

“Textual and Literary Judgments on the Biblical Text –
What Happens to the Lutheran Commitment to Scriptural Inerrancy?”
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St. Augustine summarizes the work of textual criticism as: “the correction of the copies, so that the uncorrected ones should give way to the corrected.”³ It is a discipline that seeks to resolve the differences among the manuscripts, all of which derive from the original author’s act of writing or publishing.⁴ It studies manuscripts as objective, historical artefacts, and is fundamental to any serious work with a text from antiquity. Because, of course, a manuscript is produced by hand – quite literally, in fact: *manu* is Latin for “by the hand” and *scripta* = “having been written.”⁵ And, any hand-produced item such as a manuscript is subject to the skill and indeed whims of the copyist and of subsequent users of the manuscript. Hence Augustine’s concern to “correct the copies” already in the late 4th century. His presumption, and the presumption of every reader of Scripture until the invention of the printing press, is that the manuscripts that he uses for teaching and preaching will contain mistakes, and that these mistakes require correction.

So *textual* criticism is a study of the manuscripts, to determine how well any given manuscript carries forward the text of its exemplar, the manuscript from which it is copied, all the way back as far as the original copy.⁶ We must emphasize here that *textual* criticism does not consider the pre-history of any writing or book. Textual criticism *does not* ask questions that source criticism or form criticism asks, such as whether Luke and Matthew independently used a “Q Source.”⁷ *Textual* criticism, must be distinguished from what became labelled in the LCMS as “historical criticism”⁸ This is where a good

¹ This is the title and topic as provided to me. However, as will be demonstrated in this paper, “literary judgments” are not a method (nor term) used in textual criticism, but rather belongs to historical-critical methods such as source criticism,

² Distribution, in whole or part, is not permitted without written consent of author.

³ *De doctrina christiana*, II.14.21.

⁴ For an ancient text, before copyright or legal means for an author to financially benefit from his work by producing subsequent copies, “publishing” would simply be result of an act of copying (whether approved by the author or not).

⁵ *manu* is in the ablative case, indicating means; *scripta* is the perfect passive participle from *scribere*, “to write.”

⁶ Traditionally labelled the “original text” or the “autograph;” The *Editio Critica Maior* editions and now the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* now make a distinction between the “original text” and the “Ausgangstext” or “Initial Text.” For discussion see J. Kloha, “Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Ongoing Revisions of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*,” 174 and 177–78.

⁷ Neither of which, it must be emphasized, has ever been identified in any manuscript source, they are reconstructed (or, I would argue, “constructed”) by scholars who are attempting to explain the verbal and structural similarities between Matthew and Luke (“Q”) or the “signs” source for John’s gospel. For the latter see especially Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (1941), translated as *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press), 1971.

⁸ For a summary of the method as explained in the LCMS, see “A Comparative Study of Varying Contemporary Approaches To Biblical Interpretation. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod March 1973” (describing the “Historical Critical View-Radical Position”): “4. The following theory is proposed to explain the origin and characteristics of the Gospels: “a. Over a protracted period of time, a series of situations and the various specific interests of the early Christian communities in different localities gave rise to separate traditions about the deeds and teachings of the central figure of their cult. b. Later editors combined these disparate traditions in a continuous narrative form. c. Thus the Gospel are composites of various independent units which each editor selected and

deal of confusion seems to arise: *textual* criticism works exclusively with the manuscripts and other evidence that trace back to the original act of writing or copying; *historical* criticism works with pre-manuscript editorial efforts by the author.

The threat that *historical* criticism presents to a sound theology of the Word of God should be obvious. If the authors of the biblical texts are *merely* producing texts as any other human author would, apart from the “*Spirit* of your Father *speaking* through you” (Matt 10:20) and speaking “by the Spirit” (Rom 9:1; 1 Cor 12:3), then the writing is *merely* a human writing, without any authority apart from the author’s own, and without divine insight, wisdom, or teaching. This threat has long been pointed out in Lutheran studies of the issue:⁹

Textual criticism (at least as classically practiced; exceptions will be shown below) that is, study of the manuscripts, has no interest in the pre-production process that an author may or may not have used. A textual critic is simply interested in the manuscripts, and how accurately and faithfully they preserve the original copy. A textual critic is interested in differences in the manuscripts, and how those manuscripts were copied and related to one another over a period of 1500 years, and how the manuscripts have been studied and analyzed down to the present day. As Bruce Metzger’s classic introduction was titled: *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. Note that the subtitle begins with the word “transmission.” The work of the textual critic *begins* when a writing begins to be transmitted, that is, copied in manuscripts, and not before.

In order to speak about “textual judgments,” therefore, we must look at manuscripts. Here I will briefly look at three passages where the manuscripts differ from each other, and a “judgment” must be made as to which reading is the original reading:

Mark 1:2 Καθώς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ἡσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ NA²⁸ ESV: “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet”
Καθώς γέγραπται ἐν τοῖς προφήταις ᾠ KJV: “As it is written in the prophets”

1 Cor. 2:4 οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖ[ς] σοφίας [λόγοις] NA²⁸ ESV: “not in plausible words of wisdom”
οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις ᾠ KJV: “not with enticing words of man’s wisdom”
οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖς σοφίας Ϝ⁴⁶ F G “not in persuasive [words] of wisdom”
οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖ σοφίας / *in persuasione sapientiae* 75 77 78 “not in the persuasion of wisdom”
[total of 20 slightly different readings in the manuscripts]

1 Cor. 14:34-35 Read these verses after 14:33 NA²⁸ ᾠ ESV KJV
Read these verses after 14:40 D F G 88* 915 VL 61 75 77 89 F^c R AMst SED-S

adapted to suit his particular purpose. 5. The existence of the Bible is explainable wholly in terms of the operation of ordinary historical processes, completely without need to refer to any kind of supernatural, divine authority” (p. 4).

⁹ “In a product of human thought and experience, no eternal and immutable truth is to be found. In literature containing merely human reflection on such lofty themes as God and His relation to man and history, there are bound to be radically variant viewpoints. This is all the more true of literature that comes from different periods of history and that attempts to discuss such themes in a manner that is relevant and relative to widely differing cultures.” Cited from, “A Comparative Study Of Varying Contemporary Approaches To Biblical Interpretation,” 5.

[The presentation of this section will be done via images of the manuscripts; my discussion of the 1 Cor. passages is found in my PhD thesis, the link has been provided by the event organizers]

Working with Manuscripts: The Early Church

“Textual criticism” is not a new discipline. As noted above, it is fundamental to any serious work with a writing from antiquity. For the first 1500 years of the church, there was no single, identical edition of the New Testament, only tens of thousands of manuscripts. Individual copies, produced by hand, of the gospels, the Pauline epistles, and the Catholic Epistles. Some 6000 of them in Greek alone still exist from the period before the printing press; some 600 from prior to the 10th century. Some very large, and some today only scraps ravaged by time. But all of them produced for use in the church. The challenge for us is that no one of them is identical to any other. And none of them is the original manuscript for any writing of the NT: there is no original copy (“autograph”) of any book of the Old or New Testaments in existence, to which we might refer to resolve textual questions. Please do not miss this point: there is no resource outside the existing manuscripts themselves to which we might appeal to find the original text.

Both authors and scribes in the ancient world understood full well that the texts that they were producing and copying would, sooner or later, be changed. Because there was no copyright law, once a text was in hand anyone could produce a copy, sell it, and the author would have no control over its further copying or sale. Furthermore, the author would have no control over the wording of the text—changes could be made in subsequent copies, which neither the author could control nor the buyer have any knowledge that he was commissioning or purchasing a corrupted copy. There were several ways that authors would try to minimize this problem. Some would insert warnings of various kinds into their text, written to frighten copyists.¹⁰ Others would write into their text—even into poems—the names and locations of the book seller to whom the author had entrusted a master copy.¹¹

But changes in subsequent copies were inevitable. And already in the second century, church fathers were noticing, commenting on, and in many cases resolving the differences in the manuscripts, as St. Augustine notes is necessary:

But inaccuracy must be excluded, for the attention of those who wish to know the divine scripture must first focus on the task of correcting the manuscripts, so that uncorrected ones give way to corrected ones.¹²

¹⁰ E.g., Eusebius: “You who copy this book, I adjure you by our Lord Jesus Christ and by his coming in glory, when he will judge the quick and the dead, that you collate what you copy, and correct it against this copy from which you transcribed it; and likewise that you transcribe this adjuration and set it in the copy.” Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.2 (ed. F. Winkelmann; 2nd ed., GCS NF 6.1; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999), 482. Cited from D. Parker, “Variants And Variance,” in *Texts and Traditions. Essays in Honour of J. Keith Elliott*, ed., P. Doble and J. Kloha (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 25.

