

# *Sola Scriptura*

## *Sola Scriptura—A Lutheran Watchword for Renewing the Homologoumena-Antilegomena Distinction*

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## A Great American?

“You’re a great American!” Sean Hannity of conservative radio and TV fame has made that sentence quotable—and maybe a little annoying. Given his political ideology it’s not difficult to figure out what he means by it. For Hannity, a “great American” is probably anyone who believes in personal responsibility, limited government, free markets, individual liberty, traditional American values and a strong national defense.<sup>1</sup>

Not everyone agrees with Mr. Hannity, however. John Cleese, a British writer of *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, somewhat famously wrote an *Ode to Sean Hannity*. At Cleese’s request Keith Olbermann of MSNBC performed the poem for television audiences. The ode reads:

*Aping urbanity  
Oozing with vanity  
Plump as a manatee  
Faking humanity  
Journalistic calamity  
Intellectual inanity  
Fox Noise insanity  
You’re a profanity  
Hannity<sup>2</sup>*

Currently, the political scene is charged. People are declaring America divided. It seems like more are tuning in to NFL games to watch the pre-game than the game itself. People want to see if NFL players will kneel or stand for the National Anthem. Some applaud the kneeling-protest as American while others condemn it as “disrespecting the flag.” Some applaud standing for the Anthem as American while others consider it a show of disregard for the rights of so many mistreated Americans. So, who’s a great American? Clearly, it’s up for debate.

Due to the nature of public gospel ministry Christ’s pastors are very “right-handed.” After all, the preaching of the gospel belongs to the kingdom of God’s right hand;<sup>3</sup> it doesn’t belong to the kingdom of God’s left hand. Consequently, I would not imagine that being a great American is foremost on any of our minds. Being a good Lutheran? Now that’s a different story.

## A Good Lutheran!

“He’s a good Lutheran.” I’ve heard this sentence enough in our circles that it’s become, at times, quotable. Far from being a pejorative, any confessional Lutheran pastor would consider it a high compliment. The militant bride of Christ in many parts needs only wait fifteen more days to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation of the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wp.lps.org/tnettle/files/2013/12/Liberal-vs-Conservative.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2008/10/8/624561/-](https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2008/10/8/624561/)

<sup>3</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XVI

Church. It is really a celebration of the gospel's freedom! The religious scene of our world, especially the Lutheran one, is charged. People, even we, must grapple with the meaning and impact of Luther and Lutherans. "What does this mean?" is as relevant as ever to pastors, who live with the adjective "Lutheran" before that office title, and especially to you who, even before being pastors, aspire simply to be good Lutherans.

So, who's a good Lutheran? I'm not so sure it's up for debate. The four Lutheran watchwords provide as good an answer as any. *Solus Christus. Sola Gratia. Sola Fide. Sola Scriptura.* A good Lutheran holds to the Bible's teaching that Christ alone is the world's only (a necessary redundancy) Savior from sin and death because of his holy life, innocent sufferings and death, and resurrection from the dead.<sup>4</sup> A good Lutheran holds to God's teaching that the cause of salvation is *the favor Dei*, the favor of God—his merciful disposition prompted solely and entirely by his love.<sup>5</sup> The grace of God is objective, occurring completely outside humankind. Yet God showers his grace on all. It was grace and grace alone that prompted the Father to give his Son. Therefore, no one, not even the most noble, can merit grace. A good Lutheran holds to the word of God's teaching that the individual is justified or declared not guilty of sins before God through faith alone in Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Human merit in any amount or any kind is excluded entirely and completely from justification by faith alone. Faith in Christ is not a human emotion, a human decision, or an act of the human will.<sup>7</sup> Faith is *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), *fiducia* (trust).<sup>8</sup> "The righteous will live by faith."<sup>9</sup> A good Lutheran holds to the Scripture's teaching that Scripture alone is the final and only authority for matters of life, both now and eternally.<sup>10</sup> Like Luther, Lutherans are "bound by the Scriptures" and "captive to the Word of God."<sup>11</sup> God gives his Scriptures to be read and understood by all people, not only by those in ecclesiastical authority. The word of God, particularly the gospel, is alone the powerful means by which the Holy Spirit sanctifies sinners by creating and strengthening faith in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

There's our answer. But the world laughs at us for these teachings. Rome anathematizes us for them. Evangelical Christianity considers the whole of these teachings unreasonable, irrational, unmarketable, and out of touch. A good Lutheran stands alone. This is neither extremism nor elitism. Jesus said as much in Matthew 7:14-15, "Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Watch out for false prophets." The Lutheran watchwords carve out a plot of ground for us that is small and narrow, especially when practice follows doctrine.

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<sup>4</sup> John 14:6; Acts 4:12; John 3:18

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:8,9

<sup>6</sup> Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16,17

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 2:1

<sup>8</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 39.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 1:17

<sup>10</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>11</sup> Diet of Worms, 1521.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:16,17; Romans 10:17

All four sola's are essentially important. But I would like to turn your attention to the eminent place of sola scriptura in Lutheran teaching. Am I speaking too boldly here? I don't believe so. After all, the Scripture is the cradle<sup>13</sup> wherein Christ is laid.<sup>14</sup> The Scripture is the conduit for grace that brings the crucified, risen, and now ascended Christ from heaven to heart.<sup>15</sup> The Scripture is the creator and cultivator of faith that takes hold of Christ.<sup>16</sup> If the Scriptures are so eminently important, and they are, then of course much of our discussion around the concept of sola scriptura has to do with how we read and interpret God's word. It is a discussion of hermeneutics. Lutherans read the Scripture with the Scripture alone as the master and human reason as the servant. "Says" equals "means" regardless of human reason's inability to understand. And this is fine. But the concept of sola scriptura is even more rudimentary than that. If the Scriptures are so eminently important, and they are, then even before we can talk about "how" to read the Scriptures, it is essential to know what belongs to or is the Scriptures. What are those books that we hold to with a sola scriptura spirit because they are divinely inspired? This is a question of canonicity, which leads me to the point of my essay.

