

Inspiration and Inerrancy: The LCA Debate on Scripture, 1951-1984

Historical Introductions

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1951: Hermann Sasse, *Luther and the Inerrancy of the Scriptures*

Dr Hermann Sasse (1895-1976) was well versed in German liberal theology, having studied at Berlin University where he gained his Licentiate in Theology in 1923. Further studies at Hartford Theological Seminary in the United States (1925-1926) and reading Wilhelm Löhe's *Three Books on the Church* led him to become a convinced, confessional Lutheran. It was as such that he joined the faculty of Erlangen in 1933 after many years in parish ministry. Sasse was prominently involved in the church struggles during and after World War II until he accepted a call to lecture at Immanuel Lutheran Seminary in Adelaide, South Australia in 1949, service that extended to the first two years of the new united Luther Seminary after church union in 1966. From Adelaide he continued to remain in touch with and to influence confessional Lutheranism throughout the world, even in retirement

The essay is here reprinted in adapted form from the short-lived *The Lutheran Quarterly* (Vol. IV.1, 1951), edited by the faculty of Immanuel Seminary. While immediately addressing a controversy that arose early last century in North America, it reflects and addresses much of the agenda of later Australian debates on the inspiration of Scripture, in particular, the priority of the formal claims of the scriptures to inspiration versus the priority of their content or message in determining both inspiration and canonicity. In a deft way, Sasse not only allows Luther to speak on this and other issues, but also addresses the chief matter in dispute: do the scriptures themselves allow for even a *levis error*, a slight or minor error in historical narratives?

1951 (1966): *The Theses of Agreement on Scripture and Inspiration*

It is not surprising that the Joint Intersynodical Committees of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (ELCA) and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia (UELCA) in late 1950 interrupted discussions on eschatological matters to begin a discussion on the doctrine of the scriptures and their inspiration. The question inevitably and urgently requiring an answer was this: were past disputes in such areas as eschatology, church fellowship, and ministry merely a result of differing interpretations of biblical texts, or did they arise from a far more fundamental problem – differing views on the inspiration and authority of the scriptures in their entirety? That the Joint Committees could issue an agreed statement within a year (almost to the day) indicates that the major question could rapidly be answered. There was total agreement on the full authority of the scriptures and their essential content, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. 'Verbal and plenary inspiration' was confessed without offering or accepting any theory of how this took place. Importantly, the divine and human natures of the Word were understood using the analogy of the two natures of Christ. The term inerrancy in the final clause (10) is hedged around with limitations: it does not refer to such things as copyists' errors, absolute verbal accuracy quotations, and variations in parallel accounts. Attempts at rational harmonisation to explain difficulties are rejected. Ultimately, the scriptures are inerrant because they are the Word of God.

1966: Concerning the Bible's Inerrancy

Originally published in the *Kirchenblatt* of the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church in Germany (116.10, October 1966), this statement spoke to a wider audience after appearing in an English translation in 1969. It addressed a contentious issue being debated by conservative Lutherans in Germany, North America and Australia: what do we mean when we say that the scriptures do not contain error? Specifically, it was an answer to the charge from some that Sasse failed to accept the total inerrancy of the scriptures (*inerrantia absoluta*). Here is a concise and clear presentation of his view on biblical inerrancy as a matter of faith, and not arrived at by rational deduction or by citing proof texts. Since the total truthfulness of the Bible is accepted in faith, it cannot be proved that the scriptures contain errors. Clear is that they come to us in human form using ancient literary conventions. In asserting the human aspect of God's divine Word, Sasse is not asserting the presence of errors, but seeking to avoid two pitfalls, as he put it elsewhere: the Scylla of a fundamentalist stress on the divine origin and nature of the Word and the Charybdis of a Nestorian stress on their humanity that would allow for error.

1972: The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy, and Genesis 1-3: A Doctrinal Statement

Anyone reading the first of these two statements would be forgiven for asking why it was deemed necessary at the time, and if it actually says anything not already said clearly enough in the Theses of Agreement. The statement itself gives some clues as to its origin. References to what 'appear' to be errors or to 'apparent errors' are to be read as responses to continuing reservations, on the part of some in the LCA, against the term 'inerrancy' and the concept of verbal inspiration itself as a rational construct. Were such terms more at home in Protestant fundamentalism than in confessional Lutheranism? Should the very terms be avoided? The pastoral conclusion of the statement reflects this ongoing debate, one that continued in the wider Church even after this CTICR statement was accepted by the 1972 convention of General Synod.