¹¹ David Trobisch, “The New Testament in Light of Book Publishing in Antiquity,” in *Editing the Bible. Assessing the Task Past and Present*, ed. J. S. Kloppenborg and Judith A. Newman (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 162–65.

¹² *De doctrina christiana* II.14.21. Translation from R. P. H. Green, *St. Augustine. On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

But the awareness of the differences in the manuscripts did not create a crisis of faith in the early church. The vast majority of the time the fathers simply commented on the text that they had before them. At other times they would discuss the differences, sometimes resolving them, sometimes, in fact, quoting both readings and the manuscripts and interpreting both, without disclosing which reading they thought was correct. Their goal was to explicate the text as it had been handed down to them, resolving questions raised by the manuscripts when it seemed to them to be significant enough to comment on. There is a humility before the text as they received, not a paralysis of fear that the manuscripts differed.

This humility before the text, even when encountering differences in the manuscripts, is represented well by Augustine, in a letter to Jerome:

I have learned to yield respect and honor only to the books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to the truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it. (Letter 82 to Jerome, AD 405)

Notice the unblushing confidence in the authority of the Scriptures, yet at the same time a deep humility with respect to his own abilities. The text must be right; if it *seems* not to be right, it is the fault of the manuscript (and then should be corrected). If the fault is not with the copyist, then the fault may well lie with the translator (Augustine is working in Latin). If the fault is neither with the manuscript or the translator, then the fault must lie in his own lack of insight and understanding. The text is always right. The early fathers worked with this understanding: The manuscripts, even when there is variation, can be considered true—and indeed have the authority of inspired writings.

The Canonical Text: Martin Chemnitz on Inspiration and The Historical Witness of the Church

Martin Chemnitz' (1522–86), a key contributor to the Formula of Concord, provides one of the most comprehensive and helpful discussions of the theological and historical issues of biblical authority. His *Examination of the Council of Trent*¹³ was written in the context of debate concerning exactly which texts are authoritative and how is that determined—the very question that confronts us today as we wrestle with questions of the integrity of the biblical texts. Chemnitz' context is the debate with Rome, the Council of Trent, and their claim that a single text (the Vulgate translation, including the apocrypha of the OT and the antilegomena of the NT) was authoritative. Chemnitz, however, does not simply declare that some texts were “inspired” and some were not; he realizes that this is the very issue: how does one know, in the present day, which is, in fact, inspired?

Chemnitz confesses the inspiration of Scripture from its divine source, its divine “impulse and inspiration” (using 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:21 as proof passages). He also consistently links this inspiration with “many miracles and divine testimonies” (p. 176), “special testimonies,” (p. 176) and

¹³ Cited throughout from *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971). Latin references from *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, ed. E. Preus (Berlin: Schlawitz, 1861).

that the Spirit “confirmed their written doctrine with miracles” (p. 184). This is simply NT language; the apostles regularly confirm the genuineness of their apostolic preaching, especially in the context of doubt or rejection of the apostolic preaching, with a reference to the Spirit working “powers” along with the Word.¹⁴

Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2) has the same connection between the Spirit’s words and the Spirit’s power. This first Christian sermon was regarded by many of its hearers as the babbling of drunkards. But Peter explains that this was in fact the fulfillment of prophecy: “I will pour out from my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophecy...and I will give wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below” (Acts 2:17, 19 quoting Joel 2). Peter’s message is therefore confirmed by signs, which God had foretold would occur. Furthermore, the apostles’ preaching, confirmed by signs, is precisely the way that God “commended” Jesus: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man commended to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22). Example after example could be multiplied from the book of Acts, where the apostles’ preaching is accompanied by miracles and signs (e.g., 3:12-16; 4:31; etc.).

The ultimate “sign and wonder,” of course, is the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the consistent theme of the apostolic preaching in the book of Acts, and the announcement and proclamation of that resurrection is regularly made by the “eyewitnesses.”¹⁵ Jesus himself sends out the disciples as witnesses, and in fact his last words in the Gospel of Luke are a summary of the Gospel proclamation and the sending of the disciples as “witnesses of these things.”¹⁶ This eyewitness testimony is so critical to the Gospel proclamation that the Apostle Paul grounds the veracity of his message in the eyewitness testimony, which has been handed down. The specificity of the progression of Paul’s argument is worth noting, for it gets to the heart of the source of authority for his teaching:

“But if Christ is preached, that he is raised from the dead, how can some among you actually say that there is not a resurrection of the dead?” (15:12)

¹⁴ 1 Cor 2:4: “my speech and my message were not in the persuasion of wisdom [of words], but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power”; Gal 2:5: “Therefore the one supplying to you the Spirit and working miracles among you, [is it] on the basis of works of law or the hearing of faith?”; 1 Thes 1:5: “because our gospel did not come to you only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction;” 2 Cor 12:12: “The signs of the apostle were worked among you with the greatest patience: signs and wonders and mighty deeds.”

¹⁵ Acts 2:31-32: “This Jesus *God raised up*, and of that we all are *witnesses*”; Acts 3:14-15: “and you killed the Author of life, whom *God raised from the dead*. To this we are *witnesses*”; Acts 4:10: “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom *God raised from the dead*”; Acts 10:39-41: “And we are *witnesses* of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but *God raised him on the third day* and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been *chosen by God as witnesses*, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead”; Acts 13:30-31: “*God raised him from the dead*, and for many days he *appeared* to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his *witnesses* to the people”; Acts 17:31: “of this he has given assurance to all by *raising him from the dead*”; Acts 26:23: “the Christ must suffer and that, by being *the first to rise from the dead*, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

¹⁶ “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are *witnesses* of these things” (Luke 24:46-48 ESV). This corresponds also to the sending in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (ESV)

That is to say, the Corinthians should have accepted the apostolic preaching of the resurrection as true, simply because “Christ is preached, that he is raised from the dead.”

“But if there is not a resurrection of the dead, then neither is Christ raised” (15:13)

This is logical deduction, showing that if one denies the possibility of the resurrection of those who are in Christ, then not even Christ could have been raised. The latter was shown to be already true in 15:12.

“But if Christ is not raised, empty therefore also is our preaching, and empty is your faith.”

Paul’s preaching is *κενός*—“without content, without any basis, without truth, without power”¹⁷—if Christ has not been raised. And, because the Corinthians faith was based solely on Paul’s preaching of the Gospel message, centered in the resurrection of Christ,¹⁸ so also would the Corinthians’ faith be without any basis. Paul grounds the authority of his preaching solely and completely on the preaching about Christ and Christ’s resurrection. This is critical: Paul does not claim that his message is “inspired,” and on the basis of that inspiration therefore the resurrection must be fact; rather, the resurrection of Jesus occurred, Paul preaches it, and therefore his message is true. The authority of Paul’s Word is placed on the work of Christ and his being sent as Apostle (cf. esp. Gal 1:1, 15; indeed, “sent” is the definition of “Apostle”) the truth of the work of Christ is not based on the authority of Paul’s teaching. This point is so important that Paul repeats it a few verses later: “We also would be found as false witnesses against God,¹⁹ for we testified that he raised Christ” (15:15). God’s ultimate testimony is the resurrection of Jesus Christ; Paul cannot in any way preach otherwise. His witness, testimony, and preaching is based on God’s work in Christ. This corresponds exactly to Jesus’ last words in Matthew: “Therefore all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *me*” (28:19).