Sola scriptura is a Lutheran watchword that encourages us in the present to renew the ancient. It influences us to wrestle with a distinction with some tension to it. *So, come with me and discover that sola scriptura is indeed a Lutheran watchword that prompts us to renew the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction.*

- To do this, we need to understand a broad history of the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction—in the post apostolic age, in Luther's day, and in the era after the Lutheran Reformation.
- Once we have this historical framework in place, we will see why the renewal of the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction is so vital and valuable.

It is my prayer that this essay will be a helpful exercise as you pursue all that it is to be "a good Lutheran."

### "canon"

Dr. Bruce Metzger writes, "The term 'canon' used with reference to the Bible means the collection of books which are received as divinely inspired and therefore authority for faith and life."<sup>17</sup> F.F. Bruce, "the dean of evangelical Biblical scholars" is maybe even clearer. "When we speak of the canon of the scripture, the word 'canon' has a simple meaning. It means the list of books contained in scripture."<sup>18</sup> In a Christian context, we might define the

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<sup>13</sup> Schmidt, 51. This is a paraphrase of Luther's words: "Here [in the Bible] you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies." AE 35:236

<sup>14</sup> John 5:39

<sup>15</sup> 2 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:8,9

<sup>16</sup> Romans 1:16,17; Romans 10:17

<sup>17</sup> *The New Testament, its background, growth, and content* (Nashville & New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 273.

<sup>18</sup> *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 17.

word as ‘the list of the writings acknowledged by the Church as documents of divine revelation.’”<sup>19</sup> In his recent publication, Rev. Dr. Alvin Schmidt tells us that the “early Christians used the term *kanon* as a rule or guide in regard to which books they accepted as God’s revealed, inspired Word.”<sup>20</sup>

What about this word “canon”? The word canon seems to have a Hebrew root. The Hebrew word “kana” means to stand a thing up straight. The Hebrew noun “kane” means a reed. “Of course such a reed was for a man without wood at hand an excellent measuring-rod, and the word was applied to that too; and it was taken horizontally also and used for the rod of a pair of scales and then for the scales themselves.”<sup>21</sup> The word “canon” has come into our language through the Greek word ‘kanon’. “In Greek it meant a rod, especially a straight rod used as a rule, from this usage comes the other meaning which the word commonly bears in English—‘rule’ or ‘standard’.”<sup>22</sup> It seems that the ‘kanon’ took on a similar meaning in the mental sphere too. Gregory tells us that in the art of sculpture a statue by Polycleitos<sup>23</sup> was called a canon since it was almost perfect.<sup>24</sup> In music the monochord, since it was the basis for all other tones, was called a canon.<sup>25</sup> In chronology, the canons were the dates which were known to be certain and firm.”<sup>26</sup> Even the apostle Paul, inspired of God in Galatians 6:15-16, makes use of the term. “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. <sup>16</sup>Peace and mercy to all who follow (live their lives according to) this rule (this canon/standard/guide)—to the Israel of God.” “In this sense the word appears to have been first used by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in a letter circulated in AD 367.”<sup>27</sup> While the term ‘canon’ is quite foreign in our current use of the English language, it was common in its ancient use.

There is no need for us to take up a discussion concerning the Old Testament canon. “Lutherans and non-Lutheran Protestant have from the days of the Reformation not questioned the authority of the Old Testament with its thirty-nine books that do not include the Apocrypha.”<sup>28</sup> We do not take our marching orders regarding the canonicity of the Scriptures from Rome and her decrees made at Trent. Jesus and his apostles in the New Testament have established it for us.<sup>29</sup> The discussion of canonicity in this essay will confine itself to the New Testament era and which books belong to the list of the divinely inspired New Testament Canon.

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<sup>19</sup> R.P.C. Hanson, *Origen’s Doctrine of Tradition* (London, 1954), pp. 93, 133, quoted in F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 65.

<sup>21</sup> Caspar Rene Gregory, *Canon and Text of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907), 15.

<sup>22</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Polycleitos was an ancient Greek sculptor in bronze of the 5th century BC.

<sup>24</sup> *Canon and Text of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907), 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 17.

<sup>28</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 65.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 16:29; Luke 24:44

## Different New Testament Canons

Matthew to Revelation—you can rattle them off as fast as you can say the alphabet. The New Testament contains twenty-seven books. I'm sure you've never taught differently. Your confirmation classes know that  $39 + 27 = 66$ . You only select sermon texts from these sixty-six. More than likely most of your preaching has been based on the twenty-seven. Your Bible studies, especially the most dogmatic in nature, have been based on those books from the New Testament. This is good. But the New Testament Canon hasn't always been such a clearly cut twenty-seven books. Professor Alvin Schmidt notes that "from the second to the ninth century, virtually every canon (list) of the New Testament's books used in the early churches did not all contain the same books."<sup>30</sup>

Only about forty-five years after the apostle John died and went to be with Jesus, lists or canons of the New Testament were already appearing. One of the chief opponents of orthodox Christianity, already extant in the days of the apostles, was Gnosticism and its syncretistic religious and philosophical belief system. The showdown between Christianity and Gnosticism took place in the mid-second century. The Church sought to defend herself against the heresies of the Gnostics and their false beliefs based on their own secretly revealed set of gospels. "In defending herself against Gnosticism, a most important problem for the Church was to determine what really constituted a true gospel and genuine apostolic writing."<sup>31</sup> Christians had to determine which books were or were not written by Christ's apostles so that Christians would not be led astray by false teachings. The development of the New Testament Canon arose because of a great need to preserve the truth of the gospel.

Marcion of Sinope (Turkey), born in AD 100, is the first person known to us who published a list of New Testament books.<sup>32</sup> "Marcion's canon appeared between AD 125 and 145. It contained eleven New Testament books, one of which (Luke's Gospel) he had altered."<sup>33</sup> Marcion regarded Paul as the only faithful apostle. He maintained that the original apostles had corrupted their Master's teaching with an admixture of legalism. He rejected the Old Testament and distinguished the God of the Old Testament as different than the New.<sup>34</sup> Marcion was deemed a heretic and eventually excommunicated by his own father, a bishop.

