

LAW AND GOSPEL AS THE METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE OF THEOLOGY

Gerhard Forde

It is our purpose here to deal with the problem of method in theology. I shall proceed first by defining what we mean by methodology and indicating its importance in the contemporary discussion; second, by defining and comparing the two methods which seem to be in conflict today and trying to point out some of their advantages and disadvantages; and third, I will say something about what appears to me to be at stake in this conflict.

First then, to a definition. Methodology is that part of a discipline which attempts to answer the question "How do you know?" Every discipline, that is, every area of study, has its own particular methodology, its own particular way of answering the question, "How do you know?" When, for instance, the scientist makes a particular claim, and you ask him, "How do you know?" he will refer you to the "scientific method" he has used to arrive at his claim. Likewise the sociologist has his own particular method of gathering, correlating and interpreting data and statistics in the study of human society. The historian as well has his methods of investigating and interpreting the events of the past. And so on. In each case the particular area of study tries to answer the question "How do you know?" with its method. So also it must be with theology. When we make certain claims about God, man, Christ, salvation, etc., we must be ready to give some sort of an answer to the question, "how do you know?"

Now, of course, the claims which we make in theology are all claims which are made by faith, and we operate within the sphere of faith, so the methodology we are talking about here is the methodology of the claims of faith. We are all concerned, I think, that faith should have a solid basis. What is this basis? This is the business of theological methodology.

Here perhaps we should add a word of explanation with regard to the previous two essays. In those essays too,

there was much talk about method, namely the historical-critical method. But that method was a method used by the Biblical exegete to get at the meaning of the text of scripture. Here we are concerned with method in a different sense—the sense in which it is used by dogmatic theology, that is, the method by which the claims of faith are established. When the exegete has used this method to get at the meaning of the text he has by no means as yet answered the question of whether what the text says is to be believed, or how it can be believed. The question "What does the text mean?" and the question "How can I believe it?" must be answered with different methods.

Now what is the significance of this discussion of methodology? I think it is safe to say that the major conflict in our church today is a clash in precisely this area. There is, as far as I know, no great conflict over any of the doctrines of the faith, no argument over the basic content of faith. The question at issue is primarily one of method. We have, I think we can say, two opposing schools of thought, each of which suspects the other of having a poor method—that is to say, each thinks the other has an extremely shaky basis for faith and for the theological claims it makes. It is this which is a major source of controversy in our theology today and which makes the discussion of method such an important one.

So much then for the definition. Methodology is that branch of the theological discipline which attempts to answer the question, "How do you know that the claims which faith makes are true?"

Secondly, I shall turn to the question of method in today's discussion. The question at issue is the question about the Word of God. Faith, we say, is based upon the Word of God and therefore our question, "How do you know?" is a question about the authority of the Word of God. Both sides in this debate, both of the methods we are about to investigate, insist upon the basic authority of the Word of God for the claims of faith. This means that both sides would agree that the Word of God is something special, something different from the words of men. But the question is, "What makes the Word of God different and more authoritative than the words of men?"

This is our problem. It is the contention of this essay that we can isolate two different ways of answering this question and it is our purpose to describe and evaluate these methods.

What are these methods? What shall we call them? One always has a problem when it comes to giving labels to things, especially when the things to be discussed are controversial. For the purposes of this essay I shall give each method a label according to what I feel is its distinguishing characteristic. The first method I have chosen to call the *verbal inspiration method* and the second the *law-gospel method*. Perhaps I should state at this point that I believe that both of these methods have been present within Lutheranism from the earliest times but that the latter one, the law-gospel method, has been the primary one in practice if not in theory. These two methods are quite different and there has existed, I believe, an unresolved tension between them. It is the main contention of this essay that Lutheran theology does not need the verbal inspiration method because it always has had, at its best, a method quite its own which is better and more in accord with the scriptures themselves. Furthermore, I believe that what we are witnessing in the church today is a recovery of this original methodology.

