

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO RETAIN THE TEACHING OF THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE AMONG US CONFSSIONAL LUTHERANS IN THE CELC AND HOW IS THIS TEACHING UNIQUE FOR OUR CHURCH FELLOWSHIP?

INTRODUCTION

When I have first read and wrestled with the topic of this paper a question came to my mind: WHY SO SERIOUS? Why are we taking the matter of the inerrancy of Scripture so seriously? In front of heaven's door no one will get asked if he believed in the inerrancy of scripture and if not won't be let in.¹ Are there not millions of Christians who do not (explicitly) confess this teaching but simply read the Bible and believe in the Jesus they read about? Isn't it God the Holy Spirit who works through his word no matter with what intention one is reading it? Even people I told about the topic I was invited to write about asked if there were not more important things to deal with than this. Why so serious?

"Why so serious?" wasn't only the question that came to my mind when I heard about the CELC paper. "Why so serious?" is also the most famous and memorable quote from the 2008 Batman movie "The Dark Knight" spoken by the villain "The Joker". He asks his victims (often times before killing them) why they are not smiling. In the aftermath of the movie people loved the character of "The Joker". Especially his "Why so serious?" was quoted and used multiple times in different contexts. That happened not only because people enjoyed the movie and the performance of the actor Heath Ledger so much. The quote also expressed the mindset of people of our Generation especially us "YOLO-Millennials"² quite well. They/we think, because life is short you should not waste your time with seemingly useless quarreling about opinions but try to live peacefully next to each other.

In his blog-series about Millennials Pastor James Hein describes them as follows:

Millennials rely heavily upon what feels right. What seems fair is more powerful to them than what someone tells them is objectively right. Since so many truth claims are scientifically untestable, and since Millennials grew up hating the relational dissolution they experienced with their parents, they are constantly pushing for unity. Boomers were often skeptical of others but caustic in their attitudes. Millennials want

¹ "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:31)

² "YOLO" is the acronym of "you only live once". Along the same lines as the Latin "carpe diem" ("seize the day"), it is a call to live life to its fullest extent, even embracing behavior which carries inherent risk.

"Millennials" (also known as Generation Y) are the generational demographic cohort following Generation X (birth years ranging from the early-to-mid 1960s to the early 1980s). There are no precise dates for when this cohort starts or ends; demographers and researchers typically use the early 1980s as starting birth years and the mid-1990s to early 2000s as ending birth years.

to get along. They are forgiving and relational and have great difficulty understanding why other generations don't feel the same way. They love family. They long for togetherness. They hate constant negative speech about other political parties, have no time for comments that suggest racial bias, and will opt out of any Christian church that is obsessed with pointing out the flaws in other Christian churches.³

Concerning the doctrine of inerrancy a Christian or even Lutheran Millennial would ask: "Shouldn't we be happy that there are so many Christians in so many denominations that are reading and studying the bible (the powerful word of God)? Shouldn't we stop pointing a finger and saying: "...but they do not believe that Scripture is inerrant...?"

With this in mind at first glance there is little reason why we should retain the teaching of inerrancy of Scripture. A closer look however reveals that not clinging to this teaching is not only against God's good will it is also dangerous and can become deadly. One could have become suspicious when taking the villain "The Joker" as a role model. As attractive his "Why so serious?" may seem the story behind it is cruel and sad. He describes it this way:

"Do you wanna know how I got these scars? My father was a drinker, and a fiend. And one night he goes off crazier than usual. Mommy gets the kitchen knife to defend herself. He doesn't like that. Not. One. Bit. So, me watching, he takes the knife to her, laughing while he does it; he turns to me, and he says, 'Why so serious?' He comes at me with the knife, 'Why so serious?' He sticks the blade in my mouth. 'Let's put a smile on that face!' And...Why so serious?"

In the end "Why so serious?" is the life motto of a murderer – of one who will (eventually) hurt other people and hurt himself. The same is true if we are not taking God and his word seriously. The devil himself tries everything to make lies sound good and pleasing to separate us from God and his word. In the end, however, he has no other goal than hurting and killing people eternally.⁴ God our heavenly father's goal is to help us through this into eternal life although we might not understand everything he says and does on the way. But what Paul writes to Timothy is also true for us:

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

³ <https://pastorjameshein.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/ministering-to-millennials-part-ii-who-are-they-and-whats-driving-them-away/> (4/28/2018)

⁴ "For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve." (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

So let us take a look how by retaining the teaching of the inerrancy of Scripture God is actually blessing us on our way to eternal salvation. Why is it important (God-pleasing and therefore good for us) to cling to this teaching?