The next list of books to appear is the Muratorian Canon in about AD 170. Bruce Metzger notes, "One of the most important documents for the early history of the canon of the New Testament is the Muratorian Canon, comprising eighty-five lines written in barbarous Latin and with erratic orthography."<sup>35</sup> The Muratorian Canon derived its name from its

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<sup>30</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 67.

<sup>31</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 78.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 67.

<sup>34</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 135.

<sup>35</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 191.

discoverer, Ludovico Antonio Muratori. Muratori published it in 1740. The Muratorian Canon lists twenty-two New Testament books. It excludes Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, and one Johannine epistle.<sup>36</sup> The Muratorian Canon also lists nine New Testament Apocrypha books.<sup>37</sup> In addition to this list provided by Muratori's discovery, the index of the Old Latin Bible (around AD 170) provides a list of twenty-four books.<sup>38</sup> Around AD 200, the Alexandrian Canon appeared with only twenty-three books.<sup>39</sup>

Additional canons appeared in the third and fourth centuries. In AD 367 in his annual Paschal letter, Athanasius listed twenty-seven New Testament books. He supplemented that list with the Didache, Shepherd of Hermas, and five Old Testament Apocrypha books.<sup>40</sup> Though Athanasius held ecclesiastical jurisdiction only in the east, his list came to be accepted in wider regions of Christendom. Several other canons also appeared in the east. The Syrian Church used the Peshitta Canon with a list of twenty-two.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, the Peshitta Canon is still in use by Syrian Christians today. From the days after the apostles until AD 1000 there was never a clear-cut canon of the New Testament. Alvin Schmidt makes the point that "by the ninth century, at least thirty different canons existed in different regions of the Church."<sup>42</sup>

### Homologoumena and Antilegomena Books

A century and a half before the canon of Athanasius appeared, the early Church was already making a distinction between those New Testament books which were universally agreed upon and those books which were disputed. The early church theologian Origen (AD 185-254) identified twenty New Testament books as *homologoumena* (agreed upon). The books that were not universally agreed upon he called *antilegomena* (spoken against). Bruce tells us that Origen has not left in any one place a list of New Testament books.<sup>43</sup> However, Eusebius of Caesarea, Origen's pupil, seems to have provided what his teacher did not. Known as the "father of church history," Eusebius (AD 260-340) expanded on Origen's classification. Bruce Metzger tells us that:

In the absence of any official list of the canonical writings of the New Testament, Eusebius finds it simplest to count the votes of his witnesses, and by this mean to classify all the apostolic or pretended apostolic writings into three categories: (1)

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>37</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 68.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Company Limited, 1965), 210 thought derived from Alvin J. Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 68.

<sup>42</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 68.

<sup>43</sup> *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 78.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 134.

Those on whose authority and authenticity all the churches and all the authors he had consulted were agreed; (2) those which the witnesses were equally agreed in rejecting; and (3) an intermediate class regarding which the votes were divided.<sup>44</sup>

The books of the first category Eusebius called ὁμολογούμενα. Eusebius wrote:

In the first place should be placed the holy tetrad of the gospels. These are followed by the writings of the Acts of the Apostles. After this should be reckoned the epistles of Paul. Next after them should be recognized the so-called first epistle of John and likewise that of Peter. In addition to these must be placed, should it seem right, John's Apocalypse.<sup>45</sup>

Among the homologoumena Eusebius includes twenty New Testament books. He includes Revelation, but in a different way. He qualifies it with the words εἴ γε φαίνεται (should it seem right).

The books of the third category Eusebius called ἀντιλεγόμενα. Eusebius wrote, "To the books which are disputed, but recognized by the majority, belong the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, the second epistle of Peter and the so-called second and third epistles of John, whether these are by the evangelist or by someone else with the same name."<sup>46</sup> Though they were spoken against or disputed books, he added a little phrase which softens it a bit. ἀντιλεγόμενα, γνώριμα δ' οὖν ὅμως τοῖς πολλοῖς (disputed, but recognized by the majority). Eusebius neither includes Hebrews in the first category or the third, however he thinks "Hebrews must be included among the epistles of Paul."<sup>47</sup> However, Eusebius's thought here seems to conflict with Origen who made the statement, now well known, "Who wrote Hebrews only God knows." By removing Hebrews and Revelation, both of which Eusebius seems to qualify, it appears that Origen's and Eusebius's lists agree. Schmidt also notes, "Whether Athanasius knew about Origen's and Eusebius's lists is not known, for his list in AD 367 does not mention this distinction."<sup>48</sup>

The second category Eusebius classified as νόθα, which means spurious, false, or illegitimate.

### **The Case for Apostolic Authorship**

The homologoumena-antilegomena distinction is old—1,800 years old. There has been no finding or discovery that has somehow undone this ancient distinction. And for that very reason it is very much a distinction that lives on in this present day, though the terms for the distinction are ancient and foreign. (Come on! Who uses these kinds of words anymore?) Nevertheless, since the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction is still alive and well in 2017, we should try to answer why. Why were some books called

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<sup>44</sup> *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 203.

<sup>45</sup> *Hist. Eccl.* 3.25.1-7

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 3.3.4 f.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 68.



homologoumena and others deemed antilegomena? Or, what was the basis for this important distinction?

I think Jesus' words provide a good clue to the answer. In the upper room with the eleven Jesus said in John 14:25-26, "Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." Do you see the order here? God's Word—from the Father to the Son to the apostles, who were taught and reminded of everything by the Holy Spirit, whom the Father and the Son sent! Still with the eleven in the upper room Jesus said in John 16:13-15, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you." There's the Trinity at work again! But it is the Spirit who would make God's word known to the apostles. And why the apostles? Well, they were the eyewitness! As Luke says, "They were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." Even the apostle Paul in Acts 26:16 recounts that Jesus said to him, "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me."