First, then, the verbal inspiration method. According to this method, faith's question, "How do you know?", the question about the authority of the Word of God, is answered by the doctrine of verbal inspiration of scripture. Scripture is the Word of God, i.e., the Word of God and scripture are identical, because scripture is in all its parts and in its very words inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. This means that all the statements and words, whatever their reference, contained therein are literally true because, of course, the Holy Spirit does not make mistakes. Now why is this so? What is the thinking behind this position? According to Francis Pieper, the celebrated Missouri Synod theologian of the turn of the century, it is so because it is a position which is established *a priori*.¹ What does this mean? It means that it is so because it *must be so* in order for the scripture to be considered the Word of God. That is, if you believe that the scripture is the Word

¹F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I., p. 238. The position is also buttressed *a posteriori* by internal and external evidence.

of God, then you must believe that it cannot contain any errors before you even begin to read it, otherwise you would not read it as the Word of God. The position must be established *a priori*, before the actual examination of evidence, otherwise it cannot be considered a sure basis for faith. Now lest you think I am exaggerating here, let me quote for you the statement of one of the 17th century orthodox fathers, Quenstedt, which draws out the full implications of this position:

"The Canonical Holy Scriptures in the original text are the infallible truth and are free from every error, or, in other words, in the canonical Holy Scriptures there is found no lie, no falsity, no error, not even in the least, whether in subject matter or words, but all things and all details that are handed down in them are most certainly true, whether they pertain to doctrine, or morals, or history, or chronology, or topography or nomenclature; no ignorance, no thoughtlessness or forgetfulness, no lapse of memory, can and dare be ascribed to the amanuenses of the Holy Ghost in their penning of the sacred writings."

(Quoted in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1. pp. 277-8)

The position is established *a priori*; one cannot and dare not ascribe any error to the writers of Holy Scripture, even in the least, all the way down to nomenclature. This means that when Leviticus eleven, for instance, calls the rabbit a cud-chewing animal, or a bat a bird, we must accept this even if rabbits don't in fact chew cuds, or bats are not in fact birds, because if we do not we undermine the basic authority of scripture.

From this starting point, of course, everything is quite simple. The question "how do you know?" has been settled by a *a priori* statement about scripture at the outset. Since everything scripture says is true, every doctrine can be proven by culling out the appropriate proof passages from scripture. Once the doctrine of scripture is established, all other doctrines follow like links on a chain. What makes the Word of God something different in this case is that it is *quantitatively* more perfect than the words of men. Whereas man's word may have some mistakes, God's Word has fewer, or none at all. But the difference is *quantitative*. It is a question of more or less.

God's Word is authoritative because it differs *quantitatively* from the words of men.

Inspiration in this method refers to the process by which God supernaturally influenced the writing of scripture and protected the writers from error of any sort. To quote Baier, the author of a compendium of the theology of the orthodox fathers, "Divine inspiration was that agency by which God supernaturally communicated to the intellect of those who wrote, not only the correct conception of all that was to be written, but also the conception of the words themselves and of everything by which they were to be expressed, and by which he also instigated their will to the act of writing."² Inspiration for the orthodox fathers consisted of three things: the *impulsus ad scribendum*, the impulse to write; the *suggestio rerum*, the indication or suggestion of the things they should write about; and the *suggestio verborum*, the suggestion of the very words which they should use, hence verbal inspiration. Thus the truth and authority of scripture in all things, from the greatest to the least, is assured and every "how do you know?" can simply be referred to the appropriate passage of scripture.

Faith, in the confines of this method, consists of the knowledge of, assent to, and trust in the truths set down in Holy Scripture. This is the traditional three-fold definition of faith found in the Orthodox fathers. Faith is *notitia*, knowledge; *assensus*, assent; *fiducia*, trust. this means that one first gains knowledge of the things which pertain to salvation, i.e., one learns the truths; secondly, one is persuaded to assent to them intellectually; and ultimately one may learn to trust in them. How does this come about? It comes about finally of course through the work of the Holy Spirit. But one should notice that *first* one is persuaded intellectually to accept the truth of everything in scripture, and one may be aided in this by such things as the proofs from prophecy and from miracle, the antiquity of scripture, etc., and then only *afterwards* is one led to trust in them. In other words, the doctrine of scripture is first established, and then everything else follows. When one

²H. Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 39.

has *finally* learned to trust the doctrines thus established the method reaches its goal.

