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THE ISSUE BEHIND ALL ISSUES – THE AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

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AN INTRODUCTORY WORD

Let me begin by telling you where I intend to go in this lecture. In a nutshell, I'm going to suggest that there is one issue that seems to permeate almost every discussion we have in the church and that is especially prominent when we debate matters that have the potential to divide us. It is centered in these questions: *What is the authority of the Bible? How should we use the Bible? How do we, given our roots and traditions, interpret the Bible?*

I'm not going to assert that if we can come to agreement on these questions all will be well. I *am* going to suggest, however, that the sailing may be smoother if we can have broad concurrence on them.

PART I: A LIFELONG JOURNEY

Let me begin by speaking of my personal love affair with the Bible. It goes back to the years of the Great Depression. My parents were forced to quit farming. For several months they had to live apart until they could find a suitable home for their growing family in a nearby village. My mother took five of us and went to live with her parents. My father took two and went to live with his brother two miles down the road.

Each evening after the meal my maternal grandmother would rise from the table and reach for her Swedish Bible and Psalm Book. I didn't understand a word of what she read. But it was a moment of quiet reverence for a restless four-year-old lad. It is a memory that would be inscribed forever on my heart.

About ten years later my baptismal faith was awakened at a church camp. As a result of that experience I began at age 14 to read my Bible daily. Before finishing high school I had read it from cover to cover, including every "begat" in Leviticus and every "selah" in the Psalms!

After high school and before enrolling in college I spent a year at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Minneapolis, concentrating on acquiring basic knowledge of the Bible. (Ironically, Bishop Mark Hanson's father was president of the Institute at the time.)

At Augsburg College I took Bible courses and minored in Greek. At Augustana Seminary I continued biblical studies, including courses in Greek and in Hebrew. At the Seminary I was first introduced to the importance of studying the Bible in the historical context in which it was written.

Several years after I was ordained I pursued a second master's degree at Princeton Seminary, specializing in New Testament studies. My doctoral studies in religious education at New York University included a thesis in the area of biblical studies.

In my parish ministry I accented adult Bible study. Between parish calls I spent nearly a decade in the college classroom, teaching primarily biblical studies. In my twenty years as a synod and churchwide bishop I deliberately carved out time in my schedule to teach the Bible to pastors and laity.

In addition to formal study and teaching of the Bible, I have always found it important to read the Bible for the purpose of enriching my walk as a follower of Christ. For all of our fifty-one years of married life Corinne and I have followed the discipline of daily reading of Scripture. Now with diminished eyesight I have found new delight in my recently-acquired giant print Bible.

Why do I dwell on this? Because I want you to understand at the outset that the use of the Bible, both for personal enrichment as well as for instruction in the church, is not an "ivory tower" endeavor for me. This has been my life. This Book has shaped who I am more than any other. It has been central to my ministry as parish pastor, as college professor and as bishop.

Now when I sit in the pew more often than I stand in the pulpit, my concern for the use of the Bible in the church runs as deep as ever. I long for the church -- for all churches -- to be more firmly grounded in the Holy Scriptures.

PART II: A DEEPER CONCERN

Having said all this, my burden is not simply that we read and study the Bible.

My concern is with how we understand the purpose of the Bible and use it, especially when dealing with difficult issues in the church.

We live in a culture where there is a growing tendency to use the Bible in a manner that I believe is alien to the traditions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and to most other churches that trace their roots to the Protestant Reformation. The rise of what is called Protestant fundamentalism has brought with it the assumption that every verse of the Bible is of equal or near equal importance and that all one needs to do in resolving a difficult issue is to find the right Bible verse or verses and apply them as the last word. The Bible becomes a fetish, an object of worship that must be regarded with unreasoning reverence.

We must be quick to recognize, of course, that even in our own Lutheran tradition there have been long periods when our Lutheran church fell into that trap, times when the Bible was regarded in a fundamentalist way. In his book "*The Significance of the Bible for the Church*," Anders Nygren makes a rather unsettling observation.