As is often the case in debates on the nature of the scriptures, a specific question lay in the background, namely, the interpretation of the creation and fall narratives in Genesis 1–3. This had been a contentious issue before the 1966 union, especially within the ELCA. At issue was the question to what extent subscription to the authority and inerrancy of the scriptures required a literal interpretation of these chapters; alternatively, to what extent did it allow a figurative interpretation? The final statement, also accepted by the 1972 convention, is perhaps marked more by what it rejects than by what it permits. Though conservative, the statement leaves some questions open, such as the length of the six days and the possibility of some evolutionary processes.

1977: Henry Hamann, Content Criticism and the Historical-Critical Method

Dr Henry Hamann (1916-1988) was principal of Concordia Seminary in Highgate, SA, before becoming vice-principal of the newly formed Luther Seminary of the Lutheran Church of Australia in

1968. He lectured in New Testament and Systematic Theology until his retirement in 1985, the last six as principal. He was a prolific writer and served as the first editor of the *Lutheran Theological Journal*. Uncompromisingly conservative in the tradition of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, Hamann's contribution to doctrinal discussion leading to Lutheran church union in Australia in 1966 cannot be overemphasised, as also his contribution to the work of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations where he was a strong proponent of the claims of Scripture to be the inerrant Word of God.

The chapter, taken from his book *A Popular Guide to New Testament Criticism*, shows Hamann's complete rejection of the historical-critical method in biblical studies that led to what is called *Sachkritik* in German, that is, content criticism. Quite different was a 'biblical criticism' that analysed the language, texts and literary forms of the scriptures without passing judgment on the historical or theological facticity of the biblical message. Missing from Hamann's treatment here is a consideration of the christological heart of the scriptures in determining their truthfulness and thus authority.

1979: Henry Hamann, *The Bible and the Word of God*

This essay is the third and final chapter of Dr Hamann's book, *The Bible between Fundamentalism and Philosophy*. The book's title is indicative of his desire to steer a clear course between the error of a defensive fundamentalism and a destructive rationalism in listening to the scriptures. (One might suggest that 'rationalism' would have been a better term to use in this book than 'philosophy'.) Here again is a strong assertion that the Christian faith is based and rooted in history, but not in the bare events as such (as in one form of 'Salvation History') but in history to which God has provided meaning through prophets and apostles. 'Revelation occurs when God speaks to the deed.'

What was missing from the last chapter is clearly stated: 'the Bible is the witness of the Spirit to Christ'. This remains the essential hermeneutical starting point for differentiating between a biblical view of inerrancy with that of fundamentalism on the one hand, and with a rationalist approach on the other. A defensive literalism that is compelled to explain every seeming discrepancy in the text is to be rejected as much as a magisterial use of reason that stands over the text to determine what is true and what is not. How Hamann applied this hermeneutic can be seen in his three Chi Rho commentaries on *Matthew, Galatians, James and Jude*.

1982: Siegfried Hebart, *Theology of the Word: Lecture 1*

Though born in Australia, Dr Siegfried Hebart (1909-1990) completed theological studies at the University of Erlangen under such noted Lutheran scholars as Werner Elert and Hermann Sasse, gaining his doctorate in 1939. He was principal of Immanuel Seminary (1945-1967) before becoming the first principal of the united Luther Seminary (1968-1979). Doc – as he was affectionately known by generations of pastors – published relatively little, yet exercised a major influence on the Lutheran Church in Australia as a lecturer, negotiator, formulator of doctrine, preacher, ecumenist, and popular presenter on radio and TV. He was secretary of the Intersynodical Committee that

planned the amalgamation of the two Lutheran churches in Australia and continued to make important contributions to the work of the Commission on Theology and Interchurch relations in the early years after church union. At synods, pastors' conferences, retreats, and in-service training schools he was always heard with attention and respect.

Hebart's three lectures on the theology of the Word, first offered at pastors in conference, became the focus of discussion within the CTICR because they contain a clear critique of Lutheran Orthodoxy's approach to the scriptures and the plea for a more christocentric understanding of their inspiration and inerrancy. This is clearly the main point being made in the first lecture. 'Christ is the thrust and centre and ultimate concern of God's self-disclosure' Authentic witness to Christ constitutes the basis of the scriptures' claim to be the living Word of God.

