

Beyond the “Plastic Text”: the Plot Thickens

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Abstract: *A new approach to textual criticism is being advocated by a New Testament professor at the Concordia Seminary, St Louis, one of the two theological centers for the training of pastors in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS). It is the conviction of the present essayist that this approach amounts to the destruction of the denomination’s commitment to scriptural inerrancy; returns biblical scholarship to the subjectivism of the higher criticism; and, if pursued, could cause that conservative church body to face again the theological difficulties that came close to destroying the LCMS in the Seminex controversy of the 1970’s.*

Readers may well recall my critique of Jeffrey Kloha’s “plastic text” essay.¹ I have learned (unofficially) that church authorities have met with Dr. Kloha, that he admitted to no doctrinal problems, that the authorities agreed, but that a revised version of his essay was to be prepared. Almost a year has passed, but that revised version—if in fact prepared—does not seem to have been made available to the general or to the scholarly public.

The seriousness of the issues involved for the historic doctrine of the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures therefore requires additional, though brief, examination of Dr. Kloha’s biblical orientation. This will focus on his contribution to the *Festschrift* for his mentor, Professor J. Keith Elliott,² with additional comments on Kloha’s “plastic text” essay and a reaction to his paper entitled “The Authority of the Scriptures,” delivered at the 2010 Concordia Seminary St. Louis symposium (“The Scriptures: Formative or Formality”).³

¹ John Warwick Montgomery, “The Problem of a ‘Plastic Text’: The Kloha Essay on ‘Text and Authority,’” *Modern Reformation* 24, no. 4 (July/August, 2015). This material has also been published in *Christian News*, and appears as an Appendix to the present paper. Kloha’s essay may be found at <http://thebarebulb.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/text-and-authority.pdf>.

² *Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of J. Keith Elliott*, ed. Peter Doble and Jeffrey Kloha (Leiden: Brill, 2014). Another contributor to this volume is James W. Voelz, Kloha’s New Testament Department head at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, who has found no problems with Kloha’s methodology or theology.

³ <https://gudribassakums.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/jeffrey-kloha-scriptures-symp2010.pdf>

The Magnificat (*traitement pas du tout magnifique*)

Kloha's Festschrift contribution carries the title: "Elizabeth's Magnificat (Luke 1:46)."⁴

The author argues that it is more appropriate to attribute the Magnificat to Elizabeth than to Mary.

To be sure, whether Mary or Elizabeth spoke those words poses no doctrinal issue whatsoever. But the way in which Kloha arrives at his attribution is fraught with the most serious consequences for the authority and factual inerrancy of the text—and, by implication—for all other biblical material.

Kloha, as textual critic, first sets forth the manuscript evidence for the two readings of Luke 1:46. "Turning to the continuous-text manuscript tradition of Luke," he properly notes, the Marian reading "is consistently attested in all Greek MSS at Luke 1:46" (p. 205). This, to be sure, is why "no editions of the Greek New Testament produced in the last half-century" accept any reading other than the Marian one (p. 200). The only readings of any consequence attributing the Magnificat to Elizabeth are non-Vulgate Latin readings, Irenaeus (a divided authority, however, since in one place he explicitly attributes the song to Mary), Origen (indecisive, as with Irenaeus), and a little-known, hardly impressive late 3rd-, early 4th-century Latin preacher, one Nicetas of Remesiana. The fact that these authorities are earlier than the authoritative Greek texts (Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, early to mid 4th century) is hardly a strong argument for the Elizabeth attribution, since they are non-Greek versions/translations and contradict the Greek texts.⁵ Kloha admits this.

So why does he favour the Elizabeth reading—against the powerful weight of textual authority? Answer: because he accepts the philosophy of textual criticism espoused by his

⁴ *Texts and Traditions*, pp. 200-219.

⁵ See, for example, the Nestle/Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Württ. Bibelanstalt) at Luke 1:46.

mentor, Professor J. Keith Elliott. In the Introduction to the Festschrift, we are told that “Keith’s career has seen him refocus his work from searching for an ‘original text’ to what may reasonably be said of the history to which texts point.” Kloha revealingly quotes Elliott at the beginning of his article in the following terms: the textual critic, according to Elliott, “feels able to select freely from among the available fund of variants and choose the one that best fits the internal criteria” (p. 200).