*It was the great accomplishment of the Reformation that it broke definitely with the external authority of the pope and the church; but it made the mistake of substituting another external authority, the word of the Bible. ...the church of the Reformation bound itself to the changeless word of a book, and thus doomed itself to the rigidity of a dead orthodoxy. (Anders Nygren; *The Significance of the Bible for the Church*; Philadelphia; Fortress Press; 1963; p. 9.)*

Throughout our history we have struggled with this problem. In 1938 the former United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) adopted what became known as *The Baltimore Declaration*. After stating that “*the whole body of the Scriptures in all its parts is the Word of God,*” the *Declaration* goes on to declare that one must make a distinction between the “*more important*” and the “*less important*” parts of the Bible. The difference between these two parts lies in what the *Declaration* states as the “*closeness of their relation to Christ, our Lord, and to the Gospel, which is the Word of God in the most real sense.*”

The *Declaration* was a model for a Lutheran understanding of the Bible and its place in the life of the church. It was, however, a church convention/assembly action. And as all of us know, those actions seldom seep very far into the bloodstream of the church.

For that reason, when Joseph Sittler, a leading theologian of the ULCA, wrote his book *The Doctrine of the Word* a dozen years later, it caused quite an uproar in Lutheran circles and beyond. As Sittler himself said to me one day in speaking about his book, “*I didn’t know the gun was loaded!*”

What did Sittler say that was so unsettling? The burden of his book was to argue that the Bible must be read from its center, from its witness to Jesus Christ, and not from its edges, trying to use the Bible for purposes for which it was not intended. In reflecting on Luther’s understanding of the Bible, Sittler says that it arose out of Luther’s wrestling with sin and alienation from God and his discovery of what Sittler calls “*the measureless and shocking love of God.*” It was “*that message,*” writes Sittler,

the whole context of mighty works, prophetic declarations and pleadings, the cries and moans and lyrical songs of the psalter through which that message moves to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ -- that, for Luther is the Word of God.
(Joseph Sittler; *The Doctrine of the Word*; Philadelphia; Muhlenberg Press; 1948; p. 16)

Having established the distinction between Christ as the Living Word and the Bible as the written Word, Sittler points out that Luther was able “*to move with extraordinary freedom among problems of textual criticism.*” (Ibid.)

Other Lutheran churches were wrestling with these questions in a less formal way. Fredrik Schiotz was the first president of the American Lutheran Church after its formation in 1960. In his autobiography, published in 1980, Schiotz devotes an entire chapter to the subject of biblical interpretation. Among other things, he tells the fascinating story of an informal annual gathering of theologians, beginning in 1945 and continuing for 20 years. Included were representatives from all of the predecessor churches that today make up our ELCA (LFC, “old” ALC, ELC, Augustana, ULCA and others). Because it was informal, no minutes were kept. Schiotz says that the major topic of discussion was the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As for the stance of this group, Schiotz says that “*the Lutheran theological position with regard to the Word became clear. Neither Luther nor the symbolical writings of the Lutheran church had placed any emphasis on the inerrancy of the text (of the Bible). For Lutherans, the central message is one of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.*” (Fredrik Schiotz; “One Man’s Story”; Minneapolis; Augsburg Publishing House; 1980)

Once more I must accent what I said a moment ago. Just because the leadership of the churches had a clear view of how the Bible was to be interpreted did not mean that it had seeped into the warp and woof of the congregations.

Thus, the task goes on. More recently, Carl Braaten has addressed this issue in what I find to be one of the most cogent discussions of how we in the Lutheran Church should understand the Bible as the “Word of God.” Braaten introduces the subject by asserting that the Holy Scriptures are the “*authoritative source and norm*” of the Christian faith, a statement embedded in the Constitution of the ELCA and its predecessor churches. But he is quick to assert that

The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness -- the ‘canon within the canon.’ Jesus Christ himself is the Lord of the Scriptures, the source and scope of its authority. . (Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson; Christian Dogmatics; Vol. I; Philadelphia; Fortress Press; 1984; p. 64)

Braaten agrees with Sittler in asserting that this view of Scripture is what gave Luther the freedom to criticize those parts of the Bible that did not, in Luther’s judgment, lend a clear witness to the revelation of Jesus Christ. The failure to make this clear distinction is what Braaten says

