

FIRST ESSAY FOR THE SIXTIETH ANNUAL CONVENTION

Delivered by

The Rev. Paul E. Bloedel, Pastor • St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran Church • Sauk Village, Illinois

Title: "The Authority of Scripture for the Establishment of Doctrine"

*"If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed;
and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31–32).*

*"Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning,
that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).*

*"No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.
For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man;
but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (II Peter 1:20–21).*

Even though most people who call themselves "Christians" would say that the Bible is an important source of religious instruction and guidance, this does not mean that they *limit themselves* to this source; for most of them also look to extra-biblical sources (outside and beyond the Scriptures) for spiritual guidance. So then how do they determine what God wants them to believe and do? Conservative *Roman Catholics*, in addition to using the Bible for some things, establish much of their religious beliefs on the basis of "*tradition*"—which includes ancient church views and practices, decisions of general councils, declarations of popes, and writings of venerated theologians. The *Reformed* (both Arminian and Calvinistic) consistently turn to the dictates of *human reason* (and away from the Scriptures) to establish certain points of their faith, as becomes evident, for instance, whenever they try to defend their false positions on Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Certain *Lutherans* who like to call themselves "conservative" and "confessional" look to the *Lutheran Confessions* more than the Bible in order to establish doctrine—using the confessions to norm (explain and define) the Scriptures. *Modernistic rationalists* in every denomination, instead of looking only to the Scriptures, look inwardly to their own hearts and minds in deciding what they will regard to be religious truth; and with no compunction whatsoever, such people say things like: "No I can't defend it on the basis of Scripture, but I just feel in my heart that God wants us to be accepting of the homosexual lifestyle;" or: "Well it may not agree with what is written in the Bible, but I'm sure that a fair and loving God wouldn't condemn a good man to hell just because he didn't believe in Jesus as his Savior." And there are many who claim to be Christians who openly dismiss much of what is written in the Bible as being the inaccurate opinions of men instead of the infallible declarations of the Lord. In all of these cases, the intellect, conscience, or insights of human beings are given the authority that only truly belongs to God—the authority to declare decidedly what teachings are true and what are false. In contrast to such false authorities, which are cited and respected by the heterodox, this essay will focus on the only thing upon which Christians can reliably base their faith, the only source of knowledge that carries the authority of God, namely, Holy Scripture. Let us, therefore, carefully consider...

The Authority of Scripture for the Establishment of Doctrine

Under this heading, we shall first examine *the authority that belongs to Holy Scripture*; secondly, *the way that Scripture sets forth doctrine*; and, thirdly, *what it means that doctrine is established by Scripture*.

I. The Authority that Belongs to Holy Scripture

The word “doctrine” simply means “a teaching.” *True Christian doctrine* is what *God teaches* us humans to believe; and any teaching that conflicts with what God teaches must be regarded as *false doctrine*. The reason why *Holy Scripture* has the authority to establish Christian doctrine is simply this: *The Bible is God’s own inspired Word*. According to what the Bible says of itself, it is the authoritative Word of the Lord in its entirety (*plenary inspiration*) and in every single individual word (*verbal inspiration*). The Apostle Paul writes: “**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God**” (II Timothy 3:16); and again: “*We speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth*” (I Corinthians 2:13). The prophets, evangelists, and apostles did not preach and write on the basis of their own creative impulse, but “*holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*” (II Peter 1:21). The authority of the Scriptures to establish doctrine comes from the divine Author of the entire Bible, namely, the Lord God Himself. Accordingly, it is not correct to think of the Scriptures as having any authority of its own separate or apart from God. Rather, since the Bible is the Word of God Himself, the Scriptures have the exact same authority as any decree of the Lord. Or, stated more concisely, *the authority of the Bible is the authority of God*. This point is evidently missed by those who decry us as being “Word worshipers,” as if we give undue honor to the Scriptures—honoring the Bible more than we honor God. This nonsensical charge can be simply answered by pointing out the fact that a person can honor the Lord properly only if he honors what the Lord says. In the Gospel according to St. Luke, Jesus rhetorically asks: “*Why call ye Me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*” (6:46). And the Apostle John writes in his first epistle: “*He that believeth not God hath made Him a liar*” (5:10). Consequently, if what God has set forth in His written Word is not honored as being authoritative, then the authority of the Lord Himself is assaulted. Speaking to the disciples who would be bringing His Word to others, Jesus declared: “*He that heareth you heareth Me; and he that despiseth you despiseth Me; and he that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me*” (Luke 10:16).