It appears that these words Jesus spoke to his apostles became the norm by which the early church accepted certain New Testament books and disputed others. The early church father, Irenaeus<sup>49</sup> (died c. AD 202), mentions this norm in his work *Against the Heresies* (AD 180). He wrote, "This Gospel they [the apostles] first preached orally, but later by God's will they handed it on [*tradiderunt*] to us in the Scriptures, so it would be the foundation and pillar of our faith."<sup>50</sup> Irenaeus also taught that when a New Testament book was written under the guidance of an apostle, it was also considered to be God's inspired word. He wrote, "Mark, Peter's disciple, handed down to us in writing what was preached by Peter. Luke too, Paul's assistant, set down in a book the Gospel that was preached by Paul."<sup>51</sup> This is why the Gospels according to Mark and Luke, though not apostles, have always been accepted as inspired Scripture. Lee Martin McDonald, a scholar of New Testament canonicity states, "If a writing was believed to have been produced by an apostle, it was eventually accepted as sacred scripture and included in the New Testament canon."<sup>52</sup> McDonald also notes:

The authoritative New Testament literature reflected the "apostolic deposit." The church upheld the apostolic witness in its sacred literature as a way of grounding its

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<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus defended Christianity and opposed Gnosticism and other heresies. He listened to the preaching of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John.

<sup>50</sup> Irenaeus, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger, revised Irenaeus M. C. Steenberg (New York: The Newman Press, 2012), 30.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Lee Martin McDonald, "Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criterion Question," eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 424.

faith in Jesus, represented by the apostles' teaching, and insuring that the church's tradition was not severed from its historical roots and proximity to Jesus, the primary authority of the early church.<sup>53</sup>

McDonald mentions that the issue of apostolicity was the chief reason Eusebius' classified seven books as non-canonical. About Eusebius McDonald tells us, "Besides 2 Peter, he questioned the legitimacy of James, 2 and 3 John, Jude, Revelation, and may or may not have included Hebrews with the letters of Paul."<sup>54</sup> McDonald does acknowledge the four-fold criteria for canonicity as apostolicity, orthodoxy, antiquity, and use. However, it appears that apostolic authorship was the chief criterion. In fact, Professor Schmidt notes that "if a book was known not to have been authored by an apostle, or if there was serious doubt as to who wrote it, the Early Church did not accept it, and thus it was not included in the New Testament."<sup>55</sup>

### **Luther and the Homologoumena-Antilegomena Distinction**

When Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German in 1522 he also wrote prefaces to the New Testament books. Luther understood that from ancient days seven of the New Testament's twenty-seven books were not universally agreed upon. The homologoumena-antilegomena distinction was still applied in his day. Luther's strong emphasis on sola scriptura naturally took him to the place of considering the Early Church's concern regarding which New Testament books were canonical. Therefore, Luther's prefaces not only functioned as theological introductions to the contents of the New Testament books, but they also provided helpful information about the authors and canonical status of those books. *The Lutheran Study Bible* published by Concordia provides easy access to these prefaces.

Luther deviated somewhat from the Early Church's ancient distinction. Of the seven antilegomena books, Luther accepted 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John. While the Early Church had disputed these books as canonical based on no proof or doubt about apostolic authorship, Luther liked them because they contained no false teachings and clearly presented the saving gospel of Jesus. In fact, Luther says nothing about 2 Peter regarding canonicity; he simply emphasizes the good teaching of the gospel therein. But about 2 and 3 John Luther writes, "The other two epistles are not doctrinal epistles but examples of love and of faith. They too have a true apostolic spirit."<sup>56</sup> Luther, it seems, had developed his own criteria for a books canonicity. Schmidt notes, "To Luther, a books Gospel content was highly valued, so he accepted these three epistles despite the Early Church's uncertainty concerning their authorship. In this instance, he departed from the Early Church, for it considered apostolic authorship of a New Testament book as a sine qua non (an indispensable condition or requirement)."<sup>57</sup> In essence, Luther had developed a canon within the canon, which some have referred to as "Luther's canon."

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 426.

<sup>55</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 69.

<sup>56</sup> LW 35:393.

<sup>57</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 69.

Luther, unlike the ancient church, doubted only Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. In his preface to Hebrews, Luther doubted its canonical status based on unknown authorship saying:

Up to this point we have had [to do with] the true and certain chief books of the New Testament. The four which follow have from ancient times had a different reputation...We should not be deterred if wood, straw, or hay are perhaps mixed with them, but accept this fine teaching with all honor; though, to be sure, we cannot put it on the same level with the apostolic epistles. Who wrote it is not known, and will probably not be known for a while; it makes no difference. We should be satisfied with the doctrine that he bases so constantly on the Scriptures. For he discloses a firm grasp of the reading of the Scriptures and of the proper way of dealing with them.<sup>58</sup>

Luther also seemed to question Hebrews' canonicity because of difficult teachings:

Again, there is a hard knot in the fact that in chapters 6[:4–6] and 10[:26–27] it flatly denies and forbids to sinners any repentance after baptism; and in chapter 12[:17] it says that Esau sought repentance and did not find it. This [seems, as it stands, to be] contrary to all the gospels and to St. Paul's epistles; and although one might venture an interpretation of it, the words are so clear that I do not know whether that would be sufficient. My opinion is that this is an epistle put together of many pieces, which does not deal systematically with any one subject.<sup>59</sup>

In his 1522 preface to the epistle of James, Luther wrote:

In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it. But more of this in the other prefaces.]<sup>60</sup>

We should be careful, however, not to go too far with Luther's "epistle of straw" quote. Luther softened his words about James in his 1546 preface:

Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God. However, to state my own opinion about it, though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle; and my reasons follow.

In the first place it is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works [2:24]. It says that Abraham was justified by his works when

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<sup>58</sup> LW 35:395.

<sup>59</sup> LW 35:395.

<sup>60</sup> LW 35:362.

he offered his son Isaac [2:21]; though in Romans 4[:2–22] St. Paul teaches to the contrary that Abraham was justified apart from works, by his faith alone, before he had offered his son, and proves it by Moses in Genesis 15[:6].

