principle of speaking the truth in the situation is involved.

My real argument is that seeing authority as confined to the Gospel exclusive of the written Word, material principle to the exclusion of the formal principle can go very much further than the examples just mentioned. These are, after all, only an indication of what some people would like at the moment, and there is no reason at all why the principle should not be extended to cover the cases I am going to mention now. The argument could be extended to eliminate from the Augsburg Confession: Articles I, V, IX, X, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII; almost half of the articles in the first section. One cannot develop the article of the Trinity from John 3:16 [a Binity may be], nor the doctrine of creation, nor that there should be Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the church. One cannot develop any statements about confession, private or otherwise, from John 3:16. One can't demonstrate the need for the ministry at all, let alone the ordination of women, from the Gospel. No statement on civil government derives from the Gospel proper, nor any one church usages, the return of Christ to judgement [Is judgement at all derivable from John 3:16?], and the freedom of the will.

I suppose that not everybody will be satisfied with the bare assertions just made. Accordingly, I am going to argue the case in respect of the Sacraments. There is much interest in the Sacraments among us at present, at least in them as external acts. We all rush off to the Lord's table every Sunday, and pride ourselves on Muedeking's amazement that so many Lutherans in the LCA know the day of their baptism, but whether all this has anything to do with the real nature and blessing of the Sacraments is another matter. I am going to use Werner Elert for my argument.

Thus the doctrine of Baptism and of Communion owes its special place to the fact that it takes its departure not from the kerygma of the church but from its cultic action. It must proceed from these two facts: (1) the ordination of a sacrament by Christ and (2) its

performance by the church. In relationship to the remaining contents of dogmatics, these two facts must be regarded as characteristic of the sacraments. Thus it is doubtful whether the doctrine of the sacraments can for that reason be brought into a systematic association with the whole of dogmatics. A number of deviations from the doctrine of the sacraments can be traced to the fact that, despite the contingency of the above two points, a systematic connection with the remaining dogma was simply postulated and the validity of the church's sacraments thus made dependent on such a systematics. Such a devious course resulted because the deductive process was applied. We proceed deductively when we try to deduce the inner necessity of Baptism and of Holy Communion from some part of the kerygma. That is not possible. Neither can they be deduced from the doctrine of divine creation and preservation; nor from Christology or Pneumatology; nor from the doctrines of reconciliation, justification, and redemption; nor from the doctrine of conversion. Nor can they be viewed as the outgrowth of something preceding them, as good words, for example, result from faith. The New Testament offers no support whatsoever for that.

Let us now see what results when one takes the formal principle in isolation from the material form of the written Word apart from the content.

It would be quite fundamental to fix absolutely the limits of the canonical books. If form is all, then the formal authority must have its clearly marked boundaries.

All statements in this formal authority, quite clearly fixed as to its extent, would be equally authoritative, equally important, equally valuable. For they are all Word of God and by definition and the rules of the present argument there is no authority found in the content.

All statements distinctly and clearly made would become doctrines of the church. The dimensions of the ark of Noah would become a doctrine, and a thousand other statements like it.

The Bible would become a series of divine utterances, all binding, all to be accepted and followed, like a mammoth code of laws and valid sentences.

There would be no way of separating important from unimportant material except from the judgement of human reason as to what was the one or the other, and one could certainly expect plenty of variation on that basis of judgement.

There would be no way of rejecting any view as erroneous; no way of refuting the Sabbath teaching of the Seventh Day Adventists, since the sabbath law is quite definitely set down in various parts of the Pentateuch; no way of rejecting the Baptist teaching concerning infant baptism; no way of declaring the view of the Jehovah Witnesses on the nature of Jesus Christ to be heretical. In fact, the widely differing position of the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah Witnesses, and other sects, which strongly uphold the formal authority of the Bible, show as clearly as may be the horrendous results of insisting on Scripture alone in isolation from the authority of its central content.

There would be no way of arriving at an understanding of the New Testament in relation to the Old.