But even though God moved the prophets, evangelists, and apostles to write His inspired Word, how can we be sure that we still have it preserved for us today, thousands of years after those God-breathed writings were given? Certainly if it were left completely in the hands of men (even sincere Christians), we could have no assurance that the transmission of God’s Word would have been kept accurate and reliable through the generations that followed the initial writings. Thankfully, however, the matter rests with *God*, who has given His faithful promise that His Word would be preserved till the end of time. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Lord Jesus firmly declares: “*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away*” (Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). Christ, furthermore, stresses that in His inspired Word even the tiniest letter (“*jot*”) as well as the smallest part that makes the letters (“*tittle*”) will be preserved (Matthew 5:18; Luke 16:17). With such sure promises from the Lord our God, we should never let our sinful flesh, other people, or Satan (the father of lies) tempt us to question or doubt the reliability, authenticity, or authority of the Bible that has been divinely preserved for us down through the ages. It is precisely because God has preserved His Word, and will continue forever to do so, that we are able to *continue in His Word and know the truth*, as Jesus says in John 8:31–32, and are likewise able to *teach all nations to observe all the things that He has commanded*, as He enjoins in Matthew 28:20.

Not surprisingly, unbelievers (whether they are atheists, agnostics, or even those who wrongly think of themselves as being Christians) consistently reject the authority of the Scriptures. There are some unbelievers that still have some nice-sounding words to say about the Bible (regarding it to be a good book, generally speaking, and a useful manual for ethical behavior), but they do not regard it, in all its parts, to be the authoritative Word of God; and they blatantly argue against various things taught in the Scriptures. Even though all people are born with a certain knowledge of God (Romans 1:19–20) and His Law (2:14–15), they also have the fleshly, anti-Scriptural opinion that sinful man can and must earn the favor of God by doing good works (*opinio legis*). This deeply ingrained opinion causes man in his natural state not only to mock the impossible requirements of perfection and the condemnation of all imperfection as this is found in *God's Law* (Galatians 3:10), but also to regard the precious *Gospel* of salvation by faith in Christ without the deeds of the Law as being utter foolishness. St. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: “*The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (2:14). Additionally, in our modern society in which those who do not believe in the theories of “the big bang” and inter-species evolution are generally regarded as uneducated and simple-minded, the belief in any god or in any divinely authored book is consistently undermined. Now it *is* possible to use reason and logic together with an appeal to man’s conscience and the evidence all around him in God’s creation to prove the existence of a divine Creator. But there is really nothing *we* can do to persuade a person that the Bible is the true Word of God. The authority of the Scriptures cannot be proved with a formula of logic; nor can an unbeliever be forced truly from his heart to accept the Bible’s authority.

Accepting the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God is a fruit of faith just as the rejection of it is a fruit of unbelief. Addressing some unbelieving Jews, the Lord Jesus declared: “*He that is of God heareth God’s words; ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God*” (John 8:47). When a person has been brought to saving faith through the power of the Holy Ghost—trusting in Christ Jesus as his only Savior from sin—he not only treasures the Gospel of salvation, but every word of his gracious God. Jesus told His disciples: “*If a man love Me, he will **keep** My words. ...He that loveth Me not **keepeth not** My sayings*” (John 14:23–24). The Greek word here translated as “*keep*” does not just mean “to obey” (though this is included); but it literally means “to guard” and “hold firmly” (Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). Respect for the authority of God’s Word is worked in the heart of a person when the Holy Ghost brings him to saving faith in Christ by means of the very Word that he had previously despised. But does not a person first need to accept the authority of the Scriptures before we can talk to him about what the Bible says? Thankfully this is not the case. Since all people by nature reject the Gospel as foolishness, and since the Gospel is the means through which the Holy Ghost works saving faith in the heart that has been humbled by the Law, if we would only bring the Word to those who already respect what it says, then no one could be brought to saving faith through the Scriptures. Even though he may not respect the authority of the Bible, an unbeliever can still be told what the Law of God says (which does not need to be an exact quotation from the K.J.V.), and it will (at least to a certain extent) resonate with what he knows in his heart to be true. Furthermore, even though he may not yet respect the authority of the Bible, the unbeliever who is terrified in his conscience because of his sins and the impending wrath of God can still be brought the comforting message of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. Through that Gospel the Holy Ghost can bring a person to saving faith in Christ—changing him from being one who despises the Gospel to one who cherishes it, and working in him the acceptance of the Bible’s authority as a fruit of his faith. Consider the case of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:27–34). This man was on the verge of committing suicide; but he desired to be saved, and despaired of any righteousness in himself. Knowing himself to be

a sinner, and fearing the wrath of God, this jailer's heart was prepared to hear the Gospel, but he was still an unbeliever. Paul and Silas did not first demand that he acknowledge the authority of the Scriptures before bringing him the Gospel but directly told him: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*" (v. 31). Then through the power of the Gospel, the Holy Ghost brought the jailer to saving faith; and as a fruit of that faith, this new convert then treasured the Word of the Lord and acknowledged its authority to establish doctrine (v. 34).