The theme of “witness” and “testifying” to God’s work is the same language that Chemnitz uses in describing the relationship between the inspired word and the church in the question of the canon of the New Testament. As I have described elsewhere, I believe that Chemnitz’ way of describing the relationship between the inspiration by the Spirit and the testimony of the church is very helpful, both in the question of canon and the question of text.²⁰

To review, Chemnitz takes Luther’s focus on *Was Christum Treibet* (“that which urges Christ”)²¹ and lays out the biblical view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture over and against the Roman

¹⁷ BDAG, s.v. *κενός* 2a.

¹⁸ Cf. the “Word of the cross” argumentation in 1 Cor 1:18-25.

¹⁹ BDAG, s.v., *κατὰ* 2bβ, the genitive used with *κατὰ* “after verbs that express hostile action”; 1 Cor 15:15 is rendered there: “give testimony in contradiction to God.”

²⁰ See J. Kloha, “Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Ongoing Revisions of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*,” in *Listening to the Word of God: Exegetical Approaches*, ed. A. Behrens and J. C. Salzmann (Oberurseler Hefte Ergänzungsband, 16; Edition Ruprecht, 2016), 192–95.

²¹ Hermann Sasse is especially helpful on Luther’s view of the Word and the Christological focus of the Scriptures. For example: “What is Holy Scripture without its content, Christ? *Tolle Christum e scripturis, quid amplius invenies?*” as Luther wrote against Erasmus: “Take Christ out of the Scriptures, what remains?” As we humbly bow before the mystery of the

church's decrees made during the Council of Trent (1545-63). Chemnitz focuses specifically on—and rejects—the claim that the Scriptures derive their authority from the church, and that the Roman church could (and in fact, did) declare the Latin Vulgate, including the Apocrypha, to be authoritative. Chemnitz' work remains extremely helpful, for two reasons: First, he has a clear grasp on the Christocentricity and Spirit-given nature of Scripture, as delivered through the apostles:

Strictly speaking, there is no difference between the doctrine of Christ and that of the apostles. For when Christ gave the apostles power to preach the Gospel, Matt 28:19-20, He adds clearly: "Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." John 14:26: "The Holy Ghost will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." 2 Cor 13:3: "You desire proof that Christ is speaking in me." 2 Cor 5:20: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, etc."²²

Second, Chemnitz also provides a helpful way to understand the role of the church to continue the work of teaching those things that had been entrusted to it by Jesus, while also recognizing that this work of the church took place historically. And this historical testimony of the church, especially of the "primitive church," confirms also that the canonical²³ New Testament writings are indeed inspired. He lays out a very careful and precise argument here ("Concerning the Sacred Scriptures," section 6: "Concerning the Canonical Books, or the Canonical Scriptures"). First, that the New Testament writings are "divinely inspired," using 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:21 as the Scriptural basis. Second, these writings were received by the church:

Those divinely inspired writings were laid before, delivered, and commended to the church with public attestation in order that she might, by exercising the greatest care and foresight, preserve them uncorrupted, transmit them as from hand to hand (*quasi per manus traderet*), and commend them to posterity.²⁴

Indeed, because he is speaking of the early church in its role as testifying to the inspiration of these writings by the Spirit, he is able to speak of the church as "judge" of the writings:

The primitive church at the time of the apostles was able to testify with certainty which writings were divinely inspired. For she knew the authors whom God had commended to the church by special testimonies; she knew also which were the writings which had been composed by them; and from the things which she had received by oral tradition from the

incarnation of the Eternal Word, so we accept in great humility the mystery of Holy Scripture as the written Word of God in which the Father through the Holy Ghost testifies to Christ: This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him." "Inspiration and Inerrancy: Some Preliminary Thoughts," *The Reformed Theological Review* 19.2 (July 1960), cited from *The Journal Articles of Hermann Sasse*, ed. M. C. Harrison, B. Erickson, and J. Brondos (NRP Books, 2016), 103.

²² Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 100.

²³ Chemnitz equates the terms "canonical" and "inspired," e.g., *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 177: "...in order that a writing in the New Testament may be proved to be canonical, or divinely inspired" (*ut in Novo Testamento probetur scriptum aliquod esse Canonicum, seu divinitus inspiratum*).

²⁴ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 176.

apostles she could judge (*poterat iudicare*) that the things which had been written were the same teaching which the apostles had delivered with the living voice.²⁵

The early church, then, passed down these writings:

This witness of the primitive church concerning the divinely inspired writings was later transmitted to posterity by a perpetual succession from hand to hand (*per manus*) and diligently preserved in reliable histories of antiquity in order that the subsequent church might be the custodian of the witness of the primitive church concerning the Scripture.²⁶

However, popes and councils may err, as Chemnitz points out throughout his discussion of Sacred Scripture. And, the later church does not have access to revelation outside of the Scriptures themselves. The church can only witness to what God has already done in the Word and in the church:

There is therefore a very great difference between (1) the witness of the primitive church which was at the time of the apostles and (2) the witness of the church which followed immediately after the time of the apostles and which had received the witness of the first church and (3) the witness (*testimonium*) of the present church concerning the Scripture. For if the church, both that which is now and that which was before, can show the witness (*testimonia*) of those who received and knew the witness of the first church concerning the genuine writings, we believe her as we do a witness (*testi*) to decide anything concerning the sacred writings for which she cannot produce reliable documents (*documenta*) from the testimony of the primitive church.

Chemnitz goes on, then, to describe the testimony of the “primitive church” and the “church which followed, in what is still to this day a quite well-informed historical discussion. He cites Augustine, Tertullian, Serapion (on the then-undiscovered “Gospel of Peter”), and others—the earliest evidence that was available in his day. Regarding the OT Apocrypha, he concludes:

Whoever therefore now wants to make those books canonical must be able to prove (*probare*) that they were certainly, without any doubt, written by prophets; and it is impossible to prove this. Or it is necessary to establish that it does not affect the divinely inspired Scripture whether it has divine testimonies of certainty, authority, and truth or whether it has only human testimonies. Let the reader consider whither a dictatorial canonization of these books will finally lead.²⁷

Notice how careful Chemnitz is: “Human testimonies” alone are not sufficient, because the Scriptures have their authority from God via the apostles and prophets. The later church, including the church of

²⁵ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 176.

²⁶ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 176-77.

²⁷ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 185.

today, cannot reach back into the apostolic age except through the very writings that it has received as inspired. And since there is no evidence that the early church accepted these uncertain writings as inspired and canonical, the church can only say what has already been said, that is, what it has already received from the Spirit through the apostles and prophets handed down *per manus*. Critically, Chemnitz does *not* tie the authority of the canonical writings to the work of the Holy Spirit in the present day. The authority was established by the Spirit in the writing of the apostles and prophets, the presence of the Spirit was confirmed by “signs” at the time of the Apostles, and the primitive church received and acknowledged that inspiration and authority. The only thing that the present-day church can do is evaluate (judge) the testimony of the earliest church. It cannot *make* any book authoritative, it can only *confirm* or, as Chemnitz did vis-à-vis Rome, reject the *later* church’s attempt to improperly *make* a writing authoritative.

It should be noted here that Chemnitz’ approach made him very cautious in approaching canonical questions; he maintained, for example, the distinction between the *homologoumena* (universally attested) and *antilegomena* (questioned) writings, using the categories and lists that Eusebius used in the fourth century. As a result, he regarded the early church testimony regarding 2 Peter, James, 2 3 John, Jude, and Revelation to place them in the “second rank” of canonical books. Later dogmaticians, beginning with Gerhard, were uncomfortable with the perceived questioning of these books and so erased the distinction between NT *homologoumena* and *antilegomena*. However, as Robert Preus notes:

The reason for the uncritical change of position we find in the later dogmaticians is undoubtedly due to their fear of allowing a historical judgment concerning the authenticity of authorship of a book to affect saving faith ... Thus we observe that in its polemic against Rome, in its attempt to maintain that the canon was created by the Spirit of God and not the church, Lutheran theology grossly oversimplifies the problem of the NT canon and fails to be faithful to the historical data.²⁸

At this point, I will point out that philosophical questions raised by the nature of historical study in theology are not dealt with comprehensively by Chemnitz, nor, it seems, in the smattering of references to “history” in Preus’ *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. This is a fundamental question, but it is evident that Chemnitz considers “history” of essential importance in theology.²⁹ While Enlightenment scholarship turned history against itself, Chemnitz was not constrained by Enlightenment presuppositions. I question whether we should give in to the temptation to allow the Enlightenment to frame our discussion of Scripture.