...finally triumphed and today survives in Protestant fundamentalism. The canon which was open and flexible in Luther’s thinking became closed and rigid in the circles that inherited the doctrine of Scripture in orthodoxy. (Ibid)

Braaten is exactly right. Some believers treat the Bible as if it had descended from heaven to earth exactly as we know it today; that every chapter and verse was dictated to a scribe. We forget that it took several centuries for the church to finally decide which books should be included in the canon. In his substantial volume entitled “*The Other Bible*” Willis Barnstone brings together all of the writings that competed for inclusion in our Christian Bible but did not “make the cut.” They include Jewish texts called the Pseudepigrapha, the Gnostic scriptures and the Apocrypha, a collection of writings that some Christian churches include at the end of the Old Testament. Among them are books like those in our Bible: Psalms, romances, gospels, epistles, prophecies and mystical writings. They did not make it into our Bible because, in the judgment of the early church, they were not of the same quality as those that did. (*The Other Bible*; San Francisco; Harper; Willis Barnstone, ed.; 2005)

What then makes our Christian Bible, the written Word, distinct?

First and foremost, it is a word of judgment and mercy, of law and gospel. At the center, however, is the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus Christ. That revelation, that *Written Word* about the *Living Word*, has been with us from the beginning. It was there in creation, in the history of Israel, and very specifically and very particularly in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And it is there whenever we proclaim the Gospel and receive the Sacraments.

Here I need to sound a word of caution. It would be most unfortunate if this sounds like an attempt to *diminish* the importance of the Bible. On the contrary, what we are saying is that the

Bible will come to have an even greater role in the life of the church if we make certain it is used in the proper way.

To get to the heart of this, we can return to Nygren. Having spoken about our mistake in making the Bible a kind of “Protestant Pope,” he goes on to say of the Bible that

...these human words are at the same time God’s word too. In, with, and under these words God expresses his thoughts and his will. ...the Bible does not merely appear to speak in human words, but actually does so. It is precisely in and through such words that God speaks to us. (Nygren, Op. cit.; pp. 41-42)

PART III: USING THE BIBLE IN CONTEXT

What we have said thus far would probably meet with nods of approval from most of us. Now comes the hard part. What *is* the proper way to use the Bible in the church, especially when we are faced with trying to apply it to complex and potentially divisive issues? Given this view of the Bible, how should we employ the Holy Scriptures as we state in our ELCA Constitution: “*the source and norm of the Christian faith*”?

To answer that question, I have often suggested that we in the ELCA would do well to reflect on certain methodologies developed in sister denominations, namely, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, and the Methodists. After all, isn’t one of the fundamental purposes of “full communion” that we learn from one another? I suggest we have much to learn from these churches.

Presbyterians

As for the Presbyterians, Henry May describes the process that emerged from early Princeton Seminary theologians. It included

...a sober coalescence of biblical authority, ‘doxological’ science, a vigorous intellectual tradition, and a common sense employment of human reasoning. (As cited in the Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Summer 2002, p. 233)

Catch those elements again: the Bible as primary authority; the revelation of God in the world of science; intellectual rigor, and common sense reasoning.

In the Presbyterian “Book of Confessions” we find this helpful description of the Bible:

The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of (humans), conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. (The Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America; Part I; Book of Confessions; Philadelphia; 1967.)

Episcopalians

The Episcopal/Anglican approach is described by J. Neil Alexander, a graduate of our Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary who serves as bishop of the Atlanta Diocese of the Episcopal Church. He suggests that in this tradition, when seeking the will of God, Scripture is combined with tradition and reason, but *not* as their equal. Scripture is given the preeminent place. He uses a very down-to-earth illustration to make his point:

I prefer to think of the Anglican way like a tricycle. The big, front wheel of the tricycle is Holy Scripture. It leads the way, is responsible for steering, for determining the overall direction we are going. But essential to the tricycle are its two back wheels: reason and tradition. These back wheels bring balance and stability...and make the ride a great deal more reliable. (J. Neil Alexander; "This Far By Grace"; Cambridge, MA; Cowley Publications; 2003; p. 18)

Methodists

The Methodists, our new partners in interim full communion, have a longtime process that is known as the "*Wesleyan Quadrilateral*." Though surely not embraced by all Methodists, many find it useful. As the title implies, it involves four steps:

First and foremost, we should ask what the *Bible* has to say about a particular question.

