

being a faithful pastor until you get to item thirty, “preaching content.” I’m guessing the reason for this is that there’s an assumption being made that any pastor on the synodical roster must *of course* be a faithful one. But that assumption in itself is a problem.

In the first place, if a pastor wants praise bands and other such nonsense, that’s not an insignificant thing. That would already be an indication of a man the people in Kewanee *would not want*. Nor should any faithful, confessional Lutheran want such a pastor! And it’s not just a matter of personal preference; it’s a matter of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, how you worship reflects what you believe, which we at *Gottesdienst* have, of course, always tried to stress. But the assumptions that lie behind this Self-Study are already attempting to make such things utterly matters of indifference. The poor laymen who are filling this thing out are being asked to assume worship style is entirely a matter of personal preference. And then, when one gets to this list, on the one hand there’s a prominent designation of “tact” but on the other no careful delineation about faithfulness. So while they are supposed to assume any pastor would be faithful, evidently they ought not assume any pastor would be tactful. Or patient, or cooperative, etc.

Maybe they should give special consideration to so-called “people skills,” whatever they are. If a typical layman is to assume that all pastors are faithful but that not all pastors have these “people skills,” what is he left to assume if with the coming of the new pastor there’s a strife developing in the congregation? Say he wants to be reverent in worship, but they’re more used to casual. This list intimates that it really ought to make no difference, and if the people have trouble adapting to his “new” style of worship, the cause of the trouble must be that he’s short on people skills, or something like that. The reason *must* be something like that because it wouldn’t be that he’s being faithful in a situation in which the congregation, or the previous pastor, wasn’t as faithful. Heaven help the new pastor who must try to lead a congregation toward being more faithful or confessional, when even the synodical Praesidium, assuming all pastors are already faithful, provides a questionnaire that suggests that the only reason for this trouble must be some personality fault this new pastor brings with him.

Synodical politics being what they are, I am not so naïve as to suppose it likely any substantial change will come about soon in these Self-Study materials; yet I am constrained to suggest that, in any case, a faithful district president might at least provide some disclaimers when he speaks to the call committee of a congregation. And he might also take whatever opportunities afforded to him to explain just why he finds praise bands and contemporary worship odious.

Why does the synodical default setting have to be an assumption that you can have whatever style of worship

you want, that it really doesn’t matter? Why can’t we instead insist that the way one worships is always a reflection of what one believes? I have been encouraged in recent years to hear that there is a growing number of district presidents who are willing to support confessionally beleaguered pastors in their districts.

Might I suggest, then, that if these officials want to get good men to be pastors in their districts, to make for better worship practices among the congregations, perhaps some form of the Self-Study could be tailored to reflect what kind of worship practices we’d really like to see, in the name of faithfulness. We pray for the day when a consensus emerges among the members of the entire Praesidium that Lutheran worship must reflect Lutheran faith. Toward that end, may I recommend a routine recollection of the maxim: *lex orandi, lex credendi*.



Notes

¹ bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/of-the-ministry/#ac-v-0001. Emphasis mine. It’s also worth mentioning that the Lutheran Confessions *always* use “ministry (Latin: ministerium)” to refer to the Office.

Commentary on the War: Toward Gaining Ground in the Ministry

Reading the Bible Spiritually

David H. Petersen



recognize this is harsh, but in my experience the exegesis of the Missouri Synod in the preaching and teaching of her pastors has been shallower and weaker than is fitting for a church body that confesses Holy Scripture as the inspired, inerrant Word of God and counts it as the sole source and norm for all of doctrine and life. Some of this lacking exegesis can be attributed to laziness—we are all weaker than we should be—but some of it is also because we have largely adopted a modern, Protestant way of reading Scripture, and that needs to be examined and expelled.

I think there are two main reasons for us adopting this mode of reading Scripture. First, we have suffered from a misunderstanding and misapplication of Luther’s polemical statements about the sense of Scripture. In fairness, Luther himself may have been confused and inconsistent about this issue. Secondly, we have been malformed by our battle with higher criticism so that the main and nearly only question that we ask of the text is

whether or not it is historical. These two reasons are so intertwined that I am taking them together rather than breaking them apart. In any case, a large part of the solution, I think, is a return to reading the Bible theologically, something more in line with a patristic and even medieval reading. That reading recognized that Holy Scripture has a single Author whose intent is to reveal Himself to us in all of the details of the text for spiritual purposes.