This briefly is the verbal inspiration method. How are we to evaluate this method? What are some of its advantages and disadvantages? First of all, it has the obvious advantage of being exceedingly simply and readily understandable. It follows the lines of a simple logical syllogism: The Word of God is true, scripture is the Word of God, therefore scripture is true. It is the easiest and most convenient doctrine in the world with which to operate.

Secondly, the method has the advantage of intending to place men under the direct authority of scripture. There can be no doubt, certainly, that this was the aim of the method. It was believed that by submitting wholly and without question to scripture in this fashion one was placing oneself directly *under* the authority of the Word of God and that one was being obedient to it. And no doubt it is this which many still find so persuasive about this method. Those who hold it find it impossible, apparently, to see how anyone can question the truth of any part of scripture and still be submitting to its authority. This to them would be placing man and his intellect *over* scripture, and this would lead inevitably to a kind of "take your pick" theology in which man believes only what he wants to believe. To be obedient to the Word of God means to accept scripture as it stands without question. And this position is uncompromising. No other alternatives are possible. The reason for this is, of course, that it is based on an *a priori* consideration, and this is why it is virtually impossible to argue with anyone who holds this position. The matter is simply not negotiable.

Now what about its disadvantages? Here I would say to begin with that its very strength is its greatest weakness. The belief that by accepting scripture in this uncompromising fashion one is placing oneself *under* the authority of God's Word is in fact open to serious question. For when all is said and done, the *a priori* belief that this is the way it *must be* in order for scripture to be the Word of God is nowhere established in scripture itself, and it is a human construction; it is a human

idea about what the term "Word of God" must mean. In other words, if I say that there can't be any errors in scripture if it is to be the Word of God, I am in effect saying that I know to begin with what the Word of God must be, and unless scripture meets my idea it cannot be accepted. I am then trying to establish the truth of *God's Word* in the same way I would establish the truth of man's Word. A man's word is true only if it corresponds to the facts; God's Word can be true only in the same way. I am the judge of this. And the belief that by this method I am placing myself *under* the Word of God may in fact be only an illusion. For if I say, "If the Bible contains errors I cannot believe," I am in effect saying to God that unless he provides me with the kind of guarantee which I expect and want, I cannot believe. Then I am in a very dangerous position because I am dictating to God the conditions under which I will believe. It is dangerous because it might just be that God has not *in fact* provided us with that kind of guarantee. This, I realize, is a subtle kind of argument, but since the position is based on an *a priori* consideration, it is this *a priori* which must be questioned. The fact is that *I do not know a priori* what the Word of God is. I don't know beforehand what God is going to say or how; I can only listen and then try to form some confession as to what it is after I have heard it.

Second, the verbal inspiration theory has the increasingly obvious difficulty that it is unable to deal with facts gained both by research into the Bible and the world around us. For over two hundred years now it has demonstrated its inability to cope with truths established by scientific and historical research. In the face of the mounting knowledge of the world, the verbal inspiration method has had no constructive counsel to give, but can only advise one to retreat from the world and refuse to face those things which one finds uncomfortable. One does not need to go outside the Bible itself to show the inability of this method to cope with the facts. Clearly the belief that there are no mistakes of any sort in scripture simply is not true. The many discrepancies *within* the Bible itself—where the Bible disagrees with itself—demonstrate this fact.