In the second place its purpose is to teach Christians, but in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ.<sup>61</sup>

Concerning the book of Jude, Luther said:

Concerning the epistle of St. Jude, no one can deny that it is an extract or copy of St. Peter's second epistle, so very like it are all the words. He also speaks of the apostles like a disciple who comes long after them [Jude 17] and cites sayings and incidents that are found nowhere else in the Scriptures [Jude 9, 14]. This moved the ancient fathers to exclude this epistle from the main body of the Scriptures. Moreover the Apostle Jude did not go to Greek-speaking lands, but to Persia, as it is said, so that he did not write Greek. Therefore, although I value this book, it is an epistle that need not be counted among the chief books which are supposed to lay the foundations of faith.<sup>62</sup>

In regard to Revelation, Luther cited a number of reasons for rejecting it. Here is one of Luther's thoughts to consider:

First and foremost, the apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear and plain words, as do Peter and Paul, and Christ in the gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images and visions. Moreover there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so exclusively with visions and images. For myself, I think it approximates the Fourth Book of Esdras; I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.<sup>63</sup>

Luther, in his polemical manner, preserved the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction, at least where these four books were concerned. However, he still took a conservative approach to them; he did not exclude them altogether. Luther kept them in his New Testament<sup>64</sup>, cited them as authoritative, and preached from them.

### **The Council of Trent's Decree**

Professor Alvin Schmidt notes that "from the ninth to the fifteenth century, no known church councils listed any New Testament canons, nor did they make any pronouncements regarding the canonicity."<sup>65</sup> In fact, the church had never held a council to determine which New Testament books were canonical. The church had simply received the books of the New Testament authored by Christ's apostles as canonical because they were self-authenticating. All that changed with the Council of Florence (1439-1443) with their list or

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<sup>61</sup> LW 35:395-396.

<sup>62</sup> LW 35:396.

<sup>63</sup> LW 35:398

<sup>64</sup> When he published his New Testament in 1522 he placed these books apart at the end.

<sup>65</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 74.

canon of thirty-nine Old Testament books, Apocrypha books, and twenty-seven New Testament books. The list from Florence was solidified one hundred years later at Rome's counter-reformation council, The Council of Trent (1545-1563)—very shortly after one Martin Luther had died.

One could joke the Luther's dead body was still a little warm when the Roman Catholic bishops cast their vote at the Council of Trent. On April 8, 1546 (Luther had died on February 18<sup>th</sup>) the Council of Trent adopted the same canon as Council of Florence, but with much more force behind it. Metzger notes, "By a vote of 24 to 15, with 16 abstentions, the Council issued a decree (*De Canonicis Scripturis*) in which, for the first time in the history of the Church, the question of the contents of the Bible was made an absolute article of faith and confirmed by an anathema."<sup>66</sup> With only 43.6 percent of the vote, Rome dogmatically decreed that the Old Testament Apocrypha and the twenty-seven New Testament books to be canonical. This was the first time in the Church's history that a church council decreed that Christians had to accept the Apocrypha books and all twenty-seven New Testament books as canonical or be anathematized.<sup>67</sup> Trent decreed:

The holy ecumenical and general Council of Trent... following the example of the orthodox Fathers receives and venerates all the books of the New Testament...and also the traditions pertaining to faith and conduct...with an equal sense of devotion and reverence...If, however, anyone does not receive these books in their entirety, with all their parts, as they are accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and are contained in the ancient Latin Vulgate edition as sacred and canonical, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be Anathema.<sup>68</sup>

There you have it! With a vote, the two-horned-looking-lamb spoke like a dragon again!<sup>69</sup> The Council of Trent's decree annulled the ancient homologoumena-antilegomena distinction. Not pertinent to this essay, however, you'll note that Trent also elevated the tradition of the church to an equal status with Scripture.

Trent's decree was not without effect in the Protestant realm. Metzger notes that the French Confession of Faith, the Belgic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England all identify by name the twenty-seven New Testament books as canonical.<sup>70</sup> He concludes with this interesting observation. "None of the Confessional statements issued by the several Lutheran churches includes an explicit list of the canonical books."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 246.

<sup>67</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 74.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 246.

<sup>69</sup> Pardon my reference from a book considered antilegomena!

<sup>70</sup> *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 247.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

## Martin Chemnitz Defends the Homologoumena-Antilegomena Distinction

The statement rings true again. “If the second Martin had not come, the first Martin would not have stood.” Martin Chemnitz in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* took serious issue with Trent’s arbitrary and abominable decree, even as it pertained to the unqualified acceptance of the seven antilegomena books.

Why do such men pretend to honor the judgments of antiquity when they overthrow the opinion of the first and ancient church concerning the canon of faith and dogmas from its very foundation? Let the reader diligently consider how much harm the neglect and annulment of that most ancient distinction between the canonical books and the apocryphal and spurious, or false, books has brought into the church.<sup>72</sup>

Lest we get the idea that Chemnitz was not also making a reference to the antilegomena books in the aforementioned, listen to what he states when asked whether the seven antilegomena books could be legitimately declared authentic. His answer was, “It is evident that [they] can not.”<sup>73</sup> A paragraph later Chemnitz adds:

Where therefore reliable testimonies of the primitive and most ancient church cannot be produced from the testimonies of ancient men who lived not long after the times of the apostles that the books concerning which there is controversy were without contradiction and doubt received by and commended to the church as legitimate and reliable, any and all human decrees are of no avail. For what insolent presumption it is to assert: Although the primitive church and the oldest subsequent church had doubts concerning these books on account of the contradictions of many churchmen because not sufficiently certain and firm testimonies of their authenticity were found, in spite of all this, we decree that they must be received as altogether certain and of equal authority with those which have always been judged to be legitimate.<sup>74</sup>

Chemnitz insisted on preserving the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction for another important reason. It was of essential importance in the mind of Chemnitz that Lutheran pastors and theologians observe this ancient distinction when documenting doctrines. He states, “No dogma ought therefore to be drawn out of these books which does not have reliable and clear foundations and testimonies in other canonical books. Nothing controversial can be proved out of these books, unless there are other proofs and confirmations in the canonical books.”<sup>75</sup>

Chemnitz also added, “The canonical Scripture has its eminent authority chiefly from this, that it is divinely inspired, 2 Tim. 3:16, that is, that it was not brought forth by the will of men but that the men of God, moved by the Holy Spirit, both spoke and wrote, 2 Pet.

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<sup>72</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971). 190.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 189.

