

UNSUNG HERO

A Lutheran Who Makes a Difference

Inge Lønning A Hero of the Clarity of the Gospel



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“Doctrine is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition” (*LW* 27:37).

Inge Lønning, Professor Emeritus at the University of Oslo, explicates Luther’s insight into the reasons why “doctrine” is like a mathematical point:

Clarity About the Message
“Everything in the universe of Luther’s Reformation stands or falls with the thesis of the clarity of Holy Scripture. . . . The function of the thesis of the clarity of Scripture, however, is only properly recognized when the essential content has been somewhat correctly determined. For Luther it is not a question, as is later the case with Orthodox dogmatists, of the quality of transparency (*perspicuitas*), which statements of Scripture should in a specific way have. Rather, the expression *claritas scripturae*

[the clarity of Scripture] should be understood quite unambiguously from the contrast between light and darkness and the imagery associated with these two concepts. . . . **One starts from the illuminating power of the message of Scripture and . . . there are of course signs which are obscure.** It is decisive, however, that all the key teachings of Scripture lie in the bright daylight. This has been so since Christ’s resurrection: the incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity, the atonement, the Lordship of Christ – all these have become accessible through the fact that **Holy Scripture henceforth is presented as the pure proclamation of Christ and only as this**” (p. 234).

The Sunlight of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

“That the clarity of Scripture is based on its gravitation towards Christ is seen very distinctly in Luther’s ‘Prefaces’ to the Bible. The letter to the Romans is described as a bright light, ‘almost sufficient to illuminate the whole of Scripture’ (the Old Testament). It is not by chance that in the same context the promotion or **urging of Christ** (*Christus treiben*) is presented purely and simply **as the criterion** of the New Testament. Luther writes:

All upright sacred books agree on one thing, that they all collectively preach and promote Christ. Likewise, the true criterion for criticizing all books is to see whether they

promote Christ or not, since all Scripture manifests Christ. Whatever does not teach Christ is not Apostolic, even if Peter and Paul should teach it. On the other hand, whatever preaches Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod should do it!

[Lønning continues] “Here it is seen that the criterion of ‘promoting Christ’ . . . receives material precision and profile. The attribute of apostolicity only becomes understandable in its polemically sharpened form when considered against the background of the Pauline ‘no other Gospel’ (Gal 1:8), which played a demonstrably decisive role in Luther’s theological development. The attribute of inspiration is insolubly linked to the attribute of ‘that which promotes Christ,’ insofar as the Holy Spirit is the only agent in this world capable of ‘promoting Christ’ . . . The criterion is nothing other than the opposite side of the first and most fundamental theological statement of Luther’s ‘Prefaces’ to the Bible – there is one and only one Gospel” (p. 235).

Either Clarity or Obscurity . . . No Middle Path

“Everything stands and falls with the relation of theology to Scripture: the necessarily assertive character of God’s declarations. . . . One proceeds basically either from the *claritas* or the *obscuritas scripturae*. There is no middle path.” (p. 241).

Excerpts from “‘No Other Gospel’: Luther’s Concept of the ‘Middle of Scripture’ in Its Significance for Ecumenical Communion and Christian Confession Today,” *Luther’s Ecumenical Significance*, eds. Peter Manns and Harding Meyer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).