In the final analysis the verbal inspiration method is based on a theory—a human theory about the nature of the Word of

God. Now the test for the validity of any theory is how well it explains the facts, and one can only say that this theory does not explain the facts very well. It is based upon human logic and once its logic is broken the entire position collapses all at once. This is the position of which Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in his poem "The Deacon's Masterpiece." Few people realize that this poem is actually a theological satire directed at this kind of a method. I can't resist the temptation to include a few lines because it speaks to the point:

The Deacon's Masterpiece
Or the Wonderful "One-Hoss-Shay."
A Logical Story

Have you heard of the wonderful one-hoss-shay,
that was built in such a logical way?
It ran a hundred years to a day,
and then, of a sudden, it—ah, but stay,
I'll tell you what happened without delay,
Scaring the parson into fits,
Frightening people out of their wits,—
Have you ever hear of that, I say?
Seventeen hundred and fifty-five,
Georgius Secundus was then alive,—
Snuffy old drone from the German hive;
That was the year when Lisbon-town
Saw the earth open and gulp her down,
And Braddock's army was done so brown,
Left without a scalp to its crown.
It was on the terrible earth-quake-day
That the Deacon finished the one-hoss-shay.
Now in building of chaises, I tell you what,
There is always *somewhere* a weakest spot,—
In hub, tire, fellow, in spring or sill,
In screw, bolt, thoroughbrace,—lurking still,
Find it somewhere you must and will,—
Above or below, within or without,—
And that's the reason, beyond a doubt,
A chaise *breaks down*, but doesn't *wear out*.

But the Deacon swore (as Deacon's do,
 With an "I dew vum," or an "I tell yeou.")
 He would build one shay to beat the taown
 'n' the Keounty 'n' all the kentry raoun';
 It should be so built that it couldn' break daown,
 "Fur," said the Deacon, "'t's mighty plain"
 Thut the weakes' place mus' stan' the strain;
 'n' the way t' fix it, uz I maintain,

Is only jest

T' make that place us strong us the rest.

As you know if you have read the poem, it goes on to describe how the Deacon built a shay in which every part was just as strong as every other part, and how it lasted until its hundredth year to a day, and then:

First of November,—the Earthquake-day.—
 There are traces of age in the one-hoss-shay,
 A general flavor of mild decay,
 But nothing local, as one may say.
 There couldn't be,—for the Deacon's art
 Had made it so like in every part
 That there wan't a chance for one to start.
 For the wheels were just as strong as the sills,
 And the floor was just as strong as the sills,
 And the panels just as strong as the floor,
 And the whippletree neither less nor more,
 And the back-crossbar as strong as the fore,
 And spring and axle and hub *encore*.
 And yet, *as a whole*, it is past a doubt,
 In another hour it will be *worn out!*
 First of November, "Fifty-five!
 This morning the parson takes a drive.
 Now, small boys, get out of the way!
 Here comes the wonderful one-hoss-shay,
 Drawn by a rat-tailed, ewe-necked bay.
 "Huddup!" said the parson.—Off went they.
 The parson was working his Sunday's text,—
 Had got to fifthly, and stopped perplexed
 At what the—Moses—was coming next.
 All at once the horse stood still,

Close by the meet'n'-house on the hill.
 —First a shiver, and then a thrill,
 Then something decidedly like a spill,—
 And the parson was sitting upon a rock,
 at half-past nine by the meet'n'-house clock,—
 just the hour of the Earthquake shock!
 —What do you think the parson found, When he got
 up and stared around?
 The poor old chaise in a heap or mound,
 As if it had been to the mill and ground.
 You see, of course, if you're not a dunce,
 How it went to pieces all at once,
 All at once and nothing first,—
 Just as bubbles do when they burst.
 End of the wonderful one-hoss-shay.
 Logic is logic. That's all I say.

One need not belabor the point. A system built on human logic must suffer the fate of human logic.

Now to the second method, the second answer to the question, "How do you know?" This method I have called the law-gospel method. As I said previously, I believe that this method has always been the method actually employed by Lutheran theology at its best. Every Lutheran pastor knows, or at least he should know, that when it comes to preaching he does not in fact depend upon the verbal inspiration theory to convince his hearers. Every pastor has been told often enough that the only way to gain entrance to a man's heart is to convict of sin and convince of grace. In other words, to preach the law and the gospel and to distinguish correctly between them. When it comes down to cases in actually dealing with people in preaching and teaching this is the method we have employed—or should have employed. Because everyone knows that you cannot convince anyone of the truth of Christianity by simply insisting on the doctrine of verbal inspiration. If you went to the mission field you most certainly would not begin this way. And the fact that you would not begin this way means that this is not really the method you use to answer the question "how do you know?" On the practical level, the verbal in-