1:21.”<sup>76</sup> Who were these men? Chemnitz showed that they were Christ’s apostles by quoting Tertullian (d. ca. 225), who wrote:

First of all we establish that a Gospel document has as its authors apostles, to whom this task of promulgating the Gospel was assigned by the Lord Himself. If [it has as authors] also apostolic men, these are nevertheless not alone but are together with apostles, for the preaching of [mere] disciples could become suspect, if the authority of the teachers, or rather, of Christ, who made the apostles teachers, did not stand with it.”<sup>77</sup>

In other words, Chemnitz was an ardent supporter of the ancient homologoumena-antilegomena distinction, and considered those books as canonical which had proven apostolic authorship. This stipulation is also set forth in the Formula of Concord which states, “We [Lutherans] believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged [2 Timothy 3:15-17] are the prophetic and *apostolic* (emphasis mine) Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone.”<sup>78</sup> Prof. Schmidt makes the conclusion “Thus, if a book in the New Testament was not written by an apostle, or if its authorship was in doubt, Chemnitz, similar to the Early Church, called it noncanonical.”<sup>79</sup> And when 8,000 Lutherans signed the Formula of Concord in 1580 they agreed that for a book to be canonical it had to be written by an apostle or under the supervision of an apostle!

### Johann Gerhard

There were many Lutheran defenders of the historical homologoumena-antilegomena distinction in the post-reformation era. In addition to Martin Chemnitz, there were men like Johannes Brenz (1499-1570), Matthias Hafenreffer (1561-1619), Friedrich Balduin (1575-1627), and Conrad Dieterich (1575-1639). All were ardent supporters of *Confessio Wurttembergica*, authored by Johannes Brenz. Pertinent to this essay, Article XXVII stated, “Concerning the Holy Scripture, we call only those books of the Old and New Testaments canonical whose authority has never been doubted in the church.”<sup>80</sup> Many of these Lutheran pastors considered the seven antilegomena books “*Apokryphen*” (apocrypha).<sup>81</sup>

Finally, we must consider Johann Gerhard, professor of theology at the University of Jena from 1616 until his death in 1637 and the most well-known theologian of the era we call the Age of Orthodoxy. “Gerhard is the third (Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhard) in that series of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 177-178.

<sup>78</sup> FC Ep Summary 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 76.

<sup>80</sup> *Wurttembergisches Glaubensbekenntnis (Confessio Wurttembergica)* (Stuttgart: Evangelische Gesellschaft, 1848), 53.

<sup>81</sup> Alvin Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 84.

Lutheran theologians in which there is no fourth.”<sup>82</sup> Biebert acknowledges Gerhard as Christ’s gift to his church when it needed him most. “Johann Gerhard lived during a time when the Lutheran Church was in great need of discipline and an orthodox leader. Our gracious God lovingly provided for these needs of his Church through this man.”<sup>83</sup> However, Biebert also notes that although he was a tremendous blessing, Gerhard’s writings were not infallible.<sup>84</sup>

In Gerhard’s work *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture* (1625), in the chapter titled, “On the Canonical Books of the New Testament of the Second Rank,” Gerhard redefined the historical status of the New Testament’s seven antilegomena books by call them “*secundi ordinis*” (second rank). “This was a major departure from the position the Ancient Church held regarding these books, for it did not accept them as canonical, given that their authorship was either uncertain or not known.”<sup>85</sup> Gerhard also departed from Luther’s position, even though Luther accepted three of the antilegomena books. Gerhard also departed from the post-reformation Lutherans named above. “By using the term “second rank,” Gerhard gave the antilegomena books a quasi-canonical status that soon had the effect of making them canonical.”<sup>86</sup> Interestingly enough, none of Gerhard’s contemporaries criticized him for redefining the books that were historically spoken against as second rank. Schmidt notes that “this silence is notably puzzling.”<sup>87</sup> As a result, those books now deemed second rank were considered inspired though their authorship was unknown. If you’re following Professor Schmidt’s line of thought, this ought to give us a reason to pause. For “How did Gerhard and some like-minded Lutherans know that these second-rank books, whose authors were not really known, were inspired?”<sup>88</sup> After all, Jesus said that his apostles would write God’s inspired word.<sup>89</sup> Also, to accept inspiration apart from apostolic authorship seems to ignore the words of the Formula of Concord, which Lutheran pastors subscribe to with a *quia* prescription. “We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings...should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone.”<sup>90</sup>

In his book *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Robert Preus explains the impact of Gerhard’s newly coined second rank description. “From the time of Gerhard there was no hesitancy in quoting from the antilegomena. For all practical purposes the antilegomena were canonical.”<sup>91</sup> Preus makes an interesting observation, “Thus we observe

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<sup>82</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Sacred Meditations*. (Printed: Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2000.), 9 quoted by our Pastor Nathaniel Biebert in his biography of Johann Gerhard at <http://www.studiumexcitare.com/content/71>.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Alvin Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 85.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 86

<sup>89</sup> John 14:26

<sup>90</sup> *Formula of Concord, Epitome, Summary 1.*

<sup>91</sup> Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 305.



in its polemic against Rome, in its attempt to maintain that the canon was created by the Spirit of God and not the church, Lutheran theology oversimplifies the problem of the New Testament canon and fails to be faithful to the historical data.<sup>92</sup> And he also posits why. “The reason for the uncritical change of position we find in later dogmaticians is undoubtedly due to their fear of allowing a historical judgment concerning authenticity of authorship of a book to affect saving faith.”<sup>93</sup> That’s too close to the end justifying the means, in my opinion.

I think Professor Schmidt speaks to WELS pastors too, maybe a little more “loud and clear” than we’d like to admit.

This oversimplification has since then been accepted by virtually all Lutheran theologians and pastors, most knowing very little about the theological concern that was vitally important to Lutherans before Gerhard’s time. To those pre-Gerhard Lutherans, the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction was highly relevant to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, but since Gerhard’s day, Lutherans have ironically accepted the Council of Trent’s 1546 fiat.<sup>94</sup>

It appears, that Lutherans from the days of Gerhard down to the present day, have taken “a retreat along the whole line [of the antilegomena].”<sup>95</sup>

### **Renewing the Distinction Among Us**

Today, WELS pastors acknowledge the ancient homologoumena-antilegomena as an historical fact. There has been no phenomenon or occurrence in the church’s history which has somehow made the antilegomena a part of the homologoumena. If there has been one, it is only the result of being ignorant of the ancient distinction or simply choosing to ignore the distinction altogether. It is not wrong in itself to consider the twenty-seven New Testament books canonical. Nor is it wrong to consider only twenty New Testament books canonical. Our ordination vow allows for this. We all said, “I do,” when we were asked, “Do you believe that the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the inspired word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice?” Note that the question does not say “sixty-six books,” but rather “the canonical books.” However, we do some harm to our *sola scriptura* heritage if we call twenty-seven canonical without any reference to the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction. Then we’re making an ahistorical, post-modern decision about the canon.