GOD HIMSELF SAYS IT ABOUT HIS WORD

Every human being and maybe especially my generation has a problem with accepting things as right and binding just because an authority (parents, governments, pastors, ...) tells us to. This is problematic and causes problems we otherwise would not have. All authority is from our God and therefore the system of headship and submission is good for us.⁵ However there is no human authority without sin and this (supported by our sinful heart) makes it often times difficult for us to follow and obey.

In contrast to those sinful authorities our “heavenly authority”, God himself, has no sin. He reigns perfectly and does not make any mistakes governing us humans. James writes in his letter:

“Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” (James 1:17,18)

One way mankind is gifted by God is through his word.⁶ Appreciating his word as authoritative is equivalent to appreciating God as our perfectly just and loving father (authority). With this in mind everyone should bow before God and accept his words concerning the inerrancy of Scripture as true.

Accused of blasphemy Jesus once answers the Jews:

*“Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are “gods”’ (Psalm 82:6)? If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—**and Scripture cannot be set aside (“broken”)**— what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. But if I do them,*

⁵ “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” (Romans 13:1)

⁶ “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” (Hebrews 1:1-3)

even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:34-38)

Besides other things we can learn from this passage that, if Jesus states that Holy Scripture is completely reliable, it cannot present falsehood. Like God does not and cannot not lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), Scripture cannot err or present falsehood. In his High Priestly Prayer Jesus prays to his father: “Sanctify them by the truth; **your word is truth.**” (Joh 17:17). Trusting that through inspiration God’s word is in written form before us⁷ – we can be sure that we have the truth in every word and letter.⁸

Besides these two main passages spoken by Jesus himself there are numerous verses that appreciate God’s word as trustworthy in every matter (e.g. Psalm 33:4; Psalm 119; 2 Samuel 7:28). That is because God brought people to find out themselves and believe how good God is by giving his word to his people. Furthermore God wants to let everyone know until now that his authority can be trusted. As long as one lives on this earth God “tenderly invites us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children”⁹. He does that through his powerful word. But if someone refuses to submit to God’s good authority he will find out “the hard way” that everything God said in his word is true. What Jesus tells his disciples we all should take to heart, as well:

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:15,16)

GOD GIVES US SECURITY AND A FIRM BASE

As already mentioned God is a perfect authority who wants the best for his creation. Therefore it is good for us to take every word of Scripture seriously. God however does not only say: “Just trust me!” but he also tells us why and which good things exactly he has in store for us.

Imagine being on a boat and becoming a little sea sick. What will a more experienced person tell you to do? He or she will advise you to fix your eyes on the horizon. Why? Because when

⁷ Only true when talking about the original autographs in Hebrew and Greek and still “very much true” talking about the Hebrew and Greek copies of the bible we have before us today.

⁸ “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Peter 1:20,21)

⁹ Luther’ Small Catechism, Explanation to the address of the Lord’s Prayer

everything is moving – the boat, things that are on the boat and the water – you need something that is not, something that does not move whatsoever.

In this life we find ourselves regularly in similar situations where everything is “moving”. When you lose your job, a loved one, the trust of a good friend or whatever is very important to you. When certain things become bigger than what you can handle: your workload, a marriage crisis, a severe disease or financial obligations. Then it can feel like you are on the boat during a storm. But this situation is not only making us dizzy. It can make you incredibly sad, lonely, angry, desperate, ... As a Christian you can and will cry to God and let him know about your pain. You know that God is listening. You know that God is there for you. You know that there will be better times – if not here than in heaven. But how can we be sure of that? Can we really know that or do we have to hope that the “thing with God” will work?

Here is the point where things get serious and practical. If I, when I’m feeling well, don’t care about the inerrancy of Scripture, the devil will use this indifference against me when I’m not feeling well. My “Why so serious?”-attitude I found so attractive will make me suffer even worse than before. God’s Word that is supposed to help me might then be of no use. Why? Because I am no longer sure if a comforting Bible story or passage is really true and trustworthy or nothing else than a fairy tale. It is nice that in every Disney Movie there is an happy ending. But everybody knows that this is not real life. When we read the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) in the same way as we watch a Disney Movie there is no comfort in it.

