

## **WE HAVE A COMMON FOUNDATION: God's Pure Word**

Pastor Egil Edvardsen  
Lutheran Confessional Church (Sweden and Norway)

The theme for this historic conference has a special tone for us Scandinavians. "God's Word is our great heritage" is the first line in a much-used hymn written by the Danish hymnwriter Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig. We can safely say that this hymn has been one of the most popular hymns in our countries. Therefore it is sad to observe how little is left among our peoples of the heritage of God's Word, and how few those are who truly confess the content of this hymn. For many years liberal theology and Bible criticism have had their subversive effects in such a way that God's pure and clear Word no longer is the heritage of our nations. The Scripture is no longer considered to be God's altogether trustworthy Word and the highest norm, rule, and guide for all doctrine and all life. In our so-called "Lutheran" countries the question no longer is, "What is written?" Now the only valid question is: "What do you yourself believe?" Subjectivism and therewith pluralism has replaced the testimony of the Scriptures.

Therefore it is good for our little Lutheran Confessional Church in Sweden and Norway to be part of a fellowship where we have a common foundation—God's pure Word. This fellowship encourages us not to give up but to continue to go on contending for preserving God's Word so it will become the heritage of our coming generations. It gives us strength to continue to preserve God's Word pure and clear among us.

### 1. The inspiration of Scripture

It is almost generally accepted among most Lutheran theologians that the Bible is not God's Word, but a product of men's thoughts. They may accept that God's Word can be found in the Bible, but they hold that these words are mixed with the authors' own words and opinions. The question then is: Which words in the Bible are God's words and which are men's words? If two theologians have different opinions on this, which one of them should we listen to?

In a little children's song it is said: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." But how can I know that Jesus loves me just because the Bible says it? Yes, can I on the whole know anything for sure about God and his love if what is written in the Bible is not his own words, but only human thoughts?

We believe that the Bible is God's Word, which means: We believe not only that the Bible contains God's Word, but that every word in the Bible is God's Word. How do we know this? Is it something we just have made up our minds to believe? We believe that the words of the Bible are God's Word because that is a claim made by the Bible itself. The Bible says it is God's Word, and therefore we believe it.

The Bible is made up of many different books, written in different times by different people. We have Moses and the prophets, the evangelists and the apostles—many writers. And still there is only one author of the whole Bible—God himself. The Bible is God's own book.

When we talk about how the Bible came into being, we usually use the term inspiration. The term itself—"inspiration"—can only be found in one place in Scripture. In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul writes: "All Scripture is inspired by God" (quoted from Beck, *An American Translation*; the NIV has, "All Scripture is God-breathed"). The three words, "inspired by God," are a translation of *theopneustos*. A literal translation here says that all Scripture is God-breathed or God-inspired.

Many theologians try to explain away this passage by translating in another way: "All scripture which is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching. . . ." But even if it was possible to translate the passage in that way, still it wouldn't mean that there are parts in Scripture which are not inspired. We can find Paul's opinion on this in what he wrote to the Romans: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us . . ." (Romans 15:4).

All Scripture has come into being by means of God putting the words into the minds of the writers, in many different ways, ways we cannot understand, and the writers on their part wrote down these words in exactly that form or in exactly those words which God wanted them to be written. Therefore, the words of Scripture are God's words. They have come from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4), even if they have been delivered by people. About the Old Testament and the words of the prophet it is said: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets" (Hebrews 1:1). And about the New Testament and the words of the Apostles we read: "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

These people who brought God's Word were chosen by him, and the Word was put in their mouths by the Holy Spirit. Pointing to David's Psalm 110, Jesus says: "David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared. . . ." (Mark 12:36). David's words are the same as the words of the Holy Spirit (cf Acts 1:16). The words of the prophets and narratives from the Old Testament are quoted as God's Word. We find examples of this in Matthew 1:22,23: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet"; Acts 4:25: "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father *David*"; . . . Acts 28:25: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet." So the words are God's own but he has spoken them through people. He has used human instruments. In Hebrews 3:7 he even fails to mention the human instrument. It is only said: "So, as the Holy Spirit says:" followed by a quote from Psalm 95.

