

The Proper Use of the Church Fathers as it Relates to Hermeneutics and Biblical Interpretation¹

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Questions arise among orthodox Lutherans as to the proper use of the church fathers. There have been times in the life of the church that churchmen have been more interested in what the fathers have written than in what the Scripture clearly teaches. Thus individuals pour over the writings of various theological leaders and ignore a proper exegesis of Holy Scripture. The world that Luther faced before the Reformation would be an example of this.

The other extreme is to neglect the writings of the fathers entirely. A theologian strives to carry out an exegesis of the sacred text in isolation from outside influences. This is indeed correct. However, he then does not compare his results with those who have gone before him. It is assumed that the plethora of modern exegetical tools are better than anything in the past. Twenty-first-century knowledge surpasses the understanding of theologians in time past.

What is a proper use of the church fathers as it relates to hermeneutics and biblical interpretation?

Walther and Orthodox Lutherans' High Regard for the Fathers

Walther, in his essay "Church Fathers and Doctrine,"² reminds us that Christians should definitely read the works of the fathers. The writings and thoughts of the great heroes of faith who went before us are indeed worthwhile for Christians today. As one of the great church fathers once said, "We are merely pygmies sitting on the shoulders of giants."³ The writings of the fathers give us many insights into understanding the truths of Scripture. A treasury of devotional, homiletical, and doctrinal literature has been passed down to us. The terminology developed at the great church councils is virtually indispensable in communicating the doctrines of the faith. Imagine teaching Christian doctrine without using the terms Trinity, person, nature, universal redemption, objective and subjective justification, and inerrancy.

God has so arranged it that human beings should explain God's Word to us. Therefore . . . do not despise the books of pious teachers in which Scripture is explained. Otherwise you are shameful despisers of a most precious gift. In fact, the mightier and more powerful an expositor is, the more highly you should esteem him. . . . Therefore also, do not despise the writings of the old faithful church fathers, the writings of Luther, Chemnitz, Quenstadt, Gerhard, H. Müller, etc. Otherwise you disobey the Holy Spirit, who commands you, "Do not despise prophecy."⁴

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2 C.F.W. Walther, "Church Fathers and Doctrine," in *Essays for the Church*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992).

3 Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 19.

4 Walther, "Church Fathers and Doctrine," 69.

The Only Source of Doctrine Is the Word of God

While all orthodox Lutherans have a high regard for the fathers they do not base their doctrine on the teachings of the fathers but alone on the inerrant, infallible Scriptures. Walther states that it is wrong to base matters of faith on the writings of the fathers and bind consciences to their doctrinal decisions. This is improper, **first**, because it is contrary to Scripture. Scripture is the source of all spiritual knowledge. It is the only infallible rule and norm for all teaching and teachers, and it is the judge in all religious controversies. Basing doctrine on the fathers is contrary to the nature of the Christian faith which is to be based on the divine certainty of God's Word and not on human opinion that can err. It is contrary to the warnings of Scripture which tell us not to trust in men and human ideas in matters of faith. Basing doctrine on the fathers, **second**, is improper because it is a relapse into the antichristian papacy. In Romanism the authority of the pope and the tradition of the fathers are a source of doctrine. Basing doctrine on the fathers is improper, **third**, because it is a falling away from the central tenet of the church of the Reformation which teaches that the articles of faith are not to be based on the writings of the fathers but only on Holy Scripture.⁵

The seventeenth-century dogmaticians, including Gerhard, would certainly agree that Holy Scripture is the only source of doctrine, faith, and life. Gerhard writes concerning the fathers:

