



THE  
LUTHERAN CHURCH  
Missouri Synod

Office of the President  
The Reverend Doctor Matthew C. Harrison  
President of the Synod

Easter tide 2019

Dear Saints of the LCMS,

Grace and peace to you in the name of the Risen Christ!

During the 2016 convention, a lay delegate proposed a resolution from the floor, requesting a group be formed at the mandate of the convention to deal with questions of the nature of “textual criticism.” As chair, I kindly requested the delegate withdraw his motion, asking the consent of the delegate, and essentially the body, to allow me to put together a team to address the issue.

A Synod Vice President and I had very positive outcomes in discussing and coming to resolution with a professor who had written a document that raised some concern and who graciously received our concerns as a humble churchman. Later, I decided to give the task of formulating a document on the topic to the staff members of our Commission on Theology and Church Relations (Rev. Dr. Joel Lehenbauer and Rev. Larry Vogel). Lehenbauer and Vogel accepted the assignment of providing a brief document for the Synod, (usable by pastors and church workers, but also by laity) which discusses the challenges of textual criticism as well as the limits of its use. These men consulted with a significant circle of theologians of the Synod in preparing the document presented below. I will deliver this document to the appropriate floor committee for the 2019 convention and ask them to compose an overture recommending the document to the Synod.

God grant us continued unity on the clarity, authority and inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures.

In Jesus,

***Pastor Matthew C. Harrison***

PRESIDENT, THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD



# Textual Criticism

In “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” (Part IV), The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod confesses belief in the inspiration, the saving purpose, authority and unity of Holy Scripture. Moreover,

With Luther, we confess that “God’s Word cannot err” (LC, IV, 57). We therefore believe, teach and confess that since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, they contain no errors or contradictions but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth.

We hold that the opinion that Scripture contains errors is a violation of the sola scriptura, for it rests upon the acceptance of some norm or criterion of truth above the Scriptures. We recognize that there are apparent contradictions or discrepancies and problems which arise because of uncertainty over the original text.

These words reveal the high view of Holy Scripture held by the LCMS. We hold to its inerrancy even though there is sometimes “uncertainty over the original text.” We acknowledge such uncertainty but do not exaggerate it. This in no way qualifies our church body’s unwavering conviction that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and “that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10:35” (*Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* [1932], § 1).

The “uncertainty over the original text” occurs because we no longer have access to the *original* source documents (or “autographs”) of the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT). For example, we do not have the original scrolls of the Pentateuch from Moses’ hand, or the first copy of the Gospel of John that the apostle himself wrote. The books of the Bible were written over a period of more than a thousand years by God’s OT prophets and NT apostles who “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 PETER 1:20–21). Their writings were inspired by God and are thus His very Word, but the autographs were not locked away in a vault for safe-keeping like some relic. They were not museum pieces, but writings that make people “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” since “All Scripture is breathed out by God and

profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 TIM. 3:15–16).

Old Testament and New Testament believers read them accordingly and shared them with others, having them hand-copied by scribes, preserving the texts and their saving Gospel even as fragile “paper” (papyrus) wore out from use. Texts of the Scriptures were hand-copied in various ways in the centuries before the printing press revolutionized the process. With the Hebrew OT, controls were developed by Jews concerning what text was copied and who copied it. With the Greek NT, there was a rapid and wide geographical dissemination of copies in the early centuries of Christianity. Various scribes copied from one document to another, reading one text as they wrote the next. At other times, a text was read aloud while more than one scribe prepared copies based upon what they heard.

Over a period of nearly 15 centuries after Christ, every copy of the Holy Scriptures, whether single documents like an epistle, or the entire collection of inspired writings bound together in the Bible, was a result of this laborious process. As a document is hand-copied by fallible men, change is inevitable: mistakes of the ear, the eye, and the hand happen. Here and there the scribe misses a line or misreads a word, writes unclearly, or assumes the document being copied has an omission or a mistake in grammar or spelling that he tries to correct. The result is a very limited “uncertainty over the original text.” But there is no uncertainty over the teachings of God’s Word — Scripture continues to provide instruction for salvation, for teaching, rebuking and correcting sin, and training in righteousness.

Thus, this “uncertainty” does not make the Bible we read unreliable. The thousands of virtually identical hand-written copies testify instead to biblical reliability! Despite the huge number of individual manuscripts, few textual variations make any difference in the meaning of a text and none disproves or undermines any Lutheran Christian doctrine. For example, no textual variant affects any of the Bible’s consistent teachings regarding the work of the Triune God: creating and sustaining all things, redeeming us in Christ Jesus, and bestowing faith by His Holy Spirit. No variant undermines or denies the saving power of the Gospel or the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. No variant brings into doubt, question, or uncertainty any doctrine revealed and taught clearly

elsewhere in Scripture. Indeed, rather than threatening any Christian doctrine, careful study of the ancient manuscripts reinforces the gracious way that the Holy Spirit preserves the inerrant truth of the Word of God and clearly shows that we have the substance of the wording of the original texts.

## What is textual criticism?

“Textual criticism” refers to the scholarly study of the ancient, handwritten copies of the autographs, to which we no longer have access. It compares the differences to determine the wording of the original document and to understand why variations appeared. Such textual criticism is necessary for all ancient documents, but textual criticism of the Bible is distinctive in several ways. The Bible is a collection of “books” or writings by many human authors, contained in two separate “testaments” from two time periods and primarily in two separate languages, with the Hebrew OT before and the Greek NT after the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, while a few ancient copies of the whole Bible exist from the fourth century after Christ, most of the copies of New Testament books, especially the oldest documents, are of only a single book or even fragments of a book. It is also noteworthy that because of the Exile and the Diaspora of Jews in the OT era and the growth of the church in the NT era, translations of portions of Scripture are sometimes older than copies written in the original language. Similarly, quotations of Scripture from early church teachers are also often older than manuscripts of the Bible. However, one also has to consider the textual history of these writings by early church teachers, since they too were copied over centuries.

Most textual questions have to do with the NT because there are far more NT than OT manuscripts. Where there are differences in manuscripts, decisions about the most likely reading of the original text are based on “external” and “internal” evidence. The criteria used to examine external evidence include preferences for earlier copies over later ones and for readings that reflect a wider geographical orbit rather than a narrower one. Another criterion is consideration of textual “families” — where a certain reading is shared by generations of manuscripts, often from a particular locale. The criteria used to evaluate the internal evidence seek to establish the reading which best explains how the others arose. The criteria include preferences for more difficult readings (that scribes may have thought required correcting), for shorter readings when a scribe may have added an “explanation,” and

for longer readings when a scribe may have skipped a line.

English translations of the Bible openly indicate the reality of textual criticism. For example, at the end of Matt. 1:7 which ends with “the father of Asaph,” the English Standard Version (ESV; a translation prepared by scholars committed to the inerrancy of Holy Scripture) includes a footnote saying: “Some manuscripts *Asa*, also verse 8.” *Asa* and *Asaph* are forms of a single name. This is the sort of minor variation in texts that is most common.

Another well-known example of a variation that is more troubling for some Christians occurs at the end of the Gospel of Mark. The ESV has this footnote:

Some manuscripts end the book with 16:8; others include verses 9–20 immediately after verse 8. A few manuscripts insert additional material after verse 14; one Latin manuscript adds after verse 8 the following *But they reported briefly to Peter and those with him all that they had been told. And after this, Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.* Other manuscripts include this same wording after verse 8, then continue with verses 9–20.

The question in Mark 16 is whether the original text included the material in verses 9–20. Nearly all NT scholars are convinced that Mark originally ended at verse 8, since the earliest copies of Mark end there. But the additional verses include the well-known verse we memorize from the Small Catechism: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (MARK 16:16). Several reassuring facts should be noted. First, even if the additional verses are not part of the original text, their absence does not threaten the Gospel’s assurance that Christ Jesus died and rose again, since that fact is affirmed in countless places in the Bible and also in Mark 16:1–8, nor does it change the Bible’s teaching about Holy Baptism or saving faith. Second, while the two oldest complete manuscripts of the NT do not include verses 9–20, these verses are included in the vast majority of all existing manuscripts and were included in the earliest translations of the NT and in the Bibles that were read and studied throughout most of church history. As Kurt and Barbara Aland, two prominent textual scholars, have said: “It is true that the longer ending of Mark 16:9–20 is found in 99 percent of the Greek manuscripts as well as the rest of the tradition, enjoying over a period of centuries practically an

official ecclesiastical sanction as a genuine part of the gospel of Mark” (*The Text of the New Testament*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987], p. 287). Third, the assertions of these verses are all corroborated by other NT verses and do not teach anything contrary to the rest of Scripture. Last, while the majority of scholars do not believe the verses were originally in Mark’s Gospel, there is no possibility to prove that they were not. Most certainly, the early generations of Christians that assumed they were part of Mark’s original document were not led astray in any way.

Another widely-recognized textual variant that many people have noticed occurs in John 7:53–8:11. Recent translations of the Bible note that these verses do not appear in some of the earliest biblical manuscripts. These verses relate the familiar and beloved story of how Jesus spared an adulterous woman who was about to be stoned. When Jesus is asked about her sin He replied, “Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone” (8:7). That this is not part of John’s original gospel manuscript seems certain. However, that does not mean that the event did not occur, since John himself notes that he is relating only a fraction of Jesus’ words and acts (JOHN 21:25) and many things were preserved by word-of-mouth (oral tradition) even though they were not written down early on. Moreover, the verses teach no new doctrine. Instead they echo the words and deeds of Jesus and have served to instruct and console Christians for centuries.

### How is textual criticism rightly used by faithful pastors and theologians?

While the term “criticism” may seem to imply a skeptical or negative attitude about a text (in the way we speak of criticizing something), it does not in and of itself carry such a nuance when it refers to textual criticism as described above. Textual criticism is unlike historical criticism, which *is* inherently skeptical about the truth of the Bible’s claims and openly rejects the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture. Textual criticism, rightly used, involves the careful study of Scripture in order to affirm its meaning. As a result, both of our seminaries instruct their students in the practice and value of textual criticism. Rather than creating skeptics, textual criticism encourages and attracts believing, careful, faithful scholars who practice this vital discipline because they faithfully hold to the Bible’s truth and authority. Indeed, the modern practice of textual criticism in the latter part of the nineteenth century was promoted and furthered by *conservative* biblical scholars who held to the historical and salvific reliability of the Bible.

Our Synod affirms the legitimacy of textual criticism, rightly used, because it does not hide from hard questions or challenges. As confessed above, “We recognize that there are apparent contradictions or discrepancies and problems which arise because of uncertainty over the original text.” (Note the word “apparent”!) Nevertheless, we know that the Gospel is the power of salvation and that the inerrancy and infallibility of Holy Scripture remains true because the Bible is God’s Word — His verbally inspired Word in every verse — and it continues to teach His truth. Therefore, the fact that we do not have the original autographs of the various books of the Bible does not prevent us from confessing the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture or lead us to qualify that confession.

Moreover, the so-called “problem” of textual criticism — the fact that there are thousands of biblical manuscripts — is actually reason for thankful confidence in Scripture. The multitude of manuscripts attest to the fulfillment of Christ’s promise that He would build His church, a testimony to the Holy Spirit’s gracious work in empowering the missionary growth of the Church throughout the ancient world, and of the steadfastness of the Church’s commitment to sharing the written Word of God as it planted new churches. And, as the Holy Spirit has preserved the Holy Scriptures through time, we can be confident that He will continue to do so as He enables faithful new translations of the Word of God that nurture new believers around the globe as faith takes root and grows on the solid foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ the cornerstone (EPH. 2:20). This reality is distinctive to Christianity and utterly different from the way false scriptures like the Koran or Book of Mormon are treated.

### Can textual criticism be misused?

Textual criticism can be practiced in a way that is detrimental. Textual scholars are themselves fallible, subject to biases that may become unintentional or unsubstantiated “criteria” for decisions they make. More dangerously, some textual critics may lose interest in establishing the original source text or may practice textual criticism while rejecting the Christian confession that the Bible is the Word of God. For example, Bart Ehrman, who is a thoroughgoing skeptic, practices a highly subjective form of textual criticism that assumes orthodox Christianity sought to change earlier texts to promote its own teaching in contrast to other forms of “Christianity,” which orthodox Christians deemed to be heretical. By his way of reasoning, establishing the

original text of the NT canonical texts is an impossible task and he promotes various non-canonical “gospels” and “epistles” from heretical teachers as vital to defining and understanding early “Christianity.”

Such a negative form of textual criticism often follows a trail of false logic. It begins with two truths. First, there is evidence of many small changes or disagreements among the manuscripts. Second, the differences go as far back as we can trace them historically. Then comes the false conclusion: “Therefore, far greater disagreements in the manuscripts must have been there — great enough to change or at least cast doubt on the teachings of the Christian faith!”

Such extreme and clearly erroneous misuses of textual criticism may not be an eminent threat to the LCMS, but we are not immune from other potential problems. All study of Scripture — the inspired, inerrant, saving Word of God — requires an attitude of

discipline and humility. Whenever scholars claim more for the conclusions of their scholarship than is valid, their pride is dangerous. This means we need continually to be aware of and on guard against overly subjective judgments also in textual study.

Ancient scribes who sought to “correct” the writings of apostles were, perhaps unwittingly, servants of pride. So also, contemporary textual critics and biblical scholars may sometimes — like all of us — serve their pride rather than the Holy Spirit. Yet, then as now, we give thanks that God works through fallible tools like textual criticism and other legitimate biblical scholarly disciplines in order to preserve and make known His infallible Word. We pray that the sacred text — the Holy Bible — would continue its ongoing work, making us, too, “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 TIM 3:15).