There may be other consequences as well, but this reductio ad absurdum, like the former one, demonstrates the original contention that insistence on one of the principles with which we are concerned to the exclusion of the other can only result in loss of the Gospel and of the Word of God.

2.

Obviously, form and content cannot be seen exclusively; formal and material principles must be seen somehow in conjunction. It is both proper and instructive at this point to think of the Theses of Agreement.

The first set of theses is headed 'Theses on Principles Governing Church Fellowship'. These were adopted in August 1948. But considerable discussion and debate had preceded them. The first documents after the beginning (or resumption) of dialogue between the U.E.L.C.A and the E.L.S.A (later E.L.C.A.) were written, the one by my father, the other by Dr. S.P. Hebart. The paper of Dr. Hebart was entitled 'Minimum Requirements for Church Union', that of my father, 'Minimum Requirements for Church-Fellowship'. Both parties had evidently decided that discussions should begin with a statement on this matter. The slight difference in the wording of the titles is not important. More interesting is the following. Dr. Hebart's statement had a sub-caption 'Christ All in All', while my father's first paragraph – I shan't quote it in detail – was a strong and emphatic assertion of the formal principle, as appears from the first sentence of the first thesis: 'Church-fellowship presupposes the common acceptance and confession of all doctrines revealed in the Holy Scriptures'. The union negotiations began with the problem that is busying our church at the moment and which is the subject of this present lecture.

Now, the first set of these co-ordinates the two principles in effect without going into their relations any more closely. It declares that there should be no Either-Or in the matter, declared the co-ordination of the two principles as the right way to proceed and as the right position on the matter and one to be observed in the church.

We believe that the formal and the material principles must not be brought into opposition to each other, for the Scriptures are the Word of Christ and they testify of Him. Loyalty to Christ requires loyalty to His Word, and loyalty to the Scriptures requires loyalty to Christ, His person, His work, His means of grace. We are not to stress the material principle at the expense of the formal principle, or vice versa. Churches uniting should make their pledge of loyalty to both Christ and His Word (Eph. 4:1-16). [Section 5]

This leaves the two principles to be held together, as co-ordinate authorities, to be held together in a state of tension. Now, there may be some who like to stop there and see a state of tension as a desirable thing in itself. I am not one of those, and like most people, I am sure, I like to resolve tension if at all possible, or resolve them as much as possible. Some tensions we cannot resolve, and that is the case also in the matters of the Christian faith. There is no way out of the

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tension of universal grace and grace alone. Both have to be held without any sort of movement away from the one to accommodate the other. It leaves the Lutheran teaching concerning conversion and election in a sort of no man's land rationally. Most people do not like this particular tension either, and so we have the efforts of Arminians and Calvinists, together with those who think like them, to get rid either of the sola gratia or the gratia universalis. The tension is resolved by them, but only at the cost of heresy and great distress of conscience.

I believe that it is possible to go further than the Theses of Agreement in the resolution of the tension between the material and the formal principle. As we think of the history embedded in the Biblical writings, and as we take account of the distinctly different character and nature of the two principles, the difference in nature between form and content, we can point to a number of relations between them, where now the one, and now the other principle has precedence or final authority.

First of all, in the matter of knowledge, it is quite obviously the formal principle which comes first, has priority, and conveys authority. We know at this stage of the church, and this has been true in all stages of its history except the actual time of the apostles and, possibly, of their immediate successors, of Christ and the whole Gospel only from the Scripture. All other sources of information, tradition of all kinds, liturgy, and what have you, all of them are derivative from the Scriptures, the NT in particular. This thought was developed more at length in earlier lectures. So

the Scriptures are 'the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged' (FC). Without them we should really know nothing about Christ and what he has done. In this sense, for us now, the Scripture is the original Word of God beyond which we cannot go for something more directly the Word of God. We have a movement, then, from the formal to the material principle.