Although we are ready to establish, with clear and plain testimonies of the older fathers, each and every article of our faith that is disputed between us and the papists, and though this has already been done often by our people, yet we neither can nor may recognize the writings of the fathers as the *norm* of doctrine in the church: (1) because this dignity and authority belongs only to the canonical writings of the prophets and apostles; (2) because the fathers themselves call for their writings to be tested by the norm of the divine canon; (3) because the papists themselves deny that the authority of the fathers is always authentic (that is, one cannot always know whether the church father has really written what has been ascribed to him); (4) because neither in the doctrines of faith nor in the interpretation of Scripture are the fathers unanimous throughout; (5) because many writings of the ancients are lost; (6) because, on the other hand, the writings that are still extant are forged and corrupt in many places; [and] (7) because in the writings of the fathers dross is found mixed with the gold, stubble with the gems, [and] the leaven of human opinions with the unleavened bread of the heavenly doctrine. ("Locus on the Church," par. 203 [Ed. Preuss Edition, Berlin, 1867; IV, p. 453])⁶

The Fathers Must Be Distinguished from the Confessions

The term "the fathers" is a wider concept than the Lutheran Confessions and must be distinguished from them. The Scriptures are the *norma normans* (the ruling rule).

⁵ Ibid., 68.

⁶ Ibid., 81. See also Johann Gerhard, *On the Church*, trans. Richard Dinda, ed. Benjamin Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 409-410 (*Locus* 25, para. 203).

Scripture is the absolute norm. Scripture as the decisive norm is absolutely necessary, being the norm which decides whether doctrines are true or false. The Confessions are the *norma normata* (the ruled rule). They are a secondary norm determined by the *norma normans*. They indicate whether a person has clearly understood the doctrines of Scripture. We accept the Confessions not insofar as (*quatenus*) but because (*quia*) they are the correct exposition of Scripture. They present to us the true understanding of the Word. On the other hand, the fathers do not necessarily in every case give a correct exposition of the Word of God. We accept the teachings of the fathers as long as they are in agreement with Scripture and the Confessions. This is the distinction that must be maintained between the Confessions and the fathers.

The Lutheran Confessions serve a hermeneutical function for the church. To be sure, not every individual detail of exegesis in the Confessions is normative for Lutherans today. Yet subscription to the Confessions means that the Lutheran interpreter of the Scriptures will accept not only the conclusions of biblical exegesis that form the basis of the doctrinal content of the Confessions but also the hermeneutical principles used by the Confessions to reach their conclusion. The hermeneutical principles of the Lutheran Confessions give orthodox Lutherans guidance as they interpret the Scriptures.⁷

When orthodox Lutherans explain the truths of Scripture and confess their faith to those outside the Lutheran Church, they base their presentation and arguments on the clear Word of Scripture. Each doctrine of the Bible has its specific *sedes doctrinae*. Quoting the Lutheran Confessions to a Roman Catholic probably will have little value. This is seen in the great *Loci Theologici* of Johann Gerhard. In this massive work, he did not refer to the Lutheran Confessions as frequently as one might expect. He wanted this great teaching tool for the Lutheran Church to be also an apology and explanation of the Christian faith for those outside the Lutheran Church: the Calvinists and Romanists. When orthodox Lutherans explain the truths of Scripture or discuss a particular doctrine with those within the Lutheran Church, they will certainly refer to the pertinent sections of Scripture, but they will also make abundant use of the confessional writings, especially when the Confessions speak directly to the particular subject. This also is seen in the seventeenth-century dogmaticians. The later dogmaticians were writing to solve internal conflicts within Lutheranism and therefore made more frequent use of the Confessions than the earlier dogmaticians.

For the Lutheran Church the Confessions are not interpreted according to the Scriptures. This is not to say that the Confessions are above the Scriptures. Rather, for the Lutheran Church, the Confessions give the correct exposition of the Scripture.

Again, there are those who are ready to subscribe to the Confessions with the understanding that they be interpreted “according to Scripture,” or “correctly.” In this sense, Reformed theologians, including Calvin, have signed the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. . . .By subscribing to the Symbols a man does not declare his readiness to interpret them “according to the Scriptures,” but the minister or candidate in question makes the solemn declaration to the congregation that he has already

⁷ Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 122.

discovered what Scripture teaches and he finds the Lutheran Confessions to be the expression of his own faith and confession.⁸

Walther, in explaining this truth for a Lutheran pastor or pastoral candidate, maintains that the Scripture is interpreted according to the Confessions.