Second, we should inquire about the *tradition* of the church.

Third, we should use the gift of *reason*.

Finally, we should look at the *experience* of believers.

I suggest we look at each of these four steps for a moment.

The Bible

We have no problem in citing the Bible as a primary source for guidance. Indeed, we should always begin with *a careful study of the Bible*, asking the best minds of the church, persons knowledgeable with the Scriptures in their original languages and known for their skills of interpretation to help us to answer questions like these:

What does the text of the Bible say about this question?

What do the words mean?

Is there more than one way these words might be translated and interpreted?

This makes our seminary communities and our biblical theologians absolutely crucial to the life of the church. We must give them the freedom to test the Scriptures with the same rigorous intellectual standards that we apply to other kinds of study, convinced that the Scriptures can withstand any examination we bring to them.

But the church also has a right to expect its parish pastors, ordained ministers in other settings, and lay theologians to do solid biblical work as they prepare sermons, lectures and Bible studies in the ordinary course of their ministry and especially as they help the church to think through difficult questions.

Yet, even when we do our biblical work with care and dedication, leaning on the best resources of the church, it's obvious that we often come to different conclusions on what the Bible has to say to us in a particular area. Two professors at the same seminary with equally impressive scholarly credentials may come to different conclusions on a particular issue.

Tradition

A second step is *to inquire about the tradition of the church*. There are those who believe tradition to be so important that they spell it with a capital "T". At the other extreme, some of us grew up at a time when "tradition" was a dirty word in Lutheran circles. We boasted about relying on "*sola scriptura*" -- the Scriptures alone. We criticized "*those Catholics*" for trusting too much in tradition.

Most of us, however, have come to realize that one cannot understand the Bible apart from tradition. Though we may not give tradition the same status as the Bible, we realize that the two are linked inseparably to each other. What is tradition? At its best it is the accumulated wisdom of the church. It is the refined judgment of the church that has come out of the crucible of centuries of reflection and discussion among the faithful. Thus, though we may not equate tradition with Holy Scripture, we should, at the very least, invite those who can instruct us in the history of the church to guide us in asking,

Has the church dealt with this matter in the past?

If so, what can we learn from believers in earlier generations?

How and why did they come to certain conclusions?

Are there changes in the world and in the church that might lead us to question the tradition that has been handed down to us?

For us in the Lutheran family attention to tradition will always include listening, first and foremost, to Martin Luther. I like this word from the Danish theologian Regin Prenter:

Evangelical theology must never forget that the Holy Scripture is the authoritative standard and not Luther. But the Holy Scripture can at no time be read independently of the voice of the fathers. And among the fathers Luther will always occupy a front pew in the Evangelical church. (Regin Prenter; Spiritus Creator; Philadelphia; Muhlenberg Press; 1953; p, xiii)

Spurgeon is saying that acquaintance with the content of the Bible is not sufficient. One must also consider the great wealth of biblical and theological knowledge that comes though great scholars from previous generations. Another word for that is *tradition*.

Reason

The third suggested element is the use of *reason*, or, as the Princeton theologians suggest, a healthy respect for the findings of empirical science and “*a common sense employment of human reason.*”

Luther recognized that reason, like any other good, can be demonic. But when it seemed *unreasonable* to him in the light of his understanding of Scripture and the voice of conscience to continue certain traditions of the church in his day, he was quick to argue vigorously against those traditions. Though it had been the church’s tradition for several centuries to require celibacy, for example, Luther argued that it no longer made good sense. And we should not forget that when he made his well know “Here I stand” declaration, Luther appealed not only to Scripture but also “*plain reason.*” So we should ask,

If the Spirit of God is alive and at work in the church in every age, should we not expect that there will be new insights into our understanding of the Bible in our own generation?