Elliott is one of the prime advocates of a contemporary approach to textual criticism denominated “thoroughgoing eclecticism.” Here is a recent evaluation of that methodology: “While thoroughgoing eclectics insist on the objectivity of their criteria, issues of style, language, use, theology, and other internal considerations are rarely as formally based as they propose or as clear-cut as they need to be. A wholesale diminishing of external evidence ends up placing the entirety of the decision upon the shoulders of the critic, without due consideration of the objective controls provided by external considerations. This represents the primary reason why most NT [New Testament] textual critics have rejected thoroughgoing eclecticism.”⁶

In accord with this methodology, Kloha selects Elizabeth over Mary. Example of the reasoning employed: “Were the Magnificat placed on the lips of Mary, it would be the only time she verbalizes praise to the Lord. Such a verbalization would not be consistent with her characterization elsewhere in Luke” (p. 217).

What is going on here? Luke’s Gospel is being treated as a constructed literary work, such that the critic/interpreter can “select freely” (to use Kloha’s words) among possible readings and accept those readings that fit best his or her understanding of the literary style and

⁶ Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, *Fundamentals of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 93-94. Not so incidentally, a milder position, “reasoned eclecticism,” falls under the same axe: “The same criticisms are applicable to reasoned eclecticism as are lodged above against thoroughgoing eclecticism. There are no clear criteria regarding the balance between external and internal criteria” (*ibid.*, p. 95).

organization of the text. This is, of course, the very opposite of an understanding of the biblical text as an historical account of events, determined simply by taking the best manuscript readings as representing the authorial text.⁷

An analogy or two may make this clear. I deliver a lecture in which I organize my material in the order of A, B, and C. A news article on my lecture appears, in which the writer, out of great respect for me and a knowledge of my other writings, says that I presented my material in the order of B, A, and C—on the ground that this makes more literary sense and is more consistent with my usual style. That reporter has prostituted his journalistic calling: he has not reported what actually occurred, but rather doctored it to fit what he thinks would *better* have occurred.

Or consider the battle of Waterloo. The standard French accounts of the battle agree that one factor in Napoleon's defeat was General Ney's error in thinking that a movement of casualties from Wellington's centre was the beginning of a retreat. Suppose an early Romanian translation of a non-primary, no longer existent French account attributed the error to General Grouchy. Would any competent historian choose that account—on the ground that Grouchy provided a better source of the Napoleonic defeat because his "characterization" is more appropriate to an effective narrative? Of course not: the issue is *what occurred historically*, not what narrative would be most effective from a literary standpoint.

⁷ The same approach—regarding the biblical text as a literary construction—can be found in Kloha's department chairman's essay in the same volume. James W. Voelz writes, in his paper, "The Characteristics of the Greek of St. Mark's Gospel": "It may be that the latter portion of the Gospel, containing as it does more well-known scenes or periscopes (e.g., Jesus's trial before the procurator [15:1-15], as opposed to the healing of the multitudes who come from many regions [3:7-12]), was more popular, more frequently related, and, ultimately more "worked over" by those who handed such material on. (If this is, in fact, the case, then it is not surprising that portions of chapter 6 display characteristics of chapters 8-16. The death of John the Baptist and the feeding of the 5000 could well have attained the status of pericopes from the Passion Narrative.) Characteristics of such pericopes would, then, tend to be accommodated to a more common and Attic-influenced Greek" (*Tests and Traditions*, p. 152).

But suppose one were to argue that to presuppose historicity in the case of biblical materials is gratuitous and that one should instead view them primarily as literary creations? After all, are they not “religious” in nature? The answer to this is that the Gospels themselves claim, again and again, that they are setting forth history.⁸ “That which we have seen and heard,” they write, “declare we unto you” (I John 1:3). “We have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (II Peter 1:16).

In Luke’s case, the argument is even stronger. The very chapter containing the Magnificat begins with the author’s prologue, in which he insists on the solid historicity of what he is going to narrate: “Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (Luke 1:1-4). This claim to precise historicity has been compared not only to classical historians such as Tacitus but also with the aims of Von Ranke and German historical schools of the 19th-century to represent the past “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*.”⁹

Kloha’s approach to the biblical text alters it from an historical account into a constructed literary narrative, and as such denatures it. It imposes literary categories on the text, changing the author’s intention to provide an accurate record of the events of Jesus’ life and ministry.

