Foundational Texts

The many and, at times, somewhat fruitless discussions in recent times on the right interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures in Lutheran circles has one glaring omission. Little or no attention has been given to the classical Lutheran focus on the identification and use of the texts that provide the God-given foundation for a particular doctrine and its practice, the so-called *sedes doctrinae*. This Latin term, which means, quite literally, the seat of a teaching and, figuratively, its basis, is the formal designation for the foundational texts that establish what is to be taught and done in the church. Thus, for instance, the Words of Institution are quite clearly the foundational text for our teaching on the Lord's Supper, its practice, and our faith in it. This is of paramount importance for us because we do not deduce what we teach from general principles, or system of doctrine, or even on another doctrine, but from what God's word says about it. His word establishes our teaching and practice.

Although the whole of the Bible with all its parts is the word of God, pastors cannot teach all of it at once, but only consider one topic at a time. In their teaching they therefore need to identify the passages that deal with that topic. Yet all the texts that deal with a given topic do not have the same function. Even though they are all equally inspired words of God, they do not all serve the same purpose. So those who interpret and apply them also need to determine the purpose and function of each text and distinguish them accordingly. They need to consider whether they establish what is to be believed and done, explain the purpose and significance of that teaching, or provide an example of how it was taught and applied. Take, for example, our teaching on baptism! While Matthew 28:18-20 provides the divine foundation for it, Titus 3:4-7 explains its purpose, Romans 6:3-4 describes its significance, and Acts 2:37-41 shows us how it was taught and applied by Peter on the Day of Pentecost. Yet all that is much too broad for me to consider here. My concern in this column is for the nature and use of foundational texts.

At times foundational texts are clearly identified as such. Jesus does this with his Amen sayings in the four gospels and Paul does it in his pastoral letters with his description of certain passages as faithful sayings. But, mostly, we need to infer their status and function from their context. That is a vital part of our call to preach and teach God's word. That too has been done for us with some of the most important articles of faith by our confession of faith in the Book of Concord.

Luther models this approach well for us in his Small Catechism when he asks: "Which is that word of God" or "Where is this written?" With that question he does not ask us to provide some proof texts for a particular doctrine. Rather, he focuses our attention on the Biblical foundations for our faith in Christ and life as faithful disciples. Yet that is not the only way that he gets us to interpret and apply the Scriptures. He also asks us to consider what they mean

and many other secondary considerations. But, for him and us, the foundational texts are to be our primary consideration for five interrelated reasons.

1. Foundational texts, which report what Jesus and the apostles said, give us **the divine basis** for our faith in Christ and our reception of his benefits through faith in him. Faith always rests on God's word, because it creates faith in Him rather than in ourselves, or another person, or even the church. It also strengthens our faith in Him, so that we will increase in confidence and grow in boldness as disciples who ask our heavenly Father for whatever we need. Take those words away from us and our faith has lost its divine moorings! It then becomes far easier for the devil to attack and destroy it.

2. By means of these texts God **authorizes** us to do what He wills for us to do and act in a way that pleases Him. They derive their weight from His authority. Thus the words of Jesus in John 20:21-23 authorize pastors to act on Christ's behalf by judging sin and pardoning sinners. Or, to give another example, in Luke 11:1-4 Jesus authorizes his disciples to use his own prayer, the prayer that he prays for them and all people. So, by these and many other similar authoritative words Jesus authorizes us to work faithfully and obediently with him as we put our faith in his words.

3. By these foundational words God Himself **works** through human agents and delivers His gifts to His people through physical means, such as a human mouth, words, and hands, as well as water, bread, and wine. His words do not just tell them about Him, or what He wants them to do for Him; they enact His will. They are powerful, effective utterances; they are performative words that do what they say and give what they promise. Thus, when the Words of Institution are spoken by a pastor who has been authorized to say them, he speaks them together with Jesus and serves as his mouthpiece and his coworker. Jesus thereby gives his body and blood to the congregation and grants them the full remission of sins. So through his words which authorize the administration of the sacrament, Jesus is at work in it and provides his gifts to those who receive it. That also applies for everything else that we have been authorized to do in the church.

4. By these words Jesus **empowers** his disciples with his Spirit to do God's will. Since his words are inspired by the Holy Spirit, they inspire their faithful hearers with the Holy Spirit. His words are filled with God's life-giving Spirit (John 6:63). That's what makes them so powerful and effective. So by speaking God's word Jesus imparts the Holy Spirit (John 3:34; 20:21). Wherever God's word is truly spoken, or rightly employed, the Holy Spirit sanctifies believers and empowers them to do God's will. Take, for instance, what happens in Holy Baptism! The words of Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20 empower both the pastor to baptize in God's name and the baptized person to be a child of God. Thus, in his Small Catechism Luther gives this answer to the question of how water can do such great things: "Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit…"

5. These authoritative, Spirit-giving words **provide certainty** for uncertain consciences. They are comfortable, comforting words. For us Lutherans that is their most significant pastoral purpose, for all Christians constantly beset by uncertainty. Our faith in Christ is always contested by the world, called into question by our sinful nature, and attacked by the devil. In every way the devil tries to undermine our assurance of salvation and our confidence that what we do is pleasing to God. When that happens, these foundational words are our defensive and offensive weapons against temptation. So, when the devil charges that I am not a true believer, and God is not pleased with me because I have failed to do His will, I can say, "Yes that may be so! But it is written, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." That applies also for those of us who are pastors. It helps us out in our uncertainty about our work. When the devil accuses us of failing to be good pastors, as he so often does, we can refer to our ordination with its foundational words from Jesus for the office of the ministry. So certainty in faith and life depends on what is provided for us in the *sedes doctrinae*, the fundamental words of God. There is no divine comfort apart from them.

The challenge for us is that we reclaim this useful part of our evangelical heritage and use it well for the life and mission of the church in a chaotic, confused world that is bedeviled with doubt and uncertainty because its God-given foundations have been shaken.

Dr. John W. Kleinig