spiration theory is seldom if ever employed in establishing the basis for faith. Here it seems to me that our practice, at its best, has always been better than our theory. And one of the best evidences that contemporary Lutheran theology is returning to the basic principles of the Reformation is just this fact that it seeks to restore this practical insight to its proper place and to raise it to the level of the method which governs our theology as a whole. The fact is that the verbal inspiration method has always been a theory used mainly by the dogmaticians to back up doctrines in their systematics. It has never really been the basis for the practical faith of the church. In the so-called "Locci" method of theology, theologians stated doctrines as dogmatic points (*Loci*) and they used scriptural proof passages to back up these points. This meant that they needed additional proof to assure the truth of scripture as a source book for proofs. The doctrine of verbal inspiration provided this additional proof. This enabled them to use passages of scripture at random, sometimes out of context, to prove a dogmatic point. The method was therefore almost solely a dogmatic one and involved a highly intellectualized schematization. It is extremely interesting in the contemporary debate that those who constantly accuse today's theologians of intellectualism are themselves usually the ones who have unwittingly taken the intellectualistic side of the argument.

Now what does this law-gospel method mean? It means first of all that I have no *a priori* ideas about what God's Word is or what it would have to be. I cannot start with *my ideas* of what the Word of God is or what it would have to be and then try to make the scripture fit this idea. It means that at the beginning I can only hear this thing which some men call the Word of God and then experience what it does to me and says to me, and from this hearing and experiencing learn what the Word of God really is. The *Word of God* is not a thing, not a proposition; it is an event.

It was the view of Martin Luther that in this hearing and experiencing of the Word one discovers that it is a living and active Word. That is to say, the *Word of God* is something quite different from the words of men. It is not a dead Word whose

truths can only be established by seeing whether or not it fits the systems of men and what men call truth. The Word of God is a living Word, a creative voice, the same Word which called the earth and heavens into being, and which now is a mighty and powerful voice which rings out and attacks men in their self-sufficiency, brings them down into the hell of despair and recreates them through the gospel. God does not wait around to be discovered by men and allow himself or his Word to be judged by men. God goes on the offensive through his Word. He does not allow men to judge him nor to prop up his Word through their man-made schemes. This means, according to Luther, that when the Word of God is preached *something happens*, something is always accomplished. The Word does not return void. Some may, to be sure, be repelled by it; some may be frightened by it, or terrified; and some may by the miracle of the Spirit's guidance hear the good news in it; but in any case something always happens. And that which happens, that which *actually occurs* in a very concrete sense, is the action of the living Word. It is God acting through his Word. The Word of God establishes its own authority through the preaching of it. The Word of God "packs its own punch" one might say, and appeals directly to me in my heart; it does not need to take a "detour" through an artificial support such as a human theory or doctrine.

Basically there are two kinds of things which can happen when the Word of God is preached: judgment and redemption. This is why Luther said the Word of God works as law and as gospel. Through the Word of God as law I am judged, and as gospel I am offered salvation. The Word of God as law attacks me in my security and as gospel convinces me of grace, and I become convinced that this Word is the *Word of God* only in and through this experience. The Word of God is therefore confessed to be the Word of God because of the way in which it works on me as law and as gospel to bring about faith. It *shows itself* to be a living and true Word in this action. Thus the answer to our methodological question "how do you know?" is that I am convinced of this through the experience of faith by the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to encounter the *Word of God*; it is to experience his wrath and to hear his gospel. And this

must be thought of in such a total sense that every other possible means by which we could supposedly prove or demonstrate the truth of the Word of God pales into insignificance. The conviction that this Word is God's Word comes only in the experience of reaching the end of one's rope and then being rescued; of being killed and then made alive; or as Paul puts it, of dying with Christ in order to be raised with him. Only when one realizes that there is absolutely and utterly no hope outside the gospel, and nothing but hope in the gospel, is faith created. When this Word addresses me, I can only say, "I repent, thou alone art Lord!" Then faith is created and is based solely on the hearing of the gospel, and it can ask no better basis than this. The Word of God is something quite special; it establishes its own authority.

