

GET THAT CAMEL'S NOSE OUT OF THE TENT!

By Pr. William P. Terjesen

We in the Missouri Synod believe unreservedly in the inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures and all that these words imply. We believe that Scripture is its own best interpreter. We do not countenance the idea that there are errors or true contradictions in the Bible. When we use the Bible we are confronted with the clear, consistent, true Word of God. This attitude about Holy Scripture has prevented the synod from going the way of most American denominations, and it has kept the liberals within the synod from straying too far from the holes they hide in when "the heat's on".

I was at a pastoral conference not long ago where I heard one of our theologians disparage the use of proof-texts and the practice of harmonizing apparent discrepancies in the Bible. (Using proof-texts means to prove the scripturalness of a doctrine on the basis of specific biblical texts, and to harmonize means to approach apparently discrepant passages in a way that does not violate the unity of Scripture.) Now one expects liberals and moderates to knock these things. Their theology is un-biblical and therefore cannot be supported by clear Bible texts. Their doctrinal perspective is best served by the assertion of disharmony in Scripture. However, when one hears this attitude coming from the mouth of conservative, confessional scholars, it is a cause of grave concern. We are playing into the hands of liberals, and flirting, perhaps ignorantly, with ideas that will ultimately mean our undoing.

Now, I admit that the use of proof-texts can be abused. The multitudes of cults and "isms" in our land abuse the Bible when they marshal their proof-texts. The heterodox churches in our land use proof-texts wrongly when defending their errors. For them there is an over-arching set of unscriptural presuppositions that governs the way they approach the Bible. For example, those who believe the philosophical, humanistic idea that "the finite cannot contain the infinite" will never be able to interpret the passages concerning the Lord's Supper properly, nor will they ever understand the full implications of the Incarnation. Even otherwise orthodox teachers mis-use proof-texts when they use them in a haphazard or lazy manner.

We use proof-texts properly when we pay careful attention to context and grammar; when we properly divide the law and the gospel; when we interpret obscure passages in the light of clear ones; when we pay careful attention to the analogy of faith and the Christological center of Scripture. Then our use of proof-texts provides a clear testimony that what we believe is based solidly on the rock of God's Word. This is the kind of testimony that assures faith and convinces the gainsayers. We need not content ourselves with a mere reference to the "overall message of the Bible". Our faith and doctrine are based on the testimony of specific and clear texts.

Make no mistake about it, liberals hate proof-texting because their vague theology cannot stand head to head with those whose theology based upon specific texts. And so they disparage proof-texting and thus insulate themselves from their own errors. Conservatives must not buy into this; we must not react defensively to current trends in "scholarship". Watching an otherwise confessional scholar build up and knock down the straw man of proof-texting is disconcerting. He is only playing into the hands of the enemy and doing nothing constructive.

We move on to harmonizing. Liberals have long asserted that there are many divergent "theologies" in the Bible and that conservatives have wrongly camouflaged these divergences in the interest of their belief in the inspiration and unity of Scripture. It is a favorite pastime of liberals to point out and exaggerate differences in the Gospels accounts to create the impression of contradiction and theological pluralism within the Bible. The supposition, I guess, is that if there is theological diversity in the Bible then there must also be "diversity" in the Church. They

want us to give up the notions of the unity of Scripture, and the unity of doctrine. Theological differences, they say, are not the result of sin and pride, but are built right in to the Bible, which can only be properly "interpreted" by professional (liberal) scholars. So let's all say, "Vive la difference", and obey the urge to merge.

Conservative, confessional Lutherans have always taught that there are no errors or contradictions in the Bible; that the message of the Bible is a unified, consistent message; and that there is but one theology in the Bible. Doctrinal differences between Christians are the result of sinful, prideful failure to heed the Word of God, and doctrinal controversies are caused, not by faithful Christians contending for the true biblical faith, but by errant Christians insisting on a place at the table for their errors. That said, conservatives have always recognized the presence of obscure passages in the Bible, as well as what we call apparent discrepancies (not actual errors). Conservatives have also always recognized that there are differences of emphasis and detail in the various gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, but they have always rightly asserted that these differences are not divergences or contradictions, but complementary accounts approaching the same facts from different angles resulting in a rich, compellingly consistent testimony.

The proper way, therefore, to handle apparent discrepancies in the Scriptures is to harmonize the discrepancies sensitively, in a way that does not violate the distinctive features of each passage, and in a way that is not fanciful or exaggerated. When we cannot do this, we humble ourselves before God's Word and await further information and the help of God in overcoming the "problem". We attribute the problem not to the Word of God, but to our own want of knowledge. We further recognize that some apparent discrepancies and difficulties (not errors) in the Bible were put there by the Holy Ghost possibly to foster humility in the Bible student. What we do not do is follow the liberals' lead in adopting an attitude that magnifies the distinctions, creates an impression of disunity and error, and undermines confidence in the integrity of God's Word.

Yes, there are many who have abused the practice of harmonizing. Most of us have seen various blendings the four gospel accounts into a single harmonized account, and have been underwhelmed by the result. We have read commentaries whose interpretations so blend the four gospel accounts that their distinctive perspectives are lost. We have all read or heard of "ingenius" solutions to various apparent discrepancies that were so fanciful that they actually magnified the problem. But abuse doesn't invalidate proper use. Since we rightly believe in the inspiration and unity of Scripture, our interpretation of Scripture must reflect that belief. Judicious and honest use of harmonizing is a proper response to our doctrine of Scripture.

Finally, conservative, confessional Lutheran scholars must engage in theological give and take with the theologians of the age, and they must use the tools of scholarship that have been made available to them. But they must do so remembering that many of those tools were produced, not by Bible believing scholars, but by liberal enemies of the true faith. St. Paul said, "Evil communications corrupt good manners," (1 Cor. 15) or as one modern version puts it, "Bad company corrupts good morals." It is not difficult to unknowingly adopt destructive attitudes toward Scripture through trafficking with the wrong scholars, much like our people watch their favorite sitcoms for entertainment and unwittingly adopt secular-humanist attitudes and ideas. The camel who's nose is in the tent tonight will probably be all the way in a few night's hence. Get that camel's nose out of the tent before he's in and you're out! Making a straw man out of proof-texting and harmonizing and then vanquishing him may be "cutting edge" stuff, but it's not the right stuff.