

SERMON DELIVERED AT THE SERVICE OF CONVOCATION

of the

Sixtieth Annual Convention

of the

Concordia Lutheran Conference

at

Oak Forest, Illinois

by

The Rev. David T. Mensing, Conference President

Text: **Ephesians 2:20**

Theme: *Sola Scriptura* — **The Foundation of Faith**

In the Name of Jesus Christ, the only Savior and Head of His Church, dearly beloved hearers of His Word:

We often speak of ourselves, referring to our Lutheran heritage, as “children of the Reformation,” as those who are, by God’s grace alone, the beneficiaries of Luther’s monumental work of returning outward Christendom to the “*foundation*” of faith. But Satan has not been content to sit idly on the sidelines for the past five hundred years, leaving the “children of the Reformation” unmolested upon that sure and steadfast foundation. What should have been and could have remained a revitalized and doctrinally-focused Lutheran communion, solidly anchored on the “*foundation*” of faith, “*perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*” (I Corinthians 1:10), was, almost from the very beginning, “*tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they [lay] in wait to deceive*” (Ephesians 4:14). Like a paper boat on a breezy pond, the church that had been freed from the tyranny of the Pope by the Holy Spirit in Luther’s Reformation was set upon by “winds of change” and was tossed to and fro over the next five centuries by a series of “isms,” movements among “thinkers,” philosophers, and “theologians” falsely so-called, which drove the “children of the Reformation” aground upon the rocks of disunity, false doctrine, and spiritual destruction! Those “isms” worked like gangrene (II Timothy 2:17) to destroy even the *certainty of salvation* by undermining the simple Christian’s confidence in

***Sola Scriptura* — the “*Foundation*” of Faith**

as the Apostle Paul calls it in the text which serves as the motto of our Sixtieth Annual Convention. Tragically, the wide divergency of doctrinal positions among those today who bear Luther’s name is ample testimony to the fact that *Sola Scriptura* as the foundation of faith is no longer adhered to with any consistency. In some “Lutheran” bodies it has actually *disappeared*. Concerning those, nothing more need really be said. They are what they are; they don’t even pretend to be Scripture-centered. In other bodies, the confession of *sola Scriptura* exists *in name only*, while opposing factions within the body debate historical and social contexts, exegetical

differences, textual variants in the manuscripts of Scripture, the viewpoints of “the fathers,” what Luther, Chemnitz, Quenstedt, Walther and others said about this or that, and so-called “practical considerations” in order to find loopholes, exceptions, special circumstances, and “divine” or “apostolic” precedent to justify their differences. In the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, for example, the once-orthodox church-body of Walther, Pieper, and other staunch confessors of the truth, the body from which we were “delivered” in our own “Reformation” of sorts back in 1951, we now see an outward fellowship of really *strange* bedfellows: “Liberals,” “moderates,” “conservatives,” and “confessionals” differing with one another, even *openly*, in doctrine and practice but maintaining a **guise of unity** in an effort to “save the Synod” — each from the other. Such a farcical circus with its non-stop posturing only deceives the simple and unwary into believing that doctrinal discipline (*Brief Statement*, ¶29) is actually being maintained on the basis of Scripture, while allowing some room for “reasonable diversity” among Christians. So-called “conservatives” and “confessionals” continue to “*mark*” error and errorists, but they never “*avoid them*” (Romans 16:17). They “*admonish*” heretics, but they never “*reject*” them (Titus 3:10). They claim to “*stand fast*” (I Corinthians 16:13) upon **Scripture alone**, so long as they are not forced to choose between Scripture and their membership in Synod, or their pastorate, or their synodical pension! Such theological “wimps” are hardly what **Luther** would have called “conservatives” or “confessionals;” and they are certainly not “orthodox!”

I.