This might sound preposterous, but I was once told by a professor at one of our seminaries that the Church's doctrine was immediately adulterated and confused with the death of the Apostles. He claimed that doctrine was restored to purity only by the work of Martin Luther and not a minute sooner. He wasn't denying that there were Christians in those fifteen hundred intervening years; he was simply saying that the Church that suffered open persecution, gave us the Creeds, stood against the likes of Gnosticism, Marcion, Pelagius, and Nestorius, and which collected the Canon, never had pure doctrine the way that he did. He did not think that they understood the Bible properly or knew how to read it. I loved this man, but that belief seemed to me then, and still does, to be an unbecoming arrogance.

Insofar as anyone's doctrine is pure, it is a gift from God. He gives this through His Word. Exegesis matters. Doctrine isn't an abstraction that finds proof in the Scriptures as though it were an afterthought or a rhetorical flourish. Scripture presents and establishes doctrine. If the fathers should not be our teachers in how to read the Bible, then they should not be our teachers about doctrine or life. The doctrine of the fathers was no less pure than ours. No, they were not infallible, nor was there was a monolithic doctrinal stance and exegetical opinion in every detail, but they didn't face the same explicit errors that we have faced or that Luther faced. Thus, they did not confess directly against them, but that does not mean that they were mis-confessing. I think the fathers should be read with deep respect and gratitude, and we should strive to keep the Eighth Commandment regarding their orthodoxy even when we find a particular opinion or statement troubling. I tend to think that they understood Scripture better than we do, and if we allow it, they can teach us to read Scripture more naturally.

We need a natural reading of Scripture instead of our modern, narrow, historical reading. Our current method is unnatural in that it emphasizes the human authors and their situations. As already mentioned, some of our weaknesses have become defined by historical criticism. The only question that seems to matter is "What is historical? What actually happened?" The critics say, "almost nothing," and we respond, "No, all of it happened." Then we forget to ask the Lutheran question, "What does this mean?" and do not seek the spiritual import, or do so only in a shallow, mechanical way.¹

The fathers are less embarrassed by the supernatural than we are. You will never find ideas like that of a meteor striking the Mediterranean and driving the waters of the Red Sea apart for the Exodus. They expect miracles. Throughout their reading they emphasize the divine Author. They understand Scripture as a unified theological narrative with a spiritual purpose. Their exegesis should not be dismissed even though there are fewer references to the human authors and situations and even less insistence upon the historicity of the reports. To be sure, they are not infallible nor is their understanding monolithic. Origen, generally considered the most outrageous of allegorists, dismisses bits of the creation account and fall as parables in a most unfortunate way² and should not be followed on these points. Nonetheless, Origen is trying to draw our attention to the details of the account and what the words convey. His emphasis would likely have been far different if he had lived in a world that denied the supernatural. I propose that we should not read uncritically, but that we should nonetheless embrace patristic exegesis and find in it an example of faithful reading and interpretation.³

There is merit in recognizing the human authors along with the peculiar situations and context of the original writings, even as there is merit in insisting upon the historicity and trustworthiness of Scripture. Nevertheless, we must never forget that the Bible is far more than a historical artifact. It is a supernatural reality: God's living Word. Its self-proclaimed purpose is written that we would "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31, NKJV).

Hans Boersma makes a similar point in *Scripture as Real Presence* wherein he contrasts exegetical principles from patristic to modern. His purpose is to demonstrate that most modern, Protestant exegesis is caught up in a dualism that separates natural history from divine providence. He explains:

To be sure, the Christian faith is rooted in history, and historical exegesis is indispensable for a proper understanding of the Scriptures. However, historical reading is never purely historical, as if there were a purely natural or factual substructure on which we would subsequently build a separate of distinct theological reading."⁴

One of his most useful points drawn from patristic exegesis is in the suggestion that we substitute the title archetype for Christ instead of antitype.⁵ The point here would be to recognize that a purely linear view of Scripture is slightly misleading because of Christ's eternal nature. This move would also recognize His centrality in all of Scripture which gives all else its definition and purpose.

