

A SEMINARIAN LOOKS AT  
21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY OUTSPOKEN ENTHUSIASTS

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*God's revelation in his Word is the only principle of perceiving the true religion and theology; and after the written Word was given, neither are new revelations to be expected; what is to be believed and what the components of true religion and theology should be cannot be derived from human reason.—Adolf Hoenecke<sup>1</sup>*

Whether it takes the form of a bright red comma on the side of a brick church, a catchy slogan on the radio, or a watered-down statement of belief, modern churches claiming the names of Christ and Luther advocate that God reveals himself outside of Scripture. Heresies like these are not new, but those who preach them are using new tactics. On the one hand, some of these tactics *advertise* the ‘freedom’ that comes with not being tied down to an ancient book. As this paper will demonstrate, what seems to be freedom is really slavery to the law. On the other hand, other tactics are intended to *obscure* the truly anti-scriptural nature of these statements, for the sake of avoiding outright rejection by those with even the slightest familiarity with Christian teaching. Remember that the Devil is the father of lies, and he is not stupid. He knows that sweet-sounding doctrine can sometimes say exactly what itching ears want to hear.<sup>2</sup> Why should he go to all the work of converting Jesus’ sheep into Wiccans and atheists, when simply rephrasing their doctrinal statements can bring about the same end result by leading souls away from the Means of Grace? Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Jesus himself is the Word which brings eternal life. May God’s people always look to Scripture alone for revelation.

This paper will explore two ways the fundamental doctrine of divine revelation is publically butchered in modern churches. The format is that of two case studies. The first will explore the Stillspeaking campaign of the United Church of Christ (UCC). The second case study turns to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and finds several ideological wings of that synod agreeing that God’s Word is the true norm of doctrine, as long as ‘God’s Word’ does not mean ‘the inerrant words of Scripture.’ This paper is a warning to Bible-believing Christians to stay alert and read carefully. Always ‘test the spirits, to see whether they

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<sup>1</sup> Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Vol I.* (Milwaukee: NPH, 2009), 253.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 4:3, NIV 1984

<sup>3</sup> John 6:68

are from God,'<sup>4</sup> and “examine the Scriptures” to see if what other Christian groups say (yes, even about Scripture!) is true or a trap.<sup>5</sup>

### **Case Study #1: Insufficiency leads to subjectivity (UCC)**

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” “God is still speaking,” and the comma become the coat of arms for the UCC and its million members in 2004, when that church body launched its multi-platform “Stillspeaking” advertising campaign. Certainly, God speaks to the world through his “living and enduring Word”<sup>6</sup>—“the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation.”<sup>7</sup> As the denomination’s own material will point out later, this is not what is meant by the phrase “God is still speaking.”

The belief that God would reveal himself outside of the canon of Scripture has existed as long as the Scriptures themselves. The syncretism of the Israelites, many of the heresies of the early Christian church, the *Schwärmer* of the Reformation, and the cults of more modern times all testify to humanity’s desire to discover the true God outside of the pages of the Bible.

The religious freedom of America, while a blessing, also makes this country a petri dish for new ways to mishandle the Word of God. For example,

Jehovah’s witnesses espouse the formal principle of the Bible’s authority but teach an Arian Christ on the basis of their New World Translation and their clever manipulation of Scripture passages. The Latter Day Saints list the Bible first among their standard works but teach a gnostic Christ on the basis of their other Standard works and the continuing revelation of their presidents. Reverend Moon and his Unification Church of Christianity grant the Bible an authoritative position but preach a failed Christ on the basis of Moon’s revelations. Mary Baker Eddy’s followers honor the Bible with their lips but the Jesus of the Bible is really expendable in their system. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of Transcendental Meditation, quotes the Bible (or misquotes it) when it suits his purpose but directs people away from the Christ of the Bible to their own innate divinity.

In every instance the homegrown American religions which sprang from Protestantism rely on extra-scriptural authorities...Additional writings, new and continuing revelations, or the dicta of the leader supersede the Bible’s authority. The Bible must be augmented, corrected, or explained according to the leader’s system and worldview.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:1

<sup>5</sup> Acts 17:11

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 1:23

<sup>7</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15

<sup>8</sup> Balge, Richard. “An Analysis of Some Of The Cults Which Are Likely To Disturb Our People.” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary* (April, 1983): 2.

The founders of the UCC stepped off the Mayflower and into this petri dish, advocating for abolition, female pastors, suffrage, gay marriage, and an end to world hunger.