Whether a person respects the authority of the Scriptures—trusting its promises and humbly submitting to its commands—is a good test of faith (John 8:47). An individual may vehemently claim to love God and trust in Jesus, but if he does not respect the authority of the Bible, he is not a Christian (Isaiah 8:20); and any attempts he makes to act like a Christian are abhorrent before the Lord. In Proverbs 28:9 we are told: "*He that turneth away his ear from hearing the Law, even his prayer shall be abomination.*" Therefore, when a person whom we had considered to be a fellow Christian, shows that he despises the teachings of the Lord in His Word, particularly by refusing to hear the admonition of the Christian congregation, he is to be regarded by us, not only as someone who is heterodox, but as "*an heathen man and a publican*" according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:15–17). This does *not* mean, however, that everyone who believes incorrectly concerning a non-fundamental doctrine of God's Word is necessarily an unbeliever. *Heterodox Christians* are those who profess the saving faith but who in ignorance or by virtue of an erring conscience also hold to certain errors in doctrine that do not, in and of themselves, destroy the foundation of faith, which is Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 3:11–15). Such people may be *unintentionally* and *unknowingly* evading the authority of Holy Scripture in certain points; however, true Christian cannot willfully and intentionally reject the authority of God's Word. Though they may *profess* it, heterodox Christians do not actually *practice* the principle of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), because they allow extra-biblical, false "authorities" to influence what they believe and teach. Such false authorities may include their own personal judgments of right and wrong, the teachings of other people whom they respect, or certain lines of argument based on man's sin-corrupted reason. Following false authorities instead of the true authority of Holy Scripture, even in non-fundamental doctrines, is an extremely dangerous practice, which, *if followed consistently*, will finally lead to errors in fundamental doctrines, and thus destroy saving faith in Christ. Through the pen of the Apostle Paul, the Holy Ghost warns us: "*A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump*" (Galatians 5:9); and again: "*Shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker [gangrene]*" (II Timothy 2:16–17).

If any extra-biblical source of doctrine is regarded as having the *same authority* as the Bible, it will actually, in practice, be given *superior authority over* the Bible whenever they conflict with each other. The Pharisees proclaimed great respect for the teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures, but they also had an extra-biblical authority called "*the tradition of the elders*" (Mark 7:3), which they allowed to supplant the Scriptures. One example of this, for which the Lord reproved them, was the way their tradition of "*Corban*" encouraged adult children to break the Fourth Commandment by giving to the temple that which could have helped their parents in need. On account of this, Jesus rebuked them saying: "***Full well ye reject the Commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honor thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death; but ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me, he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother, making the Word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered***" (Mark 7:9–13). The obvious parallel to this in our present day is how the Romanists use their "traditions" to establish doctrines that blatantly contradict Holy Scripture—while saying that

they honor *both* Scripture and church tradition. In order for the authority of the Bible to stand, there can be no other “authorities” alongside of it. Therefore, it is not sufficient to say that Scripture is *an* authority for the establishment of doctrine, but that *it is the only authority* for the establishment of doctrine. Accordingly, the orthodox Lutheran Church declares in the *Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord*: “The Word of God alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything should be subjected” (*Triglotta*, p. 855).

Holy Scripture is the only reliable source of doctrine, because it is the only source that carries the authority of God Himself. It is pointless to argue that God *has the ability* to reveal doctrines through extra-biblical sources—through the writings of theologians, through dreams, through modern-day prophets, and so on. It simply needs to be stressed that the Lord has *not promised* to speak to us apart from His written Word; that in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments God has *completed* and *concluded* the giving of His Word (Hebrews 1:1–2; Revelation 22:18–19); and that He has *warned* us against going anywhere but Holy Writ for doctrinal instruction. Through the pen of the Apostle Paul, God exhorts and warns us saying: “*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ*” (Colossians 2:8); and again: “*Be sound in the faith; not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth*” (Titus 1:13–14). In like manner, we are told in Proverbs chapter 19: “*Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge*” (v. 27). And lest anyone think that a person’s own heart should be trusted to guide him in the right way, the Lord declares through the prophet Jeremiah: “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*” (17:9). In contrast to these dangerous and sin-corrupted sources of religious instruction, Christ Jesus points us to the only completely reliable source, which carries His own authority, for the establishment of doctrine when He says: “*If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth*” (John 8:31–32).