We have, secondly, another situation in which the formal authority is primary. Various important and even essential parts of the Christian faith depend for their validity fairly and squarely on the Word of God as we have it now originally in the written Word of God. A number of these were mentioned earlier in this lecture, and the situation in respect of the Sacraments was developed at some length. These truths are not in any way derivative from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their position as truth to be proclaimed and administered in the church does not proceed in any logical way from the position of Christ as the centre and core of Scripture. So we have another case of a movement from formal to material.

But the opposite movement is true also, as a number of further examples will make clear. The matters just mentioned (Sacraments and so on) are, of course, not contrary to the Gospel. They are in complete harmony with it. This fact points to the role of the Gospel as final judge of what is taught on the basis of Scripture. No teaching can be in contradiction of the Gospel. Nothing in this original Word of God preserved for us in writing can be contrary to its very heart and centre. The Gospel acts as control on exegesis, of which more will be said later. This Gospel control of what Scripture is declared to teach is, basically, negative. It tells us what the Scripture or the individual text cannot mean; it does not tell us what it must mean. This new relation is undoubtedly a movement from material to formal, and is the exact counterpart of the second point.

And there is another relation to be isolated. In the matter of truth, the Gospel is not true because it is found in the Scriptures. The child's hymn is right, if 'know' is stressed as mere knowledge; but it is wrong if it is understood in Johannine fashion to mean 'believe'. "Jesus loves me, this I know/For the Bible tells me so." The Gospel was true before the NT Scriptures were written; it is true in itself, because it has to do with him who is the truth and who spoke the truth about himself and his work for men. And it is true for us because of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. It is true in whatever book it is found and no matter by whom it was and is spoken. And this is just what Luther means when he writes in his Preface to the Letters of Saint James and Jude (1522): "What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though Peter or Paul is doing the teaching; again, what preaches Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, or Herod does it. In this relation, the movement is from the material principle to the formal principle.

A still more complicated aspect of the whole matter can be recognized. This is what I might call the 'unevenness' of authority within the content of the Bible itself. This feature of authority arises from the fact that the Bible is a deposit of a history of revelation. In it we move from the revelation granted by the Word to the patriarchs, Moses, the prophets to the fulfilment in the coming of Christ, followed by the deposit of apostolic activity in church and mission and the defence of the truth against heresies. The writer to the Hebrews points to this feature of the Scripture in his opening words: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by (one who is) a Son" (1:1,2a). There can be no doubt that the reference to 'these last days' and to the 'Son' indicates not only the conclusion of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but also the high point and the acme of authority as well. That is to say: much of the Word of God given to men through men was superseded or rendered obsolete by the subsequent Word.

Particular sentences may be mentioned which state clearly what is implied in the Hebrews passage. There is the statement of Jesus used in these lectures before: "You search the scriptures ... and it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39), with which we can compare v.46 and Luke 24:44-

47). St. Paul suggests in a number of passages what he says directly in Gal. 3, that the whole OT revelation of the law had temporary significance. See vv.19-25, especially the words of v.19: "it was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made": and of 23-25: "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian". "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth" (Rom. 10:4). Something of the law remains of course, for Paul also says: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the Law" (Rom. 3:31). What is upheld also falls under the final revelation in Jesus Christ. So we have Paul in various places teaching the abolition of parts of the law: Rom. 14 (especially vv.5-9); Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16,17. In others, however, he obviously retains the law as guide to the Christian life, as in Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13,14, and, in effect, in the parnetic portion of many of his letters. In this he is a faithful follower of Jesus, who declares: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them... Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-19). But he also, while insisting on what we call the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, and even sharpening their thrust (Matt. 5:21-48), treats other aspects of the law with great freedom, like the sabbath laws and food laws (Matt. 12:1-13; 15:11). He can declare the old inherited religion of Israel to be quite incompatible with what he has to offer: "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins and the wine is lost, and so are the skins" (Mark 2:21,22). The writer to the Hebrews, comparing the New Covenant with the old, quoting Jeremiah 31, concludes: "In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13). The whole of the sacrificial system and the whole of the social legislation obviously belong to what is obsolete.