This quick summary may make the UCC sound like a liberal cult (which it is), but imagine the impact of such a denomination on a church-shopping man or woman. Suppose a woman is fed up with the scandals, cliques, and dry tradition of her last church and decides to look elsewhere. After visiting several churches, she sees a brick and mortar building that looks like a church, a sign with the name of Christ on it, and a pastor who looks like a pastor of any other church. She asks the pastor what this church has to offer that the others don't have. "Here," he (or she) answers, "God is still speaking to us. That means we listen for the Stillspeaking God." "What does that mean?" asks the woman (apparently she used to be a Lutheran). "Stillspeaking is Continuing Testament. Stillspeaking is Extravagant Welcome. Stillspeaking is Changing Lives."<sup>9</sup>

Now, those sound like positive, spiritual words, and they bring to mind thoughts of happiness, warmth, and hope for the future of the world, but the real kicker is that "God is still speaking" sounds relevant, even essential. If God's Word was completed and in its final form 2000 years ago, what role should it play in a 21<sup>st</sup> century life? If God's plan is still being unfolded to humans now, he can relate to today's problems. He can understand American society and be more flexible with his 'rules.' He can appreciate how far the Church has come in welcoming and accepting members of society who used to be excluded from God's family. The outdated paradigm of Sin and Hell gives way to a more enlightened theology: love.

This is where the Christian who takes the Bereans for his or her guide would ask the question: "Where does the Bible fit into all this?" "The United Church of Christ embraces a theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God, the creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the confessions of the Reformation,"<sup>10</sup> including the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451, the Definition of which describes Jesus as "the Word."<sup>11</sup>

(The author of this paper has no confidence that this would actually be the response given to an inquisitive visitor at any UCC church. Answers undoubtedly vary from church to church

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<sup>9</sup> UCC, "About Stillspeaking" [on-line] (accessed 8 October 2012); available from <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/about/>

<sup>10</sup> UCC, "Testimonies, not tests of the faith" [on-line] (accessed 8 October 2012); available from <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/>

<sup>11</sup> UCC, "Jesus Christ is both human and divine" [on-line] (accessed 8 October 2012); available from <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/jesus-christ-is-both-human.html>

because, according to the church's official website, "The UCC has no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures."<sup>12</sup> For the sake of some order, the denomination in convention has agreed on certain statements of faith. However, take such statements of faith for what they are worth (i.e., nothing), since one of the denomination's statements of faith rejects any binding value of statements of faith:

The UCC has roots in the "covenantal" tradition—meaning there is no centralized authority or hierarchy that can impose any doctrine or form of worship on its members. Christ alone is Head of the church. We seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith. The UCC therefore receives the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as testimonies, but not tests of the faith.<sup>13</sup>)

Pressing the issue further, the inquisitive Bible-loving (or at least absolute truth-loving) visitor must ask, "Is the Bible merely *a witness to* the Word of God, or is the Bible the Word of God?" To this, the UCC pastor could open his (or her) hymnal, *The Book of Worship*, to the Kansas City Statement of Faith, affirmed by the church's convention in 1913:

We are united in striving to know the will of God  
as taught in the Holy Scriptures,  
and in our purpose to walk in the ways of the Lord,  
made known or to be made known to us.

Here emerges a contrast between "the will of God," which is taught in the Bible, and "the ways of the Lord," which have been revealed in the past and continue to be revealed more fully now. Is this Statement of Faith, nearly 100 years old, still the position of the UCC in 2012? Here is the church's commitment to remain "attentive to the Word," as adopted by the 1993 convention in a body of doctrine called "Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Statement of Commitment":

We, the United Church of Christ, look toward the twenty-first century with anticipation. We trust God's promises. We are eager to respond to God's call. We believe that God does have more truth and light yet to break forth from God's holy word. Thanks be to God.

By God's grace, we will be a church attentive to the Word. We commit ourselves anew to listen for God's Word in Holy Scripture, in our rich heritage, in faithful witness, and in the fresh winds of the Holy Spirit so that we might discover God's way for us.

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<sup>12</sup> UCC, "What we believe" [on-line] (accessed 8 October 2012); available from <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/what-we-believe.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Now, as a sailor, the author of this paper can appreciate a fresh breeze, but not when said breeze carries with it new revelations from God, placed on par with the Church's traditions, human testimony, and the Bible.

Perhaps it would be good to consider what the UCC understands by the term 'revelation.' That church's view is not at all different from the philosophy of the Jesuit Karl Rahner. Rahner and his doctrinal statements have received glowing praise in printed UCC materials. He says,

At its origin, revelation is not the communication of a number of propositions, but an historical dialogue between God and man in which something happens and in which the communication is related to an event, to an action of God. The existential experience of God becomes the source of new revelation.