1982: Siegfried Hebart, *Theology of the Word: Lecture 2*

In his second lecture on 'The Canon of the New Testament', Dr Hebart follows its genesis from original events to oral witness, then from written testimony to the canon itself. This whole process in which the Spirit was operative is to be included in what we call inspiration, not merely the Spirit's momentary prompting of a person to write something down. While affirming Luther's stress on the Word as the living voice (*viva vox*) of God, Hebart outlines reasons for the necessity of written witness in the early church, as well as the criteria used in the recognition of writings as canonical. However, the line of demarcation between canonical and deuterocanonical writings is not always clear. Using the critical canonical principle of 'that which promotes Christ' (*was Christum treibet*), Luther felt free to place Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation at the end of the New Testament and thus at the edge of the canon.

Hebart does not argue that uncertainty about the canonicity of some New Testament books in dispute (*antilegomena*) allows us to create our own canon – the closed canon is a fact of history. It does mean that the ultimate criterion for accepting any witness in the New Testament is whether it contains the authentic, original, apostolic witness to Christ. But a statement such as the following naturally raised questions in the CTICR and the Church generally: 'The gospel is in the writings of the NT, and at the same time it is older than Scripture and above Scripture.' Was this promoting the theory of a 'canon within the canon'?

1982: Siegfried Hebart, *Theology of the Word: Lecture 3*

In his third lecture, titled 'The Word and the Church', Dr Hebart develops the thesis that 'the true basis and extent of a rightfully understood authority of Holy Scripture is the gospel and its kerygma of Christ'. It is a strong argument in favour of the 'material principal' as determinative in talking about the inspiration and authority of the scriptures. Hebart asserts that the authority of the New Testament is the gospel itself, not the authority of a book (the so-called 'formal principal'). Likewise, it is the unity of witness that points to Christ that constitutes the infallibility or inerrancy of the New Testament writings, as well as their sufficiency as the norm for on-going proclamation of the gospel in changing contexts. The way in which the gospel of Christ both affirms the authority of the Old

Testament writings and points to their meaning again shows, as Hebart argues, how authority is not based on formal claims of a book but on its content: Christ.

The most provocative assertions come at the end of this last lecture, in an attack on Lutheran Orthodoxy as espousing a supernatural Bible, a perfect codex in which the Scripture's humanity and original context is lost under the weight of concern for propositional truth and dogma. That such assertions would not go unchallenged in the LCA was to be anticipated.

1982: Henry Hamann, *Lectures on the Holy Scriptures*

The lectures were delivered at a Pastors Conference of the South Australian District, in response to a request from the organising committee. Dr Hamann's goal, in what he proposed would be his last contribution on the topic, focused on a solution to the controversy over whether the formal or material principle was determinative in establishing the inspiration and authority of the scriptures. The central assertion comes at the beginning of the third lecture: 'insistence on one of the principles to the exclusion of the other ... can only result in the loss of the Gospel and of the Word of God.'

The first two lectures lay the groundwork for developing the above thesis. They develop common ground, apart from the fact that Hamann bases the scriptures' own formal claims to inspiration on a far broader foundation than a few 'proof passages'. In developing his central assertion in the third chapter, Hamann highlights errors that result from a one-sided stress on the material principle or from seeing the formal principle in isolation from the material. Form and content are to be held together in a state of tension. While all doctrine cannot be derived from the gospel, the gospel is the final judge of what is taught in the scriptures. And since the gospel preceded the written canon, one can speak of a movement from the material to the formal principle.

The remaining lectures illustrate how, for Hamann, acceptance of the inspiration of Scripture is determinative for exegesis, and how the Theses of Agreement deal with the question of inerrancy.

1984: *A Consensus Statement on Holy Scripture*

After intensive debate within the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, a Consensus Statement was drawn up and submitted to both General and District Synods and Pastors Conferences for discussion, before being finally adopted by the 1987 convention of General Synod. Considering the issues that needed to be addressed, the Statement is marked by remarkable conciseness. It is important to note the method followed in drawing up this document. Rather than listing matters in dispute and then reaching a compromise, the Statement formulates present agreement on the basis of theses formally adopted in the past (in 1951 [1966] and 1972). The first section (A) addresses four central issues, with each supporting argument made in the form of a positive assertion drawn from previous statements, followed by an explanatory sentence detailing what the assertion does *not* mean. It is these explanations that give clues to the nature and breadth of the previous debate in the church.

The second section (B) further develops what is to be avoided in speaking about the scriptures and about the approach of others in the church to them. The pastoral tone with its plea for unity and respect for others also marks the two attachments to the Statement, the first on the authority of Scripture, the second on the extent of the biblical canon.