⁸ Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁹ Cf. John Warwick Montgomery, *The Shape of the Past: A Christian Response to Secular Philosophies of History*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

But, apart from the bad scholarship involved in such a transformation of the biblical materials, Kloha's operation moves away from classic textual criticism to the very error at the heart of the so-called "higher criticism," namely, allowing subjective judgments as to style, vocabulary, "characterization," etc., to determine the ultimate meaning of the biblical text.

It is precisely this move from objective to subjective that lay at the heart of the Seminex view of how one is to handle the Sacred Writings. A typical example from that era is Norman C. Habel's essay, "The Form and Meaning of the Fall Narrative," in which the author contended that "it is legitimate to consider this narrative a literary form which may be described as a 'symbolical religious history,' but that we should not confuse the truth that the writer is stating with this particular mode of saying it, a mode which is especially appropriate for the world in which he lived, and a mode which has at least partial analogies in the epic literature of his day."¹⁰

It should also be noted that as soon as the biblical text is regarded not as historical narrative but as the product of literary construction, the very notion of "inerrancy" disappears. There is no such thing as "inerrant" literature (what Fagan or Winnie the Pooh does or does not do cannot be evaluated in terms of "truth" or "error"). Perhaps this is why the literary approach is so attractive in mainline theological circles: if we don't have to regard the Scriptures as fact-orientated, we avoid the messy problem of their factual reliability and no longer have to worry about apparent errors and contradictions in the biblical books. (We also, to be sure, lose a factual revelation that can deal objectively with the reality of our sinful condition through God's real work in history.)

¹⁰ An essay presented to the Missouri Synod's Conference of College Presidents and Seminary Faculties on 2 December 1963. For other (agonizing) examples of such reduction of biblical material to literary forms, see Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), I, 81-123.

Two generations ago, the biblical scholar J. Barton Payne, in a classic essay, argued that a bad hermeneutic—a bad approach to the interpretation of Scripture—can destroy a meaningful doctrine of biblical inerrancy.¹¹ The Seminex professors achieved this through the use of higher criticism as a hermeneutic tool. Kloha and company are doing this by way of a philosophy of lower or textual criticism that dehistoricizes the biblical text, reducing it essentially to a literary phenomenon.

Of more than routine interest is the diametric contrast between Kloha's handling of biblical texts as literature and Luther's insistence on treating them as *de facto* history. In conflict with Erasmus on the issue of freewill and with Zwingli on the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament, Luther continually insisted that literary metaphor was the devil's tool and that one must understand the Scriptures in their plain, literal sense. Thus, against Erasmus:

Let this be our conviction: that no "implication" or "figure" may be allowed to exist in any passage of Scripture unless such be required by some obvious feature of the words and the absurdity of their plain sense, as offending against an article of faith. Everywhere we should stick to just the simple, natural meaning of the words, as yielded by the rules of grammar and the habits of speech that God has created among men; for if anyone may devise "implications" and "figures" in Scripture at his own pleasure, what will all Scripture be but a reed shaken with the wind, and a sort of chameleon? ["Plastic," perhaps—ed.] There would then be no article of faith about which anything could be settled and proved for certain, without your being able to raise objections by means of some "figure." All "figures" should rather be avoided, as being the quickest poison, when Scripture itself does not absolutely require them.¹²

Plasticity, Inerrancy, and Seminex (*déjà vu*— *all over again*)

If the textual critic may "select freely from among the available fund of variants and choose the one that best fits the internal criteria" (Kloha, quoting with approval Professor Elliott), then it becomes evident why he regards the biblical text as "plastic." Because the New

¹¹ J. Barton Payne, "Hermeneutics as a Cloak for the Denial of Scripture," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1960): 93-100.

¹² Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, WA 18, 700-701. Cf. Montgomery, *In Defense of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1970), pp. 40-85.