Now, one must be careful here to avoid misunderstanding. For Luther the term law does not mean merely the *laws* of the Bible, nor does gospel refer merely to the promises. Law for him means a way of hearing the Word of God. That is, you can hear the entire Bible and all preaching, and for that matter all of what happens in the world, as law. What this means is that apart from faith everything you encounter in life can be a threat to you; it can disturb and frighten and lead to doubt and despair. Even the words "Jesus died for your sins" may not be very comforting, but may actually be the worst kind of law because you may only be revolted by it. Law, or living under the law, means a kind of existence in which everything turns on you and you are threatened and can only ask yourself, "What shall I do?" Everywhere God is hidden behind the mask of his wrath. Even in nature, in the thunderstorm or the disaster or in the mere rustling of the leaves on a dark night one may be frightened and reminded that he is alone and lost. This kind of living is living under the law; God is hidden and wrathful and everything conspires to bring home to one that he is lost. And until this is really brought home to one, he will not hear the gospel. He may hear the words of the gospel, but he will not *really* hear it as though it is meant for him. The law, then, must first do its work. One must learn that he is utterly lost before he really can hear the gospel because the gospel is heard only by those who have given up the attempt to do something for themselves.

Just as the law is not, for Luther, merely the laws of the Bible, so also the gospel is not merely a set of words which man's reason can apprehend. The gospel is simply not available to reason. The gospel is heard only by faith, it is heard only by those who through the law have come to the end of the line. To such, the gospel is a whole new way of hearing; it is an entire new dimension of life; it is a word which is full of promise, which makes all of life blossom with good news. For Luther the gospel was something so special that in the final analysis it could not really be contained in books at all, but something which had to be proclaimed by the living voice (cf. WA 12:259, Sermons on I Peter). "And it, the gospel, really is not what you find in the books and what is contained in the letters, but rather a spoken declaration and living Word—a voice which resounds, is publicly proclaimed and everywhere heard Therefore if one would ask what the gospel is, the sophists of the higher schools would answer: it is a book which teaches a good thing. They do not know what it is because they do not understand it. Gospel means good message." Luther could even go so far as to say that it was a great deterioration and limitation of the Spirit that books had to be written about the gospel because it is something which by its very nature must be preached.

Faith, then, arises out of the hearing of the gospel proclamation when the law has destroyed all confidence in self. The only possible basis for faith is the hearing of the gospel. Faith can ask for no surer basis than this.

I think one can see that from this point of view the question as to whether there are errors in scripture is quite irrelevant. When you *in particular* are faced with the fact that you are lost, you can't beg off by saying, "Well there are errors in the Bible so maybe it's not so!" Or when you are offered the hope of God's grace in the gospel, you would not reject it on the grounds that maybe the evangelists made a few mistakes. The question at issue is not the question of literal accuracy; it is the question of faith.

The Word of God, therefore, is living and active and it has a way all its own of establishing its truth which cannot

be supported by any other theories. The Word of God is something *qualitatively* different from man's word, not just quantitatively, and it makes its own way in the world. It is authoritative because it establishes its own authority when it is proclaimed. All the Word of God asks of men is that they proclaim it, bear witness to it and let it be heard so that it can perform its proper function. It will make its own way when it is properly preached. This is why Luther said that the first and foremost task of theology was to know what the law is and what the gospel is and to distinguish properly between them. We can only serve the Word, not preside over it. If this is done, then the purity of doctrine is assured and the correct method will be followed.