But maybe we’re doing something more dangerous! Could it be that we have succumbed to the Council of Trent Effect? By nodding our heads in agreement to a closed twenty-seven book New Testament canon, could it be that we are among those Lutheran pastors who unwittingly no longer have a problem with Trent’s decree that made antilegomena books

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 305-306.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 305

<sup>94</sup> *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 85.

<sup>95</sup> Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 193.

canonical without proof of apostolic authorship? Also, an undifferentiated view of the New Testament books has triumphed in Protestant evangelical Christianity outside of confessional Lutheranism. Has this view triumphed among us?

In Luke 4, Jesus shushed the mouths of the demons who were testifying that he was the Son of God. Jesus didn't want demons with their wicked, lying, destructive reputations telling truth about him. It was undermining. I don't think any of us would be at all comfortable taking our marching orders about New Testament canonicity from the lying prophet of Rome, whether unwittingly or, even worse, wittingly. It's undermining. We'd rather live with Trent's anathema regarding their New Testament canon decree. Nor would it seem at all prudent, logical, or Lutheran to adopt a New Testament canon like Protestant evangelical Christianity, where reason is magistrate. It's undermining.

No. We WELS-ers are not sectarian cult Christians. Chemnitz highlights the real reason it's so dangerous for us to unwittingly follow Trent's decree along with the rest of Protestant evangelical Christianity.

Tridentine arrogance however threatens anathema if anyone does not receive them as equal, yes, as of the certainty and authority as the other books, about which there never was any doubt. Why should we be surprised, therefore, that some papalist parasites assert that the pope can establish new articles of faith, since in this place he is not afraid to fabricate a new canonical Scripture? As a result there can no longer be any doubt who it is, sitting in the temple of God, is exalted above all that is called God. (2 Thess. 2:4)<sup>96</sup>

If Rome can add to the canon, then they can add more to or subtract from the canon. And if by council decree they can decree disputed books canonical, then they declare false teachings true and true teachings false. Rome is given too much authority, authority that goes above and beyond the Scriptures. This is abominable and an abominable scenario. So, we would rather stand with the church in her ancient distinction derived from Jesus' words (John 14:26), applied in the Early Church, confessed in the Formula Concord, and receive without dispute only those books which the church has always agreed upon on the basis of apostolic authorship.

But there is another problem here. By unwittingly accepting Trent's decree, we undermine the self-authenticating nature of Scripture. Trent was the first council that decided by vote which books were canonical. Thus, Rome placed herself above Scripture. Up to that point in history the church simply received those books which were recognized as canonical. The Scriptures were authoritative over the church. Chemnitz explains that "the papalists say that the Scripture has this authority from the church...the authority of the church is, in a certain way, above the authority of Scripture, because the authority of the church imparted canonical authority to certain Scriptures, which they had among us neither of themselves nor from their authors."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 189.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 175

But we are unwavering adherents to the self-authenticating nature of Scripture, just like the church historic. Balge explains:

And that brings us to *autopistia*, the self-authenticating quality of the books of Holy Writ. They themselves have the power to convince us of their authority. As Christ opens them to us, our hearts burn within us. As we search the Scriptures, we accept them on their terms; we are convinced by them. History's way of stating how the canon came to be is to say that it was by a consensus of use. Another way of saying it, and this is what we mean by *autopistia*, is to say that we know by faith that these books and only these books constitute the *norma normans*.<sup>98</sup>

Sola scriptura is a Lutheran watchword that separates us from Tridentine heresy. It prompts us to renew the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction with the ancient, with Luther, with the Lutheran confessors.

### The New Testament—An Eyewitness Account

Here's where the distinction gets even more practical, I think. The growth of Islam and Mormonism is well documented. Like Christianity, they are religions "of a book." But Christianity's witness is completely different.

Muslims believe what Muhammed said in the Qur'an; namely, that it (the Qur'an) is stored on a tablet in heaven. "This is truly a glorious Qur'an written on a preserved Tablet."<sup>99</sup> One translation of the Qur'an in a footnote says about this reference, "God keeps this [tablet] with him."<sup>100</sup> Likewise, Mormons believe the golden plates that the angel Moroni gave to Joseph Smith to transcribe into the Book of Mormon are back with the angel Moroni in heaven. Smith claims, "I have delivered them [the golden plates] up to him [angel Moroni]; and he has them in his charge until this day."<sup>101</sup>

It is important to note that the beliefs of Muslims and Mormons are based entirely from hearsay or blind faith without any corroborating, empirical evidence, or reliable eyewitness proof pertaining to the contents of the Qur'an or the Book of Mormon.<sup>102</sup> In sharp contrast, Christians know that the Bible did not fall out of heaven nor are its contents stored on some heavenly "Rosetta" stone. Rather, the Christian faith is grounded in historical, factual information recorded by Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament, many of whom were eyewitnesses of the events. Similarly, the New Testament is based on the eyewitness

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Balge, *The Bible Through the Ages*, 7. Located on the web at <http://www.wlsessays.net/bitstream/handle/123456789/219/BalgeBible.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>99</sup> Qur'an 85:21-22.

<sup>100</sup> See *The Qur'an*, A new translation by M. A. S. Abdell Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 416.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1970), 1:18.