Chemnitz uses the same historical method of returning to the earliest attestation also in his discussion of the Vulgate text, the Latin translation of the Old and New Testaments which Trent had

²⁸ R. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism. A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 305–6.

²⁹ “Chemnitz’ interest in history is an important advance in the development of systematic theology. To him dogmatics is the combination of two specific historical disciplines: history (church history and the history of dogma) and Biblical study (exegesis). All his discussions may be classified as either historical or Biblical.” Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 98.

declared authoritative over and against the Hebrew and Greek texts. Chemnitz agrees that the Holy Spirit desires all to be saved, not only Hebrew and Greek speakers. And that already on Pentecost the Gospel was spoken into many languages. But the Vulgate has been elevated by Rome above the “sources themselves,” i.e., the Hebrew and Greek basis for the translation. He then brings up the issue of textual changes, of which he is aware, among the Latin manuscripts,³⁰ and goes on to criticize the Roman church for refusing to go back to the earliest sources:

What if through the ignorance or carelessness of copyists some things were altered, mutilated, or added? Will one be permitted then to depart from the old version and go back to the sources (*fontes*)? Will one be allowed to prefer the fountainheads to the brooks? And if some things in that old version were rendered badly, changed, mutilated, and added, so that they disagree with the sources, will one be permitted, if someone should push them too offensively, to reject them? The Tridentine fathers reply, ‘Let no one dare or presume to reject the common edition under any pretext whatsoever.’ Truly this must not be tolerated in the church, that in place of the things which the Holy Spirit wrote in the Hebrew and Greek sources something should be foisted onto us as authentic which has been badly rendered by the translator or altered or mutilated and added by copyists (*librariis*), and that in such a way that one may not reject them even after he has examined the sources (*inspectis fontibus*).³¹

This manner of argumentation corresponds precisely to the way that Chemnitz discussed inspiration and canonicity. The “*fontes*” or earliest attestations are to be sought, and not what the later church did with the text. The later church has no right “foist” errors and corruptions in the translations and those made by copyists on others. The resulting problem, according to Chemnitz, is that Trent

will accept the errors of the translator, the mistakes of the copyists, the additions and mutilations of men as the Word of God, and we shall not be free to believe the pure fountainheads (*puris fontibus*) themselves more than muddy and impure brooks.³²

The work of “examining the sources” (*inspiciens fontibus*) is the work of textual criticism. Chemnitz does not go into detail as to what methods are most appropriate, nor describe the differences that exist among the manuscripts. Indeed, as noted above, it was not until the early 18th century that the scope of variation among the Greek manuscripts was known, and the relationship among the Hebrew witnesses is still being sorted out in the wake of the Dead Sea Scrolls and recent studies into the Greek translations.³³ Indeed, the dogmaticians of Lutheran Orthodoxy all are active *after* the 1707

³⁰ The diversity of the versions of the Vulgate was well known, with different centers of learning in the Western church developing their own form of the Vulgate text. For this history see H. A. G. Houghton, *The Latin Bible. A Guide to its Early History, Texts, and Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) esp. 43-110.

³¹ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 201-2.

³² Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* I, 203.

³³ Textual criticism of the Hebrew is beyond the scope of this paper (and my expertise), but the issues there seem far more uncertain and complex than those in the New Testament. A new edition is produced for the Hebrew writings, *The Hebrew Bible. A Critical Edition*. According to the publisher’s website, “The HBCE represents a new model for a critical edition of the Hebrew Bible, although it will be generally familiar to scholars who use critical editions of other ancient works such as

publication of John Mill's edition of the Greek New Testament with its "30,000 variants."³⁴ Nevertheless, Chemnitz' handling of questions concerning canon and inspiration is the same as his handling of questions concerning the wording and translations of the text. Furthermore, Chemnitz' discussion of the matter of the authenticity of the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts is followed by the later Lutheran dogmaticians. And, as Preus points out, the approach to questions of text mirrors the approach to questions of canon:

Thus in any controversy appeal must be made to the apographal [manuscript copies of] Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. Underlying the debate concerning the authenticity of Scripture was the antithesis between Roman and Lutheran theology regarding the authority of Scripture and the authority of the church. The Lutheran position was very simple: just as the church cannot create the canon, it cannot decree a particular version of Scripture to be authentic. Authenticity, like canonicity, is due to God's act of inspiration. The foundation of Scripture's authority is God, not the church.³⁵

To summarize, Chemnitz' theological method and argumentation provides a helpful way of understanding inspiration and how to deal with the historical questions that followed after the time of the apostles. Some writings were universally received, and some were not. The manuscript copies of the writings were all, to greater or lesser degrees, corrupted. Nevertheless, these questions did *not* call into question the inspiration and inerrancy of the writings. They are inspired because they are the "Holy Spirit's book" that brings God's message of Salvation in Christ Jesus.³⁶ The written Word was delivered through the apostles and prophets, whose message and indeed writings were confirmed by the Spirit himself. The earliest church could attest to the Spirit's work and "testify" that, indeed, these writings were the Holy Spirit's. The later church cannot say anything more than what the earliest church said. It can "judge" whether the writings were, in fact, received as canonical by the earliest

the Septuagint or New Testament. The HBCE will consist of critical texts of each book of the Hebrew Bible, accompanied by extensive text-critical commentary and introductions to each volume. A critical text (sometimes called an eclectic text) is one that contains the best readings according to the judgment of the editor." The first volume has been published: M. V. Fox, *Proverbs: An Eclectic Edition with Introduction and Textual Commentary* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2015). Website accessed Sep. 28, 2016: <http://hbceonline.org/>. For the most recent study of the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew text (the "Septuagint") see T. Rajak, *Translation and Survival. The Greek Bible of the Ancient Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁴ The last "Champion of Lutheran Orthodoxy" discussed by R. Preus is David Hollaz (1648-1713; the first edition of his *Examen theologicum acroamaticum* was published in 1707, the same year as Mill's edition. R. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 65.

³⁵ Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 307.

³⁶ This specifically denies the Swiss theologian Karl Barth's position, that human words "become" God's Word when they are received by individuals as such. As Sasse noted: "Deeper than what Barth says about the fallibility of the Bible is his doctrine of inspiration where he tries to reconstruct the classical doctrine by adding to the "theopneustia" of the authors "a second moment in the event of inspiration, namely when the books are read and heard" (p. 138). The necessity of the operation of the Holy Spirit for our understanding of the Scriptures must be recognized, as it has been recognized by the reformers. But this "Illumination" should be distinguished from the "inspiration" that makes the Scriptures the Word of God." H. Sasse, review of K. Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine Of Holy Scripture*, *Reformed Theological Review* 21 (1960), cited from *The Journal Articles of Hermann Sasse*, 593.

church. But the later church, that is, we, cannot make a writing canonical that was not clearly considered such in the earliest church. The same holds true for the manuscripts and textual questions. We cannot say more than the early church said. The desire to claim only that for which we have clear and firm “testimony” is *not* due to a lack of respect for the Word; far from it. Regarding the caution with which the early Lutheran theologians discussed the matter of canon, Pieper summarizes:

they did that not from hastiness or levity toward the Word of God, but, on the contrary, because they were very conscientious with regard to the Word of God. Luther’s opinions on the antilegomena are not a ‘blot’ on our Church, but they rather bear witness to how careful our Church once was in determining the standard and norm of our faith and life.³⁷

The original manuscripts were inspired and received as such in the earliest church. But subsequent copies, inevitably because they are human products, had errors and even intentional changes introduced. The task of the present-day church is not to *make* a particular wording of the text authoritative, but to return to the *fontes*, to the best witnesses to the autographic texts, and “judge” that wording which was, in fact, inspired. This is the work of textual criticism, to which we now return.