Spirit and word together create the permanently active possibility of an experience that is, in principle, the same as that of the apostles, even though our experience is always essentially founded on that of the apostles, since it rests on the transmitted word of the apostles, and, founded on that, continues it.<sup>14</sup>

Here lies the root of the matter. Rahner and the UCC have rejected the rock of Scripture and replaced it with the sand of experience. The Stillspeaking movement panders to the arrogance of the sinful nature. Only apart from the sting of law and the rationally-offensive salve of the gospel, and only by defining religion for himself can the Old Adam scratch the awful itch of the *opinio legis*.

In summary, the UCC has clearly bailed on the Bible alone as the sufficient revelation of God. All Bible-believing Christians must earnestly pray for the million souls who stand looking into the abyss of postmodernism with (at best) a dangerously loose hold on the lifeline of the Bible. In addition, Christian love implores bearing witness to the sufficiency and supremacy of Scripture at any and every opportunity.

### **Case Study # 2: Eliminating inerrancy for the sake of inspiration (ELCA)**

Despite its closer historical relationship with WELS, its retention of 'Lutheran' in its name, its publishing house's extensive work with the Lutheran Confessions and its subscription to the Word of God as its norm and source of doctrine, the ELCA certainly holds a low view of Scripture, and necessarily teaches falsely concerning revelation from God.

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<sup>14</sup> Gawrisch, Wilburt. "The Bible in Current Catholic Theology," [on-line] (accessed 8 October 2012); available from <http://www.wlssays.net/files/GawrischCatholic.pdf>, 3.

The best way to begin understanding the ELCA's stance on the Word of God is to read its public Confession of Faith published in *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*<sup>15</sup>:

- Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
- The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.

Does this confession sound like it holds the Word of God in high regard? Yes. Does it agree with Jesus' words (and WELS's statement of belief *This We Believe*<sup>16</sup>) that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35)? Does this three-fold definition of "Word of God" fully cover the Bible's definition of the same?

In the Garden of Eden, when the Devil tempted Eve to doubt God's Word, he did not give a forceful speech concluding with, "God's words to you are not actually God's Word!" He asked a question. "Did God really say...?" was all it took for Eve to doubt whether God had revealed his will sufficiently to her.<sup>17</sup> Professor John Brug applies this ancient trick to the present subject: "The denial of the truth that the Scripture is the Word of God usually comes not as an assertion but disguised in the form of the question, "In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?" The not so subtle implication is, "When you say that the Bible is the Word of God, you don't really mean to say that God actually said all these things, do you?"<sup>18</sup>

The result of these doubting questions is the creation of additional confusion in an already confused field. In the 1920s and '30s, American Lutheran synods debated whether the Bible *was* God's Word or merely *contained* God's Word. In the 1960s and '70s, the Missouri

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<sup>15</sup> ELCA, "ELCA Confession of Faith" [on-line] (accessed 8 October 2012); available from <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Statements-of-Belief/ELCA-Confession-of-Faith.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> WELS, "This We Believe" [online] (accessed 1 November 2012); available from <http://www.wels.net/what-we-believe/statements-belief/this-we-believe/this-we-believe>

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 3:1

<sup>18</sup> Brug, John. "Luther's Doctrine of the Word—The Incarnate Word in the Written Word." [conference paper] (Presented at Lutheran Free Conference on 10 November 2011 in New Ulm, MN), 6.

Synod was split over the issue of the normative Word of God—was it the Bible or only the Bible’s central message?<sup>19</sup>

It seems like a clear definition of “Word of God” would be enough to solve this issue. One visible reason for maintaining ambiguity in defining “Word of God” is the wide range of philosophies espoused by the ELCA’s theologians. This paper will only briefly discuss two of these philosophies. For more information, read Prof. John Brug’s updated review of that synod.<sup>20</sup>

Timothy Lull champions one of these philosophies. In response to his synod’s Confession of Faith, he wrote in *The Lutheran*, “Why is this section [on the Word of God] so long? Perhaps misunderstanding is likely at this point. In our society “Word of God” is likely to be heard as Bible or Holy Scripture. That is part of the meaning. But Lutherans intend something more than praising the Bible when they attribute faith to the power of the Word.”<sup>21</sup>

Here Lull rejects the teaching that God reveals himself only in the words of Scripture. That implies that the Word of God can be found elsewhere. Where else does Lull find the Word? He says, “At [the Scriptures’] heart is to be found not many things, but one thing: the saving knowledge of the Triune God revealed in Jesus’ preaching...God’s chief purpose has been to shower love and salvation on us, not primarily to fill us with information nor to make us moral people.”<sup>22</sup> Brug summarizes this way: “The effect of his comments is clearly to reduce the content of Scripture which must be believed to a gospel core and to permit the view that the effect the bible has on us is more important than what the Bible says.”<sup>23</sup>