Testament books were regarded as divine revelation, there are vast numbers of manuscript copies and, consequently, thousands of variant readings (almost all of them of no significance or value), but thousands nonetheless. If the critic is allowed to choose freely among them, including the doubtful ones—as we have seen Kloha do in his treatment of the Magnificat passage in Luke—basing serious textual arguments thereon, the scriptural text does indeed become plastic.¹³

Note that once this approach is taken, the real decision as to which text to accept is made on “internal criteria,” i.e., the reading is chosen which best accords with the subjective judgment of the critic as to “characterization,” vocabulary, stylistic shifts, alterations in logic, etc. In other words, just as with the higher criticism, where the objective text becomes a pretext for subjective authorial judgments, so here the choice of variant readings (and thus the text itself) becomes a matter of the subjective opinion of the critic as to which variant can produce the literary result most attractive to the critic. With thousands of variants, there is indeed nothing but plasticity.

And inerrancy? We have already noted that the concept is meaningful only if a text is regarded as setting forth factual/ historical data. Kloha’s textual philosophy, being literary and not historical, therefore eschews any meaningful issues of the reliability of the biblical material: it is a literary construction. We may speak of its “effectiveness,” but certainly not of its truth.

This creates quite a problem for one who is a Lutheran in a conservative denominational tradition and who, moreover, teaches at a prestigious theological seminary of his church body, Kloha can hardly avoid speaking to the inerrancy issue. Here is how he does so in his “Authority of the Scriptures” essay:

If you want to rip Romans 15 and 16 out of my Bible, I can live with that. If you want

¹³ To be sure, in the exceedingly rare case where two solid readings were evenly balanced, one would be forced to appeal to “internal” criteria in choosing between the two—but, even then, these would need to be the internal considerations best supporting the historicity of the narrative, not those offering the greatest literary effectiveness in the eyes of the textual critic. That Kloha’s “internal” approach is not limited to such rare cases is painfully evident from his handling of the authorship of the Magnificat in Luke 1:46.

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 Bezae Cantabrigiae, 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 if 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 to read only the Gospel of Thomas, I cannot live with that. Or the Koran, or the Book of Mormon. Not because they are not “inerrant” or “perfect,” or even “human,” but because there is no Gospel: There is no new life in Christ.

Observe what is going on here. Kloha says that inerrancy is not the ground for his believing that the Bible—or any other book—is revelatory. Right: the mere fact that a book is inerrant doesn’t make it God’s Word (think of Euclid’s *Geometry*—no errors there). But the *presence* of errors will certainly destroy a book’s claim to being a divine revelation, since God does not err.

Thus Kloha must face the issue of biblical errors. These do not in principle or in fact bother him; he has no trouble living with poor manuscripts and textual and content errors—for his revelational criterion is the presence of the Gospel. As long as the Bible “preaches Christ,” fine.

This, of course, is the old Gospel Reductionism of Seminex and of the liberal Lutherans in general. Arthur Carl Piepkorn: “Where the stress is on a religious purpose, his [the human biblical author’s] concern with the precise and literal accuracy of concomitant historical or scientific detail may recede into the background.”¹⁴ Joseph Sittler, Lutheran Church in America (now ELCA) theologian, beloved of the Seminex people: “All verbal forms, all means of

¹⁴ Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “What Does ‘Inerrancy’ Mean?,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36 (September, 1965): 577-93.

communication through speech, prove too weak for this massive bestowal [of Gospel]. . . . We must ask after the Word of God in the same way faith asks after Jesus Christ. That is to say, that the Word of God *becomes* Word of God for us. . . . To assert the inerrancy of the text of scripture is to elevate to a normative position an arbitrary theological construction.”¹⁵

The contrast with Luther’s view of Holy Writ could hardly be more pronounced. Luther maintained that the entire canonical Scripture was authoritative, inerrant, and perspicuous. He refused to dismiss as trivial even the most minute assertions in the Bible—for they were the product of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration. He refused to accept any contradiction in the Bible, even if he himself could not resolve the problem. And he insisted that the text be accepted on its own ground, literally and factually. For him, the Scripture was 180 degrees removed from “plasticity.” Here are just a few of the many passages from Luther that could be quoted as to his biblical convictions:

I have learned to ascribe the honor of infallibility only to those books that are accepted as canonical. I am profoundly convinced that none of those writers has erred.¹⁶

He who carefully reads and studies the Scriptures will consider nothing so trifling that it does not at least contribute to the improvement of his life and morals, since the Holy Spirit wanted to have it committed to writing.¹⁷

We see with what great diligence Moses, or rather the Holy Spirit, describes even the most insignificant acts and sufferings of the patriarchs.¹⁸

I end on a personal note. One of my theological seminary professors (the late T. A. Kantonen) once remarked that he always had wanted to become famous. Then it occurred to him that to become famous in theology or biblical study would require that he present something

¹⁵ Joseph Sittler, *The Doctrine of the Word* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), pp. 62-63, 68 (Sittler’s italics).