A subscription to the confession is the Church's assurance that its teachers have recognized the interpretation and understanding of Scripture which is embodied in the Symbols as correct and will therefore interpret Scripture as the Church interprets it. If the Church therefore would permit its teachers to interpret the Symbols according to the Scriptures, and not the Scriptures according to its Symbols, the subscription would be no guarantee that the respective teacher understands and interprets Scripture as the Church does. In fact, the Church would make the personal conviction of each teacher its symbol.⁹

One finds similar terminology in the 1853 constitution of the Norwegian Synod and in the writings of the Norwegian fathers.

The doctrine of the Church is that which is revealed through God's holy Word in the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments interpreted in accord with the symbols or confessional writings of the Church of Norway, namely: 1) The Apostles' Creed; 2) The Nicene Creed; 3) The Athanasian Creed; 4) The Unaltered Augsburg Confession, delivered to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg, 1530; 5) Luther's Small Catechism.¹⁰

In August 1857, J. A. Ottesen and Nils Brandt wrote a report on their trip to find a proper seminary for Norwegian students, in which they characterized the Missourians as having

a heartfelt trust in God, a sincere love for the symbols and the doctrines of the fathers, and a belief that in them His holy Word is rightly explained and interpreted, and therefore a sacrificial, burning zeal to apply these old-Lutheran principles of doctrine and order. May the Lord graciously revive this spirit throughout the entire Lutheran church, so that those who call themselves Lutherans may no longer wrangle over questions settled by the Lutheran Confessions. May they rather show their true Lutheranism by truly believing that God's Word is taught rightly and without error in the Lutheran Confessions. Otherwise, the Lutheran name is but duplicity and hypocrisy.¹¹

⁸ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 355–356; see also Charles P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 169.

⁹ C.F.W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly* XVIII, no. 4 (April 1947): 246.

¹⁰ E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church among Norwegian-Americans: A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), 344.

¹¹ Carl S. Meyer, *Pioneers Find Friends* (Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 1963), 69.

This is not to say that the Confessions treat all articles of doctrine. Controversies have arisen in the church that were not at issue when the Confessions were formulated. It is at times necessary to write additional doctrinal statements. Likewise we do not bind ourselves to all historical, archaeological, and literary remarks in the Confessions nor to the exegesis of every passage but to the doctrinal content of the Confessions.

The Proper Use of the Fathers

It would be a caricature of Walther as a theologian to assume that he had very little concern for exegetical studies, that is, that Walther and the early Synodical Conference fathers did little real exegesis with the exception of men like Stöckhardt. When these individuals were faced with a theological problem they are said to have gone immediately to the fathers or the Confessions for their answer. It is implied that they made no real independent study of Scripture. They answered every question with quotes from the Confessions and seventeenth-century dogmaticians. We refer to this caricature as *Fathers' Theology (Väter Theologie)*.

To the extent that the early Synodical Conference fathers had such an attitude toward biblical study, it certainly was improper. Lutheran theologians will go first to the inerrant Scriptures which are the only source of doctrine. They will use the proper rules of hermeneutics derived from Scripture to reach a biblical conclusion. In theological controversy they first will study the Bible and prepare a careful exegesis of the pertinent texts. The orthodox Lutheran theologian will make his stand on the inerrant Scriptures.

Each new generation of theologians must study the Scriptures in order to make its teachings its own. They will carefully mine the Scriptures for its truths. When the doctrines of Scripture in this way become our own they will be much easier to defend and be more cherished in our midst than if they were simply handed down to us.