The two sources of God’s Word, then, which stand alongside the words of the Bible are personal experiences of continuing revelation and a ‘gospel’ scrubbed by human hands of myth and offense and summarized as a message of love. Both of these sources are blasted by Steve Paulson, professor of Systematic Theology at the ELCA’s Luther Seminary in Minneapolis. He calls them

...silly experiments...that have attempted to read Scripture as a book of the history of religions, then to demythologize the history and leave a kernel of truth that confronts hearers with an existential moment of decision...ELCA has lost track of the original

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 13,14.

<sup>20</sup> Brug, John. “A Doctrinal Study of the ELCA in 2012” [essay] 2012. WLS essay file.

<sup>21</sup> Lull, Timothy. Quoted in Brug, John. “Luther’s Doctrine of the Word—The Incarnate Word in the Written Word.” [conference paper] (Presented at Lutheran Free Conference on 10 November 2011 in New Ulm, MN), 14.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 14,15.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 15.



source of Scripture, which is the inerrancy in the letters that come through an inerrant Holy Spirit. But we must go one step deeper, which is that ELCA has become enthusiasts, fanatics, who swallow the Holy Spirit, feathers and all...At the root of this fanaticism lies a confusion of law and gospel, and so a demonic lie—that justification is by love.<sup>24</sup>

God fades into the background when people take the burden of revelation onto their own shoulders. This, of course, is not a new concept either, but was a chief tenet of Schleiermacher's theology<sup>25</sup>, as well as the philosophy of Descart, Kant, and Hegel. Hoenecke points out the human element of these theories:

“Modern theology's concept of revelation is...essentially anthropocentric, that is, all the emphasis lies on man as a factor and on the human manifestation in the revelation...It is self-evident, now that the immediacy of inner experience, consciousness, and personal experience become decisively important, that there can be no thought of real objective revelation anymore; but the inner immediate consciousness and experience of the human mind is regarded as revelation. The justification for this is said to be that man experiences the indefinable Absolute (God)...by means of his religious consciousness or inner religious experience. But...experience is no way of receiving revelation.”<sup>26</sup>

These men are modern-day Areopagites, reaching out that they might find God. The saddest sight for someone who clings to *sola scriptura* is watching members of a Lutheran synod, who are so very close to God's revelation to man, but who choose instead to seek another revelation of their own creation.

In short, one school in the ELCA denigrates the words of Scripture to elevate a subjective Word of God. Whereas Müntzer, the original object of Luther's picturesque dove-eating reproof, was insistent that the inner enlightenment of the Spirit take a position of authority over Scripture, Lull and those who agree with him seem hesitant to put their view in so many words. Professor Brug's insight explains their tentativeness: “Theologians who reject the belief that Scripture contains the very words of God usually try to hide their unbelief from devout pastors and lay people by using language which makes it sound as if they believe in the inspiration of the Bible even though they believe the Bible is full of all kinds of errors. They like to cloak their teaching with the mantle of Luther.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Paulson, Steve. “Response to Dr. Brug at the Lutheran Free Conference.” [conference paper] (Presented at Lutheran Free Conference on 10 November 2011 in New Ulm, MN), 14.

<sup>25</sup> As an interesting note, the President of the UCC refers to Schleiermacher as “a more traditional theologian” in his essay “Taking the Bible Seriously” (Thomas, John. Presented at Dunkirk, NY on 10 October 2000)

<sup>26</sup> Hoenecke, 259.

<sup>27</sup> Brug, “Word,” 19.

That leads into the second major philosophy among ELCA theologians who, whether they admit it or not, reject the Bible as “the only primary source of the Word of God which we have available to us today.”<sup>28</sup> A leading voice of this viewpoint is Dr. Carl Braaten, who wrote in his book *Principles of Lutheran Theology*,

In modern Protestant fundamentalism [Braaten’s term for groups like the WELS], which ironically claims to bear the legacy of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture is extended to include infallible information on all kinds of subjects. Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel. Nonfundamentalist Protestants [i.e. ELCA] also accept the Bible as the Word of God in some sense, but they point out that the concept of the Word of God, as Barth made clear, cannot be confined to the Bible.”<sup>29</sup>

Here Braaten attempts to defend the Bible from the historical-grammatical method and the hermeneutic of “SAYS=MEANS.” Under that method of biblical interpretation, the reader is sure of what the Bible means because he knows that what it says is true. If the Bible is not actually inerrant, then its meaning is subjective. Any reason to reject any word of Scripture (scientific evidence, allegorizing, a more enlightened view of morality, marriage, love, ministry, women, and so on) becomes an acceptable reason to search out God’s Word in different places.