Peter Gomes, preacher to the Harvard University community, asks this rhetorical question:

When we speak of the authority of scripture...does that mean that we suspend all those faculties of mind and intelligence which we apply to all other books and all other instances of our life? (Peter J. Gomes; The Good Book; New York; Wm. Morrow & Co.; 1996; p. 10)

Of course not. In his book “The Lutheran People” Martin Marty states that

*While Luther and Lutherans have reverent and even awesome regard for biblical authority, they have never been **mindless** in their reading of Scripture. (Martin Marty; The Lutheran People; Philadelphia; Muhlenberg Press; n.d.; p. 25; emphasis mine)*

Experience

Fourth and finally, there is the *experience* of believers. We can repeat the same questions:

If the Sprit of God is alive and at work in the church in every age, should we not expect that there will be new insights to be learned from the experience of believers in the world?

If so, how does that experience fit with our understanding of the Bible and of the traditions of the church?

PART IV: THE WITNESS OF THE BIBLE

The Old Testament

The process we have just described was at work among the people of God in Old Testament times. In a lecture delivered at Luther Seminary last October Gail O'Day pointed out that already in the book of Deuteronomy the Law of Moses is rewritten for a new generation.

One of the more interesting changes in the application of the law was the one related to eunuchs. In Deuteronomy we read that

No one whose testicles are crushed....shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 23:1)

Those who suffered this misfortune were known as "eunuchs". They were thought to be too imperfect to enter the tabernacle or the temple. Yet, Isaiah (probably Trito-Isaiah) proclaims a vision of a new people of God. Among those to be *included* are eunuchs.

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give...a monument and a name better than the sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:4-5)

Here is another example of how a law is changed even within the pages of the Old Testament.

How could Isaiah get by with this radical reinterpretation of a time-honored law from Israel's holy Scriptures? Claus Westermann suggests that it was because Isaiah was

...a man deeply involved in his task, conscious of being God's messenger, and one who, like the pre-exilic prophets, prepared the way for the message of salvation in defiance of the apparent logic of facts and at a time when men were depressed and resigned to things as they were. (Claus Westermann; "Isaiah 40 - 66"; Philadelphia; the Westminster Press; 1969; pp. 299, 305)

Westermann says that Isaiah is

...calling for a radical change in the idea of the chosen people. Membership ceases to be based on birth, and now depends on resolution, the resolve to take as one's god the God of Israel. (Ibid)

Many of you may have seen the tongue in cheek piece that circulated over the Internet some time ago when someone chided the famous Dr. Laura for using the Old Testament law in a literal way to make a moral declaration. The writer asked Dr. Laura:

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor to the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Shall I smite them?

I know from Leviticus 11:5-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

We smile, knowing that it is impossible to keep those laws. But does this mean that all 600 rules and commandments are worthless and to be ignored? Not at all. What we must do, and what has been done over the centuries of religious history, is to find a way to determine which are valid for us at this time in the history of the people of God.

The Ministry of Jesus

What about the New Testament? Jesus had the highest regard for the sacred writings of his people. Yet, like Isaiah, he overturned laws that stood in the way of proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God, laws that bound rather than set free. For example, one of the rules in Leviticus is that certain persons shall not be permitted to offer sacrifice to God. Among them is “*one who is blind.*” (21:18) It is also inferred that those who suffer from this and other ailments may have brought it upon themselves because of sin, either their own or that of their parents. (Exodus 20:5) So it was not surprising that when a man born blind is brought to Jesus for healing the disciples ask: “*Who sinned, this man or his parents?*” (John 9:2) Jesus surely knows the law from Leviticus. But he overturns that law, declaring, “*Neither this man nor his parents sinned.*” (John 9:3) As the story unfolds it is clear that Jesus uses this man’s handicap as one more way to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Any of us who have a handicapped relative (I have in mind, for example, my brother Dave who suffered a brain injury at birth) or a friend who is the innocent victim of an accident cannot imagine that someone would say that their disability or accident was due to some great wrong they or their parents have done.

Again, the rule for Jesus is the rule of his new Kingdom: Good News for all.

The Earliest Christians

The process we have described was also at work in the New Testament church from the beginning.