According to the clear and unmistakable words of our text, it is “*the foundation of the **apostles and prophets**,*” the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, upon which Christ’s church is “*built,*” the “*foundation*” to which our “*hope*” is **anchored**, “*both sure and steadfast*” (Hebrews 6:19), the only **source** and **norm** (or standard) of Christian doctrine and practice. Indeed, the “formal principle” of the Reformation, the basic premise upon which Luther’s work was grounded (and upon which we by the grace of God still stand today) is **sola Scriptura** — **Scripture ALONE**. It is this principle of Scripture itself (German: *das Schriftprinzip*) which establishes the **absolute reliability** of what we believe and teach, profess and practice, because it acknowledges the infallible and immutable, verbally-inspired and therefore inerrant, perfectly clear and authoritative **Word of God** as the **ONLY legitimate SOURCE** of spiritual truth. Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms: “*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); and He prayed to His heavenly Father in John 17:17 for His disciples both then and now: “*Sanctify them through Thy **Truth**; Thy **WORD** is **truth**.*” Moreover, the **Word of God**, the Word of His “*apostles and prophets,*” is the only **reliable STANDARD** against which all teaching and practice is to be judged. St. Paul writes in I Corinthians 14:37, “*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**.*” And 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 dotting 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! ... From such **withdraw** thyself!*” (I Timothy 6:3-5). And to the Romans, as well as to us in these latter days of apostasy, Paul writes and tells them precisely what they (and we) should do with errorists, saying: “*Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them; for they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ but their own belly, and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple*” (Romans 16:17–18).

Only through his study of **the Bible** was Luther brought by the Holy Spirit “*to the knowledge of the truth*” (I Timothy 2:4), to confidence in God’s *mercy*, who justifies poor sinners alone by

His grace for Christ's sake, totally apart from the works of the Law (Romans 3:20-28). It also gave him the assurance that whatever is taught, believed and practiced according to the perfect rule of **SCRIPTURE ALONE** is "most certainly **true**" (Cf. John 8:31-32), the phrase with which he concluded his explanations of all three articles of the Apostles' Creed. On the other hand, all doctrines of **men**, whether they can be shown to be contrary to Scripture or whether they are mere *adiaphora* [matters neither commanded nor forbidden by God's Word] craftily disguised as the will of *God* (Romans 16:18; Ephesians 4:14; etc.) and laid upon the consciences of God's people, as if they were *His* commandments (Matthew 15:19), must be rejected as "lying and deceiving by God's Name" —**false** and **pernicious** doctrine.

Yes, Luther took his stand upon **SCRIPTURE ALONE**. He stood resolutely upon "*the foundation of the apostles and prophets.*" He stood his ground, fully persuaded of the Scriptures' absolute infallibility, inerrancy, immutability, clarity, sufficiency and authority as **the only source and standard of Christian doctrine and practice** and fully convinced that unflinching **adherence** to that SINGLE STANDARD is the only legitimate mark of **genuine orthodoxy** (Jeremiah 23:28b; John 8:31-32).

Indeed, when Holy Scripture is rejected as the **only** source and norm of doctrine and practice, along come the "isms," one by one, and set upon the sleepy, unwary virgins (cf. Matthew 25:1 ff.), sucking the oil of the pure Gospel out of their lamps and replacing it with so much "hot air"! — Pietism, subjectivism, rationalism, mysticism, fundamentalism, liberalism, higher criticism, relativism, pessimism, accommodationism, unionism, syncretism, sinful separatism, ecumenism, and even conservatism (whatever that means, depending upon what is being "conserved") and confessionalism (which more often than not gives lip service to the Lutheran Confessions without true orthodoxy in doctrine and practice).

Mere **lip-service** to *sola Scriptura* is rendered in church bodies which call themselves "Lutheran" but tolerate diversity in doctrine and practice out of a false concept of "love" to the erring, OR on the basis of an arbitrary distinction between "doctrines divisive of fellowship" and "doctrines NOT divisive of fellowship." Who is kidding whom?? The Lord declares through Jeremiah: "*He that hath My Word, let him speak My Word **faithfully***" (23:28), and through Amos: "*Can two walk together except they be **agreed**??*" (3:3). In Leviticus 19, God Himself shows how we are to demonstrate love to an erring brother, saying: "*Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart; thou **shalt** in any wise **rebuke** thy neighbor and not suffer sin upon him.*" Unpopular though it be nowadays to engage in *polemics*, that is, to refute false doctrine, to admonish the erring, to reject and avoid those who will not heed correction, to take a "stand" and to make it count regardless of the consequences, this is what **Scripture demands** of every faithful Christian, pastor and layman alike! (Matthew 10:19ff.; II Timothy 4:2ff.).