II. The Way that the Scriptures Set Forth Doctrine

If the Word of the Lord were given in a form that no human could understand, then although it would carry His divine authority, yet it could not establish doctrine for us, because we would be unable to know what God wanted us to believe and do. Likewise, if God’s Word were conveyed in such a way that only a certain few could understand it (the exceptionally gifted, intelligent, or wise), then it still would not establish doctrine for the majority of mankind, and would leave them without the ability to distinguish between true and false prophets. But, thankfully, as the Lord tells us in the book of Deuteronomy: “*This Commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off*” (30:11). Instead of hiding His holy doctrines—those divine teachings that He wants us to believe and follow in our lives—God has revealed them to us *using words and expressions that can be easily understood*, even by the “*simple*” (Psalm 119:130). This theological point is commonly called the *perspicuity of Scripture*. Being *perspicuous*, or clear, the Scriptures set forth the divinely inspired doctrines in a way that can be easily grasped. Attesting to this fact, Psalm 119 declares: “*Thy Word is a Lamp unto my feet, and a Light unto my path*” (v. 105); and again: “*The entrance of Thy Words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple*” (v. 130). Not only does Holy Scripture *emphatically state* that it is clear, but it also *shows* itself to be clear. Even little children are able to understand the Scriptures, as the Apostle Paul attests concerning Timothy (II Timothy 3:15). All of the doctrines set forth in our exposition of the *Small Catechism* (1943) are supported and proved with easily understood passages from Holy Scripture. Those passages are not difficult to comprehend, nor in need of interpretation. Not surprisingly, there are certain words that may

need to be defined for a student because of vocabulary limitations or unfamiliarity with archaic words and expressions used in the King James Version. This, however, does not mean that the verses are obscure, dark, or incomprehensible.

Now it is true that there are certain passages of the Bible that *can* be difficult for us to understand; but this does not undermine the perspicuity of the Scriptures, for the problem lies with *us* and *not* with God's Word. One thing that can impair our understanding is the fact that we are unable to read the Old and New Testaments fluently in their original languages (Hebrew and koine Greek). For as good as our King James Version is, certain points do not come through in the English translation as precisely or with the same scope of meaning as in the original. Another thing that can contribute to difficulties in understanding a given passage is that we are so far removed from the times in which the books of the Bible were written, and thus we cannot personally relate to many cultural and historical references that were commonly understood by the people in those days. Furthermore, the sinful flesh, which even we Christians have, sometimes obfuscates in our own minds what the Lord is telling us in His Word. There are also certain things described in Scripture that we cannot understand perfectly simply because they lie beyond our experience and ability to comprehend—such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the timelessness of eternity, and so on. But, again, none of these points argue against the perspicuity, or clearness, of Holy Scripture.

Because the Bible is *clear*, it is also *self-interpreting*—not needing an outside source of illumination for its message to be comprehended. And because the Bible is *God's own Word*, it *dare not* be *privately interpreted* by the mind of man. The Apostle Peter, in his second epistle, emphatically declares: “*No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*” (1:20–21). Accordingly, out of respect for the divine authority of Holy Scripture, and acknowledging its perspicuity, the churches of our Conference and fellowship are compelled to teach only that which the Lord clearly teaches in the Scriptures—letting God speak for Himself and not allowing humanly devised opinions to contradict or obscure the doctrines He has set forth. This is what it means to follow the principle of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). Even though there may be passages that are more difficult for us to understand, everything that the Lord wants us to know for our Christian faith and life has been revealed very clearly and plainly in the Scriptures. A Bible passage that clearly presents a point of Christian doctrine in terms that are straightforward and easily understood is called a *sedes doctrinae*, which simply means a “seat of doctrine”—that upon which the teaching firmly rests. Thus a *sedes* is a proof-passage, or proof-text, that expounds and defends a teaching of the Christian faith. But it can only do this if the *sedes* is allowed to teach what God plainly declares therein *without the interference of human interpretations*. To subject a *sedes* to interpretation, in violation of II Peter 1:20, is to *handle the Word of God deceitfully* (II Corinthians 4:2)—treating the Bible as if it were not perspicuous and exalting the wisdom of man above the wisdom of the Lord. We should be so very thankful that our understanding of doctrine is based on the clear Word of God, and not the wisdom or creative thinking of man!

But the fact that the Bible *clearly* and *unambiguously* presents the doctrines of the Christian religion is by no means universally accepted in outward Christendom. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches regard the Bible to be a dark and confusing book if it is not explained in the light of church tradition. Elaborating upon the belief that Roman Catholic tradition is *needed* to explain the *unclear* Scriptures, the “*Catholic Encyclopedia*” states: “Side by side with Scripture there is tradition, side by side with the written revelation there is the oral revelation. This granted, it is impossible to be satisfied with the Bible alone for the solution of