Besides being defined by historical criticism, the modern approach to exegesis Lutherans have adopted has also made much of the slogan *sensus literalis unus est*⁶ as either a battle cry of the Reformation or an axiomatic hermeneutical principle that trumps all else. To this end, consider Raymond F. Surburg's pronouncement in 1953:

The text of Scripture had but one meaning for [Luther], even though in his practical explanations Luther often paid tribute to the allegorical sense. Thus in writing to Emser, Luther asserted: "Scripture shall not have a double meaning, but shall retain the one that accords with the meaning by the words." Again he said: "The Holy Ghost is the most simple Author and Speaker in heaven or earth, therefore His words cannot have more than one, the most simple, meaning." In the Christmas Postil for 1522 Luther wrote: "If we concede that Scripture has more than one sense, it loses its fighting force." The abandonment of the allegorical method of exegesis by Luther and the use of the historico-grammatical method was an accomplishment whose influence dare not be underestimated.⁷

A similar argument is made by Ralph A. Bohlmann, and bolstered by many of the same quotes, in his essay from 1966 entitled, "Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions." There he writes:

The insistence of the Lutheran Reformation that every passage of Holy Scripture has but one simple sense constituted a major breakthrough in the history of Biblical interpretation.⁸

Bohlman recognizes that Luther sometimes proceeds in a way that is difficult to harmonize with his insistence against Emser's two-fold method that the Bible can never, in any place, have more than one simple meaning. He takes Luther in the Large Catechism as an example. There, concerning the Third Commandment, Luther writes:

According to its outward meaning, this commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other regulations of the Old Testament associated with particular customs, persons, times, and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ. But to give a Christian interpretation to the simple people of what God requires of us in this commandment, note that we do not observe holy days for the sake of intelligent and well-informed Christians, for they have no need of them. We observe them, first, because our bodies need them. Nature teach-

es and demands that the common people—men-servants and maidservants who have gone about their work or trade all week long—should also retire for a day to rest and be refreshed. Second and most important, we observe them so that people will have time and opportunity on such days of rest, which otherwise would not be available, to attend worship services, that is, so that they may assemble to hear and discuss God's Word and then to offer praise, song, and prayer to God.⁹

Bohlmann notes that

at first glance it would appear that Luther interprets the Third Commandment as having a double-sense, the one "literal" and the other "Christian." But as Luther's context makes clear, the true and proper sense . . . then and now, is that "that we should sanctify the holy day."¹⁰

In fact, Bohlmann overstates it. The commandment did have an outward and historic component. That component can be distinguished from, but not separated from, its spiritual meaning. Luther's language in the Large Catechism about the Third Commandment's "Christian interpretation" indicates that at some level he recognizes there is a proper two-fold interpretation even though he does not use that exact language and would probably have protested against it.

The mistake, in part, that Surburg and Bohlmann have made is not one of great violence. It is simply that they have taken a few of Luther's writings and statements about the interpretation of Scripture out of context, as though the statements were not polemical and pointedly contextual but were meant to be axiomatic and borderline creedal. They have then taken these statements and used them as a lens by which to understand Luther's exegesis and set them before us as the ideal. Whether it is ideal or not, the conclusion regarding Luther's exegesis should have been drawn the other way around: Luther's own exegesis should be used to interpret his statements. His own exegesis should determine what he meant or else display that he himself was confused and inconsistent. In fact, I think Luther likely was caught up in his own polemic and didn't fully think through these statements or ever take the time to define terms carefully; and he never seemed to try to apply any of it to himself.