This in brief is the law-gospel method. Obviously there is a lot more that could be said here and that needs to be said, because this has tremendous implications for the whole theological structure. In this method, the question "How do you know?" is answered by faith. But please note, it is not faith in the sense of mere intellectual acceptance of doctrines, but faith in the sense of a trust which grows out of the experience of being put to death and made alive again. I believe because through God's Word as law and gospel I have been convicted of sin and convinced of grace. And if anyone wants to know how I can believe that, the only thing I can do is go to work on him and try to make him see the same thing. That is the way faith works. By its very nature it can only bear witness to God's Word.

Now perhaps we should say a word or two about the way in which this method deals with such things as inspiration and errors in scripture. First and foremost the Word of God is Christ, the Word incarnate; *he* is what God has to say to us. Second, the Bible can be called the Word of God because and in so far as it witnesses to Christ. It is inspired by God, i.e., written under the influence of the Spirit because it was written by men who were moved by the Spirit to bear witness to Christ and it is used by the Spirit to confront men with Christ. In this sense, one could even say that the very words were inspired, i.e., that God through his Spirit uses these words, imperfect though they be, to bring about faith. Thirdly, the preaching on Sunday morning is the Word of God because in and through it

Christ is presented. This too is inspired by God. There is qualitatively no difference between the inspiration of the Bible and the inspiration of the preaching of the Church. The Bible is the supreme authority over the preaching, however, because it is closer to the original events; it is the original witness to the Christ-event and everything we say must be measured by this original witness.

Inspiration in this view refers to the entire activity of the Spirit by which he dwells in the Church and attends the proclamation of the Word. In the older theory, inspiration is too static and finally too anemic. It seems to assume that the Spirit can convince of the truth only through a book without errors. The Spirit has a much more powerful means than this at his disposal, namely the "two edged sword of the Word" through which he creates faith. The question, therefore, of whether or not there may be human errors of one sort or another in scripture is of no particular importance. Just as the pastor on Sunday morning may make errors of one sort or another in preaching and still preach the Word so also with scripture. And the fact that I use my intellect and common sense in recognizing these errors does not mean that I am placing myself above or over God's Word. I can only say that apparently God has used quite human means in transmitting his Word to us. I could wish, I suppose, that he would have used some other means, but apparently he has not seen fit to do so. God's Word comes "in, with and under" the human words. As St. Paul says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that we may know that the transcendent glory belongs to God and not to us."

Often the question is asked of this method, "If you admit that there are errors in the little things how do you know that they didn't make errors in the big things as well, i.e., once you start admitting errors, where do you stop?" To this the only answer is faith. I am persuaded by the Spirit in the experience of faith that they are right. Even if they had been right in the "little things," this does not really help one bit in affirming the so-called big things. The only answer is the faith born out of the law-gospel experience.

Finally, a last question. Often it is asked: "Is the whole Bible the Word of God, or does it only *contain* the Word of

God?" The assumption behind this question is again that the Word of God is limited only to those things which men call "true" and that one can go through the Bible culling out parts which are erroneous. The answer in the law-gospel method is that such a distinction simply is not made. The entire Bible is the Word of God because it functions as law and gospel in creating faith.

Now a brief word about the advantages and disadvantages of this method. Since this is the position I believe is proper, naturally I feel that it has many advantages. First, *God's Word* is not confused with the words of men, and through the law and the gospel men are placed under its authority more surely than they are in the verbal inspiration method. God's Word is seen as a living Word and men are called to a living faith. Second, this method is not embarrassed by human advancements in science, history or other disciplines. This method recognizes that the Biblical writers were men of a particular time, limited by the knowledge of their time. It is concerned only to maintain that we share the same basic faith as those ancients did regardless of a difference in world-views and thought forms. Thirdly, this method can allow the biblical exegete the freedom he needs in using whatever method is practical in getting at the meaning of the text. In short, this is a method which does not conflict with, nor depend upon, the other methods men may use to get at the truth about the world.

As far as I can see the greatest disadvantage of this method is that it seems to be so difficult to communicate. I suppose the reason for this lies partly in the fact that we have been schooled so long in the verbal inspiration method that we find it difficult to understand this method. As one of my students asked me the other day, "But is it possible to have only faith?" Invariably we seek some other kind of crutch, something else to believe, besides the gospel. But the difficulty with this method lies also in the nature of the method itself. The success of it rests entirely upon the ability to distinguish clearly between law and gospel, and as Luther warned, this is the most difficult task of all. Ultimately the success of it lies in the hands of the Holy

Spirit for he alone is master of this art and must teach each individual the truth in his own heart.