Braaten’s side clearly won the battle to keep the words “inerrant” and “infallible” out of the ELCA Confession of Faith. (Brug calls this “the critical doctrinal battle during the formation of the ELCA.”<sup>30</sup>)

At this point, there is little difference between the views of the UCC and the ELCA. In fact, in 1997 the two signed a “Full Communion” agreement, with each welcoming the other to “the mutual sharing of the Lord’s Supper” and accepting each other as “rightly preaching the gospel.” On the basis of their confessions, either denomination could have made the following statement in an official publication: “The Bible is the source and norm of the church’s life, not because it gives us unerring information, but because God continues to speak through it.” The ELCA did.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Brug, John. “A Doctrinal Study of the ELCA in 2012—Part II.” WLS essay file. 2012, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Braaten, Carl. Quoted in Brug, John. “A Doctrinal Study of the ELCA in 2012—Part II.” (WLS Essay File, 2012), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Brug, “Word,” 14.

<sup>31</sup> *The Lutheran*, Quoted in Brug, “Word,” 17.

## Conclusion

“Still Speaking” pins and banners are a reality in 2012. Murals of giant commas will indeed continue to speak, but in a different tone than those who boast of them expect. They preach a word of judgment against those who add to or subtract from the inspired, inerrant, sufficient words of Scripture.<sup>32</sup>

What is the Christian who takes the Scriptures at face value to do? First learn some lessons from these two case studies. Be able to define the pertinent terms biblically, precisely, and consistently, and the distinction between truth and error will be more readily apparent.

Study what the Bible means when it talks about the Word. Is a particular reference speaking generally of the body of writings that make up the Holy Scriptures? Is ‘Word’ being used specifically of the Word through which God created and still sustains the world, or of the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, or of the proclamation of the message which lights the dark path of this world? The only way to distinguish between these options is by reading the Word itself, studying passages in their narrow and wider contexts, being nourished in the faith through the Holy Spirit’s use of the Word of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

Look to God’s Word as the spring of living water, the source of God’s revelation to man. If you are thirsty for revelation, Jesus still shouts his invitation to you: “Come to me and drink!”<sup>34</sup> Luther directs those desiring true teaching to the same source: He says that if we want to know what is to be taught in the church, we should ask God, and we will find his answer in the Scriptures.<sup>35</sup>

The temptation to look for inner light, personal revelations from God, or a continuing testament seems to be strengthening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Over the past two or three decades, the mention of *Schwärmer* in WELS circles elicited images of mega-churches with pump-up rock bands and Evangelicals looking for a spiritual high. These case studies should serve as a reminder that Lutherans need to pay just as close attention to the public reading and expounding of God’s Word. Remember, the Devil is not stupid, and he may not openly and directly

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<sup>32</sup> Revelation 22:18,19

<sup>33</sup> Romans 10:17

<sup>34</sup> John 7:37

<sup>35</sup> WA 8, 536

contradict Scripture. “Did God really say...?” has proven an effective strategy for him in the past, and undoubtedly he will employ it in the future.

Finally, seek the Lord’s revelation where he has said you will find it. “Unless God chooses to speak from heaven again, the only Word of God to which we have access is that which we have in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>36</sup>

The opposite is also true: Do not seek God’s revelation where he has not said you will find it. Luther applies this concept personally: “If a thought comes to you, no matter if it seems so beautiful and holy that you imagine it to be downright angelic, then take a good look at it, compare it with God’s Word and see if it is grounded in Scripture, and whether God has commanded or said or ordered it or not.”<sup>37</sup>

The bottom line is that “Outside the book of the Holy Spirit, namely the Holy Scriptures, one does not find Christ.”<sup>38</sup> Without Scripture there is no Christ. Without Christ there is no salvation. Without salvation people are left to their own speculation and reason. The prayer of the author of this paper is that you, the reader, and all of God’s people stay close to him by staying close to his sufficient, inerrant words.

*Seek where you may to find a way that leads to your salvation.  
My heart is stilled; On Christ I build—He is the one foundation.  
His Word is sure.  
His works endure.  
He will o’erthrow my ev’ry foe.  
Through Him I more than conquer.*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Brug, “Word,” 4.

<sup>37</sup> WA 33, 275.

<sup>38</sup> W<sup>2</sup> 9, 1775

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