We can observe something of this development, of this history of the Word of God, within the NT itself. The implications of Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath and other ceremonies of the old law are drawn out and made specific by Paul, especially in Romans 14 and Gal. 3 and 4. If you follow my exegesis of James then we see a similar process going on in respect of the idea of 'the righteousness of God' and of justification by faith – a simple and unsophisticated expression gives way to a more complicated statement of the situation as a result of further thought and conflict within the church. Jesus' very short exposition of his death and its implications in the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper are developed especially by St. Paul into his profound teaching of the atonement.

This history of development is basically at an end. But there is a development in God's speaking to man which is yet to come and for which we all wait. That is his speaking in the consummation. Then the whole of the written Word will be unnecessary. Then every ambiguity will be removed. Then every knee will bow at the name of Jesus, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Then all speaking of God will be recognized to be just that and nothing else. Of that there will be no doubt; there will be no gainsaying. Then the revelation of God will have come to its glorious conclusion.

3.

Here, very briefly, I add, like a series of postscripts, a number of further observations on authority and Scripture.

First, we could ask the question what in the New Testament is binding on the NT church? Is there anything there, like material of the OT, which has been superseded? My answer would be something like this. We are concerned here with aspects of the Law of God. What belongs to the

fulfilment of the promises of the OT in Christ, the final Word of God to man, cannot be eliminated or superseded in any way. Only the consummation might render this as no longer important. But there is also the will of God we know as Law, and even though this is more than contradictory to the Gospel, it is necessary. The Law as a summing up of love, which can describe God himself – God is love, this cannot be superseded either. In fact, Paul tells us that of the three that abide; faith, hope, and love, love is the greatest. So, we should hold that whatever the NT sets forth as the will of God is binding on the whole church of the NT unless it is plain that a temporary or local arrangement is intended. It will be part of a sound exegesis to determine what is set forth as a general validity and what is not. The decision of the Jerusalem council, Acts 15:24-29 was meant for a special part of the church (v.23) and for such time as the problem existed. Paul's advice to Timothy about taking a little wine now and then was obviously a personal advice. And other examples could be mentioned. On the other hand, to dismiss Paul's words on homosexuality as a time-bound view and to permit practising homosexuals to be pastors of the church is to act directly against a specific direction of an inspired apostle, and one put forward with considerable force and conviction at that.

Secondly, the relation between the authority of Scripture and tradition, which I shall simply and arbitrarily define as the views and teaching and opinions of learned Christian writers and

leaders, may not cause as much difficulty in thought as in practice. Obviously, their writings are subject to the authority of Scripture. But in practice it often happens that they are frequently given greater authority than Scripture, and fathers of the church and its leaders are often appealed to as though the final word has been said by them. On the other hand, there are those who, usually through ingrained laziness and lack of study, refuse to read and learn anything from them and so close their minds to a whole host of fruitful ideas. Sometimes great teachers of the church have said things better than the Bible has done,¹ more profoundly – history and study and great experience have helped them. Their words do not eliminate the Scripture as authority, of course, for even those profound statements and ideas have to be in keeping with that which is the final authority in the church, but they do point to the fact that the Word of God in Scripture is still powerful by the Holy Spirit and has not become a dead letter.

Thirdly, there is the relation of Scripture and a special tradition, the confession of the church. The question of authority here is a complicated one but a practical one. What does a person do whose study of the Scripture in a special point brings him into conflict with the church's confessional position? We say, rightly, that the Scripture is norma normans and the Lutheran confessions, norma normata. But in point of fact a pastor would be excluded from the Lutheran Church by non-acceptance of the Confessions at some point rather than by denial of Scriptural teaching at some point.²

¹ Harmann has inserted a marginal note here referencing "Luther on [...] and sin". The precise wording is unclear.

² A handwritten single word addition has been made here but it is difficult to read.