Textual and “Literary”³⁸ Judgments

The differences among the manuscripts have become great, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or in the process of checking, they make additions or deletions as they please.³⁹

These are not the words of a raving skeptic, bent on questioning the integrity of the wording of the New Testament. Instead, they were written in about the year 245 by one of the most prolific commentators on the New Testament in the early church, the church father Origen. No, these words describe the actual situation of the manuscripts, the only way that the words of the New Testament

³⁷ The full citation from Pieper is as follows: “We believe that it is not fair—probably it is due to ignorance of the facts of the case—to stamp an otherwise unimpeachable theologian as a dangerous false teacher who renders the very Word of God suspect, one who sincerely receives as canonical all homologoumena (universally accepted books) but who has his doubts as to the canonicity of one or the other of the antilegomena (disputed books). This would be thoroughly un-Lutheran. For our dear fathers in the faith, with hardly an exception till after the time of the Formula of Concord, regard and declared all or at least some of the antilegomena as not belonging to the canon; and they did that not from hastiness or levity toward the Word of God, but, on the contrary, because they were very conscientious with regard to the Word of God. Luther’s opinions on the antilegomena are not a ‘blot’ on our Church, but they rather bear witness to how careful our Church once was in determining the standard and norm of our faith and life.” (emphasis added). F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. I (St. Louis, Concordia, 1950, 332. To this discussion of canon, by extension I would add discussion of differences among the manuscripts.

³⁸ See note 1. If clear and constructive conversations are to occur, solecisms should not be presented as topics that require resolution.

³⁹ In Comm Matt 15.14; GCS 10,387.28–388.4; Cited from Metzger 1963 p. 78; also cited in numerous other places, such as Hull p. 17 and indeed Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 52.

were accessible for the first 1500 years of the church's life. And already in the third century, the church knew about, and needed to correct, the manuscripts that they considered to be the Word of God.

Origen's comment reflects the way that textual scholarship today approaches the task of reconstructing the original wording of the writings of the New Testament. The action of copying a manuscript, and the "negligence" of which Origen complains, is simply the result of accidental human error: slips of the eye, confusion of letters, inadvertently skipping over text. But there is a second complaint that he makes: that those who check over the transcriptions "make additions or deletions *as they please*." Now he is speaking of intentional alterations, people willingly and deliberately changing the wording of the text. Both categories of alterations are abundantly present in the manuscripts of the New Testament. A glance at virtually any page of the early papyri or the great pandect⁴⁰ manuscripts of the fourth and fifth century will spot corrections and erasures over and over.

How are these alterations to be resolved? Textual scholars have long classified the types of evidence used into two categories: "External Evidence," having to do with things "external" to the Greek text itself; and "Internal Evidence," that is, having to do with the wording of the Greek. A simple way to distinguish them is as follows: "Internal Evidence" is anything gleaned from the Greek and which requires knowledge of Greek to discuss; "External evidence" does not require knowledge of Greek but is usually gleaned from secondary resources, such as books that discuss the dating of a manuscript, or its geographical origin, or its relationship to other manuscripts. A classic description of these two categories is provided by Bruce Metzger, whose introductory text, first published in 1963, is likely known to many pastors. In the companion volume to the *Greek New Testament*, first published in 1968 and revised in 1975 (the last revision before the 2012 *Novum Testamentum Graece*) Metzger cites as "External Evidence:"⁴¹

- "The date and character of the witnesses"⁴²
- "The geographical distribution of the witnesses"
- "The genealogical relationships of texts and families"
- "Witnesses are to be weighed and not counted"

And "Internal Evidence," according to Metzger, includes

- "Transcriptional probabilities," that is, "the habits of scribes" and "paleographical features in the manuscripts"
- "Intrinsic probabilities," that is, "what the author was more likely to have written"⁴³

⁴⁰ "Pandect" manuscripts contain the entire canon, Old and New Testaments, in one codex (book or volume).

⁴¹ Cited from B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), xxv–xxvi.

⁴² N.B.: These are very different items. "Date" can be determined paleographically, and generally there is broad consensus on the dating of manuscripts. "Character," however is the "type of text it embodies, as well as the degree of care taken by the copyist." Those two items, however, are determined on the basis on internal evidence, not external evidence.

⁴³ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, xxvii–xxviii.

It should be obvious that there is an element of subjective observation and discrimination in every one of these ways of evaluating readings in the manuscripts. Metzger acknowledges this clearly: “Since textual criticism is an art as well as a science it is inevitable that in some cases different scholars will come to different evaluations of the significance of the evidence” and, “sometimes none of the variant readings commended itself as original, and therefore the only recourse was to print the least unsatisfactory reading.”⁴⁴

The subjective nature of textual criticism is acknowledged also by Westcott and Hort, whose *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek* was the companion to their 1881 edition of the Greek New Testament, an edition which to this day still provides the foundation for all standard printed editions. Hort (the primary author of this work) has a more helpful approach than Metzger. For he acknowledges at the beginning that there is a progression of analysis, from simple to more complex, “from which textual criticism must start if it is to reach *comparative certainty*” (emphasis added).⁴⁵ Hort is the foundation for Metzger, so the list of types of evidence is very similar. Hort begins with “Internal Evidence of Readings,” of which he distinguishes two kinds,

which cannot be too sharply distinguished from each other; appealing respectively to Intrinsic Probability, having reference to the author, and what may be called Transcriptional Probability, having reference to the copyists. In appealing to the first, we ask what an author is more likely to have written : in appealing to the second we ask what copyists are likely to have made him seem to write.⁴⁶

Next follows what Hort describes as “Internal Evidence of Documents,” that is, asking which “documents or combination of documents are the most likely to convey an unadulterated transcript of the original text,” which is derived from “the comparative trustworthiness of documentary authority.” This results in Hort’s famous and memorable dictum: “KNOWLEDGE OF DOCUMENTS SHALL PRECEDE FINAL JUDGMENT UPON READINGS” (emphasis original).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, on the very next page Hort makes clear that “knowledge of documents” is simply the accumulated study of intrinsic and transcriptional probabilities in hundreds of places of variation, and “provisional judgments” which later are revised based on this accumulation of decisions. They conclude: “By cautious advance from the known to the unknown we are enabled to deal with a great mass of those remaining variations, open variations, so to speak, the confidence being materially increased when, as usually happens, the document thus found to have the better text is also the older.”⁴⁸ Their final category of evidence is “genealogical evidence,” that is, the determination of the relationship of manuscripts to each other based on their agreement or disagreement in numerous readings. I pass

⁴⁴ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, xxviii.

⁴⁵ Westcott and Hort, 19.

⁴⁶ Westcott and Hort, 20.

⁴⁷ Westcott and Hort, 30–31.

⁴⁸ Westcott and Hort, 32–33.

over this briefly, since their reconstructed stemma of genealogical relationships has long since been shown to be inaccurate.⁴⁹

The most widely used approach to resolving differences among the manuscripts is called “reasoned eclecticism,” most articulately represented in the work on Michael Holmes. He summarizes this approach as follows:

Rather than set aside, almost on an *a priori* basis, part of the available evidence, reasoned eclecticism seeks to assess each instance of variation on its own terms, applying, as applicable, both external and internal considerations in combination, evaluating the character of the variants in light of the manuscript evidence and vice versa, to determine which variant (if any) best accounts for the existence of the others and thus should be considered as the earliest recoverable form of the text.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, “reasoned eclecticism” acknowledges that the “external considerations,” in particular the reconstruction of the history of the tradition and the relationships among the manuscripts, involves human judgment. As a result, Holmes acknowledges, a documentary approach (one that relies on the history of the manuscripts alone) can never reach back to the autographs—and here he quotes Hort:

The most that can be obtained by a purely documentary approach “is the discovery of what is relatively original: whether the readings thus relatively original were also the readings of the autograph is another question, which can never be answered in the affirmative with absolute decision except where the autograph itself is extant...” Of all the various kinds of evidence, Hort goes on to argue, only *intrinsic* probability is concerned with absolute originality; other types are concerned only or predominately with relative originality. Thus, no matter what documentary discoveries or advances in understanding may be made, we cannot escape the need to employ the intrinsic and transcriptional criteria that comprise a key part of reasoned eclecticism.⁵¹

And, in his summary:

Reasoned eclecticism is not a passing interim method; it is, in the present circumstances, the only way forward. Hopes for some sort of genealogical or documentary method that will

⁴⁹ For example, already in Streeter’s 1925 *Four Gospels*, only to have his own reconstruction abandoned by subsequent researchers. A recent summary of the problems with Westcott and Hort’s genealogical reconstruction of the manuscript tradition is found in M. W. Holmes, “Reasoned Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research. Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, ed. B. D. Ehrman and M. W. Holmes (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 784–90.