In Acts 10 we have a story often referred to as “*The Conversion of Cornelius.*” A more apt title, however, would be “*The Conversion of Peter.*” The issue is whether Cornelius, a devout Roman, could become a member of the early Christian community, until now made up exclusively of Jews who had become followers of Jesus. To prepare him for his encounter with Cornelius, God gives Peter a powerful vision. In the vision Peter sees unclean animals coming down on a sheet. God commands Peter to “*kill and eat.*” Out of his background in the holy writings of his faith and out of his respect for long tradition, Peter refuses. God repeats the scene a second and then a third time. Suddenly, believers appear at his gate, urging Peter to come and meet Cornelius. Now Peter understands the meaning of the vision.

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34)

What follows is a Christ-centered proclamation of the Good News. As he sees people responding, including Gentiles, Peter, in spite of his understanding of the holy writings and long tradition, asks this rhetorical question:

Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? (Acts 10:17)

Another good illustration from the early church's experience is found in Acts 15. As Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Junia and other apostles and evangelists brought the Gospel to new peoples they soon discovered that there was a conflict between their Jewish religious traditions and those of other cultures.

Circumcision was one of the first to test their unity. Their sacred *Scriptures* commanded that all males be circumcised as a sign that they were God's people. For more than fifteen centuries this had been their *tradition*. So far, so good.

But now *reason* and *experience* were telling them a different story. As Gentile converts joined the community some believers insisted that these new members be circumcised. But Paul and others argued the case against this practice. The debate precipitated a crisis that resulted in a great council of the church that is recorded in Acts 15. At that meeting they decided what was essential and what was peripheral.

The one central requirement would be that all agree that we are saved by faith in Christ alone. Circumcision, they reasoned, must not be a requirement for belonging to this community of faith. We can imagine that it was a difficult decision for those who feared they were disrespectful of their sacred Scriptures and were disregarding their centuries-old holy tradition. And there is evidence from other New Testament sources, such as Galatians, that the decision by the Jerusalem council was not immediately and universally accepted. But, for the sake of the Gospel, they took that important step.

PART V: EXAMPLES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

The Christian church has been engaged in this same process ever since its beginning. Again, a few examples:

Slavery:

Well into the nineteenth century there were devout Christians, including many Lutherans -- not only in the South but also in the North -- who believed that the Bible supported slavery. Furthermore, they could point to a long tradition of its practice by Christians. Where treated with respect, they believed that having slaves was no sin.

Peter Gomes calls this "*culturism*." If literalism is a danger at one end of the spectrum of biblical interpretation, then reading the Bible exclusively through the lens of one's culture is at the other. Scripture is used to defend the status quo. In describing those days of slavery, Gomes notes that

...most people...understood themselves to be good and faithful, people who were simply doing God's will. They read the Bible, they heard their preachers, they

said their prayers, and they knew in their hearts that they were right and justified by the Bible.... (Gomes, Op.Cit.; p. 51)

The result was the most savage and costly conflict the United States has ever been engaged in -- the Civil War.

Brothers went to war and shed blood in the most divisive form of human conflict, a civil war, and did so in large measure on the authority of mutually exclusive readings of scripture (Gomes; Op.Cit.; p. 97).

Over time some Christians, both in the South and in the North, and including knowledgeable and devout Lutherans, began to question whether it was right for one person to own another, no matter what the Bible seemed to say or what the tradition had been for centuries. The ensuing controversy divided Lutherans in this land. It took decades for the division to heal. But as the church searched the *Scriptures*, reflected on *tradition*, exercised good *reason*, and looked at its *experience*, the rift was healed and they came together in an understanding that slavery could not be supported by the church.

Ordination of Women:

A more recent example is the ordination of women. I get very irritated by fellow ELCA Lutherans who look down on those churches which do not ordain women, acting as though we have been doing it for centuries and that it was an easy decision for us. Have we forgotten that for more than 95% of our history we did not ordain women? Have we forgotten the struggle we went through to come to that decision? Have we forgotten that many, including me in my early ministry, felt that both the Bible and tradition precluded that possibility?

We were influenced, of course, by our culture as well as by our questionable reading of the Bible. 1 Corinthians 11:34-35 seemed quite plain:

...women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak.... If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. (1 Corinthians 11: 34-35)

I agree with those who ask whether this is a legitimate word from Paul or a later interpolation. We need not get into that here. The fact is that most in our churches read it as a word from God. We were convinced, century after century, that the altar and the pulpit were places for males only.