all dogmatic questions. ...It is the living Church and not Scripture that St. Paul indicates as the pillar and the unshakable ground of truth. ...A book although Divine and inspired is not intended to support itself. If it is obscure (and what unprejudiced person will deny that there are obscurities in the Bible?) it must be interpreted. ...Now, authority for authority, is it not better to have recourse to that of the Church than to that of the first comer? ...If there must be a religion of authority, the Catholic system with the splendid organization of its living magisterium is far superior to the Protestant system, which rests everything on the authority of a book” (quoted from the section on “*Tradition and Living Magisterium*”). Not surprisingly, laymen are generally *not encouraged* to read and study the Bible on their own, and are sometimes specifically *advised against* it lest they become confused and depart from what the Romanists regard to be the right understanding, which they believe can only come from the church (not from the Bible itself). Consistent with their disdain for God’s written Word, unbiased translations of the Scriptures have been completely and absolutely condemned by the Roman Catholic Church. In his *Bull against Bible Societies*, written to the “Archbishop of Quesn, Primate of Poland” on June 29, 1816, Pope Pius VII described the translation of the Scriptures into the common language of the people as “a crafty device by which the very foundations of religion are undermined.” And Pope Leo XII, upon assuming the pontificate, wrote in an encyclical “to all Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, and Bishops” that “to allow holy Bibles in the ordinary language, wholesale and without distinction, would on account of human rashness cause more harm than good” (*Ubi Primum*, May 5, 1824). Since the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches base their religious dogmas not only on the Scriptures, but also on *traditions that plainly contradict the Scriptures*, which St. Paul describes as “*doctrines of devils*” (I Timothy 4:1–3), it is not surprising that they regard the Bible to be a dark and obscure book that is unable by itself clearly to establish all points of doctrine.

But what about the Reformed, both Calvinistic and Arminian? With their *words* the Reformed sometimes defend the *perspicuity of Scripture*, as well as the principle of *sola Scriptura*; but in their *use* of the Scriptures, they frequently undermine both. Instead of consistently accepting the clear *sedes* of God’s Word, the Reformed often allow *human reason* to supersede the Scriptures for the establishment of doctrine. Thus *Calvinists* teach that God does not want to save all people, because God can do anything He wants and He does not save all people. While this argumentation may sound “reasonable,” it cannot be accepted as valid because it blatantly contradicts the clear Word of God, which tells us: “*As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live*” (Ezekiel 33:11); “*The Lord is...not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*” (II Peter 3:9); “[*God our Savior*] will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (I Timothy 2:4). The Reformed deny the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, because it does not seem *reasonable* to them that Jesus’ true body could be united with the bread or His true blood with the wine in the Lord’s Supper, even though Jesus clearly testifies: “*This is My body*” (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:24), and: “*This is My blood*” (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; I Corinthians 11:25). Likewise, because of their rationalism, the Reformed deny that Baptism can save a person, even though the Scriptures clearly state: “*Baptism doth also now save us*” (I Peter 3:21). None of these verses are unclear or difficult to understand in the least. While not believing what they teach, even self-confessed unbelievers can understand what those words of Scripture are saying; yet the Reformed regard them to be unclear because they cannot reconcile what these passages clearly teach with their own heterodox beliefs. Certainly, if a person approaches I Peter 3:21 with the preconceived opinion that Baptism does not and cannot save anyone, then the simple statement “*Baptism doth also now save us*” can seem confusing, but only because what the words clearly say has already been rejected at the outset and thus

eliminated from consideration. If it is assumed that the words of a particular verse cannot mean what they clearly say, then that verse would, indeed, seem to be very unclear. *But notice that it only becomes unclear in the mind of the person who discards what the passage clearly says.*

When the perspicuity of Scripture is not acknowledged, even those who know certain doctrines correctly from the *sedes* are tempted to be accepting of incorrect beliefs based on the false opinion that those passages are sufficiently ambiguous and permitting of interpretation. The spirit of *unionism* that is so prevalent in outward Christendom today is based upon and fueled by the premise that conflicting beliefs in “non-fundamental” doctrines are merely honest differences of interpretation that should not stand in the way of religious fellowship. Understandably, when the argument is framed in such a way that doctrinal differences are just one person’s interpretation as opposed to another’s, then it can seem unreasonable, arrogant, and presumptuous for one to say: “My understanding of this doctrine is definitely correct, and yours is definitely wrong.” So the false premise needs to be exposed and corrected. When a particular doctrine is clearly set forth in a passage of Holy Scripture, that *sedes* needs to be acknowledged as establishing the doctrine all by itself, without any interpretation being required, used, or allowed. The *sedes* needs to be accepted for what it clearly says; and any “*private interpretation*” (II Peter 1:20) that may be raised in opposition needs to be identified for what it is—a twisting of God’s Holy Word (II Peter 3:16)! It is crucial that *the perspicuity of Scripture* be emphasized. The Lord must be allowed to speak for Himself; He speaks clearly and does not need the help of man to get His point across. Because the *sedes* set forth doctrine *in clear and unmistakable terms*, they do not need to be interpreted; and because the *sedes* declare what *the Lord our God* tells us, we humans dare never put our own personal spin on them. “*No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*” (II Peter 1:20–21).