<sup>102</sup> Alvin Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 66.

accounts of some of Christ's apostles. The apostles simply recorded what they had seen and heard in their first-hand interactions with Jesus in his ministry and after his resurrection from the dead. Even before God the Holy Spirit had inspired the New Testament Scriptures, in Acts we learn that the apostles established Christ's church through the preaching of the gospel based on their eyewitness reports. "You will be my witness."<sup>103</sup> "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it."<sup>104</sup> "15 You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this."<sup>105</sup> "As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."<sup>106</sup> "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."<sup>107</sup> "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross."<sup>108</sup> "He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."<sup>109</sup> About Paul Ananias said, "You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard."<sup>110</sup> And Jesus himself said to Paul, "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me."<sup>111</sup>

I think these passages help us gain a better sense of why the Early Church leaned heavily upon those books which were penned by Christ's apostles and were eventually included in the homologoumena. Apostolic authorship equaled eyewitness accounts. "This selection process reveals the uniqueness of the New Testament's composition and its historical, empirical veracity. Nothing similar characterizes any other book defined as sacred by non-Christian religions."<sup>112</sup>

Right there! That's another reason why the renewal of homologoumena-antilegomena distinction is so vital and valuable for Lutherans. Elevating antilegomena books to automatically canonical by fiat without the ancient and historic distinction subtly takes apart some of the scaffolding upon which the Christian faith is built—the proven apostolic, eyewitness record. A reason the antilegomena books were designated as such was due in large part to their unknown or uncertain authorship. It is better to use the antilegomena in support of the homologoumena rather than elevating the disputed to universally accepted without distinction. The Christian witness is different than those religions "of the book."

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<sup>103</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>104</sup> Acts 2:32.

<sup>105</sup> Acts 3:15.

<sup>106</sup> Acts 4:20.

<sup>107</sup> Acts 5:32.

<sup>108</sup> Acts 10:39.

<sup>109</sup> Acts 10:41.

<sup>110</sup> Acts 22:15.

<sup>111</sup> Acts 26:16.

<sup>112</sup> Alvin Schmidt, *Hallmarks of Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 67.

## The Homologoumena Is the Room Wherein Each Sedes Doctrinae Sits

I must be clear. Preserving and renewing the homologoumena-antilegomena does not mean that we discard the disputed books. There is clear precedent that the church before us made use of them. The Lutheran Confessions quote from them. Luther lectured and preached on them. Luther preserved them in his 1522 Bible. The church read from them in their divine services. Melancthon even preached Luther's funeral sermon based on Revelation 14:6,7. Chemnitz advises us, "Should then these books be simply rejected and condemned? We by no means seek this. Of what use then is this dispute? I reply: That the rule of faith or of sound doctrine in the church may be sure."<sup>113</sup>

There's that middle Lutheran approach again. Let's not discard the disputed books. Let's just be careful how we use them. Chemnitz advises us:

No dogma ought therefore to be drawn out of these books which does not have reliable and clear foundations and testimonies in other canonical books. Nothing controversial can be proved out of these books, unless there are other proofs and confirmations in the canonical books. But what is said in these books must be explained and understood according to the analogy of those things which are clearly taught in the canonical books. There is no doubt that this is the opinion of antiquity.<sup>114</sup>

We do well when we let the clear passages in the homologoumena establish doctrine. Then it's acceptable to use a passage from a disputed New Testament book to support it. And this is our practice.

What does this mean for our use of the lectionary? The very strict dare I say legalistic adherents to the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction will insist that the antilegomena books should not be a part of the church's reading in the Divine Service. "This is the word of the Lord" is a serious declaration. I guess they are hesitant to make that declaration following a reading from a book which has historically been disputed.

But to delete the antilegomena books from the lectionary seems extreme and goes against the church's historic practice. Why not take a Lutheran middle approach? Let's use them, but not as the reading which drives the theme of the Proper. Let's use them in a way that supports the truth of the Word and underscores the theme of the day. Let's preach from them, but not as the main source of our preaching. Let's preach from them in a way that supports and underscores the analogy of faith. Let's use them in such a way that we can say with confidence "This is the word of the Lord." Let's use them mindful of the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction.

And while I have you thinking about this, take a moment to reflect on your Bible class curriculum over the last five years. What does it look like? Are you spending considerable

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<sup>113</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 189.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

time in the back<sup>115</sup> of your New Testament? That’s a popular trend these days—especially among the evangelicals. There’s a lot of application there, and by that, I mean law as guide. No wonder it’s so popular. Don’t get me wrong. It’s good and acceptable to teach from the back of your New Testament. But it’s seems very wise to have a greater percentage of our Bible class content coming from those books which the church has always agreed upon. And by the way, it is not like it’s slim pickings!

### **The Distinction Is Lutheran and Upholds the Christocentric Scripture**

We are Lutherans! And this is not just in name only, but by our confession. That means being Lutheran is a matter of faith. It’s about our hearts. We have all made a quia subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore, as noted earlier, we subscribe to the statement: “We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings...should be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone.”<sup>116</sup> Holding to the ancient homologoumena-antilegomena distinction is another of expression of what it means to be confessional Lutherans.

Finally, the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction upholds the Christocentric nature of Scripture. Jesus said, “These are the very Scriptures that testify about me.”<sup>117</sup> We have all had to wrestle with certain challenging passages located among those disputed books. I don’t mean to imply that the homologoumena book don’t have challenging passages—because of our fallen reason. But where those passages in the disputed books might appear to undermine the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone we can direct our hearts and people to that which has never been disputed. That God has given his Scripture with Christ as its center. That God has given his Scriptures with Christ for us as its message. That God has given his Scriptures so that “[we] may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing [we] may have life in his name.”<sup>118</sup>

### **Reformation 500**

There’s much to renew as we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. “Good” Lutherans and “good” Lutheran pastors find renewal in the gospel alone. You are the righteous who live by faith in Christ Jesus, clothed in his righteousness alone and cleansed from all sins at his cross. We are renewed with the zeal of Paul, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> By the word “back” I mean the disputed books, which are among the last of the New Testament books in the back of the Bible.

<sup>116</sup> *Formula of Concord, Epitome*, Summary 1.

<sup>117</sup> John 5:39.

<sup>118</sup> John 20:31.

<sup>119</sup> Romans 1:16,17.

And because of the gospel and its cause, I also pray that the Lutheran watchword—*Sola Scriptura*—prompts among us a little renewal of the homologoumena-antilegomena distinction, though it is ancient and though there remains some tension to it.

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