⁵⁰ Holmes, “Reasoned Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism,” 771.

⁵¹ Holmes, “Reasoned Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism,” 781–82.

somehow bring clarity out of confusion are illusory. “There is,” as Zuntz observes, “no *régle de fer*, no divining rod to save the critic from the strain of labour and thought.”⁵²

Notice that even a “reasoned eclectic” method requires the use of internal evidence and acknowledges that genealogical or documentary methods alone cannot determine which reading among the manuscripts was original. The method, therefore, has much in common with another eclectic method, “thoroughgoing eclecticism.”

“Thoroughgoing eclecticism” is most articulately represented in the work of J. Keith Elliott:

Thoroughgoing eclecticism is the method that allows internal considerations for a readings originality to be given priority over documentary considerations. The thoroughgoing eclectic critic feels able to select freely from the available fund of variants and choose the one that best fits the internal criteria. The critic is skeptical about the high claims made for the reliability of some manuscripts or about arguments favouring a particular group of manuscripts. For such a critic, no manuscript or group of manuscripts contains the monopoly of original readings.⁵³

Elliott also notes that, contrary to mischaracterizations, scholars using thoroughgoing eclectic approach agree with, for example, Hort, that one must analyze an “individual manuscript’s performance over a whole range of textual variation of differing types.”⁵⁴ And, such a method is quite interested in the history of the Greek language and the history of the use of the manuscripts in the church, so that it cannot be described as a method that ignores history.

The near convergence of these approaches, especially when dealing with places where the determination of the original reading is complex, shows that scholarship is indeed moving toward consensus that an eclectic approach, whether one leans toward “reasoned” or “thoroughgoing,” is the best way to analyze the manuscript and other evidence. And, in fact, every edition produced since Griesbach in 1774-75 (2nd edition 1796) has been an eclectic edition, that is, choosing from among the different manuscripts the reading that best explains the evidence, on a passage by passage, word by word basis.

Allow me to alleviate a few potential concerns at this point. First, as was pointed out above and in numerous other places, the number of words over which there is serious debate or question are in fact quite few. Second, very few materially affect the meaning of a passage, and do not affect the dogma of the church.⁵⁵ As Pieper concludes: “What the Church lacks in our day is not a reliable text of the Bible, but faith in the sufficiently reliable text.”⁵⁶

⁵² Holmes, “Reasoned Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism,” 783.

⁵³ J. K. Elliott, “Thoroughgoing Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 745–46.

⁵⁴ Elliott, “Thoroughgoing Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism,” 760.

⁵⁵ As I pointed out in my January, 2015 essay at the Lutherans Concerned Association conference: “the argument that the differences among the manuscripts invalidates their authority can be shown to be a false deduction because: (a) The church has always been aware of the differences in the manuscripts, and nevertheless confessed them as inspired and has been able to teach faithfully from them, regardless of which manuscript or printed edition was in use. (b) The Scriptures are consistent within themselves; the passages where there are differences in readings that affect meaning are able to be compared with other passages that teach the same thing but are not affected by the differences. (c) The numbers of

Nevertheless, New Testament textual scholars will continue to develop methods to analyze and study more completely and thoroughly the manuscripts. And, the editions, based as they are on the manuscripts, will continue to change. Among the areas that have received the most sustained attention of late include:

- The recognition that “text types” of manuscripts are either late (fourth century and later) or non-existent, and not of independent value in determining the original text.⁵⁷
- The abandonment of “local text types” as a model for the early history of the manuscript tradition.⁵⁸
- The recognition that patristic evidence is of greater significance than was perceived in the past. Detailed studies of individual church fathers over the last 40 years have shown their importance in understanding and reconstructing the history of the text.⁵⁹
- The study of the characteristics of individual scribes, rather than a generic list of “scribal errors.”⁶⁰
- The recognition that scribal activity must be distinguished from the activity of readers and users of the manuscripts. The latter are far more likely to make intentional alterations.⁶¹
- The recognition that the early translations (Latin, Syriac, Coptic) have value for both the history of the text as well as the reconstruction of the original text.⁶²
- The use of computers in textual criticism, including
 - The use of cladistic modelling (based on biological models for identifying shared characteristics) in the Coherence-Based Genealogical Method.⁶³

manuscripts and the consistency of their readings belie the argument that there wild and significant alterations to the text were common. This area in particular is not (in Bentley’s words) “fairly presented” by opponents of Christianity. (d) The NT manuscripts in particular show evidence that they retain features that were of significance only to the original audience and setting, thereby demonstrating strong links back to the original copies. (e) Recent discoveries have pushed the evidence for the NT text back earlier and earlier; the pattern of readings found in these manuscripts confirm and sharpen recent reconstructions of the text. These have not been highlighted in popular reports. Very close study of the individual words of the text will continue to result in some changes in wording. But we can rely both on the promises of Christ and the witness of the manuscripts themselves that the text is sufficiently firm for faithful teaching and life in Christ.” Available at: <http://concordiatheology.org/2015/03/manuscripts-and-misquoting/>.

⁵⁶ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 340.

⁵⁷ Cf. E. J. Epp, “Textual Clusters: Their Past and Future in New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 519–578.

⁵⁸ See already K. Aland and B. Aland, *The Text of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 48–71, which argues that the “Western text” is a “phantom,” and that the “major text types trace their beginnings to the Diocletianic persecutions and the Age of Constantine which followed.”

⁵⁹ Cf. G. D. Fee and R. Mullen, “The Use of the Greek Fathers for New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 351–74; H. A. G. Houghton, “The Use of the Latin Fathers for New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 375–406.

⁶⁰ Cf. J. R. Royse, *Scribal Habits in Early Greek New Testament Papyri* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

⁶¹ See especially U. Schmid, “Scribes and Variants—Sociology and Typology,” in *Textual Variation: Theological and Social Tendencies?* Ed. H. A. G. Houghton and D. C. Parker (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2008), 1–23.

⁶² See in particular the essays on the Diatessaron, Syriac, Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic, Georgian, and Gothic versions in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*.

- The ease of access to images of very large numbers of ancient biblical manuscripts online.⁶⁴
- International projects under the umbrella of the International Greek New Testament Project to produce and make available transcriptions of Greek and Latin manuscripts.⁶⁵
- The question of whether the “original text” of New Testament writings can be reconstructed based on manuscript evidence, or only an “Initial Text” (*Ausgangstext*).⁶⁶

The discussion and resolution of these challenges (and opportunities) will result in continued work on the text, work which will ultimately find its way into the printed editions that we use in teaching and preaching. While certainly there is not sufficient space to give attention to these items here, students of the New Testament should at least be aware of the developments in the study of the wording of the text.

Textual Criticism and Historical Criticism

That is not to say that some scholars who have worked with manuscripts have not moved beyond the realm of textual criticism into historical-critical or, more recently, into post-critical modes of analysis. B. H. Streeter produced one of the 20th century’s most influential studies of the gospels. This was a comprehensive study, beginning his theory of the manuscript tradition and working back through to his theory of how the gospel writers composed their works. He significantly influenced both fields of study. In textual criticism, he supplanted Westcott and Hort’s view of the history of the text with what he labelled the “Local-Genealogical” theory of text types. This is the model for understanding the witnesses of the NT until the early 1980s, when this model proved to be no longer tenable, as noted above.⁶⁷

Streeter’s second enduring influence was in his theory of Markan Priority and the Q-Hypothesis as the literary—and I emphasize literary—dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark and the hypothetical Q document.⁶⁸ This remains far and away the most widely accepted explanation for the origins of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I must add here, however, that this view is *not* present in the early church nor in the Reformation, nor is it taught by confessional Lutheran exegetes

⁶³ The most accessible description is K. Wachtel, “The Coherence-Based Genealogical Method: A New Way to Reconstruct the Text of the Greek New Testament,” in *Editing the Bible. Assessing the Task Past and Present*, ed. J. S. Kloppenborg and J. H. Newman (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 123–38.