¹⁶ Luther, “Defense against the Ill-tempered Judgment of Eck,” WA, 2, 618.

¹⁷ Luther, WA, 42, 474 (on Gen. 12:11-13); cf. WA, 15, 1481: “The Scriptures have never erred.”

¹⁸ Luther, WA, 44, 91-92 (on Gen.32: 21-24). See Montgomery (ed.). *God’s Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974), pp. 63-94.

genuinely new. However, he came to realize that since the Bible had been around for a very long time, was clear (*not* plastic) and the church's doctrine had been derived from it, innovation on his part would inevitably entail heresy. Thus, said he, I gave up my quest for fame.

Contemporary theology goes for fame at the expense of biblical fidelity. Students go from orthodox theological seminaries to liberal graduate schools in America and Europe, write “original”—or ostensibly original—dissertations,¹⁹ and ape their professors. All too often the result is, tragically, corruption of the faith once delivered to the saints and corruption of the institutions created to preserve and promote it.

Brethren, these things ought not to be.

¹⁹ There is, to be sure, the process by which at least some doctoral dissertations come into existence: the candidate “digs up material from one graveyard, rearranges it, and buries it in another.”

APPENDIX

The Problem of a “Plastic Text”: the Kloha Essay on “Text and Authority”

The “Text and Authority” paper by Concordia Seminary, St Louis, Associate Professor and Provost Jeffrey Kloha has been published on the internet,²⁰ so I am not violating Matthew 18 in critiquing it. Fascinatingly, it was delivered at the Lutherische Theologische Hochschule in Oberursel, where, in the old days, I had a wonderful relationship with the late Prof. Dr. Wilhelm Oesch—who, by the by, would have been appalled by the reasoning and theological consequences of Kloha’s essay. When most German theologians could not see the catastrophic effect of modern critical biblical scholarship on the dogmatics of the church—and were frightened silly of evaluating it for lack of linguistic skills—Dr. Oesch was well aware that the issue was not linguistic but that of bowing at the shrine of secularist New Testament scholarship without a sufficient understanding of the underlying assumptions prevalent in the field—and that such naïveté was a recipe for theological disaster.

Since Bart Ehrman, textual critic and former evangelical, has been issuing his broadsides at the notion of biblical inerrancy, two kinds of response have appeared on the American theological scene. On the one hand, it has been correctly noted that Ehrman does not give the benefit of the doubt to the best textual readings of the New Testament (as one would do, following Aristotle, in treating Homer’s writings or other ancient texts), and that he suffers from an egregious anti-supernatural bias. The other approach operates, in effect, with the tag “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em”: one can approach the textual criticism of the New Testament much as Ehrman does and still hold to historic Christian faith. The latter seems to be the tack taken by Kloha, who claims that, owing to the progress of contemporary textual studies, one need not—and should not—hold that biblical inspiration occurs as single divine events producing an inerrant, once-for-all original text to be recovered as fully as possible through lower, textual criticism. Rather, says Kloha, just as it took the church some time to arrive at its view of the canon of Scripture, so inspiration itself is a continuing process and the decisions as to what indeed constitutes inspired Scripture must be made by the Church as it is led by the Spirit in the course of advances in textual understanding.

Kloha admits that his approach is diametrically opposite to that of the Lutheran fathers—both those of the Age of Orthodoxy (Quenstedt) and those who formulated the theology of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (Pieper). The present author readily admits that those patriarchs could have been grossly mistaken (*errare humanum est*). But, if they were, what are the implications of the Kloha recension?

- 1) The mainline biblical scholarship of the 19th and 20th centuries in liberal theological circles eliminated an authoritative text through the application of the so-called “higher criticism”—subjective determinations of the “real origins” of the text and the relegation of the best text resulting from lower or textual criticism to a product of later editing and revision in light of the sociological and theological *Sitz im Leben*.