An orthodox theologian will make a careful exegesis of the text of Scripture. He will then compare his conclusions with that of the fathers. A twenty-first-century theologian knows that he is not the only one who ever had great exegetical expertise. He understands that he can be influenced by the worldviews around him. It is very difficult to do exegesis in a vacuum. He compares his conclusions with the generations of Christians that have gone before him. The forefathers of the Synodical Conference, Gerhard and the seventeenth-century dogmaticians, Chemnitz, and Luther may not always be correct. However, one should be very certain of his biblical stance when he says the fathers misunderstood Scripture or taught contrary to them.

For we can affirm with a good conscience that we have, after reading the Holy Scripture, applied ourselves and yet daily apply ourselves to the extent that the grace of the Lord permits to inquiry into and investigation of the consensus of the true and purer antiquity. For we assign to the writings of the fathers their proper and, indeed, honorable place which is due them, because they have clearly expounded many passages of Scripture, have defended the ancient dogmas of the church against new corruptions of heretics, and have done so on the basis of Scripture, have correctly explained many points of doctrine, have recorded many things concerning the history of the primitive church, and have usefully called

attention to many other things. And we long for this, that in the life to come we may see what we believe and hope concerning the grace of God on account of His Son, the Redeemer, as members of the true catholic church; that we may see (I say) the Son of God Himself, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and fathers, who held to the true foundation, and may enjoy intimate friendship with them to all eternity. Therefore we examine with considerable diligence the consensus of the true, learned, and purer antiquity, and we love and praise the testimonies of the fathers which agree with the Scripture.¹²

In our interpretation of Scripture we both can and should use gratefully the efforts of the ancients, as well as the more recent teachers of the Church. This rule is set forth by the apostle: "Do not despise prophesying" (1 Thess. 5:20). You see, because God distributes to each His gifts as He wishes (1 Cor. 12:11), to which the gift of prophecy also belongs, we should reverently acknowledge, therefore, the gifts of God in others and gratefully use their assistance in the interpretation of Scripture. One should not think that the witness of an earlier age has been preserved for us in vain. Instead, their witness has been preserved in order to be an aid for searching out the meaning of Scripture and to confirm the spirits of the devout when the true meaning has been grasped from Holy Writ. Philipp, in a letter to a friend: "Although faith does not depend upon human authority but on God's Word, nevertheless, because Scripture wants the stronger to strengthen the weak, it does help to have the witness of the Church in every kind of temptation. Just as we freely consult the living whom we consider to have some experience of spiritual matters, so also do I think that we must consult the ancients whose writings are approved. There are also other reasons why I do not hold the witness of the ancients in contempt, for I think that the Church has universally perceived what they wrote. Nor is it safe to depart from the common position of the ancient Church."

These are the principal rules that must be observed in the true and genuine interpretation of Scripture. In our *Meth. studii theol.*, part 3, sect. 4, c. 2, we discussed in detail the proclamation of the true meaning that has been found and how the preacher should make an application of it in the ecclesiastical homilies for the salvation of his listeners.¹³

The orthodox Lutheran exegete will make that same comparison with the Confessions. He will not go first to the Confessions but to the Scripture and make a proper study of the text. Then he will compare his conclusions with the Confessions. If his conclusions are contrary to the doctrine maintained in the Confessions, he knows that his conclusions are in error for the Confessions are the correct exposition of the Scriptures. We adhere to the Confessions because they present a proper understanding of the

12 Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 256.

13 Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, trans. Richard Dinda, ed. Benjamin Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 487 (*Locus* 1, para. 537).

Scriptures, while we accept the teachings of the fathers as long as they are in agreement with the Scriptures and the Confessions.

Conclusion

Orthodox Lutherans agree categorically with Walther that we do not base our doctrine on the teachings of the fathers but alone on the inerrant, infallible Scriptures. The Holy Scriptures are the sole authority for faith, doctrine, and life. At the same time, we will not neglect the great treasure the Lord has given us in the fathers of the church. We will want to make use of the two thousand years of rich devotional, homiletical, and doctrinal literature which has been passed down to us. We will hold the fathers in high regard. "We are merely pygmies sitting on the shoulders of giants."

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