How did we change that long-standing tradition? Certainly our changing culture had its impact on the church. Family planning and women in the workplace became common after World War II, bringing a new stature to women in our society. But the church, as is often the case, lagged behind the world around us. Finally, after pressure from those who wanted change, we began to look at the issue. We studied the *Bible*, we looked at the *traditions* of other churches, we exercised our *reason*, and we looked at our *experience* -- at what women were already doing in ministry in the church. Out of it came the decision to ordain women who were qualified on all other grounds.

Divorce:

Then there is the issue of divorce. Most of us have seen significant change in our own lifetime. My roots are in the Augustana Lutheran Church. In 1925, the heart of “The Roaring Twenties,” the Augustana Church met in convention and passed a resolution declaring that any pastor who conducted a marriage ceremony for someone who had been divorced could be subject to discipline.

The action was based on what many believed was a plain and obvious reading of Scripture. After all, had not Jesus said that

anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
(Matthew 5:32)

And had not Paul reinforced the word of Jesus when he wrote an even stricter rule for Corinth?

To the married I give this command -- not I but the Lord -- that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.
(1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

The Bible seemed so clear on the question of divorce.

Over time our churches changed their positions on divorce. My own recollection is that it was Elton Trueblood, the Quaker, who first suggested as early as the 1950s that were Jesus among us in our increasingly complex world he might speak a more understanding word to some who needed to end a bad marriage. Even the most fundamentalist denominations moved away from a strict interpretation of the Bible. Certainly the culture around us played a role. We were forced to take a new look at the issue. Many came to believe that a more careful examination of the *Bible and tradition*, a more *reasonable* understanding of our changing culture, and the *experience* of the church in real life situations -- all called for a reconsideration of what had seemed so certain and settled.

Eucharistic Celebration

Change, however, is not always permanent. Let me add at least one example of how the church moved back to an earlier practice. In my youth the Eucharist was offered four times a year. If you missed a Sunday or two for any reason you might have only one or two opportunities to partake of the Lord’s Supper. I believe that our ecumenical dialogues, especially with Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Episcopal churches, reminded us of our deeper tradition. Now it is not uncommon to find congregations celebrating the Eucharist weekly. More than that, we also decided that there was no biblical basis or any good reason to withhold the Eucharist from our younger children.

We could cite many other examples, but the point is clear. The people of God, beginning in Old Testament times and running up to our own day, have always had to wrestle with change. How to respect the Bible, our “*authoritative source and norm of...faith and life,*” how to honor sacred

tradition, our anchor in times of change, and yet, how to bring the essence of both to an ever changing world -- that is an endless challenge.

PART VI: THE CORE ISSUE: HOW WE INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

Whenever the church engages in these kinds of debate there is a tendency for those who champion little or no change to be regarded as “*conservative*” and those who call for study and possible adaptation to be labeled “*liberal*”. Unfortunately, this penchant for attaching labels to those who disagree with us clouds the real question -- how do we *interpret* the Bible and how much weight do we give to tradition, reason and experience?

Lutheran theologian Karlfried Froehlich addresses this question in an article in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*. Froehlich writes about what he calls, “*The Predicament of Biblical Interpretation*.” He observes, as I have suggested, that in the history of interpretation there has been one principle that has always been at the core, namely,

...that God’s action in the historical person of Jesus Christ was central to God’s plan of salvation.... Beyond that, (principles of interpretation) could show immense variation in scope, emphasis, and vital concerns. (Karlfried Froehlich; “Aminodab’s Chariot’: The Predicament of Biblical Interpretation”; Princeton Seminary Bulletin; Volume XVIII, No. 3, New Series 1997; p. 277)

Froehlich also makes the observation that the way we interpret Scripture will inevitably be influenced by

the articulated faith and hope of the interpreters as well as of the communities in which and for which they have operated. (Ibid., p. 273)

Donald Juel, another Lutheran on the Princeton faculty until his untimely death, made the same observation:

Confidence that (the Bible) is reliable will include confidence that the Spirit of truth continues to work through scholarly conversation and committee votes. (Donald H. Juel; “Your Word is Truth’: Some Reflections on a Hard Saying”; Princeton Seminary Review; Vol. XVII, No. 1; 1996; p. 12.)