By God's grace, we in our beloved Conference have stood foursquare on **Scripture alone** down through the years, recognizing the **Word of God** as the **sole determiner** of what is preached and taught in our churches, practiced among us, committed to students in our seminary, printed in our position papers and in our *Concordia Lutheran*, and agreed to in meetings with other groups whose stance we must carefully examine (I John 4:1). "*Not unto US, O Lord, not unto US, but unto **Thy Name** give glory, for **Thy mercy** and for **Thy Truth's sake!***" (Psalm 115:1). Indeed it is not to **our** credit personally or collectively that **Scripture alone** has been and continues to be the **sole source and norm** of what **we** stand for; but the Lord in His great mercy and according to His promise has preserved His precious Word to us in these latter days, His Word in its **truth and purity** —a gracious and completely undeserved blessing for which we are grateful beyond expression.

II.

Scripture alone is **not**, however, just a **theoretical** “*foundation*” of our faith, beloved brethren, as if there were no real “consequences” to abandoning it as such! The Apostle Paul tells us in our text, in our Convention motto, that “**Jesus Christ Himself** [*is*] the **Chief Cornerstone**,” the indispensable “keystone” of the **arch** and the topmost “capstone” of the **vault** —those basic architectural forms that are integral parts of a stone edifice. The “keystone” is as central to an arch as “*Jesus Christ Himself*” is both the **object** and the **validation** of Holy Writ. He refers to the Scriptures as **His** Word. “*The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life*” (John 6:63). “*If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed*” (John 8:31). “*If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you*” (John 15:7).

Similarly, the “capstone” is as central to the vault and keeps it from collapsing upon itself as “*Jesus Christ Himself*” — “true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man born of the Virgin Mary,” the God-anointed Redeemer of sinful mankind, is **central** to the Scriptures, the **object** of sacred prophesy, and the very **purpose** for which the “*oracles of God*” were penned! Paul writes to Timothy that “*the Holy Scriptures* [even those of the Old Testament **alone**] *are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*” (II Timothy 3:15). They are the **Means of Grace**! Peter told Cornelius and his household: “*To Him* [that is, to **Christ**] *give all the prophets witness, that through His Name, whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins*” (Acts 10:43). And Jesus told the Jews, who said they revered Moses, while at the same time they despised Him: “*Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of Me*” (John 5:39). “*...Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed Me; for he wrote of Me!*” (v. 46).

The **practical consequence** of rejecting the Scriptures as the authoritative, inerrant, clear and unmistakable, absolutely indispensable “*foundation*” of faith upon which Christ’s Church, Christ’s true members, His “*disciples indeed*” are “*built*” is the rejection of “*Jesus Christ Himself*,” for if anyone will not hear “*Moses and the prophets* [the Scriptures even of the **Old** Testament], *neither will [he] be persuaded, though one rose from the dead*” (Luke 16:31), though indeed Jesus Himself rose from the dead, as that blessed account is recorded by His evangelists and apostles in the Scriptures of the **New** Testament. What an unspeakably great and completely needless tragedy!

Brethren, “*the Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad!*” (Psalm 126:3). He has graciously preserved to us and our children His precious Word in its truth and purity and has strengthened us through that Word to ever greater steadfastness in building upon its **sure foundation**. Let us be wary, however, lest Satan lift **us** up with pride to despise the Word as **our** only authority and cause **us** to fall! Rather, let each of us, pastor and layman alike, “**hold fast the form of sound words**” (II Timothy 1:13), “*grow[ing] in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; to Him be glory both now and forever! Amen!*” (II Peter 3:18).

Soli Deo gloria!