Inspiration implies that the people God used to preach his Word wrote exactly what he wanted them to write. They did not write their own words but God's Word. "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). That Peter also had in mind the written prophetic Word is clear from the preceding verse: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20).

The divine inspiration is a verbal inspiration, e.g., every word in Scripture is inspired by God. Inspiration applies not only to the thought content or message of the Bible, or the biblical writers only, but the Holy Spirit made them write the exact words which they wrote. This is taught both by Paul (2 Timothy 3:16) and by Peter (2 Peter 1:21). Jesus said that the disciples received the words from him (John 17:8), and Paul writes to the Corinthians that his message came to them in words he had learned from the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:13). God said to Jeremiah: "I have put my words in your mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9), and: "Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you" (30:2).

The fact that every word in the Bible is God-breathed does not imply that the biblical writers functioned as robots. God made use of the various gifts and distinctive character which he had given to the different writers. Because of that John's mode of expression, for example, is quite different from Luke's. The biblical writers were also fully aware of the fact that the Holy Spirit spoke through them. David said: "The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue" (2 Samuel 23:2).

We do not know how inspiration came about. We cannot scientifically explain it. It is a miracle of God. We believe in inspiration on the basis of the Bible's own testimony, and this testimony in itself contains a convincing power.

The Bible's own testimony is clear: It is God's Word, to the full, written down word by word in accordance with the inspiration of the Spirit.

## 2. The authority of Scripture

The authority of Scripture follows directly on the inspiration of Scripture. It is not founded on human beings, but on God himself. God is behind every statement, every doctrine, every promise, and every command in the Bible. The prophets received the command from God: "Speak this word to them . . ." (Jeremiah 14:17), and they were to go to the people and say: "Hear the words of the Lord!" Paul's words were not his own thoughts or opinions but "the Lord's

command" (1 Corinthians 14:37), and the Christians had received it, "not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Because the Bible is God's Word, its authority cannot be limited by human beings. It is absolute. It does not stand under any human authority. To rebel against the authority of the Bible is the same as rebelling against God himself. Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:18, 19). The only one who can invalidate the authority of God's Word is God himself. When God has said something is going to be valid for ever, then it is valid for ever. God may give a command or a direction with a limited validity, but then he himself has stated that in his Word. This applies, for example, to the Old Testament ceremonial law, which was fulfilled once and for all through Christ's vicarious sacrificial work (Hebrews 7-10).

The authority of the Bible is not limited in time. Neither is it limited by geographical, cultural, or social circumstances. With reference to Scriptures written down in a completely different time, under totally different cultural and social circumstances than he himself lived in, Paul still writes: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us" (Romans 15:4). Also these "old" writings were by Paul considered "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Christ held the same view concerning the Old Testament Scriptures. In John 10:34 he quotes Psalm 82:6, and in reference to the word "gods" he says: "He called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken" (10:35). He wants us to have the same obedience to his own words: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31,32). And Paul demands the same obedience to his words: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:8).

The Bible surely is not a textbook in geography or science. But its authority when speaking about such things is still absolute. Jesus said to the Jews: "I have spoken to you about earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:12). If we don't believe God when he tells us how he created the world and the human race, how could we believe him when he preaches about salvation in Christ and the forgiveness of our sins? Anyone who modifies the authority of Scripture undermines the very foundation of our salvation.

The absolute authority of Scripture implies that criticism of Scripture is the same as criticism of God. Over such criticism rests the verdict: "There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day" (John 12:48).

### 3. The inerrancy of Scripture

The inerrancy of Scripture is insolubly tied to the inspiration of Scripture. If every word in the Bible is God's own inspired Word, then the Bible must be inerrant. For who would believe that God wants to deceive us? Who will say to God: "God, you are lying. This and that word in the Bible is wrong." If there is anything in his Word that is wrong, then God is only a fallible human being, and the Bible a human book.

Even if God used people as instruments in writing down his words, all these different people were compelled by the Holy Spirit when they wrote. Therefore every thinkable mistake was locked out.