⁶⁴ E.g., <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/>.

⁶⁵ <http://www.igntp.org/>.

⁶⁶ M. W. Holmes, “From ‘Original Text’ to ‘Initial Text’: The Traditional Goal of New Testament Textual Criticism in Contemporary Discussion,” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 637–88.

⁶⁷ This is the model used in Bruce Metzger’s *Text of the New Testament* (1963; 1968²). But already Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland abandoned the notion of text types altogether (see above).

⁶⁸ Streeter also posited a literary source for Matthew (labelled “M”) and another for Luke (labelled “L”), but few scholars have accepted the need for these additional written sources.

today.⁶⁹ Rather, until the rise of historical criticism, the earliest descriptions of the rise of the four gospels is that they were independently composed through inspiration of the Spirit by eyewitnesses or the assistants of the apostles without any literary dependence on each other.⁷⁰

It must be noted, however, that Streeter started his study with textual criticism, and then went on to source criticism. That would seem to be the wrong order, would it not? Shouldn't one begin with the composition of the texts, and then move on to the copying of the texts in the manuscript tradition? But that is not what Streeter does, nor is it what modern source criticism does. Rather, Streeter and others use observations on scribal and editorial activity *in the manuscripts* and apply those observations as “rules” *not to compare manuscripts to each other, but to compare the gospel narratives to each other*. So, the principles which have been developed in comparing, say Codex Sinaiticus to Codex Alexandrinus, are instead used to compare Matthew to Mark. This is, I believe, a fatal failure of category mistake. Copying, correcting, and editing a manuscript is one activity. Writing a narrative is another activity.⁷¹ In particular, writing an account of “what has been brought to fulfillment among us” (Luke 1:1) by an author living in the first century, is not at all the same activity as transcribing nor even correcting or emending a text in the second, third, or fourth centuries. Furthermore, there is no indication in the gospels themselves that the evangelists used or edited each other, or were even aware of the other gospel writings. Finally, the presumption that Mark must have been the first written gospel narrative and then used by Matthew and Luke is not a given, and even some scholars who insist on literary dependence have argued cogently for Matthean priority, and that Mark and Luke are both based on Matthew. As mentioned above, I do not agree with the view that there is literary dependency *at all*. I am merely pointing this out to demonstrate that the use of textual criticism—the study of manuscripts—is inappropriately applied to source criticism—the study of how authors composed their texts. Textual criticism and historical criticism must be kept distinct.

Nevertheless, the use of textual criticism to study the origins of the gospels is a common move made in biblical scholarship. B. H. Streeter was the first to link explicitly textual criticism and source criticism in the study of the Gospel, in his 1925 *The Four Gospels*. By the 1960s Gordon Fee noted,

That there is an interrelationship between textual criticism and the Synoptic Problem is the presupposition of most Synoptic studies. Nonetheless, the specific nature of that relationship, especially as it affects the finding of solutions, is seldom spelled out, and, it would seem, is frequently neglected.⁷²

⁶⁹ It is not taught by the members of the faculty of Concordia Seminary or, so far as I know, by members of the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary.

⁷⁰ Cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.8; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3:39.14-17. The evangelists themselves make no mention of the other authors or canonical gospels.

⁷¹ And, it should go without saying as one who teaches and preaches with a biblical and creedal understanding of the Word, but I will say it anyway: “Writing a narrative” by an apostle entails the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

⁷² G. D. Fee, “The Corrections of Papyrus Bodmer II and Early Textual Transmission,” *Novum Testamentum* 7 (1965): 257.

Nevertheless, assumptions that textual criticism can be appropriated for source criticism are constantly evident in studies on the gospels.⁷³ So to some extent I can understand some of the confusion that a non-expert might have.

The consequences are entirely destructive of biblical authority. Koester, for example, argues

New Testament textual critics have been deluded by the hypothesis that the archetypes of the textual tradition which were fixed ca. 200—and how many archetypes for each Gospel?—are (almost) identical with the autographs. This cannot be affirmed by any evidence...The story of the text of the Gospel of Mark and the revisions of its text—documented by Matthew, Luke, and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*—illustrates this, as well as the harmonization of Matthew and Luke in Justin and other witnesses.

These arguments, however, are easily dealt with from a historical and textual basis—let alone theological. Holmes, in assessing Koester, notes that “he offers essentially only a single line of evidence, one that is subject to its own challenges” and that his “claims are incommensurate with his evidence and arguments.”⁷⁴

Furthermore, the “historical critical” method has functionally destroyed any possibility of biblical authority. For it refuses—and indeed, is unable to—determine a final, ultimate source. This problem is summarized well by David Dungan:

Spinoza and his followers multiplied questions about the physical history of the text to the point that the traditional theological task could never get off the ground ...; [this was] to create an endless 'nominalist barrage,' if you will an infinitely extendable list of questions directed at the physical history of the text, to the point where the clergy and the political officials allied with them *could never bring to bear their own theological interpretations* of the Bible. In other words, Spinoza switched the focus from the referent of the biblical text (e.g., God's activity, Jesus Christ) to *the history of the text*. In so doing, he effectively eviscerated the Bible of all traditional theological meaning and moral teaching.⁷⁵

⁷³ For example, the claim that use of text-critical criteria to resolve the synoptic problem “so consistently move in the direction of Markan priority that one is compelled either to adopt the Oxford Hypothesis or jettison text-critical procedures in use by all scholars today.” (Scot McKnight, “Source Criticism” in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. D. A. Black and D. Beck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 136-72; and again, “the supposition—following Streeter—that Matthew and Luke had copies of Mark slightly different from what we have is far from impossible.” W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 113. The most recent example to explicitly link textual criticism and source criticism is M. C. Williams, *Two Gospels from One. A Comprehensive Text-Critical Analysis of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006). In fact, this book is a wholesale adoption of text-critical principles (pp. 49-64) to the “Synoptic Problem” (in fact, he discusses only the relationship between Matthew and Mark).

⁷⁴ See especially M. W. Holmes, “What Text is Being Edited? The Editing of the New Testament,” in *Editing the Bible*, 112–19, from which the Koester citation is taken.

⁷⁵ D. Dungan, *History of the Synoptic Problem*, 172.

This is why any biblical, creedal Christian must reject historical criticism, for it replaces the authority of the text with a phantom pre-text, one which is ultimately inaccessible, and which cannot norm faith and life.

In addition to the problem of moving to historical criticism, some textual critics have taken the *data* of textual criticism (the manuscripts, patristic sources, early translations) and connected it with literary theories which are similar in framework to a Deconstruction model. That is,

There can be no purely “ideal” meaning, there is only an endless series of reverberations. What presents itself is the representation of nonpresence, what Derrida call “otherness,” “difference,” or “alterity,” thereby opening meaning up to flux and play and endless deferral.⁷⁶

This is most evident in the work of Bart Ehrman. His *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* explicitly breaks from traditional textual criticism:

This takes me now to a different theoretical understanding of the significance of textual variation in the New Testament manuscripts, an understanding that derives less from traditional categories of originals and corruptions than from modern literary theories that call these categories into question. Because scribes occasionally changed their texts in “meaningful” ways, it is possible to conceptualize their activities as a kind of hermeneutical process. Reproducing a text is in some ways analogous to interpreting it.⁷⁷

As Ehrman notes, this is a fundamental reconstrual of the work of textual criticism—and indeed the activity of scribes—that is distinct from the work of virtually all other textual critics. In fact, it results in the same ever-receding text that Dungan describes historical criticism as creating. Responses to Ehrman’s claims have been many, from questioning whether scribes could indeed rewrite the text so thoroughly in the act of transcribing a copy to the tendentiousness with which he selects criteria in order to “prove” that a given reading is an “orthodox corruption.” We do not need to go into details here; my point is solely to demonstrate that some textual critics have gone beyond the bounds of textual criticism into questionable literary theory. This has nothing to do with textual criticism, and must be dealt with theologically and hermeneutically. However, one must not lump all textual critics with Ehrman: *abusus non tollit usum*.