As an example of Luther's approach, consider the very sermon that Surburg quoted. It is from Luther's postil for Christmas Eve on Luke 2 from 1522. In context, Luther's statement was: "If we concede that Scripture has more than one sense, it loses its fighting force." For in this same sermon, Luther claims that Christ was born at midnight to indicate that the world is in darkness, that the light that shone around the angels shows us that

the Gospel is not apprehended by human reason, that the angel that announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds is a type of modern preachers and the shepherds of modern hearers¹¹, that the name Judea, which means confession or thanksgiving, shows us that no confession but the Gospel teaches Christ, that Bethlehem, which means literally “House of Bread,” means that “without the gospel there is nothing but desert on earth and no confession of God and no thanksgiving.”¹² He also claims that the swaddling clothes “are nothing but Holy Scripture, in which Christ the Truth lies wrapped up.”¹³ He says also that “the four soldiers who crucified the Lord were prefigurations of all bishops and teachers in the four parts of the world who tear apart the Gospel and kill Christ and faith in Him.”¹⁴ He proclaims that the manger is “the gathering of Christian people in the Church to hear the sermon,” that is, that we are beasts who there feed upon Christ.¹⁵ He nods to the healing of the ten lepers in an allegorical way also, for he says “Christ is the priest, all men are spiritual lepers because of unbelief.”¹⁶ Later he claims that the phrase “evening and morning” in the creation account refers to Law and Gospel because night is dark and morning is light.¹⁷ He also teaches that the swaddling clothes have two sides, the outward part which is rough and that which is close to the skin which is soft. These, he says, refer to the Old and New Testaments.

Reproduced below is one of his most allegorical paragraphs:

The shepherds indicate this in that they are found in the field under the sky, and not in houses; thus they do not cling or cleave to temporal goods. In addition, they are in the field at night, despised and not recognized by the world which sleeps during the night and likes to strut and be seen during the day. But the poor shepherds are up and working during the night. They represent all the lowly ones who lead a poor, despised, unostentatious life on earth and live under the open sky, subject to God. They are ready to receive the gospel. The fact that they are shepherds means that nobody should listen to the gospel for his own benefit solely, but each one should tell someone who has no knowledge of it; for whoever believes for himself, that one has enough and he must see to it from then on how he might bring others also to such a faith and knowledge, so that one person is the shepherd of the other, and pastures him and takes care of him on this earth in the darkness of his life.¹⁸

I submit that in all of this we can see that Luther understands the historical details as revealing to us more than simply what happened. He understands the details

that Luke recorded to have theological importance. In the full quote given above, he says that the angels announced the Lord’s birth at night under the open sky, that is out-of-doors, because the world is caught up in the idolatry of materialism. It happened at night because that same world is asleep in moral laziness and ignorance. The vocation of shepherd is central. It is not simply that they were awake and out-of-doors, which is the historical reality; it is that the office of shepherd is typical for all Christians, not just ministers, but all Christians. This is because all Christians are to shepherd others with the Gospel and lead them out of the night and into the day. I find it quite delicious that Surburg chose this particular sermon for his proof text about Luther’s method and a dismissal of allegory.

In fairness, Luther does not understand himself to be preaching allegorically. He believes this is the literal meaning of the text. What we ought to be able to discern from this is that every detail mattered to Luther and that every detail was related directly to the Gospel in the wide sense, that is, that it is meant to reveal God to us as He wants to be known and our place in His kingdom.

All this is to say that Luther’s occasional repetition of *sensus literalis unus est* and even what he says about it should not be allowed to become creedal statements that bind the imagination or cut us off from history of the Church, even if the point is to uphold the historicity of the Biblical accounts. Luther opened his imagination to the Word of God. His preaching did the same for his hearers. I think we can be more deliberate and that we can recapture a more natural and spiritual reading of Scripture that upholds and teaches the historicity of Scripture. I think that doing so would be more in line with how Luther proceeded and also with how the Scriptures were read in both the early and medieval church. I think that doing so will be of great benefit not only for our own souls, but also for those of our hearers.



Notes

¹ This is largely the argument of the Eastern Orthodox theologian Andrew Louth in *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (1983). The book is a quick read and well worth your time.

² Origen, “De Principiis,” in *Fathers of the Third Century*, ed. Alexander Roberts et al., trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, 1885), 365.