Finally, what is at stake in this conflict over method? Must we make a choice between them today? If so, why? I think we must. Many things are at stake in the conflict. I will single out just a few which are of immediate importance for our discussion here. First, there is the nature of faith. In the verbal inspiration method the impression is given that faith is a matter of believing a number of doctrines. They range from whether or not Adam and Eve were real people to whether or not hell is a place of physical torture. And then invariably the question is raised, "How many things do you have to believe in order to be saved, or to be a Christian?" Faith is immediately put on the defensive and is equated with the task of believing a number of "things." From the verbal inspiration method one invariably gets the wrong impression about faith. Faith is the living trust in God brought about through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You do not believe a number of things; you trust in him. This is clearly upheld only by the law-gospel method. Where the law and gospel are not clearly distinguished it is always the gospel which loses.

We are fighting for the restoration of the gospel. It must be made absolutely clear here that it is *not* dedication to historical-critical research, it is *not* dedication to science or any other human endeavor which decides the matter. It is purely and simply dedication to the gospel. For the twentieth century the burning question is the question "how do you know?" and one cannot compromise on this question today without compromising the gospel. It is not possible to hold both these methods today, or to compromise between them without compromising and hence distorting the gospel.

Secondly, the question of the basis for faith is at stake. The verbal inspiration method seems to believe that faith can be solidly based only if it is assured that scripture is without error, even in the most insignificant details. But how strong is this faith, really? In the face of the mounting human knowledge about the world and about scripture, this faith is only as strong as the will of the one who holds it to resist the advance-

ment of human knowledge. I have been around colleges and universities now long enough to know how strong this faith is in the majority of cases. Usually it simply withers and dies, for when a child has drummed into him over and over again that if it can be shown that there are errors in scripture then his faith is groundless, he is doomed. When we allow someone to continue in this assumption, we are in fact only pushing him out on a limb and inviting someone to saw it off. By this method we produce nervous and timid Christians who can maintain their faith only by cutting themselves off from the world. As far as I can see, it is absolutely imperative that we operate today with a method which enables us to face the world and to enter into a meaningful conversation with it. In this, it seems to me, the law-gospel method offers much more fruitful possibilities without sacrificing any of the essentials of the faith.

Thirdly, the very nature of preaching is at stake. The acid test for any method is its practical consequences. Here too the law-gospel method is the best one we can adopt. Under the influence of the verbal inspiration method, where faith may be understood as a matter of believing a number of doctrines, the sermon gets to be a kind of theological lecture in which doctrines are merely recited. The gospel becomes merely another doctrine which "is to be believed." The gospel then becomes another law, something which you have to do, something you have to believe. The sermon then becomes a recital of truths which you ought to believe and be "really sincere" about. If the parson has little imagination, the sermon is dull. If he is clever, he may spice it up with interesting stories and inspirational anecdotes. But in either case, neither the law nor the gospel is preached in its radical sense. Instead of the law, we are usually merely scolded for not supporting the church program; instead of the gospel we get psychological comfort for our laziness.

To me the greatest argument for the law-gospel method is the fact that it attempts to restore some vitality to the preaching of the church. The pulpit is not a story-telling forum, nor is it the place for scolding the congregation; it is the place for the proclamation of the Word of God as law and as gospel. The ultimate goal of the law-gospel method is the revitalizing

of the preaching of the church. This is one of the things that is at stake.

In summary, the law-gospel method is an attempt to recover the fundamental genius of the Reformation. It is the assertion that the Word of God can only be brought home to men through the preaching of the law and the gospel. In this preaching and in the hearing of it, the whole matter is decided. The only real purpose and the ultimate goal of this method is that the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the gospel, be restored to the church in a time when it has been confused with many other voices and virtually drowned out by them.