God's Word is true and without mistakes not only for him who believes it (true in a subjective way), but God's Word is true by itself, even if nobody believes it (true in an objective way). The psalmist says: "All your words are true" (Psalm 119:160). "Your promises have been thoroughly tested" (Psalm 119:140). And the Savior says of God's Word: "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). The truth of God's Word has nothing to do with what people may or may not believe. "What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar" (Romans 3:3, 4).

For Luther the inerrancy of Scripture was a presupposition. Even if reason says something else, we should believe God's Word, he said, for "it is not man's word, which could lie and be wrong; it

is the Word of God, who is the eternal truth" (LW 23:95). In his commentary to Psalm 112 he writes: "The Scriptures cannot lie" (LW 13:393).

The Lutheran Confessions also teach the inerrancy of Scripture. In the exposition on the first commandment in the Large Catechism it says: "These words must stand and prove to be true since God cannot lie or deceive" (Cat. Maj. I:46). "My neighbor and I—in short, all men—may deceive, but God's Word cannot err" (Cat. Maj. IV: 57).

The inerrancy of Scripture is strongly attacked in our time. Even conservative Lutheran theologians claim there are mistakes and self-contradictions in the Bible. The leaven of Bible criticism has had the chance to carry out its damaging influence for a long time. Karl Barth spoke about the miracle "that fallible men speak God's Word with fallible human words" (*Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1/2, p. 529). And the Bible commission of the Swedish episcopal council says in its report "*Bibelsyn och Bibelbruk*" (The view and use of the Bible) (1970) that one can hardly be intellectually honest and at the same time claim the view that every single little detail in the Bible necessarily must be historically correct (p. 68). Among such "little details" is also counted Christ's true and bodily resurrection from the dead.

The so-called conservatives within the Lutheran church still hold to the central truths about salvation. But they mean that we may accept a critical viewpoint on such "peripheral" things as the days of creation, the historicity of Adam and Eve, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, etc. The inerrancy of Scripture in every part is according to their opinion "a fortress impossible to defend." But in order to avoid showing openly that they are on their way to give in to Bible criticism, they put another meaning into concepts like truth and inerrancy. The fact that the Bible is true doesn't really mean anything more than that it is written by honest and truthful people. "Truthfulness" therefore is a distinctive feature of the human writers of the Bible, not of the words of the Bible. The fact that the Bible is "inerrant" only means that most of the mistakes in the Bible were not made on purpose. The different writers were ignorant of many things we know today, and they wrote what they really believed was true. Some mistakes may also have been made on purpose, but then only to glorify God or to explain one or another deeper truth.

Thus the inerrancy of Scripture is explained away. We, on the contrary, believe that the Bible is inerrant in all respects, and this inerrancy is an objective truth, either if people want to believe it or not, and we say with Luther: "The Scripture has never erred. . . . If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for?" (LW 32:11,12).

#### 4. The clarity of Scripture

The Bible is written in a human language, and therefore we can understand its teachings. In itself it is clear and plain. God's Word is "a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). It is like "a light shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19). Yes, the Bible is so clear and plain that it can make wise the simple (Psalm 19:7). Even children can learn to know the Scriptures: "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation," Paul writes to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:15).

The reason why many things in the Bible are obscure and unclear to us should not be blamed on the Bible, but on us. It is impossible for human reason to explain many of the narratives in the Bible. Anyone who wants to put more trust in his own reason must look at the wine miracle at Cana as unacceptable, likewise many of the other narratives about miracles. Many of the Bible doctrines are also unacceptable to human reason. Who can fathom the nature of God (the Trinity), the creation of the world, the mystery of the person of Christ, the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Lord's supper, the resurrection of the bodies of all people on the last day, etc.?

Nevertheless, for the believer this is no problem. He takes "captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). He knows that the natural man does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, that for him they are foolishness which he cannot understand (1 Corinthians 2:14). And with Paul he confesses: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing

out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" (Romans 11:33-35).

The Bible is in itself plain and clear. This means it is fully competent to make us "wise for salvation" (2 Timothy 3:15) and to make us "thoroughly equipped for every good work" (3:17). We do not need to supplement the Bible with, for example, oral traditions, statements from the pope, decisions made by church councils, so-called "new" revelations, etc. Together with our Lutheran forefathers we "pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated" (Sol. Decl: Introduction Tappert, p. 503:3).