Once it is rightly understood that false doctrine is *not* the result of legitimate alternative interpretations of vague Bible passages, but, instead, results from the refusal to abide by the clear Word of God, then no true Christian should have any desire whatsoever to engage in unionistic activities—joining in religious work and worship with those whose teachings oppose the teachings of Holy Scripture. On the contrary, love for the Savior leads the believer to honor and cherish the Lord’s Word (John 14:23); and in appreciation for every single doctrine revealed by God for our edification and guidance, the Christian treasures the full truth of the Scriptures and abhors every single false doctrine. Accordingly, the Psalmist declares: “*How sweet are Thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Thy precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way*” (119:103–104); and again: “*I love Thy commandments above gold, yea, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem all Thy precepts concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way*” (119:127–128). Notice how *love* for God’s Word of pure truth produces *hatred* of the error that would undermine that truth. This proper Christian attitude (*hating every false way*) should be shown consistently in respect to *all doctrines*, not only the “fundamentals.” Despite their serious disagreement concerning Christ’s real presence in the Sacrament of the Altar, Zwingli—sounding just like the unionists of today—said to Luther: “Let us confess our union in all things in which we agree; and, as for the rest, let us remember that we are brethren. There will never be peace in the churches if we cannot bear differences on secondary points.” To which Luther appropriately replied: “I am astonished that you wish to consider me as your brother. It shows clearly that you do not attach much importance to your doctrine” (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 7, p. 645). Luther could not agree with Zwingli’s expression of fellowship because, unlike Zwingli, Luther highly prized and held firmly to the truth that God’s Word clearly taught. Do we truly appreciate the fact that the Lord has so clearly set forth the doctrines of the Christian faith that we need not

be doubtful or unsure about what the Scriptures teach us to believe? Oh how blessed we are to be able to point to the *sedes* and say with confidence: “*Thus saith the Lord,*” as opposed to, “This is what my pastor thinks this verse means,” or “After much soul searching and inward reflection, here is my personal, well-thought-out opinion about what this passage is trying to say.”

III. What It Means that Doctrine is *Established* by Scripture

Because they were written by inspiration of God, and because they clearly set forth the teachings of the Christian faith, the Scriptures *establish* doctrine, that is, they firmly and decidedly settle what is to be believed, taught, and confessed by the followers of God. There is to be no debating among Christians whether or not a clear teaching of Holy Scripture will be accepted and followed by them. When the Bible speaks about anything (whether it concerns our faith and life, or concerns matters of history and science), it must be accepted as absolute truth. *Thus the matter is settled and the correct doctrine is firmly established. “Thy Word is truth”* (John 17:17) should be the continuous refrain of God’s people when they are tempted by the devil, the world, and their flesh to doubt, question, or take issue with anything contained in the Scriptures.

The Bible has rightly been identified as both the *source* and the *norm* of Christian doctrine (John 8:31–32). As the only true *source* of doctrine, all correct religious teachings must originate from Holy Writ—not from human speculation, creativity, or private opinions. That the Bible is also the only *norm* of Christian doctrine means that it provides the only authoritative standard of judgment to be used in Christ’s Church for determining what is true and what is false teaching. As the orthodox Lutheran Fathers confessed in the *Epitome* of the *Formula of Concord*: “The Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong” (*Triglotta*, p. 779). The Lutheran Confessions are a reflective norm because (*quia*) they accurately present the doctrines of Holy Scripture (not their own doctrines). But the Confessions are correctly designated as *norma normata* (the rule that is ruled), because *they are to be normed by the Bible*, which is the only *norma normans* (the rule that rules).

A certain doctrine may only have one *sedes* (proof passage) in the whole Bible, or it may have a great many. It really does not matter how many *sedes* can be listed to support a doctrine; one single passage of God’s Word is fully sufficient to establish the correct teaching of the Christian faith. In answer to each of the devil’s temptations in the wilderness, Jesus used *single passages* to rebuke the tempter effectively (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). Christ exposed the Sadducees’ error in denying the resurrection of the dead by applying a *single phrase* from the Old Testament, saying: “*Have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living*” (Matthew 22:31–32; Exodus 3:6); and this *one phrase* of Scripture was sufficient to “*put the Sadducees to silence*” (Matthew 22:34). On another occasion, Jesus defended Himself by stressing *one single word* from the Old Testament Scriptures—the word “*gods*” as used to describe the representatives of God in government (Psalm 82:6; Exodus 22:28)—as He made the point that “*the Scripture cannot be broken*” (John 10:35). In his epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul established a point of doctrine by citing not only a *single word* from the Old Testament but also *the form of that word*, the fact that it was *singular instead of plural*, when he wrote: “[*God*] *saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy Seed, which is Christ*” (Galatians 3:16; Genesis 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Many more examples could also be listed that show how Christ and His apostles would reference passages from Holy Scripture to establish doctrine. And this same practice has been observed by the faithful followers of Christ down through the ages.