²⁰ <http://thebarebulb.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/text-and-authority.pdf>

Kloha achieves much the same result by his approach to lower, textual criticism: the Nestle-Aland text, for example, is not to be viewed as a means of arriving as closely as possible to original, inerrant autographs, but as the current state of a “plastic” process which must never be reduced to the status of a propositionally inerrant revelation. To quote Kloha: “We now have a plastic text of the New Testament. It is *plastikos*: moldable, shapeable, changeable. . . . The transmission history of the New Testament text has . . . forced us to reckon with the ‘death of the text.’ ”

In light of his departure from the Lutheran fathers’ approach to the nature of biblical inspiration, how does Kloha see himself as a Lutheran—particularly as a conservative Missouri Synod Lutheran? The answer lies in his promotion of an analogy between the divine/human natures of the incarnate Christ and the divine/human character of Holy Scripture. He criticizes liberal Lutheranism (the ELCA) for overstressing the human side of Scripture—but he is similarly convinced that the classical Lutheran theology, as reflected in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, has committed the equal but opposite error of overemphasizing the divine side of the biblical texts.

The severe theological difficulty of Kloha’s reconstruction is, to be sure, not just the mistake of pushing an Incarnation-to-Bible analogy much too far (we surely know that the Scripture does *not* in fact have two natures!), but particularly in his disregard of the fundamental Lutheran teaching of the *communicatio idiomatum*: the truth that in the God-man the divine nature is communicated to the human nature whilst the human nature is never divinited.²¹ Calvinism’s discomfort with this formulation has produced immense problems in Reformed circles, as Herman Sasse (strangely, one of Kloha’s most cited authors) has emphasized. If one wishes to analogise from living Word to written Word, therefore, one must *never* allow the human side of Scripture (including the work of the lower/textual critic) to overwhelm the divinely inspired character of it. Scripture is first and foremost God’s divine, inerrant revelation to a fallen race; textual activity must operate *ministerially*, not *magisterially*, in relation to that fundamental perspective.

- 2) In Kloha’s view, final theological authority cannot reside in a Bible produced by single acts of divine inspiration. Rather, that authority must lie in the Church herself as she continually reevaluates the results of the labours of textual scholarship. The text, like the canonicity question, is never finally closed, but remains an open and continuing task for the Church. Writes Kloha: “Who then decides? As always, the gathered baptized, those who hear the voice of the shepherd and follow where he leads. . . .The church decides, but the church has been and continues to be led by the Spirit into all truth as it hears ever again the Word.”²²

²¹ See in particular Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, ed. Fr. Frank, I, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1885), pp. 527- 91 (Locus IV, chaps. 10-13: “De communicatione idiomatum”).

²² Remarkably, though Kloha’s specialty is the New Testament text, he does not seem to realise that “the leading into all truth” (John 16:13) like the bringing “all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (John 14:26) were special gifts of the Spirit bestowed by Jesus on the original apostolic band, and thus the guarantee that their recounting of divine truth would be infallibly reliable—not a general promise to the church that

Such a viewpoint would work perfectly in a Roman Catholic context, where an “organic” view of revelation prevails, and where the Magisterium is essential for determining the true meaning and theological application of Scripture in the life of the Christian community; this is the Church as the “continuing incarnation of Christ in time.”²³

Needless to say, on such a view it becomes impossible to employ the Scriptures as the final authority by which the Church is judged—since it is the Church that in reality creates the Scriptures by its handling of them. Indeed, the Preface to the Formula of Concord, declaring that the Scriptures are the authority by which “all teachers and writings must be judged,” can no longer have any significant meaning.

And one cannot avoid this catastrophic result by arguing dialectically, as do Roman Catholics and Anglicans, that the Scriptures judge the Church whilst the Church is judging the Scriptures, for this leaves the Christian community in a logical and practical impasse: which judgment ultimately prevails? Do we really want to return to the notion that the Spirit somehow manages to keep the Church on track in spite of there being no objective, propositional revelation by which the Church’s activity can be evaluated? Had this view been maintained by Luther, how could his Reformation ever have occurred?²⁴

- 3) Practically, what would the Kloha approach mean in the day-to-day life of the parish? A pastor would never be able to say with assurance, “Thus says the Lord”—since all of the sacred texts suffer from plasticity. And the individual believer would be unable to have confidence in the text as he or she reads it as a declaration of God’s will or as a source of life-giving teaching—since its meaning is subject to the latest decisions of textual scholars (such as Kloha). As for the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, it really should not attempt to make theological decisions or pronouncements on issues such as women pastors, for as with one of Kloha’s major exegetical illustrations, the plastic text of I Corinthians 12-14 may well not at all be prohibiting women to exercise authority in the church but rather may simply be giving advice on the conduct of husband-wife relations.