What Froehlich and Juel are saying is that the task of interpreting the Bible is more complex than taking a text, following certain time-honored “principles,” and coming to an obvious conclusion.

How Much Change Can We Bear?

I believe most of us will agree with most of what I have said thus far. A reading of biblical and church history makes it obvious that we do change our positions on certain matters from time to time. I have discovered, however, that whenever I make a presentation like this there is great fear that we may give too much credence to *reason* and *experience* as agents of change. We begin to feel we are walking on thin ice.

This is a very legitimate concern. And this may be a good point to insert a word of caution. It is legitimate to ask, “*Whose reason? Whose experience?*”

A look at two biblical passages may be helpful. In his letter to the Corinthians about the use of tongues Paul is very careful to distinguish between one’s private use of that gift for personal edification and the claim of some that it is a gift for the whole church. He concludes his advice to them by urging the Corinthian believers to “*excel in gifts that build up the church*” (1 Corinthians 14:12).

But what about those times when change is called for for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel and for establishment of justice? Let me appeal to a somewhat unlikely passage in Jeremiah. This one bothered me for a long time. The people are living under the domination of King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet Hananiah, an honorable man, prophesies that Nebuchadnezzar will be overthrown and there will be peace within two years. But the people wonder if he can be believed. Is he a true prophet? Jeremiah says that they will know if he is a true prophet when his prophecy comes true. That never seemed very helpful. I felt disgusted with Jeremiah. What kind of answer was that to a very sincere question?

But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made to me. Jeremiah, it seems to me, is telling his audience that a *process* is involved. Yes, there are always many prophets. In the cacophony of differing voices some seem obviously false. But others make us stop to ask, “*Could there be something to what this person is saying? Is God calling for change?*”

We find ourselves asking the same question that was put to Jeremiah: *How can we know who is right?*

The only way is to listen, to study, to pray, to have dialogue, and, most importantly, to agree to stay together in unity until we have come to understand what God is saying to us in our generation. The experience of one or of a small group must never be seen as an independent source of truth. But neither must it be assumed that an endeared tradition is God’s way for our current life in the church.

As we carry on our arduous work of dialogue and decision-making, some will leave because they are impatient with the process and despair that change will ever come. Others will leave because they fear we are headed for disaster. What we must do is to appeal to the broad majority to stay the course, to hold high our commitment to unity, and to love one another no matter how deep and intense our differences.

CONCLUSION: IS THERE A “LUTHERAN” WAY TO LIVE TOGETHER?

As I said at the beginning of this lecture, we would be hopelessly naïve to think that there will come a time when our church will not be challenged by one issue or another. That is not the question. As we look to the future these are legitimate questions: *Can we be a less anxious church? A less contentious church? A less fractious church?*

In my final report to the Churchwide Assembly in 1995 I spoke of my hope that we might “*be the church with confidence.*” I long for a church that will not be hobbled by threats to withhold support whenever something happens that is contrary to our personal preference. I long for a

church that is so single-mindedly focused on our mission of proclamation and our call for justice that we will have that kind of confidence, that kind of unity, that kind of love for the world and for one another.

Can it happen? I believe it can if we embrace as never before the pattern of the early church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

And I believe it can happen if we have a broad and deep commitment to the principles that guided the early church. First, there is this word from the believers gathered at Jerusalem:

...we believe that we will be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ....(Acts 15: 11)

And then there is this word from Paul to the Romans, a word I suggest every congregation of the ELCA print in every Sunday bulletin:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments... are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' (Romans 13: 8-9)

Luther held that the key to our use of the Bible is that Jesus Christ be at the center. We can differ on many matters -- and we do! But there is a core, the bedrock understanding that all are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Luther insisted that the church is the creation of the Holy Spirit. Further, he held that the Spirit works primarily through the Gospel that comes to us in Word and Sacrament. If we can grasp hold of this, the core of our confession, then I have hope that we can sail with greater confidence through whatever gales may lash at us in the years to come.