Moving Ahead: The Word, The Promise, and Us

The question that I was told to address today was this: “Textual and Literary Judgments on the Biblical Text – What Happens to the Lutheran Commitment to Scriptural Inerrancy?” My answer to that question is, by this point I hope, clear: “I affirm it.” This is consistent with the installation rite of our church body: “Do you believe the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be the

⁷⁶ C. G. Bartholemew, “Deconstruction,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. K. J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 164. Bartholemew notes that “Deconstruction is far more than another ‘neutral’ method of interpretation. It involves a critique of Western philosophy and of the entire hermeneutical tradition.”

⁷⁷ B. D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 29.

inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice?" I confess this this not because I have proven it to be so, for certainty in theology comes not from our proofs. Rather, certainty is the Spirit's creation, as already the orthodox fathers recognized:

The second characteristic that marks the theology of Lutheran orthodoxy is certainty, certainty of the divine origin of the Gospel and of all theology, certainty that true theology is attainable and certainty concerning one's own theological position and confession. This certitude is of course something highly subjective, but it is not therefore mere fancy or wishful thinking; it is rather a certitude and assurance wrought by the Spirit of God, a veritable *fides divina*... This doctrinal certainty was closely associated with the doctrine of the divine origin and authority of Scripture.⁷⁸

This certainty is focused on Christ, as Preus continued:

The man Jesus Christ is God's revelation *par excellence*, and the Gospel revealed by Him and preached in the church is God's Gospel, His divine message to man. Furthermore, the theology represented in Scripture, guaranteed by Christ, and taught in the church is God's theology. And so the church possesses and proclaims the truth of the very God.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, Chemnitz provides a helpful framework in which to trust biblical testimony and use the factual data of history and historical documents (manuscripts) in order to confirm the inspiration of the written Word of God. The church, as Chemnitz pointed out, has been entrusted with this word and testifies to its divine source and origin in the teaching, preaching, and writing of the apostles. To repeat my argument from a previous essay:

The task before us is to carry further the work of Luther and Chemnitz, who faced challenges to the authority of the writings of the Scriptures not only (and not frequently, for that matter) with simple assertions of "inspiration." Rather, they saw the Scriptures as God's Word breaking in to history, received, copied, and handed down in history, and that historical evidence could be cited to demonstrate that the ancient church had made the correct "judgments" in accepting them as the Word of God. I am convinced of the same. That the more we study the manuscripts of the New Testament and the writings of the early church the more confident we can be that church did receive the inspired Scriptures for what they are. At times mistakes were made in copying, and at times some people thought that some writings were apostolic which turned out not to be so. At times a few writings and readings were added for the sake of clarity or to ensure faithful teaching and practice. But these can be identified and dealt with as we turn our attention to the earliest witnesses—the "primitive church" of which Chemnitz spoke, so that we can be preserved faithful and steadfast to the same Scriptures in our day.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 408.

⁷⁹ Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 409.

⁸⁰ Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Ongoing Revisions of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*," 204.

The church continued to confess Christ faithfully through that Word, even though there were errors and corruptions and poor translations of that Word in the manuscripts that the church was using. Indeed, at times the church went astray, but the voice of the Shepherd continued to call back through that very Word, the written Word of God which calls us daily to repentance and new life. Even in the midst of the uncertainties of manuscripts, and in the abstruse and esoteric writings of biblical scholars, we can nevertheless be confident in Christ and in his promises, for he has acted in Christ and in his Word and through his church:

...we need have more of the dogmatians' reverence for Scripture as the God-breathed, authoritative Word, which we recognize on the basis of its authorship, human and divine, its content, and the history of its use through the ages of the church.⁸¹

It should be evident that I am not convinced that we need a philosophical or scientific grounding for the authority of Scripture. That is not to deny its usefulness in some settings and with some individuals who do not yet know Christ. But at the same time we must be cautious, for

theology operates entirely differently from science. Theology does not start from demonstrable principles (like science) and thus yield necessary and universal conclusions, but all theological conclusions are drawn from revelation, from the authority of God alone. Scientific knowledge and theological knowledge are entirely different in character. Scientific knowledge is evident knowledge; theology is by no means evident in the same sense, for it deals not with things to be known but things to be believed (τά πιστά). Therefore theology insists that reason that seeks to know theological matters be taken captive.⁸²

Finally, "In many and various ways, God spoke to his people of by the prophets; but now in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son" (Heb 1:1). Liturgically we recite this at the end of the hearing of the Scriptures, and before we hear the Word about Christ in Law and Gospel through the sermon. God's speaking took on new form, as flesh and blood, in the incarnation. That Word "came to his own [creation] and his own [people] did not receive him" (John 1:11). He came not to overwhelm and overpower and coerce belief, but to be rejected by man, crucified, and killed—for us. Jesus Christ

⁸¹ J. A. O. Preus II, "The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmatians," *Springfielder* 25 (1961): 8–33. The Christological analogy of a "divine/human nature" of Scripture that, in some way, corresponds to the now natures of Christ, has a long history in the early church and in Lutheranism. See Kloha, "Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections," 181–82. See also "A Comparative Study of Varying Contemporary Approaches To Biblical Interpretation," 5: "The Bible, inspired by God and written by men, is a divine-human book. However, this is not to say that these are two parts which can be separated. The divine and the human in the Bible are combined in an inseparable union analogous to the union of the two natures in the Person of Christ...Lutherans acknowledge and teach that the Bible, even though it is and transmits God's very own Word, is a thoroughly human book. They do not have a docetic view of the Bible."

⁸² Preus, *Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 203 (discussing Calov). Cf. also J. A. O. Preus II, "The New Testament Canon in the Lutheran Dogmatians," 30: "There is a peculiar combination of faith and history involved in the study of the Canon. We can be scientific and scholarly up to a point, but at that point faith must take over. Where faith is lacking, not only the Canon but so does the Bible and ultimately the Christ to whom the Scripture testifies. Strict logic and adherence to probable historical data will go part of the way only. That is the reason that much modern scientific theology has failed."

looked like any other human being, he sounded in many ways like many other teachers. We have a God who comes to us, not as we would have a divine figure to be, but as the incarnate Son of God he humbled himself, taking the form of a slave (Phil 2:7). He participates in our space and time in order to restore us to himself, in love. So it is with his Word, which comes to us perhaps not as we would like but as writings, copied and corrupted and edited and restored over centuries, continuously pointing us to and indeed pressing upon on us Christ:

...it is only by receiving the Bible from God's hand as his Word, as it is, and not by trying to make it what our reason expects of a divine book that we will be in a position to believe and understand it as the book of eternal truth.⁸³

In the end, we either trust the promises of Christ, or we do not. "Surely I will be with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20); "But when the Comforter comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me" (John 15:26). The presence of Christ, until he comes again, is in his Word spoken, preached, and working through water and with the eating and drinking. We cannot *make* the Scriptures authoritative, we cannot prove them to be authoritative; any foundation or method which depends on our interpretation or reconstruction is, by definition, self-referential, self-serving, and ultimately uncertain. Only one based on Christ and his promises, which we know through his Word, is certain. As our Lord himself says: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to *me*." And so, with the promise of his authority, we baptize and teach all nations "to obey all that I have commanded you," for he is with us, in his Word, written, preached, poured, and eaten, "to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20).⁸⁴

⁸³ H. Sasse, „Zur Irrtumslosigkeit, *Kirchenblatt* 116.10 (Oct. 1966): 206; *Lutherische Blätter* 19.89 (Dec 1966): 111-12; translated in *Scripture and the Church. Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, ed. J. Kloha and R. Feuerhahn (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1995), 408.

⁸⁴ "[W]hen Christ instructs not only the apostles, but His Church (Matt. 28:20) to teach all things (πάντα) whatsoever He has commanded them, He gives the Church the guarantee that His doctrine in all its parts will be clearly and surely known to it to the end of time." Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 238.