Though he was raised in a church system that placed more emphasis on the teachings of men than the teachings of God, Martin Luther, having been enlightened by the Holy Ghost through the Gospel, became a staunch defender of *sola Scripture*—that *the Bible alone* is to establish doctrine in Christ’s Church. Luther’s famous question “Where is this written?” was effectively used as a reminder that nothing should be advanced as true Christian doctrine if it is not solidly grounded in the written Word of God. He put this principle into practice in his preaching, teaching, and writing; and thus Luther proclaimed the pure doctrines of the Christian faith for the comfort, guidance, edification, and salvation of countless souls. At the Marburg colloquy—a meeting between Luther and Zwingli—the main point of expressed disagreement between these two influential Protestant leaders centered around the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. Due to his rationalism, Zwingli refused to accept the words of institution in their literal sense, insisting on a figurative interpretation. For Luther, however, the doctrine of the real presence was thoroughly settled by the plain words of Jesus, “*This is My body;*” which words Luther wrote on the table and pointed at repeatedly in order to refute every attempt of Zwingli to make the bread and wine in the Sacrament *mere symbols* of Christ’s body and blood. Even though some would consider their disagreement about the little word, “*is,*” to be a minor point of dispute, Luther rightly marked Zwingli as having a *different spirit*, because he so freely took liberties with the words of the Savior. Since the Lord had clearly spoken, the correct doctrine was firmly established, as Luther faithfully presented it; and the opposite teaching of Zwingli was exposed as *false doctrine*.

Since the Scriptures carry the authority of God to establish *true doctrine*, they also carry His authority clearly to identify the *false teachings* of *false teachers*. Simply put, any teaching that conflicts with, adds to, or diminishes from (Deuteronomy 12:32) the doctrine established by Scripture must be *false doctrine*; and those who represent their own false teachings as if they are the doctrines of God’s Word are described in the Bible as being *false prophets* (Matthew 7:15; Jeremiah 23:31) who *worship God in vain* with their false doctrines (Matthew 15:9). Knowingly to reject the wisdom of God in the Scriptures in preference for the ideas of man is the height of arrogance and foolishness. Thus St. Paul says that such a person “*is proud, knowing nothing*” (I Timothy 6:3–4); and the Lord rhetorically asks through the prophet Jeremiah: “*They have rejected the Word of the Lord; and what wisdom is in them?*” (8:9). Even though Jesus warns us that false prophets try to hide their true character under “*sheep’s clothing,*” we need not be deceived by them, because He also tells us: “*Ye shall know them by their fruits*” (Matthew 7:15–16). The *fruits* of a teacher are the things that he teaches. So those fruits need to be evaluated on the basis of the only authoritative norm of Christian doctrine, namely, Holy Scripture. Therefore, the Apostle John writes in his first epistle that the *test* for whether a person is a true or false prophet is to examine whether or not that person adheres to the words of Christ’s apostles. He says: “*We are of God. He that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error*” (4:6). This is the test that every Christian layman should also apply to his own pastor—not just assuming that whatever comes out of his mouth must be true even if he has been a faithful pastor for many years. Earlier in the same chapter, John writes: “*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try [or, test] the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world*” (4:1). Consequently, if a person wants to be regarded as a true prophet of the Lord, then he needs to honor the doctrine set forth in Holy Scripture. The Apostle Paul writes: “*If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord*” (I Corinthians 14:37). It is, in fact, the solemn duty of every faithful Christian to speak in complete harmony with the full truth of God’s pure Word.

“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (I Peter 4:11). *“He that hath My Word, let him speak My Word faithfully”* (Jeremiah 23:28).

Just as there can be no fellowship between righteousness and unrighteousness, no communion between light and darkness, and no concord between Christ and Satan (II Corinthians 6:14–15), so also there can be no true fellowship between those who hold to the doctrine established by Scripture and those who replace the doctrine of God with the teachings of man. Having religious union without doctrinal unity is completely inconsistent for anyone who claims to cherish the full truth and purity of God’s Word (Psalm 119:103–104, 127–128); and it also shows a disregard for the warnings and commands of the Lord, who does not want His people to be led into sin and misbelief through the proponents of false doctrine. By inspiration of the Holy Ghost, St. Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy: *“If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is Godliness; **from such withdraw thyself**”* (6:3–5); and to the Romans he writes: *“I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and **avoid them**”* (16:17). True respect for the fact that doctrine is clearly and firmly established by the Scriptures is inconsistent with the spirit of unionism, which tries to minimize and ignore the impassable chasm between true doctrine and false doctrine.