#### 5. The purpose of Scripture

Scripture is God's Word, given to us for a very special purpose. We did not receive the Bible by accident, and God did not act without a definite purpose when he compelled inspired prophets and apostles to write down his words. When he compelled the prophets to speak and write: "Thus says the Lord . . .," and when he compelled evangelists and apostles to write "what they had seen and heard" (1 John 1:3), he did this with a special purpose in mind.

The Bible is given for our salvation. In his infinite love and grace God decided to save fallen mankind from its deep fall into sin. He sent his own, only begotten Son, Jesus Christ to this world, that he by his vicarious life and his vicarious suffering and death should redeem mankind. But what use do we humans have of this complete work that Christ has done in our place, if we do not hear about it? That is why God has given us the Bible. It can give us wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15). The Bible tells us about God's love and grace. It shows us Jesus Christ, our Savior, who he is, true God and true man, and what he has done for us.

Therefore Jesus also says to the Jews: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). And John ends his Gospel by establishing the reason for writing all this down: "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Thus John summarizes the purpose of the Bible: That we may believe and live.

The Bible is also given to teach us and train us to serve God with our lives. For even if a person has come to faith in Jesus and has become a Christian, he has nevertheless not rid himself of sin. As long as we live on this earth, we are at the same time sinners and righteous, righteous through faith in Jesus Christ, and sinners because of our old nature that daily tempts us to sin. God has given us the Bible to help us in our daily battle against sin. It can guide us in living a God-pleasing life. God's Word is called "a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). The Bible lights up the way for us, so we can see where we should walk. The psalmist asks: "How can a young man keep his way pure?" And he gives the answer himself: "By living according to your word . . . Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors" (Psalm 119:9 and 24). Especially from the well-known verses in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 we see what is the great and important purpose of the Bible: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that (e.g., by following the Bible as a guide) the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Bible has been given to us for help in our daily life, to show us which way to go for help against temptation. It is our directions for life.

#### 6. The use of Scripture

The most important purpose of the Bible—to make us wise for salvation and be a guide for our lives—can be fulfilled only if it is used. If it stands unused on the bookshelf or lies hidden in a cupboard, it cannot fulfill its purpose.

The Master himself is our best teacher in how to use the Bible. He used the Bible in his daily life. Already as a twelve-year-old boy he was familiar with the holy Scriptures (Luke 2:46, 47), and he

used them to refute Satan's temptations in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11). On the cross he quoted the Bible (Matthew 27:46 and John 19:30).

But he also used the Bible in performing his prophetic office. He used it in his preaching (Luke 4:16-32) and his teaching (John 3:1-16, Matthew 21:15,16). He used it to strengthen and keep his disciples in the faith (Luke 24:25-27; 24:32 and 24:44-46) and to teach about himself (Matthew 22:41,46).

Just like Christ, we too should learn everything the Bible teaches and give prominence to what is written there (Luke 18:31; Mark 11:17; John 15:25 etc.). We ought not to exclude anything. Hence the Great Commission applies to all Christians: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20). Above all we should emphasize the preaching of the gospel, just as Jesus asked us to do: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15), and as he did himself (Luke 4:18,19).

Christ viewed Scripture as the absolute authority in all things. "The Scripture cannot be broken," he said pointing to one single word (John 10:35). In that way he fulfilled the important principle, not to add and not to deduct anything from what is written (Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 21:18,19). Teaching something different than the Bible teaches is the same as teaching rules of men (Matthew 15:1-9).

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me!" (John 5:39). When Jesus said this to the Jews, he also said something about the use of the Bible to every human being, man, woman, and child, that the Scriptures should be studied, because there we find him. We do not find him in nature. We do not find him within ourselves, but we find him in Scripture. So it is something that concerns everybody: Search the Scriptures, study the Bible, use God's Word!

## 7. Conclusion

The Bible is God's inspired, inerrant Word, given to us human beings for salvation and guidance in life. It is our absolute authority for all doctrine and all of our life. Therefore we confess with the Lutheran reformers: "We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (FC, Ep, Introduction).

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