When, however, we cherish every word of this parable and every story of the Bible as God’s word and saving truth then we have an “unshakable horizon”. Then we have something and someone to help us through challenging times in life. Let us listen to Jesus and draw the right conclusions from Abrahams words in the parable:

“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” (Luke 16:29)

Whenever our lives shake, whenever we lose something or someone we loved (too) much and whenever problems seem too big for us it is wonderful to have someone bigger and stronger than us to give us words of comfort. God wants to be this person who can be trusted in good and in bad times. He assures you, me and every believer, that it is really true that he loves us even though we are not feeling loved or think we don’t deserve to be loved:

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:9-10)

Whenever we doubt that God is hearing and answering our prayers he assures us (note the connection to Jesus words):

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. [...] If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (John 15:5,7)

God does not want us to doubt but to be certain of his love and goodness. For that reason he promises us again and again numerous blessings. Trough those promises he and his Holy Spirit lead us to the same sure hope and knowledge he gave Paul who wrote:

“What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:31-39)

Without accepting God’s word as the inerrant truth all those passages are worth nothing. The devil will do its destructive work to empty them of all their meaning and power. If we give up the mighty sword of God’s word as our weapon against the devil he will try his best to weaken and destroy our faith. If we however are convinced that God provided us with trustworthy information about him and his story? with humanity we can be sure that he is the same God today as he has been in biblical times. With him on our side nothing and no one can hurt us.

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:27-28)

HOW IS THIS TEACHING UNIQUE TO OUR FELLOWSHIP?

In our society “uniqueness” is something a lot of people strive for. No one wants to be “average” and “normal” because that is connected with “boring” and “not worth of much attention”. Only if you become (one of) the best in a certain field you get the recognition (fame, money, love, ...) every soul longs for. You have to reach this point or you will never have a fulfilled life and will never experience real happiness. That is the picture you often get when you turn on the TV or talk to friends and colleagues. As Christians we are tempted to look for happiness and fulfillment in those same spots. At the same time we know from the Bible that there is only one source for everything good: God himself.¹⁰ Everything that is in this world (attention, fame and money included) can be used by God to make us happy. But it can also be used by our sinful heart as an idol, that promises happiness, demands sacrifices in return, but never keeps what it promises.

In a way our Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference also strives for uniqueness. Implied in the topic that was given to me lies the thought that the teaching of inerrancy of Scripture is one not many churches still retain. Could it be that we are indeed the last remaining group of Christians that confesses this doctrine and practices accordingly? And if so, how do we deal with this “uniqueness”? Is it a treasure we cherish and use? Is there also a danger with “having or striving for this doctrinal uniqueness”?

Let us first take a short look around and see what other Christian denominations teach about the inerrancy of Scripture. Prof. Dr. Friedhelm Jung¹¹ summarizes in his article “Die Stellung der Konfessionen zur Inspiration der Bibel“:¹²

„...there are essential differences between the denominations. In fact most of them confess the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures by the Spirit of God. But neither the Lutheran nor the Reformed Churches derive the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible from this. At best they confess the infallibility of the Scriptures in the area of their soteriological statements. By way of contrast, most of the conservative evangelical denominations confess both inspiration and inerrancy in the area of soteriological statements; some even believe in the inerrancy of the whole Bible.”¹³

What makes a precise description of the different positions difficult is that not all denominations teach and practice according to the confession, they stand on (e.g. Lutheran

¹⁰ “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” (James 1:17+18)

¹¹ since 2005 professor of Systematic Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Texas)

¹² Bibel und Gemeinde 111, volume 3 (2011), p. 27-42 (<https://bibelbund.de/2018/04/die-stellung-der-konfession-zur-inspiration-und-irrtumslosigkeit-der-bibel>, 5/1/2018)

¹³ l.c. p. 42

State Church in Germany). Many churches also do not understand confessions as binding for every pastor and member as we do concerning the Lutheran Confessions (e.g. Anglican Church, Mennonite Churches, Baptist Church, Methodist Church, Charismatic Churches). Some churches completely go without having a detailed written confession (e.g. Orthodox Churches, Unity of Brethren, ...).

Where there are written documents of faith all Christian denominations accept the Inspiration of Scripture as true. Sadly the understanding of what Inspiration means ranges. Some see Inspiration only in the worldly sense: “Inspired” as “stimulated” or “moved” by God the biblical authors started to write down **their own** thoughts. In this understanding Inspiration then would have no effect on the trustworthiness of Scripture because after God made the start the Apostles and Prophets wrote down their own sinful opinions. Inspiration, in their opinion, is not even limited to the authors of the Bible but every Christian until today could become an “inspired writer”.

As a consequence only a few churches confess the inerrancy of scripture in all it says as true. Officially that is still the case in the Roman Catholic Church and in many conservative evangelical State- and Freechurches. The Problem is that in almost every church body you find at least three wings: “conservative, moderate and liberal” next to each other. Wherever you find a conservative minister there is a chance that he tries to retain the teaching of inerrancy for himself and so rests his proclamation on the firm ground of God’s word. One can imagine however that his other more liberal brothers in the office and members of the church will try their best to win him for their seemingly more contemporary view of the Bible. To avoid confrontation many have settled settle on the middle ground that the Bible is inerrant in its central message about Jesus Christ or infallible in what it wants to achieve. By giving in, sadly the trust in God’s word is lost – at least in part.