To say, as Kloha does, that these staggering difficulties can be resolved by making Christ and his gospel central to our hermeneutic is piously moving but of no assistance whatever. It smacks of the “gospel reductionism” of the Seminex movement; but, far more important, if the biblical text is indeed “plastic: moldable, shapeable, changeable,” *so is the Christ of Scripture and so is His gospel of free grace.*

it would function as the vehicle of revelatory truth. Pre-eminent New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann referred to this as the “gift of total recall.”

²³ See Montgomery, “The Approach of New Shape Roman Catholicism to Scriptural Inerrancy,” in his *God’s Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974), pp. 263-81.

²⁴ Cf. Montgomery, *In Defense of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1970; reprint edition in press for the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, 2017).

We have nothing against odd theological views; indeed, we have successfully championed religious liberty before the European Court of Human Rights on several occasions. America is a free country, and if one wishes to believe in the Great Pumpkin, that is an available option. But historic Lutheranism is not Roman Catholicism, and the two theologies are mutually incompatible—especially when it comes to the locus of theological authority. A plastic Bible cannot support the theology of the Book of Concord. If we think it can, we make precisely the same mistake the Seminex professors made when they believed that the higher criticism was compatible with Lutheran orthodoxy.²⁵ Now it's a question of a new philosophy of lower criticism, but in Kloha's case that's a distinction without a difference.

Addendum to the Appendix: A Word or Two about Textual Criticism

Against the criticisms just presented, one might argue that textual criticism need not be evaluated, much less critiqued theologically, since it must precede all theological discussion. After all, only when one has arrived at a reliable sacred text can one begin to determine proper Christian doctrine and correct Lutheran teaching.

From a logical and scientific standpoint, this is of course correct. One must have a Bible before one can do biblical theology. In that sense, textual criticism is a heuristic discipline; it functions analogously to formal logic and scientific method—which precede content investigations of the world and need no justification. However, the issue cuts deeper than this, owing to the existence of at least two *philosophies of textual criticism*. The classic philosophy, maintained through the history of the discipline and represented by such scholars as Sir Frederic Kenyon and F. F. Bruce (and the perspective that Kloha is at pains to replace), views the task of textual or lower criticism as our attempt to arrive as closely as possible at the original, autograph text through an examination of the textual material actually available to us.²⁶

The “plastic” philosophy espoused by Kloha, however, directs us to the ephemeral character of 1st century writing and publication, and argues that since one cannot always with certainty declare one variant reading better than another, we have a fluid, continually modifiable text, and that just as the early church, unable to decide on the canonicity of certain books, held them in suspension, so the church today, by the work of the Spirit, must embrace and live with the plasticity of the biblical text.

Note the overwhelming problems with such a philosophy of textual criticism.

²⁵ Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, 2 vols., 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1973). It seems quite remarkable that Pastor Martin R. Noland can write that “I can't find anything theologically wrong or defective in his [Kloha's] essay.” Noland is clearly overwhelmed by the fact that, as he puts it, “Dr. Kloha is the only non-retired academically-qualified text-critic we have in the LCMS right now.”

²⁶ “The province of Textual Criticism is the ascertainment of the true form of a literary work, as originally composed and written down by its author. . . . The function of textual criticism, then, is to recover the true form of an author's text from the various divergent copies that may be in existence. . . . The task of textual criticism, then, in relation to the New Testament, is to try to extract the actual words written by the apostles and evangelists” (Sir Frederick G. Kenyon, *Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953], pp. 1, 2, 6).

