

“Power in the Word of God Alone”
By John C. Wohlrabe, Jr., Th.D.

One of the three great rallying cries or slogans of the Reformation is the Latin phrase *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. Yet, this is more than a mere slogan. It is the formal principle of the Lutheran church - the source by which all doctrine is derived and judged. The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 3, declares that the Word of God is the sole judge and evaluation for all teachers and teaching in the church:

First, we confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated. (Kolb and Wengert, ed., The Book of Concord, p. 527)

When The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (called originally the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States) was founded in 1847, the Synod’s first constitution (Article III.8) stated: “Matters of doctrine and of conscience will be decided by the Word of God alone. All other decisions will be made by a majority of votes” (“Our First Synodical Constitution,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly [CHIQ]*, April 1943, p. 4).

At the Missouri Synod’s second convention in 1848, C.F.W. Walther, the first synodical president, gave an address entitled “Why should and can we carry out our work with joy even though we have no power except the power of the Word?” (*CHIQ*, 33, April 1960; *Concordia Theological Monthly [CTM]*, 43, July-August 1972, pp. 430-437). Walther made clear that Christ alone rules in his church, and that he exercises this rule only through his Word, along with the holy sacraments (the visible Word). The only power that pastors and lay people possess in the church, both in the congregation and at the synodical level, is the power of the Word. If any other power is exerted in the church, particularly through resolutions and other proposals, Walther maintained that the Synod “would become a huge multi-membered machine, but it would not be a living organism; the more the external structure would succeed, the more the internal life would disappear.” He went on to describe the demise that would result if the Word of God is not the only power in the church:

Our main concern would soon become discharging our own human ordinances and arrangements; this would consume the blessed struggle for the true treasure of the church - the purity and unity of teaching. In short, we would lose sight of our glorious goal - to build the true church which has not external form but which is God’s kingdom in the hearts of people - and we ourselves, at the very best, would soon dissolve. (CTM, July-August 1972, p. 436)

Walther acknowledged the possibility for abuse, which he referred to as an enslaving democracy or a papacy of another form, in which “we who are servants of Christ will become the slaves of men.” Abuse of a democracy in church matters occurs when people prescribe exactly what the preacher of God’s Word may or may not

proclaim, **when people choose for themselves to contradict God's Word, or when people in any way hinder the performance of the ministerial office according to the Word.** On the other hand, if the Missouri Synod follows the practice of working with the power of the Word of God alone, the synodical organization will exert a beneficial influence:

There will certainly be struggles, but they will not be those disheartening conflicts which require obedience to human rules. Rather, they will be sacred struggles for God's Word, for His honor and kingdom. The more congregations realize that we desire the power of God's Word which sanctifies all believers, and no other power, the more open they will be to our advice. Those who do not want the Word will separate from us; those who love the Word will find refuge in our fellowship. (CTM, July-August 1972, p. 437)

Walther concluded his 1848 synodical address with the following words of advice:

Therefore, my esteemed brothers, let us exercise this power correctly. Let us be intent above all else and in every matter on proclaiming the pure teaching of our Evangelical Lutheran Church among us. Let us make this pure teaching familiar to all our congregations and preserve it from falsification, treating it as a precious possession. Let us not compromise one iota of what the Word requires. Let us make the Word the controlling power in our congregations - on this point let us be firm and unbending. If we do this, we do not have to be concerned about the success of our work. Even if the work appears to be fruitless, it cannot be, for the Word does not return void, but accomplishes the thing to which the Lord sends it. The church was established by the Word, without any other power, and has been preserved to this very hour by the Word alone, in spite of Satan's fury and madness. Throughout her history all of the great actions of the church have been accomplished by the Word. Through the Word alone the church will stand, even in these confusing times. The church will stand until the end of time, and even the gates of hell will not prevail against it. "For all flesh is like grass, and all human beauty is like the flower. The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the Lord's Word remains forever." [Is. 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24] Amen. (CTM, July-August 1972, p. 437)

Power in the Word of God alone is the formal principle for the Lutheran church. The Missouri Synod was founded upon this principle. Even today, the LCMS Constitution states (Article VIII): "All matters of doctrine and conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God. All other matters shall be decided by a majority vote."

On April 10, 2003, a Dispute Resolution Panel (DRP) issued a report on its decision to lift the suspension of the Rev. Dr. David Benke and thereby restore him to the office of President of the Atlantic District of the LCMS. The basis of the DRP ruling was Resolution 3.07a from the 2001 Missouri Synod convention (for the complete report, see <http://www.crisisinthelcms.org/appendixRR.htm>). Dr. Benke had been charged with violating the First and Second Commandments as well as Article VI.2 of the Synod's

Constitution (“Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description...”) for his participation in the interfaith “A Prayer for America” service at Yankee Stadium on September 23, 2001. The Rev. Dr. Wallace Schulz, as Second Vice President of the Synod, was asked to rule on the charges. Consequently, Dr. Schulz found Dr. Benke guilty of the charges based on the Word of God alone and suspended him from office (for complete documentation, see <http://www.crisisinthelcms.org/benkemain.htm>). The Dispute Resolution Panel overturned these charges based solely on a resolution passed at a synodical convention. Concerning this distressing state of affairs, Dr. Schulz responded on May 11, 2003:

I am also deeply shocked, as I am sure others will be, that the Panel states: “Rev. Wallace Schulz went on to present a very thorough argument concerning the charges on the basis of the Holy Scriptures alone,” after which the Panel immediately writes: “However,” and then maintains that this case had to be determined on the basis of an LCMS convention resolution. In fact, the Panel’s decision makes over 25 references to the controversial resolution and an additional 35 references to bylaws but fails to make even a single reference to the Holy Scriptures! In other words, even though this case involves a very serious offense against God’s First Commandment and must therefore be dealt with on the basis of God’s Word, the Panel has decided to rule on the basis of a man-made resolution! In its decision the Panel has clearly violated the Constitution of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and sinned against the Word of God, since Article VIII of the LCMS Constitution states “All matters of doctrine and conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God.”

If the Panel’s decision is permitted to stand unchallenged, its impact will reach far beyond the Benke case, fundamentally changing our Synod and leading it to resolve spiritual issues on the basis of men’s opinions rather than God’s Word. (<http://www.crisisinthelcms.org/schulzreport.htm>)

Sadly, it appears that certain concerns expressed in Walther’s 1848 synodical address have become a reality in the Missouri Synod today. The primary focus of some officers within the Synod seems to be the discharging of human ordinances and arrangements, disregarding the blessed struggle for the true treasure of the church - the purity and unity of teaching. That teaching must be based on the Word of God alone. What was the primary concern for C.F.W. Walther and the Missouri Synod for much of its existence, has now unfortunately been characterized by some leading officials in our Synod as “an incessant obsession with internal purification.”

The anti-Scriptural and non-confessional basis upon which the Dispute Resolution Panel has reached its decision regarding the charges against Dr. Benke sets the Synod on a new theological and confessional course. Therefore, all members of the LCMS are strongly encouraged to study the issues (<http://www.crisisinthelcms.org/benkemain.htm>) read Dr. Schulz’s complete report (<http://www.crisisinthelcms.org/schulzreport.htm>) and then search the Scriptures themselves. There is power in the Word of God alone.

The Rev. Dr. Wallace Schulz was the recipient of the *Gottesdienst* 2002 Sabre of Boldness Award for his heroic confessional stand based on the power of the Word of God alone.