Even though we believe that God works through his word, Jesus himself warns us that the devil has at least three ways to separate us from God’s saving truth.

“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:19-23)

Not understanding God's word can lead to mistrusting whether it is true in everything it says. When seemingly educated people "persecute" a Christian because he still believes in the inerrancy of Scripture it can lead to not letting the roots of God's word sink in. When the earthly life of an unchristian friend looks so temptingly good some Christian will regret to have "only" the life God promises in his word. In reality in all three cases the devil tries to convince Christians that there is something better than what God has in store for us and what God tells us in his word. The devil knows the means of grace which God the Holy Spirit is using to bless us. And because he cannot stop God himself he tries to put his children off those means and especially his saving truth.

Looking around it is hard to find a group of Christians which confesses unanimously that God's word is verbally inspired and in every word and letter the inerrant truth. The churches of the CELC are unique that they find this teaching so important that they will not have fellowship with anyone that teaches differently. How are we to deal with this uniqueness in our daily lives as Confessional Lutheran Churches, Pastors and Christians?

Lady Gaga, a popular American Singer, songwriter and actress once said:

"For being different it's easy. But to be unique, it's a complicated thing."

I don't know in what context she said that and what her intentions were with that quote but I like the statement itself. Becoming unique is something many people long for until they die. Many people find a way to express themselves in a special way and "become different". But once they found a way to be "special" they might find out that this does not make them happy all by itself. The expected fulfillment of all their dreams connected to "being unique" does not happen automatically. It stays difficult – even if they found a way to be different from anybody else in the world.

Concerning our uniqueness as CELC the same thing is true. With the teaching of inerrancy of Scripture we definitely have something that makes us different. But that is by itself not necessarily only a good thing. One danger of this uniqueness is that it can make us proud of ourselves – as if we were smart and brave enough to take all of God's word as true (and all others are not). To the contrary, it is 100% God's gift to us that he made us able and willing to accept every one of his words as inerrant. A second danger is that we try to retain this teaching like we try to keep money under a pillow. Just like money God's word loses its worth when we are not using it to buy things. Claiming to possess the truth (and pointing out false teachings) without using, enjoying and sharing the live-giving and comforting godly teaching of inerrancy makes us different in the "Pharisaic way".

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." (Isaiah 29:13) [...] Leave

*them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”
(Matthew 15:8,9+14)*

A third danger lies in our uniqueness: As necessary as it is to point out false teaching in love and as sad and angry it might make us when we see how people are left in doubt and despair because someone took their firm foundation, there is also reason for joy. We believe in an almighty God who promises:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; ...” (Isaiah 55:8-12)

God is good and he works through his powerful word. Humans in and around our churches may have their reasons to mistrust God. But our almighty God has means that can transform an enemy of God into his friend. He does this miracle inside and outside of our fellowship. And this is a reason to praise God. Our uniqueness concerning the teaching of inerrancy of Scripture will become a wonderful blessing to ourselves and others as long as we see and use it as a gift of our unique and loving God and father.

CONCLUSION

“WHY SO SERIOUS?” was the question that came to my mind when first thinking about the given topic. There are some seemingly good reason to not take the teaching of inerrancy too seriously.

- With good intentions churches want work together in God’s kingdom but on this teaching they have different opinions.
- In some passages the Bible seems to contradict itself.
- Some things in God’s word do not sound scientifically accurate.
- Some say: “Insisting that every word and letter of the Bible (even in the most unimportant Details) must be seen as God’s inerrant word is loveless nitpicking!”

There are also some seemingly good reasons to take no authority in this seriously like “The Joker” – a life without boundaries seems to be attractive. Whenever we take a closer look we will see that we easily delude ourselves. Especially concerning God’s word and God’s will

we know that in this life the devil never stops to attack us. His lies will always sound good and pleasing. But in the end he will always leave people empty, hurt or even dead. In the Batman movie “The Dark Night” Alfred, Bruce Wayne's butler, trusted ally and best friend says about the Joker:

"Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn."

The Joker is nothing more or less than ultimate personification of chaos, anarchy, death, destruction, madness and psychopathy. In a very similar way but much more powerful the devil wants to “see the world and many human souls burn”.

God however does everything to protect his children and save souls from the devils power. He himself convinces people of his goodness und the trustworthiness of his word. And he gives them the “sword of the Spirit” to protect themselves from and fight against the devil:

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. [...] Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:12,14,15)

In the end it is God, our reliable friend and almighty king himself, we find in the words of the Bible. Let us cherish every one of his words and trust that through Jesus he will provide us graciously with everything we need now and till eternity.