It is not, however, the Bible’s firm establishment of doctrine that is to blame for the great divisions that exist in outward Christendom. On the contrary, Romans 16:17 says that those who teach *“contrary to the doctrine”* established by Scripture are the ones who *“cause divisions and offenses”* among Christians. The Lord certainly desires all people to be spiritually united together, not by allowing error to coexist with truth in a mock fellowship-in-name-only, but by having all people believe the Scriptures in their full truth and purity. Thus Jesus prayed for *true unity through the Word* among His believing followers of all time, saying to His heavenly Father: *“Sanctify them **through Thy truth; Thy Word is truth.** ...Neither pray I for these alone but for them also which shall believe on Me **through their Word, that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us**”* (John 17:17, 20–21). The formula for genuine unity in a congregation or wider fellowship of believers is simply this, that every soul is to accept all the doctrines of Holy Scripture as these are clearly set forth in the *sedes*, without rationalistic arguments, fleshly opinions, or personal feelings being permitted to distort the Word of the Lord. Because the Scriptures have the authority to establish doctrine—that which is to be taught and believed in the Christian Church—they provide the only legitimate basis for Christian unity. In his first epistle, St. John refers to the establishment of true fellowship as a purpose and result of the apostles’ inspired writings, saying: *“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ”* (1:3). The common objection that perfect unity in doctrine is impossible for sinful human beings to attain in this life may sound reasonable, but it cannot stand the test of Scripture. By inspiration of the Holy Ghost, the Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: *“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”* (1:10). In the book of Acts we learn that the *very large congregation of believers* (4:4) shared this spiritual unity, for the Lord tells us: *“The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul”* (4:32). Furthermore, if it is acknowledged that God *“is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or*

think” (Ephesians 3:20), that it is the Lord who grants spiritual knowledge and unity through the Scriptures (John 17:17, 20–21), that “*God is not the author of confusion, but of peace*” (I Corinthians 14:33), that He has promised those who continue in His Word that they “*shall know the truth*” (John 8:31–32), how then can it be doubted that the Lord is able to teach many people the truth, and thus to unite the hearts of a multitude of believers in the pure doctrines of His holy Word as these are so clearly taught in the *sedes*?

Even though Holy Scripture has the authority of God to establish the saving doctrines of the Christian religion, sadly, not all those who use the Scriptures accept what is plainly taught by them (Hebrews 4:2; Acts 13:46); in fact, the sinful flesh of man bitterly opposes the Word of God (Romans 8:7). Consequently, not all who read the Bible are Christian; and not all Christians who read the Bible are orthodox—they do not all accept the full truth of God’s Word. As the authentic Word of the Lord, the Bible (specifically the Gospel) conveys His own divine power to convert the hearts of men (Romans 1:16) and cause them, all who by nature can only reject it as foolishness (I Corinthians 2:14), to believe and rejoice in the doctrines presented therein. And the person who, through the grace and power of God alone, *does* accept in a believing heart that which the Lord teaches in the Scriptures receives the most priceless blessing—being made “*wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*” and “*thoroughly furnished unto all good works*” (II Timothy 3:15–17). To all those who stay firmly grounded in the Word of God as the true disciples of Jesus, the Savior promises knowledge of the truth, and freedom from the slavery, guilt, and punishment of sin (John 8:31–32). In order that the Ephesian pastors would be strengthened in their faith and be saved eternally, the Apostle Paul commended them to the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ Jesus, saying: “*Now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified*” (Acts 20:32).

Knowing that such glorious blessings are conveyed by the Holy Ghost through His Word, we should treasure it greatly, and not allow anyone or anything to dislodge us from this solid Rock of our faith. For our own spiritual welfare, it is important that we heed the exhortation of the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Thessalonica: “*Brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle*” (II Thessalonians 2:15; II Peter 3:17–18). But the tenacity with which we hold to the authority of Scripture is not God-pleasing if it is only motivated by self-interests. Rather, out of *respect* for the Lord God as the highest Being and out of *love* for Him as our dear Savior and Redeemer, we should cling to the Scriptures and gladly submit to their authority. As Luther says in his explanation of the Third Commandment: “*We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.*” Emphasizing the proper attitude of humble respect that every Christian should have before the Scriptures, the prophet Isaiah writes: “*Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. ...But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and **trembleth at My Word***” (66:1–2). A person who rightly trembles with respect at the Word of God cannot willfully take a position against it; nor would he knowingly follow the leading of anyone who teaches contrary to it. In Deuteronomy 13:3, the believer’s rejection of false prophets is described as being proof of his *love for the Lord*; and in John 14:23, Jesus says that the man who *loves Him* will guard and cherish His Word. So then it is the Gospel, which proclaims the love of Jesus in sacrificing Himself for our redemption (I John 4:9–10), that moves us Christians to love Him in return (4:19) and to say in the words of the Psalmist: “*With my whole heart have I sought Thee; O let me not wander from Thy commandments. Thy Word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against Thee. Blessed art Thou, O Lord; teach me Thy statutes. With my lips have I declared all the judgments of Thy mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of Thy testimonies, as much as in all*

riches. I will meditate in Thy precepts and have respect unto Thy ways. I will delight myself in Thy statutes; I will not forget Thy Word” (119:10–16). May this expression of genuine love and respect for the Lord and His Word be truly reflected in our hearts and lives as we continue to hold firmly to the authority of Scripture for the establishment of doctrine, for Jesus’ sake!

Soli Deo gloria!