

RESPECT FOR THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

If Jesus appeared again visible on this earth and spoke to us directly, all Christians would surely listen with reverent awe. No one would question what Jesus was telling them. They would not feel the need for a critical analysis of what He was saying in order to determine what He really meant. They would accept everything He said at face value. Every Christian would agree, "This is the voice of authority."

Jesus praised the army officer's faith. He believed that all Jesus had to do was give a command, even from a distance, and He would save his dying slave. God has spoken to everyone, in the Holy Scriptures, with a voice of full authority, both in the Old Testament and in the New. Jesus Himself asserted the divine authority of the Old Testament even for a passage in the Psalms that many must have wondered about, when He said, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (Joh 10:35). The apostle Paul claimed divine authority for the New Testament as well as for the Old when he wrote, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching and for *pointing* out error, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the person who belongs to God may be ready, equipped for every good work." (2 Tm 3:16-17).

There is a right use of reason in connection with God's Word. We have to use our reason to understand what God's words mean for us. When that happens, reason is acting as a servant. Sound scholarship should faithfully search out the true meaning of Scripture, by letting the Scriptures explain themselves. However, no authority, whether it is human reason, science, or scholarship, may be allowed to function as a judge in relation to God's Word. We may not presume to pass judgment on them.

It is a strange inconsistency that many people who would stand to attention if Jesus called them by name and spoke to them in person are not willing to show the same respect for His written Word. For them the authority of Holy Scripture has become a forgotten principle. In many quarters, people's reason, science, and scholarship (falsely so called) are being permitted to stand in judgment over Scripture.

The following comments from a theologian who occupied a responsible position in a Lutheran church represent this "new" approach to the Scriptures. In an interview he expressed the opinion that a church should be able to tolerate differences of opinion without being afraid that unity in essential matters would be destroyed. He implied that some Lutherans were wrong in identifying things like the six-day creation and the story of Jonah as articles of faith, necessary for all. He was quoted as saying:

What is an article of faith in the first chapter of Genesis is that God is the Creator of the world. That is affirmed. Many Christians are able to affirm that God is Creator and that there was an evolutionary process. If they are able to do so, I see no problem.

This is a typical example of how reason, science, and scholarship stand in judgment over Scripture in an attempt to make it more plausible and palatable for twentieth-century people.

We are given the impression that these are really minor issues, that we may hold similarly divergent views on many passages of Scripture without destroying our unity in essential matters. Our eternal salvation, they tell us, is not affected.

The Gospel of God's forgiveness through Jesus' death and resurrection is the basis of our salvation. That Gospel hangs in a web of God's dealings with human beings in this world. The Genesis account of creation and story of Jonah and many other Scripture teachings in which Bible critics indicate there may be differences of opinion are all part of the Sacred Record, of which Jesus has said, "The Scripture cannot be broken." If we can't believe God when He tells us that He made the world in six days or that He created a great fish that swallowed Jonah, we can't trust Him any more when He tells us, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."

Dr George Stoeckhardt, an outstanding theologian of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod said years ago:

The teaching that the Bible is not the very Word of God robs the Christian of all comfort and assurance. One who holds that the Bible is a book that has a divine and a human side, may easily in the day of distress, in the hour of death, sink into despair. When he looks to, say, John 3:16, Satan may challenge him. "Where is your guarantee that this word is not one of the human ingredients of Scripture, that God's love for the whole world of sinners is not merely a pious wish and self-delusion?"

We can learn a good deal from the humility of that non-Jewish army officer, and his certainty about Jesus' full authority. For him, at his wits' end, one sentence from Jesus was worth all the world put together. It gave him what he longed for.

[Adapted from an article in *The Northwestern Lutheran*, 18 January, 1970]

A QUOTATION FROM MARTIN LUTHER:

It is the duty both of preachers and of hearers first of all and above all things to see to it that they have clear and sure evidence that their doctrine is really the true Word of God, revealed from heaven to the holy, original fathers, the prophets and apostles, and confirmed and commanded to be taught by Christ Himself. For we should by no means ever let doctrine be manhandled according to the pleasure and fancy of the individual who adapts it to human reason and understanding. Nor should we let men toy with Scripture, juggle the Word of God and make it submit to being explained twisted, stretched, and revised to suit people to achieve peace and union; for then there could be no secure or stable foundation on which consciences might rely.