³ Two articles from the summer issue of *Concordia Journal* 2023 (Vol 49, No. 3) also make this point with many examples. David Maxwell, “The Exegetical Elephant in the Room” (15–37), and Joel Elowsky, “The Wedding of Cana in the Interpretation of the Early Church” (55–66). Both of these articles will greatly bless those who read them.

⁴ Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, xii.

⁵ Boersma 25, footnote 93.

⁶ “The literal sense is one,” a commonly cited Lutheran hermeneutical principle.

⁷ Raymond Frederick Surburg, “The Significance of Luther’s Hermeneutics for the Protestant Reformation,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 24, no. 4 (April 1953): 241–261. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed March 24, 2018), 6.

⁸ Ralph A. Bohlmann, “Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Confessions,” in *Aspects of Biblical Hermeneutics* (CPH, 1966), 29.

⁹ LC I 82–84 in Kolb-Wengert, 397.

¹⁰ Bohlmann, “Principles of Biblical Interpretation,” 33.

¹¹ AE 52:19.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸ Ibid., 25. Paul Scott Wilson makes the argument that Luther uses a two-fold sense of the literal sense like that of Nicholas of Lyra, where one half of the literal sense is the historical reality and the other half is a spiritual meaning (*God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching* [2001]). In fact, Luther explicitly denies this, naming Lyra. (AE 3:26–27). Perhaps, however, Luther protests too much.

Taking Pains

Reverence is not primarily a matter of feeling pious, but rather of taking pains. – The Anglican Breviary

Why Rubrics? (Continued)

Mark P. Braden

In the Easter 2024 issue of Gottesdienst, this column began discussing the “why” of the rubrics that attend the Mass. That discussion continues here.



We have identified three components of the Divine Service as ceremony, rite, and rubrics. Ceremony is what we do with our bodies: how we move, where we stand, how we hold our hands, when and how we bow or reverence the altar, etc. Rite is the written Ordo or Order of Service. Rubrics are written instructions that govern the ceremony, providing direction of what to do and when and how to do it. There are rubrics for the pastor and rubrics for the congregation. By these, order is observed in the Divine Service. God is a God of order. His Service, the Divine Service, ought to be conducted in an orderly way. The rubrics govern the ceremony. The ceremony makes a public confession of the faith we believe, teach and practice.¹

Our fathers in the faith left to the Church a blessed foundation in the basic framework of the Mass.

Consider Luther’s comments as he begins his 1523 *Formula Missae*: It is not now nor ever has it been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God [*cultus Dei*] completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use. We cannot deny that the mass, i.e., the communion of bread and wine, is a rite divinely instituted by Christ himself and that it was observed first by Christ and then by the apostles . . .²

So too, the Apology:

At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are celebrated every Lord’s Day and on the other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things . . .³

From Acts 2:42, in pericopes peppered throughout the New Testament, through Clement and Justin, in the *Didache*, in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, in the Apostolic Constitutions, in *Ordo Romanus Primus*, in Luther’s great *Formula Missae*, in the Saxon Agenda of 1540, in the Chemnitz/Andrae Agenda, in the Agenda of Wilhelm Löhe, in the Agenda of Friedrich Lochner, and through to the Common Service, the framework of the ancient Mass is preserved—even religiously maintained and defended. Through the preservation and use of the historic Mass the unity of the holy Church of the ages is expressed and achieved. That our doctrine is the doctrine of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church is publicly confessed by our adherence to the historic Order of Service.

Throughout the years notes on the conduct of the Mass were added. Those notes, many of which are preserved in our rubrics, reveal how our fathers in the faith responded, verbally and kinetically, to the presence of Christ and His saving gifts in the Divine Service.

The same truth, that Christ is present, drives church architecture. The historic shape of a Christian church is cruciform. The altar, the very place where the Body and Blood of Christ will be placed, is the high point. Light radiates from the altar. And so the movement of the celebrant, the assistants, and the congregation is normed by the same truth—Christ is present in the Divine Service. And, of course, since Christ is present, so are His angels.⁴

Why rubrics? Simply put: Because of Jesus.⁵ Consider these words from the introduction to *Lutheran Worship History and Practice* regarding the meaning of the word “worship”: