The Authority of the Scriptures

Paper by Dr. Jeffrey Kloha, delivered in an annual 2010 symposium in Concordia Seminary „The Scriptures: Formative or Formality?”

Let me tell you up front where I’m going today.

I will make four main arguments

1) Scripture is authoritative

2) In avoiding one error in talking about Scripture, the error of ignoring of the divine Word and its authority, we have fallen into another error – ignoring the Scripture as God’s Word in human words.

3) The way we have argued for, and taught our congregations about, that authority is no longer tenable given what we know about the formation of the canon and the manuscripts of the New Testament.

4) An accounting for the authority of the Scripture must be grounded in nothing other than the work of Jesus Christ, focused in his death and resurrection.

I’m becoming more and more convinced that all theology is biography. That is, theologians write about what they do using the arguments that they do because of their circumstances, contexts, opponents, and probably a host of other random occurrences. Reading Luther, for example, tells us a lot about theology, of course. But Luther wrote about what he did, using the methods and resources that he did, because of when he lived, what his background was, and who his opponents were. He spent a lot of time on the monks and monasteries – for obvious, even personal reasons. But monks and monasteries have not been the topic of any CTCR documents, nor I suspect, do they play a prominent role in the footnotes of the new CPH study Bible (nor the ESV study Bible, nor the Fortress one either).

So, I’m here to talk about the authority of Scripture. I will talk about in a certain way because of my context and situation. In fact, even my talking about it is the result of my own background. While an undergraduate at Concordia, Ann Arbor I took a class on New Testament Textual Criticism, taught by Jakob Heckert. As a class we took a field trip to the Harlan Hatcher graduate library at nearby University of Michigan, where we were shown the earliest extant manuscript of Paul’s letters, Papyrus 46, dated to around the year 200. Something of the romantic stirred in me. How cool, old stuff. Only 150 years after Paul wrote. Wouldn’t it be great to work with that kind of stuff. That field trip would be the first of many visits to the rare book room of that library, where I became known by face to the head librarian. And, some twenty years later, that same manuscript became a major focus in my dissertation on the text of 1 Corinthians.

A second defining event that has affected how I think about this topic is a task I was assigned as a reference desk worker in the Concordia Seminary library during my
STM year. A set of unpublished translations of writings of Hermann Sasse were in the libraries holdings. But these translations were on yellowed, brittle paper in fading, purple mimeograph ink. So, a secretary in the library was given the task of typing up the essays on a computer, and I was assigned to proofread them. Now, I had read a good deal of Sasse in my systematics classes, but on topics like the sacraments, the church, ecumenical issues. But I had not been assigned anything by Sasse on Scripture. Yet here was a box full of essays by Sasse on Scripture, which apparently Concordia Publishing House did not want to touch. A scandal. A hidden archive. Ooohhh (I’m trying to make this sound like the Davinci Code, in case you’re wondering). These were published, along with an essay that I wrote for an independent study class for Dr. Feuerhahn, by the Seminary Press in 1995. I mention this because there are a billion of these left over, and we’re selling them during the symposium at a discount. Go buy one. Or three.

Where these two seemingly random events come together is in the doctrine of Scripture. Or rather, more specifically, how we talk about and defend the authority of Scripture. I was puzzled even as a student by the way the Pieper’s dogmatics approached the topic. CTCR documents, which as we learned yesterday are useless, did not help much, and if anything else failed to take into account issues of text and canon that had arisen since the early 20th century (let alone the 16th). The answer to the problem of Scripture’s authority, it seemed to me, was expressed rather straightforwardly: The Bible says it is theopneustos. Therefore it is perfect, infallible, inerrant. Its authority is derived solely from its divine source. Some human role might be acknowledged in the process of writing, but this is very quickly minimized so that the human authors are merely “pens” or “strings on a lyre” – completely passive, adding (and taking away) nothing from the divine word. So all you are left with is divine, perfect, inerrant, infallible, Word of God.

Sasse did not talk about inspiration and inerrancy in this way. He certainly struggled with the topic, changed his mind, regretted things he had written, even publicly withdrew one essay. And, troublingly to a young seminarian, he criticized pretty much everything the Missouri Synod ever wrote on the topic, from Pieper to the Brief Statement to Engelder to Scharlemann to various official study documents produced in the 60s. No wonder CPH never published his material on Scripture. But I found Sasse to be helpful, scriptural, confessional. And I was surprised to hear my professors, back in the day, say many of the same kinds of things that Sasse was saying about scripture. But, at the advice of wise Dr. Feuerhahn, I confined my work on Sasse while a student time to a historical survey of his writings on the topic; I did not evaluate his theology. And then, I was called by a congregation, then the seminary where I took up again studying manuscripts of the New Testament, and left the doctrine of Scripture to the Systematicians. But, of course, systematicians don’t have all the answers, and the problem of biblical authority in the light of the uncertainty of the canon and text has received even more attention in recent years, with Davinci Code, the discovery of the Gospel of Judas, Bart Ehrman’s Misquoting Jesus, and so on. The way that we reacted to these, it seemed to me, was not always very helpful, or scriptural, or Lutheran.

So Sasse on Scripture has never been far from my thinking, nor indeed, I must admit, from the way that I talk about scriptural authority in the classroom. I’ve found useful a parallel that Sasse often used when discussing Scripture:
“And likewise it has been recognized that, corresponding to the doctrine of Christ’s person, both the true divinity and the true humanity of the one Holy Scripture must be asserted . . . everything is divine and everything is human. Just as Christology since the Council of Chalcedon has to steer a course between the Scylla of Nestorianism and the Charybdis of Monophysitism, even so the doctrine concerning the Holy Scripture must be careful not to suffer shipwreck on the cliffs of a rationalistic, history-of-religion’s understanding of the Scripture and a super-naturalistic, docetic understanding of the Scripture. The Holy Scripture is God’s Word. The Holy Scripture is man’s word. But the Word of God and the word of man are not two Holy Scriptures – perhaps, someone might say, the kernel in the Bible which might be designated God’s Word – but one Holy Scripture. This self-same one Holy Scripture is complete, unabridged Word of God, and complete, unabridged word of man, not a mixture of the two, not a synthesis which a person can again separate.”

In other words, the Scriptures, their authority and their use, must be understood to entail both the divine and the human, God’s Word in Human words.

Now, before I get proceed further I want to repeat the first of my arguments, actually, it is merely an assertion: The Scriptures are authoritative. I know that as I move along through this paper it will sound to some of you like I am denying their authority; that is not the case. What I am attempting to do is to lay an accounting for the authority of the Scriptures that recognizes both their divine source and purpose and their human nature.

So, in The Rite of ordination, candidates are asked—I was asked: “Do you believe the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice?”

To this I did, and still do answer, yes.

Now this question asks a great deal of the candidate. It is not only a “doctrinal” question, but asks the candidate if his teaching, preaching, and life will be guided solely and unquestionably by these writings (and no other). Will you conduct your service as slave of Christ and servant of this congregation based on this book?

I would note only in passing at this point that the books are not listed. It only asks about “the canonical books.” The list of books that are canonical and infallible would be different for Martin Chemnitz than the list that we would produce today, for example. And while this question asks a great deal of the candidate, it does not go into a great deal of detail about exactly why or how to use this inspired Word of God. There are a lot of blanks to be filled in, and we fill them in many different ways. But, I want to make clear from the beginning that the confession of the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God given by the Spirit through the prophets and apostles and the only source and norm for faith and life is not in question, is not what I am challenging in this essay. What I am challenging is the manner in which we account for the inspiration and authority of Scripture. We have an accounting that is neither specifically Christian, nor rooted in either Christ or His Holy Spirit; neither is our account plausible or persuasive in our present context, and we have left our hearers, our congregations, the people of God vulnerable to anti-Christian apologetics and argumentation. That is to say, by insisting on a certain way of talking about the
Scriptures, we have not described them as they are nor in a way that points to the *solus Christus*.

Now, my second point: In avoiding one error in talking about Scripture, the error of ignoring of the divine Word and its authority, we have fallen into another error – ignoring the Scripture as God’s Word in human words.

Having the pure, prefect Word of God sure is convenient. Because then it becomes quite easy to ignore all the messy context and setting and assume that God is speaking directly to me. On a lark, I googled the phrase, “Inspirational Bible verses.” The first link was to a page called, appropriately enough, “Inspirational Bible verses: Real. Powerful. Timeless.” You can guess where this is going to go. What are some of these verses? “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9 Awesome. What a promise. Now I can go ahead and do that presentation at my job tomorrow, and God will give me power, and go with me all the way to my new promotion. Forget Joshua, leading the chosen people into the promised land. This passage is for me. If you don’t like that one, you can clink on some of the links on the side of the page: Comfort Bible verses; Confidence Bible verses; Blessings Bible verses; and verses for all occasions: Bible verses for graduation; Babies Bible verses; Bible verses for birthdays; and if you can’t get a date, Dance Bible verses. If you have a big football game you click on sports verses: “‘For the Lord your God is going with you! He will fight for you against your enemies, and he will give you victory!’” Amen. Forget that God is speaking to Israel upon entering the promised land in Deuteronomy, and that the enemies are worshippers of false gods who would corrupt Israel and cause them to be unfaithful to the covenant. And that “victory” is not putting more points on the board, but putting people to death.

The only way to have Real. Powerful. Timeless. Verses is if they are perfectly divine. And if they are perfectly divine, that is, God’s pure Word and truth, then it does not matter if they were spoken to Joshua, or Israel, or that they didn’t have birthday parties or graduations or baby showers in Corinth. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. And I get to pick what things I want to do.

I’m assuming this web site was not developed by an LCMS Lutheran (though I can’t guarantee that, and unfortunately it would not surprise me were that the case. But we are guilty of it, too. Some examples: “Bring in the full tithe” . . . “test me in this, says the Lord, and see if I do not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down a blessing.” Ever used that for a stewardship sermon? I have to preach on this text in chapel here on campus in a few weeks – to seminarians. Get out your pencils, figure out your 10%. Test him in this. Then he will open the heavens and pay off your student loans. When you preached on this text, did you point out that the “you” is Israel, not an individual or a giving unit? Did you point out that the house where the tithes are brought in is the Temple, not your budget? Did you point out that one of the blessings promised, as the next verse in Malachi 10 says, is that the locusts will stop devouring your plants?
Now, some of this, to be sure, is laziness, sloppy exegesis, etc. But these are born out of, made possible, by a view of Scripture that assumes that these are God’s pure, perfect, powerful word.

Allow me to give a theological example, and this relates more directly to our topic. “All Scripture is God-Breathed.” It’s been running across the screen in Werner Auditorium for the last couple of days. This is the decisive proof for the divine nature of Scripture, the a priori, ultimate and unquestionable statement that everything in this book is from God. Okay, but only if this is a completely divine, and not human passage. For if God said it, then the Scriptures are inspired, all of them. But of God said it through the Apostle Paul to Timothy, who from infancy has know the sacred writings. When Timothy was an infant there were no letters of Paul written, let alone considered authoritative. There were no gospels. “All Scripture” in 1 Tim 3 refers only to what we now call the Old Testament, whatever the exact limits and contours of the that was in the early 60s AD. In fact, every passage we use to prove the divine source and authority of the Scriptures refers to – and only to – the Old Testament. John 10:35 The Scriptures cannot be broken. 2 Peter 1:21 – No prophecy of Scripture comes from the will of man. Unless these passages dropped out of the sky like the book of Mormon, or cam like water through a pipe like the Koran, then they say nothing about the source and authority of the New Testament.

Some years ago, I was asked to speak at the district theological conferences the took place in the wake of the “Yankee Stadium” event, this one in the Florida Georgia District. After the presentations, participants were invited to submit questions – anonymously, that we presenters were asked to answer. The only question I remember is this: Well, it is actually an admonishment. The slip of paper said: “You keep saying, incorrectly, “Paul wrote.” This destroys the authority of Scripture. You should say, “God said.” Keep in mind, the text I was asked to cover was eating in temple dining rooms, buying food at markets, going to idol temples, and eating in unbelievers homes in 1 Corinthians 8-10. And I was attempting, I hope successfully, to sort through how the resolution to these problems that we have very little experience will give us – shape us – to live out our life together in ways that are guided and directed by these texts That, apparently was not good enough. In order for the Scriptures to be authoritative, I could not talk about Paul, nor his rhetoric, or flow of argument, or personal example in the entirety of 1 Corinthians 9 – Frankly, it borders on the absurd – does God say, “do we not have the right to take along a wife”? Doesn’t Paul say that? And yet it is still the Word of God?

On the other side is a denial of the divine. This, I think, we have less problem with. We have been trained in the LCMS to sniff out any hint of a playing down of the divine source and authority of Scripture.

The consequences of accepting only a human side of scripture is evident in the way that the ELCA has dealt with matters such as homosexuality and clergy. The most recent document, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” adopted by the Aug, 2009 Church wide Assembly, ignores the two clear NT references in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6, as well as any reference to the behavior in the Old Testament. They apparently have nothing to say to the topic. Why not? Go back to the “Background Essays on Biblical Texts” from a 2003 Task Force of the ELCA. I quote:
“the remaining passages speak clearly of same-gender sexual relationships as inherently prohibited. . . . The relationships are themselves “against nature” and contrary to the will of God expressed in creation from the beginning. Other interpreters—on reading the texts with care also—conclude, however, that the same passages pose challenges. Those in Leviticus seem to be the clearest at the purely descriptive level, but as the discussion above has shown, some interpreters question their relevance beyond their time and place.”

Notice the two moves: One, all biblical interpretation is contingent on human readers, and therefore we cannot derive any authoritative meaning from texts; Two, they have no relevance “beyond their time and place” There is nothing “divine,” the texts are entirely humanly contingent, therefore they have no authority and no role in the this church’s discussion of the homosexuality issue.

So how do we avoid “Purpose-Driven Life” Style exegesis, but at the same time avoid passing off everything in the Scriptures as unclear, opaque, unusable, and irrelevant. Sounds like a seminary professor.

Before I propose an answer, on to my third point, which must also be incorporated into our accounting for the authority of Scripture: The problem of the text and canon of the Scriptures. My thesis is this: The way we have argued for, and taught our congregations about, that authority is no longer tenable given what we know about the formation of the canon and the manuscripts of the New Testament.

Allow me to start with Sasse:

“In the conflicts between Fundamentalism and Modernism our sympathy belongs with those who fight for the truths of the ancient Christian faith, and if we had to choose between the two, we have no doubt as to where our sympathy would lie. But this sympathy with the Fundamentalists dare not hinder us from recognizing that Modernism is the natural, legitimate child of Fundamentalism, even as nothing seems to happen more swiftly than the conversion of a Fundamentalist to extreme Modernism, at least among our young people”

Sasse wrote this in 1951, and some 44 years later Bart Ehrman describes his conversion, as a young man, from Fundamentalism to Modernism:

Ehrman: “If one wants to insist that God inspired the very words of scripture, what would be the point if we don’t have the very words of scripture? . . . this became a problem for my view of inspiration, for I came to realize that it would have been no more difficult for God to preserve the words of scripture than it would have been for him to inspire them in the first place. If he wanted his people to have his words, surely he would have given them to them. . . The fact that we don’t have the words surely must show, I reasoned, that he did not preserve them for us. And if he didn’t perform that miracle, there seemed to be no reason to think that he performed the earlier miracle of inspiring those words. . . Before this—starting with my born-again experience in high school, through my fundamentalist days at Moody, and on through my evangelical days at Wheaton—my faith had been based completely on a certain view of the Bible as the fully inspired, inerrant word of God. Now I no longer viewed
the Bible that way. The Bible began to appear to me as a very human book. (Ehrman, 11).

This book by Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, caused a rather large stir in evangelical circles, and among some in the LCMS as well. It was a big hit. NY Times bestseller in religion, Ehrman made appearances on both Colbert and John Stewart. Just two weeks ago I saw another book blurb of someone writing yet another response to Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus*. I read the description. I won’t be following that guy’s line of argumentation.

Why is Ehrman so successful? Why does having a complete mess of the text and canon of the Scriptures cause us no end of consternations, and even provoke outrage? I would submit that it is because our tradition does not have an adequate accounting for the authority of Scripture.

We have answered the question as dogmaticians. Scripture is “inspired” (usually with reference to 1 Tim 3:16). And so we already know that it has a divine origin and authority. Quenstedt, for example, in the 17th century, argued: "Although inspiration and divine authority inhered originally in the autographa, these attributes belong to the apographa [copies] by virtue of their derivation, since they were faithfully transcribed from them so that not only the sense but also the words were precisely the same.” That is to say, the inspiration of the Spirit guaranteed the authority of the original, and the copies are very, very close to the original. Problem is, Quenstedt was writing at a time when scarcely anyone looked at copies. There were no Greek New Testaments with critical apparatuses. There were no competing editions, all Greek New Testaments were essentially reprints of the Textus Receptus. Quenstedt could assume that, if there was a problem with the copies, then those problems were not significant enough to cause any trouble. Interestingly, still today I see people defending the authority of Scripture by claiming that the copies are not a problem. But Robert Preus notes that Quenstedt's statement is rather uninformed. “There is certainly reason to doubt that he, like Hollaz, was aware of the of the fact of variant readings among the manuscripts. . . The dogmaticians of the seventeenth century were scarcely informed and were not especially interested in the subject of textual criticism.” 4 If we pretend it is not a problem, then we can stick to our tight formulations: We have a perfect text, and therefore we have a perfect Word of God.

Some 250 years later, however, we find the same argumentation in Pieper’s *Dogmatics*. He starts with the assertion that the integrity of the biblical text is assured both *a priori* (that, is on the basis of passages such as John 8:31-32 and 17:20, where Jesus urges his disciples to “remain in my word”), and *a posteriori*, that no doctrine, and I emphasize that he states that no doctrine, rather than the meaning of any individual passage, has been affected by the variant readings. In the end, the autographs are inspired and authoritative and the copies, with their variants, are not. This assertion is made to preserve inspiration, but are the autographs available to us? Pieper does not wish to answer this question; instead he falls back on the argument that we have “a reliable text, or in other words (was dasselbe ist), the authentic
doctrine of the Apostles and Prophets” (p. 239). Suddenly, text morphs into doctrine. This is backed up with the statement, common among conservative theologians, that no doctrine is affected by the variants in the manuscripts. Again, quoting Pieper: “Compare the newer critical editions . . . with the textus receptus . . . and you will be completely cured of the fear that the collection of many thousands of variant readings which modern textual criticism has recorded demand a change in a single Christian doctrine.” (p. 239) As true as some may think that statement to be (and I will demonstrate shortly that it is not) all we are left with is a text that gets us close enough for doctrine, but we do not have a text which we can consider inspired – because only the autographs are inspired. But then, is the text open on my desk still inspired? And if not, how can it be authoritative? Haven't we in fact lost our inspired text? And what if we find more copies, with more variants, and pretty soon all of our sedes doctrinae for a given locus are called into question? This slipperiness of moving between doctrine and text, autograph and copy, depending on the argument, leads both to confusion and, more importantly, an uncertainty as to whether or not the text in front of me is authoritative.

This was not only Pieper. In 1944 Theodore Engelder, another dogmatics professor at Concordia Seminary, wrote Scripture Cannot be Broken: Six Objections to Verbal Inspiration Examined in the Light of Scripture. Thirteen pages of this book are spent on what he labels, “The variant reading sophistry.” That is, “Because we have no reliable Bible text . . . consequently, verbal inspiration must go by the board.” (p. 181). Like Pieper, he concludes, “The fact that our copies offer a multitude of variant readings has no bearing on the thesis that everything written by the holy writers was verbally inspired and remains verbally inspired. We insist that these two matters be kept separate.” (p. 182). Now, this presents an obvious problem. We have no original manuscript. Engelder acknowledges this, though he dismisses the problem by analogy: The laws of the land are effective and in force, even though very few have actually read the original laws as passed by the legislature. So, he says, “The Bible did not lose its force, its authority, the divine power of its words, through its transmission to us by way of written or printed copies.” (p. 192).

It is Quenstedt, and Pieper, and Engelder – or rather people who view Scriptural authority in the way that they do – who Ehrman was addressing in his book. And it is those same people, the people in our pews, who have been taught by us, whose faith has been rocked to the core by Ehrman and his manuscripts, and Elaine Pagels and her gnostic gospels, and by the gospel of Judas, and by the Davinci Code. To use Sasse’s metaphor, we have avoided shipwreck on the cliffs of a rationalistic, history-of-religion’s understanding of the Scripture only to crash into the rocks of a supernaturalistic, docetic understanding of the Scripture.

So what we know about the formation of the canon and the manuscripts of the New Testament? And can we fit this into our accounting for the authority of the Scriptures as the Word of God?

Fasten your seatbelts, because I suspect that this will not make you happy.
Quenstedt, Pieper, Engelder all worked with the assumption that there never was really any question about the extent of the canon, that the original text of the Scriptures is inspired, and that the copies were not a problem. And we, you and I, work with the assumption, or maybe the untested hope, that what we have in our BHS and our Nestle-Text is pretty darn close to the original text. At least close enough that we don’t have to worry about it. That the 66 books we always find in our Bibles, always in the same order, were always there. That is to say – and forgive me if I’m exaggerating, but I don’t think it is by much – Paul wrote a letter to, say, Rome. The Spirit guided him in this process, and when Rome got this letter it was evident immediately that what they had in their hands was, indeed, not merely the words of Paul, but the Word of God. They took this letter and preserved it, and in their contacts with other churches discovered that they, too, had received wonderful, powerful, indeed inspired letters from Paul. They put their best people to work copying these priceless documents, and soon not only the letters but also four gospels were received and put together into what we now call the Bible.

Some of that actually happened, except everything after “Rome got this letter.” Let me start with the issue of the “original text” and “Inspiration.” We conceive of inspiration as a single act whereby the Spirit causes a human author to write down the Word of God, so that what leaves the pen of, say, Luke, is inspired and therefore perfect. We do this because we live in a print culture where authors write a draft, send it to the publisher, and then it is published. This might take some time, of course, but you have the writing, and then you have the, single final draft that get duplicated by the printing press. This is how you make books, the biblical authors are making books – add the Holy Spirit to the mix and now you have a way to make the autographs inspired and authoritative.

But is this how writing a book took place in the ancient world? One act of writing, one draft, and then a copied edition. We now know that this is not the case for writing books in the ancient world; in fact, even recent texts do not have a perfect original.

Gettysburg Address:

Washington Monument edition:

that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

There are two drafts in Lincoln’s hand, given to secretaries before and the day of the speech at Gettysburg. In both, instead of “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom” reads, “that the nation, shall have a new birth of freedom” – no “under God. The three versions that were written for various publishers, however, all read “under God.” One was sent by Lincoln to an editor for publication shortly thereafter, one was sent to a friend, which is the only copy actually signed by Lincoln. So what is the original “Gettysburg Address.” We have five autographs. And what did Lincoln actually say that day in Gettysburg? And is it what he said that is authoritative? Or what he wrote? And if so, which one?
Now, lest we think that this has nothing to do with the Scriptures, it is worth rehearsing what the act of “publishing” would have been in the Greco-Roman world. First, there is no book trade, there are no publishers, no bookstores, no editors, no Amazon.com. Second, while we might conceive of the act of writing as a single action: Me, sitting down with my laptop, tapping away, saving, printing, revising, and then submitting to a prof, a publisher, an editor. I get the proofs back from the publisher, re-read them carefully, send them off. And then, poof, a book. A “first edition,” an original text.

Not so in the ancient world. First, compositions were not written to be sold, to be published, to be read by a wide audience. Books were written for friends, benefactors, patrons— not for a general public. And— and this will be completely foreign to us— the printed form is not the intended version. For books were not read, they were performed. Take a look at Luke, for example. He “compiles a narrative” – he doesn’t “write an essay” for Theophilus. In this age where TV, radio, DVD, and internet do not consume our eyeballs, entertainment consisted in hearing. And books were written to be performed. Some, perhaps in one sitting; some in several sittings. After the first performance was over several copies would be made— for the patron, for close friends. And that’s it. Once the performance occurred and copies were made the text was completely out of the hands of the author. His friend or patron could choose to have additional copies made and passed around. Or they may choose not to. Now, keep in mind in all this— if the author has a performance copy of his text, then the actual performance, and finally the post-performance, perhaps cleaned-up copy, which one is the original? To use our theological terminology, which one is “inspired”? The draft? The performed version? The revised version? And if we choose the revised version, which of the three or four copies— all of which, inevitably, will be different from one another— words will be added or omitted, phrasing will be different. Which of the three or four hand-made artifacts is the one that is “inspired.”?

Or consider Paul’s letters. Take the letter to the Romans. Paul wrote this to a church that he did not begin. He had never been to Rome. He writes a letter hoping to establish connections and forge a partnership for his continued mission work in the west, so he lays out his theology for the church in Rome. Will you support me when I go and preach this good news of God saving his people, Jew and Gentile, and giving us new life in the Spirit. He dictates— to Tertius— the letter. What the precise relationship between Paul the author and Tertius the scribe is must remain unclear. Did Tertius take shorthand, then write it out in longhand, cleaning up a few things along the way, then give the proofs to Paul for a final check before making several clean copies? One of these copies would go to Rome, one would be kept in Paul’s files. Perhaps one or two would go to others who were interested in the work. Which of those three or four are “inspired”? And the letter was not received in Rome by FedEx and then printed in the church newsletter. It was read, out loud, in the assembly, by Paul’s delegate, the person sent to carry and deliver the letter. Furthermore, Romans presents a rather difficult problem, for there are in fact two forms of Romans— one ends at chapter 14; lacking is the discussion of Paul’s plans to visit Rome and his request for funds, and chapter 16, which are the endless personal greetings that Paul extends to people in the church in Rome whom he has met elsewhere. It makes sense that Paul would not bother sending those two chapters to other churches or individuals. So which version is “inspired”? The one he sent to
Rome? Or the one who wanted read by other people – which is therefore functioning more like a normative Scripture? And were there other changes in the text of the first 14 chapters? The manuscripts we have today suggest that there were. So which was inspired?

My point in all this is that to speak of a single act of inspiration which produces a single normative text, and that this single, inspired text is clearly distinguishable from the “copies,” is entirely unhistorical. Our dogmaticians are basing their argumentation on a reconstruction that is not historically defensible. I am not trying to impute false motive to the dogmaticians; so far as I can tell they never considered what the act of writing a letter, or gospel narrative, let alone Psalter or Book of the 12 would have looked like.

This is not some bizarre, out there kind of thinking about texts in the ancient world, however. Your Greek New Testament for all its careful gathering and sifting of data from thousands of manuscripts and early translations and citations in the writings of the church fathers does not claim to represent “the original text” of the New Testament.

The preface to the 26th edition of the Nestle-Aland (1979) text proclaimed that it was, in that printing, the original text of the New Testament. Quite a claim, even for a German. Even if many New Testament scholars were relieved that they didn't need to worry about textual criticism any longer, No longer are editors proposing to produce the "original text" of the New Testament. Rather, the editorial goal now is to produce what is labeled the "Ausgangstext", or in English, the "Initial Text." This reconstructed text is not "what left the pen of the author" (even if that is actually what took place in the first century). Rather, the editors are reconstructing the text from which all existing copies derive. This is a significant change. No longer are the editors proposing to have reconstructed, say, the letter Paul sent to Rome. Rather, they are reconstructing the form of Romans that became part of the Corpus Pauline sometime by the end of the first century, and from which all extant manuscripts derive. In the case of the gospels this becomes even more problematic, for if the goal of this edition is to reproduce the text of, say Mark, they will be reconstructing the text of Mark as it was transmitted in the four gospel codex, from which virtually all of our gospel manuscripts derive. Not being reconstructed is the text of Mark as it existed in the first century, let along "as it left the pen of the author." This has a profound impact on how we view the text that is sitting in front of us as we teach and preach. Is it "the Word of God"? Or is it the form of the New Testament that existed in the second century, or even later?

So if we want to claim that this is the original text, we are making a claim that the people that produced the text do not make about it. We can comfort ourselves with our dogmatic formulations based on a, single, original text, and repeat those formulations to our hearers, but soon enough there will be another Bart Ehrman or Gospel of Judas or History Channel show that will destroy the basis for our argument. And their faith, based as it is at least partly on Scripture – perhaps in place of Christ – is shaken. Certainty is lost, because we have instructed them to place their faith in our hypothetical reconstruction, which is not based in history nor, ultimately, in the one who works in history.
So to my final point: 4) An accounting for the authority of the Scripture must be grounded in nothing other than the work of Jesus Christ, focused in his death and resurrection.

To this point we have not talked about Jesus. So try this one on:

Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

All Scripture is theopneustos

What is the relationship between the two? Is there any?

What Bart Ehrman is knocking down is the second statement: All Scripture is theopneustos, but his argument is successful only if you do not have the first statement. Let me explain.

The second statement is able to be knocked down without the first because change a word and you have the same thing that the Koran says about itself, or the Book of Mormon says about itself. We claim that the Bible is the Word of God, Islam claims that the Koran is the Word of Allah. We claim that the Bible is inspired, the Muslim claims that the Words of God came to Mohammed like water goes through a pipe. We can exegete passages to prove that the Bible does not err, the Muslim can exegete passages of the Koran to prove that it does not err. Heck, you don’t even need the exegetical gymnastics that we sometimes need to get this out of the Koran, “It (the Koran) is an invincible book. Falsehood does not invade it neither from before it nor from behind it, a revelation from Allah Almighty, He be praised.” (Koran 41:41-42).

So if many religions make truth claims about their holy book, and can cite passages from Divine Books that claim Divine origin and authority, how do you decide which one is right? It is not the “claims” no matter how often we repeat or how fervently we believe them that make them true, or persuasive. How are our claims persuasive in a pluralistic culture, persuasive to our people?

Again to Sasse: “The Word of God, which is entrusted to the church, does not exist in a void, but is proclaimed in the concrete world of humans and people. . . However, this is a world full of genuine or alleged revelations, a world full of a thousand holy scriptures, which are regarded by their respective adherents as true revelations but dismissed by their opponents as demonic fraud and sole destroying error. One cannot urge theology, true theology without appropriating knowledge of this world and its history – the complete history of that which has taken place between God and humanity. . . As the eternal Son of God was a true historical man without ceasing to be God, so it belongs to the essence of the divine word of revelation that it was spoken by humans in time, proclaimed by human mouths, written by human hands, and is truly human words, without ceasing to be God’s eternal, infallible and imperishable Word.”

What kind of God do you end up with, if you have a God who will not involve himself on history, time, humanity? He stand above and distant from the imperfection of this world? You end up with Allah – Allah does not become flesh. He does not enter into this world. He does not sacrifice himself for his people. He is perfect, and
he demands perfection. You do not ask for his love, you simply give him your obedience, because he is perfect, and we are not. Or, you end up with a gnostic worldview, where the only thing that really matters is the “spiritual”, and the physical of this world is either avoided or, in an American context, indulged, because it doesn’t really matter what we do with our bodies, the only thing that will determine my future is my “spirituality.” Since anything of this world – any text in this world – is merely human, all religions lead to the same place, to the same non-worldly, spiritual place.

I hesitate to put it this way, but I since this is a safe place for theological discussion, I see very little difference between what the Lutheran dogmatic tradition focuses on in its view of Scripture assumes the “finitum non capax infinitum” of the Reformed tradition, present obviously in Warfield but ultimately expressed, ironically, in Barth and Bultmann as well as underlying Islam and gnosticism. What is genuinely Lutheran – creedal, Scriptural, in our way of talking about the authority of Scripture?

A line from Luther’s Bondage of the Will that Sasse turned to again and again helps focus this: Tolle Christum e scripturis, quid amplius in illis invenies” – Take Christ out of the Scriptures, what more will you find in them? Jesus is that around which the Scriptures cohere. Pull the Jesus brick out of the building, and the building crumbles. It has no meaning.

And where Christ is, there is the Holy Spirit. And where the Holy spirit is, there is Christ. (That’s Luther again, BTW). How do I “know” that it is inspired? I can offer several claims. But the decisive

This is why the Koran is not Word of God. Because Allah has not acted in history, except to speak. All you have is Mohammed, and his word. Call it inspired call it perfect. It is not Word of God. It is why the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Thomas is not Word of God. Because all of them take you out of history, to gods who have no power to change history. But God, the father who raised him our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead has acted in history. Decisively.

This is precisely where the New Testament locates his authority – not on its perfection, not on its origins, but on an event:

“The good news that I announced to you, which you also received, in which you also stand, through which also you are saved by this word that we announced to you, if you hold fast – unless part from this you believed uselessly. For I passed on to you as of first importance, which you also received: that Christ Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried and that he rose from the dead on the third days in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared – to Cephas, the twelve, more than 500, James, the apostles, last of all to Paul. . . And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ.”

On what do we stand? What was passed down, and received? A message, good news, about what Jesus did. He died for out sins, he was put into a tomb, and he came out alive again three days later, and he appeared – again, and again, and again. Most of this, you notice, sounds like the Creed, a summary of God’s Trinitarian work.
Jesus did something. He died and rose from the dead. This is what you stand on. The announcement of this event is the word that saves you.

But there is death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians – explicitly. There is death and resurrection in Mark – explicitly. There is death and resurrection even in the Old Testament – implicitly. Notice that phrase “Christ Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” Nowhere in the Old Testament – the Scriptures, for Paul – does the meshiak die for anyone’s sins. Nowhere in the Old Testament does the meshiak rise from the dead on the third day. There are no “words” of God in the Old Testament that say that, yet Paul is able to claim that this historical event, which people saw with their own eyes, is foreseen in the “words” – perhaps “meaning”? of the Old Testament. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days – this is the “sign” of Jonah, which points to the resurrection of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus did not happen because the Scriptures had predicted that they would, the Scriptures find their meaning – their authority – in the death and resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus had not risen, not only would your faith be in vain, but you would not be reading the Old Testament. Even more, if Jesus had not risen from the dead, your New Testament would be useless. Paul would have nothing to preach. He would have no basis for a proclamation of new life in Christ. There would be no 1 Corinthians. There would be no Luke. There would be no New Testament. There would be no announcement of Good News. There would be no Bible.

The resurrection is not just a logically necessarily prior event to the Scriptures – If Jesus had not risen, there would have been no reason to announce the good news, and to write it out. There would be no Paul, and no letters of Paul, without the resurrection, of course.

But the resurrection is also a theologically necessary event to the Scriptures – if Jesus had not risen, these words, no matter their source, could not give life. Without the resurrection of Jesus, even the Bible itself would be nothing other than the Koran, or the book of Mormon. A book, with claims of a divine source, which you simply have to accept because of the claims it makes about itself about its divine, outside of this world source, and because it does not participate in the imperfections of this world.

But Christ Jesus has risen from the dead, the first fruits – the down payment. He rises with a body – a swma – that can be recognized by friends; that can start a fire on the beach; that can eat a piece of broiled fish, crunching oily fish bones between his resurrected teeth – and presumably digesting, with his resurrected intestines, this slimy piece of the old creation; he has hands and feet that still have holes that can be seen and touched, if necessary. Oh yes, perfected. Returning to the father, appearing suddenly from nowhere, passing through walls, but still, inevitably and necessarily, human, physical, a swma.

What does this say about bodies? About things that are human? Both in the incarnation, and more importantly in the resurrection, the finite is capable of the infinite. God is not lowered by becoming human. He is not diminished by coming into the world. He is not corrupted by participating in the human realm. But he restores it, to his purposes.
This was not obvious to everyone. Some people saw Jesus, heard his preaching, and walked away. Some thought he was possessed by demons, some thought he was nuts. Some people heard Paul’s preaching, and mocked this thing he called “resurrection.” Yet, in the weakness of what is preached is revealed the power of God. God in Christ, and God speaking, is not obvious. He looks like any other guy; he sounds like any other speaker. And this is not a bad thing. We have a God who comes to us, not as we would have a God to be – mighty, in power, awing the nations before him. But as he is, humbling himself, participating in our space and our time and our flesh.

And so it is with his Word. It comes to us not as we want it to be, but participating in our time, and in our world. What of the Bible? What of all those manuscripts? What of the “original text”? If you want to take Mark 16:9-20 away from me, I can live with that. If you want to take the Woman caught in adultery away from me, I can live with that. If you want to tell me that Elizabeth sang the Magnificat, not Mary, I can live with that. If you want to argue that Jesus was “angry” and not “compassionate” in Mark 1:41, I can live with that. If you want to rip Romans 15 and 16 out of my Bible, I can live with that. If you want Hebrews, James, Revelation torn out too, I can live with that. If you force me to look only at p46 or the bizarre majuscule manuscript W or one of thousands of Byzantine minuscules and use them as my New Testament--I can live with that. Give me only Codex Boernarianus, one of the most poorly copied, misspelled, error filled copies of Paul’s letters, and I can live with that. I could live with or without any of those, because even these poorly copied, corrupted by people, edited, to use Luther’s words, preach Christ. And if they preach Christ, they are of the Spirit, for preaching Christ is the Spirit’s work. And of they preach Christ, they are apostolic, for the apostle can speak nothing other than what he has been sent to speak. So apostles, no matter who they are, even one who has been aborted yet lived like Paul, who once persecuted the church, preach the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I can live without a perfect Bible. I cannot live without God raising Jesus from the dead.

On the other hand, force me read only the Gospel of Thomas, I cannot live with that. Or the Koran, or the Book of Mormon. Not because the are not “inerrant” or “perfect,” or even “human,” but because there is no Gospel: There is no new life in Christ.

So we do not flee from history. Because God acted in history. We do not fear the taint of the human which would corrupt the divine, because God chooses reveal himself in the messiness of humanity. How did we end up with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? We actually have no idea. This doesn’t mean that “the Holy Spirit dropped them out of the sky,” but in space and time writings were produced by those who saw and heard, and were used by those who saw and heard. And copies were made by those who saw and heard those before them. Sometimes good copies, sometimes bad copies. But even the bad ones still testified to what those people, that church new to have happened. And in hearing those scriptures, generation after generation, in Greek and Latin and Syriac and Coptic and Slavonic and German and English and Spanish and into thousands of languages – sometimes poorly translated, sometimes translated well; some translations based on poor copies, some translations based on good ones. And in every generation that word announced again what God had done in history and will do in history and was now doing in them: Burying people into his death through
Baptism in order that they rise to new life. Hearing again and again this word and called by that Word to live as his people, awaiting his restoration on the final day of history.

From Sasse’s last published article on the topic:

“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.”

That is not resignation. To receive the Bible from God’s hand as his Word, as it is, with all the messiness of its writing and gathering into canon and copying – is not capitulation to the skeptics. It is a statement of confidence. That here God does his work, here, in my space and my time, by this his Word – even this word – which makes me his.

2 Preus, Canon of Scripture in the Lutheran Dogmaticians.

3 Sasse, Additional Notes, S & C 164.

4 Preus, Inspiration of Scripture, 48-49:


6 Scripture and the Church, 96.