- 1) The nature of letter writing and book production in the ancient world is irrelevant to the question of the revelatory character of the biblical text. Just as the Old Testament prophets were often unaware of the ultimate value of their utterances (II Peter 1:21), so the fact that an apostle or associate of an apostle directed his letter to a single congregation has no significance as to the general revelatory significance or inerrancy of that writing for the whole church. If, as Oscar Cullmann and others have maintained, Jesus in fact bestowed the gift of the “total recall” of his ministry and teachings upon the apostolic company—and no serious textual critic, including Kloha, would deny the textual value of John 14:26)—then apostolic writings constitute valid Scripture *regardless* of the immediate intent of the apostle when writing or transmitting what he wrote. Note also that in the New Testament itself, Peter classes Paul’s writings with “the other Scriptures [*ta graphe*],” i.e., with Old Testament revelation (II Peter 3:15-16).

- 2) The fact that in some cases a variant reading in a given passage cannot be definitively regarded as better than another does not offer any ground for the “plasticity” theory. It simply underscores the nature of a fallen world: our best efforts sometimes do not result in success. The proper approach in such instances is to suspend judgment until better information becomes available, not to declare both variants as somehow equally revelatory, or to believe that Holy Spirit, through the visible Church, will somehow reveal which variant we should follow. Note also that the early church, by continually refining its investigation of apostolic origins, *did* finally come to definite decisions on the canonical content of the New Testament, and those decisions were confirmed during the Reformation period when it was recognized by Protestants that one could not accept the books of the New Testament on the ground that the Church said so. It follows that canonicity today cannot be regarded as something “plastic.”

- 3) One must always remember that instances of indeterminate New Testament textual variants are minuscule—a minute fraction of the entire New Testament text falls into this category—and that none of those variants are determinative for the establishment of theological doctrine.²⁷ That being the case, there is no reason whatever, in the face

²⁷ “[Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek* (1882), p. 2] says: ‘The proportion of words virtually accepted on all hands as raised above doubt is very great, not less, on a rough computation, that seven-eighths of the whole. The remaining eighth, therefore, formed in great part by changes of order and other comparative trivialities, constitutes the whole area of criticism. . . . This area may be very greatly reduced. Recognising to the full the duty of abstinence from peremptory decision in cases where the evidence leaves the judgment in suspense between two or more readings, we find that, setting aside differences of orthography, the words in our opinion still subject to doubt only make up about one-sixtieth of the whole New Testament. In this second estimate the proportion of comparatively trivial variations is beyond measure larger than in the former; so that the amount of what can in any sense be called substantial variation is but a small fraction of the whole residuary variation, and can hardly form more than a thousandth part of the entire text.’ It is further to be remembered that, although some doubt attaches to the record of certain incidents and sayings of great interest and value, yet no doctrine of Christianity rests solely upon a disputed text. The Christian student can approach the subject without misgiving, and may follow whithersoever honest inquiry seems to lead him, without thought of doctrinal consequences. His researches should unquestionably be conducted in a reverent spirit, but he may avail himself, without hesitation or mistrust, of all the resources of secular science” (Kenyon, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7).

“The great mass of the New Testament . . . has been transmitted to us with no, or next to no, variation; and even in the most corrupt form in which it has ever appeared, to use the oft-quoted words of Richard Bentley, ‘the

of advances in textual criticism or theory, to move to a “plastic Bible.” We are so close to the original autographs (unavailable not just for the New Testament but for all ancient, and most modern writings) that pastors and laymen can “read, mark, and inwardly digest” with confidence the biblical material as inerrant divine revelation. It is *still* the case that *Verbum Dei manet in aeternum*.

As is so often true, the difference between orthodoxy and heresy does not depend on factual or scientific data per se: it depends on the philosophical stance and methodology of the theological investigator. When engaged in or evaluating the work of the textual critic, it would therefore not be amiss to keep in mind the Montgomery clan motto: *Gardez bien*.

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real text of the sacred writers is competently exact; . . . nor is one article of faith or moral precept either perverted or lost . . . choose as awkwardly as you will, choose the worst by design, out of the whole lump of readings.’ . . . The autographic text of the New Testament is distinctly within the reach of criticism in so immensely the greater part of the volume, that we cannot despair of restoring to ourselves and the Church of God, His Book, word for word, as He gave it by inspiration to men” (B. B. Warfield, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* [1896], pp. 14-15).

The above estimates of textual accuracy should be followed—rather than those given by Norman Geisler in the *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* and elsewhere, allegedly based on Bruce Metzger’s *Chapters in the History of New Testament Textual Criticism*, since Metzger there does not in fact present the estimate attributed to him by Geisler.